

**Thursday
22 November 2018**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 22 November 2018

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Train Services in the North

1. **Mary Creagh** (Wakefield) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase the (a) reliability and (b) number of train services in the north. [907763]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):

We are now running significantly more services on Northern than we were prior to May, but I am aware that there are continuing performance issues, particularly this month. In September, with Transport for the North, which jointly manages this franchise with my Department, I appointed leading industry figure Richard George to co-ordinate the efforts of the train operators and Network Rail to improve the reliability of services in the north. Richard is also working with industry and TfN to examine the significant increase in services which the operators committed to in December 2019. It is essential that these changes are realistic and deliverable, given the need for rail operators to provide a reliable service to passengers.

Mary Creagh: I thank the Secretary of State for that reply, but he is showing a bit of a tin ear to the lived experience of my constituents. One of them took six hours to travel the 75 miles between Wakefield and Scarborough, which, with a good wind, I could have achieved on a bicycle in the same amount of time. Why has capital investment in the north fallen—as the Institute for Public Policy Research has shown—when the need for investment in our services has never been higher?

Chris Grayling: I would make two points. First, the IPPR keeps using misleading comparators. The Infrastructure and Projects Authority figures, which are the official figures prepared for the Government, have already shown that, per capita, the north is currently receiving and will over the coming years be receiving more expenditure per head of population than the south.

Of course, in the north—the hon. Lady's area—the flagship programme for the next five years on rail, the trans-Pennine upgrade, is the most substantial anywhere in the country. Her constituency is also benefiting from increased services on the route to Knottingley.

I accept that there have been some real issues with the TransPennine Express on the route to Scarborough. Those are things that need to be addressed. There are performance issues that are not good enough. It is not a question of having a tin ear. We are actively working to try to improve things on a network that is delivering more services, rather than fewer, and in which substantial

investment is happening. One of the frustrations is that the timetable problems in the north this year were triggered by an investment programme that was delayed.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend ensure that we get a full picture of this? Will he ensure that we see what new trains were being made available in the north between 1997 and 2010, and between 2010 and let us say 2020, so that we can see the investment that is going on by the Government in the north?

Chris Grayling: My right hon. Friend makes an important point and I pay tribute to him for ensuring the investment programme that is currently taking place. The reality is that, in that decade, there were no new trains in the north and no investment: the Labour party let a standstill franchise on the northern rail network. It is this Government who are renewing every single train in the north of England and it is long overdue.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): The Secretary of State goes back to the timetable changes, but currently one in four Northern trains are delayed or cancelled and nearly one in three TransPennine trains are delayed or cancelled. Is not it time that he took control and took these franchises back, so that we can have a proper rail service in the north of England?

Chris Grayling: That is precisely why I say that I am not satisfied with the current performance issues. That is why we have appointed Richard George to understand why the service is not performing adequately. It is of course hampered by the fact that some of the performance issues recently have been caused by the elderly Pacer trains, which are being phased out, starting in the coming weeks. However, we need to do everything we can and we will continue to do everything we can, in partnership with Transport for the North, to identify the ways of getting performance up. It is not simply a question of changing ownership of the franchise or control of the franchise. There is not a magic team down the corridor waiting to step in and make this work better. We have got to make it work better.

Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): As we have heard, TransPennine passengers to and from Scarborough have had to endure a summer of delays. Indeed, because of drivers' hours, many trains have been terminated at York, leaving passengers waiting an hour for the following service, if it is not also delayed. Although there has been some improvement, when are we likely to see a return to normality?

Chris Grayling: I absolutely sympathise with people in Scarborough. Of course, we are introducing additional services to Scarborough in the coming months, so that there will be a Northern service there as well. The work that Richard George is doing to look at why these performance issues are happening is similar to the work we did with Chris Gibb on Southern, which has led to an improvement in performance on that network, and I am absolutely clear that we have to deal with the issues that he highlights.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Let us get to the real north, which is Scotland. Overall, the Abellio ScotRail franchise is the best performing large franchisee, but 50% of delays and cancellations are

attributable to Network Rail. The Secretary of State is being obstinate with us, but will he not consider devolution of Network Rail to allow the Scottish Government to take full responsibility? It would generate savings, which would also help to offset the £400 million shortfall from his Government.

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman makes that argument regularly, but the devolution of Network Rail was not recommended in the report produced on devolution in Scotland. Given the SNP's less-than-good record in running other services in Scotland, it escapes me why he thinks that devolving Network Rail would make a difference to train services in Scotland.

Alan Brown: As usual, the Secretary of State shows his full knowledge of Scotland. He will be aware that the rail industry review panel includes Tom Harris, a former rail Minister, who has written a report that calls for the devolution of Network Rail to Scotland. I wrote a letter to the Secretary of State on 15 October but he has not responded. Will he now confirm that he has not restricted the terms of reference for the rail industry review panel, and that if they recommend devolution of Network Rail to Scotland, he will act on that?

Chris Grayling: I have not set any limits on that approach. I have asked the panel to consider the question of devolution, as well as how we can improve the workings of the railways. It is no secret that in my view we need a more joined-up railway to meet the challenges of a system that is under intense pressure. The Government are investing record amounts in infrastructure upgrades, including spending money in Scotland, and that is in addition to using the Barnett formula, which is the norm for the allocation of funds to Scotland. We have a railway that is bursting at the seams, and it needs to work better if it is to deal with the pressures on it.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Since the announcement of the northern powerhouse agenda, transport spend per person has risen by twice as much in London as it has in the north. New analysis of Treasury figures published this week shows the gap widening, with an increase in spend of £326 per person in the capital, just £146 per person in the north, and the amount even falling in Yorkshire—more than in any other region—resulting in poor reliability and capacity. Why such under-investment?

Chris Grayling: I am the Secretary of State who has planned over the next five years for 50% of the rail enhancement budget that the Government are putting in place to be spent in the north—on upgrading the east coast main line, on the trans-Pennine upgrade and on other schemes that will make a real difference. When Labour Members were in government they did none of that, so you will forgive me, Mr Speaker, if I take no lessons from the Labour party about investment in transport in the north. We are getting on with delivering it.

South Western Railway and National Rail Review

2. **Mr Ranil Jayawardena** (North East Hampshire) (Con): What steps his Department has taken to implement the recommendations of the independent review of South Western Railway and National Rail. [907765]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): The South Western Railway performance review was published on 10 September 2018. It was independently chaired by Sir Michael Holden, and SWR and Network Rail are already working to implement its conclusions. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the former rail Minister met representatives from South Western Railway and the Network Rail Wessex route on 24 October to review their progress in implementing the performance review. They are on track to complete delivery of all the recommendations in that review, a number of which are already complete, and all short-term recommendations will be complete by the end of this year.

Mr Jayawardena: May I welcome my hon. Friend's return to the Front Bench? Although my constituents will welcome the review, they are furious about the terrible disruption across South Western Railway on "mayhem Monday" this week, with seemingly no contingency plans and diabolical communication. Will my hon. Friend ensure that South Western Railway and Network Rail are held to account and made to learn lessons from this week's mess, especially given the planned Network Rail engineering works this Sunday?

Andrew Jones: That incident was utterly unacceptable—there is no question about that—and I am not surprised that my hon. Friend's constituents are furious about it. The Secretary of State spoke to Andrew Haines, chief executive of Network Rail, at 7 o'clock on Monday morning, and he made clear his dissatisfaction with the incident and demanded action. Network Rail has started an independent investigation to look at how the work was planned and delivered, and how the resulting disruption was managed. It has already made management changes, and new leadership on the Wessex route will start next week. South Western Railway also has lessons to learn, and it must review its communications with its customers. That part is critical and it failed on Monday. It must do far better.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Welcome back, but—I have had some pretty miserable experiences on that train line, but they are as nothing compared with how ghastly it must be to be rail Minister. Does my hon. Friend think that that might have contributed to his predecessor's resignation?

Andrew Jones: That question is flawed, Mr Speaker. There is nothing ghastly at all about being the rail Minister, and I cannot understand where my right hon. Friend is coming from. I think the reasons for my predecessor's departure are already documented elsewhere.

Mr Speaker: The Minister's portfolio grows by the day. He previously served the House and the nation with distinction as the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for buses, so from bus to rail really is an impressive CV, it has to be said. [Laughter.] Well, it is.

Train Timetable Changes

3. **Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What lessons his Department has learnt from recent train timetable changes. [907766]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):

We recognise the appalling disruption that some passengers experienced following the May timetable introduction. We have to be very clear that this cannot be repeated. The final Glaister report, providing recommendations on future changes that can be made to prevent disruption at timetable changes, will be published shortly. We are also working closely with the rail industry to provide a seriously enhanced level of assurance on planned timetable changes in December 2018 and May 2019.

Tom Brake: Does the Secretary of State agree that, contrary to the impression that he gave in this letter, the Department for Transport did have a significant role in the timetabling fiasco? In fact, according to the Office of Rail and Road interim report, the DFT's decision to phase in the introduction of Thameslink stretched resources badly. Does he agree that one of the most damning comments in that report is that the industry placed engineering requirements ahead of serving passengers? How will he ensure that in future the DFT accepts full responsibility for its failures and the industry prioritises passengers over rails and rolling stock?

Chris Grayling: The latter point is extremely important. It is not good enough to have Network Rail too focused on engineering and not focused enough on passengers. It is one of the problems in the rail industry and why we have already started to work towards a more joined-up railway through an alliance structure. As I said with the announcement of the rail review, that is an essential part of delivering the much more substantial change that is necessary, given what happened this summer.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend appreciate that it is not just timetable changes that are important, although they have been improved on lines from London to Stafford, but the number of coaches on the trains? On the London Northwestern railway—the LNWR—we are seeing very good services, but the trains are too short, with four carriages, instead of eight. Will he have a look at that?

Chris Grayling: I will certainly have a look and the rail Minister will be happy to talk to my hon. Friend about that. We are supporting a programme of substantial investment in new rolling stock all around the country, which will benefit passengers. New coaches will be arriving on the LNWR franchise, but we could certainly have a discussion about where they are serving.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): In the last timetable changes, on the midland main line, Stagecoach was forced to lengthen the journey times of peak time trains from Sheffield to London to accommodate more Thameslink commuter trains. Is it true that the Department for Transport has told Stagecoach it cannot revisit that in the next timetable changes because of the shambles last time and the nervousness that has created in the Department?

Chris Grayling: We would dispute that we have done anything to disadvantage Sheffield to help Govia Thameslink Railway. We are of course doing a massive upgrade programme on the midland main line. I pay tribute to all those involved in the recent Derby station remodelling. Many projects have gone badly wrong; that did not.

It was handled very well. Further improvements are happening up and down that line, as part of the biggest modernisation programme on that route since Victorian times. That work will continue. We will do everything to make sure, if we can, that the timetable remains as intact as possible as those changes happen.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I do not wish to disappoint the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely), but he does have Question 9, which will be reached and is grouped, so it is mildly inconvenient to call him any earlier than that. We are keeping him waiting, but it will be worth waiting for, I feel sure.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Is there any advice that the Secretary of State can give to the Welsh Transport Minister? Changes to the franchise and timetable changes have resulted this week in the chief operating officer coming out with a statement saying that too many trains have been cancelled, delayed or have arrived late, with fewer carriages than normal—and that is under a Labour Government.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend puts his finger on the nub of the issue. The Labour party says, "If we just wave our magic wand, it will all be fine." The reality is that we have a deeply congested railway facing big operational challenges. We are investing substantial amounts in it but—he points out the situation in Wales—there are no magic solutions anywhere in the country, under any Government.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State can duck and dive but the fact is that there is a lack of strategic leadership in his Department. What we found in Huddersfield is that, overnight, they cancelled the link between Huddersfield and Wakefield Westgate, so people cannot get a main line train unless they go to Leeds—and nobody in Huddersfield would want to go to Leeds at any time. The fact of the matter is that we want good strategy and policies that stop people living in chaos and not being able to get to work or go on holiday.

Chris Grayling: What the hon. Gentleman needs are policies that invest money in rail in the north to deliver—as I know is happening at his station—new trains to replace long out-of-date trains and provide more services for passengers. That is what we are aiming to do and what we are doing.

Local Roads

4. **Alan Mak (Havant) (Con):** What steps the Government are taking to improve the condition of local roads. [907767]

12. **Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab):** What steps the Government are taking to improve the condition of roads in residential areas. [907777]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): The Department for Transport is providing over £6.6 billion to local highway authorities in England between 2015 and 2021 to improve the condition of

local roads. That includes a £296 million pothole action fund and the additional £420 million for local highways maintenance announced in Budget 2018.

Alan Mak: Many councils now use technology to enable residents to report road-related problems. Will my hon. Friend encourage the greater use of digital apps and technology tools to make councils more accountable for the road issues in their area?

Jesse Norman: I am well aware of my hon. Friend's interest in technology and the potential ways in which it can improve productivity. He is absolutely right, and I encourage all councils to use technology better as far as possible for residents to report road-related problems. As he will be aware, they do so in Hampshire, where the county council uses an online reporting tool, but the Department has also done work to support this, not least through assistance to Cycling UK to revamp its pothole reporting website.

Helen Goodman: I hope that the Minister will find £60 million for County Durham. In the meantime, new estates are being built without proper roads. Instead of overseeing this 21st-century squalor, will he talk to his colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to require the planning rules to be changed so that roads are built to adoptable standards?

Jesse Norman: The hon. Lady will be surprised to know that there is a housing infrastructure fund that is in part precisely designed to facilitate the relationship between road building and new housing, and of course, that is what it is doing.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is not so much the condition of local roads but the amount of obstructions on them, from double parking to kerbside parking to parking in bus and cycle lanes. Rather than waiting for traffic management orders, which can be quite binary, to come into place, would it not be better for the Department to issue guidance on the definition of "obstruction", so that more local authorities can deal with it in a flexible way that means that motorists are not being penalised in an unreasonable manner?

Jesse Norman: Gosh, I am going to resist the temptation to bring in the casuists to discuss the question of how obstruction is to be defined, but I direct my hon. Friend, without giving too much of a sneak preview, to the work that we have done—announced today in a written ministerial statement—on the cycling and walking safety report, which includes enforcement against parking in mandatory cycle lanes for precisely the reasons that he indicates.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): This week is Road Safety Week, yet investment on minor roads has fallen by 40% since 2010 and the number of potholes is rapidly increasing, leaving 17% of local roads in England in poor condition, according to the Asphalt Industry Alliance. The Department's own figures show that there have been 13 deaths and 192 cyclists seriously injured since 2010 on roads that have a defective road surface. In this week of all weeks, how can the Government defend their record on maintaining local roads?

Jesse Norman: I am not sure where to begin with that. If the hon. Gentleman looks carefully at the work of the RAC Foundation, he will discover that, in relative terms, the number of potholes on our roads spiked between the years 2005 and 2010 and has been coming down slowly but steadily, more or less, ever since.

Matt Rodda: Is the Minister in all sincerity denying the evidence of the Asphalt Industry Alliance, which carried out a detailed survey of local authorities, which showed that there is a backlog of a minimum of £9 billion of work on potholes?

Jesse Norman: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman might want to look at a wider range of sources than just the Asphalt Industry Alliance for his information about the use of asphalt in filling potholes, but the issue is a serious one. He will know that I have made clear my interest not merely in an in-year road settlement of £420 million for potholes, which the Government have just passed and which is highly welcome, but in a more strategic approach to local roads funding over the next five years.

Engineering: Girls and People from Ethnic Backgrounds

5. Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to encourage more girls and people from ethnic backgrounds to pursue a career in engineering. [907768]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): My Department launched the Year of Engineering to increase the number and diversity of engineers across the UK and to address the engineering skills gap. I am indebted to my hon. Friend for his tireless work as he criss-crossed the country, working with 1,400 partners to help us to deliver 1 million experiences to young people in his role as ambassador, or envoy, for the Year of Engineering, focusing particularly on girls and people from ethnic-minority backgrounds.

Stephen Metcalfe: Over the past year, I have been greatly encouraged by the reaction that I have seen from young people as they come into direct contact with inspiring engineers from all backgrounds. Does my hon. Friend share my commitment to finding a way to carry on the good work of the Year of Engineering, so that we can continue to push the message that engineering is open to everyone, regardless of background, ethnicity and gender?

Ms Ghani: Absolutely. We are building on the legacy of this year, working with organisations ranging from Siemens, FIFA and Apple to the Science Museum, and we are committed to building on that work so that even more young people understand and appreciate the success of a career in engineering.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) on the success of the Year of Engineering in promoting engineering as a fantastic career for everyone, but engineering is not just for one year; it is forever. Will the Minister follow Labour's example and produce a diversity charter for the transport sector, so that the numerous initiatives—which

are all very good in their own way—can be brought together, and we can see concrete progress and, most importantly, measure it?

Ms Ghani: The Year of Engineering has been a collaborative project involving more than 1,400 firms and partners. One of their objectives was to reach out to communities that may not have had experience of engineering. We have had some successes: young people in primary schools are thinking about engineering as a career, as are older students. We will work with our partners and see what more we can do, building on the work that we have done this year.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I had an opportunity to visit Northern Ireland with the hon. Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe), and we thank him for coming. Northern Ireland has seen a 5% rise in female engineering students in the past two years. Does the Minister intend to target children in key stage 3, to initiate a passion for engineering in the early stages of secondary school applications?

Ms Ghani: Absolutely. We fully appreciate that girls in particular can close their minds to engineering at quite an early stage, at primary school. We want to work with young students throughout their school lives to ensure that they realise that it is a good career, and one that is open to them.

Southeastern

6. **Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab):** What recent discussions his Department has had with Southeastern on (a) timetabling and (b) performance standards. [907769]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): The franchise agreement between the Department and train operators includes key performance benchmarks. The Department monitors each train operator against those levels, and that includes regular meetings with their senior management team at which performance figures are scrutinised and challenged. A range of enforcement mechanisms are available to the Department in the event of non-compliance.

Matthew Pennycook: Given their experience in recent years, many of my constituents are looking to the next operator of the Southeastern franchise to significantly improve timetabling performance. With that end in mind, will the Minister—whom I warmly welcome to his post—confirm that the Department still expects to announce the winning bidder this month and reassure passengers that the start of the new franchise will not be delayed?

Andrew Jones: The level of performance management in that area is 91.2%, which is high across our railways. I will write to the hon. Gentleman with full details of the answer that he has requested.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister on taking up his post. My constituents could be forgiven for thinking that new Rail Ministers turn up more frequently than Southeastern trains.

Public performance measures are currently below their 2010 level. They are running below their target and are not due to reach it until 2025. Does that not show that privatisation is not working for my constituents, and it is time that Southeastern was brought under public control and the Mayor of London?

Andrew Jones: I would just highlight to the hon. Gentleman that the railways are carrying significantly more passengers. On his privatisation point, privatisation has turned around our railways: after decades of decline under British Rail, we have seen passenger numbers grow from 750 million to 1.7 billion. We have one of the most intensively used, fastest growing and safest railways in Europe. Privatisation is the answer.

East Coast Main Line Route Study

7. **Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind):** What decisions on railway investment he plans to make as a result of the recent east coast main line route study. [907771]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): The Department is investing up to £780 million to upgrade the east coast main line from 2019. The works are to be completed in the early 2020s and will enable faster, more frequent journeys with more seats. Building upon those works, the east coast main line route study has identified a broad range of investment choices. We are working closely with Transport for the North, Network Rail and High Speed 2 Ltd to assess which enhancements should be taken forward.

Kelvin Hopkins: In 1990, British Rail ran an express train from King's Cross to Edinburgh with track cleared of other traffic in 3 hours and 30 minutes, including a two-minute stop at Newcastle. This was less time than planned for HS2, and with some additional four-tracking and two rail flyovers, the east coast main line could run regular 140 mph services in such times, and with the existing stock. Will Ministers look positively at such investment, as first proposed long ago by British Rail?

Andrew Jones: The key point to make is that we are carrying significantly more passengers on the east coast main line, and this investment will enable it to deliver faster and more frequent journeys with more seats between London and Edinburgh.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I welcome the Minister back to the Dispatch Box. He will know from his previous time in the Department of my campaign for better train services into northern Lincolnshire, particularly a direct service from King's Cross. May I invite him to visit northern Lincolnshire and to travel by train—a wonderful experience—and meet the major businesses in the area who have joined my campaign?

Andrew Jones: I always enjoy my visits to north Lincolnshire and will happily take up my hon. Friend's invitation.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): As the Minister will be aware, the east coast main line goes through my constituency of East Lothian. Can he confirm that,

following this review, the stations at East Linton and Reston in my neighbouring constituency are still on task to be reopened?

Andrew Jones: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is already in discussions on this very issue, and we will get back to the hon. Gentleman with detailed answers.

Mr Speaker: I call the hon. Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker) to ask Question 8. He is not here.

Cycling and Walking

9. **Mr Bob Seely** (Isle of Wight) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to encourage cycling and walking. [907774]

10. **Emma Dent Coad** (Kensington) (Lab): What steps he is taking to promote the take-up of cycling and walking. [907775]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): The Department will today publish a response to its recent call for evidence on improving cycling and walking safety. This will set out a vision and a two-year plan of action, with some 50 actions. It will also include a summary of the many steps the Government have taken to encourage cycling and walking and the significant additional funding that has been made available under the cycling and walking investment strategy.

Mr Seely: When will there potentially be a new round of funding to support new and upgraded cycle routes such as the planned cycle route in West Wight between Newport, Yarmouth and Freshwater, which will significantly improve our cycling offer on the island?

Jesse Norman: The Government have made available £1.2 billion under the cycling and walking investment strategy, and that has been supplemented by a range of other funds since then, including the local growth fund. Further funding is to be made available through the highways infrastructure fund and the future high-street funding programme just announced in the Budget. Further funding from 2020-21 onwards will be a matter for the spending review.

Emma Dent Coad: Some 5% of my constituents cycle to work, which is double the national average. However, CrashMap shows the number of accidents between my home and Parliament Square and that has frightened me off taking the plunge. In addition, today is our third day in a row of poor air quality alerts. Will the Minister please tell me, in road safety week, what we are doing to tackle the scourge of poor vision and behaviour of construction and delivery lorries and the problem of air quality, which are, literally, a deadly combination?

Jesse Norman: We are addressing these issues with the utmost seriousness. Today, we are publishing a cycling and walking safety review, with 50 actions designed to pull together a whole suite of Government policies and set in motion further work specifically designed to improve not merely cycling and walking safety, but also air quality and the fight on issues of health and obesity,

and to improve access to high streets and economic productivity, all of which go to many of the general points the hon. Lady raises.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Following the success of the Tour of Britain in 2016, the Cheshire East Council leader called Congleton

“The heart of cycling in Cheshire East”,

and town councillor Suzie Akers Smith, who is mayor of Congleton this year, in our 700th year of having a mayor, made cycling her flagship project. Yet despite leading the development of a cycling masterplan for Congleton in 2016, more than two years later, after a number of funding applications and more than 400 meetings, Councillor Akers Smith has been unable to make any progress to obtain material substantive support for her project. Will the Minister meet me and the mayor to discuss this?

Jesse Norman: I am delighted to hear that Congleton has been declared the centre of cycling in Cheshire East, and I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the problem in more detail.

Air Travel: Disabled People

11. **Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): What steps he is taking to make air travel more accessible for disabled people. [907776]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The Government recognise and are addressing the needs of disabled passengers who choose to travel by air. This forms an important part of the new aviation strategy, which we are developing, and the inclusive transport strategy, which I published in July. The Government are considering what more can be done to ensure that disabled passengers have equal access to air travel and the confidence to travel independently. We will consult on options in a Green Paper, due to be published by the end of the year.

Helen Whately: I welcome the Government's work. Tomorrow, my private Member's Bill is due for its Second Reading. It sets out steps to improve the experience for disabled passengers, from car parking to getting on and off planes and, crucially, reducing damage to wheelchairs. Do I have the Government's support for my Bill and my efforts overall to ensure that air travel is more accessible for everyone?

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend's Bill raises vital issues. I commend her for all her campaigning work and thank her for the opportunity to meet her and her constituents to discuss the matter. It is crucial that disabled air passengers are able to travel in comfort and with dignity, and independently if they wish. That is why we will continue to work with the Civil Aviation Authority to secure improvements throughout the industry.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): There have been many reports recently of disabled people suffering poor service when travelling by plane, yet we still await publication of the aviation strategy, which might offer some reassurance to disabled air passengers. Why has the strategy not been published? When will it be published?

Ms Ghani: The aviation strategy is due to be published, but the hon. Gentleman will have had sight of the inclusive transport strategy, which covers many elements of work to be done by the Civil Aviation Authority to ensure that accessibility, dignity and independent travel are delivered for passengers with disability as they are for passengers without disability.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Disabled access is equally important in our rail stations across the United Kingdom, which is why the Access for All scheme that my hon. Friend has commissioned is fantastic. I know that Montrose station in my constituency has already benefited. When will the next round of funding be released for the bids sent in?

Mr Speaker: The question is supposed to be about air, but I will allow a degree of flexibility.

Ms Ghani: Thank you, Mr Speaker. That is very kind of you. The Access for All fund has £300 million, and we had more than 300 applications. Decisions on the stations that will be able to receive that extra funding will be made early next year.

Bus Journeys

13. **Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the number of bus journeys. [907778]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Local bus passenger journeys account for about 59% of all journeys made on public transport. The number of local bus passenger journeys in England fell by 1.5% to just over 4 billion in the year ending March 2017. The Bus Services Act 2017 introduced new powers for authorities and operators to work together to improve local bus services and grow passenger numbers.

Afzal Khan: Evidence shows that regulating buses improves services and bus patronage, so why are the Government siding with the bus companies rather than passengers by refusing to give councils such as Manchester's powers to take back control of local buses?

Ms Ghani: The hon. Gentleman seems confused. When you wait for a bus, three come along at once: over £13 million of bus service operators grant has been made available to Manchester; the transforming cities fund has given the mayoral authority £312 million to drive up intercity connectivity; and, moreover, the Mayor has the authority to ask for franchising, but he has not—I suggest that the hon. Gentleman and his Mayor just jump on the bus and ask for it.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Late-running and cancelled buses cause just as much misery for people as late-running and cancelled trains. We talk a lot in this Chamber about the trains, but it is also happening on the buses at the moment. The Transport Committee has heard about the problems in Bristol, and there is misery on the buses in Cambridge. What assessment has the Minister made of bus punctuality, particularly the effect of bus driver shortages?

Ms Ghani: I have been following the Select Committee inquiry very closely. It is interesting that the hon. Gentleman mentions Bristol, because bus passenger numbers have gone up by 42%. He raises a valid point, because punctuality, the timing of bus arrivals and departures, and journey times are key to increasing bus patronage, which is why we are increasing funding to make sure that information is available.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Since 2010, bus funding has been almost halved, fares have been increased by over 50% and thousands of routes have been cut, shrinking the network to its smallest size in decades. Does the Minister agree with the United Nations assessment of Tory transport policy:

“Abandoning people to the private market in relation to a service that affects every dimension of their basic well-being is incompatible with human rights requirements.”?

Ms Ghani: I would rather stick to the facts. We make over £1 billion of funding available for concessionary bus passes every year, and we continue to be committed to that. Some £250 million is paid to support bus services up and down the country. There is no denying that there are challenges in some parts of the country. However, the hon. Gentleman forgets to note that bus patronage is up by 42% in Bristol, up by 38% in South Gloucestershire and up by 31% in Central Bedfordshire. There are services that are working right, and local authorities are working with bus providers to make sure that up-to-date information is available.

Andy McDonald: Just as Conservative Members ridicule complaints about the state of our roads, the Government have dismissed the UN report as political. Let me tell the Minister that the decision to axe vital public services to fund tax cuts for millionaires, now that is political. Now the Prime Minister has declared that austerity is over, will the Minister commit to reversing these cruel and harmful cuts that are denying people their human rights?

Ms Ghani: I am afraid that Labour Front Benchers have run out of anything positive to say about any part of our transport infrastructure, even to support buses across the country. As I said, there is £1 billion of funding for concessionary bus travel. We are making franchising available to those mayoral authorities that wish to take it up, but they refuse to do so. *[Interruption.]* I do not know whether this is just going to go back and forth, but the fact is that we are putting funding into bus services, making sure they are greener, making sure that more information is available and making sure that more people can catch a bus.

TOCs: Derogations from Franchise Obligations

14. **Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): What criteria his Department uses to assess train operating company requests for derogations from franchise obligations. [907779]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): A derogation is a deferral of a contracted obligation. Requests for derogations are assessed by considering the operator's reasoning on why delivering

as contracted is not possible and the impact of the proposed deferral. Derogations will not be agreed if requested retrospectively.

Richard Graham: I am grateful to the rail Minister, who will know that, in its 2017 franchise award, CrossCountry's intercity service was required to make two additional stops a day in the city of Gloucester, once the Network Rail works at Filton Bank are completed at the end of this year. Will the Minister celebrate his return to the Department for Transport by saying when this derogation will come to an end and when the operator will deliver those two additional services a day?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend is a long-standing campaigner on this issue. He is right to say that we want to see the services in the franchise resumed. The derogation was granted in March, and I know he has met my predecessor to discuss this issue. The works at Filton Bank are progressing, but this is a complex project. It is firmly on my radar, but perhaps I may ask him to meet me so that we can review the project and I can update him.

A19: Safety Improvements

15. **Mr Stephen Hepburn** (Jarrow) (Lab): What recent steps his Department has taken to improve road safety on the A19. [907780]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): Since 2011, Highways England has delivered safety improvements at many locations on the A19, and more are planned or are under way. For example, works to improve safety at Sheraton have commenced and are expected to complete by spring 2019. A safety review was undertaken along the A19 from Dishforth to the Tyne tunnel in summer 2018, in order to inform further interventions.

Mr Hepburn: The Minister will be aware that this week is Road Safety Week, and my two local newspapers, *The Shields Gazette* and the *Sunderland Echo*, are running a "Safe A19" campaign, backed by the local MPs. Bearing in mind that the Department's safer roads fund was underspent by £75 million last year, will he commit funds to the A19 to alleviate local concerns?

Jesse Norman: I am grateful for the question. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, the study of the A19's safety has already been completed and is being analysed at the moment. The £75 million to which he refers was not underspent; the whole fund was used for the 50 schemes that were applied for and was fully discharged for that.

Free Ports

16. **Douglas Chapman** (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential merits of creating free ports in the UK. [907781]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The Government have been clear that they are open to ideas that deliver economic advantages

in the UK. Section 100A of the Customs and Excise Management Act 1979 provides the legal basis for the designation of free zones by the Treasury and will continue to do so following the UK's withdrawal from the EU. Applying for designation as a free zone will be a commercial decision to be taken by private port operators.

Douglas Chapman: We are in uncharted waters as regards Brexit, and the danger is that Scottish exporters will not be able to access their European markets in the same way as they have done pre-Brexit. Does the Minister agree that this is the time to advantage ports such as Rosyth in my constituency and make sure that we have a strong ports sector in the future? Free ports would add into the benefits associated with doing that.

Ms Ghani: The cost and benefits of free port status will depend on the final outcome of the Brexit negotiations, but we in the Department are preparing for all outcomes. The hon. Gentleman will know that I will continue to work as hard as I can to ensure that our ports sector is promoted, and continues to be efficient and as competitive as possible.

Strategic Road Network

17. **Neil O'Brien** (Harborough) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve the strategic road network. [907782]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): The Government have a massive investment programme taking place in our strategic road network, where we have just announced £25.3 billion for Highways England for the next road investment period. We are also committed to a substantial investment in the major road network, the next tier down of roads, and indeed in large local major roads, where some important connecting projects are needed around the country.

Neil O'Brien: The A6 in Kibworth in my constituency has a major problem with air quality and congestion every morning. Will the Secretary of State look closely, as part of plans for the major route network, at proposals from Leicestershire to solve that serious problem?

Chris Grayling: I hope the major road network fund will enable us to deal with problems such as the one my hon. Friend has identified. The A6 is one of the roads I expect to be eligible for that funding. I am pleased that we are moving ahead with that and particularly pleased with the first schemes we announced. We are doing what the Labour party never did, which is looking after Barrow-in-Furness and finally get rid of the Grizebeck bottleneck on the A595. That is the kind of thing Conservatives do for the north and Labour never did.

Leaving the EU: Aviation Sector

18. **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What steps his Department is taking to help the aviation sector prepare for the UK leaving the EU. [907783]

19. **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential effect on the viability of the aviation sector of the UK leaving the EU. [907784]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): The UK Government and European Commission have agreed in principle that the two sides should negotiate a comprehensive air transport agreement, and the Department is working closely with the aviation sector to ensure its requirements are factored into the negotiations.

Martyn Day: The draft withdrawal agreement will have done little to alleviate the uncertainty of the aviation industry, and with the post-Brexit relationship yet to be negotiated and the risk of no deal increasing, can the Minister confirm whether the aviation agreement talks, which the Secretary of State earlier this month said were ready to start, have now begun? When does the Minister expect them to be concluded?

Jesse Norman: The hon. Gentleman is a keen student of Adam Smith and he will therefore know that free trade is constantly something that both sides will benefit from and will seek to derive gain. The conversations that he mentions continue and both sides have a strong interest in reaching a deal. That should be no cause for surprise, because the President of the European Council said on 7 March:

“I am determined to avoid that particularly absurd consequence of Brexit that is the disruption of flights between the UK and the EU”,

and he was right.

Chris Elmore: Less than a month ago, the Secretary of State told the aviation conference that it was theoretically possible that the European Aviation Safety Agency could refuse or delay the certification of UK-certified planes. Now we have even less time before we leave the EU, so can the Minister offer any more certainty to the aviation sector?

Jesse Norman: I can do no better than to remind the hon. Gentleman of the notice that was published on 13 November which said specifically that there would be reciprocity in operations between the UK and the EU in the air transport sector, that aviation safety certificates would remain valid for a period of time, and that passengers and cabin luggage from the UK would not need to be rescreened. This all points to the likelihood of a perfectly good, sensible and comprehensive agreement.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Will the Minister tell us whether Airbus, which is critical for Bristol jobs, and the other manufacturing industries in its supply chain will be able to maintain planes and move parts between the UK and the EU exactly as before if there is no deal?

Jesse Norman: As the hon. Lady knows, we expect there to be a deal and there is every reason for there to be a deal. Contingency arrangements are already in place, and I would direct her to the technical notices that have been published on this topic.

Crossrail: Mayor of London

20. **Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con):** What recent discussions he has had with the Mayor of London on progress on delivering Crossrail. [907787]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): The Secretary of State has regular discussions with the Mayor of London covering a variety of subjects, including progress on delivering Crossrail.

Alex Burghart: There have been reports in the media that Transport for London's finances are in trouble. Crossrail reaches out into my constituency, with stations at Brentwood and Shenfield. Is the Minister concerned by these reports, and will this affect the delivery of Crossrail?

Andrew Jones: TfL's finances are a matter for the Mayor of London, and Crossrail is a 100%-owned subsidiary of TfL. It is becoming clearer how the Mayor's policies are causing long-term problems with TfL's finances, but the Government will continue to work with TfL as joint sponsors to oversee Crossrail's delivery of the new railway as soon as possible.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What discussions has my hon. Friend had with the Mayor of London about the funding that the Department for Transport provides to London for Crossrail?

Andrew Jones: I know that the conversations involving the Secretary of State are extensive. I have not personally had any yet, as this is day 6, but I intend to pick up on those conversations in order to support my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before we come to topical questions, I want to advise the House of a change in the order of business. After topical questions, we were due to have an urgent question on Bombardier, followed by the business question. In fact, what is now going to happen is that after topical questions we will have the business question, and after that there will be a ministerial statement on Bombardier. I have agreed to a request for such a change to be made. The rationale for it is not something that I need to go into now, but I am advising the House so that colleagues can make their preparations accordingly.

Topical Questions

T1. [907789] **Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I shall start with some good news for the south-west. A couple of months ago, I announced that we would be extending the current public service obligation on flights from Newquay to Gatwick. I also spoke at the Dispatch Box about the potential benefits for Newquay airport and the south-west of a direct link to Heathrow, once Heathrow expands. I am pleased to say that that link is going to happen sooner, and that it will be starting in the spring of next year, supported by the Government. I think that it will provide a really good boost to business in the south-west, providing it with connections to important destinations around the world.

Gillian Keegan: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. The A27 in Chichester is at capacity and that is restricting economic growth. The local councils have approved their local plan review, which is now out for public consultation and, as is required to pass the process, it includes minor improvements to the road. The strategic solution, however, is the only viable answer

to the problems with the A27. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that it is still the Department's intention to fund major road improvements around Chichester in the recently increased road investment strategy 2—RIS2—budget?

Chris Grayling: I know how important this is to my hon. Friend and to many of her constituents. She will know that the divisions of opinion in the local community have put the project back by a number of years. I do not want to give her undue cause for optimism about its position in the queue, because it was certainly a setback when the local authority decided to reject Highways England's plans, but it remains the view of the Government and Highways England that improvements in the area around her constituency will be necessary in the future.

T2. [907790] **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): In my recent community consultation, I heard growing concerns about bus services and prices, particularly from young people. Sheffield fares are as high as £3 for journeys of little more than a mile and a half. Throughout the country we have seen a 12-year low in the number of bus journeys. The spiral of decline started with Tory deregulation in the 1980s, but since 2010 bus budgets across England and Wales have been cut by 45%. When are the Government going to recognise that we need a new approach?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Bus patronage is different up and down the country. Those local authorities that work closely with their bus operators and use technology and concessionary fares appropriately see an increase in bus patronage. I mentioned earlier the areas in which patronage is going up—it is up 22% in Brighton and Hove—and there are areas throughout the country where younger people are jumping on buses, too. It is about making it work better, collectively; it is not just about money—even though there is more than £1 billion for concessionary fares and we have invested £250 million in bus services.

T3. [907791] **Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Disruption on the M20, M26 and all roads in Kent is having a serious impact on the county's economy. Schools are reporting that as many as 15% of students are getting in late, and businesses are already preparing for shift working in case their employees cannot get to work. That will cost serious time and serious money. A combination of works on the M26 and overnight closures on the M20 not ending until 6 am are causing the problems. My hon. Friends the Members for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) and for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) and I have already written to Highways England for answers. Will the Minister explain to residents, schools and businesses in Kent just what he, Highways England and Kent County Council are doing to keep Kent moving?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): My hon. Friend will know, because we have met on many occasions and discussed this matter in the Chamber, that the Department is very focused on concerns in the south-east. Highways England is carrying out works on the M20 smart motorway scheme between junctions 3 and 5. That work is about relieving congestion and improving journeys. Of course, some disruption is

inevitable—that goes with major programmes of road investment—but I will ask Highways England to investigate the effect of the current roadworks, and in particular the timing of the overnight closures on the M20.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): If the Government really are serious about Northern Powerhouse Rail, will they commit to giving it precedence over Crossrail 2? Will they also commit to starting with the route from Hull to Leeds, as that part of the track has had very little investment over the years?

Chris Grayling: We remain absolutely committed to Northern Powerhouse Rail. I have been clear that the two projects—Crossrail 2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail—must march in lockstep. The hon. Lady will be aware that we have just provided an additional £40 million for the continuing development of Northern Powerhouse Rail. Transport for the North is working on the business case right now. We provided for passive provision for Northern Powerhouse Rail in the structure of HS2, so the necessary junctions will be there. We are very committed to the project.

T4. [907794] **Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Following the massive reductions in bus services in parts of Stoke-on-Trent, does my hon. Friend agree that it is essential to take action to strengthen the local bus market to improve services in the city?

Ms Ghani: Absolutely. The Bus Services Act 2017 introduced a number of new tools to help local authorities to improve local bus services, including through partnership working and franchising. Stoke-on-Trent City Council has not yet engaged with my Department about using the new powers available, but we are working together to develop its proposals for the transforming cities fund. I was delighted that the council successfully applied for a share of the £1.7 billion fund.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): Crime is soaring on the railways. It is up a fifth in the past year, and that is fuelled by a spike in sexual offences, which are up 16%, and violent crimes, which are up 26%. The highest increases are in areas where trains operate without guards—just one symptom of our broken franchise model. The guards in the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers are striking for passenger safety on Northern rail. Why will Ministers not follow the evidence and end the expansion of driver-only operation?

Chris Grayling: The problem is that even in areas where there is an offer to the RMT that guards will remain on the trains, they are still on strike. This strike is not about safety—the national safety regulator for the railways has said that it is nothing to do with safety. We are trying to deliver a better railway, and the reality is that if guards are not standing at the back of trains waiting to press a button, they are better able to look after passengers. It is also worth saying that on the new trains that are being introduced by this Government right across the country, the introduction of closed circuit television will make a real difference to safety. May I also pay tribute to the work of the British Transport police? They do an excellent job in trying to protect passengers on the railways.

T5. [907796] **Chris Davies** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Will the Minister inform the House what progress is being made on creating apprentices in the transport sector?

Ms Ghani: There has been good progress, but we are committed to doing more. Leading transport employers are committed to providing quality apprenticeships, and more than 5,000 apprenticeships have been created in road and rail since 2016. In 2017-18 alone, we have seen a 22% on-year increase. Employers have committed to 10,000 apprenticeships with Heathrow expansion and 8,000 in express delivery. Training places for maritime cadets will rise to 1,200 each year over the next seven years, and we have seen 1,300 apprenticeship starts in road freight, but we are committed to doing more.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): We have known for five decades that there were 4,000 holes in Blackburn, Lancashire, but the number in Gateshead now far outstrips that—potholes I am talking about. When will we get some resources to the local authorities to mend the holes in our roads and to give drivers much-needed alleviation from the problem?

Jesse Norman: I absolutely understand the hon. Gentleman's concern. As I have already pointed out, the spike in potholes, to which he refers, originally occurred between 2005 and 2010. He asks when, and the answer is in the previous Budget where a specific £420 million in-year contribution was made. I do not have the numbers to hand, but if I did I have no doubt that I would find that multiple millions of pounds have been spent in his highway authority locally on potholes as a direct result of that funding announcement.

T6. [907797] **Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): Following our summer of severe service disruption that saw Northern rail cancel more than 12,000 services, will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss how we can ensure that it does not happen next year? More importantly, though, can we also discuss the building of the South Fylde line, which will see the doubling of the service from once an hour to every half an hour, as it will be a huge boost to the Fylde coast?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): We have been very clear that disruption following the introduction of the May timetable was entirely unacceptable. I would, of course, be very happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss his proposals and the work that is under way to ensure that we minimise the risk of disruption for future timetable changes.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Ministers will be aware of the work that is being carried out by Bridgend County Borough Council, me and my Assembly Member to try to close the Pencoed level crossing following safety concerns. Network Rail is now agreeing to regular meetings to try to progress the closure. It tells me that it needs more funding from the Department for Transport. Wales Office officials have now agreed to attend these three-monthly meetings to be able to progress the closure and improve infrastructure. Will Ministers now agree to their officials attending these meetings so that we can make some progress on closing this dangerous level crossing?

Andrew Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I have to say that I am not immediately familiar with that particular level crossing, but I will, of course, look into it and get back to him with the answer.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) is in a category of her own. She is the only hon. Member standing who has thus far not asked a question this morning. I know that colleagues will agree, in a spirit of equality, that their own need is secondary to hers.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): What assessment has my right hon. Friend made of the review into non-statutory property schemes for High Speed 2, and why did it fail to deliver a bespoke package for Long Eaton, which has been promised by Ministers on more than one occasion?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend and I have had many discussions about Long Eaton. I am very keen to make sure that we have done the right thing by the different people affected by the proposed railway line through Long Eaton, whether it is the businesses affected or the people who live in the railway cottages. If there are things that we are not yet doing, I suggest that she and I sit down and go through it again.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It costs me more to get a bus a few stops up the West Road in Newcastle than to cross the whole of London. It costs more to get a bus from Newcastle to Amble—30 miles—than to get a bus from London to Newcastle—290 miles. Can we have a comparative study of the cost of bus travel in Newcastle under a Tory Government and in London under a Labour Mayor?

Ms Ghani: Managing bus fares and having transparency on bus fares will further encourage bus patronage. Those bus companies that make bus fares available and public will always see an increase in bus patronage. We are working with the bus sector to do what we can to make sure that this information is available, just as it can be available on journey times and at stops, too.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement and the Department for Transport's ongoing commitment to connecting Cornwall. What assessment has he made in light of today's announcement on Heathrow of the potential for exports from Cornish businesses and for inbound tourism, and of their effect on the Cornish economy?

Chris Grayling: Improving transport connections for the south-west is essential, and it is one of the parts of the country that needs those improved transport links. A range of things are happening: the number of local trains within Devon and Cornwall is increasing, new trains are now serving that route, and road improvements have taken place. Now, there will be a better link for business into Heathrow airport. This is all part of making sure that we deliver on our promises for better transport in the south-west.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order.

Business of the House

10.35 am

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

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

MONDAY 26 NOVEMBER—A general debate on the 100-year anniversary of the Royal Air Force.

TUESDAY 27 NOVEMBER—Second Reading of the Courts and Tribunals (Judiciary and Functions of Staff) Bill [*Lords*].

WEDNESDAY 28 NOVEMBER—Remaining stages of the Offensive Weapons Bill.

THURSDAY 29 NOVEMBER—A general debate on improving education standards.

FRIDAY 30 NOVEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

This week marks the centenary of the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918, which first allowed women in the UK to become MPs. Since then, 489 women have been elected to Parliament, compared with more than 4,500 men. Clearly, we have a way to go to achieve a 50:50 Parliament, but I was encouraged to see so many enthusiastic women come to Westminster yesterday, including some of my constituents, as part of the Ask Her to Stand campaign.

This week is also Road Safety Week, an initiative to inspire thousands of schools, organisations and communities to take action on road safety and promote life-saving messages. I was pleased to provide time for debate on this vital issue earlier this month.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the short business statement. Again, the date for the Easter recess has not been fixed. I remind the Leader of the House that Easter is on 21 April, so it cannot be beyond the Government's capability to work out the recess dates around that. Will she also say what the position is on the sitting days for consideration of private Members' Bills?

There is nothing but a general debate on two of the days next week. Will the Leader of the House confirm that the Prime Minister will make a statement following the special summit of the EU on 25 November, whether it has been postponed or not, as I understand that the Prime Minister is also meeting Jean-Claude Juncker?

I want to correct the record. Last week's *Official Report* makes ghastly reading. The Leader of the House said that she wanted to see some evidence, but obviously she was not in the Chamber—she was discussing the deal at No. 10—when a number of points of order were raised about when Parliament would be told about the deal. There was genuine disbelief from hon. Members of all parties that there was a suggestion of a press conference at 9 pm. When I raised that in a point of order, a journalist emailed saying, "We need to have our dinner—why are you saying 9? We have been told that the deal will be announced at 7." That is one piece of evidence. The second is that the Government ended the business early so that there was no opportunity for the Prime Minister to come to the House and make a statement that day. There were no discussions through the usual channels about the Prime Minister making a

statement to the House first. I read the ministerial code into the record last week and it clearly says that important statements must be made in the House first. We are not a vassal Parliament with an overbearing, non-accountable Executive.

Last week, I also asked the Leader of the House about the provision of the legal advice on the proposed withdrawal agreement. That does not have a 12-week deadline. In her evidence to the Select Committee on Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs on Monday, she said that the Government will seek to do that whenever possible while not undermining either the law or long-standing constitutional conventions. We are not asking for legal advice every day. We are just asking for the legal advice on this most important issue that confronts our country—these are extraordinary circumstances. The House has resolved on a Humble Address calling for the advice to be published. We do not want a position statement; we want the advice to be published.

Curiously, the Leader of the House seems to want to abide by some conventions but not others. Will she abide by the convention of collective Cabinet responsibility? The Cabinet agreed the deal last Wednesday, but by the weekend the Leader of the House and the gang of five were meeting to say that they were going to make amendments to the agreement. May I ask how that is going? Will the Leader of the House be abiding by the convention of Cabinet responsibility, or will the gang of five be tabling lashings of amendments?

I ask that because the Procedure Committee's eighth report of Session 2017-19, "Motions under section 13(1) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018", calls for a bespoke business of the House order and amendments to the motion to be decided on first. Will the Leader of the House confirm whether the Government have responded to the Procedure Committee's report, and if not, when they will respond? On that note, will she say when the meaningful vote on the deal will take place, and whether we are going to have a debate before the vote?

On the home front, the Government conceded on our amendments to the Finance Bill. The Opposition made a powerful case, which was clearly so compelling that the Government accepted our amendments. Given that those proposals were in our manifesto, there is a serious point to be raised: are the Opposition in a confidence and supply agreement with the Government? Should the Government not step aside and either let the Opposition govern or have a general election?

The Leader of the House mentioned two general debates. Could we have a debate on the visit to the United Kingdom by Philip Alston, the United Nations rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights? His report is very succinct. If we have a debate, we can hear what the Government have to say about it, and other parties can also put their views.

The London Eye was finally lit up in suffragette colours yesterday. Hon. Members—men and women from across the House—went to the Terrace as we celebrated the centenary of some women getting the vote. Let us remember that on the Opposition side, our parliamentary party is made up of 45% women. That is more than all the other parties put together. [*Interruption.*] Our positive action—[*Interruption.*] Let me just finish. So our positive action—[*Interruption.*] Ooh, very sensitive!

Our positive action is like a pyramid; we have a solid base. We, too, had two female leaders, and I can say to the House that they were not acting—they were doing it for real. However, it is good to celebrate a House that represents the full diversity of our country.

Finally, I want to send Harry Leslie Smith our good wishes for a speedy recovery. Harry is a political commentator and outspoken campaigner against austerity and the privatisation of the NHS. He is a former RAF pilot and a veteran of the second world war. He is in hospital, and we wish him a speedy recovery.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for going through a smörgåsbord of different subjects, as she always does.

