

**Tuesday
11 December 2018**

**Volume 651
No. 221**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 11 December 2018

House of Commons

Tuesday 11 December 2018

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—
Sporting Infrastructure: Cornwall

1. **Derek Thomas** (St Ives) (Con): If he will take steps to increase funding for sporting infrastructure in Cornwall. [908121]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): The Government's investment in sport is delivered through Sport England, which has invested £9 million in sport and physical activity in Cornwall since 2013, including £3 million for sports facilities.

Derek Thomas: Dare I say, Mr Speaker, that your tie today is a fine one?

The Minister will be aware that I have been working with stakeholders in Cornwall for 10 years now to deliver a stadium for Cornwall. A stadium is not only about sport, although we should celebrate Cornish sport, it is also about the health and wellbeing of children and adults right across the county of Cornwall. We have been working hard and we are nearly there with the money; what more can the Treasury do to deliver on this fantastic opportunity?

Robert Jenrick: I know that my hon. Friend has campaigned for a new stadium for Cornwall since even before he was elected. At his instigation, I met the Cornwall Council officer responsible for the project last week. With the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, we will continue to work closely with partners in Cornwall and Sport England to seek a means to bring this exciting project to a successful conclusion. We appreciate that, as the most remote team on the mainland, the Cornish Pirates deserve a fitting home for the future.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Any supplementary question does need to be about Cornwall, not about Devon.

Luke Pollard: Plymouth Argyle has lots of supporters in Plymouth, but is also the premier choice for many Cornish supporters, too. There is concern about the lack of grassroots sports pitches in Devon, Plymouth and Cornwall. Will the Minister set out how the Treasury is going to fund local government—especially in the absence of a local government settlement—to support the development of grassroots football, especially through the provision of changing rooms for not only boys and men but women and girls?

Robert Jenrick: That was very tenuous. Once a new stadium has been built in Truro, perhaps people will not need to go to Plymouth to support Argyle. We are supporting grassroots sports in several ways—for example, the soft drinks industry levy has ensured that more than £500 million of additional funding has gone into school sport and into the health and wellbeing schemes that are delivered, along with breakfast clubs, in our primary schools.

Support for the High Street

2. **Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to support the high street. [908122]

12. **Peter Heaton-Jones** (North Devon) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to support the high street. [908133]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): Budget 2018 announced our plan for the high street, which provides £1.5 billion of support to fund local areas as they make their high streets fit for the future. The plan includes a £675 million future high streets fund, planning reforms, a high streets taskforce, support for community assets and a cut by a third to the business rates bills of independent retailers for two years from April 2019, saving businesses almost £900 million.

Maria Caulfield: Although I welcome the measures that the Chancellor just mentioned—they are helping high streets greatly—the business rates system is currently not working for high streets. Will the Chancellor therefore consider a type of transaction tax that would level the playing field between online businesses and those based on premises, and also enable businesses such as Starbucks and Amazon to start to pay their fair share of tax?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend makes a point that has been raised on many occasions. There is concern about the way the business rates system works. In 2016, we conducted a fundamental review of business rates that agreed that property-based taxes were easy to collect, difficult to avoid and stable. There was no consensus around any replacement for business rates. My hon. Friend will know that separately the Government announced in the Budget a digital services tax to ensure that digital businesses pay tax that reflects the value that they derive from UK users.

Peter Heaton-Jones: Will the Chancellor join me in congratulating Barnstaple, where the high street has bucked the national trend? We have fewer vacant premises and increasing footfall. Will the Government continue to support retailers, especially the smaller independent businesses that are the backbone of our economy?

Mr Hammond: Yes, I am happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating Barnstaple on the success of its high street. Of course, there are many successful high streets throughout the United Kingdom, even at a time when the high street overall is under pressure. I am sure my hon. Friend is aware that Devon's success does not stop at the high street; it has seen a wider economic achievement, with unemployment across Devon down by no less than 57% since 2010 and down by 25% over the past year.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): A buoyant high street is absolutely vital for communities such as mine in Batley and Spen. The Treasury Committee report released today suggests that northern towns are more exposed to Brexit trade-related risks than others. With that in mind, will the Minister tell us what has been put in place to support communities such as mine that will be hardest hit post Brexit?

Mr Hammond: The answer, of course, is to ensure that we leave the European Union in a way that supports our economy across the United Kingdom. That means a negotiated deal that allows us to have a smooth exit and retain a close trading partnership with our European neighbours in the future.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Some 51,000 shops on the UK's high streets closed in the past year. Local businesses in even successful places such as Kendal and Windermere struggle because they are forced to pay huge taxes while mega-online retailers get away with paying next to no tax at all. Will the Chancellor give a well-deserved Christmas present to the high street by halving business rates there paid for by taxing internet firms on the basis of their turnover, not just their profits?

Mr Hammond: I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman was in his place for the Budget, but I did in fact announce a digital services tax based on turnover. I also announced a reduction of one third in the business rates for independent retailers. I am very happy to have a meeting with him and explain the changes in detail.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) for mentioning the Treasury Committee report published this morning. The Treasury Committee is about more than Brexit, as I hope this House is too, and next week we will be holding a joint Committee session with the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee on business rates. I am sure that the Financial Secretary is looking forward to his evidence session greatly.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride) *indicated assent.*

Nicky Morgan: I see the right hon. Gentleman nodding.

Business rates are an issue for retailers, and there are some simple things that could be changed now. Does the Chancellor agree, for example, that, for many retailers, their busiest period is Christmas when they could perhaps agree to pay more in business rates and then pay less in periods when they are less busy, so, overall, the same amount is paid, but there is flexibility in payment?

Mr Hammond: If my right hon. Friend is asking whether there is anything that local authorities can do to help with the cash-flow challenges of seasonally based businesses, I am very happy to take that away and look at it and see whether there is anything that we can do to help in that way. The challenge, of course, is that business rates raise £25 billion a year and are a vital part of our overall tax system. If we are to change them, we must find a sustainable way of replacing them.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Chancellor does not like it when I use what he calls my "synthetic passion", so, very quietly, may I beg him to take very seriously indeed where we are as a nation? It looks like we are heading for financial meltdown: people are losing their confidence in this country—[*Interruption.*] People are losing their confidence. My high street retailers—the big people and the small people—have their heads in their hands, and householders see a real likelihood of a 30% drop in their home value. Will he do something to stop this madness?

Mr Hammond: There are a couple of points there. First, I should just say to the hon. Gentleman that I was actually congratulating him the other day on his display of synthetic anger, which is one of the best in the House. On the wider point, the high street is facing challenges because of the uptake of online retailing across the UK at a faster rate than in any other large economy. That means that our high streets will have to adapt. The Government cannot save the high street from the need to change. What they can do is support it as it goes through that process of change.

22. [908144] **Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): I am currently working with Fylde Borough Council and St Anne's Town Council on a package of measures to regenerate the town of St Anne's in my constituency. Will the Chancellor of the Exchequer meet me briefly in order to talk through how we can best take advantage of the excellent package of measures that he put forward in his Budget?

Mr Hammond: I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend. My hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary is the expert on this matter and he might find a meeting with him more fruitful, but either one of us is very happy to meet him.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Many of the shops and firms located on the high street are represented by the Federation of Small Businesses. Has the Chancellor seen what the FSB has said about the current Brexit position? Its chair has said:

"Planning ahead has now become impossible for a lot of firms as we simply don't know what environment we'll be faced with in little more than 100 days' time...the economic warning signs are now flashing red."

The Chancellor knew full well in our debate last week that the Prime Minister's deal was not going to receive the support of the House. Is it not only right that he is straight with her by telling her that businesses cannot face any more uncertainty and that a decision on the deal cannot be delayed and put off until late January, as some around her are suggesting?

Mr Hammond: I would be the first to agree that businesses need an end to uncertainty and clarity about the future, but frankly I think that the shadow Chancellor is probably the last person who should give us that lecture, because his policy agenda has been designed to create uncertainty and a lack of clarity for business in the future. What the Prime Minister is doing—absolutely rightly—is making a last attempt to see whether she can get further concessions from our partners in the

European Union, which is clearly the desire of this House. She will come back and report to the House when she has done so.

John McDonnell: Both sides of the House have to address the seriousness of the situation we face. The director general of the British Chambers of Commerce has said:

“Firms are looking on with utter dismay at the ongoing saga in Westminster”.

Today’s Treasury Committee report is devastating in its criticisms of the way in which the Government have sought to assess options not even on the table. A month ago, the Chancellor committed his support to a deal that guaranteed frictionless trade with the EU. Will he now be absolutely straight with the Prime Minister and tell her that unless she comes back with a deal that does fulfil his promise of frictionless trade, it will not succeed in protecting our economy and could not be supported?