On Easter recesses, we have talked about this a great deal. I have gently pointed out to the hon. Lady, on every occasion, that her party's Government, when in office, were extremely tardy in announcing Easter recess dates. I, on the other hand, have been pleased to announce Christmas recess dates and February recess dates, and I will announce Easter recess dates in due course. She will appreciate that there is some quite serious business to be got through in this place before we recess for Easter.

The hon. Lady asks about private Members' Bills. She will be aware, no doubt, that I have tabled a motion to provide the House with an additional three sitting Fridays, and that this motion has been objected to. I am keen for the House to have more days to debate private Members' Bills, and I will bring another motion back very soon.

On the PM's statement, as always, the Prime Minister makes a statement to the House as soon as she is able to, particularly after EU Council matters, and particularly at the present time when she fully respects that this House needs to know exactly what is going on with regard to the UK leaving the European Union. Frankly, I am sorry, but I just did not understand what the hon. Lady was suggesting needed correcting in the record. The Prime Minister came to the House last week as soon as she was able to. There was no sense in which the Government finished the business early. The House finished the business early—it was nothing to do with the Government.

The hon. Lady asks about legal advice with reference to the Humble Address that her party put forward. As I have said, there is a legitimate desire in Parliament from Members of all parties to understand the legal implications of the deal once it is finalised. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has agreed that the Government will make available to all Members of the House a full, reasoned position statement laying out the Government's legal position on the withdrawal agreement, and that the Attorney General will assist further by making an oral statement and taking questions in the normal way. We have always said that Parliament will have the appropriate information ahead of the vote on the final deal.

The hon. Lady asks about the gang of five. There is no gang of five, and there never was. She might think that everything she reads in the papers is true, but on the Government side of the House nobody is that naive, including when it comes to Cabinet leaks and journalists' suppositions. She asks about the Procedure Committee

report. As she knows, I take all Select Committee reports very seriously. I have seen the Procedure Committee's report—it makes some interesting suggestions and fully acknowledges the need for a clear answer to be given to the Government on whether the House agrees to the Government proceeding with the withdrawal agreement as it stands—and we will respond in good time.

The hon. Lady asks about the meaningful vote. Again, the meaningful vote will be approved through the responsibility of the House of Commons alone. She will appreciate that the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 confirmed that Parliament would have the ultimate role in delivering the will of the people. Once the deal is agreed, it will be put to Parliament, and MPs will have the decision on whether to back it or reject it, but people should not be under any illusion that the EU would be prepared to start all over again and negotiate a different deal. It is very important, therefore, that we end up with a straightforward approval of the deal.

The hon. Lady talks about the Finance Bill. As the Minister made clear, it was agreed that the Opposition amendments were seeking clarification on Government manifesto commitments, and it was considered entirely reasonable to seek further information.

Finally, the hon. Lady talks about the achievement of the Labour party in having more women MPs. I should point out that the Conservative party is extremely proud to have had two female Prime Ministers who have presided over this country at times of great stress and have shown their determination and commitment. All women and men across the House should be proud of the achievements of women.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on changing practices in how we buy and sell goods? There is little doubt that the impact of online shopping has produced a disconnect between shops and customers, so I think we need a strategy and taskforce—but not one led by some dodgy entrepreneur.

Andrea Leadsom: As ever, my hon. Friend raises an important point. In March, we established the industry-led Retail Sector Council to bring Government and industry together and boost the sector's productivity. The council last met on 12 November and has agreed its priority work for the next two years. In addition, we announced measures in the Budget as part of an action plan to support the sustainable transformation of our high streets, including a £675 million future high streets fund.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the rather paltry business for next week. I know we say this every week, but what a week! Norman Lamont famously said of the equally disastrous and chaotic Major Government that

"they give the impression of being in office but not in power".

This Government do not even give the impression of being in office, far less of being in power. First, they refuse to vote on Opposition day motions; now they just refuse to vote.

With the DUP plug well and truly pulled, they have started to realise the reality of minority government and that they can no longer be assured of getting

[Pete Wishart]

anything through the House. The only thing likely to save them is Labour's indiscipline and failure to get its vote out. It is the only party that can look a gift horse in the rear end. We managed to get two amendments to the Finance Bill through on Tuesday, which is more than we achieved in the preceding 20 years, so three cheers for zombie government! Can we have a debate on parliamentary democracy so that we can learn the Government's position on the basic concept of voting?

We have had a welcome dose of reality from the new Work and Pensions Secretary, who revealed that this binary choice of a bad deal or no deal would not happen when she said that the House of Commons would not accept no deal. Then there is the Chief Secretary to the Treasury saying there might be no Brexit. Then there is the calzone collective's own options for Brexit. Everybody knows that the Prime Minister's deal will not get through the House, and everybody and their auntie knows that the House will never accept a no deal Brexit, so will the Leader of the House finally confirm that this "devil or the deep blue sea" option is over and that the House will choose the option it wants?

Lastly, I very much welcome the Tay cities deal, which was signed off in my constituency this morning, bringing in £150 million of UK Government spending and £200 million of Scottish Government spending. It will be transformative for Tayside, with investment going into a number of fantastic projects right across the region. I am sure the Leader of the House will want to welcome that great example of cross-Parliament co-operation and working together.

Andrea Leadsom: May I first announce to the House that the Prime Minister will be making a statement to the House later today?

I would like to answer the hon. Gentleman's fine set of questions. I am delighted to hear him admit that the only achievement of the Scottish nationalists in all the time that they have been sitting in this House is two amendments to the Finance Bill, seeking some further information. I am not sure that the people of Scotland will feel that they are worth the effort. My Conservative colleagues who represent seats in Scotland are doing rather better; perhaps we could hear more about that as business questions progresses.

The hon. Gentleman asked what my view is of us leaving the European Union. I can tell him that I agreed with the Prime Minister when she said yesterday that we will be leaving the European Union on 29 March 2019. I sit on the committee that is looking at day-one readiness in all eventualities. Preparations are far advanced for no deal. We absolutely intend to get a deal that Parliament can support, but we will definitely be leaving the European Union in March 2019.

Finally, I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman is delighted about the Tay cities deal, which brings investment from the UK Government, the Scottish Government and business and is welcome right around the United Kingdom.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee is currently doing an inquiry into leasehold properties. What emerged from our sitting on Monday was the

scandal of certain housing developers selling their properties' freehold to finance companies without even offering the freehold to the leaseholder. Of course, they all say that it is within the law. Can we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government on what action he will take to close this disgraceful loophole that prevents leaseholders from being enabled to purchase their freehold?

Andrea Leadsom: Many Members will have great sympathy with what my hon. Friend talks about. We need to do more to protect the rights of people who own their own homes and find that the freehold is sold from underneath them. The Secretary of State is looking carefully at that, and I encourage my hon. Friend to ask a written question, to get a direct answer.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I note that the Government have tabled general debates on Monday and Thursday next week, as well as a general debate on the armed forces covenant this afternoon. It is now five weeks since the Backbench Business Committee had any time in this Chamber, and we are not likely to get any more for at least another fortnight. If the Government's intention at the start of this two-year Session was to have the 27 days of Backbench time in the first year and none in the second, it is a great shame that the Committee was not informed of that intention at the outset.

It seems as though the Committee and Back Benchers are not being allocated a fair amount of time to air their concerns. Many hundreds—and I mean hundreds—of Back Benchers have signed up to debates we have on a list that are as yet unheard. Back Benchers are being served badly by the timetabling of business by this Government. While general debates on Government matters are very important, the Backbench Business Committee was established to meet a problem that was recognised by the House, and it is not now being facilitated by time from the Government to do so.

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely understand the hon. Gentleman's desire to ensure that his Committee has time in the Chamber in which to schedule its business. Last week—unfortunately, he was not here—I offered to meet him to discuss the specifics of what he is keen to see tabled. I am glad he recognises that a significant number of Back-Bench days have been provided so far in this Session. I am extremely sympathetic, and I am happy to meet him directly.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): My post office is proposing to relocate the counters from its main branch to a WH Smith shop in a covered mall where there is no free, accessible disabled parking. Royal Mail owns the site where its counters currently are, but it says it is not planning to close its sorting office or its operation there. May we have a debate on the validity of, and allegations of falseness about, the post office consultation, as many people believe that its move is already a done deal?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important point, which has been raised in the Chamber during business questions before. I can say to him that combining a post office with a successful retailer is a proven model. Over 97% of the network already operates in this way. The Government have invested nearly £2 billion in the Post Office for the period 2010 to 2018 to maintain and

modernise the branch network, which is good news for post office users. He may be aware that the public consultation on the proposals for Crawley post office runs until 12 December. The post office is welcoming customer views on areas such as accessibility, as well as wider community issues, and I am sure that my hon. Friend will be providing evidence to it.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): On the evening before bonfire night, I spent an eight-hour shift with West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service. Acting firefighter Sherriff was very impressed with its professionalism, but was also struck by the severe impacts that the cuts have had on its service. May we have a debate on the funding awarded to our wonderful fire and rescue services?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate the hon. Lady on spending time with firefighters. I have also done that, and it is a real opportunity to see their priorities at first hand. I want to congratulate them all on their commitment to keeping people safe. She will be aware that we have questions to Home Office Ministers on 3 December, and she may want to raise the issue of cuts directly with them.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Scotland is already the highest-taxed part of the United Kingdom, but unless the SNP Scottish Government follow the lead of the Chancellor and bring more middle income earners out of the 40p tax rate, this gap is going to grow even wider. I am already hearing from employers on the Scottish borders that this issue is making the recruitment and retention of staff all the more difficult. May we have a debate on the implications of the higher taxation in Scotland on recruitment, employment and business opportunity?

Andrea Leadsom: I am glad my hon. Friend acknowledges that the Budget was very good news for middle income earners, with the Chancellor announcing both a rise in the tax-free personal allowance and a higher-rate threshold increase. This puts money back in the pockets of hard-working individuals and families, and supports our strong economy. My hon. Friend raises a very serious point about border businesses and those subject to Scotland's higher taxes. Although this is a devolved matter for the Scottish Government, I hope that SNP Members are listening very carefully, because they do not want to see Scotland's economy less competitive than that on the other side of the border.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Yesterday, I met members of the Youth Parliament to discuss their campaign on knife crime and how we can work together to ensure that tackling knife crime with a public health approach is debated in this House. Over 1 million young people voted in the Youth Parliament's recent ballot, so I am pretty sure that they would not struggle to get the signatures to secure a debate here. However, it is important that this is debated in Government time, and I am sure the Leader of the House absolutely agrees with me. Just for the eighth time, I am asking: when will this be debated here?

Andrea Leadsom: I commend the hon. Lady for her commitment to this issue. She will be aware that those 1 million young people could, and I thoroughly recommend that they do, raise a petition to give their particular

views to Parliament. As she will know, the Government have set up a serious violence taskforce, which is seeking to invest in measures to prevent young people getting into a life of crime, violence and gang membership. The Government are doing a huge amount. I am sympathetic to the hon. Lady's desire for a debate on this subject, and I am looking into that, as well as writing to the Home Office on her behalf.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the people of Crickhowell on winning the title of "UK's best high street" in last week's Great British High Street awards? Will she accept an invitation to visit Brecon and Radnorshire to see that excellence for herself, and will she allow time for a debate on how we can revitalise our high streets in the UK and follow Crickhowell's example?

Andrea Leadsom: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Crickhowell on its excellent award. I was there in January this year with my family—we stayed at the fantastic Bear Hotel—and I agree that it is a superb high street. These awards shine a light on the good work being done in high street communities across the UK, and I congratulate all the other winning high streets that were recognised by those awards.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May we have an early debate on atrial fibrillation, which means an irregular pulse? If someone has an irregular pulse—as many Members of the House will have—they have a much higher likelihood of having a stroke. Up and down the country, GPs are failing to diagnose, failing to test, and even when they recognise the condition, they are prescribing aspirins that, if they do anything, do harm. Four new wonderful anticoagulant drugs can relieve people's stress and this condition, and they could be a real life changer. May we have an early debate on the significant failure of UK GPs to prescribe the right drugs?

Andrea Leadsom: As he often does, the hon. Gentleman raises an important point that affects people's lives. I have a family member who suffers from this condition, and the hon. Gentleman is right to raise it. Health questions are on Tuesday, and I encourage him to ask Ministers directly what more can be done.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): About an hour ago, partners from different levels of Government signed the Tay cities deal, which means £150 million of UK Government money coming to the region, over £65 million of which will go to the county of Perth and Kinross, which I share with the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). That is fantastic news, but the city deal process involves many different partners and layers of Government. May we have a debate to discuss how we can improve the process for the future, so that all levels of Government in all parts of the UK benefit?

Andrea Leadsom: People across the UK are delighted at the investment going into the Tay cities deal, which will provide a real boost for people and businesses in that area. I am always delighted to hear from colleagues across the House about ways to improve negotiations

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

on city deals, and I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend, or encourage him to seek a meeting directly with a Treasury Minister to discuss the process.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): Popular counterfeit products can contain less than half the internal components required to run safely, leaving people at risk of serious injury or property damage. With that in mind, and with Christmas fast approaching, may we have a debate on the steps that the Government are taking to disrupt counterfeiters, dismantle their infrastructure, and protect UK businesses and citizens from fake goods?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a good point—as she says, particularly in the run-up to Christmas it is important to protect consumers from buying counterfeit goods. I encourage her to seek a Westminster Hall debate so that hon. Members can share their constituents' experiences and ideas about how we can do better.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I recently met the family of Asia Bibi, who has been persecuted for her faith and whose life is in grave danger. One hundred and twenty five parliamentarians from across the House, including Lords Spiritual, have written to the Prime Minister asking the Government to do the right thing morally in granting asylum to that persecuted family. May we have an urgent statement and/or debate in Government time on religious freedom, and on the Government living up to their British values of standing up for the rule of law, justice, and helping those who are persecuted?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a vital issue about avoiding the persecution of people for their religious faith. He is absolutely right to do that and I know all hon. Members are concerned about the fate of Asia Bibi in particular. I can tell him that we have Church Commissioners questions next Thursday, and Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions the following week. He might want to raise the matter directly with Ministers then.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Is the Leader of the House aware of the report published today on managed migration to universal credit by the Work and Pensions Committee, which shows that the vast majority of people will move on to universal credit not within the managed migration system, as was promised to this House when the cuts were put in place, but without any transitional protection whatever? They are set to lose thousands of pounds immediately. Will she ask the new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to look at this seriously and make an urgent statement to the House?

Andrea Leadsom: What I can say to the hon. Lady is that there are lots of rumours about universal credit. The Government have listened very carefully to concerns and have continuously improved universal credit. The Government have increased advances to 100% of a full monthly payment so that those who need it can get access to that money on day one, scrapped the seven days' waiting and introduced a two-week overlap of housing benefit payments—all of which Labour voted against. In the Budget, the Chancellor announced that

we will increase the amount that someone can earn before their universal credit is reduced and we have given all self-employed people 12 months to get their business off the ground. So I do think that the Government have listened very carefully. Universal credit is significantly better than the legacy benefits it replaces. It makes it easier and better for people to get into work, which is better for them, for their families and for our economy.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Paragraph 56 of the Procedure Committee's recent report recommends that a Business of the House motion is published five sitting days in advance of the debate on the meaningful vote, that a full day's debate be allowed for that, and that that should take place no fewer than two days in advance of the meaningful vote. Can my right hon. Friend update the House on her response to that, given that if the debate on the meaningful vote is to start on 3 December, the Business of the House motion should have been published yesterday?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a matter that is of great significance at the present time to the House. What I can say to him is that the Government's goal is to secure certainty and clarity for the public after two years of negotiations. I have seen the Procedure Committee report and the Government are considering its recommendations carefully, although it will be for Parliament to debate and determine the procedure that will apply for the vote.

Mr Speaker: That is absolutely true. It is also true, of course, that the Government have made clear their commitment to an amendable motion. The Leader of the House has said that a number of times in the Chamber and the point has been made by the Prime Minister as well. I know there has been no movement from that position at all. An amendable motion will be put to the House. I think it is important to be clear about that.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): May we have a debate on the importance of British food and drink? Instead of Peroni and pizza, would it not be better if the infamous five group had something like Somerset cider, cheddar cheese and Jacob's crackers?

Andrea Leadsom: I sincerely hope the hon. Gentleman is not alluding to the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) when he makes his comment about Jacob's. I absolutely share his enthusiasm for the UK food and drink sector. Right across the UK, we have superb brands and superb food producers. I think we would all share in the desire to do more to promote UK goods overseas.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Mr Speaker, as you are well aware, repetition is not a novelty in this place. I, too, would like to welcome the Tay cities deal, which was announced this morning, with £150 million for the Tayside region. The UK Government have invested an extra £1.1 billion in Scottish city deals. Will my right hon. Friend agree to a debate on how important it is for the UK Government and the Scottish Government to work together for the betterment of areas such as my constituency of Angus?

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. It is vital for the Scottish Government and UK Government to work together closely for the success of

the entire United Kingdom. We on the Government Benches always seek to consult widely and collaborate with the Scottish Government in our desire to see the strengthening of the United Kingdom. I am very pleased and proud that we have such a good group of Scottish Conservatives who are always willing to put the interests of the United Kingdom and Scotland together.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): In the Leader of the House's opening remarks, she mentioned the #AskHerToStand events yesterday, and she may be aware that I raised a point of order with Mr Speaker in relation to a report from three years ago that asked that the Standing Orders of the House either be gender-neutral or do not use the male pronoun. The report is some three years old. I know that you are supportive of the change, Mr Speaker. I accept that the Leader of the House was not in her position when that came forward, but she is a champion of equality and women's rights in this Chamber, so will she either adopt that report from three years ago or, if there is a new report from the Procedure Committee—which I will be pushing for next week—calling for new Standing Orders to be published, agree to those in full so that we genuinely have a House that allows women to take seats in it?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising his point of order the other day. I heard part of it, but I will now go away and look carefully at what he said, and give consideration to his suggestion.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): There are some fantastic opportunities for smaller businesses to export right around the world when we leave the EU, so will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time on the export opportunities for the many smaller manufacturers in areas such as Stoke-on-Trent from the new trade deals that we hope to pursue?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a great champion for his constituency, and I absolutely agree with him that there will be great opportunities for all businesses in the United Kingdom as we leave the European Union and are able to seek free trade deals across the world. I encourage him perhaps to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can discuss, particularly with Ministers in the Department for International Trade, precisely what the impact could be for Stoke-on-Trent and his constituency.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): As well as the centenary of women's suffrage, this week is also the centenary of the Education (Scotland) Act 1918, which is celebrated in early-day motion 735.

[That this House recognises that 2018 marks the centenary of the 1918 Education (Scotland) Act, which established in law the principle of state funding for Catholic schools in Scotland; notes the range of celebrations planned by the Scottish Catholic education community to mark the ongoing collaboration between Church and State; believes that the arrangements put in place by the Act represent a unique and successful partnership, that continues to serve the people of Scotland well; further believes that the anniversary year will provide an opportunity to rejoice in the academic, cultural, civic and social achievements of pupils who have attended Catholic schools in the last one hundred years, and is a chance to mark publicly the ways in which Catholic schools are not just good for Catholics, but good for Scotland; believes that the positive contribution

of Catholic schools to Scottish society is well documented; notes the continuing support of government and all of the main political parties is encouraging for the future of denominational schools; further notes that during 2018 schools, families, parishes and local communities across Scotland will reflect on the past, the present and the future of Catholic Schools, using the theme, Catholic Schools: Good For Scotland as a way to highlight the contribution Catholic schools make to wider society; and notes that by working with elected members from local authorities, and the UK and Scottish Parliaments, the Catholic Education Community aims to show that this distinctive collaboration for the governance of schools continues to reflect the diverse, inclusive and progressive nature of Scotland.]

We were joined yesterday by the Archbishops of Glasgow and of St Andrews and Edinburgh here in Parliament. Can we have a debate or a statement on Catholic education in Scotland, and does the Leader of the House agree that Catholic schools are good for Scotland?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate all Scottish MPs on the anniversary that they are celebrating. There is a debate on education next Thursday, and the hon. Gentleman might well like to raise this issue there.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): The Leader of the House has been phenomenal in her work to try to tackle bullying and harassment in this place, and I am sure that she was more appalled than anyone by the recent decision in the other place. What more can my right hon. Friend do to give people confidence to come forward with their issues and that they will not see them blocked by the use of petty parliamentary procedure?

Andrea Leadsom: I am glad that my hon. Friend raised this issue. I want to make it clear that I am personally disgusted by what took place in the other place. It is not right that this matter should be allowed to rest, and I know that colleagues in the other place are taking it very seriously. I and the members of the former steering group on the complaints procedure strongly agree with Lord McFall of Alcluith when he said that he was "deeply disappointed" with the decision of the House of Lords to send the report into the conduct of Lord Lester back to the Privileges and Conduct Committee. In particular, the former steering group sympathises with the complainant at what must be a very difficult time for her. This is, however, a matter for the House of Lords, and I note that Lord McFall has made it clear that the Committee will consider the decision of the House and will look to present a further report to the House that will fully explain the Committee's position.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Next year, I hope that Ministers will agree to extend the M11 through Lincolnshire to the Humber Bridge during the 2020s, funded from the £28 billion for the national roads fund, which was announced in the Budget. With the success of halving the Humber Bridge tolls and with the Severn Bridge tolls being abolished on 17 December this year, can we have a debate on whether extending the M11 to the Humber Bridge will be the right time to scrap the Humber Bridge tolls once and for all?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is assiduous in raising important constituency matters and she is absolutely right to do so. I hope that she took advantage of Department for Transport questions just now to raise that issue directly with Ministers. The Chamber has heard her request and she will have further opportunities to raise it with Ministers in the coming weeks.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I recently met a delegation of constituents from the Horn Park estate to lobby the Greenwich clinical commissioning group about the closure of a nurse-led drop-in centre on the estate, and to ask the CCG to reopen it. The closure has left my constituents with three-week waits for GP appointments and long journey times to alternative services. May we have a debate about GP waiting times, and also about public consultation by clinical commissioning groups? The situation in that part of my constituency is simply unacceptable.

Andrea Leadsom: I am genuinely sorry to hear of the hon. Gentleman's concern about his constituency. We shall have health questions next week, and I encourage him to raise it directly with Ministers then.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Although my constituent Jean Allardyce of Bridgend Garage in Auchinleck always pays her PAYE and national insurance contributions on time, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs often sends her debt-chasing letters, the most recent of which was dated more than a week after she had made the payments. This causes her stress. She has to take valuable business time out to make checks, and HMRC then has to make further checks. May we have a Government statement about simple reforms that HMRC can make in order to tackle the real culprits?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman has raised an important point about wasted administrative processes. I encourage him to raise it in a written parliamentary question to Ministers so that they can consider his suggestion.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): On 9 May, 12 July and 6 September, I asked the Leader of the House about the whereabouts of the immigration Bill. I think that there is still no answer, but let me give her a break and ask her about a different Bill. Would not 25 November, International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, be a terribly good day on which to lay the domestic abuse Bill before Parliament?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will know that the Government have published a draft Domestic Violence and Abuse Bill. It is intended to be groundbreaking, and will be extremely comprehensive. We want to be sure before we introduce it that we have taken into account all considerations in our efforts to put an end to the appalling problem of domestic violence once and for all.¹

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): I am sure the hon. Lady will be aware of the recent decision by Talgo, the Spanish train manufacturer, to site its new manufacturing plant in Kincardine in my constituency, thus creating more than 1,000 new jobs. It is a huge investment, and it constitutes a vote of confidence not only in my constituency but in Scottish Engineering and "Team Scotland", which worked hard to put the

deal together. Will the Leader of the House allow a debate in Government time on the importance of inward investment in post-Brexit Britain?

Andrea Leadsom: Absolutely. I am delighted for the hon. Gentleman's constituency, and I am also delighted at the endorsement of the engineering strengths in Scotland and the United Kingdom as a whole—and, of course, the confidence that that shows in the UK once we have left the European Union. According to one of the latest figures, the UK is one of the biggest beneficiaries of foreign direct investment other than China, which is a great endorsement of the strengths of the UK economy.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Since 2001, the St Paul's youth forum project Bolt FM in my constituency has empowered young people in the north-east of Glasgow to run a community-led radio station. They branched out in July, when five of them went to Zambia on an international exchange programme, where they helped with four projects. On returning to Glasgow, the young people took the initiative, and began planning a fundraising ball to raise money for those projects. With little experience of organising such events, they still managed to raise more than £1,000, which was a great achievement. The ball was held on 6 October. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating those young people, and will she consider allowing a debate in Government time on the contribution that young people make to international development?

Andrea Leadsom: I think the whole House will want to congratulate that group of young people on an amazing achievement. It is superb to see what communities and volunteers can do when they really set their minds to it. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek a Westminster Hall debate, so that Members can share the experiences of their young people and how they have really made a difference around the world.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): So far the Leader of the House has been somewhat vague and opaque in her remarks about the Procedure Committee report. The key recommendation was that the amendments should be debated and voted on before the main motion. Can she assure the House now that she and the new Brexit Secretary will table a business motion setting out a process enabling amendments to be debated and voted on first?

Andrea Leadsom: As I have said in response to a number of questions on the Procedure Committee's report, I have seen it and I have looked at it very carefully. The Government are considering its recommendations. It will be for Parliament to decide—to debate and determine the procedure that will apply to the vote, including the number of amendments that can be voted on. But as the Procedure Committee report sets out, amendments threaten an orderly ratification, and that risks creating huge uncertainty for business, consumers and citizens.

Mr Speaker: The Government have already promised an amendable motion and the Leader of the House has herself done so on the Floor of the House. I hope that the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) is at least reassured by that. There will be further discussion of these important matters, as the Leader of the House has said, but I hope the hon. Lady is reassured by that fact, of which there is evidence in the *Official Report*.

1. *Official Report*, 3 December 2018, Vol. 650, c. 8MC.]

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): It was a great pleasure yesterday to welcome Judith Dunn, my constituent, to ask her to stand. She had an entertaining, educational and inspiring day in Parliament, and I thank all those who organised that. Also on Tuesday I was able to welcome the Teapot Trust, who invited people to do a doodle. I was grateful to various Health Ministers and shadow Health Ministers who attended. May we have a Government debate on the importance of art and culture for the mental health wellbeing not just of children, whom the Teapot Trust works with, but all of us across the United Kingdom?

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman's remarks are obviously welcomed by the House. He is right to point out the contribution of the arts and all creative subjects in the health and wellbeing of the nation, and I am sure there would be great support for a Westminster Hall debate so that all hon. Members can share their constituents' experiences.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I am hopeful that the Leader of the House can help me with a problem that the Home Office seems to be having in answering my named day written questions. For example, I tabled one on settled status on 9 October and it took until 12 November and a chaser question to get an answer, and I am currently waiting for an answer to one that was tabled on 31 October as a named day question regarding settled status payments. May we have a statement on what has gone wrong and how this can be improved?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman is waiting for some replies. We do have Home Office questions on Monday 3 December, but if he wants to write to me, I can chase those matters up on his behalf.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You said in business questions on two occasions that the Government will table an amendable motion, which is also the understanding of the whole House. However, the Government have also said that, regardless of what happens to that amendable motion, they will only put the option of the Government's take-it-or-leave-it deal. Do you know anything more about this process? Will this amendable motion be taken to the House with a range of options, or is it your understanding that all that will be put to the House is the Government's deal on a take-it-or-leave-it basis?

Mr Speaker: I think that this is an issue still in progress. *[Interruption.]* The Procedure Committee has produced a report in which it has helpfully set out, if memory serves me correctly—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps if the House is interested in listening to what I have to say in response to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart)—*[Interruption.]* When Ministers have finished their private conversation, perhaps I can respond to the point of order from the hon. Gentleman. I will start again. The matter is still in progress. The Procedure Committee has helpfully produced a report on this matter in which—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps I can start again. *[Interruption.]* Perhaps I can start again when the Leader of the House has finished her conversation with her hon. Friend on the Front Bench, the hon.

Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker). I would be extremely grateful for that courtesy. *[Interruption.]* I can happily wait. I think it would be a courtesy if Members would listen as I respond to a point that the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire has legitimately raised. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. *[Interruption.]* May I just ask the Leader of the House if she will do me the courtesy of listening while I respond to the point of order from the hon. Gentleman, as I did her the courtesy of listening to her responses to the business question?

The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire has raised an important issue, on which the right hon. Lady had some remarks to make a few moments ago. I was simply saying to him that the matter is still in progress. The Procedure Committee has produced a report in which it sets out—

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): She's doing it again!

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): It is a discourtesy to the House.

Mr Speaker: Well, I can live with that. The Procedure Committee has produced a report in which it sets out three options for the handling of this matter. If memory serves me correctly, the Committee has indicated its view that the motion should be amendable and that amendments, in accordance with the normal procedure, shall be voted upon first. The Government will have an opportunity, if they wish, to respond to that report, and a business of the House motion from the Government is to be expected. I rather imagine that will happen before the debate, and certainly before the meaningful vote. But that there is to be an amendable motion is not something coming from me; it is a commitment that has already been made both by the Prime Minister and by the Leader of the House on the Floor of this House. That much is simple and incontrovertible. I hope that is helpful to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire. I am sure he will keep an eye on the matter.

John Spellar: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it not only disrespectful to yourself but, quite frankly, disrespectful to the House that, during a point of order relating to procedure, for which the Leader of the House is responsible not just for the Government but to the whole House, she should indulge consistently in a conversation? *[Interruption.]* She has now scuttled out. She indulged consistently in a conversation while you were giving a judgment on important issues relating to an enormously important matter of procedure.

Mr Speaker: My shoulders are broad and I am happy to work on that basis, but there is an issue of courtesy to the House. I do not think any deliberate discourtesy was intended but, whatever people's intentions, the facts of the matter are on the record. The fact is that there is a commitment to an amendable motion. The House may have an opportunity to consider the Procedure Committee's report, or if it does not, the Government will in any case have to table some sort of motion for the consideration of these matters. This issue will not go away, and I feel sure that the strength of feeling across the House one way or the other will be heard. The Chair is attuned to the strength of feeling, and the Chair is

[Mr Speaker]

certainly very respectful of the position taken by the Procedure Committee, which has long been regarded as a very important voice—even authority—on these matters.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. We do not mention or identify officials in this place, and rightly so, but may I ask if it is not also utterly unacceptable that officials standing and leaving the official Box just now were smirking and shaking their heads at my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) as he was making his point of order? They have gone now, but is it not unacceptable for officials who are here to do a job to make comments in such a visual fashion against a senior Member of this House?

Mr Speaker: I do not have eyes in the back of my head, I did not note any disorderly behaviour and certainly I allege no disorderly behaviour on the part of anyone in the Box. Suffice it to say that, very briefly, I sat in that Box as a special adviser 23 years ago, and I remember being told very clearly that officials are there to sit and provide papers or advice if required, and discreetly and respectfully to observe proceedings. The right hon. Member for Warley is a very senior and respected Member of this House. What anyone outside this House or performing an ancillary function thinks about what he is saying is of no interest to me, of no interest to the right hon. Gentleman, and, I rather imagine, of no interest to the House.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I have been in this House a very long time—people usually say too long—but in all my time here I have never seen a Leader of the House act with such disrespect and then flounce out of the Chamber, with her officials following out in the same way and showing their dislike of something a right hon. Member has just said. That is far more serious than the bit of fun with a football the other night; it is a serious affront to this House, not to you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am very sorry that the hon. Gentleman has felt it necessary, on the basis of what he has witnessed, to make that point. My desire would be to lower the

temperature and to give opportunities for colleagues to reflect. I am very sorry that, in his long experience, he has not witnessed anything of the kind he has just seen.

My concern is that a proper procedure should be followed in respect of the upcoming matter, perhaps the most serious matter to be brought to this House in half a century. This matter must be dealt with in a manner that suits the House, rather than one particular opinion represented in the House. In my time in the Chair, for all the mistakes that I have made and the inadequacies that I have demonstrated—[HON. MEMBERS: “No!”] Oh yes, because to err is human. I have always stood up for the rights of Back-Bench Members and the rights of Parliament, and the rights of Parliament can sometimes be different from those of a particular Executive at a given time. The Speaker has to be on the side of Parliament, and I always am and always will be.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. You have rightly set out that there is a normal procedure that has to be followed in this House. Can you advise us on what might be open to Members of Parliament should the Government decide not to follow that normal procedure? For instance, are there precedents, in circumstances similar to these, for Members of Parliament perhaps to occupy Parliament?

Mr Speaker: I would not recommend any such thing. What I would say to the right hon. Gentleman, consistent with what I have just said about the importance of lowering the temperature and taking time to reflect, is this. I understand and respect the seriousness and sincerity of the right hon. Gentleman, who has himself served with distinction as a Deputy Leader of the House. My point would be to let us wait to see what happens. In the words of the late Lord Whitelaw, “It is, on the whole, better to cross bridges only when you come to them.” I am sensitive, however, to what the right hon. Gentleman has said, and I think some of these concerns may play out in discussions to follow in the coming days. I hope that is fair and reasonable to people of all views.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Can you confirm that, when the Government bring forward a business motion, it is open to any Member of the House to table amendments to that business motion, on which the House will be able to take a view?

Mr Speaker: It is.

Bombardier

11.33 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): Following Bombardier's announcement that it plans to reduce its workforce by 490 employees at its Belfast aerostructures site, I have this morning spoken to Michael Ryan, the chief operating officer of aerostructures and engineering services, and arranged a follow-up meeting with him later this afternoon. This follows the company's announcement earlier this month that a further 5,000 staff from its global workforce will need to leave it over the next 12 to 18 months.

I understand that the employee consultation period of 90 days has now been triggered. During this time, Bombardier will be doing what it can to mitigate the number of compulsory redundancies required, including considering the possibility of voluntary redundancy packages. I recognise this is unwelcome news for the Belfast workforce and their families. It is regrettable that they face further uncertainty at this time of year, but Bombardier is a private company and the Government have no role in its commercial decisions. My top priority has been to emphasise our support for Bombardier's high-quality UK workforce, now and in the future. The Shorts factory in Belfast employs about 4,000 skilled workers, with almost a quarter of those working on the A220, the new joint venture with Airbus. It also supports a supply chain of hundreds of companies and many more jobs in the UK. It is in all our interests that Bombardier's Belfast facility is successful. Last year, when the joint venture was announced, both Bombardier and Airbus made a number of important commitments to me, including that wing manufacturing will continue in Belfast; that the treatment of UK sites and suppliers will be equal to that of other Bombardier and Airbus suppliers, and that the strategy will be one of building on existing strengths and commitments, not on plant closures, taking opportunities to increase sales of the C Series across the globe. Those commitments still hold true.

The announcement yesterday is part of a five-year transformation plan that covers the global business. It is a long-term strategy designed to increase the competitiveness of the company. It is, of course, deeply unsettling for the workers at the Belfast facility, and the Government will work closely with Bombardier to minimise the uncertainty and help them prepare for the future. The Government are also working closely with the Belfast facility on its longer-term competitiveness. In the global aerospace market, this is driven by embracing new technology. This year, the Government invested more than £20 million of research and development activity at the Belfast plant to develop new products and improve efficiency.

The Government will continue to work closely with the company, the unions and the devolved Administration to support the company, and support manufacturing sectors we can be proud of. In Northern Ireland, the Department for Communities redundancy service offers to support employers, workers and those impacted during a redundancy situation.

11.36 am

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. I would like to say, "And for advance sight of it", but, as he will know, that was

hardly the case. Indeed, when it was emailed to me less than 25 minutes before the end of business questions, I texted back to my office to ask whether it did indeed end at that point. I was advised, "Yes, that's it." That most certainly is not it. Bombardier's presence is vital to the economy in Northern Ireland, representing 8% of Northern Ireland's GDP and about 40% of the Province's manufacturing output. The company employs 4,000 people across Northern Ireland as a whole, so this announcement will be a devastating blow, and not only to the 490 families who will be directly affected by it in the run-up to Christmas, because this involves an estimated 20,000 indirect jobs throughout the UK supply chains and many of those families may also be affected by the company's decision. Downsizing its UK operations has significant implications for the whole of the UK and this matter is therefore of national public policy importance. For the Minister to say that the Government have no role here is simply unacceptable.

I visited the plant in Belfast last year when the company was under attack from President Trump in his attempt to impose tariffs of 292% on Bombardier aircraft exported to the US. I spoke to the unions there and I know what a relief it was when those unfair tariffs were not applied as a result of a ruling by the International Trade Commission and Commissioner Meredith Broadbent, whom I also met when I visited Washington to argue Bombardier's case. I pay tribute to the way in which both Unite and GMB worked with Michael Ryan and Bombardier's management at that time to fight those job losses, but I am sure the whole House will be disappointed that the same spirit of co-operation appears not to have been the case here and that Jackie Pollock, the Unite regional secretary, has indicated that the unions were not made aware of the extent and scale of the job losses that the management were contemplating. The trust and co-operation that was built up last year should have been respected and maintained, particularly when the company reported a 57% rise in its profits only nine months ago.

The industry is not unused to coping with fluctuations in the workforce. In May 2015, at least 220 jobs were lost. In February 2016, it was announced that about 20% of the Northern Ireland workforce would go, with 580 jobs lost in 2016 and 500 in 2017. In April 2016, those job cuts were revised up from 580 to 630. In September and October 2017, another 375 job cuts were announced. These 490 proposed job losses are just the latest in a long line of redundancies at Bombardier. There have been more than 1,700 since May 2015. Such huge cuts to the workforce, so highly concentrated in one area, will have devastating consequences for entire communities. The company has said that the job cuts are part of a global drive to cut costs, but a disproportionate number of the 5,000 Bombardier jobs to be cut globally are in Northern Ireland, representing more than 10% of the workforce there. Bombardier represents 8% of Northern Ireland's GDP and 40% of its manufacturing output.

What recent discussions has the Minister had with Bombardier regarding the global restructuring plans? Has he received any suggestion from the company that its restructuring plans have been influenced in any way by Brexit? When will he be travelling to Northern Ireland to meet the unions and the families affected? What discussions has he had with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland about securing alternative inward

[Barry Gardiner]

investment into Northern Ireland? What provision will be put in place for advice and support for the affected families? Has he spoken yet to Invest Northern Ireland and the officials at the Department for the Economy about the future of manufacturing in the Province? Finally, many ordinary people in Northern Ireland wish to know when the Government will make serious efforts to get the Northern Ireland Assembly back up and running so that issues such as these can be properly responded to at a local level.

Richard Harrington: I have a lot of time for the hon. Gentleman, and I have many private conversations with him. I know that he is generally a positive person, so I feel disappointed at the way in which he has talked down Northern Ireland and its economy in his response to the statement. There is a lot of good news coming from Northern Ireland. For example, the recent significant investment by Artemis Technologies has shown that the economy of Northern Ireland is expanding. A lot of the expansion is technology-based around aerospace, and Bombardier—we usually call it Shorts, as that is what it was originally—is very much part of that. We have also had the announcement of the Belfast city deal, which is worth about £350 million, so I do not write off what is happening in Northern Ireland at all.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned tariffs. I have broad shoulders—just as you said you had, Mr Speaker—but I disagree with his implication that the Government did not do a huge amount in dealing with the United States authorities. This was not just a trip to Washington with a press release; we had continual meetings with the State Department, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State met the Commerce Secretary several times. The outcome was the result of all of us—Bombardier, the Government, the Northern Ireland Office and the unions, as the hon. Gentleman correctly said—pulling together. That was an example of the trust between all of us.

I have jotted down the hon. Gentleman's questions and I shall try to answer some of them. This is not a Brexit issue. That was confirmed to me this morning in my discussions with Mr Michael Ryan. The hon. Gentleman asked about my discussions with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I have many such discussions, including from a sedentary position today as I am pleased to say that she is sitting beside me on the Front Bench. We discuss Bombardier a lot. The hon. Gentleman also asked what dealings the Government had had with the company, and I can tell him that they are regular and ongoing. Only this week, a team of officials from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy visited the company. On the question of whether they discussed what was announced yesterday, I can tell him that that was not the case. Clearly, the company has to deal commercially, and it discussed this matter with us—and, I presume, with the trade unions—when it put out its statutory notice yesterday. As soon as I heard about it, I contacted the company, as did my officials. I spoke to Michael Ryan on the phone this morning and I have arranged to meet him in London this afternoon. This is not something that we take lightly, because we know that—as the hon. Gentleman fairly pointed out—the impact in Belfast of anything that happens to Shorts can be very serious.

I am always delighted to see the unions. In fact, I met them on my first visit, when I had just taken over this job, to Bombardier in Belfast. Although they might not agree with me on some things, I hope they would agree that my door is always open to them—not just in respect of Bombardier, but for aerospace generally and for the automotive sector and all the other sectors that I deal with. I have benefited from the knowledge I have got from speaking directly to unions, not only nationally but at plants when I visit them.

I am not in any way implying or insinuating that this is good news—it is not very good news at all—but I accept the fact, and hope the hon. Gentleman does, that Bombardier's main concern is that it is dealing in a very competitive international market. It has competition coming up in Russia, China and elsewhere and is fighting hard for every contract it gets, so it has to make sure that the company is efficient.

I am pleased that the technology that I saw is absolutely first class and that the Government are part of that work. We have support from the local MPs, and I was delighted to deal regularly with the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), whom I see in his place. I commend him on his work to help with everything that we have done on Bombardier. [Interruption.] Mr Speaker is getting impatient, so I shall sit down.

Mr Speaker: No, no, it is always a pleasure to listen to the Minister's mellifluous tones, which are equalled only by those of the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes).

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Political theorists and practitioners from Benjamin Disraeli to Ernie Bevin understood the relationship between the national interest and the common good, but the Government's procurement policy, and particularly the policies of their agencies, frequently subsumes both those noble things in all kinds of extraneous qualifications, usually under the title "state aid". The excellent Minister has said that he will work with Bombardier, and the Government in their industrial strategy have committed £4 billion to the aerospace sector. Will the Minister ensure—perhaps he can tell the House now that he will do so—that the procurement policy of the Government and all their agencies will be amended, reformed and in tune with that support and investment?

Richard Harrington: As ever, my right hon. Friend is right and as erudite as he always is in explaining the significance of the Government's procurement role. That is also true for many other sectors in which I am involved, including construction. I think my right hon. Friend was asking me whether state aid policies will change in relation to the procurement of Government contracts and so on. I cannot answer that question, because we will have to see what happens in future, but I can say that my Department is regularly in touch with other Departments that are responsible for procurement, to push continually the advantages of Bombardier and many other companies in the supply chain, in all the areas that we deal with.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of the statement.

In the light of the 57% increase in profits announced earlier this year, the announcement of job losses is clearly a real kick in the teeth for the workforce. Our sympathies

obviously go out to the 490 employees and their families. The latest news follows a longer-term pattern, with the 220 jobs lost in 2015, 630 lost in 2016, nearly 400 lost in 2017, and close to 500 lost now. Given that pattern, what discussions have the UK Government had with Bombardier over this period about stemming job losses and about the plant's long-term future? What money can be made available either to protect these jobs or to help with redeployment? It is not good enough for the Government to say that it is a private company and a commercial decision, because they need to do everything to protect jobs from being lost.

We hear from the Government statistics about record employment and record low unemployment, but such statistics hide serious issues such as this one at Bombardier and the recent announcement of 850 job losses at Michelin in Dundee. What steps are the Government taking to make sure that the industrial strategy is fit for purpose and will protect manufacturing jobs?

One of the Brexit dividends so far has been the plummeting of the pound, which is actually supposed to help manufacturing exports. What assessment has the Minister made of future currency fluctuations and inflationary pressures in the sector and what that can mean for jobs?

Finally, the Minister's statement confirms that the UK Government provided £20 million of research and development grants to the plant in Belfast, and this was to be used to bring in efficiency measures. Can he confirm that, when the Government give R&D grants for efficiency measures, they do an impact assessment to see what that means for jobs and that the grants are only for protecting jobs? Any job losses must come with transitional arrangements and plans for workforce redeployment.

Richard Harrington: I will try to answer the hon. Gentleman's questions as best I can. I was jotting them down quickly as he said them.

First, I did say that this is a commercial decision, and it is a commercial decision. The last time I looked, Bombardier was not a nationalised industry, so it is not at all a question of the Government making people redundant. The Government's support for Bombardier and for aerospace generally is unmatched by any time in history. Bombardier is an important part of the Aerospace Growth Partnership, which I chair jointly with Colin Smith, an industry veteran and former president of Rolls-Royce. We have channelled about £1.95 billion to support R&D, of which Bombardier is the beneficiary.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the £20 million that was announced. This is for a number of projects including a reverse thrust project. *[Interruption.]* It is a reverse thrust for an engine. I know, Mr Speaker, that you will be personally interested in reverse thrusts. I have learned quite a lot about it and would be delighted to brief you personally on the subject if you require it. The serious point is that the whole of the aerospace industry, particularly in passenger jets, is changing. We must make sure that the Government funds that we have help to change our aerospace industry, which has a turnover of £42 billion, of which £38 billion is exported, and shape the business for the future. I am very pleased about the projects that are going on, and I have visited them with the hon. Member for Belfast East to see what was happening. The project itself—the factory that I visited—was

opened by Arlene Foster when she was the Minister responsible for that area, so this is very much a cross-party thing.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the ups and downs of the currency. He is right that it has changed significantly, but businesses such as Bombardier are used to dealing with changes in currencies. It has happened in cycles throughout history, and when companies such as Bombardier—I cannot speak for them, but this is what happens in my experience—get an order, they take hedging positions on the currency so that they do not face currency risk.

The most serious and significant point that the hon. Gentleman made, among the many points—*[Interruption.]* I will try. There has been a lot of chuntering about me going on too much, Mr Speaker, but the hon. Gentleman made a very important point about industrial strategy. Aerospace is a critical part of it. It is really about place, which is ideal for Bombardier because it is in Northern Ireland. It is about skills. Again, these are very highly skilled and very highly paid jobs, I am pleased to say. It is about channelling the partnership between the Government and the industry to produce a business for the future, and I am certain that Bombardier in Belfast will be part of that.

Mr Speaker: I say to the Minister: my cup runneth over with excitement. Little did I know that service as Speaker entailed a personal briefing on reverse thrust, but one learns something new every day.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): If we are in the business of reverse thrusts, may I suggest that a bit of reverse thrusting be done in the direction of Bombardier? Although my hon. Friend the Minister is absolutely right in that it is a private company and he has no power over it, he should not underrate his own degree of influence. He will meet the company, as he says. Let him do a bit of thrusting and let him thrust it in the right direction.

Richard Harrington: Mr Speaker, I think you will soon consider declaring “thrusting” comments completely out of order and unparliamentary language. As you might imagine, the sentiments of what my right hon. Friend says are absolutely right. We are in continual touch with Bombardier. I am proud of the factory; I am proud of the workers there; and I am proud of the Government's role.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I recognise the Minister's sincerity on Bombardier and thank him for his continued sincere efforts over the past three years. It would be very easy to consider this as a solely Northern Ireland issue or a localised Belfast issue, but I have been heartened over the past three years that parliamentarians from across the Chamber have recognised its significance to our economy and to high-level engineering, as well as the future benefits associated with Bombardier's success. The workforce have been through an incredibly difficult time over those three years, and this is a further disheartening blow for a workforce who saw the clouds shifting from above the plant, in Belfast, in Newtownards and in Newtownabbey. Recognising the constraints of private business but knowing the contribution that the Government have made to date, may I ask the Minister to continue to explore every avenue of financial support

[Gavin Robinson]

and to engage with the Department for International Trade and other Whitehall colleagues to ensure that prospects for future growth, sustainability and security are not only explored but delivered for the workforce in Northern Ireland?

Richard Harrington: I am delighted to be able to give the hon. Gentleman the assurances he asks for. This is critical to my Department, and we hope that Bombardier's model will be part of our future industrial strategy. The political stability that will, I hope, return to Northern Ireland in a field beyond my remit can only help the future of the workforce there. We work closely with trade unions and politicians of all political parties, and I am pleased to say that the aerospace part of my portfolio is to me the most exciting. I look forward to having many more models of wings produced in Belfast on my office desk.

James Heapey (Wells) (Con): Having spent three of the past 12 years living in Northern Ireland, I know just how important Bombardier is to the economy there and what brilliant aeroplanes they make. Does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that there is an opportunity to work with Bombardier on the research and development of a new generation of aircraft using hybrid and electric propulsion, so that Bombardier can be in the vanguard of the future aviation industry and so that we can make a positive out of what is undoubtedly a setback today?

Richard Harrington: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Hybrid technology is the nirvana for the future of jet engine propulsion and much of the money we have put in with industry for research and development is for hybrid technology. I am sure that Bombardier will be at the centre of that. This is about not just Bombardier but other companies in Northern Ireland that are in the supply chain. Northern Ireland is a significant hub. At the air shows I visit, the Northern Ireland exhibition stand is prominent and visited by companies from all over the world.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Just a few weeks ago, I visited the Bombardier plant in east Belfast with the hon. Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe), just to see it. There was no indication at that stage that there would be any job losses, so the announcement of 490 will affect my constituents in Newtownards. Northern Ireland has 10% of the cut to the workforce of 5,000 jobs globally, at a time when the company made a 57% increase in profits in February. The Minister will understand our angst. Will he outline the discussions he has had about investment in the Northern Ireland branches of Bombardier, which reflect the importance the Government have placed on Bombardier and on funding it in Belfast, at Newtownabbey and, in my constituency of Strangford, in Newtownards? Has the Minister had discussions with Bombardier about its intentions to bring back from Mexico and Morocco the work on parts that were once made successfully in Belfast to reflect the high level of investment the Government have made?

Richard Harrington: I commend the hon. Gentleman—I know Newtownards is part of his constituency—as well as the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) for

their work and the support they have given to the aerospace industry in their constituencies. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentions the parts that are being made in Mexico, and I was not aware of that but will bring it up at my meeting this afternoon and at every contact between my Department and the management.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that we must ensure that all parts of the country can benefit from the industrial strategy? What support is being given to Northern Ireland, in particular, as part of this?

Richard Harrington: I can answer my hon. Friend's question in two ways. On the aerospace sector, I have already explained how much money has been committed—about £1.8 billion in total—but Northern Ireland is also a very important part of this because it is one of our most important aerospace clusters. As regards Northern Ireland itself, I would particularly point to the recently announced Belfast city deal, which involves investment, again on a partnership basis, of about £350 million, of which aerospace will be a significant beneficiary—not just big companies but many small companies are involved. There is also the multiplier effect of those companies for the economy of Northern Ireland.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Not one single constituency is not impacted by this. The supply chain in terms of engineering and advanced engineering in Northern Ireland relies on Bombardier. To put this into perspective for Members in this part of our nation, this would be the equivalent of the Minister standing at the Dispatch Box and announcing more than 15,000 redundancies. That is the sobering reality of what we are facing. Will the Minister speak to the Northern Ireland Administration with regard to the monitoring round and release some of that money into the manufacturing side of business, and will he have an impact assessment carried out with regard to the supply chain in Northern Ireland?

Richard Harrington: The real answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is that we really do need devolved government enabled to distribute this money with the specific targeting that he refers to. Generally speaking, our policy is very much to support the supply chain. Obviously, manufacturing is very much part of that because it is where the high-quality, skilled jobs that are part of our industrial strategy come from. I will absolutely make sure that that is the case. I will do my best, in my dealings not just with Bombardier but with many of the other companies involved, to reflect the admirable sentiments that he has expressed.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I understand that the aerospace industry supports over 200,000 jobs across the whole UK. What more can the Government do to help us increase our share of the global market?

Richard Harrington: As I said, the aerospace growth partnership that I jointly chair is responsible for precisely what my hon. Friend asks for—the development of the industry in a high-tech manner using the skills in research and development that we have. We are very supportive of the industry, because apart from the high-level

employment, the exports are very significant. As I say, out of £42 billion in turnover, the industry has £38 billion of exports, so it is absolutely critical to us.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), I was appalled by the Minister's statement that as Bombardier is a private company the Government have no role in its commercial decisions—the “not me, guv” approach to government. It mirrors the blinkered approach of the Ministry of Defence, which has been shovelling contracts towards Boeing, often without competition, while Boeing is trying to crash Bombardier. What sort of message does the Minister think that that sends? Is it really too much to hope for a whole-of-government, active approach to back an industrial strategy, and back British industry and British workers?

Richard Harrington: I rarely disagree with the right hon. Gentleman, but I must remind him that what I said about this being a commercial decision is a question of fact. It is not subjective; it is not a value judgment. This is a private, independent company that is quoted on the Canadian stock exchange. He is very well aware of that, being very experienced. *[Interruption.]* The Government can influence it, as I heard in a typically erudite chunter from the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson). We influence it by the investment we put into research and development, as he quite correctly said. That is very important. I know from my discussions with Bombardier management centrally that they do regard Northern Ireland as a central part of their developments in future. As I said in my statement, the company gave us various undertakings. The future of the plant in Northern Ireland—in Belfast—is absolutely critical to them.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Bombardier employs many people across many constituencies in Northern Ireland, and I know that those employees and their families will be deeply worried today. In trying to support them and in the absence of devolved government in Northern Ireland, how will the Department work with others, including the likes of Invest Northern Ireland, to ensure for those employees a quick transition into good jobs elsewhere?

Richard Harrington: The hon. Lady cares deeply for her constituents, and so do I. On the intricacies of devolved government in Northern Ireland, the relevance to my Department is that it makes it more difficult for us to communicate. We have to communicate directly with companies, which is a pleasure, but it is important that we ensure a democratic element to the process as well. We do all we can, however, and have to make the best of the situation. There is certainly no lack of effort or will from my Department. We want more skilled jobs in Northern Ireland, and Bombardier is very much a part of that, so we are not writing the company off because of these redundancies, although I accept that they are significant and a serious issue for her constituents.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): More than 30% of the Bombardier workforce has been cut since 2015. In my experience working with Scottish Enterprise, first-tier aerospace companies, particularly Bombardier, have quite a shallow penetration into second and third-tier supply chain companies in the UK.

Will the Minister redouble his efforts and ensure a proper industrial strategy that maximises the inputs from first-tier companies such as Bombardier into second and third-tier companies so that we can mop up some of the jobs that have been lost?

Richard Harrington: I cannot speak for the hon. Gentleman's experience in his constituency, but it is my impression, from my dealings with Bombardier and other companies in the Northern Ireland cluster, that they are well integrated and co-ordinated with each other. He asks me to redouble my efforts, however, and I certainly will do. I will bear in mind his point in every visit I make and every conversation I have.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman is a decent man sent to the House to do a dirty job. I say in the nicest way that he should not try to bamboozle the House. Michael Ryan is a good chief executive—indeed, he is a “Make it in Great Britain” industry champion for the Government—and Bombardier is a damned good company. We know it. I have just been to Northern Ireland, and I know how proud Northern Ireland is of it, but the reality is that it is an integrated global business, and the disturbance created by our leaving the EU is having a deep effect, including on Airbus and supply chains. Michael Ryan and his team are very unsettled by what the Government are doing in coming out of Europe and upsetting the supply chains. Behind all this is our leaving Europe. The Minister should take that on board.

Richard Harrington: I hope you would agree, Mr Speaker, that I am not a bamboozler by nature, and it is certainly not my intention to bamboozle the House or the hon. Gentleman. On the serious point, the company has said this is not a Brexit-related decision.

Mr Sheerman: It would do.

Richard Harrington: It has said that very clearly. As I think the hon. Gentleman knows, aerospace is a truly international business and frictionless trade is an important part of it, and I believe that the deal the Prime Minister has been negotiating, which will provide for frictionless trade to help manufacturing industry in the future, will help Bombardier and all other companies remain strong. The Irish trade unions have issued a statement urging the deal to happen.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I have worked in the aerospace industry, so I have a rough idea of what is happening. It was mentioned that direct jobs are being affected, but hon. Members have mentioned the supply chain. In my experience, for every direct job lost, three indirect jobs could be lost. Can the Minister give us the actual figures and set out the impact on the supply chain?

Richard Harrington: I think the hon. Gentleman is correct about the multiplier effect. I cannot say exactly, but it is about three to four indirect jobs for every one direct job.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I visited Bombardier last month, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson), in a visit

[*Christian Matheson*]

organised and paid for by the Industry and Parliament Trust. Bombardier is making fantastic products. The danger is that these cuts upon cuts will lead to the loss of the critical mass of skills, meaning that the next set of products cannot be made there. Does the Minister share that concern, and if so, what is he doing to protect skills?

Richard Harrington: I share the hon. Gentleman's concern, which is common to industry generally, including steel and other sectors. The Northern Ireland aerospace hub is very solid. Although orders will not come through until 2020, the deal that Bombardier did with Airbus means that the company can plan for the future, and it is very aware of the need to maintain skills.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): One area where Government can help is retraining. Will the Minister consider an endowment or individual learning account for workers who have been made redundant, to enable them to get training and secure positions elsewhere?

Richard Harrington: That is very interesting. I believe that it is a devolved matter, but I will look into it with interest.

Points of Order

12.10 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Have you had any representations from a Minister in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to make a statement to the House on the case of Matthew Hedges? Many Members will be concerned that a British citizen has been given a life sentence—possibly tortured in the process—and yet we have not had a statement from Government. Can you tell me how I can ensure that a Minister comes to the House as soon as possible to update us on that case?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The issue is very much in the public square, as he will know, and is the subject of much angst and horrified discussion among not merely parliamentarians but, I rather imagine, a very large number of people across the country who feel for Mr Hedges. I think I can predict with complete confidence that this matter will be aired in the Chamber next week, whether by the offer of a ministerial statement or by other means with which the right hon. Gentleman is closely familiar. It is unimaginable that next week will pass without this very significant humanitarian and foreign relations issue being fully discussed by Members.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Thank you for your response to the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake). It is important for the family to know over this weekend that Ministers are working as hard as they can to ensure this man's freedom and are calling for his so-called punishment to be deferred and for him to be sent back to the United Kingdom. I think of the family—I always do—over this weekend. The Department should be contacting them.

Mr Speaker: I know that Ministers will be having contact, and I think the fact of the Foreign Secretary's contact with Mr Hedges's wife is a matter of public record. The House will be sitting tomorrow, and as things stand, the Prime Minister will be here later today. Admittedly she is not here for that purpose, but the Chair may exercise a modicum of discretion as appropriate for brief reference to be made to this issue, although that is not the principal business. One way or the other, I rather imagine the issue will indeed be aired in the Chamber if Members want it to be before the weekend, and assuredly next week. I hope that that is helpful to colleagues.

Armed Forces Covenant

[Relevant Documents: Ninth Report of the Defence Committee, Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2017, HC 707, and the Government Response, HC 1571, and Eleventh Report of the Defence Committee, Mental Health and the Armed Forces, Part One: The scale of mental health issues, HC 813, and the Government Response, HC 1635]

12.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Armed Forces Covenant.

It is a pleasure—indeed, an honour—to open this debate on the armed forces covenant annual report 2018. Before I go any further, for those watching live, on the 10 o'clock news, the Parliament channel or maybe one day on Dave, I want to say on behalf of everyone here to those who are in the armed forces, whether they be regulars, reserves, part of the armed forces family and community or veterans: thank you for your service. The country is certainly indebted to you.

Over the last couple of weeks, we have reflected on the role of our armed forces in world war one, when Britain stepped forward. What happened then defined our reputation today, as a nation that is willing to fly the standard in defence of global liberty across the world. It is the professionalism of our armed forces today that allows us to continue playing a role on the international stage. That war also exposed the conditions that our services were fighting in when facing combat, as well as the requirement to support our armed forces when they return from the frontline.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): My right hon. Friend mentioned liberty. A disproportionate number of our veterans are actually in prison. The excellent “Phoenix” project run by Care after Combat reaches only one in 10 veteran prisoners. Will he look at the possibility of finding finance to extend that excellent programme?

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful for that early intervention. I will come on to that subject, but my right hon. Friend touches on something that I must grasp straightaway, which is the myths surrounding our armed forces. He is incorrect to say that a disproportionate number of our armed forces or vets are in prison. Indeed, in many categories, whether it be those suffering from mental health problems or those in prison, the number of people from the armed forces is lower compared with the general population. That does not mean to say that we should not provide support, including through charities such as the one that he mentions. I would be delighted to talk with him to see what more we can do to ensure that care is provided to those veterans, so that they do not reoffend and can provide more value to society once they depart.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the same applies to the idea that veterans are disproportionately represented among the homeless population, which is not true? Does he also accept that where service has caused problems leading to involvement with the criminal justice system and homelessness, we have a special duty under the military covenant to sort it out?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend touches on the essence of the covenant, which I will come to. He also underlines the myths that are perpetuated out there. As the cohort of our society has less and less direct contact with the armed forces, these myths can be perpetuated. It is up to those in the armed forces, as well as Government and Parliament, to ensure that those myths are not perpetuated.

Someone who joins the armed forces will come out a better person; they will learn more about themselves, go to places they did not even know existed and serve their nation with pride. Some 90% of those who serve leave the armed forces either in education or with a job. However, the underlying point must be made that many, through no fault of their own, require support, and we ensure that support is provided.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What are the Government doing to assist the families of ex-soldiers who have mental health problems? That is a very important factor, because it can lead to family break-ups and all sorts of problems. Can the Minister give us an assurance about that? I also remind him that it was a Labour Government who started the covenant.

Mr Ellwood: Support for mental health—or what I prefer to call mental fitness—is critical to what the covenant espouses. The hon. Gentleman is right to raise that. If I may, I will venture further into my address, but he is welcome to intervene at a later stage.

I was touching on the reforms that we have seen since the first world war. There have been many key moments in the history of our nation when we bettered the service conditions for our armed forces. The major ones came in 1868 with the Cardwell reforms, which removed the use of flogging, abolished the sale of officers' commissions and set the length of service for how long people would remain in uniform. In 1880, the Childers reforms established the regimental system that we recognise today and the standardisation of uniform. There was a feeling that wearing a red tunic on the battlefield was not such a great idea, and something a little bit greener might be better if we did not want the enemy to see us—something that my regiment, the Royal Green Jackets, picked up quite quickly, hence the name. From 1906, the Haldane reforms brought in the lessons from the Boer war, but also created the British Expeditionary Force—the first force to set foot in France and provide our initial response in world war one.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister also recognise that the 1906 Haldane reforms created the Territorial Force, which has of course been an instrumental part of Britain's military capability since that time?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I do not know where we draw a line on those reforms, but he is absolutely right that the introduction of the reserves as such, and of a standing Army, was something Haldane was very important in doing, and we are ever grateful to him for that.

To go back to what happened in the aftermath of world war one, it was the warriors returning from the continent who exposed the shortfall in support for our veterans. That shortfall in support prompted the creation of many of the charities we recognise today, such as

[Mr Ellwood]

Combat Stress and Blesma, as well as the Royal British Legion, which led to the poppy appeal that does so much to support our veterans.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): The Minister mentions the poppy in passing, but does he share my distaste about some of the remarks made in the far-left media during the Remembrance period? Such people of course have the right not to wear the poppy and even to object to it, but I rather thought that speaking out so negatively about the work of the Royal British Legion was beyond the pale. I hope the Minister agrees.

Mr Ellwood: I think my hon. Friend speaks for the whole House in supporting the poppy and the work of the campaign, which is absolutely terrific in providing support for our veterans. I would hate to see anybody choose to make political gain out of the poppy. It is important to reflect on what the campaign has achieved, and I hope that that will continue.

The nation owes a debt of gratitude to service personnel and their families for what they do for this country, and that is what the covenant is all about. It is about how we apply that in practical terms. Today, under section 2 of the Armed Forces Act 2011, we publish our seventh armed forces covenant annual report. In simple terms, the covenant is about the contract that we must have with those who serve and those who have served. In setting the scene for the debate, I will, if I may, read out its opening lines:

“The first duty of Government is the defence of the realm. Our Armed Forces fulfil that responsibility on behalf of the Government, sacrificing some civilian freedoms, facing danger and, sometimes, suffering serious injury or death as a result of their duty. Families also play a vital role in supporting the operational effectiveness of our Armed Forces. In return, the whole nation has a moral obligation to the members of the Naval Service, the Army and the Royal Air Force, together with their families.

They deserve our respect and support, and fair treatment.

Those who serve in the Armed Forces, whether Regular or Reserve, those who have served in the past, and their families, should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services. Special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given most such as the injured and the bereaved.

This obligation involves the whole of society: it includes voluntary and charitable bodies, private organisations, and the actions of individuals in supporting the Armed Forces. Recognising those who have performed military duty unites the country and demonstrates the value of their contribution. This has no greater expression than in upholding this Covenant.”

This is what the covenant is about: it is our duty to those who serve and have served.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): I have looked at the document very carefully, and I can find nothing in it about the veterans, particularly Northern Ireland veterans, who are now being arrested for historical offences that took place many years ago. Many such veterans have been arrested already and about 300 more are facing the prospect of a dawn raid. This is completely against natural justice, it is against the covenant and these brave veterans deserve the full support of my right hon. Friend's Department.

Mr Ellwood: May I pay tribute to the work my hon. Friend is doing along with other Back Benchers on this particular and important issue? He is absolutely right that that is not included in the report on the covenant because, quite separately, it is being studied by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I know that he is contributing to that debate as well. A consultation on this has been opened. He will be aware that this is tied in with the Belfast agreement. He knows my own personal views on this. As we move forward, we need to clarify this and be in a position whereby those who serve this country do not feel that questions will be asked about them 30, 40 or 50 years later.

Dr Murrison: The Minister has laid out the contract contained in the military covenant, but does he agree with me that people are rejecting the offer on a truly industrial scale? That is why we have a big problem with recruitment and retention. It is no good eulogising the covenant and the offer to members of our armed forces if they pass a vote of no confidence—that is essentially what they have done—in what is on offer.

Mr Ellwood: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who is a former naval officer. I would correct him about where the trends in recruitment are going; we have new processes in place. He will be aware of how competitive the current environment actually is. The challenge actually lies in retention. We need to be able to provide an atmosphere that encourages people, as their circumstances change—as they get married, as they have children—to remain in the thing they love: the armed forces themselves. I will come on to some of the changes being introduced specifically with that in mind to make sure that we can retain the people with the skillsets we need.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman read out the opening remarks of the covenant. I am sure he will agree that a lot of the responsibilities for the covenant rest with local authorities. With funding settlements from the Ministry of Defence coming for only two-year periods, does he not agree that there is a need for more certainty in implementing the covenant? If authorities are given funding beyond the two-year funding formula, we could put in place long-term plans for supporting veterans and, indeed, bereaved families.

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman touches on something that is so critical to the armed forces covenant. It is not just the responsibility of the Ministry of Defence to execute it, but the duty of different Departments right across Whitehall. If they do not live up to their charge, it is often the MOD that gets to know about it. It is so important that the covenant has the practical ability to hold to account other Departments and, as he mentions, local authorities. That is one area in which we need to get better. I put my hand up to say that it is not as good or as equal across Britain—there are different standards depending on where people are—and that absolutely needs to improve.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): On that particular point, will my right hon. Friend confirm how many local authorities are not signed up to the covenant? I know that my local authority, Powys, certainly is, and I am delighted that it is. Does he have any figures, and what more can he do to ensure that other local authorities sign up to it?

Mr Ellwood: I am pleased to say that all local authorities are signed up, but signing up to something is not the same as implementing it. That is where we need to improve what we do by holding those local authorities to account. As I look around the Chamber, I see Members representing different parts of Britain. Some of our constituencies have an historical connection with the armed forces, and those local authorities tend to be far better at implementing the practical application of the covenant than those with less of a connection. That is what we need to change, and where the covenant must come in with a bit more venom and a bit more severity if we are to hold such local authorities to account.

James Heappey: Almost all public bodies—all local authorities and many clinical commissioning groups and schools—are signed up, but does my right hon. Friend agree with me that an area that causes the families of serving military personnel great frustration is when utility companies are difficult about allowing them to break contracts midway through because they have a change of posting or their circumstances change as a consequence of their duty? Does he agree that there is actually a great deal of work to be done among those in the private sector to persuade them to recognise the challenges of military life and to adapt their terms of service to accommodate such personnel?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend mentions two issues, on which I share his concern. On clinical commissioning groups, I am aware that, when service personnel are transferred from one locality to another, they do not necessarily gain the same access to medication for their children, which they need. It is very serious if children move to a new location and cannot get their medication and that must change—we must address that issue. He also mentioned businesses. The big and small businesses with which we are working and which have signed up to the covenant are providing flexibility on contracts. For example, those who are mobilised to go to Afghanistan are allowed to cancel their mobile phone contract without fear of penalty because those companies have signed up to the covenant. Those are practical examples of how businesses can provide support and not penalise people because of their service.

I touched on some of the changes that have been introduced in the past few years of which we can be proud. First, part of the support provided for charities is the introduction of the gateway—the single portal that allows any veteran, and their families, to identify where support might be found in myriad areas, be that housing, homelessness, writing a CV or employment. The veterans' gateway provides a single access locality so that myriad charities that can help can be identified in a much simpler way than in the past, when perhaps it was a bit confusing to know which way to turn.

The second change—this is very much thanks to the Defence Secretary—is the launch of the 24/7 helpline for serving personnel and veterans. It is critical that people know where they can turn to for help, no matter what time it is, day or night, and no matter the situation.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I do not want to talk figures, but from my experience a worrying number of veterans take their own life, and I wonder what help is available for those who feel suicidal, for whatever reason. It is critical that we help people in their most urgent moment of need.

Mr Ellwood: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. We have introduced the Samaritans handbook to provide the necessary support for all serving personnel and that is being rolled out to veterans. I am concerned about this issue, which has taken a higher profile in social media and elsewhere. Whether it is perceived or otherwise, it is important that we do not shy away from our responsibility to help those veterans who may feel that they have gone into a very dark place. I touched on the 24/7 helpline, but there is also the cross-Whitehall veterans board that allows us to hold to account other Departments that need to upgrade their support for veterans and their families, as well as the armed forces. It is still in its infancy, and it still needs to get stronger and sharper in holding other Departments to account—I am sure we will debate that further this afternoon. However, I am pleased that the board is in place, and doing good work to encourage and wake up other Departments to their direct responsibilities, which are separate from those of the Ministry of Defence.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Minister has just made an important point, and it is important that he recognises the infancy of the process. Is he seized of the inadequacy of the Northern Ireland Office representing Northern Ireland Departments, including Health and Housing, for which they have no operational responsibility or indeed knowledge?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. I was in Northern Ireland for Remembrance Sunday and it was a pleasure to be back. He knows that I served there a number of years ago, and it was a pleasure to see how far advanced the whole of Northern Ireland is in embracing the ability publicly to thank the armed forces. I was in Coleraine for Armed Forces Day, but at the time that I served we would never have seen our armed forces marching down the streets with people thanking them for their service. There are, however, some particular challenges in Northern Ireland, of which the hon. Gentleman is more aware than me. He is also aware of the situation with the Northern Ireland Assembly and the development of the new districts that are coming in. It is a bottom-up approach. We are trying to make this work. There is the veterans' support office, which he is familiar with. I have met people from that office, too. Anyone who feels that they are not receiving support needs to get directly in touch with that office because that is the avenue through which to find help. Help is there, but as with many situations, this is about knowing where to go when such help is required.

The other major change is the mental health strategy, and the significance of that issue has already been touched on a number of times. This is about what we put our brave personnel through, and whether there is a requirement for them to have additional support in that area. In my time—I am looking around the Chamber and there are many old warriors here—

James Heappey: Speak for yourself!

Mr Ellwood: Well let's go out and do a basic fitness test and see how we get on. My point is that, in our time, would we have been willing to put our hand up and say that we had an issue with our mind? If we had a physical injury, absolutely, we would have stepped forward—we would not have had a problem with that—but there was perhaps a stigma associated with being honest

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about any mental troubles we might have had. That was the entirely wrong approach, because those issues can then incubate and become worse, and then someone ends up departing the very thing they love because they find it difficult to cope. That has a knock-on impact because, when somebody loses confidence in themselves, that affects their career possibilities, they may depart the armed forces and it may affect their relationships and lead to family break-up or unemployment, which could spiral into a very dark chapter.

Let us go back to the beginning. If someone is able and encouraged, and does not feel that it will threaten their ambitions in the armed forces, they should be able to put their hand up and say “Actually, I have a bit of an issue. Can someone help to sort it out?” Someone might say to them, “Why don’t you go and see the doctor and get yourself checked out? It’s okay”. That is the place we are now going towards. Every ship’s captain, platoon commander, squadron leader and person now has a responsibility—a duty—to look after one another and ensure that if there is an issue we talk about it straightaway. It is okay for someone to say that they are not okay.

Mr Sweeney: The Minister is making a positive effort to outline the vision we ought to have, which I think everyone shares. Does he also recognise that four in 10 service families who have requested access to and been referred for mental health care have had difficulty accessing that treatment? That is not good enough and we need to do more. Many of our veterans experience great frustration when it comes to mental health support, and that leads to the despair that we have seen, with a spate of veteran suicides.

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman is right, and I will come on to the details of mental health and wellbeing, and say what more we are doing. More funds have come through from the recent Budget, but we need to ensure that treatment is available and that veterans know where to find it.

James Heappey: My right hon. Friend is right. Over the three tours that I did, in 2005, 2007 and 2009, the difference in attitude to mental health, and the reactions within theatre to things that were happening, grew exponentially. The key is to ensure that the lessons learned when mental health was a necessity in combat become business as usual for regiments, ships and squadrons going forward. I hope that since I left the military in 2012 that has become the norm, and that it is business as usual for mental health always to be a topic of conversation, rather than just in connection with operations.

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The whole aspect of decompression is new, too. When our armed forces come back from a combat arena, they are moved into a different environment before they see their family. They are checked and discussions are had to check their temperament. We now get back in touch 12 months after any person has departed the armed forces to see if they are still okay and how they are getting on. These are all new changes that were certainly not in place when I served and I do not think they were in place when my hon. Friend was serving either.

I want to touch on the transition service before I turn in more detail to mental health. We need to get to a place where people, when they put their hands up to say they are departing the armed forces, are retrained so they can move back into society without a problem. Again, when I served, this was not on anybody’s mind. As soon as we put our hands up to say we were departing, we were normally given rear echelon jobs and told to just get on with it.

Today, we have to recognise several things. The skill sets one learns in the armed forces are formidable: the leadership, teamwork, grit, tenacity, determination and the willingness to work beyond five o’clock are all skill sets that anybody in civilian life might want to pick up. As I have said, the cohort of people with direct understanding of what the armed forces are like is very different today from 20, 50 or 100 years ago. As such, an employer or HR director may not be aware of what it is like to be in the armed forces. They may have the wrong impression and they may believe the myths we touched on earlier.

It is therefore absolutely critical that we are able to work with businesses through our Defence Relationship Management and Career Transition Partnership teams. They go out to businesses to explain what skill sets are available and how they might be useful to workforces, and most importantly to train, to educate and to ensure that those who have put their hand up to say, for whatever reason, “I’ve decided to leave the armed forces” have the qualifications during what can be up to two years of transition. I am very proud of the direction of travel on that.

Those who serve in our armed forces actually serve our country twice. They not only do so in uniform with pride, doing something exceptional and unique that very few other people do—putting themselves in harm’s way to defend our country—they also serve a second time by serving the nation and society in other jobs by taking those skill sets across. We need to make sure that transition is as simple and as easy as possible. That is exactly what our Career Transition Partnership intends to achieve.

The issue of mental health has been raised a number of times by hon. Members. They are absolutely right that we need to get this right. I talked about the new strategy, our comprehensive overhaul of how we treat and look at mental health. It has four themes. The first is to promote a better attitude to remove the stigma of mental health. The second is prevention, making people aware of what to anticipate, so that they are appreciative of environments where they may be affected by mental health issues. The third is detection, understanding and finding out what is going on, through discussions and better checks of what individuals are going through. Fourthly, if you can detect it, you can treat it early and get those people back into the frontline, where they want to be, as quickly as possible. We do not want to wait. We do not want any individuals to allow these issues to incubate or for them to live in denial of a problem.

There is one spectrum of veterans about whom I am particularly concerned. We are seeing the benefits of the processes we put in place following the lessons we learned from Afghanistan and Iraq. The groupings who are more vulnerable, because the stigma was so prevalent, are those who served at the time of the Falklands.

They are now in their 40s, 50s, 60s and 70s. They saw and experienced things that perhaps they still do not want to talk about. They were not educated during their time about where help could be found. It is those people whom we have a duty to reach out to and find through means other than our connections to the armed forces.

Our new approach begins at the start of any individual's career, through promoting positive mental health and wellbeing, preventing and detecting the onset of mental illness at the earliest possibility, and treating such illnesses when they are diagnosed. I touched on the additional funds that are coming from the Budget. An extra £2 million a year is being brought in to improve mental health services for our armed forces, on top of the £20 million already committed.

As hon. Members will be aware, this is another great example of where responsibility lies not just with the Ministry of Defence. We are often compared with the United States, which has a completely different approach to this, but we have the NHS, which is the best in the world. It would not make sense to replicate that with another health service simply for our armed forces. We need to tap into and take advantage of the NHS skill sets. If people go to the NHS and it denies them support, the machine is not working and we need to ensure that that changes. It is therefore important that the MOD has a close relationship with NHS England and indeed the devolved Administrations to make sure it works right across the country and meets the healthcare needs of the armed forces community.

Healthcare in England is devolved to local clinical commissioning groups. I have touched on the issues that we have with different standards and approaches; that needs to be reconciled. Most services for all demographics, however, are commissioned and provided locally. Healthcare for devolved Administrations is devolved to those Administrations for more regional and local determination of services and is consistent with national approaches to healthcare. In England, local CCGs, working with local authorities, have the legal responsibility for planning and commissioning, and for providing appropriate health and social care for the population where they live. Those requirements and needs are measured through the respective local authority-chaired health and wellbeing boards and underpinned by the latest data on where the armed forces communities live. That is absolutely critical because, if they move from one locality to another, they do not want to be waiting for their records to catch up with them to gain the necessary treatment they deserve.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): On local authorities, will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Aberdeen City Council, which has just renewed its commitment to the armed forces covenant by signing a new one? This covenant will show the city's appreciation for the work of our armed forces and veterans. It puts in place additional support to help veterans into employment; to help them and their families; and to give more new council housing to those who have served in our armed forces. Does my right hon. Friend think that that is a leading initiative that other councils should perhaps follow?

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. He is absolutely right. He highlights the fact that there is different modelling around the country.

He also touches on something that perhaps I can praise him for: he has bothered to understand what is going on in his patch. I hope that we all can be bothered to do that. All hon. Members should take an interest, because of the varying standards around the country, to go in and ask those questions. We have a role to play in upgrading the standards and maybe copying what is happening in his local authority.

To turn back to NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care, we have written, at national director and permanent secretary levels, to the chairs of all the health and wellbeing boards, reminding them of the need to update their strategic needs and assessments, and to use the latest annual population survey data, which reflects where the armed forces are based. The Local Government Association, in conjunction with the Department of Health and Social Care, collects data on all local authorities that have signed the armed forces covenant. It is critical that they do their duty as well. Based on ongoing use of nationally commissioned services, as well as evidence-based research, NHS England's transition, intervention and liaison complex mental health treatment services are continually reviewed to ensure that both capacity and capability are in place and services are reconfigured to meet both clinical demand and changes to professional practice—that relates to the point the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) raised earlier.

The mental health complex treatment service was launched in April. It caters to the individual treatment needs of veterans at community level. This is where we need to ensure that veterans are aware of what support is available. This follows on from the introduction of the transition intervention and liaison services last year, completing the tiered approach to veterans' mental healthcare.

In addition, there is the Veterans Trauma Network, which collects data, numbers, location and intervention types on all patients who access the service. The VTN steering group is working with the veteran patient cohort and researchers to look at the societal impacts of their injuries and interventions to inform planning and delivery reviews of the service. It is complicated to go into the weeds of the support. Sometimes people might get the impression that little is being done, but support is available, and it is so important that veterans are made aware of where that support is.

Turning to local government, I have touched on the role of the armed forces champion. Again, I encourage every single Member here to go to their local authority and ask, "Who is the armed forces champion?" Find out their name and whether their name is on the local authority's website. Find out what they do. Are they making sure that every single guideline and rule that the council puts forward is through the prism of understanding what impact it will have on our armed forces and our armed forces community? If there is a homeless issue, what is being done, for example, to make sure that the local authority is providing for the vets who may be homeless? Typically, that is the sort of work that the armed forces champion should focus on. The more that we as Members of Parliament ask these questions, the better we will raise the bar overall.

From a housing perspective, I am pleased that earlier this year, the MOD signed a duty—a statutory requirement—with the new Ministry of Housing,

[Mr Ellwood]

Communities and Local Government to refer individuals leaving the military to local authorities, if they are deemed by their local commanding officer to be at risk of homelessness. That is so important. It means that we should not see people who might end up becoming homeless leaving the armed forces with nowhere to go, because their plight will be flagged up as they depart.

On education, it is important to understand again that not just the armed forces, but their families, are affected by moving. If individual personnel are moved from one locality to another and they have children, this will of course have an impact on schooling and other aspects of education. This is disruptive. Any child can end up moving three or four times during their schooling, and that is not good for their education. We cannot have a situation whereby people move to a new locality and find that they do not get their school of choice. In some cases, I found, horrifically, that when special needs school support is required, individual personnel are not being given that support, and this must change.

We are providing research to understand the impact of mobility on the progression of service children. We are also looking at service children's progression from an alliance practitioner hub perspective to bring together local partners, including schools, colleges, universities, local authorities and charities, to address the specific needs of service children in a local context. In March 2018, the alliance carried out a UK-wide consultation that identified strong common themes. These will help to improve the evidence base to inform the development of our policy, so that we make sure that we can answer these challenging questions of how we disrupt less and less the lives of children seeking education.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): What is my right hon. Friend's position on the boarding school allowance for service children? That benefits not just officers, but non-commissioned officers and soldiers, who tend to use it increasingly frequently.

Mr Ellwood: All these questions get raised regularly with the Treasury. I know in my time how important this was—I am sure it was in my hon. Friend's as well—and how important it continues to be as the basis for providing a single locality for individuals, particularly when NCOs and others are deployed abroad, because it provides the stability that they need. I will write to him in more detail, but we continue to debate this regularly with the Treasury. It is something that we recognise absolutely, and I am personally committed to making sure that it continues.

On funding for childcare, I am pleased to say that we have allocated £20 million in the Budget for facilities for service families in 40 locations around the country, and Cyprus is included as well. The English admissions code continues to recognise the mobility of service children and has provisions for them to apply for school places before they move into an area. I add that some individual personnel only have up to four months' notice of when they move. That is shorter than the period that schools require, so I ask the Department for Education to recognise the unique circumstances that our armed forces face. They do not always have the

luxury of giving extended notice of when they might move into an area, and therefore we need to say that these children must not be disadvantaged. Sometimes, they will receive only four months' notice and the school admission authorities must be aware of the difficulties that they face.

In the financial year 2018-19, nearly £23 million will be allocated to state schools in England through the service pupil premium to benefit over 76,000 current and former service children in over 10,000 primary and secondary schools. I am pleased that the Secretary of State for Defence announced the extension of the education support fund in July 2018. That will be on a limited basis and will consist of £3 million in 2018-19 and £2 million in 2019-20. The educational support fund is open to publicly funded schools, academies and free schools in the UK that are attended by service children whose parents are subject to exceptional mobility or deployment. Applications for local authorities in support of these schools can be accepted.

I know that the area of suicides and post-traumatic stress disorder is of concern to many in the House. Any suicide is a tragedy, especially when it is someone who has served our country. However, I make it clear—I know that this is a sensitive issue—that suicide does not occur in isolation. It is usually the most tragic symptom of many other issues, such as mental health issues, family breakdown, debt, unemployment or myriad other problems. It is inaccurate and, indeed, disrespectful and trivialising to link it solely with military service, but I will say that in some cases, military service plays a role, and we need to better understand the causes so that we can act to prevent further potential suicides in future.

We have set up a new suicide prevention working group to urgently look at cases involving such distress in service personnel. It will look at how to address the issues affecting those in such distress now and how to prevent others from feeling the same way. It will look at the triggers in service to ensure that all future veterans have the resilience that they need while serving and after they leave. For existing veterans, we now have, as hon. Members will be aware, a Minister responsible for suicide prevention—the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price)—who was appointed in October. She is also a member of the ministerial covenant and veterans board and is responsible for addressing this issue.

The Department of Health and Social Care has had a national suicide prevention strategy in place since 2012 that aims to address the causes of suicide for every civilian, not just veterans. However, veterans are identified in the strategy as requiring tailored approaches to meet their mental health needs. This has resulted in NHS England's veterans' mental health transition, intervention and liaison service, which has supported hundreds of veterans and their families since its launch in April 2017. This is complemented by the veterans' mental health complex treatment service that I mentioned, which was launched in April this year to support those with the most complex needs and provide holistic support for the whole person and their family.

This very difficult area is something that I have shared with the "Five Eyes" nations. I brought together veterans Ministers from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the United States and the UK to compare what we are doing better to improve our support for our service

personnel and veterans. We still do not understand this in detail; we still do not understand what drives someone into that dark place. Indeed, in many cases—up to 50%—there is no indication whatsoever that people would actually take their own lives. That is exactly what happened in my own family circumstance: there was no indication that my uncle was going to take his life. It is indeed a complicated scenario for us to address. We must better understand what is going on. We must make sure that we improve our support for veterans, and we must make clear where that help lies.

I have touched on some of the key areas, but let me also highlight the tables at the back of the annual report, on page 118, which give the coding on how well—or not—we are doing.

This is a moving debate. It represents a graduation in our attempts to improve our support for our armed forces and for our veterans as well. When we look at what has happened in the past and the support that was there, I think we can be proud of the direction in which we are going, but I will be the first to say that there is much more to do. Of course, the more we can secure funds—as we do, and we are bidding for more in the next spending review—the more that helps, but if we want to inspire the next generation to think about putting on the uniform, we must ensure that we look after this generation who serve and the last generation who are now retired. The covenant is doing its work, but it must do more.

I look forward to the debate that we are about to have, and I look forward to responding to the issues and concerns that Members will raise. I commend the publication of the seventh armed forces covenant annual report, pursuant to section 2 of the Armed Forces Act 2011.

1.1 pm

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): The armed forces covenant represents the solemn and enduring commitment that we owe to members of the armed forces community. Those who serve our country make so many sacrifices in defence of the UK and our interests, and they rightly deserve respect, support and fair treatment both during and after their service, along with their families at home.

The sacrifice made by our servicemen and women has of course been at the forefront of our minds recently, with the Remembrance commemorations and the centenary of the armistice. However, the covenant reminds us that the debt that we owe to the armed forces community is not for a particular day or week, but runs the whole year round. Labour Members fully support the covenant and the important guarantees that underlie it, and we supported its becoming law in 2011; but, of course, simply writing it into a statute is not enough. What matters is whether it is making a difference on the ground. Are our veterans actually receiving that special consideration when accessing healthcare? Do the children of personnel really experience no disadvantage when it comes to their schooling? On that count, a lot more needs to be done, and I want to touch on some of that this afternoon.

Let me begin with healthcare. I welcome some of the steps that have been taken in recent years to try to improve awareness of what the covenant requires of health professionals. The Welsh Government recently

issued guidance to all health boards on veterans' priority healthcare, and knowledge of the covenant now forms part of the membership exam for the Royal College of General Practitioners. However, the Royal British Legion has expressed concern about a lack of awareness and understanding of the policy of priority treatment, as well as an inability to measure implementation and a lack of clarity about the Government's interpretation of the policy, and the Defence Committee has noted confusion over how the principle of priority treatment should be implemented among both clinicians and veterans. I should be grateful if the Minister would tell us what more is being done to improve understanding of this important guarantee.

When it comes to mental health, the picture for personnel, veterans and families is worrying. The latest families continuous attitude survey has found that four in 20 of the families who sought mental health treatment experienced difficulties or were unable to access treatment, and we know that that is sadly true among the population at large. Our mental health services have never been under more pressure. Funding for mental health services in England has been cut by over 8% since 2010, and the number of mental health nurses has fallen by 6,600. The Defence Committee has also found that

"it is still taking too long for veterans to access treatment when they need it".

As was mentioned during last week's debate on the veterans strategy, it is important to be clear that rates of mental illness among personnel and veterans are generally no higher than those among the population at large. However, support must be available to those who need it, and it must be delivered quickly and effectively.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Local authorities are key to this topic, as they are responsible for housing and social services. Does my hon. Friend agree that they must be 100% behind it in the future, so that our servicemen and women are given the best possible support?

Nia Griffith: I absolutely agree that we want the full support of all our local authorities, and our health boards, but I must put on record again that they have experienced very severe cuts under this Government. That is an issue, particularly when we are trying to develop new initiatives and make progress.

We know that the requirements of service life do not just affect personnel. They can also have an impact on families, including children. We do not always recognise just how difficult and stressful being the spouse or partner of a member of the armed forces can be, given the loneliness, the upheaval of moving house frequently and trying to get the children settled, and so on. I congratulate the women behind Forces Wives Challenge, whom I met yesterday and who are raising awareness of the problems. Early next year, some of them are going to Chile to climb the highest volcano in the world, Ojos del Salado. Just as important, however, is the fact that they are working with partners and wives across the country using challenges—in their words, "enabling ordinary women to do extraordinary things"—to bring women together, foster a sense of community, and help women to deal with issues such as loneliness.

One particular challenge arises when service families have to move, which can have a knock-on effect on schooling. I welcome the changes in the common transfer

[*Nia Griffith*]

file—for instance, the inclusion of more contextual information. That should ultimately help children with the process of moving schools, but it is clear that some issues remain. In its comments on this year's covenant report, the families federations identify a “distinct spike” in the number of school admissions issues raised with them over the past year, and say that recent surveys show that

“finding school places is a key source of anxiety for Service families.”

Some local authorities are clearly taking a proactive approach to dealing with the problem. For example, Rhondda Cynon Taf council employs a dedicated forces education officer, who is himself a former soldier and a serving reservist, to work closely with forces families and schools to ensure that the children of personnel are properly supported.

Of course, as the families federations themselves point out, schools continue to be challenged by funding constraints—despite the Chancellor's promise of cash to cover “little extras”—but I should be grateful if the Minister would tell us what work his Department is doing now to ensure further improvements in time for next year's report.

We know that the quality of housing for personnel and their families is a matter of real concern. Members will be familiar with the appalling service provided by the contractor CarillionAmey. Many of us have heard at first hand from personnel and families about unacceptable delays to repairs and the poor quality of maintenance. I myself have met representatives of Amey, which has taken over the contract following the collapse of Carillion earlier this year. They assured me—as, no doubt, they have assured the Minister—that they are working hard to improve the service because they recognise that things have simply not been working well enough, but the fact is that there is a very long way to go. The latest families continuous attitude survey found that barely a third of families are satisfied with the response to requests for maintenance and repair work.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is the use of the private sector that has created this crisis in the maintenance of armed forces housing?

Nia Griffith: My hon. Friend makes a good point. There is the issue of privatising services, but there is also a need to watch what those contractors are doing and keep an eye on whether the service providers are actually providing the service. That is the challenge to the Minister; this is a real issue in the defence sector at the moment. Unfortunately, only three in 10 families are satisfied with the quality of that work, which is the lowest level for at least eight years.

However, the use of a private contractor to deliver maintenance services cannot absolve the Government of their responsibility for overseeing—or failing to oversee—the contract properly. Indeed, the Defence Committee has concluded that the record of the MOD and the Defence Infrastructure Organisation in managing service accommodation has been “lamentable”.

Looking to the future, the MOD is currently in the process of taking bids for the four regional facilities management contracts, with a decision expected in

February. Will the Minister set out how the Department will ensure that whoever takes over the running of MOD housing will be held to the highest standards? What assurances are being sought and what penalties will be in place to deter poor performance?

The Department is also still working on the future accommodation model. That causes concern to those living in service family accommodation, with the families federations recording confusion, anxiety and uncertainty over the past two years. I have said many times that the Opposition do not want to see personnel being forced into the private rented sector, with all the additional costs and insecurity that could result, but can the Minister at least provide some certainty to families about when they will learn more about what is being planned?

One of the most worrying trends that we have witnessed over the past few years is the fall in morale of serving personnel and the perception that the overall offer to those who serve is declining. Morale has fallen steadily since 2010 across both officer and other ranks, and, very worryingly, the proportion of Royal Marines who rate their service morale as high has more than halved in the last two years alone.

James Heapey: The 2010 data coincide with an end to the most regular and intense operations, and it is indeed a perversity of the mindset of those of us who have served that we are happiest when we have some combat operations to go away on, so I cannot help but feel that the dip in morale since is a consequence of that, as well as other factors that I am sure the hon. Lady is about to mention in her speech.

Nia Griffith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that valid point.

The number of training exercises that have been cancelled will not have helped matters, nor will the months of leaked reports on plans to cut the Marines as part of the modernising defence programme. The state of morale should concern us all, so I would be grateful if the Minister set out what he feels is behind this worrying fall, and more importantly, what he plans to do about it, because low morale will only compound the problems that we are already experiencing with retention in the forces. Personnel numbers are down across each of the services compared with last year.

Satisfaction with pay and pensions is the lowest ever recorded, and while I am of course pleased that the Government have finally agreed to lift the pay cap, this alone will not make up for seven years of below-inflation rises, and of course the Treasury has refused to provide the money centrally, meaning that we are likely to see yet more defence cuts.

As we had a debate on veterans last week, I will keep my comments on specific veterans issues brief, but I want to raise with the Minister my very considerable concerns about further privatisation of the veterans service. Members from across the House have talked about Capita's abject failure to deliver the recruitment contract and Ministers' seeming unwillingness to sack the company, so would the Minister kindly explain to the House why, given the problems with other contracts, his Department now proposes to hand over yet more services, including the armed forces compensation scheme, the war pension scheme, the Veterans Welfare Service and the Medal Office, to private contractors, who inevitably

will be tempted to put profit before serving our veterans? And Members do not need me to tell them who one of the bidders is in this case. Will the Minister put a stop to this now, and have a complete rethink?

James Heappey: As a former adjutant, I agree very much that the best recruiters are serving military personnel and I think that the old-fashioned recruiting sergeant does that much better than a civilian, but that model of recruitment meant lots of people being appropriated from regimental duty to go off and recruit, causing all sorts of tensions when we were trying to fill our order of battle within a unit. So while I understand the hon. Lady's point, the MOD needed to make a difficult decision between operational effectiveness and the recruiting operation.

Nia Griffith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I am asking why we are privatising more services, including the particular ones I mentioned. I would like the Minister to explain why the Government are not considering putting a stop to this and having a complete rethink.

At the heart of all these issues is the need to ensure that the promises made in the covenant are being effectively delivered in a way that benefits the forces community—regulars, reservists, veterans and families.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the hon. Lady recognise that there is a disproportionate number of veterans in Northern Ireland—not just those, like the Minister, who served in Operation Banner, but those who served in other sectors? Does the hon. Lady feel—as I, other Northern Ireland Members, and, I suspect, the Minister, feel—that there is a need for more proportionate funding for veterans in Northern Ireland because of the large scale of service that there has been? In terms of looking after people, the service of those from Northern Ireland needs particular attention.

Nia Griffith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making a valid point, and we are very grateful to all those from Northern Ireland who have served our forces so well.

Local authorities are responsible for many of the services that fulfil the covenant's guarantees, yet they have borne the brunt of much of the Government's austerity programme. Many councils are doing their very best, despite devastating budget cuts from central Government, and I pay tribute to the armed forces champions who do so much in councils up and down the country to promote the armed forces covenant—and look forward to welcoming some of our Labour champions to Parliament on Monday. However, as the Minister has said,

“we know there is much more still to be achieved, particularly in ensuring consistency of outcomes”,

and I think that there is a discussion to be had on whether some aspects of the covenant should be formalised as statutory duties to ensure that they are being delivered properly, because ultimately what matters are not the warm words of politicians, but the real-life experience of our forces community, who do so much for us all and who deserve the very best.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. We have been informed that the Prime Minister is to make a statement to this House at 3 o'clock. However, I understand that the Prime Minister

has already spoken to the press outside No. 10 Downing Street. I consider that to be a gross discourtesy to this House.

Secondly, I understand that an agreement has been reached between the Prime Minister and the European Union on a draft declaration. I would have thought that that draft declaration would be available to this House, but as of 10 minutes ago it is not available in the Table Office. Will you ensure, Mr Deputy Speaker, that that draft declaration is made available well before the Prime Minister gets to her feet at 3 o'clock?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): It is good practice to share such information and there is still time. If Her Majesty's Opposition have got to listen to a statement they should be well informed in order to be able to put the right questions. I also say that this House should be told first, not the TV studios; Members of Parliament are here to be told first, not everyone else. We know that that is best practice and it should be the practice: whoever they are, they should come to this House first, and then by all means go to the TV studios. The hon. Gentleman has put that on the record, and I hope that anything that needs to be printed and produced will be ready for the 3 o'clock statement. We do have time, and I am sure that message has gone out loud and clear, and I am sure the Whips will be dealing with it very quickly.

Mr Ellwood: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. May I confirm that, in coming to the House and presenting the ninth annual armed forces covenant report, I did not go to the media beforehand, but came here first?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is the best practice, and I am sure you will advise the Prime Minister on how to take it forward in the future. What a great Minister you are.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): On a point of order, The outworking of the statement that we are due to hear at 3 o'clock this afternoon is, I imagine, that this important consideration of our armed forces covenant will be curtailed. Can you confirm whether the intention is to have the winding-up speeches in this debate before the Prime Minister's statement, or do you envisage its proceeding beyond the point of interruption? What are the plans for full consideration of the covenant statement?

Mr Deputy Speaker: In fairness, that is also in the hands of Members such as your good self, who have put in to speak. They can help the House to finish this debate ready for the statement. I am sure that the Whips will work closely to ensure that that happens. Looking at the time, I am sure that everything will come on time, as predicted and as, I would say, now planned.

1.21 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): In view of the unexpected extra performance by the Prime Minister this afternoon, I shall endeavour to confine my contribution to this debate to one specific area, but let me begin by putting on the record the delight of members of the Defence Committee at the success of one of our members, the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), in being

[Dr Julian Lewis]

elected president of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. That is not only a feather in the United Kingdom's cap, but a well-deserved recognition of the hon. Lady's many years of dedicated support for the cause of defence in general and NATO in particular. We are absolutely delighted for her.

I wish also to record my thanks to another member of the Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), who is not here this afternoon but who was here last Thursday, deputising for me. He made an admirably comprehensive speech, in which he touched on the issue I will speak to today: the plight of 200 to 300 war widows who lost their war widow's pension on remarriage or cohabitation and who have not had it restored. I had not imagined that, only seven days after having to miss that debate, I would have the opportunity in this debate on the armed forces covenant report to make amends. Clearly, there is a high degree of interest in the armed forces in the Government, or perhaps their attention is somewhat distracted by Brexit concerns; either way, we must make the most of the opportunities.