Mr Hammond: The right hon. Gentleman can practise his synthetic concern at the Dispatch Box, but the remedy lies in his hands. There is a deal on the table that will end the uncertainty and allow this country to move on, and our polling shows that that is exactly what the British people want. All he has to do is get behind it, vote for the Prime Minister’s deal and we can all move on.

Mr Speaker: I say very gently to the Chancellor, to whom I have been listening with great care, that it is quite difficult to vote for something if there is not a vote. I am only trying to help him; it is a point that is so blindingly obvious that I am surprised that I have to state it, but manifestly I do.

Children’s Services

3. **Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the adequacy of funding allocated to local authorities for children’s services. [908123]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): Spending on the most vulnerable children has increased by over £1.5 billion since 2010. Thanks to our increased investment in childcare, the overall early years and children’s services budget has increased to £12.7 billion this year.

Bambos Charalambous: Will the Minister please acknowledge that she is simply putting a sticking plaster on the crisis in children’s social care? It is essential that children’s social care gets an extra £3 billion by 2025, and the Chancellor’s Budget commitment is less than 3% of the way there. Will the Minister admit that we are not on track to meet this target?

Elizabeth Truss: It is certainly the case that we are seeing rising demand for children’s services, but the important thing is that we help children’s services departments intervene early. We are rolling out a pilot programme this year to adopt models like that used in North Yorkshire that has reduced the number of children going into care, the number being arrested and the number ending up in accident and emergency, so it is important that we spend the money in the right way.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Me and my colleagues on the all-party parliamentary group for children were delighted by the extra money that was found for children’s services in the Budget. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important that we continue to distribute extra funds fairly across all regions of the UK?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is exactly right. We also need to make sure that we are sharing the best practice of those authorities that are successfully helping to keep children out of care. We are also using the initiative of the children’s Minister to ensure that we are using independent school facilities better and helping with mental health problems. We need to do all those things.

Further Education Funding

4. **Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education on the adequacy of funding for further education. [908124]

Elizabeth Truss: I regularly meet the Secretary of State for Education to discuss school and FE funding issues. We have protected the base rate of funding for 16 to 17-year-olds between 2015 and 2020.

Nic Dakin: The national funding rate for 16 to 18-year-olds has been frozen for five years. That is beginning to cause significant problems in delivering for this age group. Will the Government do something about it before it is too late?

Elizabeth Truss: What is important is that we are achieving better results for 16 to 18-year-olds. We are seeing more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds going to university and improvements in the quality of apprenticeships that are being taken up by young people. We are also putting extra money into the new T-levels, which are due to improve technical education.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Our FE colleges are great poverty-fighting institutions that provide vital ladders of opportunity for our constituents. Given that school pay rises have been fully funded and FE has only had 0.1%, is there not a case for parity of esteem for teachers in FE colleges?

Elizabeth Truss: It was indeed very good that we were able to give teachers, particularly those on the lowest wages, a 3.5% pay rise this year—the highest pay rise seen for a decade. FE colleges are set up differently. They are independent institutions that have the wherewithal to change the pay for lecturers who work within them.

Major Infrastructure Projects: Funding

5. **Priti Patel** (Witham) (Con): What criteria his Department uses to approve funding for major infrastructure projects. [908125]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): All public spending proposals, including those for major infrastructure projects, are appraised against five key considerations: the strategic case for change, the net value to society of the intervention, the affordability of

the proposal, the robustness of delivery plans, and whether a realistic commercial deal can be struck to deliver the proposal. As I announced in the Budget, there will be a zero-based review of capital spending at the spending review next year.

Priti Patel: The Chancellor will know that Essex is a gateway for infrastructure and trade from around the world, but he will also know that we sorely lack major infrastructure investment across the county, despite having some very compelling business cases. What will he do to ensure that we can get the investment in for the A12, the A120, and the great eastern main line?