I mentioned how fortunate I am in the calibre of members of the Defence Committee; it is worth pointing out also that we as a country are fortunate in the calibre of our defence ministerial team. They are a strong team. We have a Secretary of State who, although new to the subject, has shown himself not only willing and ready to listen to those who have been acquainted with it for many years, but also determined—if one can persuade him of the rightness of an issue—to go out there and fight to put a new policy into practice. That is especially true in relation to the inadequate defence budget. I hope he will redouble his efforts to rectify that woeful situation.

We are also fortunate in our two Ministers in the Commons and our representation in the House of Lords, but I do not envy—I suspect no one would—the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), for the sheer range and complexity of the matters with which he has to deal, although there is no doubt that he has mastered his brief. When we compare the distribution of ministerial office in the Ministry of Defence with other Departments of similar prestige, I do not understand why we have only one Minister of State. Personally, I think it would be good if the Veterans Minister were to be redesignated to Minister of State level, not only because of the obvious ability of the present occupant, but because of the strong message it would send to the veterans community about the importance and the status of their concerns.

Bob Stewart: May I wholeheartedly endorse that comment? The Minister currently on the Treasury Bench, who opened the debate, would make a superb Minister of State.

Dr Lewis: And so say all of us. I hope the Whips are listening and act accordingly—[*Interruption.*] Even at this moment, I see messages being passed urgently. Could this be some good news? I would happily give war if it is.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Another resignation?

Dr Lewis: Heaven forbid.

Other matters deserved equal attention today. We have heard about the legal hounding of Northern Ireland veterans and other veterans of different campaigns; that is an ongoing matter. Also, at some point it would be right for the House to consider the Home Office's failure to allocate sufficient British passports to veterans of the Hong Kong Military Service Corps and the Royal Navy. That injustice needs to be rectified. However, as I said, in the time available to me today I will concentrate on war widows, and I will do so slightly unusually—in their own words.

First, I remind the House of the terms of the covenant itself, which the Minister read out. The words relevant to my remarks are the following:

“the whole nation has a moral obligation to the members of the Naval Service, the Army and the Royal Air Force, together with their families... Special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given most, such as the injured and the bereaved.”

Back in May, I had the pleasure of meeting Judith Thompson, the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors. We discussed the plight of 200 to 300 war widows who lost their war widow's pension and did not have it reinstated when others were more fortunate.

I see the hon. Member for Bridgend has just taken her place. Sadly, she missed the tribute paid to her achievement in becoming president of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, but she is here to hear me reiterate it. I hope she will contribute to the debate.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab) *indicated assent.*

Dr Lewis: I am glad to see that she will—very good. We look forward to that.

Very recently—it arrived a few days before last week's debate, which is why I was so anxious that the matter be flagged up—Judith sent me something I had asked for in the course of our conversation: a concise summary of the situation and some personal recollections and reflections by individual war widows. I intend to put those on the record today.

First, the summary. This is how the commissioner spells out the situation:

“If your spouse died or left Military or War Service before 31 March 1973 and you also receive the War Pension Scheme Supplementary Pension you keep your War Widow's Pension for life. If you were widowed after 5 April 2005 and receive Survivors Guaranteed Income Payment from the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme you keep your War Widow's Pension for life.

From 1st April 2015 if your spouse died, left Military or War Service after 31 March 1973 and before 5 April 2005 and you were in receipt of a War Widow's Pension on that 1st April 2015, you keep your War Widow's Pension for life. However, if your spouse died or left Military or War Service after 31 March 1973 and before 5 April 2005, and you remarried or co-habited you were required to surrender your War Pension or Compensation; to date this group do not receive their War Pension or compensation.”

There is an anomaly, which is that if a person who was unlucky enough to fall outside the appropriate date range were now to divorce their other half, their husband or wife, the pension would be reinstated, and if they were then to remarry the very same person, the pension would not be taken away. That is, frankly, bonkers. It is

basically creating a perverse incentive on people who, by definition, have already suffered trauma and tragedy to part from the person with whom they have found renewed happiness and go through a charade of this sort if they wish to have the pension permanently reinstated.

Gavin Robinson: The Chair of the Select Committee is right not only to highlight that anomaly but to press the point that the moral case has been won—we just need to see the corresponding action. There is a further perverse anomaly. In Northern Ireland, under Operation Banner, members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary served and died alongside members of the Ulster Defence Regiment and other regiments. Widows of RUC men who were killed, of whom there are 302, have had this issue resolved, yet the bereaved widows of service members who may have died alongside RUC service personnel have not, to date, had a resolution.

Dr Lewis: My excellent friend, for that is what he is—he is another pillar of strength to me on the Defence Committee—will be glad to know that among the examples I intend to quote are several widows who lost a husband serving in the Ulster Defence Regiment and who are in precisely that anomalous position.

This is what happened in the case of Linda, whose husband John was murdered by the IRA in May 1973:

“He died instantly as a boobytrap bomb exploded underneath him. We were stationed in Germany at the time of John’s deployment. Within two days of his death my three month old son and I were put on a flight back to England, leaving behind our life, home and friends to face an uncertain future. With my mum’s help and support I was eventually able to move into a small home of my own and begin to rebuild my life. This is where I received my first ‘inspection’.

In the early 70s War Widows were visited by inspectors to ensure they were not living with another man whilst in receipt of their compensation pension. I felt degraded by this. Life was lonely as a young women with a baby and over time I missed the family life I so tragically had taken from me. I missed my son having a father, I missed the closeness and friendship of a husband.

After years alone I was blessed with a second chance of happiness but felt saddened that my pension would be withdrawn on remarriage as this was a tangible link to John and our previous life together. I also felt this action demeaned John’s sacrifice and that somehow I was no longer a War Widow. However, I had a choice to make and I chose to be part of a loving family again with the security and warmth that it would bring my son and I.

When going through the process of having my pension revoked I spoke to many officials and was insulted when one of them told me ‘not to worry, another man will now look after you.’ Once more I felt let down as I would have to start my new relationship not as an equal but financially dependent on my new husband.

As was stated in 2015 this was a choice that should not have been forced on War Widows. I was personally heartbroken when I was told that pension changes in 2015 had left me behind. The utter disbelief that the government didn’t really mean ALL War Widows would now have their pensions for life was unbearable. These changes made me feel like a second class War Widow and I have now been made to relive the pain and grief of 1973 every day. I cannot and will not accept that John’s sacrifice is less worthy than others.”

Bob Stewart: My right hon. Friend has just read out a very touching story. John would expect his country to look after his widow for life. It is a very simple matter. Let us correct it now.

Dr Lewis: I entirely agree with my hon. and gallant Friend. Of all 650 Members of this House, he knows better than anyone, in personal terms, the devastation these killings left behind. That is why I intend to read out several more extracts before concluding. Mr Deputy Speaker, please indicate if you feel I am going on too long.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): The Whip is there.

Dr Lewis: Okay, I will do my best. I do not intend to elaborate over and above the words, which speak for themselves.

Muriel, the widow of Jimmy, writes:

“My husband was 40 years old when he was murdered and I was left a widow at 37 with 5 children. Jimmy gave his life in defence of this country and I believe I should have the recognition that I am a war widow. It should make no difference that he died in 1977 and not on another date that the government has decided qualifies widows for pensions.

My husband was murdered because he put on a uniform and tried to uphold law and order. He died in his own home when gunmen shot him at our front door. I have had to live with the horror of this and our family has suffered terribly but instead of feeling that the government recognises our sacrifice we feel betrayed and that we are a nuisance asking for money the government says it can’t afford. I felt I had done something wrong when I remarried and tried to rebuild my life, as if everything that I went through meant nothing.

I don’t even get a full state pension because I paid married woman’s national insurance and I often think I should have been better advised by the MoD who should have given more priority to my welfare. I am a war widow and should be acknowledged as such and the government must do the decent thing and reinstate the pension for those of us whose lives were destroyed so that democracy could flourish.”

Now I come to a daughter, Elizabeth, who says:

“I am disappointed and saddened that I am even writing this... My Father”—

John—

“was a member of the UDR and he was shot dead when aged 40 years in 1981 doing his civilian job.”

I will not go through the events that happened, but Elizabeth continues:

“Each Remembrance Day and on my Dad’s anniversary, we remember him with pride. The impact of my Dad’s murder was severe, my Mum was left to bring up 3 children, I was aged 11 years. This was very difficult for my Mum both financially and emotionally. We all as a family still struggle today.

When she remarried her war pension was taken away from her. This is an absolute disgrace. We as children were still orphaned. It is a struggle for my Mum. She has no financial security in her later years and she can’t help her family the way she would like to. My Dad would be extremely saddened at the way the MoD have treated us.”

That is the very point made a few moments ago by my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). Elizabeth continues:

“I would also like to add that the aftercare is a disgrace as there actually isn’t any aftercare. When I enquired at the MoD about the pension being reinstated I was told no but if my Mum divorced her husband and then remarried him again she would get it back. How morally wrong is this? It is ridiculous that she is being penalised because of when my Father was murdered and for when she remarried. The pension should be reinstated and a full apology given for the way my Mum and other widows have been treated.”

Bob Stewart: And backdated.

Dr Lewis: And backdated.

Mrs Madeleine Moon: I wish to thank the Chairman of the Select Committee, particularly for the leadership he gives those of us who serve on that Committee. The more he reads out, the more it becomes absolutely clear that Governments are happy to write names on memorials and to make soundbites in this Chamber, but they are not willing to allow the country to maintain its financial commitment and promises to war widows and their children to mitigate for their lost life. As parliamentarians, should we not take that into our hands, perhaps as the Committee, by putting forward a private Member's Bill?

Dr Lewis: That is a wonderful idea, and it is exactly the sort of constructive suggestion I would expect from the hon. Lady. I suspect that at the root of this situation is probably not a flaw in the Ministry of Defence, but a problem being raised by people from the Treasury saying, "If we do something for this group, we'll have to do something for another group. We will be opening some sort of Pandora's box." And so on and so on. I say, frankly: if that is the argument, they should hang their heads in shame.

Although I think I have already made the point quite forcefully, I intend, if I may, to read out two or three more of these extracts, so that the point cannot be escaped, because every one of these stories has a different dimension. I hope that is acceptable. If I start to see urgent signals from those on the Front Bench when I really need to get a move on—[*Interruption.*] I am getting a few of them now, so I shall do this as concisely as possible.

I come to the case of Margaret, whose first husband, William, was a part-time member of the Ulster Defence Regiment. He was murdered—blown up—in 1986. She says:

"At the time we didn't know if we would even be able to have William's coffin open due the extent of injuries...in the end all we could see was his face, with a wee cut just above his right eye. No one has ever been convicted of William's murder.

She talks about the "rituals" that they always had to go through for their own security, and the circumstances in which what happened took place. She continues:

"I am now happily remarried to my second husband, John and we have two sons. When I married my second husband John in 1993 I automatically lost my pension. To me this was highly unfair, as older widows and now younger widows have got to keep their pensions, what is the difference, between widows like them and me? I have endured the same trials and tribulations as them.

I detest writing this letter and find it extremely difficult, to me it's like a begging letter, yes I have endured financial hardships in the past and if my pension was reinstated it would mean a lot to me financially, it would be extremely useful for my two sons' further education and for repairs to our home. But, to me, it would be some acknowledgement from the Government that they realise and appreciate that William laid down his life for his country and for our people, and that although I have remarried I still bear the scars of the past."

The final extract I will read, given the unexpected time pressure—I hope the other ladies will forgive me—is from Eileen, whose husband David served part-time in the UDR and was murdered in 1977. She says:

"I was so proud of my husband and how he sacrificed his life to try to keep to his community safe at nights and weekends. When he was on duty I waited at home in bed until he arrived safely back home. Those were worrying times for me.

I felt the need to serve my country with pride and also allowed my family to make a positive contribution to maintaining peace and I became a member of the UDR in 1984."

So this lady, seven years after losing her husband in the defence of her country, joined the same regiment herself. Does that not make us feel proud of her and does it not make us all feel ashamed of the way that she and the other women whose stories I have related today have been treated?

1.45 pm

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): Let me echo the comments made by the esteemed Chair of the Select Committee and congratulate our colleague on the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), on her elevation in becoming the NATO Parliamentary Assembly president. I am sure she will serve in that role with great distinction. All I can say is—I was there when it happened.

Mrs Moon: I would not want people to think I had already got above myself, in not being here for the start of the debate. I had a visit from members of Parc prison, in my constituency, who went to the Ministry of Justice to be given an award for their work with young prisoners with autism, and I felt they deserved my time. This was not a case of neglecting this debate; I got here as quickly as I could and I do apologise to colleagues.

Douglas Chapman: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate on a topic that affects every Member of this House. Those who are serving or who have served in our armed forces are owed a great debt of gratitude by us all, and they deserve to be supported and looked after, both in service and after they have left.

The core principles of the armed forces covenant set out to ensure that these individuals suffer no disadvantage compared with other citizens when it comes to accessing services and that, where appropriate, they are given special consideration. However, according to some of the personal accounts I have heard, that is not always their experience. We have heard a long list of other examples from people across the country for whom this is not their experience either. We know that that must change, and I welcome the Minister's recognition that change was inevitable and that continuous improvement in the support for veterans was required.

The Ministry of Defence is currently struggling to recruit and retain the personnel we need. This year, the British Army was 4,000 troops short of the 82,000 it was set to have; only 7,500 were recruited. It is 2,000 shy of the 10,000 required to maintain troop numbers. The total number of trained personnel based in Scotland dropped by almost 2% in 2016, to 9,970; with a drop of almost 19% in the officer ranks. Across the rest of the UK, the picture is no better, with an astonishing 10% drop in the number of new recruits. The Public Accounts Committee report published in September reported skills shortages in more than 100 critical trades. All of this leads us to see a jigsaw that will undoubtedly have an impact on existing personnel, through increased workloads and pressure, not to mention an alarming lack of capability to respond to the changing threats facing the UK.

On remuneration, the Government say that they are moving away from the 1% pay cap for public sector workers, which is to be welcomed. However, the Defence Committee noted that

“no additional funding will be made available to the MoD for increases above this level for Service personnel”.

Those who serve in our armed forces are exceptionally skilled and committed people, and they absolutely deserve better than what they are getting at the moment. Furthermore, if we are to have any hope of attracting the talent and skills we need to the services, the MOD has to do better than the decidedly unattractive package currently on offer.

Other Members have talked about housing. For years, service personnel and their families have had to put up with poor maintenance standards that would simply not be tolerated in the local government sector. In June, the Defence Committee stated:

“The record of CarillionAmey, the Ministry of Defence and the Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO) in managing Service accommodation has been lamentable.”

This disrespect of armed forces personnel and their families is one of the reasons that people are increasingly leaving the services. Ministers must urgently grip the dysfunctional organisation and lay out an action plan for radical improvement.

Mrs Moon: One of the issues brought to my attention by John Allison is the problem with local authorities’ residency rules for allowing people to move from the military into areas where they might not have had a previous residence in order to set up home. That is resulting in people being denied housing accommodation. This should have been dealt with in the armed forces covenant. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need to ensure that we do not have a homelessness problem among our veterans when they leave the military?

Douglas Chapman: The hon. Lady makes a valid point, and I will discuss what is happening in that regard in Scotland a bit later in my speech.

Ministers must get a grip of the current situation if they are to convince service personnel and their families that they are valued and that their housing needs will be cared for appropriately in future. The welfare of families is often challenged directly by the difficult lifestyles of those who serve, and considerations relating to the continuity of education for children, support for spouses, financial advice and family accommodation must be taken more seriously.

I would suggest that veterans in Scotland have a somewhat different experience of accessing public services from those south of the border, and I make no apology for that. It is a thoroughly good thing, and if we can learn from other parts of the UK in order to improve matters for everyone, surely that is the best way forward. The Scottish National party Government in Edinburgh established a £1.3 million Scottish veterans fund to support projects that provide a wide range of advice and practical support to veterans. As well as having a Minister responsible for veterans in the Scottish Government, we have appointed a Scottish veterans commissioner—the first such position anywhere in the UK. Our commissioner produced a report on veterans’ health and wellbeing earlier this year; the recommendations of which the Scottish Government are taking forward.

Members have mentioned the importance of armed forces champions, and I want to say a big thank you to my local authority armed forces champion, Councillor Rod Cavanagh from Fife Council, who does a tremendous job. I am sure that his commitment and efforts are being replicated across the country by our other armed forces champions to keep the needs of their armed forces at the heart of local government, alongside the work that we do here to keep these matters at the heart of central Government.

The care and health of our veterans is of huge importance, particularly in the area of mental health, which the Minister spoke enthusiastically and sincerely about. Our society is becoming more open to discussing mental health issues in general, but we must ensure that the specific concerns of veterans are included within this evolution. The armed forces charity SSAFA found in 2016 that 40% of working-age veterans said that they were suffering from depression, that 36% felt they had a lack of hope or purpose, and that 30% reported mental health problems. SSAFA also found that loneliness and isolation were widely reported. I welcome the £10 million of further support allocated to addressing the mental health needs of veterans at the last Budget, and I hope that that line of funding continues to be a priority area for addressing the needs of veterans.

I should like to return to the question of housing and homelessness. There are varying estimates of the number of veterans who might be homeless, ranging from 7,000 to 13,000 across the UK. It is shameful in this day and age that homelessness should be the future for any citizen, never mind for people who have served their country. Members may be aware that, in Scotland, all local authorities have a duty to provide permanent accommodation for all applicants who are unintentionally homeless. The code of guidance on homelessness in Scotland states that housing applications from veterans should be treated sympathetically and that close links should be made between the armed forces and local bodies to help to support those re-entering civilian life. The Scottish Government have also recently updated their Scottish housing guide for people leaving the armed forces and for ex-service personnel, which contains advice on all accommodation options for veterans.

There are a lot of really good organisations already providing support to armed forces personnel and veterans in Scotland, and we all know who they are, but I would welcome the development of a more comprehensive support network for veterans and, in particular, for those who feel that they have absolutely nowhere to turn. I look forward to seeing the new tri-service defence holistic transition policy when it is published next month, and I hope that it will go some way towards filling the gaps.

My SNP colleagues and I support the creation of an armed forces union to accommodate the wide range of interests, concerns and identities within this community. We owe our armed forces personnel a voice in the development of policies that serve and support them and their work, and this should take the form of a permanent organisation that can readily represent and consult current and former personnel. The body should be able to be truly representative. It would not be a trade union in the sense that people would be able to go on strike. Rather, it would be like the bodies that support police officers, for example. Such a body could support

[Douglas Chapman]

our armed forces personnel to enable them to raise genuine concerns and areas of interest affecting all serving personnel in a mature and adult way, to ensure that their voice was heard.

The armed forces covenant has provided a central focus for developing a veterans policy, but there is still much more work to be done. We need to do all we can to ensure that our veterans and serving personnel feel included in the decisions that are made on their behalf to help them back into civilian life. I speak for all my colleagues on these Benches when I say that we stand ready to support any measures that the Minister might wish to bring in, so long as the issues around pay, housing and support for our armed forces personnel and veterans are at the heart of the discussions.

1.57 pm

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman). I, too, pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), who made a powerful speech. I agree with the sentiments behind everything that he said, and I hope that all hon. Members will support his campaign to ensure that war widows get their pensions returned to them.

When the armed forces covenant was established in 2011, it was wildly welcomed nationally and in my constituency, where we play host to an important Army base and an infantry training range. We also play host to 160 Brigade. Consequently, we are home to a large number of serving and retired Army personnel, together with their families. Added to this, just 15 miles across the border and Offa's Dyke in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin), we are proud to have another important Army base where the SAS are based.

As we know, the covenant outlines the nation's moral obligation to respect and support current and former members of the armed forces and their families. More particularly, the covenant commits the nation to ensure that those

"who serve in the Armed Forces, whether Regular or Reserve, those who have served in the past, and their families, should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services."

I am delighted to report that the community in and around mid-Wales has been supporting military personnel and their families for decades, if not centuries. We are home to the military museum at the barracks in Brecon. The barracks are under the threat of closure, but I shall not discuss that now; I shall save that for another occasion. The barracks play host to a wonderful collection, which features the South Wales Borderers, whose conflict in the Anglo-Zulu war was immortalised in the film "Zulu." It is very important to our nation.

We also play host to a Gurkha troop. As one walks around Brecon, it warms the heart to see Nepalese people working behind the counter of the local supermarket and involved in our local town council. They are involved in all aspects of society. It did not take a formal covenant to get that support in my constituency, which is like so many constituencies that host Army, Navy and Air

Force bases. People in our country naturally accept and adopt everything to do with our servicemen and women and their families. That is the right thing to do. The covenant has ensured that the whole of society supports it, from national Government, local government and devolved Government to voluntary and charitable bodies, businesses and private organisations, and including the actions of individuals and community groups, so this joined-up approach can only and must only be a good thing.

Special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given the most, such as the bereaved families, together with the injured—when I say injured, I mean both physically injured and mentally injured. It has taken some time for us in this country to understand that the mental damage caused to so many veterans is real and is on a larger scale than was first anticipated and accepted. We must talk about these issues publicly, and I am delighted that under our Prime Minister, and before when she was Home Secretary, we have now been doing that. Until quite recently, it was not accepted that PTSD was an issue, but it is a very serious one.

On the theme of mental health, I wish briefly to talk about a constituent of mine whose case I have been involved in for the past three years. Gus Hales has been in the public eye a little bit recently, because he has been on hunger strike in the town of Newport—he lives just outside Builth Wells in my constituency. Gus served as a soldier in the Falklands conflict and in other conflicts around the world, but he has not had the treatment that he rightly deserves. Just before Armistice Day, I sat on a grass verge in Newport, which is a two-hour drive from my constituency, outside Combat Stress, with which Gus has an issue, in a most undignified manner, because there I was sitting next to a gentleman who had served this country and who was on hunger strike because of the complaints he had. Those complaints were very justified.

The Minister has already been praised, but I wish to praise him some more, because he has not only spent three quarters of an hour in a telephone conversation with Gus, but had several conversations and meetings with me. Sitting on that grass verge outside Combat Stress, it was heartening to hear Gus praise our Minister, who showed not only empathy but complete and total understanding of Gus's case and his issue. I thank the Minister for everything that he has done, because believe me it has made my life a lot easier and it was comforting to hear Gus say what he said about him.

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend has raised such an important case. Combat Stress does such an amazing job, but in the provision of support for our armed forces, people occasionally fall through the gaps. We must make sure that that does not happen. I formally apologise to Gus Hales for what he has gone through. As my hon. Friend said, Gus and I have spoken on the phone, and I stand ready to meet him again. Combat Stress has put its hand up to say yes, it got it wrong with Mr Hales. I thank him for his service and for all he has done for our country. We must learn from this case. If anybody else has received a level of support that is questionable and not what we would expect, please come forward. Let us learn from this, move forward and make sure that we support our brave veterans to the standard that they expect.

Chris Davies: I thank the Minister for his wise words and his support for this case. There is criticism of Combat Stress, but I am sure most people in the House will remember that just a few months ago I reinvented the Lords against Commons pigeon race—it was one of the great events of 2018 in this place and will be remembered for decades to come, I am sure—and the charity that we raised money for and to which so many Members of this House and of the other place donated was Combat Stress. It was the designated charity, and it does a tremendous amount of work, as do so many charities. Nevertheless, mistakes were made, as the Minister said. He has ordered a review of Combat Stress and the period when mistakes were made and veterans slipped through the net. I can only praise him again for that. I must also say to any veteran listening out there: please do not stay away from Combat Stress, because just like so many other charities, it is still doing an enormous amount of tremendous work for our veterans. That work will continue, because we must not forget that PTSD does not happen just like that; it can happen 10, 15 or 20 years after people have retired—after our servicemen and women have seen conflict. It is very important that Combat Stress continues to offer that support.

Mrs Moon: The hon. Gentleman mentioned that Gus served in the Falklands. I do not know whether part of the problem that Gus is experiencing today is because of that service, but is the hon. Gentleman aware of the support that the Falkland Islanders still give to veterans? They subsidise flights so that veterans can return to the Falklands, and they give them support in revisiting some of the battlefields and help them to work through some of the trauma that they experienced. I wonder whether that might help Gus. If the hon. Gentleman is interested, I can give him further details later.

Chris Davies: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, and I congratulate her on her election referred to earlier. A Member of the Legislative Assembly flew over from the Falkland Islands when they heard that Gus was on hunger strike, and they have been involved in his case.

Among the many people who have been involved in Gus's case are my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard), who is not present, and my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan). I thank them for their support for Gus and, indeed, their work with Combat Stress. I pay tribute to the president of Combat Stress, General Sir Peter Wall, who has gone to Newport in Shropshire on several occasions to meet Gus. Ironically, he was previously Gus's commanding officer, so it is wonderful that he has offered that support. A great deal is happening, but I wanted to raise Gus's case because he has done a lot and has caught the public eye. It is important now that the Department and we MPs get behind our veterans and make sure that nobody else has to go on a hunger strike to bring these issues to our attention.

Combat Stress is not the only charity out there, of course. The Royal British Legion was very much to the fore in the run-up to Armistice Day. I also wish to pay tribute to Care after Combat, which is unfortunately one of those charities that some people stay away from, because it primarily deals with people who are in prison. They are ex-servicemen and women who, in the main, have mental health issues. They are in prison because of

drug and drink-related issues and because they cannot cope with society. Care after Combat does such a good job and is one of the only charities to take these people on board, take them under its wing and look after them. I pay exceptional tribute to Jim Davidson, who is of course well known in many other theatres, not necessarily the theatre of the House of Commons. He has done a superb job of taking these servicemen and women under his wing as chief executive of that charity. He does a vital job.

I am being pressed by the Whips because of the time, but before I sit down, let me give the House a statistic for Care after Combat. In the first year, the reoffending rate is 8% when Care after Combat gets involved, compared with the national average of 45%. That just shows how a little bit of money goes a long way with such a superb charity.

Mrs Moon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. We in Wales can be especially proud that Parc Prison, which largely takes prisoners from Wales, has established the endeavour unit, which particularly focuses on veterans. The work that it has been able to do with building veterans' links with charities, such as Care after Combat and many others, has turned veterans' lives around and changed their reoffending rates. That is something of which we in Wales can be very proud, and I am particularly proud that it is happening at Parc in Bridgend.

Chris Davies: A lady with a prison—you can't beat that, can you? I congratulate the hon. Lady on that.

Bob Stewart: I am a spokesman for Care after Combat. Jim Davidson is a very good friend of mine. Care after Combat becomes even more effective when it gets funded. It has been funded by the Government previously, and I hope that they will look very kindly on re-funding the charity, which does such sterling work.

Chris Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He has just stolen my summing-up line, but I can think of no greater person to make that plea than my gallant and hon. Friend. Care after Combat does deserve to be supported; it has been supported in the past. There was very welcome news in the Budget of an additional £10 million for the armed forces covenant fund, which was announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. Unfortunately, Care after Combat does not fall within the rules to get that money. I urge the Minister to help in any way, because this is a worthwhile charity, as so many of them are, and it is certainly a charity that many of my Government colleagues, and I am sure Opposition Members as well, think deserves ongoing support.

2.11 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The armed forces covenant is an extremely important document not just because it recognises the value that armed forces personnel have in public life, but because it recognises our duty of care to servicemen and women and their families. It is that duty of care that has motivated me to address this debate on the subject of service family accommodation.

A life in the military is transient and uncertain. It means moving across the country and, in some cases, across borders. For service personnel, it means setting

[Alex Sobel]

up a home and a life in a place, with the knowledge that they may have to repeat the process again very soon. It means them having little or no choice about their location and type of accommodation. Given this sacrifice, as well as the other sacrifices that our servicemen and women make every day, it is reasonable for all service families to expect that, wherever they are stationed, they are guaranteed a secure, affordable and comfortable home in which to live and raise their children. As a nation, to meet our obligations enshrined in the armed forces covenant, we need to do all in our power to see that this very practical and important need is met.

The armed forces covenant states that service accommodation should be

“good quality, affordable and suitably located.”

I attest that this component of the covenant not only is unmet, but has been categorically failed. In 1996, the Ministry of Defence sold off 57,400 service family homes to Annington, a subsidiary of the Japanese bank, Nomura. Annington has since been sold to private equity firm Terra Firma for a profit—thought to be in the region of £2 billion. This has caused not only a serious black hole in the MOD’s finances, but great concern among armed forces families about their financial future. The ripple effect of the decision is significant. Annington has sold off 20,000 homes over the past two decades. Many forces families who are living in those houses were told that they could not stay—even if they had the means to buy those houses—as they were contractually obliged to return them to their original state. For many, their only option was to queue in a field for hours without any guarantee over what house they would get.

The contract agreed by the Government in 1996 allowed a rent review in 2021—just three years from now. There is nothing to stop Annington from charging market rent. Although we know that the MOD would like rents to fall, Annington expects them to rise significantly from 2021. The MOD could hand back the cost, but that would be very expensive. There are very few cards to play. Annington holds the monopoly. Indeed, rents are already rising significantly and new service families are already paying 2020 rents.

In 2016, Annington put 147 houses in Hawke barracks up for auction on 25-year short leases. Councils, desperate for housing stock to reduce waiting lists, bid at an auction and an out-of-area council won. These are state entities using state funds to bid on housing stock, which was owned by the state in 1996. The profits from this have filled the pockets of a private equity firm. That is a failure and a disgrace.

The result is far-reaching. There are very few houses left for armed forces families. In my most local garrison in Catterick, there are no houses at all for new postings to move into. Planned additional housing is yet to materialise and there are strong suspicions about whether the new super-garrison will be delivered on time. When it is delivered, it will be one of only three super-garrisons in the UK. Many regiments plan to move there. Can the Minister guarantee enough housing for service families in Yorkshire even after that is delivered?

Many service families have been pushed into the private rented sector. Indeed, the future accommodation model has set out the option for the introduction of a rental allowance to allow families to rent privately.

A survey carried out by the Army Families Federation, a fantastic organisation that gives a voice to service families, looked closely at this matter. There was great concern over affordability, access to schools, the difficulty in obtaining housing, the lack of time to look and the security of tenure. One of the starkest observations was the loss of the support networks and the understanding that comes from living in a military community. Some 59% said that a loss of a military community was a negative or very negative aspect of renting privately. They also cited the difficulty of establishing themselves in an existing community with the transient nature of a service family’s life.

One person who had lived outside of the military community said:

“It was difficult to integrate into an already established community, there was a feeling of detachment from the unit when my spouse was deployed. They made many efforts for which I was grateful, but the geographical distance establishes an automatic sense of isolation.”

This loss of community is happening within existing barracks, too. In a parliamentary question last year, I asked how many civilians, not including reservists or civil servants—so these are civilians unattached to the military—are subletting service family accommodation. The number for 2017-18 had more than doubled from the previous year and tripled from the year before that. The figures included sublets only and did not include the former SFAs in Army garrisons that have been taken into the private sector. This practice raises all kinds of security issues, causes a strain on resources designed and built for military life and does nothing to foster the community that is so vital to service family life.

All these problems can be traced back to that single act of selling military housing to Nomura. This sale, like much of the privatisation projects of the past few decades, was sweetened with the promise of quality and an end to the dilapidation of the past. However, the standard of these houses is far from satisfactory for many of the service personnel. Less than half of regular personnel are happy with their accommodation, and the Army Families Federation says that accommodation is by far the top issue reported to them by personnel.

One member of a service family, who very understandably asked not to be named, said:

“The single soldier’s accommodation facilities are dire. There are 4 men sharing rooms as standard. These have not been updated in line with new regulations about single soldiers having single rooms with en suite facilities”—

these do not even have en suite facilities—

“and it’s like a permanent sleepover that nobody wanted to go to.”

If the armed forces covenant is to be honoured, we must see to our end of the bargain. We must ensure that we have homes fit for heroes. Anyone who risks life and limb in service to this country deserves to live in the knowledge that they and their families will be taken care of and that they will have a home to come back to. Ending the scandal that has caused this crisis in military housing must be a top priority for us all.

2.18 pm

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): It is an absolute pleasure to speak in this debate. I set up the all-party parliamentary group on the armed forces covenant when I was first elected in 2015, and found

that the covenant had been published for five years, but had never been discussed in the House. It was a great pleasure to persuade the Backbench Business Committee to give colleagues and me time to do so. Two years on, it is even more exciting to see the Government bringing the matter forward themselves. I commend the Minister because I know that it is down to his efforts that this is now part of the national conversation. That is, of course, what the covenant is and should be—part of the national conversation. It is also a moral obligation that is practically delivered, and it is thought about by everybody who lives and works in our great country.

I will cover a few areas today. The report is extensive and shows the real depth of work that is beginning to emerge in this area, and that is fantastic to see. I would like to raise just a few issues that are brought to me most often by serving families and, indeed, veterans.

The first is education for the children of service personnel. It is fantastic that the Department has agreed to finance the education support fund for another two years. This is used by those who are doing research and helping us to understand, in particular by data collection, much more about the impacts on service family children. That is incredibly welcome, because it is very difficult for Ministers to make decisions that will genuinely be effective if they do not understand the realities of the situation.

I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill some 18 months ago asking the Department for Education to change the status of military children when they have to move to the same as that of looked-after children. The Minister said that it can sometimes be a four-month wait, but several families have come to me for whom it was six or eight weeks to deployment. In those cases, there is not only no time to get their lives in order and sort themselves out, but invariably the wife was doing most of the work because her husband was serving, although in one case the wife was a serving member of the armed forces. It is incredibly difficult, and the challenge with civilian schools is that people cannot apply for a school unless they have a house, and they cannot get a house until they know where they are going, and the Department can only move them so fast when they have a six-week window to go from one deployment to another.

There is progress, but I urge the Minister to push the Department for Education further to take this on. It involves a change of regulations, not primary legislation, and it would make a dramatic difference to a very small number of families who get very short-term deployments in the middle of the school year and whose children are just left out in the cold. Not this September but last, there was a statistic that showed that more than 70 children were still not in school in November because they had special needs and a place could not be found for them in the new location.

Mrs Moon: One of the other issues is the lack of understanding when families are not in community-based schools with a lot of military families but are isolated. Schools do not necessarily understand the additional stressors and tensions in families where the father, mother, or sometimes both, is on deployment. Is there not also work to do with schools to understand the additional tensions and problems of our young children when their families are away and to help them, particularly at times of stress such as during exams, to ensure that their education does not suffer?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. It is great to see in this year's report that more guidance is going to schools with the service pupil premium funding to help teachers understand some of the particular needs of those children. I am lucky enough to have an RAF base in my constituency, and Longhoughton school, the local school next to the base at RAF Boulmer, has an extraordinary cohort of teachers. Military children make up 80% of the school, so teachers' knowledge, understanding and ability to spot a child under stress because their parents are having to move—a lot of them deploy out to the Falklands for six months—are extraordinary. When there are schools that understand because they see a lot of these children, we need to draw out that knowledge and share it. The hon. Lady is right, these children can land anywhere in the country at any point.

The hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) talked with great insight about accommodation and how DIO is making progress. This year has seen a fantastic investment of £68 million in housing, which is incredibly welcome, but for me the missing link is still the fact that DIO is working in a silo. The body that looks after the housing should have an understanding of the retention problems and the realities that a wife will run out of steam and her husband will leave service because the house is just too difficult to live in. That understanding should be linked directly to DIO's thinking patterns so that it invests, because the loss of the incredibly expensive investment in personnel is a bad swap for a £10,000 kitchen or fixing a leaking window or one that does not lock. Those are the frustrations that drive retention problems, and they could be resolved if DIO had much more direct contact at a practical level that it was expected to follow up with investment. I encourage the Minister to keep pushing at that door. It will require a change in DIO's terms of reference to achieve the change.

Colleagues have spoken at length about mental ill health, and the challenges we face. The trick to help this unravel and help the NHS to make progress is identifying the markers of veterans. Medical records are working much better.

James Heapey: Before my hon. Friend moves on to veterans, let me say that she has been an amazing champion for armed forces families during her time in this place. May I add to the list of challenges for armed forces families that she has so brilliantly explained? Spousal employment, and the role the military can play in helping spouses to find employment as their other halves are being posted, are key factors in the morale of armed forces families.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Businesses underestimate the value of the incredible workforce that can be provided by a military base close by, the effort that these extraordinary people, mostly women, will put in and their commitment to anything. An Army wife is a committed person who will work as hard as she can, even if she is going to be there for only two years. I have met many for whom it has been a frustration, and they take jobs at a lower level than their qualifications afford because they will only be there two years. Businesses fail to take the most advantage of the incredible resource that is on their doorstep. I know that

[*Anne-Marie Trevelyan*]

the Department is looking to work on that in the coming year, and that it is one of its targets. I will be encouraging the Department in that, and I urge my hon. Friend to do the same.

We talk about ill health and veterans, and about the charities that support veterans' needs. It is great to see the covenant fund being invested in and having a more open perspective than it has had in the past, but the challenge is for those small charities and social enterprises that do great work in the local community. I have two. Forward Assist, in the north-east, is wonderful, and helps with isolation and bringing veterans back into the workplace. Another wonderful charity is Forgotten Veterans UK, set up by an amazing veteran, Gary Weaving. It will formally open its new project at Fort Cumberland down in Portsmouth next week, and I am honoured to be a part of that. The charities help veterans with very simple tools, but they cannot access funding. They are sent the veterans who need that on the ground, day-to-day, gritty support, but they are not really getting any funding to help. We need to look at that more closely.

Bob Stewart: PTSD Resolution is a very small charity that has an incredible impact. It does not pay anyone anything, and any money it receives it uses for treatment. It is run by Colonel Tony Gauvain, my old commanding officer, so I declare an interest, but I ask the House to please support PTSD Resolution. It does great work.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: There are many such charities that do specific, targeted work, and we need to try to chip away to give them the support they need to provide that.

In all these things, the question is carrot and stick. The covenant was set up to drive forward this moral obligation for all the organisations and for all of us to pick up. However, as I said to the Minister last week, I question whether the carrot is enough, and ask whether we need a stick. Do we need to create some sort of covenant ombudsman, so that if someone is having NHS issues and cannot find a solution there is always someone with an independent voice to go to? It is not only unfair to ask the MOD to pick up a lot of the stuff and try to sort it out. Is marking one's own homework the right solution if we believe in our veterans and military families? They do not have unions. They serve our country selflessly and put their lives on the line, and they do not have an independent voice. They rely on us as MPs, and often that does not fit the problem. I call on the Minister to continue the conversation about how to create an independent ombudsman for those who find that the system does not support them as it should.

2.28 pm

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak and to follow the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (*Anne-Marie Trevelyan*), who is an admirable champion for armed forces personnel, veterans and their families. It is a privilege to have shared in a small way in the work she has done on this issue.

We will have to constrain our contributions this afternoon for reasons outside your control, Madam Deputy Speaker, and outside the Minister's and mine. I fully appreciate the opportunity to put forward a voice

for Northern Ireland at a time when we give a disproportionately higher percentage of our population to the armed forces—higher than anywhere else in this United Kingdom—but are so disproportionately poorly served by the implementation of the armed forces covenant. That is why it is important for me to contribute to the debate.

I accept fully the sincere commitment the Minister has given and is giving to the implementation of the armed forces covenant in Northern Ireland. It is a genuinely felt belief of mine that the Minister sincerely wishes to resolve some of the outstanding and ongoing issues about full implementation in Northern Ireland.

This is such an important issue that we included it within the confidence and supply agreement. However, when we look through this armed forces covenant report, and consider through-life support for armed forces veterans, we see on page 98 reference to the support we give veterans in England; on page 101, reference to the support we give veterans in Scotland; and on page 102, reference to the support we give veterans in Wales. Where is the page on Northern Ireland? Where is the part of this document about the support we give veterans in Northern Ireland? It is not there.

I have raised on the Floor of this House before the Border Force—or border farce—issue that has affected veterans seeking to serve their country in that regard. Anywhere else in the United Kingdom, someone can satisfy the eligibility criteria through their military service; in Northern Ireland, Border Force scrapped that proposal. It did so on the basis of an erroneous understanding of advice given by the Equality Commission. The Equality Commission merely said, “You have to justify your actions if it disproportionately impacts one side of the community or another.” Border Force—an agency of our Government, responsible to a Whitehall Department—decided not to justify why someone's service within our armed forces should satisfy eligibility criteria. In the thrust and the vein of the armed forces covenant, that is a disgrace. Now Border Force is facing legal challenge from a former member of the armed forces who happens to come from the Roman Catholic community but is being denied the chance to serve his country because of his religion. Border Force cited protections for him and his community, yet it is using those very protections to frustrate that gentleman's ability to serve his country. That is not okay.

On two separate occasions, for two years in a row, I have had to challenge veterans Ministers in the Defence Committee and say, “It's great that we have armed forces champions in local government, but, our local government in Northern Ireland has no role or responsibility in housing or in health, or any of the issues through which the champion process makes a big difference.” In October 2016, I brought correspondence to the Defence Committee that stated, up-front and full-square, that the armed forces covenant does not apply in Northern Ireland. That was wrong, but it was the policy direction being set by the Minister of Health at that time, Michelle O'Neill. It was a disgrace. That is why it is crucial that when we consider the implementation of the armed forces covenant, the Minister has to consider placing a statutory duty on Departments and our public services throughout this United Kingdom. This cannot rest at the will or the whim of any Minister in charge at any given time, because to allow it to be within their grip,

poisoned by their political ideology at any given time, is a true disservice to service personnel who served us so well.

The Minister has mentioned the veterans support officer who has been appointed. I know that the Reserve Forces and Cadets Association for Northern Ireland is doing tremendous work to try to navigate its way behind the scenes through the labyrinthine problems that we have in Northern Ireland. I am concerned that the funding that has been made available to them comes from LIBOR, that there is no sustainability of funding, that they are only just getting going, and that they are trying to work without full political support—the full intervention and the full weight of Government behind them. Yet they continue admirably.

I hope that in the coming months the Minister will be able to take the opportunity to think about how he profiles resource properly for veterans' support in Northern Ireland, including extending it further. How does he recognise that we as a country still owe a duty to the significant number of service personnel whom we get from the Irish Republic? The armed forces covenant does not apply at all to those in the Republic of Ireland, and why should it? Yet those veterans who have served this country and have returned to their home nation have to pay for themselves to travel into the UK to avail themselves of these services. Their service was exactly the same; the sacrifice they were prepared to make was exactly the same. We are going to have to consider that in the months to come.

These progress reports, I accept entirely, show a continual development of the covenant commitment to our service personnel. It is a continually improving picture. But until we grasp the nettle of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998—until national Government believe that we need to and should amend section 75 to include veterans as a specific classification of individuals who should be protected in equality law—we will never fully realise the commitment that we have made.

I was going to talk about war widows, but the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) has admirably delivered all the points that needed to be made on that subject, save to say that the principle of the argument has been won with regard to those who have not had their pensions reinstated as a consequence of marriage. The way they are treated is a stain on how we treat the honour and the valour of their former loved ones. I hope that the Minister will turn his attention to resolving and removing that stain in the weeks to come.

2.35 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): It is a pleasure, as always, to follow my friend from across the water, the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson). I want to talk about what my constituency—the community that I represent—is doing to implement the armed forces covenant at a local level and to pay tribute to and do right by veterans locally by repaying the debt we owe them.

My local authority, East Renfrewshire Council, works in partnership with two other neighbouring authorities in Inverclyde and Renfrewshire to ensure that our armed forces personnel and veterans want to come to stay in the area because they know that if they come to live there, they will be with a local authority that has them

at the heart of the services that they provide. It co-ordinates access to housing-the-homeless services, and provides social care, welfare benefits, literacy support, and referrals on to statutory models. Through our local community covenant, the council safeguards the healthcare of armed forces personnel by ensuring that they are known to our local healthcare professionals as well as to local NHS specialist services.

Those who have served in the armed forces also have access to our veterans gateway—a consortium of expert organisations specific to the AFC who all offer different support to those in need. North of the border, one particular important partner is Poppyscotland, which offers incredible support to the AFC through their many branches, including, in particular, the armed services advice project, which is provided by Citizens Advice nationally throughout Scotland. That programme is embodied by East Renfrewshire Citizens Advice Bureau in Barrhead, which offers advice on housing, benefits, debt, and much more. Importantly, Poppyscotland also offers respite breaks for families, and employability services that support the family as a whole. Other Members have touched on issues for families, and that key part of the programme is extremely important.

There are over half a million veterans in Scotland, of all ages, many of them embattled by homelessness, unemployment, loneliness and other complex issues. For all that there are these great services out there, many particularly vulnerable veterans do not engage with services unless they have somebody in whom they have confidence to go with them. As a result, many miss vital appointments, which, in turn, impacts negatively on many aspects of their life.

I really want to pay tribute to an organisation called Fares4Free, which was set up by David Gibson in 2016, and offers much-needed transport assistance to veterans. It provides free transport by asking taxi drivers to give up to four free fares a month to help veterans to access important services and combat loneliness. It has paired this project with a campaign to provide wheelchair-accessible vehicles staffed by trained ex-service personnel. It also provides drivers trained in mental health first aid to transport, accompany and support veterans, building up friendships and sharing confidences.

When I became a Member of Parliament and went to the Coming Home Centre in Govan—which is not in East Renfrewshire but just across the boundary in Glasgow—I was really surprised by how many gaps there were. A public who honour and value their armed services, as they do, would be shocked to know the extent to which they still require volunteers to get second-hand furniture, and to dip into their own pockets to go to the supermarket, so that a veteran has a bed to sleep on and milk in the fridge.

The AFC is fantastic, but in and of itself it is not enough—what matters is whether it is being implemented on the ground. I very much welcome the great steps taken by this Government and the progress update today, but we still have quite a long way to go before we can really give ourselves a pat on the back.

2.39 pm

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): My constituency sits between Carver barracks to the west and Colchester garrison to the east, and while it has a fair few veterans

[James Cleverly]

and military families within its geography, it does not have the critical mass to result in the organic wraparound support provided in a more condensed military environment. I am pleased to say, however, that, because of the armed forces covenant, Braintree District Council has fully implemented a series of changes that prioritise the military and military families in the allocation of social housing. It has worked with both Colchester Council and Tendring Council to fund, through the AFC, a project manager to support military families.

It is incredibly important, as we move from an era of very intense military operations, and as the tempo of military commitments thankfully reduces, that we do not allow the level of public awareness and support to see a corresponding reduction. Warrant Officer Class One Glenn Houghton, who was until recently the Army Sergeant Major, the most senior warrant officer in the British Army, summed it up brilliantly when he said that veterans needed not sympathy but empathy, and that they did not want, and should not have, pity, but they absolutely should have support and understanding.

I am sure we are all partially familiar with the Kipling poem, "Tommy Atkins", and know that, in the abstract, we are terribly supportive of our service personnel and, by extension, their families. We have already heard mention of a number of service charities, including Care after Combat, which has, as one of its principals, my former honorary colonel, General Freddie Viggers. Service charities do fantastic work for those armed forces personnel who are perhaps a little harder to love—the ones who have fallen into criminality, or perhaps addiction and alcoholism, and who need our support just as much as anybody else.

I will finish my brief remarks with one final point. We must always remember that the families of our service personnel are not just chattels, not a problem to be mitigated and worked around, but an essential element and moral component of our fighting power. They are a positive, and deserve our respect, admiration and support, and I am pleased to say that through the armed forces covenant we are seeing that, but I would suggest that this should be a constant watching brief for the whole of Government.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

James Cleverly: I think I would get a very stern look if I gave way to my right hon. Friend, so unfortunately I will not.

2.42 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I begin by echoing and reinforcing the earlier comments of the Chair of the Defence Select Committee when he congratulated my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) on becoming president of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. It is an excellent tribute to her, but it is also good for this country, and I am glad that we are all united in supporting her in that position.

This has been an important debate, not least because it comes 100 years after the end of the first world war. It is important to reflect that when those brave men and women came back from different parts of the world—not just Europe—they did not find in this country a land fit

for heroes. There was a lack of support for so many men and women. Lessons were learned, but it took a long time. They were learned during the '20s and '30s and after the second world war, but only recently have we had the explicit support provided through the armed forces covenant. I am proud that much of the preparation was done under a previous Labour Government if implemented by the Conservatives.

It is important, too, that we recognise how important and significant is the report before us today. It is important because it contains the observations of the covenant reference group, whose involvement in the process is extremely important.

We have heard today from a number of hon. Members. The last to speak was the hon. Member for Braintree (James Cleverly). He reminded us how important it is that we have this covenant and debate. We heard from the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the Chair of the Select Committee, who spoke eloquently about the desperate plight and unfairness of the situation faced by many war widows. I hope very much that the Government address that situation. We heard from the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) about the particular situation in Northern Ireland and from the hon. Members for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) and for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton). I echo their support for the covenant.

It is clear from this debate and report that the implementation of the laudable principles in the covenant is uneven and varies between different parts of the country. I hope for a degree of uniformity before too long so that service personnel and veterans might have the equal support through the country that they deserve. I would cite the situation in Wales. All the local authorities bar one are very involved in the provision of the services that the covenant calls for, and I hope that Powys will join the other local authorities to ensure comprehensive coverage in all of Wales.

My own area, Caerphilly, is a shining example. Armed forces awards are being given tonight in Wales, and I am sure that Caerphilly will loom large among the recipients, because excellent work is being done there on the education of veterans' children and on employment opportunities. There is a particular focus, however, on homelessness, as is common throughout many parts of the country. Caerphilly has appointed a first-rate regional armed forces covenant officer, who covers not only Caerphilly but other parts of Gwent, and we have a first-rate community covenant champion in Councillor Andrew Whitcombe. That model has been replicated elsewhere, but Caerphilly is a good example for others to follow.

It is important, too, that we recognise that we are not just talking about veterans when we talk about the covenant, important though they are. We are talking about those serving currently, as is made explicit in the covenant. One of the big concerns I am aware of is that the armed forces are still not satisfied with the quality of accommodation on many parts of the armed forces estate. This point was made very clearly by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel). It is very important that we heed the comments from the Defence Select Committee. It has been extremely critical—quite rightly, in my view—of the agreement with Annington Homes, which was clearly delivering substandard accommodation for our personnel.

That is still a problem; it is not just a historical one. It is noticeable that in the annual report, the armed forces families federations are cited as still being critical of the standard of single living accommodation. It is important to recognise the concern over the last few months about the liquidation of Carillion. Those difficulties continue, and I hope that the MOD will learn the lessons from that kind of outsourcing.

This is an important report, and I hope that Members will take time to read it from cover to cover. Although much has been done, much more needs to be done. I am delighted that there is political consensus on both sides of the House that support for our veterans and armed forces should be vital in our approach to political engagement, whether we are on the right, left or centre. I hope that that bipartisan approach continues and is reinforced, and that a clear message goes out from the whole House of Commons that we are firmly behind veterans and the armed forces generally.

I would like the Minister, in the brief time available to him, to seek to allay concerns that many people have about the proposals we believe are in the pipeline to outsource veterans' services. We believe that that would be a mistake. I would also like him to clarify what exactly the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust will mean for changes in financing. A number of Members have referred to Care after Combat and its belief that it will be excluded from future funding. If that were the case, it would be a huge tragedy. I ask the Minister to specifically address those points. I would like to finish by reiterating the point I made earlier: we stand firmly behind the veterans and armed forces of this country.

2.50 pm

Mr Ellwood: It is a pleasure to conclude this important debate on the support for the armed forces covenant. I notice that there are a few more Members in the Chamber than there were when I opened the debate. I am sorry that they did not have an opportunity to participate in it, but they are most welcome. In the short time available to me until I am upstaged, I will try to respond to Members' questions.

The shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), spoke about the future accommodation model. She is aware that it has been delayed. I am sorry to hear that. I will write to her, and indeed to all colleagues, with the answers that I cannot provide in the short time available. She also spoke about morale, and I pay tribute to the work that the families federations do in providing support and understanding of where things are with our armed forces.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) on her election as president of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly; I have participated in the assembly myself. The Chair of the Defence Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), touched on the important issue of war widows. He is aware of my personal view and that of the Secretary of State. He also touched on the fact that that is a Treasury matter, and we will continue to work hard to see whether the issue can be rectified.

The hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) touched on the importance of the devolved Administrations. They are critical in the complex map of support that we have in this country. It is

important that we provide consistent support, regardless of where armed forces personnel are situated or where they are moved to up and down the country. I welcome the introduction of the Scottish veterans commissioner, as well as the role of the armed forces champions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) mentioned the need to talk more and praised the Prime Minister for her role in promoting the removal of stigma around discussing mental health. It is not just in the MOD or in defence, but in society as a whole that we need to do more on that issue.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Ellwood: I will not be giving way.

I pay tribute to the work that has been done to support Gus Hales, and I recognise that more work needs to be done with Combat Stress to move that issue forward. The hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) spoke—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The House needs to quieten down a bit, because we need to hear the Minister.

Mr Ellwood: I was about to get offended. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The hon. Member for Leeds North West spoke about the importance of accommodation and the problems we have had with Annington Homes. I appreciate that. I recognise that 95% of our accommodation does meet the decent homes standard. However, there is more that we can do.

My good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), who did so much in her role as Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Defence Secretary, raised a number of important issues, not least to do with having a national conversation about the work we do in supporting our armed forces. She also made the interesting proposal of having an ombudsman. If I may, I would like to discuss that further with her.

The hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) spoke about some of the issues. I have promised to come back to Belfast to discuss these matters in more detail. My hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) talked about the importance of working with councils. That is critical for the work that we do.

Sir Nicholas Soames: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: I am sorry, I will not give way. If I have time, I will give way shortly.

I am pleased to present the report on the armed forces covenant. The covenant is making a real difference, but we need to do more in scrutinising our support for the armed forces community. First, whether in helping a child into school, getting personnel on to the housing ladder or, indeed, getting better data when it comes to understanding the number of suicides that have taken place, there is room for improvement. That includes better joined-up work between organisations and stakeholders, not least with the private sector and the public sector. It is important that there are no gaps.

[Mr Ellwood]

Secondly, it is important that we maintain momentum in pressing partners to play their part in progressing the work of the armed forces champions and, indeed, getting more businesses—we now have over 3,000—to sign up to the covenant. I would love to get to a point where, when waiting to board an aircraft, I heard the announcement, “In appreciation for their service, would all armed forces veterans please have the honour of boarding our aircraft first?”

Finally—this point was raised a number of times in the Chamber—we need to transform perceptions about what our military personnel actually offer, and to bury the myths that are falsely perpetuated about our armed forces personnel being broken by their service.

A mark of professionalism is not just how we equip our armed forces on the frontline, but how we look after them when they are back home—the housing, the education of children and the health requirements—and our duty of care once they depart. That is why we have an armed forces covenant. In considering that, let us consider not just the last generation who have served or the current generation who are serving, but the next generation whom we are inspiring to sign up to our armed forces.

From where I stand, the world is getting more dangerous and more complex. As Britain aspires to continue to play a role on the international stage, we must retain our full spectrum capability. This is not just about hardware; it is also about people. It is about honouring our covenant commitments and allowing us to retain skills, so that we can continue to be the most professional armed force in the world. In that spirit, I commend the report on the armed forces covenant to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Armed Forces Covenant.

Progress on EU Negotiations

2.58 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): With permission. Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on our negotiations to leave the European Union.

Last week, I set out the details of the draft withdrawal agreement, which will ensure our smooth and orderly departure when we leave the European Union on 29 March next year. I also updated the House on the outline political declaration that set out a framework for the future relationship we want between the UK and the EU.

Last night, I met President Juncker in Brussels to work through the details of the full political declaration on this future relationship. We had good discussions, in which I was clear about what we need to ensure the best possible deal for the United Kingdom. We then tasked our negotiating teams to work through the remaining issues. As a result, the text of the political declaration has now been agreed between the UK and the European Commission, and I updated the Cabinet on that progress this morning.

The draft text that we have agreed with the Commission is a good deal for our country and for our partners in the EU. It honours the vote of the British people by taking back control of our borders, our laws and our money, while protecting jobs, security and the integrity of our precious United Kingdom. It ends free movement once and for all. Instead, we will introduce a new skills-based immigration system that is based not on the country people come from, but on what they can contribute to the UK. The draft text ends the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice in the UK. We will make our own laws in our own Parliaments, here in Westminster and in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast, and they will be adjudicated on by UK courts. It means an end to sending vast sums of money to the EU, so we can take full control of our money to spend on priorities, including our long-term plan for the NHS, to which we have committed to spending over £394 million more per week by 2023-24. Just this morning, I was able to announce a major new investment in primary and community care worth £3.5 billion a year in real terms by 2023-24.

The text we have now agreed would create a new free trade area with the European Union, with no tariffs, fees, charges or quantitative restrictions. That would be the first such agreement between the EU and any advanced economy in the world, which will be good for jobs. The EU said that the choice was binary—Norway or Canada—but the political declaration recognises that there is a spectrum, with the extent of our commitments taken into account in deciding the level of checks and controls. Crucially, the text we have agreed also has an explicit reference to the development of an independent trade policy by the UK beyond this partnership with the European Union, so we would have the ability to sign new trade deals with other countries, and capitalise on the opportunities in the fastest-growing economies around the world. We would be able to get on with that, negotiating deals during the implementation period and putting them in place immediately afterwards.

The deal would mean that we leave the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy, so let me be absolutely clear about what that would mean for fishing. We would become an independent coastal

state, with control over our waters so that our fishermen get a fairer share of the fish in our waters. We have firmly rejected a link between access to our waters and access to markets. The fisheries agreement is not something that we will be trading off against any other priorities. We are clear that we will negotiate access and quotas on an annual basis, as, for example, do other independent coastal states such as Norway and Iceland. The trade agreement with the EU would also cover services and investment that will go further than any other recent EU agreements, and it would secure new arrangements for our financial services sector, ensuring that market access cannot be withdrawn on a whim and providing stability and certainty for our world-leading industry. We would also have a cutting-edge agreement on digital, helping to facilitate e-commerce and reduce unjustified barriers to trade by electronic means. There would be strong rules in place to keep trade fair and ensure that neither side can unfairly subsidise their industries against the other.

The text we have agreed with the European Commission also includes a new security partnership, with a close relationship on defence and tackling crime and terrorism to keep all our people safe. There would be a surrender agreement to bring criminals to justice no matter where in Europe they break the law and arrangements for the sharing of data, including on DNA, passenger name records and fingerprints. The new security partnership would also ensure close co-operation between our police forces and other law enforcement bodies. We would continue to work together on sanctions against those who violate international rules or commit atrocities. There would be joint working on meeting cyber-security threats and supporting international efforts to prevent money laundering and the financing of terrorists.

Finally, as I set out for the House last week, the draft withdrawal agreement will ensure that we transition to this new and ambitious future relationship in a smooth and orderly way. It will deliver a 20-month implementation period, so that we have time to put our new future relationship in place and that businesses have time to prepare for it. It will protect the rights of EU citizens living in the UK and UK citizens living in the EU, so they can carry on living their lives as before. It will ensure a fair settlement on our financial obligations, less than half what some originally expected, and it will meet our commitment to ensure there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland and no customs border in the Irish sea.

The text we have agreed is explicit about the determination of both sides to avoid the backstop altogether by getting the future relationship in place on 1 January 2021, and, in the unlikely event that we ever did need the backstop, to ensure it is quickly superseded either by the future relationship or alternative arrangements. As part of this, there is an explicit commitment to consider facilitative arrangements and technologies that could avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland. I am grateful to my right hon. Friends the Members for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) and for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) for their ideas on this. Preparatory work on alternative arrangements to avoid the backstop would begin before we leave, enabling rapid progress after our withdrawal.

I want to be very clear about the stage we have reached in these negotiations and the scale of what is now at stake. We have an agreed text between the UK

and the European Commission. The text is today being shared with the leaders of the other 27 member states ahead of the special EU Council on Sunday. The negotiations are now at a critical moment and all our efforts must be focused on working with our European partners to bring this process to a final conclusion in the interests of all our people.

Last night, I spoke to Prime Minister Sánchez of Spain. We have been working constructively with the Governments of Spain and Gibraltar in the negotiations on the withdrawal agreement. We want this work to continue in the future relationship. But I was absolutely clear that Gibraltar's British sovereignty will be protected and that the future relationship we agree must work for the whole UK family. Today, I met Chancellor Kurz of Austria, which currently holds the EU's presidency, and later today and tomorrow, I will be speaking to other European leaders ahead of returning to Brussels on Saturday.

The British people want Brexit to be settled. They want a good deal that sets us on a course for a brighter future. And they want us to come together as a country and to move on to focus on the big issues at home, like our NHS. The deal that will enable us to do this is now within our grasp. In these crucial 72 hours ahead, I will do everything possible to deliver it for the British people. I commend this statement to the House.

3.7 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for the advance copy of her statement. These 26 pages are a testament to the failure of the Tory's bungled negotiations: 19 extra pages, but nothing has changed. The only certainty contained within these pages is that the transition period will have to be extended or we will end up with a backstop and no exit. It represents the worst of all worlds: no say over the rules that will continue to apply and no certainty for the future. There is no change to the withdrawal agreement, no unilateral pull-out mechanism, no concessions on the backstop, which would create a new regulatory border down the Irish sea. Did the EU not receive the amendments and improvements promised by the Leader of the House?

A little over a year ago, we were confidently told by the Government that by the end of the article 50 period we would have a trade deal. The International Trade Secretary said it would be the "easiest in human history". Instead, we have 26 pages of waffle. This empty document could have been written two years ago. It is peppered with phrases such as "the parties will look at" and "the parties will explore". What on earth have the Government been doing for the past two years? They have managed less than one page a month since the referendum.

The Prime Minister said that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. It is clear from this document that, indeed, nothing is agreed. This is the blindfold Brexit we all feared—a leap in the dark. It falls short of Labour's six tests. *[Interruption.]* This Government could have negotiated a new comprehensive customs union, giving certainty to business and securing the manufacturing industry and manufacturing industry jobs. Instead, they are more interested in dog-whistling on immigration. I hope—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. When the Prime Minister delivered her statement, she delivered it to a largely attentive and courteous House. I could not care less what somebody, largely inaudibly and certainly irrelevantly, chunters from a sedentary position. The Prime Minister was heard in courtesy. The right hon. Gentleman the Leader of the Opposition will likewise be heard in courtesy. If it requires the process to take a bit longer, so be it. If it requires it to take a lot longer, so be it. If it takes several hours, so be it. So give up, be quiet, behave—on both sides—and let us hear people speak.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I hope the Prime Minister will abandon the poisonous and divisive rhetoric about EU nationals jumping the queue. European Union nationals have contributed massively to this country, across all industry and public services, while this Government and this Prime Minister as Home Secretary built a hostile environment for non-EU immigrants.

Chequers has been chucked. There is no common rulebook and no mention of frictionless trade. Our participation is downgraded in a number of European agencies, or we are out of them in their entirety. After more than two years of negotiations, there is no clarity over our status with a range of European-wide agencies—the Erasmus scheme, the Galileo project, Euratom, the European Medicines Agency, the European Chemicals Agency and the European Aviation Safety Agency. On none of these do we know our final status.

Take, for example, section 107 of the document. It says:

“The Parties should consider appropriate arrangements for cooperation on space.”

Well, what a remarkable negotiating achievement that is! After two years, they are going to consider “appropriate arrangements”. This is waffle—the blindfold Brexit of a Government that spent more time arguing with themselves than negotiating for Britain.

On fisheries, the Prime Minister and the Environment Secretary have been saying that Britain will leave the common fisheries policy and become an independent coastal nation, yet this agreement sets an aspiration to establish a new fisheries agreement on access to waters and quota shares by summer 2020. That sounds to me like we are replacing membership of the common fisheries policy with a new common fisheries policy. It is clear—absolutely clear—that during what will now inevitably be an extended transition period, there will be no control of our money, our laws and our borders, or indeed, of fishing stocks for a very long time to come.

The Prime Minister stood on the steps of Downing Street and said that a deal had been agreed between the UK and the European Commission and that it was now up to the EU27. Until this Parliament has debated and voted, there is no UK agreement. This half-baked deal is the product of two years of botched negotiations in which the Prime Minister’s red lines have been torn up, Cabinet resignations have been racked up and Chequers has been chucked. This is a vague menu of options, not a plan for the future and not capable of bringing our country together.

The Prime Minister: I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that in virtually everything he said in his response to my statement, he could not have been more wrong. Indeed, I did not believe that he had actually even read the political declaration that we have published

today, as with the withdrawal agreement. He did quote one sentence, I think in an attempt to suggest that he had actually read the document. He said that it was an example of lack of detail. Perhaps if he had read some of the other aspects of the document, he would know that there is significant detail in it.

The declaration refers to

“no tariffs, fees, charges or quantitative restrictions across all sectors”.

No other major economy has that. It refers to

“liberalisation in trade in services well beyond the Parties’ ...WTO...commitments and building on recent Union...FTAs”.

It refers to “equivalence decisions” on financial services. It refers to

“a Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement”,

and to

“reciprocal arrangements for timely, effective and efficient exchanges of Passenger Name Records...and of DNA, fingerprints and vehicle registration data”.

It refers to enabling

“the United Kingdom to participate on a case by case basis in”

common security and defence policy

“missions and operations”.

There is plenty more—I could go on—but I think the right hon. Gentleman is beginning to get the message about this.

The right hon. Gentleman also talked about where he thought that somehow we had not achieved any changes. Let me be clear about some of those changes. I referred to at least one of them in my statement. The EU said that the choice was binary: Norway or Canada. The political declaration concedes that there is a spectrum. It says that “the extent” of our

“commitments...would be taken into account”

in deciding the levels of “checks and controls”. The EU said that we could not share security capabilities as a non-member state outside free movement and outside the Schengen area. The political declaration grants us direct access to some, and promises to enable many others. Those are further commitments than the EU has made to any non-member state. The EU said that we could not preserve the invisible customs border between Northern Ireland and Ireland without splitting our customs territory. The withdrawal agreement maintains the integrity of the UK’s customs territory. Again, I could go through some further points.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about the common fisheries policy. This is where I began to think that maybe he had read the document but not understood it, or what lies behind it. If we are to ensure that we are able to continue to have access to the waters of other European Union member states, as we do at the moment, we will need to negotiate, as other non-EU member states do, an annual agreement on access to waters between the UK and the European Union. The point at the moment is that we are not able to do that as an independent coastal state, and in the future we will be able to do that as an independent coastal state.

I must also say to the right hon. Gentleman that what I have been doing throughout this process is looking at what are the best interests of the United Kingdom. Let us just go through his other challenge to this: the six Labour tests on Brexit.

“Does it ensure a strong and collaborative future relationship with the EU?”

Hon. Members: No!

The Prime Minister: Yes.

“Does it ensure the fair management of migration in the interests of the economy and communities?”

Hon. Members: No!

The Prime Minister: Yes.

“Does it defend rights and protections and prevent a race to the bottom?”

Hon. Members: No!

The Prime Minister: Yes.

“Does it protect national security and our capacity to tackle cross-border crime?”

Hon. Members: No!

The Prime Minister: Yes, it does. *[Interruption.]*

“Does it deliver”—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Mahmood, we do not need you gesticulating. You are not a football referee or a linesperson. Calm yourself, man. The Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Does it ensure that it delivers a deal that is good for every part of the UK? Yes, it does.

Let me say to the right hon. Gentleman that this is a good deal for the United Kingdom. It delivers on the vote of the British people. It brings back control of our borders, our money and our laws. It protects jobs, it protects security, it protects the integrity of the United Kingdom. The right hon. Gentleman may want to play party politics; I am working in the national interest.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I of course appreciate enormously my right hon. Friend’s huge endeavours to deal with what has now emerged as a particularly toxic issue: the Northern Irish backstop, now bound into the withdrawal agreement. However, for all that effort and work, the reality is that this is not the withdrawal agreement, and the withdrawal agreement will make it very clear that should we, even under these terms, struggle with a negotiation for a free trade arrangement and not complete that process, we will fall into the Northern Ireland backstop as it exists at the moment. That means that we will be bound by those restrictions that force Northern Ireland into a separate arrangement and us into the customs union. I simply say to my right hon. Friend therefore that I hope that she will now consider that none of this is at all workable unless we get the withdrawal agreement amended so that any arrangements we make strip out that backstop and leave us with that positive open border that we talked about.

The Prime Minister: The premise of my right hon. Friend’s question is that if the future relationship is not in place by 1 January 2021, and if in some sense there needs to be that interim arrangement, we would then automatically go into the backstop. That is not the case. The withdrawal agreement makes it clear that there is the alternative of the extension of the implementation

period, but it also refers to these alternative arrangements, and, as I said in my statement, I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his proposals in relation to that matter and we are working on them. So it is simply not the case that we automatically fall into the backstop described in the withdrawal agreement.

Secondly, there are many instances in the document—I will not go through the full list—where it is clear that that arrangement, whether the extension of the IP, an alternative arrangement or a backstop, is there for a temporary period before we are able to put the future relationship in place. What the backstop and those alternative arrangements and the proposals amount to are what I think my right hon. Friend was talking about at the end of his question, which is our commitment to the people of Northern Ireland that there will be no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, and that they will be able to carry on their business much as they do today. That, I hope, is what we are all striving to achieve in relation to this matter. There are a number of ways in which we can achieve that, as the withdrawal agreement and political declaration make clear, and we are working on all of them.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I thank the Prime Minister for an advance copy of her statement.

This Government really are spluttering forward in a haphazard, chaotic way. There are of course outstanding political concerns still to be addressed by the EU27 this Sunday. Central to this political declaration remains the matter of fishing rights—a matter critical to Scotland. A week ago, Scottish Conservative Members in this place wrote to the Prime Minister and said:

“At the end of the Implementation Period, we must be able to negotiate access and quota shares with the EU and other third countries independently...This means that access and quota shares cannot be included in the Future Economic Partnership.”

Paragraph 75 of the political declaration agreed today states:

“Within the context of the overall economic partnership the Parties should establish a new fisheries agreement on, *inter alia*, access to waters and quota shares.”

There we have it: Scotland’s fishing community is once again a bargaining chip used by a Tory Government in Brussels.

Worse, the detail in the draft withdrawal agreement has pitted fishing against aquaculture—access to waters versus access to trade—making plain once again that Scottish interests are expendable. When the UK entered the then European Economic Community, under the leadership of Ted Heath, the Conservatives traded away our fishing rights, and they have done so continuously since then. Scotland’s fishing rights—thrown overboard as though they were discarded fish. So much for taking back control; more like trading away Scotland’s interests.

This is an absolute dereliction of the promises Scottish Conservative Members and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs made to Scotland. Shame on them! Will the Prime Minister tell the House if her Scottish MPs and Secretary of State have agreed to this political declaration? Is it not the case that she has just lost further critical votes on the deal, because the Scottish Tory MPs could not possibly vote in favour of this sell-out of Scottish fishing interests?

The Prime Minister: I think it will help the right hon. Gentleman if I repeat what I said in the statement. We will become an independent coastal state with control over our waters, so our fishermen get a fairer share of the fish in our waters. We have firmly rejected a link between access to our waters and access to markets. The fisheries agreement is not something we will be trading off against any other priorities. We are clear that we will negotiate access and quotas on an annual basis, as do other independent coastal states such as Norway and Iceland. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Gentleman may choose to shout at me from a sedentary position, but I have to say that he devoted all his response to my statement in—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I understand that the right hon. Gentleman adheres very strongly to his position—it is in the nature of holding an opinion. But he must hear the response from the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The right hon. Gentleman devoted all his response to the issue of fishing. He is sitting there chuntering that this is a sell-out of Scottish fishermen. I will tell him what a sell-out of Scottish fishermen would be: the policy of the Scottish nationalists to stay in the common fisheries policy.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend accept that this declaration is self-contradictory in that it insists on the sovereignty of both the EU and the United Kingdom legal orders, and that without control of our own laws and by surrendering to binding rules of the European Court, this declaration cannot be reconciled with the repeal of the 1972 Act or with the referendum vote? Will she further note that the European Scrutiny Committee has resolved to hold an inquiry into the Government's handling and the outcome of these negotiations?

The Prime Minister: This political declaration asserts the sovereignty of both sides of the agreement—the United Kingdom and the European Union—because that is exactly what will persist. We will be a sovereign nation. We will no longer be under the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. There are circumstances where a point that is being looked at—for example, in arbitration—is considered to be a matter of the interpretation of European Union law. There is one body that interprets European Union law: that is the European Court of Justice. What we make clear is that, in those circumstances, the arbitration panel may ask the European Court of Justice for an opinion on the interpretation of European Union law; the arbitration panel will then consider its decision in the light of that opinion.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): I am grateful to the Prime Minister for her movement in paragraphs 26 and 27, taking on board our proposals to use on the Irish border modern techniques and processes used elsewhere, but—there is a big but in this—as long as the backstop exists in a legally binding document, there is a danger that, should talks fail, the backstop becomes accepted and we have the horror of being in the customs union, the horror of Northern Ireland being split off under a different regime. As I saw in Washington this week, if we cannot control our tariffs

and our regulatory regime, we cannot do free trade deals with other countries. At this late stage, will she consider withdrawing the backstop from the legally binding draft document and replacing it with the draft trade facilitation chapter and border protocol that we gave her earlier in the week, and making that legally binding so it could become the new backstop?

The Prime Minister: As I have indicated, I am grateful to my right hon. Friend and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) for the work they have been doing on this issue.

In the withdrawal agreement we negotiated a specific reference to alternative arrangements that enables us to work up those alternative arrangements such that they will be, as the name suggests, an alternative to the arrangements for the backstop, or would enable us to come out of the backstop if we had started down that route.

I continue to say to my hon. and right hon. Friends, and to Members of this House more widely, that it is the firm determination of this Government, and indeed it is the determination of the European Union, that we will work to ensure that we have the future relationship arranged and able to be in place by 1 January 2021. It is not the case that there is a sense in which the backstop is automatic. The backstop is not automatic. There are alternatives to the backstop, and the United Kingdom can choose those alternatives. There are pros and cons to those alternatives and, when the time comes, obviously the choice will measure those pros and cons, but what matters is that it will not be the case that the only way to deal with the interim period is through the backstop; it can be dealt with by alternative arrangements, or by an extension to the implementation period.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): This is essentially an agreement to have an agreement, and it is full of worryingly vague aspirations. How, for example, can the Prime Minister justify paragraph 24, which relates to medicines, chemicals and aviation safety, where we currently have strong agreed co-operative standards? She has managed to negotiate an agreement to “explore the possibility of cooperation”.

That is pathetically weak, and it will cause great anxiety to millions of people who depend on high standards of safety.

The Prime Minister: When we leave the European Union we will cease to be a member of certain European Union agencies. The right hon. Gentleman might have noticed that there is a strong reference to close co-operation in the text in relation to the European Aviation Safety Agency, which already permits a third country to have access to the agency. That is not the case with the European Medicines Agency or the European Chemicals Agency, which is why, as we identified in the White Paper published in the summer, it will be necessary to work on what should be the access arrangements to those agencies. The EASA already has a model that can be used, and the other two agencies do not. In relation to these negotiations, we are not able to put legal texts together until we have left the European Union and are no longer a member of the European Union—that, of course, is what we will be able to do when we leave on 29 March 2019.

Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): The backstop ties the UK to the customs union and single market rules with no voice and an EU veto on our exit, while paragraph 23 of the political declaration makes that the starting point for future relations to build on. The top reason people voted to leave the EU was to take back democratic control over our laws. Is it not the regrettable but inescapable reality that this deal gives even more away?

The Prime Minister: This is my first opportunity to thank my right hon. Friend for the work he did as Brexit Secretary. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. This is very unseemly. Everybody will get a chance to ask a question. The right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab) has asked a question and the Prime Minister is answering it. Let us try to show each other some courtesy.

The Prime Minister: I say to my right hon. Friend that I have explained, in response to other right hon. and hon. Members, the point about the backstop—it is not the automatic route for dealing with a temporary period in relation to any gap that exists between the end of the implementation period in December 2020 and the future relationship coming into place. The political declaration is about that future relationship. There are important points that have been agreed within the withdrawal agreement that will ensure that we can get a good agreement in relation to borders and to our trade area when we become that independent state outside the European Union. He will be aware that, as is reflected in this political declaration, there is a spectrum and there is a balance between willingness to abide by rules and the necessity for checks at the border. It continues to be our ambition and our objective to get that frictionless trade at the border, because we believe that is important.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): The Chancellor of the Exchequer said last night that he did not like the backstop. He said that he does not think that the backstop is a good arrangement for our economy or a good arrangement for our Union. We agree with the Chancellor of the Exchequer. In the light of the political declaration, in paragraph 27, to which the Prime Minister referred, it is now clear that the EU is beginning to accept that there are alternative arrangements that can be put in place without the need for the backstop. I say to the Prime Minister that if she wants to have the support of my party for the withdrawal agreement, we need to see an end of the backstop and those alternative arrangements put in place.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. He started off by reflecting the comments made by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. As I have said in this Chamber, and as others have said in this Chamber, none of us wants to see the backstop being used. The best way to ensure that the backstop is not used is to get the future relationship into place. There are all those alternative arrangements and we will be working on them, and I am happy to discuss with the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues what those alternative arrangements could be. But what is important is that we have within the document means by which we can guarantee to the people of Northern

Ireland—and from the EU's point of view it wants that guarantee in relation to Ireland—that trade across the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland can continue as it does today. That is the commitment we have made—no hard border—and that is what we will continue to be committed to providing.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): Outside this House there is a much higher appreciation of the tenacity of the Prime Minister in pursuing a successful deal than we sometimes hear inside it. One of the principal worries, as we are hearing, has been that in some way we will be trapped forever, either in the backstop or in a customs union. What is there in this declaration and in the withdrawal agreement to calm those fears?

The Prime Minister: There are several elements that I would suggest to my right hon. Friend would calm those fears. First, there are many statements within the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration that explicitly recognise that the backstop, should it be necessary, would only be a temporary arrangement. Indeed, article 50, which is the legal basis for the withdrawal agreement, cannot establish a permanent relationship. That is reflected in the text and that is accepted by the European Union. There are also, as I have just explained, the alternative arrangements that can be put in place and the possible extension to the implementation period. But the best route to ensuring that those concerns are calmed is to ensure that we work to get the future relationship, as set out in this political declaration, in place by 1 January 2021 so that there is no need for any interim arrangement at all to provide our guarantee and commitment to the people of Northern Ireland.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Unlike the withdrawal agreement, this political declaration is not legally binding. Although it may now be 26 pages as opposed to seven, it still does not provide the House with clarity and certainty about our future economic relationship with our biggest, nearest and most important trading partner. Is it really going to take the defeat of her deal to persuade the Prime Minister that she cannot achieve frictionless trade while leaving the customs union and the single market, and that therefore, sooner or later, a different approach is going to have to be found in order to secure the future of our economy and the jobs that depend on it?

The Prime Minister: We have of course put forward proposals that would enable frictionless trade to be achieved outside the customs union and outside the single market. That is not something that is accepted by everyone in the European Union—I fully accept that—but we have in the future negotiations the ability to continue to work for our objective of achieving that frictionless trade. The right hon. Gentleman talks about concern about uncertainty into the future; I have to say to him that the thing that would create most uncertainty in the future is a failure to take and agree a deal that is going to be good for the UK, that delivers on the vote of the people in the referendum, and that does so while protecting people's jobs and security.

Boris Johnson (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con): May I regretfully point out to my right hon. Friend that of course nothing in this political declaration changes the hard reality of the withdrawal agreement, which gives the EU a continuing veto over the unilateral

[Boris Johnson]

power of the entire United Kingdom to do free trade deals or to take back control of our laws? May I therefore respectfully suggest that we can accept the generalities and the self-contradictions contained in this political declaration, but we should junk forthwith the backstop upon which the future economic partnership is to be based, according to this political declaration, and which makes a complete nonsense of Brexit?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that my right hon. Friend will recall the discussions we had earlier in the year when we were agreeing the temporary customs arrangement as our proposal for the basis on which we would ensure that we guaranteed the commitment for the people of Northern Ireland, and, indeed, obviously elements of that have been reflected in what we see in the withdrawal agreement. There are various arrangements that we can put in place, as I have said to others who have questioned me so far in this statement in relation to the backstop. I say to my right hon. Friend that the future relationship that we have set out in the political declaration ends free movement, ends sending vast sums of money to the European Union every year, and ends the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice here in the United Kingdom, and it enables us to hold an independent trade policy and to negotiate trade deals around the whole of the world. I know that my right hon. Friend has in the past expressed his desire to have all those elements available to the United Kingdom, and that is what this deal delivers.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): As has been said, this is a declaration of aspiration and a charter for years of uncertainty. It is not the comprehensive free trade deal that the Prime Minister promised we would have before exit day in her Lancaster House speech. Having broken that promise, can she now guarantee that that comprehensive free trade deal will be finalised by the end of the transition period, because so far this gives no certainty whatsoever to our businesses?

The Prime Minister: On the contrary, if the hon. Gentleman looks at the comments that have been made by business in relation to the declaration—that were made, in fact, in relation to the outline political declaration last week—he will see that organisations such as the Federation of Small Businesses are very clear about the certainty that is provided for businesses looking into the future. When he looks through the political declaration and, indeed, through the withdrawal agreement, he will also see the firm commitment on both sides to ensuring that we work to put in place that legal text. Yes, it is the case that we cannot have the legal text on the future agreement until we have left the European Union, and one of the elements towards the end of the political declaration, as the hon. Gentleman will have seen, sets out the commitments in relation to working on that for the future. I say to the hon. Gentleman that what is important is that we have here a political declaration that is fuller than the outline that we published last week and that sets out very clearly a deal for the UK that is good for the United Kingdom and good for jobs.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I do not believe that this is a good deal for Britain and I do not think that many young people in our country think that this is a

good deal for Britain at all. Does the Prime Minister accept that, if the meaningful vote is lost, and if this House votes also against exiting the EU with no deal, the only right option then is to go back to the people and allow them to have a final say, including young people—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. People should not be shouting out. The right hon. Lady is asking the Prime Minister a question. Have the manners to listen.

Justine Greening: Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I think that young people would like to be listened to in this debate as well. I was asking the Prime Minister whether, if the meaningful vote is lost and if this House, as I believe it will, votes against a no-deal exit from the EU, the Government intend to come back with an alternative proposal on how to break the deadlock, and why would that not include going back to the British people to ask them their views?

The Prime Minister: Of course, we have set out in legislation the procedure that would be followed were the meaningful vote to be lost in this House. My right hon. Friend asks about going back to the people in a second referendum. I say to her, as I have said now on many occasions here in this House, that this House and this Parliament overwhelmingly gave the British people the choice as to whether or not to leave the European Union. The people of Britain voted to leave the European Union. I believe that it is important that politicians do not turn around and say, “Well, what do you think now? Would you like to think again?” but say, “You voted to leave and we will deliver that Brexit—that leaving of the European Union.”

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister told us in her concluding remarks that she wants to “move on” to focus on the big issues such as our national health service, but how does she expect to move on when she has signed up to a deal that does nothing for our services sector? Our services sector comprises 80% of our economy and includes things such as retail banks, leisure and tourism. Can she give our country today a guarantee that our UK services sector will enjoy the same access to the single market that it enjoys today?

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Lady looks at the sections that we have on the services sector, she will see that the arrangements we have in the political declaration go beyond any that have been offered to any other non-member of the European Union.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): May I say to my right hon. Friend that a number of people I speak to are fully in admiration of the determination that the Prime Minister has shown over these very difficult negotiations, doing something that no other Prime Minister has ever been tasked with doing? Will she explain to the House a little bit more? If this agreement—the 585 pages of the withdrawal agreement and today’s document, which has been agreed with the Commission—is rejected, does she think that the six paragraphs offered by the Opposition are the alternative?

The Prime Minister: First, I thank my right hon. Friend for his opening remarks. Secondly, I say no. The Opposition

have set these six tests, but at no stage have they set out what their plan for an alternative arrangement with the European Union would be.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): When questioned over whether any deal is financially worse than EU membership, the Chancellor said late last night that it is not only about the economics. I have news for the Prime Minister: we say that it is all about the economics. The people can now see that the British Government are swivel-eyed in their determination to rip the UK out of the single market and the customs union. Is it not time to take the deal back to the people and let them decide what matters most?

The Prime Minister: I responded on the issue of the second referendum when I responded to my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening). On the question of the economy, this is a deal that protects jobs and livelihoods across the whole of the United Kingdom.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): Is not the lesson of this long negotiation that, when you try to unravel yourself from an international rules-based system because you do not like the rules, unless you want chaos, you start creating a completely new set of rules, many of which are in fact as binding and onerous on this country as any that we had before? In that context, the backstop—I have to say this to my right hon. Friend—is a constitutional anomaly of the first order because it makes the EU the guarantor of a bilateral treaty between ourselves and Ireland on which the people have never been consulted. I urge her in those circumstances, if she wants to go ahead with this, to put her deal to the people of this country and to offer them the alternative of remaining, because the one big eye-opener that one sees from all this is that, however hard she has tried, at the end of the day, we will be in an international rules-based system because that in fact is where our national interest lies.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and learned Friend has heard my response about asking the people in a second referendum what their views are. What we have negotiated is an arrangement with the European Union that continues a close partnership between the United Kingdom and the EU. I believe that that is the right thing for us to do and that coming out of the EU will enable us to develop even closer partnerships with other countries around the world through our trade deals and, indeed, through other means of support and the work we will be able to do with them on security and defence. It is also important, given our geographical position and given that the EU is our nearest trading neighbour, that we continue to have that good relationship with the EU, and that is what this delivers.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister now admit that extending the aspirations into a political declaration that is 19 pages longer than the original series of aspirations is not actually a deal? When will she reach a deal so that, when we vote to leave through the withdrawal Act, we will know where we are leaving to? And whatever happened to frictionless trade? It is not mentioned at all in her list of aspirations.

The Prime Minister: The position, as I have mentioned to others, is that it is of course not possible for us to agree the legal text of our future relationship with the European Union until we have left the European Union. If the hon. Lady looks again at the text, she will see that it clearly expresses what we have expressed previously in relation to trade—that there is a spectrum, there is a balance between commitments that are given on rules and the issue of the checks that take place at the border. It remains our intention as a Government to work towards that frictionless trade.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): There are clearly parts of this document that are positive and that I welcome, but my grave worry is that it will never come into effect anyway. The EU is unlikely to agree a new economic partnership with us because the withdrawal agreement locks us into paying the £38 billion and also commits us to a backstop that has us obeying EU rules and applying its customs rules without our having any say in them.

The Prime Minister: I recognise my right hon. Friend's concern about the backstop, but the reality of the position from the European Union is the complete opposite. There are those in the European Union who actively believe that the backstop would be an advantageous place for the United Kingdom to be—advantageous because, in their eyes, it has that access to the market of the European Union without any payment and without free movement. That is not a position they actively want us to be in. That is why both sides have made it clear throughout the document that we do not want the backstop to come into place at all and that were it to come into place it would only be temporary.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I congratulate the Prime Minister, because she has managed to satisfy her immigration obsession and to deal with the EU queue jumpers. Is it not the case that what we do to them they will do unto us? Her agreement aims to provide visa-free travel only for short-term visits to the EU. Is it not the case that the rights the Prime Minister and I have enjoyed to live, work and love in a continent of 27 nations will be denied to the next generation of young people?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman knows full well, what we will be doing in relation to immigration is bringing an end to free movement once and for all. We will have an immigration system based not on where somebody comes from but on the contribution they can make to this economy. That will be good for the whole of the United Kingdom, including Scotland.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): May I welcome this political declaration, particularly paragraph 77 on the global co-operation enshrined in this agreement? Does the Prime Minister agree that we must continue to work more closely than ever with our European partners, even when we leave the European Union, on trans-border issues such as climate change, trade protectionism and all the other issues that we have to deal with together and cannot deal with singly?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why it is important that we have that section in this political declaration. We are leaving the

[*The Prime Minister*]

European Union; we are not leaving Europe. It will make sense for us to continue to co-operate with our European partners on a whole range of issues that affect the whole world and on which our being able to work together will be important in terms of how we can address those issues and resolve them—as he suggests, that includes issues such as climate change.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Poorer, with less control, and years and years of more uncertainty. [*Interruption.*] In her heart of hearts, does the Prime Minister honestly think that this is what people were voting for two and a half years ago?

The Prime Minister: I think that a number of my colleagues, when the right hon. Gentleman started talking about being poorer and having more uncertainty, thought that he was describing a Labour Government. I think that what people voted for was to bring an end to free movement, and to take control of our borders, our money and our laws, and they wanted us to do it in a way that protected their jobs, protected their security and protected our United Kingdom—and that is exactly what this deal does.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): One of my constituents who was on the other side of the referendum vote has written to me today saying that it appears that the UK's Brexit requirements are being achieved, or as close to that as is going to be achievable. He wants to applaud the Prime Minister and her team for their negotiation, and says that anyone who votes against this deal would actually be voting against the referendum result and the interests of the country. May I put it to the Prime Minister that I think that that is representative of many people in all parties throughout the country?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing his constituent's views to the House today. I think that, when every Member of this House looks at the meaningful vote, they will have to ask themselves precisely the question that that constituent has asked—does this deliver on the vote, and does it do it in a way that is good for the United Kingdom? I think the answer is unequivocally yes.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): The Prime Minister seems to imply in paragraph 27 that the new facilitative arrangements and technologies to prevent a hard border are new. They have been around for some time, and customs officials—all sorts of people—have written about this. The fact is that the Prime Minister's team have not looked at this seriously until very recently. Even at this late stage, could I say to the Prime Minister that the backstop has no need to be in a legal agreement, and that it should be taken out and we should get on with getting the kind of changes that would make a hard border impossible?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is right that of course there have been ideas around for some time in relation to the way in which customs and the treatment of customs is developing with today's technology, but there are further technological solutions that I think will be available. On the question of no hard border, we

have a commitment to no hard border, but I believe it is important that we also try to work to ensure that businesses and people in Northern Ireland are able to carry on their business and their daily life much as they do today. This is about no hard border but it is also about our overall commitment to the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): May I refer my right hon. Friend to paragraph 134 of the proposal on the question of interpretation of Union law, which gives authority to the Court of Justice of the European Union? Why is there not a similar paragraph giving the right of interpretation of UK law to the UK courts, or is it implicit that European Union law is senior?

The Prime Minister: It is not the case that European Union law is senior. It is the case that we have consistently said, throughout all the negotiations, and made it clear at various points, that the court of one party cannot have jurisdiction over the other party. But the body that interprets European law is the CJEU. As this makes clear, the arbitration panel can decide to ask the CJEU for an opinion on the interpretation of EU law. UK law is interpreted, indeed, by United Kingdom courts. The arbitration panel, when it comes to making its decision—had it referred the ECJ to give an opinion on a matter of European Union law—would take its decision in the light of that opinion.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister knows that this is a complicated and historic time for us all—we are deciding the future of our country—but she also knows that most honest MPs would say, “We haven't had a chance yet to evaluate this.” She knows, too, that by Sunday many people—the economists, the pundits, the think-tanks—will have evaluated it. If that is possible—and will happen—why can the British people not have the chance to evaluate it properly once they know whether it is a good deal?

The Prime Minister: I think the hon. Gentleman has heard my answer to that question in response to earlier questions. I refer him to that answer.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend please confirm that she intends to ensure that the treaty envisaged in the political declaration will include a provision analogous to article 50 of the treaty on European Union to enable the United Kingdom, should it so wish, to withdraw from that arrangement?

The Prime Minister: As my right hon. Friend knows, we have already said that, in looking at a future treaty, it is important to do a couple of things. He talks about being able to bring a treaty to an end, but it is also important, because we accept that over the years trade relationships will develop and change and that administrative arrangements will change, to have a regular review mechanism in place, so that as those changes take place, it is possible to make changes to the agreement.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Was not the Prime Minister's fundamental mistake triggering article 50 without getting a commitment to conclude a future trade agreement before exit day? As a result, is she not asking the country to trust her—to

take a leap in the dark—entirely on the basis of this flimsy, unenforceable set of political words? We face year after year of further negotiations. Or can she now tell us when the negotiations on the future trade arrangement will conclude?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has heard me mention in response to other questions the determination and commitment of both sides to ensuring that those negotiations take place such that the future framework is in place at the end of December 2020. He complains that we triggered article 50 when we did. I remind him that the Leader of the Opposition wanted to trigger article 50 the day after the referendum.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The Federation of Small Businesses, the CBI, the vast majority of members of the Institute of Directors and even the Ulster Farmers Union are all saying they support the withdrawal agreement. Should those of us who care about the jobs and economic security of our constituents not support, it too?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend. The important thing is that the deal delivers on the vote of the referendum, while protecting jobs and the security and livelihoods of people up and down the country.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Can we be clear what a deal is and what it is not? A deal is what we have at the moment—I happen to think it is a very good deal. This is simply a piece of paper full of meaningless waffle. It is not legally binding; it has nothing about frictionless trade; it has lots about the ECJ, even though the Prime Minister claims it does not; and it cuts off opportunities for our young people and their futures. The Government Benches behind her are emptying. When will she realise that the only way out of this crisis is by putting it back to the British people in a people's vote?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman says that what we have now is a deal. What we have now is membership of the European Union, and the British people voted for us to cease that membership and leave the European Union.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I welcome paragraph 53, which talks about

“entry and stay for purposes such as research, study, training and youth exchanges”,

which is incredibly important for professionals and young people in my constituency. Will my right hon. Friend also confirm that once we leave the common agricultural policy—another important issue in my constituency—we will have as close and as frictionless trade in agricultural goods as possible?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to confirm that. The exchanges that my hon. Friend referred to are indeed important, particularly for young people and young professionals. We will be leaving the common agricultural policy. Obviously, we will be putting in place our alternative proposals for support for the agricultural sector, and we will be looking to ensure that we have the ability to move agricultural products and goods across the border as easily as possible.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): If the Prime Minister will not apologise to EU citizens for accusing them of queue jumping, I do so on her behalf. To make amends, will she confirm that there are no circumstances in which she will inflict no deal on the country, and will she offer everyone a people's vote, to get us out of this Brexit quagmire, which she has created?

The Prime Minister: I refer the right hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave earlier.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Paragraph 23 makes provision for us to be in the single customs territory provided for in the withdrawal agreement. Paragraph 135 states that we could be fined for not following EU law. Which normal independent country has an ambition to enter into that kind of relationship with the European Union? Mexico? Canada? Japan? What other country would want to submit to these kinds of arrangements?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend will see that we also say in paragraph 23 that this economic partnership will

“ensure no tariffs, fees, charges or quantitative restrictions across all sectors, with ambitious customs arrangements”.

As I said in my statement, that is something that no other country has been offered by the European Union. This is a deal that delivers on the vote, but also protects jobs and security around the UK.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): For a £39 billion divorce fee, the British people are being offered the prospect of years, if not decades, of wrangling over sectors such as transport, chemicals and nuclear. The ECJ will be the final arbiter in any decision, with the ability to impose fines on us. The Prime Minister is going to this summit pretending that she can get this deal through Parliament, when she knows she cannot. Is it not time to stop the madness and put this back to the people in a vote, so that they can reject it?

The Prime Minister: In response to the hon. Lady's final question, I refer her to the answer I have given to other right hon. and hon. Members. There is much else I could say about the other details in her question, but I will simply make this point. This deal does not make the European Court of Justice the final arbiter on any dispute.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): The Prime Minister mentioned that there is an explicit and welcome reference in the document to the UK pursuing an independent trade policy, including the ability to sign new trade deals with the rest of the world. Does that include specifically the ability to conclude free trade agreements?

The Prime Minister: Yes. We will have the opportunity to conclude free trade agreements with countries around the rest of the world. As I hope my right hon. Friend sees, this aspect has been inserted in the full political declaration to make absolutely clear that we will have an independent trade policy.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): By contrast to the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), I am pleased to see the Prime Minister recognise the role of the European Court of Justice, because this agreement explicitly states that we will not only respect its integrity and agree to binding rulings, but consider financial compensation for when they are broken. Can she tell us a bit more about how she intends to influence the decisions of the ECJ, given the impact that this will have on British businesses and British jobs?

The Prime Minister: What is absolutely clear is that in the future relationship we will have with the European Union, the European Court of Justice will not have jurisdiction here in the United Kingdom. It is possible that the hon. Lady is thinking of the circumstances put in place in the withdrawal agreement in relation to either those cases that are pending in relation to the European Court of Justice and Union law before we leave, or those cases that relate to activity that has taken place under European Union law while we were a member of the European Union, in which case it will be possible for those cases to continue to be taken as they would have been had we remained a member.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on getting alternative arrangements into the narrative, which is a very considerable achievement indeed. Given articles 174 to 178, to what extent does she think that the independent arbitration panel ultimately will be able to determine if and when the conditions for alternative arrangements have been met?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has clearly made a careful study of the withdrawal agreement. He will know from the withdrawal agreement that the process that will take place is that, if we are in the backstop and believe we have alternative arrangements—whether the future relationship or another arrangement—that mean the backstop is no longer necessary, that will be a matter initially to be discussed between the United Kingdom and the European Union through the Joint Committee. It would be possible then, if there were no agreement and there was concern about good faith in relation to this, for that matter to be arbitrable before the arbitration panel. Of course, it is not for me to set out the sort of decision that the arbitration panel will take; it would be for it, at that point in time, to determine whether either side had been failing to act in the way in which it was intended.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): In sector after sector, these proposals represent a downgrading of UK power and influence compared with what we have now. That is one side of the equation here, but I want to ask the Prime Minister about the other side of the equation. Can she look the House in the eye and say that these proposals will make the country economically better off than continuing with our current arrangements?

The Prime Minister: I do not agree with the first part of the right hon. Gentleman's question. I believe that actually, as an independent state outside the European Union, the United Kingdom will continue to play a very key role in a number of multilateral organisations around the world, such as the United Nations and NATO.

More than that, we have already started to extend our partnership to countries around the world where we have not had the same extent of partnership as a member of the European Union and to look forward to us outside the European Union. I think the right hon. Gentleman has probably asked me the question about the economics previously. Outside the European Union, I believe it is important for us not only to have a good trade relationship with the European Union—that is what this deal delivers—but to be able to develop those trade relationships around the rest of the world.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Will the Prime Minister help those of us who want to try to help her in this vote? She knows that what we are worried about is that we will be trapped for years in a customs union. She tells us that this backstop is temporary, so can she give me this commitment? Given that the Vienna convention makes it absolutely clear that a sovereign state can abrogate any part of a treaty with an international body when it likes and that this Parliament cannot bind its successors, if by the end of this Parliament—or the due date of the end of this Parliament—or by 1 January 2022, we are still trapped in these arrangements, will she assure me that she will abrogate those treaties and we will become an independent nation again?

The Prime Minister: The premise of my hon. Friend's question is that we would be in the backstop by 1 January 2022. I repeat to my hon. Friend and to others, first, that it is our intention and the intention of the European Union to work to ensure that the backstop need never be brought into place. There are many references throughout the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration that make clear the temporary nature of the backstop, should it be exercised. But of course, as I said earlier, even if an interim arrangement were necessary, it would be the case that alternative arrangements—the extension of the IP—could be in place instead of the backstop.