Mr Hammond: First, I acknowledge my right hon. Friend's tireless work in campaigning to improve infrastructure and boost productivity in the Essex region, including her chairing of the Great Eastern Mainline Taskforce. We expect about £47.9 billion to be spent on the railway nationally between 2019 and 2024. I very much look forward to hearing the outcome of the Great Eastern Mainline Taskforce study. Regarding the A120, the Government are carefully considering Essex County Council's proposals for a new dual carriageway to ensure that a robust plan is ready should that project secure funding in RIS 2—the second road investment strategy.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): "State of the North 2018", a report published by the Institute for Public Policy Research North earlier this month, highlighted the fact that public spending in the north of England fell by £6.3 billion since 2009-10 while spending in the south-east and the south-west was up by £3.2 million in the same period. Does this not demonstrate that the northern powerhouse is nothing but a vacuous slogan? What does the Chancellor assess will be the infrastructure funding available once we leave the EU?

Mr Hammond: We have had this one before. The Institute for Public Policy Research consistently publishes these figures and they are consistently wrong. I would urge the hon. Lady to look at the Infrastructure and Projects Authority's figure. The problem with the IPPR is that it needs also to look at central Government funding to the regions. When we look at central Government funding to the regions, we will see a very different picture.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): One of the most important things for long-term infrastructure spending is knowing what the long-term programmes are going to be. These are not projects that can be put together in a year or two years. What reassurance can the Chancellor give us that he is making sufficient capital available so that the big infrastructure companies involved in our roads, railways and power operations have the knowledge that those funds are going to be available?

Mr Hammond: We are doing two things. First, we are investing more public capital than ever before under the previous Labour Government, but we have also put in place the National Infrastructure Commission to develop a transparent pipeline of projects both publicly and privately funded so that investors in infrastructure projects can have that visibility of future projects available.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): While accepting that it is not a simple matter, the criteria used tend to favour infrastructure development in the south, rather than the north. What more can the Government do to support major infrastructure development, particularly when it comes to transport, in the north of England?

Mr Hammond: I reject the hon. Gentleman's accusation. The methodologies we use are designed to be fair and equitable in the distribution of infrastructure funding, but if he would like to meet me and my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary, I am happy to go through the whole issue. We are as concerned as he is to make sure that infrastructure investment decisions are made on a transparent and equitable basis.

Sale of Public Assets: Value for Money

6. **Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment his Department has made of whether value for money has been achieved by the sale of public assets. [908126]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): It is Government policy to explore options for the sale of corporate and financial assets where there is no longer a policy reason to retain them and value for money can be secured for taxpayers. All asset sales are subject to a rigorous value-for-money assessment before they can go ahead.

Meg Hillier: In the Government's pursuit of paying down the debt, they are at risk of selling off assets that could be of benefit to the public in the long term. Although the Economic Secretary talks about the modelling, we know from our work on the Public Accounts Committee that the model is very debatable in exactly what the benefit and disbenefit will be to the public in the long term. Will he commit to assessing every upcoming sale rigorously and making sure that the Treasury is learning, so that it is not selling off the family silver and taking things away from the British public that belong to them?

John Glen: I read the report published by the hon. Lady's Committee, and I recognise the need for a rigorous value-for-money assessment of every sale. That is why, with respect to student loans, which was the subject of the Committee's last report, I was pleased that the NAO said that

"the sale achieved prices at the upper end of these estimates"

and that

"the transaction...achieved value for money."

The Government will continue to be guided by that in every transaction they undertake.

Youth Unemployment

7. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What comparative assessment he has made of the level of youth unemployment in the UK and EU27 countries; and if he will make a statement. [908127]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): Since 2010, the UK has seen a larger fall in youth unemployment than Germany, France and Italy combined.

Today's employment figures show that the youth unemployment rate is down to a record low, with the number having nearly halved since 2010.

Michael Fabricant: It seems the message is simple: it is better to grow up in Lichfield than, say, Limoges or Lyon—does my right hon. Friend agree? If youth unemployment has fallen by 50% since 2010, how will she maintain that?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; I am sure it is nothing but fun growing up in Lichfield, with him as the local Member of Parliament. The reason we have such low youth unemployment is that we have expanded the number of apprenticeships, reformed employment to make it easier to take on staff, and reformed our welfare system to make sure that it always pays to go into work.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): The evidence is that younger people are moving out of towns such as Wrexham, which I represent, and being dragged into the south-east of England and the south-east of Wales, because the opportunities for younger people in creative and dynamic industries are not being created in towns. What are the Government doing to address that?

Elizabeth Truss: I think it is good if young people have the opportunity to work and study across the country, and we should not say that people have to be kept in their place, as we often hear from the Labour party. By expanding broadband and roads and putting more money into infrastructure, we are making sure that every town in Britain can succeed.