My hon. Friend asked me about the due date for the end of this Parliament—the general election in 2022. What I am very clear about is that it is my firm intention that we will be firmly in our future relationship with the European Union by the time of the next general election, such that we are able to look the British people in the eye and say, “You gave us an instruction to leave the European Union, and we have delivered.”

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The outline declaration last week referred to Europol and Eurojust, but they are not mentioned in this declaration. All we have is the Prime Minister saying:

“There would be a surrender agreement”.

Frankly, given the loss of British influence that there will be—even though we continue to participate in security arrangements of different kinds, we are not actually making any decisions—this is an apt description, is it not, of the whole document: a surrender of influence agreement for our country?

The Prime Minister: No, it is not. The hon. Gentleman specifically mentioned two agencies in relation to security matters. We have been discussing and negotiating, and he will see in the results of those negotiations on the political declaration a growing recognition on the part of the European Union. At the beginning of this process

the EU felt that it could not give the United Kingdom access to certain security arrangements or arrangements that deal with criminal justice, because we would be a third country. However, we made the case—which the EU accepted—that it is in its interests as well as ours to ensure that we have access to those arrangements, to keep people safe across the EU.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Earlier this morning I visited year 5 in Danemill Primary School in Enderby, before rushing back to London. The year 5 children asked me questions about Brexit. Will the Prime Minister take this opportunity to tell them that the deal she is proposing is in their best interests to ensure a brighter future for them and the whole United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: First, I commend the pupils of Danemill School whom my hon. Friend visited this morning on the fact that they asked him questions about Brexit, and I reassure them, and him, that this deal sets us on a course for a brighter future. For those pupils, this is about their future; it is about jobs and opportunities for them, and that is what the deal delivers.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): This deal keeps the common fisheries policy after Brexit. We will still have the rules, but no way to influence them. No freedom of movement means that our fish processing industry will lose half its workforce. Trading access to our waters for trade access is exactly what fishing federations argued against, and what the Prime Minister's Secretary of State for Scotland said would make him resign. Has he gone yet? Will the Prime Minister admit that this deal is a disaster for Scotland and for our fishing industry, which has been sold out once again by a Tory Government? What does she say to families in Scotland whose livelihoods will be destroyed by this Government?

The Prime Minister: I suggest to the hon. Lady and her Scottish nationalist colleagues that they listen to the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, which said the following:

"The declaration gives the UK the power to assert its position as an independent coastal state with full, unfettered sovereignty over our waters".

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I have drafted, negotiated and indeed enacted scores of dispute resolution clauses over my years, and I can tell the Prime Minister that this one will work—in fact, it will even allow us to get out of the withdrawal agreement if the EU does not play ball. Despite all the wrinkles that hon. Members may find, this is a choice between an agreement that the EU will accept and certainty for our constituents, or playing Russian roulette with their security, jobs and earnings. We should all think twice before playing politics.

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, and I recommend this deal, which I think is the right deal for the United Kingdom. A failure to accept it will mean more uncertainty and division, and frankly it just takes us back to square one.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Let me call the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), whom I hope the whole House will unite in congratulating on her election as President of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Thank you for those kind words, Mr Speaker, and let me therefore ask an appropriate question of the Prime Minister. In the section on foreign policy, defence and security, paragraph 107 talks about considering appropriate arrangements for co-operation in space. Many space assets are vital for the defence and security of the country. How will all parties to this agreement ensure that whatever arrangements are made do not weaken the NATO alliance, and that they ensure that any capability is available for the future security and defence of the whole alliance membership?

The Prime Minister: First, let me add my congratulations to the hon. Lady on her election as President of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. She refers to what will be possible within NATO and the capabilities available to NATO. We remain committed to NATO, as we always have been, as the secure element of our defence. We have had to take some decisions including, as she will be aware, a key decision about some future capabilities in relation to Galileo, because what was being offered by the European Union would not have given us sufficient ability to be part of and participate in that system. That is why we decided to take our own decision and go it alone in that area.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): But it is a wish list, isn't it?

The Prime Minister: No, this is a commitment on both sides to the future relationship that we will now be negotiating into legal text. As my right hon. Friend will I am sure recognise, there is a linkage between the withdrawal agreement and this political declaration that makes clear the importance of both sides putting their best endeavours into ensuring that this future relationship is negotiated in legal text and available by the end of December 2020.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): The political declaration contains some interesting additions from last week's draft, including paragraph 54, which states:

"The Parties also agree to consider addressing social security coordination in the light of future movement of persons."

That sounds as though EU nationals working in the UK under the terms of the agreement could continue claiming benefits from our benefits system. Can the Prime Minister clarify?

The Prime Minister: This is in relation to some very specific issues, which I am happy to write to the hon. Lady about.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): As I serve on a Select Committee with the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), may I join the whole House in congratulating President Moon on her appointment?

Unlike the Leader of the Opposition, I have read both documents. I was the Conservative party spokesman on the Lisbon treaty in 2008, a bagatelle of a mere 300 pages, so I believe that perhaps I have understood

[Mr Mark Francois]

the withdrawal agreement. The political declaration—I would like the Prime Minister to confirm this—is not in any way legally binding. The withdrawal agreement is. It is a draft treaty, which as the Chair of the Exiting the European Union Committee knows, would bind us under international law. The problem I have is that the Prime Minister has, at the Dispatch Box, repeatedly made commitments that we would leave the customs union. That is in our election manifesto, yet in this draft treaty we would remain in the backstop and we could only leave if the EU let us—the so-called “Hotel California” dilemma. Moreover, she has said that she would never contemplate a border down the Irish sea, yet the withdrawal agreement contemplates exactly that. Prime Minister, why have you repeatedly made commitments at the Dispatch Box and then done the opposite? And when will the meaningful vote—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the right hon. Gentleman is concluding his question.

Mr Francois: I just asked the Prime Minister when the meaningful vote will be. Will it be before or after Christmas?

The Prime Minister: On my right hon. Friend’s last point, discussions are taking place in the normal manner on these matters. There is a balance we need to address between ensuring there are sufficient days of debate for this House coming up to the meaningful vote, and recognising the timetable we need to be aware of in relation to getting the withdrawal agreement Bill through on the basis of a positive vote.

I am sure that my right hon. Friend will not be surprised that I do not accept some of the points he made in his interpretation of the nature of the document we have before us. We will be leaving the customs union. He is absolutely right that I have said that at the Dispatch Box. I have said it elsewhere and I am happy to repeat it now at the Dispatch Box. That is the point of the future framework we are setting up. We have to put this into legal text. He is right about the difference between the two documents, although we have the linkage clause in article 184 of the withdrawal agreement in relation to the best endeavours to put this in place. I responded earlier in relation to the backstop. But it is the future framework—and the future relationship—we want to see in place on 1 January 2021 that will ensure that we do not remain in the customs union and we do not remain in the single market, and that we are able to do the things and take the judgments and have control in the areas that people voted for when they voted in the referendum.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Further to the Prime Minister’s last answer on the meaningful vote, will she make it clear that she and her new Brexit Secretary accept the recommendations of the Procedure Committee to have the votes and debates on amendments before the debate and vote on the main motion?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady will recognise that there are certain matters that are for the House, but I repeat the point I have made in this Chamber before on a number of occasions. If you asked members of the public, “If Parliament is asked to vote on the deal that

the Government have brought back from Europe, what do you expect Parliament to vote on?”, I think they would expect Parliament to be able to have a vote on the deal. We have been clear that a motion may be amendable, but people will want to know the view of Parliament on the deal as it is brought back from Europe.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I welcome this declaration and, in particular, the strong and explicit commitments to ensure that free movement will end, that the country will have the freedom to strike trade deals around the world, and yet that we will forge a strong and close economic partnership with the European Union. Is that not exactly what business wants? Is not the withdrawal agreement’s provision for a transition period what business wants, and should not those of us who wish to implement and honour the referendum decision recognise that this sets the path towards a pragmatic and orderly Brexit and that we should think very carefully before rejecting it?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The withdrawal agreement allows for that implementation period. That is exactly what business had requested and what will give business the certainty that it wants. I think that is exactly one of the aspects that every Member of this House will wish to consider when they come to the meaningful vote.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): My constituents who voted to leave the European Union want me to oppose this deal because for them it does not reflect the aspirations of sovereignty and control that were promised during the referendum. My constituents who voted remain want me to vote against this deal because it does not deliver the economic security that led them to vote remain, and I think all of them are horrified by the notion that this country would be locked into protracted negotiations for years, if not decades. When the Prime Minister goes to the European Council this weekend, will she be honest with the other countries that this deal does not have the support of the House of Commons? And when will she wake up to the reality, which is that if she wants to see this deal in practice, it is right, for both principled and pragmatic reasons, to ask the people, “Do you want to proceed with Brexit as it is being delivered, or would you rather remain in the European Union?”? What is she afraid of?

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave earlier.

Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con): The reason why the 2016 referendum was the largest democratic exercise that this country has ever seen was that that campaign engaged people who were marginalised and disillusioned and who did not participate in our democratic process. Many of those people in the months and years since that vote have written to me, and I imagine to many other colleagues, expressing their concern that somehow what they voted for would not be delivered. I have written back to them, based on the excellent speeches that the Prime Minister has made and on the promises that both Front-Bench teams made in their manifestos last year, promising that it would, but it strikes me that where we are today is maybe not where the Prime Minister hoped we would be when we started off. Would it not be

more candid to say to the British public that this deal is not where the Prime Minister hoped we would be when she assumed office after the referendum?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, when we go through negotiations, compromises are made on both sides—that is the nature of a negotiation—but I have kept my focus on delivering what I believe were the key issues that, as my hon. Friend said, many people who had never entered the democratic process before voted for when they voted to leave the European Union.

I think that key for many people was bringing an end to free movement, and this brings an end to free movement. I think that the end of the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice and the end of sending those vast amounts of money to the European Union every year were two other key factors that people voted for. That is what this deal delivers, but it does so in a way that does protect their jobs. I think that the people whom my hon. Friend talks about—those who, up and down the country, felt marginalised all too often in the past—want to see a Government who are protecting their jobs and livelihoods, but are also setting a course that will give a brighter future to them and their children.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Last night the Chancellor of the Exchequer conceded on national television that the Government's "worst of all worlds" Brexit will make the country much poorer than the current position of being a member of the European Union. Does the Prime Minister agree with the Chancellor?

The Prime Minister: I have been asked the same question by one of the hon. Gentleman's colleagues, in relation to our economic future. Life will be different outside the European Union—of course it will be different—but what is to our economic advantage is being able to negotiate our own trade deals around the rest of the world, as well as having a good trade deal with the European Union. That is what this deal delivers. It is good for the UK, and it is good for jobs.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Without informed consent, there is no valid consent. Following the publication of the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration, we now have a much clearer idea of what Brexit looks like, which allows people to weigh up the risks and the benefits. That is what informed consent is all about. Does the Prime Minister accept that we have reached an impasse in the House, and that now that we are in a position to ask people for their informed consent, it really is time for a people's vote on this final deal?

The Prime Minister: As I have indicated to a number of Members—obviously I have answered the question about a people's vote before—I strongly believe that having asked people in this country to determine whether or not this country should remain in the European Union, we, as their elected representatives, should recognise the feeling that was expressed in that vote and should deliver for people on that vote, and that means delivering leaving the European Union.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): The problem is that there are no guarantees that things will be as good as they are now. NHS patients get new drugs six months earlier because we are a member of the European Medicines Agency, but the declaration just says that we

will "explore the possibility" of future co-operation with the EMA. Would not patients be better off joining my kids writing their wish lists to Santa tonight than relying on this wish list from the Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: There is an assumption in relation to some of these issues, such as our recognition of the role of the European Medicines Agency in the political declaration, that somehow this is only about the UK asking the European Union. Actually, what we are looking at in relation to these matters—the EMA and the European Chemicals Agency, and, indeed, the European Aviation Safety Agency—is, in a number of areas, what is in the mutual interests of both sides, the UK and the European Union. An awful lot of work is done here, in the UK, by our pharmaceutical companies in terms of placing drugs on the European market. There are benefits to both sides of our being able to keep that co-operation in the European Medicines Agency.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Prime Minister had already told the House that we would be giving away a minimum of £39 billion to the EU. We have learnt today that the implementation period might be extended, which would mean billions of pounds more of taxpayers' money being given away to the EU in return for a wish list. How does the Prime Minister square that with her red line that we are not giving billions of pounds to the European Union?

The Prime Minister: First, I did not say that it would be a minimum of £39 billion. The financial settlement that has been achieved in the withdrawal agreement is for £39 billion. That £39 billion is less than half what a number of commentators and others were suggesting—including from the European Union—at the beginning of that negotiation.

It is right that there is a difference between the backstop and the extension of the implementation period, in that in the implementation period I think there would be an expectation of payments, and in the backstop there is no financial obligation. That is one of the reasons why it is not attractive to the European Union for us to be in the backstop. But the decision in relation to those, or, indeed, the alternative arrangements that are developed, would be a decision for the United Kingdom. It would be for the United Kingdom to determine which of those we wished to be in, were it necessary—as my hon. Friend knows, I want it not to be necessary—to cover an interim period before we were in the future relationship.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): The Prime Minister says that she has changed the minds of EU countries on data sharing to enable continued security co-operation, but rather than any mention of the second generation Schengen information system, the strongest language in the declaration, in paragraph 87, is that:

"The Parties should consider further arrangements appropriate to the United Kingdom's future status...such as exchange of information on wanted or missing persons...with the view to delivering capabilities that, in so far as is technically and legally possible, and considered necessary and in both Parties' interests, approximate those enabled by relevant Union mechanisms."

I put it to the Prime Minister that that tortuous, weak language suggests that we are not going to remain part of that incredibly important system to which we gained full access when she was Home Secretary.

The Prime Minister: We have indeed moved the European Union on. As I said earlier, it started from the position that we could not share security capabilities because we were a non-member and that position has changed. The hon. Gentleman referenced SIS II. A number of hon. Members have raised concerns about SIS II and the European criminal records information system. They provide for the exchange of information on wanted or missing persons and objects and of criminal records, which is exactly what is referenced in the text in paragraph 87. It does not name SIS II and ECRIS, but it does refer to the information that is exchanged within those two bodies. It might help the hon. Gentleman if I point out that SIS II was technically a Schengen-based system, and as a member of the EU outside Schengen it took a lot of negotiation for us to get into SIS II even within the EU. What we have here is a recognition that we can put arrangements in place to ensure we are still able to exchange the very data that are exchanged in SIS II.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the substantial progress she has made since last week, not least the inclusion in paragraph 23 of the statement that economic partnership should ensure no tariffs across all sectors, which will be vital to my midlands constituency with its manufacturing industry. A critical issue to my constituents, 60% of whom voted “out”, is whether we will truly regain national self-determination by 1 January 2021. Can she reassure me on that point, please?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right: I am sure that is what many people voted for, and that is what this future relationship will deliver. As I have indicated, obviously we have to negotiate the legal text of that future relationship, but there is every commitment and determination to ensure that that is in place by 1 January 2021. This deal will deliver that sovereignty that my hon. Friend looks for.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Will the Prime Minister confirm that the political declaration is not legally binding and is merely the basis of at least one more year of protracted negotiations with our European partners?

The Prime Minister: As I have explained, we still have the legal text to negotiate in relation to this document. *[Interruption.]* We still have the legal text to negotiate in relation to this document! What we have is a linkage between the withdrawal agreement in article 184 and the work that will go forward in relation to this. But, yes, there is further negotiation on the legal text of this document. I have been very clear about that in answer to a number of questions.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for her steadfast focus on jobs throughout these negotiations. Paragraph 32 talks about

“the temporary entry and stay of natural persons for business purposes”.

Businesses and people in my constituency have said that this is incredibly important in relation to both manufacturing and services. Can we ensure this paragraph is as strong as possible in the agreement, because it underpins hundreds of thousands of jobs in this country?

The Prime Minister: We recognise the importance of the temporary arrangements for businesses around the country. We will have that in mind when we continue the negotiation of the legal text, but I recognise that that temporary stay is important for many businesses, including those in my hon. Friend’s constituency.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The hallmark of this process has been slogans and empty platitudes, and I am afraid that this document just continues that run of poor form. May I draw the Prime Minister’s attention specifically to paragraph 24, which says:

“The Parties will also explore the possibility of cooperation of United Kingdom authorities with Union agencies such as the European Medicines Agency”.

May I remind the Prime Minister that in July this House voted to remain part of the European Medicines Agency? She will remember it because the amendment was proposed by her neighbour, the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee). Why is she ignoring the will of the House?

The Prime Minister: We are not ignoring the will of the House. We recognise what was expressed by this House back in the summer. We will be negotiating on the legal text in relation to our future co-operation with the European Medicines Agency, the European Chemicals Agency and the European Aviation Safety Agency.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): May I thank the Prime Minister for siding with my constituents, who trusted this Government’s and the Opposition’s manifesto commitments to leave the European Union, as they voted to do? It is obvious that there are concerns about the backstop in this House and across the country. She has done brilliantly well to negotiate more stuff in. May I ask her to press a little a bit harder on Saturday?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for reminding the House that something like 80% of Members of this House stood on a manifesto to leave the European Union, to deliver on the vote of the referendum, and I hope all Members will recall that when they come to the meaningful vote. He is right about the concerns expressed in relation to the backstop, and I recognise those concerns. That is why we have been looking at alternative arrangements that could be put in place, and we will continue to work on those.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I think we should celebrate the largest democratic vote in our history and be determined to implement leaving the European Union, but I have to say that after two and a half years, I am disappointed that the Prime Minister has come back not with a deal but with the preconditions for a negotiation, and expects the House to vote on it. The fact is that the European Commission, the European Parliament and the other 27 countries are more satisfied than this House is with what the Prime Minister has proposed to them. I do not believe from what the Prime Minister has said so far that she is guaranteeing the future sovereignty of this country. To take just one example, she talks about regulatory alignment. That means we will not be able to adjust our regulations and laws to enable our industries—biological and agricultural industries—to benefit from our independence.

The Prime Minister: Paragraph 138 makes it clear that

“it is the clear intent of both Parties to develop in good faith agreements giving effect to this relationship”.

The hon. Gentleman refers to sovereignty. The contents of the political declaration are a recognition that there is a balance between the question of checks at the border and the degree to which rules are accepted and operated on both sides of that border. What we set out in the White Paper we published in July was a recognition of that and a proposal that frictionless trade came with a commitment to a common rulebook, but with a parliamentary lock, so that it would be a decision of the UK—of the UK Parliament—to choose to diverge from those rules.

I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is aware that divergence from those rules such that products were manufactured not in line with the standards and regulations operating in the European Union would have an impact on access to the market of the European Union, just as it would under any other agreement we made with other parts of the world. We will be sovereign—this deal delivers that sovereignty—but if it is in place, it will be for this House to decide where it wishes to go in relationship to the rulebook that enables access to a market versus divergence and a sovereign decision.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): As the Prime Minister has said, beyond this place people are just desperate that we get Brexit over and done with. I have met many people in my constituency who greatly admire the resolve she has shown in pursuing this deal in recent weeks. Does she agree that they will look very dimly if we grind ourselves to a standstill here by pursuing ideological perfection, rather than accepting the very good and pragmatic?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It is for us in this House to look pragmatically at what will deliver for the British people. That is what I have done in this deal, and it is what I believe the deal delivers for the British people. He is right that we should remember the many people up and down the country who want us to get on with this and build that brighter future.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The Prime Minister has spent much of the past two years wrangling with her own MPs and allowing the hard Brexiteer tail to wag the Tory dog. The result we now see is a blind Brexit in which 44% of UK trade will be dependent on the fulfilment of a wish list. Will she now concede that this level of fundamental risk to every nation and region of the UK and every sector of the UK economy is not what anyone voted for in June 2016?

The Prime Minister: What people voted for is for us to leave the European Union and to bring control of money, borders and laws back to this country, and we are doing so in a way that protects jobs and livelihoods up and down the country.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): There is much here that is reassuring to my constituents working in the health, aerospace, automobile and nuclear energy sectors. They are people who see, above all, the need for sensible

compromise to achieve continuity, rather than disruption, when we leave the European Union. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the big divide now is between them and those who would risk anything for no deal or no Brexit, putting at risk every chance of achieving a deal that few may love but most could live with?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. Most of our constituents up and down the country will want Members of Parliament to deliver on the vote to leave the European Union by ensuring that we leave the European Union, while also looking at considerations around their jobs, their livelihoods and their futures. It is this deal that does both, protecting jobs while also delivering on the vote.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): The police have agreed that the most important instruments for our security are the second-generation Schengen information system, the European arrest warrant, ECRIS, Europol, Eurojust and European investigation orders. Is it not the case that, without full membership of those organisations or access to those databases, we are blinding law enforcement in its fight against organised crime and terrorism?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady gives a list of what she thinks are important security arrangements. She left out Prüm and the passenger name records, which are incredibly important in dealing with organised criminals, solving crimes and dealing with terrorists. We are clear that we are working on the arrangements that will enable us to exchange the very type of information that is exchanged in SIS II and ECRIS.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): I put aside my fear of the backstab agreement and come straight to the point. My right hon. Friend is right that we do not want another referendum; we want to see the benefits of the one we had. To that end, I thoroughly welcome what she said about negotiating deals during the implementation period. Can she assure us all that those deals will come to fruition, even if the implementation period is extended?

The Prime Minister: Those deals would come to fruition. I think the point is that, in an extended implementation period, there would continue to be an issue about the ability to put those deals into practice, which may be the issue my hon. Friend is raising. That is one of the factors about an extension of the implementation period. Whether we should be balancing the backstop versus that or alternative arrangements, would have to be taken into account.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The Prime Minister will be aware that my party colleagues and I profoundly disagree with her on the Ulster protocol, or the backstop agreement, but we recognise that she is working very hard to square an elusive circle, and we pay tribute to her for seeking to overcome that great difficulty. If paragraphs 26 and 27 of the declaration mean anything of substance, does she accept that there would therefore be no need for the Ulster protocol or backstop? Can she confirm what she meant in page 5 of her statement today, that the backstop will be “quickly superseded”? Can she quantify what “quickly” means?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is right in this sense: the alternative arrangements or indeed the extension of the implementation period could be chosen as a means of ensuring that the backstop was not put into place. I talked about the period of time for which the backstop would be in place, were it ever used, and it is absolutely clear in a number of ways throughout this document that it is only intended to be temporary, because it is intended to cover an interim period before the future relationship comes into place. The best way for us to be able to guarantee our commitment to the people of Northern Ireland on having no hard border is through our future relationship, which will be the permanent relationship and which will ensure that we deliver on that commitment.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): The majority of my constituents voted to leave the EU. Many of those people are among the thousands of workers in my constituency who work in manufacturing or in the logistics industry, which completely depend on being able to move goods across borders. My constituents voted to get control of our money, laws and borders, but I am sure that in doing that they were also expecting that manufacturing industry and logistics would be able to continue to operate properly, so that we maintain their jobs and can create more jobs in the future to go with them. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that that is exactly what she is trying to achieve in the work she is doing on behalf of the British people?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Many people, his constituents and others, voted leave in order to bring back control of our money, laws and borders, but of course they also have wanted to ensure that those jobs were there for them and their children in the future. Our support for manufacturing industry is an important part of that and that is exactly what this deal delivers.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): The Prime Minister has talked again about there being a spectrum of future relationships with our closest and largest trading partners, but is it not the truth that, stripped back to essentials, and despite the incredible vagueness of this document, this is firmly leading us towards a Canada-style free trade arrangement, rather than any alternative model; that that is widely understood to be an act of economic self-harm; that it will leave this country poorer; and that absolutely nobody voted in the 2016 referendum to be poorer?

The Prime Minister: I made it clear in the statement that, obviously, the European Union started from the position that there was a binary choice between the Norway model or the Canada model, but it has accepted that there is a spectrum in relation to these matters, where there is a balance between rights and obligations. That is what is clear within this document. We retain our ambition, our commitment, our objective of having frictionless trade. As I said earlier, not everybody in Europe has accepted that, but we continue to work on that and we continue to maintain that objective, because it is about protecting jobs.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): The overwhelming vote to leave the EU in my constituency was a vote against politics as usual and a vote to bring

back control of our money, borders and laws to this country. Like it or not, the reality is that the Prime Minister's deal is the only practical way to deliver that. So does she agree that voters should be appalled when they see people place narrow party interest above the national interest and risk subverting our democracy itself with talk of a second referendum?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend; he is right. He said that many people in his constituency voted against politics as usual. They will be surprised to see politicians playing politics with this issue in this Chamber. Every Member of this House must consider the interests of constituents, the need to deliver on the vote of the people to leave the European Union and to do so in a way that is in the best interests of our constituents.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Following on from the point made by the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), the west midlands economy is largely about manufacturing and it relies very much on the free movement of labour, particularly for research and development in the universities, such as the one in Coventry. I have received a lot of letters from constituents who work at those universities or in the national health service, and they are concerned about the free movement of labour and that they might not be able to move as freely as they want backwards and forwards. Can the Prime Minister give some reassurances about those jobs and about the situation regarding those people?

The Prime Minister: Free movement will come to an end, but what we will ensure is that we have an immigration system that is skills-based. I think that would reflect the concerns that the hon. Gentleman has expressed in his question. So it will be about the contribution that people can make here to the United Kingdom, and the Home Office will look, within that, at ensuring that the system in place is as easy to use and efficient as possible.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): The Prime Minister is absolutely right to say that we should take no lectures from SNP politicians about fishing, because we know all too well that they want to drag our fishermen right back into the common fisheries policy. Can she confirm that the UK will be sitting down unfettered at the negotiating table as an independent coastal state by December 2020 and on an annual basis thereafter?

The Prime Minister: That is certainly our position. That remains our position. Of course a reference within the fisheries section—I think it is in the fisheries section—refers to the desire to have those arrangements in place by July 2020, such that they are in place for the consideration of fixing access and quotas for 2021 and thereafter.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): On financial services, the Prime Minister said that equivalence would not be withdrawn on a whim. Will she tell the House what she meant by that? At the moment, equivalence for a third country can be withdrawn by the European Union at 30 days' notice, as Switzerland is now experiencing. Will it be different for the UK?

The Prime Minister: Yes. If the right hon. Gentleman cares to look at the language in the political declaration, it is clear that what we are negotiating for financial services does in fact go beyond what is available elsewhere.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): Yesterday in the Treasury Committee, we took evidence from Mr Thompson, the chief executive of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. He said that it would take 24 months from the moment of certainty to put in place a new customs system. He said that that moment of certainty could be next July, in which case we would have six months of transition, or six months of backstop. Can the Prime Minister tell us which would be selected, as well as how and by whom? If there is no moment of certainty, because there is ultimately no agreement despite the best endeavours of both sides, will there be a risk of our ending up in an extended transition period, effectively a form of "Hotel California"? How do we resolve that particular risk?

The Prime Minister: I have not had an opportunity to look at the transcript of the evidence that was given by HMRC yesterday. It was clear when we published our proposals on customs in the summer that the facilitated customs arrangement within that would be capable of mainly being in place by 1 January 2021, albeit that the repayment mechanism in that system would take longer to put into place. What my hon. Friend will see throughout this document is the clear intent and determination of both parties to ensure that we negotiate these arrangements in relation to customs and the free trade area, and indeed the overall future relationship, such that it is in place by 1 January 2021.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): We want a permanent customs union, to support jobs in the UK. Paragraph 23, on tariffs, in today's document commits to "build and improve on the single customs territory". How will the Government do that?

The Prime Minister: There are a number of features of that single customs territory that are important in looking at customs arrangements for the future. For example, it has normally been said that it is not possible to have good customs arrangements with the European Union without free movement, but that single customs territory allows us to do exactly that—to divide those two freedoms.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I am pleased that paragraph 24 recognises the importance of our relationship with a number of EU agencies, especially as some of my local businesses have emphasised the importance of the role of the European Chemicals Agency. Will my right hon. Friend expand on how she sees our relationship with the European Chemicals Agency developing as we leave the EU, in order to reassure my local businesses?

The Prime Minister: This is important, and we recognise the significance of these agencies, each in their own way, to businesses in the United Kingdom. As I indicated in an earlier response, there is currently no model for third country representation or participation in the European Chemicals Agency, and that is precisely why it is necessary for us to carry on working with the European Union to see on what basis and under what conditions that participation can take place.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): We have heard at the all-party parliamentary group on textiles and fashion, which I chair, that the industry has grave concerns about services,

intellectual property rights and brand control. Instead of "Choose Life", there was a newly designed T-shirt about the Prime Minister's deal bearing the slogan "Fashion hates Brexit". Can the Prime Minister reassure this massive industry, which contributes £21.9 billion to our economy annually?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the significance of that industry to our economy. Representations from the industry have been made to me, particularly about issues such as the future immigration system that we will put in place and the concern about ensuring that people of high skills will still be able to come to the United Kingdom to participate in and help to develop the industry. Our immigration system will indeed be skills-based.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Does this political declaration negate the legal status of the backstop, which will be enshrined in a legally binding international treaty?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend knows that the withdrawal agreement is indeed a legal document and that the legal text around the political declaration has still to be negotiated. There is a linkage between the withdrawal agreement and the political agreement, as set out clearly in the withdrawal agreement. With regard to the backstop, it is clear that, were we to be in it, it would be only temporary, but also that that is not the only option if it is necessary to have an interim arrangement to provide for our guarantees for the people of Northern Ireland prior to the future relationship coming into place.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Article 8 of the withdrawal agreement says that the UK will not have access to EU networks after we leave. That clearly contradicts the political declaration and its weak references in paragraph 24 to common regulations. Will the Prime Minister finally come clean with the chemicals, aviation and medical sectors referred to in the political declaration and admit that she has not the first idea how to deliver what they all need?

The Prime Minister: As I have said in response to a number of other Members who have raised this issue, there is currently no model for the participation of a third country in the European Chemicals Agency or the European Medicines Agency, which is why it is necessary for the negotiation to take place to ensure that we can, because it is in the interests of both sides—the United Kingdom and the European Union—that such participation is available in future.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The Prime Minister has repeated yet again today that we will leave the European Union on 29 March. She has also frequently repeated that no deal is better than a bad deal. The 70% of my constituents who voted to leave are even more determined that they want that to happen. Will she assure them that in the event that the agreement was rejected by the House, the Government would hold fast and ensure that we did indeed still leave on 29 March?

The Prime Minister: I give my hon. Friend the assurance that as far as I am concerned we are leaving on 29 March 2019, and that is what this Government are working towards. My hon. Friend will be aware that some voices

[The Prime Minister]

around the Chamber would prefer us not to leave on 29 March 2019—[Interruption.] I hear the odd yes from Labour Members on that—but I am clear that we will be leaving on 29 March 2019.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister said in her statement:

“The EU said that the choice was binary—Norway or Canada—but the political declaration recognises that there is a spectrum”.

I would like to hear what the Prime Minister’s spectrum is. Bearing in mind the range of views across the House, that spectrum should surely keep all the options open; otherwise, this political declaration is already past its sell-by date.

The Prime Minister: Actually, the document makes clear what that spectrum is. As I have referred to on other occasions in response to questions, there is a balance between checks and controls and the acceptance of rules and regulations.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Hon. and gallant Members on both sides of the Chamber will be familiar with the term mission command. They will also be familiar with the importance of regularly restating the mission. Will my right hon. Friend therefore restate for the House today that any Government led by her will have as its mission that we will take back control of our money, borders, laws and trade policy, that we will honour the result of the referendum and that we will do so without putting our economic growth or the integrity of this United Kingdom in jeopardy?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to give my hon. Friend the commitment that that is absolutely our mission.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Breaking up is clearly quite hard to do, but at least the Prime Minister has a sum in mind to pay out, but what about our pan-European families where there is a break-up and the stress of that situation, where we have children who are trying to seek access to parents and where we have lone parents trying to get assets and payments for their children? Are we really only to explore options, confirmed in paragraph 58,

“for judicial cooperation in matrimonial, parental responsibility”.

Is that genuinely as far as we can go to make that helpful for families?

The Prime Minister: No, what we want to do is ensure that, when we have the legal text in place, we are able to see the co-operation, which I recognise is over a matter of concern—a matter of concern to the families to which the hon. Gentleman refers—and it is a matter that has been raised by the legal sector.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Lincolnshire has a proud military heritage. A number of my constituents have contacted me with their concerns about news reports of the European army. Will my right hon. Friend reassure me and them that nothing in this withdrawal agreement will require our British forces to join a European army?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to give my hon. Friend that absolute commitment. Indeed, it is the United Kingdom within the European Union that has been arguing against the creation of a European army. We are very clear that the bedrock of defence for Europe is NATO. There may be ways in which the European Union can act on the defence field that complements NATO, but there is no question of any British personnel joining the European army.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Earlier this afternoon, the Prime Minister admitted to this House that she had failed to negotiate Britain’s continued involvement in the Galileo satellite project. Will she tell the House how much it will cost this country to develop an alternative because of her failure?

The Prime Minister: In any negotiation, there are two sides. There were reasons why the European Union did not want the United Kingdom to be part of Galileo on the basis on which we felt that it was right for us to participate. At that point, a decision has to be taken. I suggest to the hon. Gentleman that the real failure would have been to say that we would remain in Galileo on a basis that did not permit us to have guarantees in relation to our security. It is better for us to say that we would do it ourselves and ensure that security.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): Electric pulse fishing by Dutch trawlers off the East Anglian coast is devastating our fisheries and should stop now. Can the Prime Minister confirm that there is nothing in the political declaration that undermines the cornerstone of the Fisheries Bill that, in future, we will control access to our waters and will be able to stop this abhorrent practice?

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier, we will be an independent coastal state. We will be negotiating that access to our waters in our own interests, but, as my hon. Friend will see within the fishing opportunities section of the political declaration, we are very clear that we need to work to ensure that fishing is at sustainable levels. That is in the interests of all fishermen to ensure that the industry can survive and be sustainable into the future.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Prime Minister’s deal has succeeded in uniting people who have written to me who voted to leave and who voted to remain, and that position is reflected in this House in opposition to the deal. Given that there is no prospect of this House voting through her deal and no prospect of this House voting for no deal, what is the contingency plan that she is making?

The Prime Minister: I am here recommending this deal. All Members of the House of Commons, when they come to the meaningful vote, will have to consider their duty to deliver on the vote of the British people to leave the European Union and to consider the jobs of their constituents up and down the country. This deal protects those jobs and delivers on that vote.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): I have listened intently to what my right hon. Friend has said on fishing. This afternoon, the deputy EU Brexit negotiator, Sabine Weyand, tweeted:

“We need an EU-UK fisheries agreement that covers both access to waters and market access”

as it is in the best interests of both sides. As this document is not binding, will my right hon. Friend provide a cast-iron guarantee today, and in writing to me so that we have it in black and white, that any fisheries agreement will never link access to our waters with single market access and that the UK will determine who fishes in our waters, when they fish in our waters and what they fish in our waters?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has identified that this is an issue on which there are strong feelings in the European Union. We have rigorously resisted attempts to link these two issues. He asked me to write to him, but I am tempted to say that what I said in my statement was that the fisheries agreement is not something that we will be trading off against any other priorities. That is not just in a letter from me to him; it will be in *Hansard*. I hope that he will take some comfort from that.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Two hundred of my constituents—people who are highly skilled and who regulate chemicals for the agricultural sector—will lose their jobs if this deal goes through. Why should they back her?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady has made a statement there, and I am not sure about the nature of the jobs that she mentions. We are clear about the importance of our agricultural industry and of our negotiating on the European Chemicals Agency, if that is one of the issues that she was talking about. This is a deal that is good for the UK because it is a deal that protects jobs.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Although I commend my right hon. Friend for her extraordinary energies, given that the whole basis of this declaration is trust, does she trust the European Union and how, ultimately, will it be held to its side of the bargain?

The Prime Minister: We have negotiated in good faith. As for holding people to their side of the bargain, my hon. Friend will see that action can be taken through legal measures if we were to believe that the European Union was no longer acting in good faith.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): I am looking at a statement from @ScotTories that said:

“Let me be absolutely clear: As we leave the EU, we need complete control over UK fishing. #NonNegotiable”.

In a reply to the BBC, one hon. Member was asked whether the final deal would affect how they might vote in the meaningful vote, and they said that it would and that it would be very important. How will the Prime Minister explain the whole Scottish backstab to @ScotTories, because the deal is not about complete control, is it?

The Prime Minister: I suggest that the hon. Gentleman read *Hansard* to see the references I made to fishing and the commitments that this Government made to the fishing industry.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con) *rose*—

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Andrew Percy: My question will not live up to the build-up. Seven out of 10 of my constituents, young and old, voted to leave the European Union, and two things are very clear from talking to them this weekend. First, they are sick of remainers telling them that they did not know what they voted for, and they are also tired of some Brexiteers telling them what they will accept in our exit from the European Union. I encourage the Prime Minister to press on as she is doing.

Secondly, and more importantly, perhaps, for where this House seems to be heading, my constituents are sick and tired of hearing people talk of a second referendum. This was not talked about by the remain or leave side during the referendum campaign and would amount to a betrayal of that vote in 2016. It would be an establishment stitch-up that might please some in the metropolitan elite and their wealthy overseas backers, but it would be a gross act against democracy. Will my right hon. Friend assure the House that the Government will put forward no legislation for a second referendum in any way?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to give my hon. Friend that commitment, and he is absolutely right. That is why I have said, as I have said before, that any second referendum would not be a people's vote but a politicians' vote.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): There is a strange sense of déjà vu and, indeed, anti-climax in this document after more than two years. The words “shall be decided” occur 127 times, and paragraph 147, at the end, states that a high-level conference will be convened at least every six months, with no guarantees of anything. That is a possible Brexternity. At what date and time will these negotiations ever end? With both this and with last week's so-called deal, will the Prime Minister not just admit that she is flogging a dead horse?

The Prime Minister: I have made clear before that we will be working to ensure that the future relationship can be in place on 1 January 2021.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): I spent eight years of my life campaigning against European integration and for a referendum, and I never thought the day would come when I held in my hands a negotiated, detailed plan of the British Government to leave the European Union—it is a huge achievement.

As I decide what I think about this deal, I think about three things, Prime Minister. First, I think about your incredible success in breaking the European Union's red lines and in securing tariff-free access to the European Union's internal market without paying in £10 billion every year and without having to give up control over immigration. That is a huge thing that the European Union has moved on, and we should recognise that. The second thing I think about is the fact that every single business group is backing this deal, and the Marxist shadow Chancellor is against it. The third and final thing I think about is that I have listened all afternoon to people saying again and again that they are going to try to stop Brexit. Does the Prime Minister agree that if the people who want to stop Brexit are successful, a large number of people in this country will feel that our democracy has been profoundly undermined?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with what my hon. Friend has just said. If this House were to stop Brexit, the British people would feel that it was a gross betrayal of the trust that we had shown in them and they had shown in us. I believe that it is a matter of our integrity as politicians that we deliver on the vote that we gave to the British people, when they told us, in no uncertain terms, to leave the European Union.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): The withdrawal agreement worsens the situation for the UK in terms of EU state aid, leaving the UK legally bound by European Commission decisions. Currently, the European Commission waves through state aid cases case by case, but that will not be so for the UK, with our economy and major industries permanently disadvantaged. At the same time, workers' rights and environmental protections seem not to have any of the same types of protection. Was this negotiated by the Prime Minister, or was it at the behest of the EU?

The Prime Minister: We have made this clear on a number of occasions, and the proposals that we have put forward are very clear about non-regression in relation to workers' rights. We already, in some areas, have higher standards on workers' rights than other countries in the European Union, and we have, as a Government, been working to enhance workers' rights in a number of ways, not least in our response to the Matthew Taylor report. It was this Government who banned exclusivity clauses in zero-hours contracts—a matter that the Labour party spoke about for many years but failed to do anything about.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): EU citizens currently make up 17% of UK academic staff, and many universities are concerned by the Government's plans to roll out tier 2 visas to EU citizens after Brexit. This means an average three-month delay between job offer and job take-up. Universities tell me that this will have a detrimental impact on their ability to continue to compete on the world stage. So what does the Prime Minister say to our universities, such as Goldsmith's in my constituency, about her plans to maintain their global competitiveness?

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham).

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): With regard to transport, the previous Brexit Secretary admitted that he did not understand the criticality of Dover. Shamefully, it took from June 2016 until just last month before the Transport Secretary bothered to go and visit the port of Dover. After two years of the Transport Secretary promising an aviation agreement, he now admits that talks have not even begun. Does this not prove, first, that there are no plans in place for no deal; and secondly, that this absolute ineptitude means that there is no way that this Prime Minister would be able to negotiate proper agreements in an implementation period?

The Prime Minister: There are plans in place for no deal, and the Government are continuing to work on those.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): There is something in this document that gives me hope. In paragraph 125, the British Government have committed, in deciding the strategic direction for the future relationship, to encouraging civil society dialogue. According to the European definition, that means speaking to the public. If the Prime Minister will not commit to a general election or a people's vote, how will she seek to take the views of the British people on this proposal? If she does not, does that not show that the words in the paper are worthless?

The Prime Minister: The British people gave us their view on our membership of the EU in June 2016, and we are delivering on it.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): For all the Prime Minister's bluster, this political declaration underlines that 18 months of shambolic negotiations have produced embarrassingly little. Parliament looks set to be asked to vote and agree to a blind Brexit and to a deal that, despite what she claims, does not protect jobs, rights or the economy. When will she wake up to the reality that any deal she brings to the House cannot command the support of the House and will leave the country poorer?

The Prime Minister: This is the right deal for the UK. It delivers on the vote while protecting jobs, livelihoods, security and our Union.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The Prime Minister has recently said two things. On the one hand, she has said that the UK will definitely be leaving the EU on 29 March next year—in fact, she repeated that today. On the other hand, she has said there is a risk—or, as many of my constituents would call it, a chance—of no Brexit. How can those two statements coexist as opinions in her mind without causing a major malfunction?

The Prime Minister: Very simply: I am clear that we will be leaving the EU on 29 March 2019, but there are some voices across the House that want to frustrate that. That would betray the vote of the British people.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I genuinely believe that this is a bad deal for the north of England. Manchester airport in my constituency caters for 30 million passengers, but the Prime Minister's favourite rhetoric is about ending free movement. Does she not acknowledge that that works both ways? Why on earth should I vote for a deal that restricts the right of workers to travel and work abroad?

The Prime Minister: The UK will end free movement and put in place its own immigration system for people from across the world, including from EU member states. Of course, the arrangements that other member states put in place will be a matter for them. We have clear arrangements for the sort of short-term visits—tourist and business visits—that are an important part of the movement the hon. Gentleman talks about.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Speaking as the newest Member, I can say that from day one I have been bombarded with correspondence from constituents requesting a people's vote. The Prime Minister continually states that this is a good deal for the UK—not

the best deal or a brilliant deal but a good deal. If she is so confident, there is no reason not to go for a people's vote.

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I gave earlier.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): In answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), in relation to Schengen, the Prime Minister admitted that it was incredibly difficult and took a long time to negotiate an agreement with the EU when already in the EU. If that is so, how on earth does she think it will be easy, straightforward or quick to negotiate all the hundreds, if not thousands, of agreements implied in this document?

The Prime Minister: First, it is in the interests of both sides to have that access. Secondly, the fact that we did negotiate membership of SIS II, despite our not being a member of Schengen, shows it is possible to negotiate such a thing when both sides see that it is in their interests.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): If the Prime Minister is so proud of this document and the withdrawal agreement and believes that it is what people voted for, why does she not seek to strengthen her really terribly weak negotiating hand by putting it to a people's vote, along with the alternative of staying in the EU? And before she gives another glib answer about this being what politicians want, I should say that almost 3,000 of my constituents have written to me with their concerns about Brexit. They deserve the courtesy of a proper answer.

The Prime Minister: I have answered the question about a people's vote on a number of occasions, and the hon. Gentleman will be able to see that answer in *Hansard*.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I have listened closely to the answers that the Prime Minister has given to questions about relationships with agencies such as the European Medicines Agency. People think that this is a deal, but it is not; it is the start of a long and complex negotiation. She will know that representatives of the life sciences sector have said that it is essential for our future that we have full membership of these agencies. Are they wrong?

The Prime Minister: As I said in an earlier answer, the declaration states that

"it is the clear intent of both Parties to develop in good faith agreements giving effect to this relationship".

The hon. Gentleman talks about the life sciences sector. This Government have been putting together a life sciences sector deal. We recognise the importance of the life sciences sector, and it is our modern industrial strategy that is delivering for the life sciences sector.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): If we are being honest, the majority of Members are at an age where they have more yesterdays than tomorrows, but there are millions of young people out there whose opportunities will be curtailed as a result of Brexit. I want to ask the Prime Minister a question that I have been asking since I entered the House. Will a first-year student at Lochend High School in Easterhouse still be able to enjoy Erasmus by the time they leave high school?

The Prime Minister: We have referred to the continuing ability for us to participate in programmes, and Erasmus is one of those that we had in mind, but of course, we have to look at the conditions that would be required for our continuing membership of Erasmus. I challenge the hon. Gentleman, because I do not believe that the futures of young people are in any way restricted as a result of our decision to leave the European Union. Indeed, the way in which we will build new relationships around the rest of the world could enhance the futures of young people and the opportunities open to them.

Cancer Treatment: Psychological Support

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

5.26 pm

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): I am grateful to be granted this debate on psychological support after cancer treatment. I recognise that there will probably be fewer Members here than there have been in the last few hours, but I thank anyone who stays to hear what I have to say.

When we talk about cancer, the conversation often starts with survival. Overall, survival has doubled in the last 40 years in the UK, but we lag behind the best in Europe, and survival rates for certain cancers—such as lung, brain and pancreatic cancer—continue to be extremely low. That means there is, rightly, a drive towards earlier diagnosis and access to new and innovative treatments. However, for most patients, just living is not enough. They want to live well, and that is why we must do more to ensure that patients receive the best possible psychological support after cancer treatment.

It goes without saying that cancer can take a huge emotional toll on patients and those close to them, right from the moment of diagnosis. Less well understood are the consequences of cancer treatment, which can affect patients' lives on a daily basis and leave them needing support for many years afterwards. No group illustrates that better than stem cell transplant patients.

Every year in the UK, around 2,000 blood cancer patients need a stem cell transplant from a donor to save their life. It is usually their last hope. One third of patients will be lucky to find a matching donor in their families, but the remaining two thirds of patients will require an unrelated donor. The search for a donor can be extremely stressful. Despite the fact that there are more than 1.4 million incredible individuals on the UK stem cell donor register, there are still patients who miss out on the life-saving transplant they need because either no donor is available or a donor cannot be found early enough.

My experience with my son was that we were very fortunate to find a donor. That donor then failed his medical, which was a traumatic experience for the family. Not only were we concerned about what the problem was for the donor, but we did not know whether the donor would return to fulfil that pledge. We will be eternally grateful that he did.

Even when a patient does find a match, this is not the end of their journey. Tellingly, the day of the stem cell transplant is commonly referred to as day zero. First, the patient must spend a number of weeks in hospital isolation to protect them from infection. This alone can be a very difficult experience, with patients often feeling very cut off from the outside world. Things such as patchy wi-fi, poor facilities and rooms without windows do not exactly help with this experience. Hopefully, the patient then begins their recovery, which brings with it entirely new physical, emotional and practical challenges. In fact, of all cancer treatments, stem cell transplant patients experience some of the most severe long-term effects, and it is for that reason that they are often described as patients for life.

To give hon. Members some idea of what it can be like for those living with the long-term effects, approximately half will suffer from graft versus host disease, which is

when their new immune system attacks their own body. I can certainly say that this is not a particularly pleasant experience, and in the worst cases it can actually kill the patient as well. Patients can also experience infertility, premature menopause, sexual dysfunction, fatigue and problems with their eyes, bones, teeth, joints and muscles, and they are at higher risk of infections and secondary cancers. In addition, it is not unusual for patients to be left with a range of psychological effects, including depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. All of this can have an impact on patients' ability to study and work, and with that can come financial issues and even a loss of their identity. It can be completely and utterly overwhelming.

With all this in mind, it is perhaps not surprising that in response to a survey of more than 300 stem cell transplant patients conducted by Anthony Nolan, the UK's stem cell transplant charity, nearly half—47%—said that they needed emotional and psychological support, such as counselling or group therapy. It is surprising and even shocking that only half—54%—actually received it.

Let us take some individual cases. Joanna received a stem cell transplant in 2016 to treat acute myeloid leukaemia. It saved her life, but when she got home to her family, she could not get off the sofa or out of bed. It was the worst she had felt since the actual diagnosis. Her daughter was only a teenager at the time, and the caring role of mother to child had to be reversed. In Joanna's own words:

"I think my lowest emotional time was after transplant. I questioned why I'd gone through this experience and just couldn't see an end in those first three to four months... I wish there had been more psychological support for me and my family—even though staff tried their best, when I really needed help, it just wasn't there."

Joanna's story is not unique.

Ruth, a teacher from Yorkshire, also received a stem cell transplant in 2016. In the two years since, she has experienced many ups and downs, and she is still dealing with chronic graft versus host disease. For her, this means her eyes are constantly dry, she cannot perform fine motor skills too well and her feet are in constant pain because of nerve damage. Ruth says:

"The biggest downside of my whole transplant experience has been the complete lack of support since leaving hospital. It felt like I was on my own—my GP has offered me nothing. I'm on the waiting list for a counsellor, but it's very long... I'm surprised you're not referred to a counsellor as soon as you're diagnosed."

As well as those patients who have received transplant, the charity Macmillan has provided me with some other brief personal stories. Let us take Frances, who finished treatment for Hodgkin's lymphoma five years ago. She says:

"Emotionally, in the first year after treatment I think I was shell-shocked because you're trying to catch up with everything that has happened to your body. You feel like you're a failure and you've failed to bounce back in the way you think you should have done."

Ciara, who finished treatment in 2016, says:

"The fear of cancer never leaves you but I'm trying now to think, if it comes back, it comes back. I can't live under that shadow. But it is so difficult to mentally recover."

Finally, Chris, who finished his treatment for head and neck cancer in 2016 stated:

“People say to me, ‘I bet you wake up every morning feeling glad to be alive.’ You know, it can’t be further from the truth.”

The stories from Joanna, Ruth, Frances, Ciara and Chris affect all cancer patients—they cover everybody.

So what do we need to do? First, psychological support is for everyone, not just those with diagnosed mental health conditions. Secondly, the families of patients should also be offered psychological support, and thirdly, it seems that patients and their families are not getting the psychological support they need. Let me address those points in turn.

First, psychological support is for everyone, not just those with diagnosed mental health conditions such as depression or post-traumatic stress disorder. That includes patients who are feeling anxious, worried or frightened, and those who are having trouble adjusting to their “new normal”. The fear of cancer returning can be particularly difficult to manage. For example, some blood cancers relapse, which can be a common occurrence. Even if someone is doing physically well, that sense of dread never goes away for them or their family members.

Because of patients’ varied needs, psychological support can take many forms. Clinical psychologists and others working in improving access to psychological therapies services are able to help those with the most complex needs. Clinical nurse specialists, who we know are hugely valued by patients, can enhance overall wellbeing by providing general emotional support based on skilled communication and effective provision of information. The third sector, meanwhile, provides a wide range of services, including helplines, online forums and peer support. There is no silver bullet, however, and many different actors have a role to play.

Secondly, patients’ families should be offered psychological support because they too feel the consequences of cancer treatment. If someone is acting as their loved one’s carer, that can affect their relationship and ability to go about their daily life. They might have suddenly become the family’s main breadwinner, which could be a source of enormous stress. Family members will often feel as if they have to put a brave face on things and somehow do not deserve help because they are not the ones who are ill. In reality, however, patients regularly say that they worry more about their family than themselves and that in turn can affect their recovery. I know from personal experience that the CLIC Sargent nurse who came to us on a weekly basis to give my son chemotherapy was somebody to talk to who understood, and that side of the process was just as important to us as the medicine being given.

Thirdly, patients and those close to them are not getting the psychological support they need. According to the most recent results from the national cancer patient experience survey, only two thirds of patients felt that they were able to discuss their fears or worries, and I hope the Minister will respond to that.

In many cases, this comes down to workforce—either not enough specialists are available who properly understand the consequences of cancer treatment, or the demands on staff time are so great that it is impossible to provide patients with adequate psychological support.

In response to a 2017 survey of GPs and nurses, 31% of respondents said that workforce pressures mean patients are not being supported to regain a good quality of life after treatment. In other cases, the right support existed but patients are not being appropriately signposted. I have heard of many patients having to be proactive and find help for themselves. Patients should certainly be empowered to take control of their own care, but I think we all agree that this should be a choice and not a necessity. They should not be let down by poor communication and co-ordination, but in many cases they are.

The Minister may refer to the recovery package in her response. It consists of four main interventions: a holistic needs assessment and care plan; a treatment summary; a cancer care review; and access to a health and wellbeing event. This can certainly help to identify patients’ psychological needs and I welcome the fact that NHS England has committed to rolling out the recovery package nationally by 2020. However, does the Minister agree that identifying patients’ needs is only one piece of the puzzle and that more needs to be done to ensure they actually receive the right psychological support?

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an extremely moving speech. Does he agree that getting the right psychological support from the start also helps the medical treatment? For many cancer patients and their families—as he said, it is very painful for them to watch the treatment—getting psychological support helps them to be able to face going through the treatment, which can be so devastating, as I know he knows.

Mark Tami: That is very important. What we tend to do throughout the whole process is address the disease itself and its physical aspects, but we do not address the psychological damage and problems that can occur. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we need to do that.

Before I close, I would just like to take a moment to talk about the specific needs of children, teenagers and young adults who have had cancer. They experience many of the same physical and psychological problems as adults, but they also face some unique challenges, such as the impact on their growth and development, education and future prospects. Earlier this year I was very pleased to be part of the inquiry into patient experience by the all-party parliamentary group on children, teenagers and young adults with cancer. I would like to put on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), who set up the group and chairs it. She is doing sterling work and I thank her for that.

When parents and young people were surveyed, 73% felt that not enough was being done to ensure access to post-treatment support. Some 26% of parents and young people identified mental and emotional help as the biggest improvement needed. As Kate Collins, chief executive of Teenage Cancer Trust, summarised:

“Young people have told us that actually the experience of being spat out at the end of treatment can be as traumatic as diagnosis, because all of a sudden you’ve been radically changed, you’ve been through this remarkable transformation experience in lots of ways, you’ve faced problems that lots of adults have not had to face...you may be clear of cancer but often young people are living with long-term effects, be they psychological or physical.”

[Mark Tami]

The all-party group therefore recommended that the Department of Health and Social Care makes mental health support for children, young people and parents a key part of diagnosis, treatment, follow-up and recovery. Furthermore, NHS England should engage with children and young people with cancer to ensure that the recovery package meets that specific need. The all-party group also recommended that the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education should re-examine their proposals in the mental health Green Paper and take account of the impact of a long-term physical condition on young people's mental health.

When the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) gave evidence to the all-party group, he said:

"For the 80% of children who survive, they've got it all ahead of them, so we have to make sure that we tool them up to live their lives."

Can the Minister tell us what she and the Department are doing to give children, teenagers and young adults the tools they need to deal with the psychological consequences of their treatment?

CLIC Sargent's 2017 report, "Hidden Costs", found that 79% of young people felt that cancer had a serious impact on their emotional wellbeing, 70% experienced depression, 83% experienced loneliness, 90% experienced anxiety and 42% experienced panic attacks during their treatment. For parents, the figures are similar: more than half of parents—63%—said that they experienced depression, more than one third experienced panic attacks, and 84% experienced loneliness.

It goes without saying that surviving cancer is brilliant news. However, I urge the Minister and everyone here today to remember that although survival rates are improving, people are living with the effects, including the long-term effects, that cancer has dealt them. We must do more to ensure that patients such as Joanna, Ruth, Frances, Ciara and Chris not only live, but live well. That means taking action to improve the provision of gold-standard psychological support. Finally, I thank Anthony Nolan, CLIC Sargent, Macmillan and the Teenage Cancer Trust for their help.

5.46 pm

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): I am sure that I speak for everyone here in congratulating the hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) not just on securing such an important debate, but on the bravery he showed in his speech by sharing with the House his family's experience. It is very important that we bring the voices of the people we all seek to serve in this place into the Chamber, as well as the experiences that were shared from CLIC Sargent and Macmillan, so I thank him for that. I know that he is doing extremely good work through a number of organisations in the House to ensure that cancer patients are getting the very best treatment and support. He has also given a huge amount of support to setting up the all-party group on children, teenagers, and young adults with cancer. Although the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) has left the Chamber, I praise her work on the really good report that she and the hon. Gentleman produced. I read it last night and thoroughly recommend it to other Members.

I am standing in for the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), who has ministerial responsibility for cancer. He is very sorry that he cannot be here this evening and he was very pleased to be able to contribute to the APPG's report. He asked me to remind the House that he has agreed to respond to everything—all the recommendations—in the report, so the hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside will get a full written response from him.

I am pleased to respond on the Government's behalf to this debate, because it brings together two vital issues, which are crucial to the health of the nation and are at the top of the Government's priority list. Approximately one in four people in the UK experience a mental health problem every year. In England, one in six people report experiencing a common mental health problem, such as anxiety and depression, in any given week. Cancer affects one in two of us—there will not be anyone here this evening who has not been dreadfully affected by this disease—so it is absolutely important that the Government are focusing on these priorities.

Since 2010, cancer survival rates have been improving year on year. We estimate that some 7,000 people are alive today who would not have been here just 18 years ago, but we are not at all complacent. We know that there is more to do to make sure that our results are the best in the world. That is why last month the Prime Minister announced a package of measures, which will be rolled out across the country and which aim to see three quarters of all cancers detected in the earliest stages by 2028. The plan, backed by a record level of investment in the NHS—an extra £20 billion a year by 2023—will radically overhaul screening programmes and provide new investment in state-of-the-art technology to transform the process of diagnosis and boost research and innovation.

However, what I really want to talk about in the few moments available to me is the support that we must give to people who are living with and beyond cancer. The recovery package, which is a key component of that priority, consists of a set of four interventions that are designed to help patients and clinicians to assess patients' holistic needs and plan appropriately for their care and support. They include a holistic needs assessment and a care plan, which guide conversations about patient's holistic needs—not just physical and psychosocial needs, but financial, social and mental health needs. An HNA should take place within 31 days of diagnosis and at the end of each acute phase of treatment, and the care plan should be updated on each occasion. Both interventions enable patients to be referred to appropriate psychological support when necessary.

That personalised follow-up and support to help people to live well with and beyond cancer is a crucial element of the cancer strategy, and helps us to create the world-class cancer services to which we aspire. NHS England will roll out recovery packages nationwide by 2020, so that the support that they provide is available to all cancer patients in England regardless of where they live. All Cancer Alliances are receiving the necessary funding this year to support full implementation of the recovery package.

As the hon. Gentleman has said, some cancers, such as chronic blood cancers, can sadly never be cured. Blood cancer patients are frequently on a regime of "watch and wait", often over many years, to establish

whether their cancer has progressed to a point at which treatment needs to begin. Understandably, that can take a huge psychological toll on not only patients but their families, which is why the recovery package takes a holistic approach and fully considers the patient's mental health needs. The package is already being commissioned and delivered, in full or in part, by many clinical commissioning groups across England, but NHS England's aim is to accelerate the process to ensure full implementation by 2020 so that every cancer patient is given that full package of care.

Of course we need to ensure that cancer patients, and their families and carers, can access appropriate mental health services if and when they need such support, which is why the Prime Minister has made improving access to mental health services an absolute priority for her Government. There has been a fivefold increase in the number of people accessing Talking Therapies since 2009-10, and that is excellent progress, but we are not complacent; we know that much work needs to be done. In July last year, the Government announced an additional £1.3 billion to expand the mental health workforce and allow the NHS to treat an extra 1 million patients by 2020-21. That will help to ensure that cancer patients can be referred promptly to any psychological support that they need as part of their recovery package. We know that clinical nurse specialists can provide not just clinical but crucial emotional support for cancer patients as they go through cancer treatment, and—often more important—in the follow-up after their treatment.

Mark Tami: Does the Minister agree that we use the word “cured” far too often, as though there were a cut-off point when people are cured and therefore

exactly the same as everyone else, and exactly the same as they were before? The problem with that is that it is not true: it does not take full account of the reality.

Sarah Newton: The hon. Gentleman has made a very important point. That is why the tailor-made, holistic approach to treating every person as an individual is so important: no two people will respond in the same way. No two people have the same family or community support networks around them, so it must be tailored to the individual. There must also be a recognition that some people might need a lot more help over a longer period of time than others. That is why it is so important that NHS England has committed to more people having access to clinical nurse specialists, and why last year's cancer workforce plan produced by Health Education England committed to greater investment to make sure that everybody has access to that support. There is also a great opportunity here to signpost people to be supported by the wonderful voluntary sector organisations that the hon. Gentleman mentioned this evening.

In conclusion, I want to reaffirm the Government's utter commitment both to improving people's survival rates from cancer and to making sure they have tailor-made, supported arrangements, including psychological services, so that people can, not just survive cancer, but live well with cancer and continue to play their full part in society.

Question put and agreed to.

5.55 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 22 November 2018

[MR PETER BONE *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

State Pension: Women born in the 1950s

1.30 pm

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Before we begin this important debate, it might help Members to know that the Prime Minister will make a statement in the House at 3 o'clock. If Members wish to speak in this debate they must return for the wind-ups, which will start at approximately 4 o'clock. Nine Back Benchers have indicated that they wish to speak. I do not intend to impose a time limit.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Bone. I am sorry to interrupt proceedings before they have really started. Thank you for your guidance, although I am not one of the Members who will speak; I am unable to because of other engagements. Could the debate be relayed to another room, so that the many people who cannot get into the Strangers Gallery can listen to it? They have come here for that, and are currently excluded. It would be kind to let them hear it.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Thank you for that important point of order. I entirely understand the frustration. I do not schedule debates. The debate could have been scheduled in the House where there would have been enough room for everyone. However, rather than postponing or stopping it, I think we should continue. It may help people to know that when debates happen in Westminster Hall a similar one often happens in the House at a later date. We should crack on with today's important debate.

1.31 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered state pension equalisation for women born in the 1950s.

I stand today feeling the weight of despair, the burning sense of injustice and the genuine bewilderment felt by the women who, by sheer bad luck, were born in the 1950s and thereby inexplicably became fair game to be robbed, mugged and made the victims of theft of the most cruel and callous kind. For some women, that theft can be of up to £40,000 in lost pension. A large number of MPs—too many to mention—who support the Women Against State Pension Inequality in their quest for justice sent messages asking me to convey their support despite their absence. Many colleagues across the House dearly wanted to speak in the debate but were unable to attend.

In my lifetime, this could be the most unjust Government policy since the poll tax. It affects 3.8 million women, and 4,800 women in my constituency. The acceleration

of the timetable set out in the Pensions Act 1995 has meant that these women have faced changes to the pension age abruptly, with little or no time to adapt and prepare. These women have had their pensions stolen from them—it is as simple as that. They paid into their pensions through a lifetime of work, raising their families, and often acting as carers for other members of their families. They did all the right things, only to be told, when it came time for them to be paid, that the rules of the game had changed. Not only that, but no one had thought to tell them that the rules of the game had changed—and that was just bad luck.

In addition, lower wages and broken employment periods mean that many of these women do not have a full national insurance record, so they receive lower state pensions than men anyway. Indeed, the average woman receives about 82% of what a man receives in his state pension. They also have a fraction of the savings of men. Equalisation is not just about the age at which people reach retirement.

With no time to make alternative plans, many women are suffering, and many are now living in poverty as a direct result of the political choice not to give them their due. Only last week, Philip Alston, the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, concluded that after decades of decline we are now witnessing a rise in pensioner poverty, with the figure rising in recent years by 300,000. He went on to say that

“a group of women born in the 1950s have been particularly impacted by an abrupt and poorly phased in change in the state pension age from 60 to 66.”

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Patricia Gibson: I will just finish the quotation from the rapporteur. He continued:

“The impact of the changes to pensionable age is such as to severely penalize those who happen to be on the cusp of retirement and who had well-founded expectations of entering the next phase of their lives, rather than being plunged back into a workforce for which many of them were ill-prepared and to which they could not reasonably have been expected to adjust with no notice.”

I would be keen to hear the Minister's response to the rapporteur's words. If he wishes to intervene to rebut them, I would be delighted to give way, but in the absence of his seeking to intervene, I will take an intervention from the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham).

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The next best thing!

Mr Cunningham: I do not know about that. I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this timely debate. We have had many such debates, but the Government do not seem to get the message. From the start of the recession until now, women have carried the burden of the recession. In tax adjustments, the Government saved something like £14 billion at the expense of women. The amount the Government are saving through not doing the right thing by these women probably runs into billions. A fraction of those billions could take care of the problem.

Patricia Gibson: The hon. Gentleman makes his point well. It was recently said to me that it was interesting that the Government have chosen to pick a fight with

[*Patricia Gibson*]

women of a certain age, with a policy that will most harshly affect women in a lower income bracket. They will feel the most pain as a result of the policy, and were perhaps considered an easy target. Perhaps the Minister has views on that.

I have participated in every debate on the WASPI women since I was elected, and I repeatedly hear from whoever is responding for the Government—a variety of Ministers have done so—that the policy is about us all living longer. However, the debate is not about life expectancy, although we know that that has stalled; it is about women who had their pension age changed with little or no notice, directly causing considerable hardship.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): My hon. Friend has been a consistent campaigner on this issue; there have been so many debates, and it is heartening to see her pressing it so often. She is absolutely right to press the point about life expectancy. Whenever we have had a debate on state pension inequality, the Pensions Minister has been unable to tell me what the life expectancy in my constituency is. Newspapers such as *The Guardian* like to talk about the life expectancy in Glasgow East, so I am surprised that the Minister does not know that it is not that high. The changes really affect people in my constituency.

Patricia Gibson: I suspect that the Minister knows fine well the life expectancy in Glasgow East and various parts of the UK, but it might make uncomfortable reading when trying to impose a one-size-fits-all policy and stealing people's pensions. Many of the women in my hon. Friend's constituency, and indeed in my own, will die before they are of age to collect.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has pointed out that more than one in five women—21.2%—in the group affected by the recent increases in the state pension age were in poverty, which is up 6.4% on the situation pre-reform. Meanwhile, analysis by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies found that the poorest pensioners are the least able to work into their later years. It concluded that both men and women who had been poor during their working lives were the most likely to leave the job market between the ages of 50 and 55, with poor health being the key driver.

With striking inequalities in life expectancy and health expectancy, there are great worries that the policy hits hardest the poorest and most vulnerable. That has been borne out by analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies that shows that a third of single women aged between 60 and 63 were in poverty after housing costs—up 13.5% since before the reforms. Similarly, nearly four out of 10 people who rent their homes are in poverty—up from around a quarter. The IFS also found that 1.1 million women had seen their individual incomes fall by an average of £50 a week. Increased income from earnings is simply not enough to offset the loss of pensions. TUC analysis shows that half a million workers who are within five years of state pension age have had to leave the workplace for medical reasons, and that those who have worked in the lowest-paid jobs are twice as likely as managers and professionals to stop working before retirement age, owing to sickness and disability.

In the absence of labour market reforms, it is hard to see how raising the state pension age will allow this group to continue working. Rather, it will mean greater reliance on working-age benefits, which the Government say they wish to avoid. That makes it even more indefensible—this point is key and I hope the Minister is listening, because I would really like him to address it in his reply—that the Government decided to implement the Cridland review's recommendation to accelerate the rise in pension age to 68, but chose to ignore the welfare reforms that John Cridland said would be essential to cushion the impact of those changes. Will the Minister tell us why? The Government cannot just pick the bits they like; they should implement the whole review or none of it.

The Government have not listened, but that does not mean that these women are not suffering. Many of them have been left destitute. The Government may think that because they are ordinary women—organised, persistent and dignified as they are—they are easier to ignore than rich and powerful men, but the reality does not bear that out. These women have been robbed, betrayed, misrepresented and mistreated, and they will not go away. I repeat a question that I have asked the Government many times: where on earth do they expect these women to go?

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): The 10,000 or so WASPI women in my constituency are certainly not natural protesters who wave a placard at the first opportunity. In fact, they have played a very positive role in our communities throughout the years. They are to be found in the women's institute, making jam, and in many other voluntary groups. It is deeply disappointing that any Government should treat them in such a disrespectful way. Considering that the Chancellor announced more money in the recent Budget, it would have been nice if that Budget had given the WASPI women some recognition.

Patricia Gibson: I agree with everything the hon. Gentleman says. One of the most frustrating things that WASPI women have found in their quest for justice is not that they are not getting what they are asking for—bad as that is—but the wall of silence with which they have been met. It is as though they do not exist. That is not acceptable.

Sir Peter Bottomley: There have been too many occasions on which Pensions Ministers have said how many years women will get a pension for—once they get it. Can we make it plain that the question is what happens in the years before they get the state pension?

Patricia Gibson: The Scottish National party commissioned independent research into how this could be resolved, but the Government rejected it. As far as I can see, they have rejected every other potential solution proposed from every quarter. I would like the Minister to tell us how he thinks the matter can be progressed, because doing nothing is not a sustainable option—certainly not for the WASPI women.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Patricia Gibson: I will make some progress.

The WASPI women's situation is doubly unjust because they are a group who have faced pay discrimination throughout their working lives. They have been paid less, acknowledged less and valued less. Now, when they should be enjoying retirement, they are expected to sit quietly and simply accept the loss of their well-deserved and much-needed state pension. This is not pin money; it is money to pay the rent, buy food, do the shopping and pay the bills. How is that decent, by any measure? It is an absolute disgrace.

The Minister really must have a brass neck if he thinks he can talk his way out of this. The UK Government's lack of engagement on the issue has been breathtaking in its arrogance. These women know that many of the hardest hit among their number have been driven to self-harm and suicide. Of 873 respondents to research undertaken for the BackTo60 campaign group by the charity SOS Silence of Suicide, almost half had self-harmed because of the stress and hardship caused by this pension reform, while 46% reported having suicidal thoughts as a direct result, and 70 women had attempted to take their own lives. All the while, the UK Government wring their hands and stutter about people living longer.

Such is the Government's intransigence that these women have been forced to go to court. BackTo60 has launched a judicial review to force the Government to reverse their decision. The argument will be made by Michael Mansfield QC that the pension policy implemented by successive Governments is a gross injustice and is discriminatory, even though the delay in paying out the pensions is in the name of equality—there's a wee irony for you. Law professor Jackie Jones has argued that the UK is in breach of its international treaty obligations. The demand for what is right—fair transitional arrangements for these women—will not be silenced.

Inconveniently for the Government, the former Pensions Minister, Steven Webb, has conceded that not enough was done to inform and prepare these women for the changes. The Select Committee on Work and Pensions concluded that

“more could and should have been done”

to communicate the changes. It seems that a mess was made of the acceleration of the changes in the Pensions Act 2011, but the only people to pay the price for that mess are the women involved.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Many women, including constituents of mine at the Blackfriars pub in Glasgow, are watching this debate and listening to my hon. Friend's excellent speech. Does she agree that the mythical letters that the Department for Work and Pensions was supposed to send to so many women to tell them that their pensions were changing were so elusive that there was a better chance of finding a golden ticket in a Wonka bar than of getting one?

Patricia Gibson: Indeed. I am sure that the WASPI women are gratified to hear the support in this Chamber for their cause and their quest for justice.

Let me turn, before the Minister does, to the well-worn phrases and half-hearted justifications that may well form part of his reply. Let me be clear: this debate is not about the age at which people should retire, nor is it about how we are all living longer. It is about successive UK Governments not communicating significant changes in the women's pension age, and about the political

choice not to address that in order to save money. It is about how expendable women born in the 1950s are to this Government. The fact is that pension equalisation was not supposed to begin until 2020, as set out in the Pensions Act 1995, but that was accelerated in 2011 with no communication of or care for the effect on women. That had the added bonus—accidental, I am sure—of saving the Treasury about £5 billion a year by equalising the state pension age at 65.

In an interesting development, Baroness Altmann, who was formerly a great champion of older people but was neutralised in this debate by being elevated to the Lords and given a ministerial portfolio on pensions, has now told us that she was informed that the 1950s women

“would go away sooner or later.”

Well, guess what: they are still here. They are watching today in this Chamber and in towns and villages across the UK, willing this cruel and heartless Government to listen and do the right thing.

We continue to hear from this Government—I am sure the Minister is planning to mention it—that concessions of £1.1 billion have already been made. That figure is trotted out as though the Government have targeted money at the women affected. That is, at best, disingenuous. The £1.1 billion did not go solely to women and the concessions were limited to 500,000 men and women who were born within a short timeframe—between January and October 1954. The concession took the form of limiting the delay with the change in annually managed expenditure, estimated at £1.1 billion. I want to be clear: £1.1 billion of cash was not doled out to people in envelopes; in fact, it was not a monetary exchange for those involved.

Today I and my party stand beside the WASPI women, who have been the victims of a great injustice. As I said earlier in my speech, it is no less of an injustice than the poll tax. We will continue to stand beside them. The issue has not been debated in the Commons for more than nine months, and I am sure the Government thought the storm had passed. It has not passed. It will not pass. These women are engulfed by the storm every single day they have to manage without their pensions. Up and down the country, in all parts of the UK, WASPI women are watching the debate, inside and outside the Chamber—including Cunninghame WASPI, to whom I pay tribute. All the WASPI women are waiting for justice, hoping against hope that this heartless Government will finally hear their pleas for what is rightfully theirs to be restored to them.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Patricia Gibson: I am sorry; I am just about to wrap up.

In the name of all that is just and all that is right, I urge the Minister to go back from the debate today and tell his Government that this must not stand. The WASPI women need and deserve their pensions. Let us get this sorted. Let us undo the damage once and for all, and let us do it now.

1.51 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I do not wish to make lengthy remarks. This is a very important debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member

[Alex Burghart]

for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing it. Brentwood and Ongar is the most beautiful constituency in the world, but North Ayrshire and Arran has a chance of being called the second best.

This issue has affected a number of women in my constituency since I was elected last year. I very much understand what they have been through, but I would like to set out my thinking on the subject in the context of how we have arrived where we have.

In 1995, the then Government decided to equalise the state pension age for men and women to address long-standing inequality. That change was part of a wider social trend towards gender equality, but was also a decision that arose partly from European law and equality law cases relating to occupational pension provision. The last Labour Government, between 1997 and 2010, continued the policy and additionally determined that a state pension age of 65 could not be sustained for very much longer. That was the thinking that led to the Pensions Act 2007, which raised the state pension age to 66, 67 and then 68.

Under the stewardship of the former Member for Thornbury and Yate, an excellent Pensions Minister, the coalition Government introduced additional reforms in the Pensions Act 2011, which brought in a number of highly important reforms—not least auto-enrolment, which has benefited many people across all of our constituencies—and sought to address a growing imbalance. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), who was then Secretary of State, said at the time:

“Back in 1926, when the state pension age was first set, there were nine people of working age for every pensioner. The ratio is now 3:1 and is set to fall closer to 2:1 by the latter half of the 21st century. Some of these changes can be put down to the retirement of the baby boomers, but it is also driven by consistent increases in life expectancy. The facts are stark: life expectancy at 65 has increased by more than 10 years since the 1920s, when the state pension age was first set. The first five of those years were added between 1920 and 1990. What is really interesting is that the next five were added in just 20 years, from 1990 to 2010.”—[*Official Report*, 20 June 2011; Vol. 530, c. 45.]

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): My predecessor as MP for Ipswich is reported to have characterised the demands of the WASPI women as “intergenerational theft”. Will the hon. Gentleman dissociate himself from that comment?

Alex Burghart: I feel that the hon. Gentleman has achieved his purpose by putting such a claim on record. I am not aware of his predecessor having made such remarks and I am not aware of the context, so he will forgive me if I do not comment on them, although I am sure that he did not really make that intervention to get my response.

Chris Elmore: Although a potted history of where the state pension has come from and why changes have been introduced under whichever Government is interesting, the debate is not about that; it is about the fact that the Government have taken an archaic view and are essentially punishing women born in the 1950s, who have already faced discrimination through maternity laws, previous pension changes and national insurance changes. The debate is not about a potted history of why we are where we are. It is about some sort of redress for those

women, who have already faced unnecessary burdens throughout their working lives. I am not trying to suggest that the hon. Gentleman is trying to move the agenda on, but the debate is not about why we have the pensions that we do. It is about the fact that the Government are accelerating the change and not giving any redress to the women affected, who quite frankly deserve it.

Alex Burghart: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his lengthy intervention. I am making my own speech and will make my points in the way that I wish to make them, although I am grateful to him for telling me how I should speak.

The major demographic change needed to be addressed. A girl born in 1951 was expected to live to 81, and a boy to 77. By this year, the Office for National Statistics cohort figures showed an increase of more than 10 years for newborn girls and more than 12 years for boys, to 92 and 89 respectively.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), who secured the debate, has indicated that it is not about life expectancy. With due respect, can I mention an issue raised with me by my county council, which is healthy active life expectancy? In many of the constituencies that Opposition Members represent, healthy active life expectancy is considerably shorter than elsewhere. It is 10 years shorter in County Durham than in parts of the south and south-east. Surely we should be relieving the burden on women who are subject to such discrimination and injustice.

Alex Burghart: The hon. Gentleman makes a genuinely interesting point about healthy life expectancy, the figures on which should feature more largely in the debate than they often do. I acknowledge that point.

When Lloyd George first brought in the state pension in the Old Age Pensions Act 1908, it was at 70, when life expectancy was considerably lower.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I have no reason to doubt the hon. Gentleman's statistics, but is it not just as interesting that the country is now three times as rich as it was when these ladies were born in the 1950s? When there have been other mistakes or crises in the economy, the Government have found money to bail out the bankers. If one compares the equity of this case to that, does the hon. Gentleman not think the Government should change their mind?

Alex Burghart: Presenting the case in the way that the hon. Gentleman does is slightly misrepresentative, because the cost of not bailing out the banks would have been extraordinarily high and would have seen businesses all over the country go bankrupt and people go out of work. It would have damaged their lives and would have become a cost to the state. I simply cannot see things in the binary way that he sets them out.

In 1942, William Beveridge wrote about the purpose of his pensions proposals, saying that

“giving to each individual an incentive to continue at work so long as he can, in place of retiring, is a necessary attempt to lighten the burden that will otherwise fall on the British community, through the large and growing proportion of people at the higher ages”.

Under the last Labour Government, it was acknowledged that we must not reach a position where women would be expected to spend 40% of their adult lives in

retirement—that proportion is due to increase continually. No Government could have sustained that without dramatically curtailing services for younger people. On top of those demographic concerns, the Pensions Act 2011 had to deal with the circumstances that were dictated by the great financial crisis of 2008.

Sir Peter Bottomley: My hon. Friend talks about the introduction in 1908 of the state pension age of 70, but he could have told us that it was reduced to 65 in 1925, and that the inequality of the earlier retirement age for women was introduced, I think, in 1940. I am not arguing with him; I am trying just to set the scene.

Alex Burghart: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's scene setting. Forgive me if I skipped a sentence earlier—I should have said that the retirement age of 65 was introduced in the Contributory Pensions Act 1925, so I am grateful to have been put right.

The Pensions Act 2011 dealt with the circumstances of 2008 and was introduced in the context of the emergency Budget brought forward by the then Chancellor in 2010, which offered the triple lock. To remind Members, that guarantees, each and every year, a rise in the basic state pension in line with earnings, prices or a 2.5% increase, whichever is the greatest. That policy meant that between April 2010 and April 2016, the value of the state pension rose by more than 22%, compared with growth in earnings of about 7.5% and growth in prices of 12%. Pensioners saw their incomes rise at almost double the pace of the average worker in that period. In 2018-19, the state pension is more than £1,450 a year higher than it was in 2010.

We know that the triple lock will be in place for the duration of this Parliament. For people reaching state pension age after April 2016, a new pension has been introduced at a single flat rate of £159.55 a week, which also has been triple-locked. All the women affected by the 2011 state pension age changes will draw their state pension under the new system.

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I am quite confused. It is lovely to hear all this information about what happens when people retire, but we are debating the issue of those women being left in limbo, where they are expected just to fend for themselves.

Alex Burghart: I appreciate the hon. Lady's point, which I am coming to.

The Pensions Act 2011 sped up the equalisation of women's state pension age and required men and women's state pension age to be raised to 66 by 2020. During the passage of that Act, the Government spent £1.1 billion—we might dispute the amount—on capping the maximum increase that any woman would see in her state pension age at 18 months, relative to the timetable set out in the Pensions Act 1995. Having heard the stories and spoken to some of the women involved, I know that this has been a hard transition and has caused difficulties and distress for many of them.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): On the point of equalisation, will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Alex Burghart: Yes, I will.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. Before the hon. Gentleman gives way, let me say that I am grateful to him for making brief remarks, which have gone on for more than 12 minutes.

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He has given his analysis of the equalisation, but does he find it ironic that the women who were told that they had to work for an additional 18 months were given only five years to sort out that problem, but the men who were asked to work an additional 12 months were given seven years to plan for that change?

Alex Burghart: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. Having spoken to women in my constituency, I understand the stress and difficulty that this change has caused. However, it is clear that any attempt to reverse the policy would be extraordinarily expensive.

Dr Drew: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Alex Burghart: I look to you, Chair, to know whether I am entitled to take any more interventions.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): The hon. Gentleman is entitled to go on for as long as he wants, but I would prefer him not to.

Alex Burghart: That makes two of us, Mr Bone.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran did not talk much about the cost of reversing Government policy, which is a shame. I understand that the SNP has costed the reversal of the Pensions Act 2011 at £8 billion, but other experts see that as a vast underestimate. It would actually cost the taxpayer £30 billion or more. There is no doubt that the Scotland Act 2016 gives the Scottish Government the powers that they need to address the issue.

Patricia Gibson: I am really disappointed that we have a speech from somebody who clearly has not read the Scotland Act 2016 and has just lifted the headline from the *Daily Mail* or whatever it is that he reads. There is no power in that Act to mitigate yet more Tory cuts. We already mitigate Tory cuts to the tune of tens of millions of pounds. Even if we wanted to, under section 28 of the Act—the hon. Gentleman can look it up—we do not have the power. Once again, I urge him to stick to the focus of this debate. He says that I did not talk about money, but I talked about what it has saved the Treasury. Let us spend that money on these women.

Alex Burghart: The focus of the debate is compensation for the women involved. It is a fact that the Scottish Government could do more than they are doing.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): I want this issue to be addressed at UK level—that is absolutely right—but devolution across the UK means that different choices can be taken by those who are in power. It is not just section 28 that gives the Scottish Government the powers to act. Section 26 allows them to make short-term payments to people who need them to “avoid a risk to the well-being of an individual.”

I genuinely believe that the Scottish Government should act where they can, and they should not play politics with this issue.

Alex Burghart: I am sure we all agree that that was a very interesting intervention. Once again, the SNP wants all the power and none of the responsibility. The Labour

[Alex Burghart]

party has made multiple suggestions about how it would address the situation, and many Opposition Members seek the full compensation package of £70 billion. They proposed in their manifesto to keep the state pension age at 66, which reversed the Labour decision of 2007. It would cost at least £250 billion more than the Government's preferred timetable, and that is not covered by the party's 2017 manifesto.

In addition, I understand that there are particular legal difficulties in reintroducing a different retirement age for men and women. Unquestionably, any amendment to the current legislation that introduced a new inequality would be challenged. This is an unsatisfactory situation. I admire the very good campaign that the WASPI campaigners have put together. Having met them, I know that they are principled people who wish to see policy change for entirely understandable reasons. However, I see the cost of change as absolutely prohibitive, and I see no solution from either Opposition party.

2.8 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for securing this very important debate. It is important for all parliamentarians who believe in equality to continue the fight to put right a wrong for women who were born in the 1950s. It is clear that the Government have given up on them.

Last month, we learned from the former Pensions Minister that, as Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) refused to engage with women born in the 1950s who were adversely affected. She was instructed not to speak to them and was told that they would go away sooner or later. When will the Government get the message that the WASPI women are not going anywhere? People seeking to put right a great injustice do not just go away. Good for them!

Last week's report by the UN expert on extreme poverty showed that the number of pensioners living in poverty in the UK had risen by 300,000 to 16% in the four years to 2016-17, despite measures such as the triple-lock guarantee. The rapporteur said:

"The impact of the changes to pensionable age is such as to severely penalise those who happen to be on the cusp of retirement and who had well-founded expectations of entering the next phase of their lives, rather than being plunged back into a workforce for which many of them were ill-prepared and to which they could not reasonably have been expected to adjust with no notice."

He said that the uptick in pensioner poverty was driven by single pensioners, who are significantly more likely to be women. The Government's response to that damning evidence has been to ignore the findings and shoot the messenger.

Dr Drew: Does my hon. Friend agree that the least the Government could do is to make an actuarial assessment of what the true cost would be of paying compensation to people who have clearly lost out heavily?

Mohammad Yasin: I thank my hon. Friend for that very important point. I agree 100%.

The Government are completely ignoring that evidence. The new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions said that that excellent report on extreme poverty is "highly inappropriate", but she missed the point. What is highly inappropriate is the Government's arrogant and dogmatic policy on pension inequality. I have received heartbreaking letters from women who have worked hard and paid their dues all their lives, and have now found themselves struggling and humiliated. There are those who are faring better, but only because they can rely on spouses to help them out. Why should they have to do that? Women who do not have their option, perhaps because their spouse is dead, have found themselves destitute at a vulnerable time in their lives. The Government's appalling response is to tell those women, who have worked for nearly 40 years, to get on their bike and try to find a job. That is highly inappropriate.

If the Government were even remotely in touch with real life, they would know that that is not an option for most of those women. Many are unable to work or have caring responsibilities for elderly parents, spouses and grandchildren. Instead of dismissing the women born in the 1950s, who are fighting for their rights, and dismissing the UN special rapporteur's report, the Government should make the welfare system more humane. If they do not, they will be dismissed at the next general election.

2.13 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing this debate. She has been a stalwart in speaking out for the WASPI women. I was very happy to be a co-signatory to her request to the Backbench Business Committee for this debate, and I am happy to add my support.

I know that I speak for so many others when I say that my constituents in Strangford were gutted to find that no change has been made to the nefarious decision to deny women their hard-earned pension. An email I received said that there was a sense of

"despair amongst our WASPI women with increasingly negative effects on mental and physical health and catastrophic financial situations."

I cannot underline enough those women's mental and physical health and their catastrophic financial situations. The people I have spoken to are greatly affected by those three things.

It is little wonder that those women feel like that when it appears that the political route has led nowhere. The Bill supported by the all-party group on state pension inequality for women has been kicked into the long grass. For that reason, the WASPI women have, alongside their political campaign, been progressing on the legal front. They believe that proving that the DWP failed in its duty and committed maladministration is the most cost-effective and quickest way for the 3.8 million women affected by the changes to the state pension age in the Pensions Acts of 1995, 2007 and 2011 to achieve justice and recompense.

I am aware that the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman has begun his preliminary inquiry. He is starting with the 1995 Act and is looking at whether the DWP failed in its duty to inform women of the significant change to state pension age, which had been 60 for

women since 1948. If he finds that the DWP failed in its duty and committed maladministration, he should make recommendations about what the Government should do to make amends. That would be an important way of addressing these issues. Those recommendations should perhaps include recompense for the losses suffered by all women adversely affected by the changes.

It is time that we did the right thing for those women. In my constituency alone, 5,800 women have been adversely affected. I am not saying that every one of them has come and spoken to me, but a great proportion have. They worked their fingers raw and had their end goal in sight, but the certainty of a pension was removed from them with very little notice. They did not have the ability to change the course of their financial future. They were told the facts of the case and were left to deal with it. The women who have spoken to me include not only civil servants who planned their financial future and are now cast into uncertainty, in doubt about how their well-deserved retirement will pan out, but women who have literally scrubbed on their hands and knees. They are saying, “Jim, I don’t know how I can physically do this anymore.”

Sandy Martin: The point is not just that those people worked hard all their lives and then suddenly found that their pension age had been increased, but that they were not given the time to plan their lives in advance. In many cases, they finished work and found that they would not get their pension for years afterwards.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. They thought they had planned for their pension age, but suddenly found that it was grasped away from them at the last moment. The impact on women throughout Northern Ireland is incredible. I have said this before, and I will keep on saying it: we need to do the right thing. The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran said that we must do the right thing. I am here to do the right thing and make sure it happens.

This equalisation was initially brought about in 1995, when an EU directive prompted the Government to equalise retirement age for men and women—then 65 and 60 respectively. The Government chose to level it at 65, and it was decided to increase women’s SPA in stages between 2010 and 2020. Women born in 1950–51 would retire at 61, those born in 1952–53 would retire at 62 and so on until 65 was reached for all post-1955 women in 2020.

I am unsure how we got to the stage at which we are asking women to work into their 70s and beyond. People are working longer, but they will not live longer if we make them work longer. I believe that enough is enough. I am not alone in that view. I read an article—the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran referred to it—that said:

“A United Nations independent expert has affirmed the stance taken by campaign groups including the Women Against State Pension Inequality...that certain women have been affected disproportionately by recent pension age changes.”

We cannot ignore the United Nations—we often refer to it.

“Philip Alston’s report *Statement on Visit to the United Kingdom on extreme poverty and human rights*, out on Friday (16 November), showed the number of pensioners living in poverty in the UK had risen by 300,000 to 16 per cent in the four years to 2016/17. This

was despite measures such as the triple lock guarantee. But he found a group of women born in the 1950s had been particularly impacted a ‘poorly phased in’ change in the state pension age.

Mr Alston said: ‘As was made clear to me in a number of submissions and through powerful personal testimony, a group of women born in the 1950s have been particularly impacted by an abrupt and poorly phased in change in the state pension age from 60 to 66.’

The impact of the changes to pensionable age is such as to severely penalise those who happen to be on the cusp of retirement and who had well-founded expectations of entering the next phase of their lives”—

as the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) said—“rather than being plunged back into a workforce for which many of them were ill-prepared and to which they could not reasonably have been expected to adjust with no notice.”

Ross Thomson: I want to share the experience of Ann from my constituency, whom I met on Friday. Three months prior to her 60th birthday, she had to leave work due to a health issue. She lived alone and had no income, and therefore had nothing to resort to bar her life savings. She is now living on a very small work pension, but had to add to that significantly from her savings. Over the years, she had done exactly what the hon. Gentleman spoke about. She had planned how to spend her savings, but she now has to use them for ordinary living expenses instead. There is an inherent unfairness in that.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. He has told us the experience of his constituent, as I have done—many of mine tell me the same thing. They are not physically able to continue to work and have planned their future in what they thought was the right way, only to find that it has been—if I may use this word—stolen from them by this system. I could not do anything other than come to the debate in Westminster Hall to speak on behalf of the 5,800 constituents of mine who have indicated their distress and need for the Government to address the issue.

I understand that others want to speak and I want to try and keep to the timescale that you indicated, Mr Bone, so I will conclude. It is clear that others can see what the Government cannot. We must address the issue, and address it now. I hope the Minister will outline how he intends to address it rather than—with respect—wash his hands of it. It is time for action, not for words. Enough is enough.

2.21 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I promise that my brief remarks will last less than 17 minutes. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing the debate and on making such a powerful speech. She covered the issue, but what she said about the number of people who are suicidal, attempt suicide, or self-harm, was particularly pertinent and should make the Government sit up. That sums up the injustice of the issue; the Government should really listen.

Once again, I am here to speak on behalf of the 6,500 women in my constituency who have been affected by the various Pensions Act changes. First of all, I want to look at some of the politics surrounding the pension changes and the subsequent developments. We all know that the women affected by the Pensions Act 1995 were

[Alan Brown]

not properly notified. That is completely undeniable and even loyal Tories have acknowledged in previous debates that there were “communication issues”, which is certainly an understatement. Many Tories have stated their genuine concern and have signed up as backers of the WASPI campaign, yet all these years and months later, there has been no change despite the fact that we now have a minority Government. How hard can those sympathetic Tories really be working their Government on the issue? The Democratic Unionist party were able to extract concessions to prop the Government up, but that is proving very challenging for Conservative Members.

As the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) demonstrated in his speech, too many Tories blindly back the mantra that there was a £1.1 billion concession during the Bill stages of the Pensions Act 2011. Not robbing women of an extra £1.1 billion is not the same as putting money into the system. It was just a bit less of a shuffling for some of those affected, and I could not believe that the hon. Gentleman repeated that myth. We then hear the bigger picture: the Tories blame all the cuts that they imposed on the financial crash and the previous Labour Government. I might agree that Gordon Brown squandered billions of pounds, but while the Tories impose spending cuts, they have no problem introducing tax cuts for the wealthiest.

A Library briefing with projections of Budget measures from 2017 and 2018 estimates that the tax giveaways such as corporation tax, inheritance tax and higher income tax thresholds will cost the Treasury £78.6 billion pounds between 2017 and 2025. It is clear that austerity is for some but not for others. The fact that the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar said that compensation is completely unaffordable just shows that those choices have been made by Members in the Division Lobbies.

The Liberal Democrats now fully back WASPI, but the Minister for Pensions in 2011, Steve Webb, was one of theirs. They are the ones who started the austerity process in coalition with the Tories. Back then, Steve Webb estimated that if the timetable was not altered, pension spending would be £26 billion higher over a decade. Why was that figure so important in the grand scheme of Government spending when, as I have pointed out, tax cuts have suddenly become affordable?

Labour—Scottish Labour, in particular—is peddling, along with the Tories, the myth that the Scottish Parliament should be able to rectify matters for affected Scottish women. That comes after it said that pensions would be protected by Scotland remaining part of the UK in 2014, and after it fought tooth and nail against the concept of pensions being devolved to Scotland. Labour made sure pensions were not a Smith commission recommendation. The Scotland Act was designed specifically to make pensions a reserved matter and ensure that the Scottish Government could not introduce an age-based benefit. Why has Labour bought into the Tory sleight of hand which says that we can make changes in the Scottish Parliament while our budget is cut by £2 billion over a 10-year period? It was also a Labour Government that devolved pensions to Northern Ireland, while steadfastly refusing to do so for Scotland, which is another mystery that I cannot get my head around. Those parties all have culpability either for the current situation, or for masking responsibility for it.

Meanwhile, our constituents still suffer. I have been contacted by a constituent who has been fighting for 18 years to get her dead husband’s Metropolitan police pension. Recently, when she had primary care duties for her mother, she had to fight local authorities in England to get her mum into a care home. She has also been hit by the increase in contributions required, and is trying to pay more into the system—another five years’ contributions—so she gets a full pension when she reaches state pension age. She still has four years to go to reach her new state pension age, and without her widow’s pension she is in real financial hardship. She says that she does not want to access benefits because of a fear of the assessment process and of the threats and demands placed on jobseekers. That is the reality of the Government policy about which the UN special rapporteur says UK Government Ministers are in denial.

Finally, I pay tribute to a WASPI constituent of mine, Ann Hammil, who first raised the WASPI issue with me a number of years ago. She has fought her corner with the authorities and her case is now with the parliamentary ombudsman. The other week, she said to me:

“Alan, I will not give in to them.”

I completely support her attitude and that of other WASPI women and campaigners all over the UK. I hope I can help them achieve justice.

2.27 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing this extremely important debate. The message from today could not be clearer: this issue is not going to go away. We will not allow it to be kicked into the long grass and the tenacity of the campaigners will certainly not let it be forgotten. It is not a couple of pounds that have been taken away, and this is not a request for a handout. It is about livelihoods being destroyed, homes being lost, dignity being taken away, and the social contract between the state and the citizen being broken.

Events this week have demonstrated clearly that the Government do not command a majority, even on financial matters. Given the support we have heard right across the Chamber, the parliamentary arithmetic would clearly favour a fair and just settlement for the WASPI campaigners. I say to the Minister that time is running out for the Government to bring forward a proposal on their own terms.

I understand that this is not a simple issue to resolve and that there will be financial consequences for the Government, but when we are talking about a profound injustice on this scale, there is an imperative to act. As we have seen with the vast sums of money being expended on a Brexit deal that even members of the Cabinet do not support, or the additional expenditure in Northern Ireland to pay for a confidence and supply agreement that has delivered neither of those things, the Government have shown that they can find the money when there is a political imperative.

I simply do not accept that nothing can be done. There is not just a political imperative, but a moral imperative. In this country, we do not tell people who

are ill that only they should be responsible for funding their treatment. We do not tell parents that they alone should fund the education of their children. When a mistake of this magnitude has been made by a Government, whether it happened yesterday or 23 years ago, the only morally acceptable outcome is for us all to accept responsibility and find a solution. We will hear concerns about the sums involved, but what we are really trying to do is find some justice.

We have all heard harrowing stories from our constituencies of women who have worked all their lives and now, through a change of circumstance, have found themselves in a dire situation, with some having to sell their homes. Some have worked hard and progressed through their careers only to face the indignity of being told to take up an apprenticeship when they are in their early 60s. Women who were in senior positions have been forced to attend DWP courses where they are given advice on how to dress for a job interview or how to write a CV.

I fear that the most serious cases might not even be those we have heard about today, or the ones that end up in our inboxes. It is not only about the ones we hear about; it is about those who are unable to fight for their rights. One of my constituents told me:

"I am struggling daily with trying to work three days a week as I am now disabled. I suffer from anxiety and depression and every day is really hard for me. I cannot impress on you strongly enough how hard life is for me."

Another said:

"It's now a heat or eat situation for many. Some women are suicidal and some have had to sell their homes. Can you imagine how it feels for a woman in her 60s who has always worked, but is now frightened and in ill health, to be made to sign on? This isn't equality it's injustice."

I could not agree more.

It is worth reminding ourselves that the state pension system is founded on a contributory principle; it is not a state benefit in which no prior commitment is involved. Yet that group of women, who have paid and fulfilled their end of the deal, face being short-changed retrospectively.

There is great irony in the fact that if a defined benefit pension fund became insolvent and left people possibly facing such a position in retirement, scheme members would be compensated by the Pension Protection Fund. That scheme is funded by a levy applied to all members of the scheme, so that those who have lost out through no fault of their own are not left destitute as a result.

The principle is simple: women born in the 1950s were not responsible for the failure to communicate the planned changes, so they should not be left alone to face an unfair and disproportionate burden. However difficult this might feel politically for the Government at the moment, they must now act to deliver justice.

2.31 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend, who even got a naughty bit of applause from the Public Gallery.

I congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing this debate and on her passionate opening speech. It is important

that we keep this issue on the parliamentary agenda, and that we continue to speak up for the women who have been so adversely affected by the changes.

Like other hon. Members, I have received a significant number of letters and emails from women who have been badly affected by the impact of the equalisation of the state pension age. I will use my time to share just a few of the experiences of the 6,100 women in my constituency who have been affected by all the various changes since 1995.

Janice wrote to me:

"I was born in 1956 and expected my pension when I was 60. The government has moved the goalposts twice and I now have to wait until I am 66...I am 63 and have left work to spend quality time with my 79-year-old husband. This has not been an easy decision as I am living without my pension."

Then there is Carol, who wrote:

"I only received a letter from the DWP four years before I was 60, so had very little notice at all."

Carol has a private pension, but will not receive her state pension until she is 66. She is caring for her 89-year-old mother, and two of her granddaughters.

Susie Donkin, who was born in 1957, received notice only two years before she turned 60 that she would not receive her pension until she was 66. Another of my constituents, Sue, put it all succinctly when she wrote to me that:

"Women have so much against them. In the past they have had the burden of looking after the children and unable to build careers as men did...wages were not equal and opportunities for married women were not the same either."

The WASPI women need action now. They have already waited long enough, and many are suffering real hardship and are basically destitute, as we have heard. It is totally unacceptable that the Government are simply ignoring the calls of those women. I ask the Minister to please listen to their calls now.

2.34 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I thank you, Mr Bone, for calling me to speak, and my friend the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for securing this important and timely debate. It is absolutely essential to keep this issue on the agenda, as it affects every single constituency. Though not as many of my constituents are affected by the change as those of the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely), nevertheless 4,542 women in Easington are, and I owe it to them to keep fighting until the Government give them the justice that they deserve.

I want to mention my late constituent, Val Roberts. I have referred to her before. She was a determined campaigner in the interests of WASPI women. As I mentioned in a previous debate, she was left with no alternative but to sell her home and move into private rented accommodation. Sadly, Valerie has passed away, and that has redoubled my determination to see that others receive their due state pension.

We have debated this issue many times in the main Chamber and here in the Westminster Hall Chamber. I pay tribute to the WASPI women for their incredibly active campaign over the years and in particular over the past few months. Early-day motion 63 has been signed by 196 right hon. and hon. Members, including Conservative Members—notably the hon. Member for

[*Grahame Morris*]

Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley)—and others present such as my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) and the hon. Members for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), while numerous others have also pushed the campaign forward. An e-petition laid before Parliament attracted well over 100,000 signatures, and support for the campaign continues to grow.

My recollection of a previous Westminster Hall debate is that it was so oversubscribed—as this one would have been today but for the Brexit statement in the main Chamber—that Members were sitting on the window ledges, as those who were at the debate will recall. This is a live political issue that will not go away.

Dr Drew: Does my hon. Friend agree that part of the reason why the WASPI women are so frustrated is that the Government will not engage with the matter? I do not expect them just to give the money over, but it is time for the Government to have a proper discussion with the representatives of WASPI to see whether there is a way forward. At the moment, there does not appear to be. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is the Government's fault?

Grahame Morris: Absolutely. I could not have put it better myself. I hope, however, that the Minister will come up with some positive solutions to address this terrible injustice.

We have heard that 3.8 million women are affected, many of whom will be driven into poverty and reliance on food banks. That is a disgrace in one of the wealthiest nations on earth. Although the report by Philip Alston, the United Nations expert, has not been greeted with enormous acclaim by Department for Work and Pensions Ministers, we should look at what he says. He talked to various campaign groups, including the Women Against State Pension Inequality. He says that certain women, including the WASPI group, have been affected disproportionately by recent changes in policy, particularly those in relation to the pension age. Philip Alston's statement on extreme poverty and human rights in the UK showed that in the four years to 2016-17 the number of pensioners living in poverty had risen by 300,000, or 16%. That is despite assurances from the Government that measures such as the triple lock guarantee would ensure that pensioner poverty was a thing of the past.

I mentioned this in an intervention, but it is an important point, which I hope the Minister will address. This is not just about variations in life expectancy—Ministers keep telling us that people are living longer, so in order to make pensions affordable the state retirement age has to be adjusted. There are huge regional variations not only in life expectancy, but in the amount of time that a retired person can expect to live a healthy and active lifestyle. That, too, should be factored into the Government's calculations.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): Two, three, four or five times the number of WASPI women watching in this room are outside. I pay tribute to them for coming to Westminster, and it is a great shame, as you remarked earlier, Mr Bone, that we could not have had a bigger venue to accommodate them.

Grahame Morris: Absolutely. I applaud the campaigners; they have pressed their case and put pressure Members of Parliament to come up with solutions. I also salute my hon. Friend, who will be addressing a meeting in his constituency on this issue on Saturday.

Chris Stephens: Surely we should consider not just life expectancy but work life expectancy. I suggest that is different. In many cases, women do physically taxing work; there is a huge difference between what someone can be expected to do in their working life and their life as a whole.

Grahame Morris: That is a relevant point. I hope the Minister and his advisers are noting the contributions being made, because they should be all factored into the calculations.

Women are particularly affected by poverty. Reductions in social care services translate into increased burdens on primary care givers, and that burden falls on women disproportionately. Various reports have indicated that, not least a report last year by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which warned that half a million more people would live in poverty if the Government maintained their existing benefits freeze. The Government have room for manoeuvre and some flexibility. They could have used the windfall to end the benefits freeze a year earlier than planned. Instead, they chose to change income tax thresholds in a way that will help those who are better off and to do nothing to help those in greatest need and in poverty. The poor could easily have been spared from the worst effects of poverty, if the political will had existed.

There are things that the Minister and the Government can do immediately. We are unnecessarily making many women of the 1950s generation rely on food banks; some are being forced to sell their homes and rely on the benefits system. That is degrading for women who have worked all their lives, often in very demanding occupations. If the Minister is looking for suggestions to make an immediate start, he could announce that the winter fuel allowance, which can be worth up to £300, will be paid immediately. If the Government were to give the WASPI women that payment, they would be able to have some level of comfort during the cold winter weather. Many in my region in the north-east will have to choose between heating and eating.

We must recognise the injustice faced by these women, because there have been so many missed opportunities to put their position right. I have no doubt that the Pensions Act 2011 accelerated the changes—many Members mentioned that. The former Pensions Minister Steve Webb, who is quoted extensively, said that he wrote to the WASPI women on behalf of the coalition Government after those changes. He said that he not only informed them about the one-year change in pension age, set out in the 2011 Act, but informed them—many for the first time—about an earlier change that meant that some women's state pension retirement age was being extended by six years.

I was incredibly disappointed that the Budget did not offer any form of help or relief for the WASPI women. I acknowledge that some Conservative Members made representations to the Chancellor in all sincerity, and I was disappointed that neither he nor the Prime Minister responded sympathetically to them. I understand the

Prime Minister is a WASPI woman; I would be curious to know from the Minister whether she received notification from the Department for Work and Pensions about the changes in her pension.

The Government must understand that this is a time-sensitive issue. We are willing to work cross-party to find a solution. If the Government are unable to do that, they will let down a whole generation of women who are being denied a fair deal on their state pension. In my constituency, 4,500 women are affected. The campaign is looking for justice, not just warm words.

2.45 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for bringing this important debate before us, and you, Mr Bone, for allowing me to speak directly after my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), who has worked tirelessly over the years to press this cause. He is a true champion of this subject and a far greater expert on it than me.

There are more than 5,000 WASPI women in Hartlepool. I am proud to say that this Saturday, the inaugural meeting of the first Hartlepool branch will take place. My hon. Friend will be the guest speaker. I pay homage to those women of Hartlepool, two of whom, Barbara Crossman and Lynne Taylor, are here today. The event on Saturday has been organised by Councillor Lesley Hamilton, Unison and local WASPI women activists, and will conclude a week in which we have championed the need for women to be engaged in politics. That irony has not escaped me. As parliamentarians, in the centenary year of women's enfranchisement, we have campaigned all week for better representation for women in Parliament, celebrating the suffragettes and sporting their colours on both sides of the House. Yet this injustice towards women's pensions lingers on without resolution.

It is unfortunate that there appears to be a fragmentation of those campaigning on this important issue—there is WASPI, CASPI, which stands for Campaigning Against State Pension Inequality, and the BackTo60 movement—because the main campaign is so important. The Pensions Act 1995 increased the state pension age for women from 60 to 65 in order to equalise it with that for men, with the change to be phased in over 10 years from 2010 for women born between 1950 and 1955. That transition was later sped up by the Pensions Act 2011. Those changes came as a shock to many women who had not been made aware of them. Some women found that they would have to wait up to six years longer for their state pension, which not only affected their retirement plans but pushed some into poverty and forced others to sell their home in order to make ends meet.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his speech. If women were notified, it was more likely to be by those campaign groups than by the Department for Work and Pensions.

Mike Hill: The hon. Gentleman makes a poignant point.

Many of my constituents in Hartlepool have been affected in the way that I described. As a member of the Petitions Committee, I am well aware that the WASPI petition easily achieved the 100,000 signatures required

to generate a debate in Parliament. Subsequently, there have been numerous debates on the subject, with one clear and stark exception—it has not yet been discussed in the main Chamber as part of official Government business. In fact, the Government continue to reject calls for compensation for the unfair ways in which the 1995 and 2011 changes were implemented, which affected the lives of around 2.6 million women.

The Government argue that they had to make the state pension more affordable to taxpayers. It has been estimated that the reforms have delivered £5.1 billion back to the Treasury. A study by the Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that women's household incomes reduced by an average of £32 a week as a result of the increase in the state pension age from 60 in 2010 to 63 in 2016. The IFS also says that the implementation has had a bigger impact on lower-income households—the knock-on effect was a 6.4% increase in the absolute poverty rate.

How can an estimated 3.5 million women, all upstanding citizens who have paid their dues to the state, be treated like this? They were the subject of legislation aimed at equalising the state pension age, but in the process of that happening, they were not properly notified, and therefore not given the necessary warning to make provision for the changes. They were quite simply caught out, which led to a sharp increase in income poverty among 60 to 62-year-old women. The changes have had devastating consequences for the women affected, including many in my constituency. For the Government to allow this state of affairs to continue is nothing short of a disgrace and a scandal.

2.49 pm

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for securing this debate. I want to make a few brief points. Many of them have been made already, but they are worth making again, especially since we have the Minister here.

[*JOAN RYAN in the Chair*]

I have a very active WASPI group on the Isle of Wight, which is led by Yvonne Yelland and others. I pay tribute to the work she has done with her WASPI team. I hear many of the same concerns about financial loss and hardship. It seems to me, as I said earlier, that these people are not naturally given to protesting or being dissenting voices in our society. For decades they have brought up families, in many cases been part of traditional husband and wife structures, and played their parts in their communities very well. For us to ignore these ladies and their plight, in effect because we think they will not dissent, go out on the streets or cause problems, is fundamentally to disrespect them and their contributions to public life.

I am partly motivated by a sense of fairness. These women went into the workforce in a very different era. They did not have any hope of equal pay, which we have more or less achieved in this day and age. Not only did they work generally for less pay than their menfolk and male counterparts, but they now find the modest pensions they had hoped to gain have been pushed back—more than once. They have faced not only pay inequality but unfairness over pensions.

[Mr Bob Seely]

As I said, the WASPI women in my patch have played a strong and active role in our society. Their quiet poverty concerns me. Many of them, their menfolk having also retired, are effectively dependent on one pension. Yvonne and other people from my WASPI group have talked to me about the effect of that on their quality of life. They have to make iniquitous and wretched choices—they are not able to go away or visit their grandchildren, and they perhaps have to think carefully about how they heat their homes in winter.

I do not think we will get anything like a perfect settlement—these women have already been negatively affected by not being able to get the pension they are entitled to—but I strongly support the report of the all-party parliamentary group on state pension inequality for women. I know the Government have to keep an eye on the purse strings, but I have difficulty understanding why some kind of gender assessment cannot be published. I do not see why we cannot have some kind of open, official forum for the WASPI women or their representatives to come and tell their stories about how the changes have affected them.

For me, this is a question of natural justice. Although we are unlikely, for better or worse, to be able to afford to do everything the WASPI women want—I realise we have to balance the books—I hope very much that, now we are moving on in some way from austerity, the Government can move to some kind of transitional arrangement to recognise some of the hardship. They should do that not only through one-off payments but in a structured way that recognises the injustice and that something can and should be done. I know such vague words occasionally come back to haunt politicians, but something can be done to rectify this situation. We need some kind of transitional agreement that respects the WASPI women's plight and, while respecting the financial position we are in, recompenses them, because I believe their cause absolutely to be a just one.

2.54 pm

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I will try to sum up as succinctly as I can. First, let me say that it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely). His was one of the few sincere speeches we heard from Government Members. Since this problem first rose to prominence, I have made every effort to be as factual and politically neutral as possible. I think everyone who has been active in the campaign throughout would agree with me about that. It is great to see the same sensible comment and genuine constructiveness in the Conservative party, because this issue affects every constituency in the UK. It is an honour to follow the hon. Gentleman.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson)—also known as Patricia—on bringing this issue forward for debate again. I honestly cannot remember how many times we have debated it—this must be the 13th or 14th. I find myself thinking, “What the hang am I supposed to say that's new? What more evidence can we give?”

While I praised the sincere comments by Government Members, I want to address some of their more insincere comments. First, however, I want to try to frame this issue a little. What underlies the entire issue is the fact

that austerity does not work. We have been arguing that for years. If someone is a millionaire, their money sits in the bank—it is not the most productive—whereas if we make a conscious effort to ensure that the average worker has more money in their pocket, they spend it and we find that local economies start booming, people start picking themselves up off the ground and communities thrive. We have witnessed from consecutive Conservative Governments the total destruction of any chance of recovery after the economic crash. That is the underlying thing.

The Government say problems such as WASPI just have to be suffered because they are all in the national economic interest. They also say things such as, “The national debt has fallen.” It has not—it has just been transferred to households. Household debt is getting worse because people are being forced to face all the debts for which the Government have decided, “That's not my responsibility, end of.” That just cannot be okay.

As well as transferring that debt to households, the Government are trying to transfer political responsibility for this issue to the Scottish Government. When I say this issue is too important to play politics with, that is exactly that kind of guff I am talking about. I notice that the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) is not here to hear my responses to what he said, but I will indulge other hon. Members with my comments.

Let me make this absolutely clear: section 28 of the Scotland Act 2016 states that the Scottish Government cannot assist

“by reason of old age.”

I do not know how that could be clearer. We cannot pick a group of people and say, “We're going to give you money because of your age.” This Government are trying to peddle the mistruth that we can but are choosing not to. The Scottish National party, along with individuals from other parties, has been at the forefront of doing the Government's work for them. We provided a report—I hand-delivered it to Downing Street, so I know they have a copy—yet there has been no progress. We have yet to hear anything from the Government other than, “Look, we tried our best. We're just going to ignore it.” That is not good enough from any Government.

I was amazed that the hon. Gentleman also said that this was typical SNP and that we did not want any of the responsibility. I am sorry, but that is just untrue. The SNP's stance is for independence. We want all the powers because we want responsibility. We are tired of having Governments we did not vote for dictating to us, creating problems and then turning to us and saying, “You fix it.” The idea that Scottish people should be taxed more to fix it by a Parliament and a party they voted for who are completely against austerity is ridiculous. If anything, I suggest that any tax increases to mitigate the Tories' policies should be referred to as a Union tax, because that is the price Scotland will pay so long as it is part of this Union and allows the Conservatives to have control over pensions.

Let me make it clear again, in case it has been lost in previous debates: if the Minister wants to give us power over pensions we will gladly accept it. We will accept that responsibility and try to do our utmost, but please stop peddling mistruths and trying to deliberately confuse people.

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): Can I give the hon. Member some advice?

Mhairi Black: Yes.

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): You could say that an hon. Member or a Minister is incorrect but you cannot say that it is an untruth. I hope that is helpful.

Mhairi Black: Even if it is untrue?

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): I have given you my advice.

Mhairi Black: Okay. Of course, out of respect for this place that is absolutely fine.

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): I think you know the rules about implying that an hon. Member has told a lie.

Mhairi Black: Forgive me. I am just explaining things as they are in front of me. Of course, I will take that back now.

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): Thank you.

Mhairi Black: I will happily accept that the Ministers and several Conservatives might just be very confused and they may have got their facts wrong, which in itself is quite worrying. I would suggest that they do not make statements making demands of other Governments until they have read the Act themselves.

My last point is that this is all about equality—that is the one thing that pretty much everyone in the Chamber can agree on, and we will no doubt hear the Minister say that this is all about equality. Yesterday I took part in a panel at the Fawcett Society. As hon. Members will be aware, we have had 100 years of women in Parliament—we have had many events. Last night, we had a big photograph on the Terrace with all the male and female MPs and it was all great, with everyone celebrating how far we have come, but these things mean something only if the Government's actions back them up.

Equality is defined as

“the state of being equal, especially in status, rights, and opportunities.”

We have to accept that this generation of women have not had equality throughout their lives. They have suffered so much. To be honest, we are still only at the tip of the iceberg in understanding just the effect on them. I am not talking just about the money in their purses; I am talking about anxiety, depression and other different things, the repercussions of which we are still trying to work out fully. Yet here we are battling the Government again at the last hurdle. It cannot be justified in any sense.

The events in Parliament should be solidifying and celebrating how far women have come, to prove how much we have learned from feminism, to show a true understanding of the double burden that has been placed on women for generation after generation, and to show a true understanding of why the female experience of life has been so different. But here we are. These women are still being patronised, misled and ignored. They are constantly treated as less and by repeating something for long enough the Minister is hoping it will just become true. That is not the case.

Let me be clear: equality is not about treating everyone exactly the same. It is about treating everyone fairly. It is acknowledging who they are, what they have been through, what their experience of life has been, what their experience of Government and policy structures have been and what it has done to affect them. The job of Government now is to make sure that our policies help to mould a society that satisfies and respects all its citizens and their needs—

“the state of being equal especially in status, rights and opportunities.”

If the Minister truly believes that the Government has delivered on that then I am afraid he has not listened. If he, like me, cannot argue that the Government is furthering these women's rights or opportunities, that should be his starting point. I can only hope that his conscience takes him there.

3.4 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I sincerely thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for securing this vital debate and for her consistent record in championing the cause. I am pleased to be able to respond on behalf of the Opposition, not just because it is an opportunity to thank Members for a good, well considered and passionate debate, but because I have raised this issue from the start of my time here, which has not been long—I arrived in 2017.

I do not wish to reiterate what has already been said, but it is clear that the decision to accelerate the rise in women's state pension age in 2011 has had a devastating impact on many women who were born in the 1950s. Many are now facing hardship and poverty as a result, as was recently highlighted in the UN report cited by the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran and my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris).

Some 3.8 million women affected did not have “fair notification” of the changes. Those are the words not only of those 3.8 million women nationally or the 4,000 women affected in my constituency, but of the former Pensions Minister, Steve Webb. Those women certainly deserve recognition for this injustice, and fair transitional protections.

In one of my earliest interventions in the House I mentioned Catherine Vernon, one of more than 4,000 constituents in Weaver Vale affected by this issue. It is an issue that was created by, and as things stand can only be solved by, the current Conservative Government. They could be influenced by the Democratic Unionist party, of course. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is no longer in his place, has been consistent in supporting women and campaigning on this issue. I would hope that he and his colleagues on the DUP Benches will put the same energy that is going into Brexit at the moment into supporting this campaign.

This injustice has been highlighted many times before, and in my short time here the issue has been mentioned more than 100 times in Parliament. We have had debates, lobbies, protests, a petition signed by well over 100,000 people and early-day motion 63, with 196 signatures from across the parties. I recently had the honour of joining many campaigners outside Parliament, and I met up with an old family friend from Castleford, West Yorkshire, named Sheila, who was there with some very vocal campaigners. “I'm sorry, Mike,” she said. “I'm

[Mike Amesbury]

just going to have to go away now—unfortunately I can't spend any longer with you. I've just got to go and block the road with many other people.” I must confess that I did not join her because as an MP I felt that was not my place.

Many MPs have taken the cause forward with passion and conviction, none more so than my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who is co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on state pension inequality for women. Perhaps most memorably, during the Budget statement a few weeks ago we saw a number of women affected making their case in what can only be described as a very direct and loud manner. I was certainly proud to applaud them.

I and many other hon. Members have been inspired by the commitment and tenacity of the campaigners, and I would like to pay tribute to every single one of them in the Chamber now, those who could not get in and everyone watching. However, as today's debate has made clear, we are no closer to securing justice for these women. This Government are no closer to accepting their culpability and doing something about it. As my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East has said before:

“These women feel cheated and disrespected, and they are angry. Every meeting”—
including this one—

“is packed. Not one of these women has any intention of giving up until they get the result that they have earned and that they deserve”.—[*Official Report*, 14 December 2017; Vol. 633, c. 648.]
If the Government think that these campaigners will simply disappear or give up, they could not be more wrong.

As hon. Members have said, the problems are real and UK-wide, and they need action now. We have had contributions today from the hon. Members for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), for Strangford, for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) and for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely), from my hon. Friends the Members for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin), for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for Easington, for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) and for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), and from the Scottish National party spokesperson. Apart from one, they have all been pretty consistent in their opposition to the Government's proposals.

I will cite examples: the hon. Member for Isle of Wight quite eloquently called on the Chancellor, in the forthcoming spending review, to help what I think in his case were 10,000 constituents affected to move toward justice. My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston highlighted a challenging case of a constituent struggling to pay her bills while holding down a part-time job, and my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West highlighted a case of a constituent struggling to look after her husband, who is in his 70s now, and juggling a part-time job when she should be enjoying retirement. Those are the injustices that people face on a daily basis.

As I mentioned, if we are to respond properly to these stories and gain justice for those affected, the Government must listen and they must act. My question to the Minister is, will they do so? Will they commit to extending pension credits to hundreds of thousands of

women born in the '50s? Will they respond to the question that my hon. Friend the Member for Easington asked about extending the winter fuel allowance to the people affected? Beyond that, will they commit to developing a proper and full package of transitional proposals to support these women and address the injustice they have experienced?

It is positive that Andy Burnham, a former Member of this House and now a metro Mayor, has offered a solution on transport, with free bus passes for those affected in Greater Manchester, but let us be clear about this: it should not be up to our local politicians to take action when it is the Government's responsibility to do so. As important as it is for local politicians to come up with such schemes, it in no way compensates for, or reflects the true scale of, the injustice that millions of women have suffered.

The Minister must take responsibility and take action, because the problems go beyond individual hardship; this injustice is furthering wider problems in our society too. It has been pointed out by parliamentary colleagues elsewhere that the gender pay gap for the over-60s has increased by nearly 3% in a year, partly as a result of so many women having to take low-paid jobs just to make ends meet. It is a self-defeating policy, and it needs to be addressed now.

Sadly, the Government's commitment to dealing with people who have been affected, even under the existing regulations, appears to be lacking. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) has previously noted that there are just three case examiners working on almost 3,000 WASPI cases. The average wait for a complaint is 36 weeks, with many taking more than 43 weeks. Will the Minister show some commitment to dealing with such complaints by ensuring that there are enough staff to handle them, so that women are not yet again left in limbo and feeling ignored by this Government?

Yesterday we recognised 100 years since the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918, which allowed women to stand and vote in Parliament, a key milestone in a long campaign for women's equality and suffrage. At the heart of that campaign for equality was a rallying cry to action, “Deeds not Words”. One hundred years on, our 1950s women need deeds, not words, and it is up to the Minister and the Government to deliver them.

3.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing this debate and thank all individual hon. Members for their forthright and impassioned contributions.

The background is well known. The change, announced in 1993, was made for a number of different reasons, notably equality legislation and various cases in the European courts. At the same time, life expectancy and pressures on state spending were being considered. The reality of the present situation is that the number of people receiving a state pension is expected to grow by one third over the next 25 years, and by 2034 there will be more than twice as many people over 100 as there are now. The old age dependency ratio is projected to rise significantly over the next 20-odd years.

Following the passing of the Pensions Act 1995, the actual and projected growth in the pensioner population continued faster than anticipated, due to increasing longevity. As a result, the then Labour Government decided that a state pension age fixed at 65 was not affordable or sustainable. The Pensions Act 2007 was introduced, increasing state pension ages to 66, 67 and 68 years. The coalition Government, as has been explained today, set out further changes in the Pensions Act 2011, which accelerated the equalisation of women's state pension age and brought forward the increase in men and women's state pension age to 66, so that it would be completed by 2020. The Pensions Act 2014 then brought forward the increase in state pension age to 67 by eight years, so that it would be completed by 2028, and introduced regular reviews of the state pension age, the first of which was the Cridland review of 2017, to ensure that the system remains fair, sustainable and affordable for taxpayers on an ongoing basis.

There has been much discussion about life expectancy, which I will touch on briefly at this stage. The reality is that since the second world war there have been dramatic transformations in NHS care, in the quality of healthcare generally and in the nature of healthy lifestyles. Cohort life expectancy projections have also been transformed in that time, rising by more than 10 years for individual men and women. By 2018 those figures had increased by more than 10 years for newly born girls and by more than 12 years for boys, to 92 and 89 respectively. It remains the case that women live significantly longer than men.¹

Grahame Morris: I wonder whether the Minister might address the issue I raised about not just life expectancy, but the anticipation of a healthy and active lifespan after retirement. Many of my constituents have worked in quite demanding occupations and are physically not capable of further work, which the Minister has previously suggested they should take advantage of. They really need to access their state pension.

Guy Opperman: I was going to come to that, but I will turn to that point now. I will deal first with general life expectancy and then with the point on healthy life expectancy.

On general life expectancy, I was going to answer the point made by the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), who is no longer in his place; I know we all have other commitments in other bits of the House today. The Office for National Statistics releases period life expectancy by local area of the UK, but not by individual parliamentary constituency. Life expectancy at birth in Glasgow is 73 years for men and 78 years for women, and it has increased by four years for men and more than two years for women since 2001 to 2003; it has increased in every area of the UK over the same period. Cohort life expectancy at birth in Scotland is currently 87 for men and 90 for women, and cohort life expectancy at age 65 in Scotland is currently 19 years for men and 21 years for women.

I turn to healthy life expectancy. The latest ONS statistics show that 65-year-olds in the UK are expected to live over half their remaining life in good health, at 11.2 years for women and 10.4 years for men. Healthy life expectancy as a whole has increased over recent decades, and healthy life expectancy at age 65 as a

proportion of total life expectancy has been relatively stable since the year 2000. I apologise that I do not have the data for the specific area of the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), but I am happy to write to him on the specifics. I know his constituency very well; it is down the road from mine. In Scotland, healthy life expectancy at age 65 has increased in recent years. I believe that addresses that point.

I stand here defending not only the Conservative Government but the coalition Government and the Labour Government who were in power for 13 years, as well as the nine different Secretaries of State for Work and Pensions and 11 Pensions Ministers over that time, some of whom are still serving in this House today: the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman); the Deputy Speaker, the right hon. Member for Doncaster Central (Dame Rosie Winterton); and the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper); and various other Members such as the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) and the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), all of whom supported the policy changes that took place because of the increase in life expectancy.

Mrs Hodgson: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. I was waiting until he finalised his point. This issue goes all the way back to when it started in 1995, under various Governments who had decades of opportunities to let people know about the changes. The ball has got to stop somewhere. The buck that gets passed around has stopped here with this Government. This is real now. These women are being left destitute. Given all the failures of the past, will he now do something to help the women rather than just say, "Oh, well, it's not just me. Other people could have done something and didn't."? It is him now and he can do something about it.

Guy Opperman: The issue of communication has been addressed on an ongoing basis in this House and in the Work and Pensions Committee, which did a highly detailed assessment of the matter a couple of years ago. The matter began in 1993 and received considerable publicity at the time. Since 1995, the Government have gone to significant lengths to communicate the changes in various ways—

Mrs Hodgson indicated dissent.

Guy Opperman: She asked me the question—let me finish. The Government have gone to significant lengths to communicate the changes to ensure that those affected were fully aware of their rights. That has been done using a range of formats, communication methods and styles—as I have explained, it has been gone through in a multitude of ways by the Work and Pensions Committee—including communication campaigns, information online, and individual letters posted to approximately 1.2 million women who were directly affected by the 1995 Act changes. A further 5 million letters were sent later to those affected by the 2011 Act changes between January 2012 and November 2013. Between April 2000 and the end of September 2018, the Department for Work and Pensions provided more than 24 million personalised state pension statements, and we continue to encourage individuals to request a personalised state pension statement.

1. [Official Report, 17 December 2018, Vol. 651, c. 4MC.]

[Guy Opperman]

On transitional arrangements, the coalition Government and previous Governments gave careful consideration to a range of options that were debated at great length in this House on repeated occasions. The matter was debated during the passage of the 1995 Act, the 2007 Act, the 2011 Act and the 2014 Act. Any amendment to the current legislation that created a new inequality between men and women would unquestionably be highly dubious as a matter of law. Secondly, causing younger people to bear a greater share of the cost of the pension system in that way would be unfair and would undermine the principle of intergenerational fairness that is integral to our state pension reforms.

Mrs Hodgson: On that point about intergenerational fairness, we have to factor in the unfairness that the 1950s women face for all the reasons that have been set out: historical reasons such as paying a lower stamp, women not working as often as men, and spending time at home when they had children. With regard to intergenerational fairness, I think the younger generation accept that it is different for the 1950s women.

Guy Opperman: I take the hon. Lady's point, but that matter was unquestionably considered by female Ministers such as the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham and the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford. As the matter has been debated on an ongoing basis, it has been an evolutionary process throughout the past 23 years. I am the latest of many different Ministers who have stood in this post, and I continue to defend the actions of Governments and Ministers who went before me.

Mhairi Black: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: I will give way to the hon. Lady, but first I want to address the point about complaints that was raised by the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) and others.

A number of different processes were raised in respect of complaints, including departmental complaints. The Government have worked extensively—there is no change in the policy approach to departmental complaints under this Government or previous Governments—to engage with a significant amount of correspondence from women who have contacted them on this issue. There have been approximately 8,000 complaints on the topic and a significant amount of resource has been dedicated to it. The Government believe there has been no maladministration within the Department for Work and Pensions with regard to the communication of state pension age changes under this or previous Governments.

We have an Independent Case Examiner. If the House will bear with me, I will explain the processes. The steps the Department took to notify the general public about changes to state pension age have undergone additional scrutiny by the Independent Case Examiner, an independent office holder who reviews complaints about the Department for Work and Pensions. The Independent Case Examiner does not consider policy or legislative issues, but examines whether the Department for Work and Pensions has appropriately administered stated policies or procedures. The Independent Case Examiner's team has concluded

investigations into approximately 185 women's state pension cases to date, and in every case there was no finding that the Department had failed to provide appropriate notice of the changes.

I will finish the last two aspects on complaints and then I will give way to the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South.

We also have a Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman. Some complaints have been escalated to the ombudsman, who has identified a sample of cases that they feel reflect the issues raised in the WASPI complaints. They are now considering whether to investigate, and, if so, the scope of that investigation. Should they decide to investigate, the Government will co-operate in full with that process.

Finally, colleagues will be aware that there is an ongoing judicial review application. It would be inappropriate for me to comment in any detail on the legal case. I can confirm that the High Court has refused the claimant permission to apply for judicial review, but I understand there is a reapplication for oral permission. I spent 10 years both suing and defending the Government as a judicial review lawyer. My last client was a gentleman by the name of Ed Balls when he was Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families. I will not comment on the merit of the matter, because it is for an individual judge to decide. Now I give way to the hon. Lady.

Mhairi Black: I am genuinely grateful to the Minister for giving way; no doubt I am probably getting on his nerves after all this time. Can the Government not concede that there has clearly been terrible communication? It was 14 years before letters went out, and now that women are coming forward and saying how hard this issue is hitting them—and bearing in mind the lives and the inequalities that they have suffered—the Government are still not listening to them. When he talks about intergenerational fairness, my generation is looking at how the Government are treating the older generation because they are our aunties or grannies, so how can we have any faith in the pension system? Will there even be a pension system years from now?

Guy Opperman: The point of having a balance between spending on state pensions and the number of people coming into receipt of the state pension is to ensure that there is a state pension in the future. With a larger number of people becoming pensioners, any Government has to make assessments, as has been shown, and that is what has happened.

Ben Lake: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: I will give way in a second. First I will address the poverty point.

The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) raised the issue of poverty and others have raised the United Nations report. In the early 1970s, roughly 40% of pensioners were in relative poverty. That figure is now down to 16%, one of the lowest rates since comparable records began. No one disputes that more has to be done, but that is a significant improvement. Since 2010, there are 200,000 fewer pensioners in absolute poverty before housing costs. That is a record low. The reality is that we spend approximately

£121 billion on benefits for pensioners, which includes the £97 billion spent on state pensions this year—2018-19. The overall trend in the percentage of pensioners living in poverty is of a significant fall over several decades. At the same stage, the basic state pension has risen by £660 more than if it had just been uprated by earnings since 2010.

Ben Lake: I understand the Minister's argument about the need to ensure that the number of people entering the state pension system is equalled out, but surely if we are to readdress the matter or rebalance any imbalance, it would be far fairer to do so for those in my generation, who have decades to plan for our pension and retirement, than to punish the women who for decades worked and strove, in the reasonable expectation of retiring on a particular date.

Guy Opperman: That is the debate that, clearly, has to be held. I return to the point that the decision was originally taken in 1993 by my—then very youthful—right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) and was supported by a series of Governments and Ministers way more experienced than I am, who have been here over the past twenty-something years. I am merely continuing that debate and discussion about how we progress.

Patricia Gibson: I thought I heard the Minister say that there had been a fall in pensioner poverty. That leads me to question where he gets his information. The UN special rapporteur was clear: between 2012-13 and 2016-17 there was a 300,000 rise in pensioner poverty in the UK, which he specifically linked to the rise in state pension age. Is the special rapporteur wrong?

Guy Opperman: We may take some time to dissect the specific figures on that, but I will attempt to do so—[*Interruption.*]—if the hon. Lady bears with me.

One starts with the basic principle that the figure used to be at 40% for relative poverty and is now down to 16%. The reason for the 300,000 increase is that more pensioners are in relative poverty after housing costs. That is the issue in relation to relative poverty, because in the past few years the housing costs of those of working age have reduced, because of lower mortgage rates. That reduction in housing costs increases income for those with mortgages, and that pushes median income up. That then feeds through to increase the number of pensioners who are below the 60% of median income poverty line, as the vast majority of pensioners do not have a mortgage and so do not see any benefit from lower mortgage rates. There can be a discussion about relative and absolute poverty and how to measure them, but the overall trend is dramatically down for such poverty, and I believe the explanation of what the rapporteur said is as I have just set out.

I have not addressed the specific point about the Scottish National party proposals and the vexed question of the Scotland Act 2016. As I understand it, various previous proposals—and specifically the one outlined today—would reverse the 2011 Act in its entirety. The SNP's projected cost for that is £8 billion. We manifestly disagree and suggest it would be in the region of £30 billion, with further costs as long as women's state pension age was below 66.

As to the Scotland Act powers, I accept that the hon. Members for North Ayrshire and Arran and for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) and I have had robust debate on many such occasions, but I would always say as I have previously, "Don't take this from me." I will read the letter from Jeane Freeman of 22 June 2017, in which she sets out what payments can potentially be made under sections 26, 28 and 24 of the Scotland Act 2016. Under the heading of section 26 she states:

"This power is limited to providing help with 'short term needs', and those needs must require to be met to avoid a risk to a person's wellbeing... Their needs and the risks to their well-being would have to be assessed individually."

Mhairi Black: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: I will set these things out, and then the hon. Lady can come back at me.

On the creation of the benefit under section 28, I point out with great respect to the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South that in paragraph 3 of the same letter, her own party's Pensions Minister in Scotland rebuts the point on old age—and she puts "old age" in inverted commas:

"I accept that 'old age' is not defined in the legislation, and that most people would not regard this age group as old".

Under section 28, there is the capability to create a new benefit. That is the heading that Jeane Freeman gives to the relevant part of the letter: "Creation of a new benefit using section 28". Finally, the situation on top-up and reserve benefits under section 24 is also set out.

Mhairi Black: I am very appreciative again that the Minister has given way. I want to say something very directly. First, if he is suggesting that the Scottish Government should mitigate the situation, that does not solve the problem for the rest of the UK, where women are suffering just as much. Secondly, that leads me to question who is responsible. If he wants us to take the burden, will he devolve pensions control to us to let us do it? Currently he is saying, "With the limited powers you have, try and fix this whole problem." It is like giving us control over the window wipers and complaining about the direction of the car. What he suggests has nothing to do with the issue. Does the Minister support the Scottish Government taking full responsibility for pensions?

Guy Opperman: I am not going to re-litigate and re-debate the Scotland Act 2016. I accept that the Scottish Parliament cannot provide assistance by way of a pension to individuals who qualify by reason of old age. However, those who have not attained state pension age are, by definition, of working age, and are not therefore being provided support by reason of old age, and therefore the restriction relied upon by the hon. Members for Paisley and Renfrewshire South and for North Ayrshire and Arran does not apply.

We spend about £50 billion a year on welfare disability support in this country, and the key choice facing any Government of any form when seeking to control and manage state pension spend is whether to increase the state pension age or to pay lower pensions, with an inevitable impact on pensioner poverty. The only alternative is to ask the working generation to pay an ever-larger

[Guy Opperman]

share of their income to support pensioners. Successive Governments have made appropriate, difficult decisions to equalise and increase the state pension age, and we do not intend to change that today.

3.37 pm

Patricia Gibson: I know that I have just two or three minutes to sum up the debate. I am beyond disappointed. We have heard nothing new today. We have seen again a huge lack of any real and meaningful engagement from the UK Government. That lack of engagement has to end. It is dismissive of and disrespectful to an entire generation of women.

Giving speeches on the history of pensions is not what the debate was about, and it does nothing to address either the fact that women's pensions were stolen or the suffering caused as a result. The debate was not about life expectancy; it was about the theft perpetrated upon women. These women were often

excluded from company and workplace pensions. They raised families and cared for relatives and they have now been abandoned by the UK Government. To be told that there is no solution, as we heard from one Government Member today, is frankly an insult. It is not good enough, and the campaign will go on.

Brexit is entirely consuming UK politics, but we can and will continue to keep this issue firmly on the agenda. These women are our mothers, sisters, grannies and wives, and the UK Government have not heard the last of this. The entire state pension system has been undermined by this travesty. A social contract has been broken, and I remind those in this place that an injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered state pension equalisation for women born in the 1950s.

3.39 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 22 November 2018

EDUCATION

Higher Education Student Finance

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): On 2 July 2018, I made a written ministerial statement confirming that that maximum tuition fees for the 2019-20 academic year in England will be maintained at the levels that apply in the 2018-19 academic year, the second year in succession that fees have been frozen. This means that the maximum level of tuition fees for a full-time course will remain at £9,250 for the next academic year (2019-20).

I can now announce further details of student finance arrangements for higher education students undertaking a course of study in the 2019-20 academic year.

Maximum undergraduate loans for living costs will be increased by forecast inflation (2.8%) in 2019-20. And the same increase will apply to maximum disabled students' allowances for students with disabilities undertaking full-time and part-time undergraduate courses in 2019-20. Maximum grants for students with child or adult dependants who are attending full-time undergraduate courses in 2019-20 will also increase by forecast inflation in 2019-20.

We are also increasing support for students undertaking postgraduate courses in 2019-20. Maximum loans for students starting masters degree and doctoral degree courses from 1 August 2019 onwards will be increased by forecast inflation (2.8%) in 2019-20. And for postgraduate students with disabilities, we are increasing the maximum postgraduate disabled students' allowance to £20,000 in 2019-20 from its current level of £10,993, which will help the most disabled postgraduate students with high support needs.

The Government have created a new form of leave for children under section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016 (the Dubs amendment). This will ensure that those children who do not qualify for refugee or humanitarian protection leave will still be able to remain in the UK long term. Those who qualify for this new form of leave will be able to study, work, access public funds and healthcare, and apply for settlement after five years, without paying a fee. In line with this change, I can announce today that "Dubs children" starting higher education courses from 1 August 2019 onwards will be subject to home fee status and will be able to apply for student support.

Further details of the student support package for 2019-20 are set out in the document available as an online attachment.

I expect to lay regulations implementing changes to student finance for undergraduates and postgraduates for 2019-20 early in 2019. These regulations will be subject to parliamentary scrutiny.

The attachment can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2018-11-22/HCWS1103/>.

[HCWS1103]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Immigration

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): I am today publishing a review of applications by tier 1 (general) migrants refused under paragraph 322(5) of the immigration rules.

The review responds to claims that hundreds of highly skilled workers—who entered the UK under this now closed route—were facing removal due to making minor errors in their tax returns.

Our review has examined 1,697 applications refused since January 2015. The discrepancies between the earnings declared to the Home Office and those shown by their tax records were over £10,000 in 88% of cases (1,490). The pattern of behaviour in amending tax records, often close to making a further Home Office application, was sufficiently unusual for HM Revenue and Customs to draw it to the Home Office's attention.

Applicants were given the opportunity to explain these discrepancies. In many cases, having taken all the evidence and applicants' explanations into account, we were not satisfied that these were minor tax errors as claimed, but attempts to misrepresent self-employed earnings, most likely for the purposes of obtaining leave or settlement in the UK.

Where the explanation given was not, in our view, satisfactory, applications were refused under paragraph 322(5). There has been some criticism that the use of this rule has been disproportionate. I want to be clear that we are not claiming these applicants are a threat to national security. Refusal under this rule covers a wide range of character and conduct issues and its use is appropriate in these types of cases where the evidence supports it (a point that the courts and tribunals have acknowledged).

The review has looked at litigation outcomes in both statutory appeals and judicial reviews. The picture here is mixed. Some courts and tribunals have accepted applicants' explanations for discrepancies that the Home Office had previously rejected. Others, faced with broadly similar arguments, often around the role of applicants' accountants, have supported the Home Office's position. We look forward to the Court of Appeal providing clarity on some of these issues in upcoming hearings early next year and will consider in the light of these further rulings.

Aside from cases which have been allowed by the courts and tribunals, the review has identified 12 decisions which we intend to overturn, and a further 19 cases where we will seek more information from applicants before reconsidering their cases. The Home Office will contact each of the 31 individuals concerned to resolve their cases by the end of December. Errors of this kind are always regrettable, and I do not seek to minimise the impact that the error may have had on the individuals concerned. I will also ensure that the findings in this small minority of cases are used to inform our future decision making, to ensure that similar errors are not repeated.

Skilled migrants make an important contribution to our economic wellbeing and our society. The Government recognise the need to attract and retain them, and our

immigration system will continue to do so. However, it is important that people play by the rules to preserve the integrity of the immigration system.

I will arrange for a copy of the review and accompanying guidance to be placed in the Library of the House and for them to be made available on gov.uk.

[HCWS1102]

PRIME MINISTER

Intelligence Oversight

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): The Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (ISC) has today laid before Parliament two reports: its report into the terror attacks last year in Westminster, Manchester, London Bridge, Finsbury Park and Parsons Green, titled “The 2017 Attacks: What Needs to Change?”; and its annual report 2017-18. I welcome both of these reports and thank the Committee for the work that has gone into them. The Government will consider both reports in full and respond formally in due course.

The 2017 post-attacks review

The five terror attacks in 2017 claimed the lives of 36 people. Many more were injured. Our thoughts remain with the victims and all those affected by the attacks.

I have spoken before of the severe threat posed by terrorism. The police and intelligence community face an unprecedented challenge and have to make difficult prioritisation decisions every day. Since the tragic attack in Westminster, 17 further plots have been disrupted including four extreme right-wing plots.

It is right that we look at what happened so that we have the best chance of preventing further attacks. In 2017, MI5 and the police led internal reviews of the handling of intelligence relating to the Westminster, Manchester, London Bridge and Finsbury Park attacks to identify enhancements to their operational practices. They also commissioned a broader operational improvements review, which is commended by the ISC in its report. Both reviews were independently overseen by Lord Anderson of Ipswich. A review of the Parsons Green attack has also led to improvements in the implementation of the Channel programme.

There has been significant effort to implement the recommendations of the operational improvement review. Lord Anderson is currently conducting an independent stocktake of the progress that has been made to deliver the recommendations, and will report his findings to the Home Secretary early next year. A public report on his findings will then be laid in the House.

This work is happening alongside Government’s wider efforts to tackle the threat from terrorism. On June 4, we published a strengthened version of the UK’s comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy, Contest. This reflects the findings of a fundamental review of all aspects of counter-terrorism, and builds on the lessons learned from last year’s attacks. Through the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Bill 2017-19, we are ensuring that the police, prosecutors and the judiciary are better equipped with the powers they need to tackle the threat posed by terrorism.

The ISC’s annual report 2017-18

The ISC’s 2017-18 annual report considers in some detail the case for the UK and allied response following the chemical weapons strike on Douma in April. The OPCW interim report on the Douma attack clearly indicated the presence of chlorine at the site and the UN Commission of Inquiry’s most recent report supported the Government’s conclusion that a chemical weapons attack was carried out on Douma on 7 April. The response was a limited, targeted and effective strike to degrade Syrian chemical weapons capability and deter their future use. As I said at the time, it is in our national interest to prevent the further use of chemical weapons in Syria and to uphold and defend the global consensus that these weapons should not be used.

[HCWS1101]

ISC Detainee Reports

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): On 28 June 2018, the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (ISC) published its detainee mistreatment and rendition reports. Today, the Government are publishing their response.

The Government are grateful for the extensive investigation that the Committee has undertaken into detainee matters and have now considered the conclusions and recommendations set out in its reports.

The Committee found no evidence indicating that UK personnel directly carried out physical mistreatment of detainees. Nor did it find any evidence that any rendition flights transited the UK with a detainee on board. The Committee’s report does state that two detainees are known to have transited through the British overseas territory of Diego Garcia. This fact was originally reported to the House by the then Foreign Secretary in February 2008.

The Committee has said that it was unable to take evidence from some witnesses operating overseas at the time. The Government engaged as fully as possible with the ISC, within the terms of its memorandum of understanding. They spent many thousands of hours reviewing corporate records and disclosed all relevant documents amounting to thousands of pages, and Ministers and senior officials concerned gave many hours of oral evidence. Parliamentary Committees do not ordinarily seek evidence from junior officials and the Government believe they were right in asking only senior officials to speak to the events set out in the documentary record provided to the ISC.

In a specific case, the Committee found evidence suggesting that UK personnel were directly involved in detainee mistreatment administered by others and that this had not been fully investigated. The Ministry of Defence has asked the service police legacy investigations team to consider whether further investigation is required.

In the light of the ISC’s reports, the Government have asked Sir Adrian Fulford, the Investigatory Powers Commissioner, to consider how the consolidated guidance could be improved, taking account of the Committee’s views and those of civil society. He has since conducted a public consultation and the Government look forward to receiving his proposals in due course.

The Government continue to give serious consideration to the examination of detainee issues and whether any more lessons can be learned, and, if so, how.

Copies of the response have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses (Cm 9724).

[HCWS1100]

TRANSPORT

Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy: Safety Review Call for Evidence

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): Cycling and walking are increasingly being understood not just as modes of transport but as crucial parts of an integrated approach to issues of health, obesity, air quality, and town and city planning.

In this context, I am today publishing a response to the cycling and walking investment strategy (CWIS): safety review call for evidence (call for evidence).

The CWIS, published in 2017, set out the Government's ambition to make cycling and walking the natural choice for shorter journeys, or as part of a longer one, by 2040. When the Department for Transport published the call for evidence on 9 March this year, I restated the Government's commitment to increasing cycling and walking and making the UK's roads safer for vulnerable users, including cyclists, pedestrians and horse riders.

The call for evidence was very well received, with over 14,000 responses from members of the public of every age and description, as well as local authorities, cycling and walking organisations, police forces and more. People responded with vigour, sending the Department for Transport great ideas, evidence of what works, examples of good practice from other countries, innovative technologies, and imaginative solutions.

More recently on 18 October, the Department published a purely factual document summarising the call for evidence responses and setting out the main themes emerging from our analysis.

We continued to analyse the contributions to the call for evidence, as well as outputs from our regional workshops held in London, Bristol, Birmingham and

Manchester. The Government response published today includes a range of safety measures that will bring cycling and walking closer together as part of the Government's overall ambition to increase active travel. The response also sets out a vision and a two-year plan of action, with 21 packages of measures addressing the key themes and issues raised in the call for evidence.

Among the key measures are:

- A review of guidance in The Highway Code to improve safety for vulnerable road users;

- New investment to support the police to improve enforcement by developing a national back office function to handle footage provided through dash-cam evidence;

- Enforcement against parking in mandatory cycle lanes;

- The appointment of a new cycling and walking champion to raise the profile of active travel;

- Encouragement for local authorities to increase investment in cycling and walking infrastructure to 15% of total transport infrastructure spending

- Work with key cycling and walking organisations to develop a behaviour change campaign alongside the action plan.

All these measures are designed to support the continued growth of cycling and walking, with all the benefits they bring to our communities, economy, environment and society.

I recognise and value the tremendous amount of activity being undertaken nationally to keep vulnerable road users safe. The Department for Transport wants to provide effective leadership and support to the wide range of partners and other bodies who collectively work together with great commitment to make a real difference to cycling and walking safety. We look forward to continuing our close working with other Government Departments, devolved Administrations, motoring agencies, local councils, police, cycling and walking organisations, motoring groups, road safety campaigners and wider stakeholders to take forward this action plan.

The House may also be aware that we have recently carried out a separate consultation on new cycling offences, which closed on 5 November. It sought views on whether cyclists should face offences similar to those of causing death or serious injury when driving dangerously or carelessly. We are in the process of analysing responses and will publish our response in due course.

[HCWS1099]

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