Mr Speaker: It is perfectly open to the hon. Members for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall) and for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) to take part in the exchanges on this question, to which their own rather later inquiries are entirely relevant.

8. [908128] **Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con):** Can the Minister update us on what analysis the Treasury has conducted of the effectiveness of the apprenticeship levy in helping young people get into high-paid roles once they finish their apprenticeships?

Elizabeth Truss: We are seeing a growing number of young people taking up high-quality apprenticeships, which is fantastic news. We were able at the Budget to improve flexibility, so that it is easier for small and medium-sized enterprises and companies in the supply chain to take on apprentices.

16. [908138] **Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con):** Young people are our future. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that today's Office for National Statistics figures showing that youth unemployment has fallen by 24,000 is a sign that this Conservative Government are delivering the jobs for young people that they need?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right. It is surprising that we have heard nothing from Labour Members about today's fantastic employment figures and record wage growth—the highest we have seen for a decade. The reason is the policies that this Government have

pursued. We have the second highest youth employment rate in the G7, and we have been one of the fastest improvers.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Youth unemployment in the United Kingdom is sitting at about 3% below the equivalent figure for the rest of the European Union. The Chief Secretary puts that down to sound management of the UK economy. By a very similar margin, youth unemployment in Scotland is consistently lower than the equivalent figure for the rest of the United Kingdom. Surely that must mean that young people in Scotland have a better chance of gainful employment under a Scottish National party Government than they would if Ruth Davidson were First Minister.

Elizabeth Truss: I celebrate when the UK economy is doing well and I celebrate when the Scottish economy is doing well. I was recently in Scotland meeting the Scottish Finance Minister and talking about measures to improve growth. What I think will be interesting is to see, in tomorrow's Scottish budget, whether the Scottish Government match the tax cuts that we have made across the rest of the UK—or will Scottish taxpayers end up paying more?

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): The Resolution Foundation has found that millennials' weekly earnings are less than those of the previous generation at the same age, which is unprecedented. That is due to more insecure and low-paid jobs, and less job mobility. As well as stronger workers' rights, halting the decline in business investment would help, but that needs business confidence. Will the Chief Secretary tell me why her Government are listening only to the European Research Group, not to the voice of business when it says that we need a permanent customs union?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Lady obviously has not seen today's wages figures, which show that real pay grew by 0.8%, and we are seeing more and more young people getting into work.

Income Tax

9. **Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con):** What progress he has made on reducing the amount of income tax that people pay. [908129]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): The Government are committed to ensuring that working people can keep more of what they earn. At Budget 2018, I announced that the Government will increase the personal allowance to £12,500 and the higher rate threshold to £50,000 from April 2019, delivering on our manifesto promise one year early. This is a tax cut for 32 million people that will save a typical basic rate taxpayer a further £130 a year in tax. In the north-west and Merseyside, 196,000 of the lowest paid will have been taken out of income tax since 2015, leaving more of their hard-earned money in their pockets. The typical basic rate taxpayer across the UK will pay £1,205 less in 2019 than he or she did in 2010.

Antoinette Sandbach: Some 37,000 constituents in Eddisbury have had an income tax cut and 738 pay no tax at all, but many will pay another tax on their

income, which is national insurance. What steps is the Chancellor taking to reduce the burden of national insurance on the lowest paid?

Mr Hammond: The Government do consider national insurance contributions and income tax together to ensure an overall progressive tax system in which those earning the most pay the most. However, when we are looking at national insurance thresholds, it is important for us to remember that national insurance payments provide access to social security benefits: they build individuals' entitlements to contributory benefits, including the state pension, as well as helping to fund the NHS. It is probably worth my mentioning that on average, in 2019-20, households in the lowest income decile will receive over £4 in public spending for every £1 they pay in tax.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Will the Chancellor bear the whole issue of national insurance in mind, both now and when it comes to his Budget, in that people on low wages, who understand they will begin to pay national insurance much earlier than they pay tax, should retain more of their hard-earned money in net terms?

Mr Hammond: I hear the hon. Gentleman's point, but I repeat what I have just said. We have to remember that people coming into national insurance at a lower rate also means people coming into entitlement to contributory benefits at that rate. We have a contributory principle in our benefits system, and national insurance is the key to it.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): When income tax was first introduced, it was supposed to be temporary. Can the Chancellor of the Exchequer update us on his plans finally to get rid of this tax, or will it, like the backstop, be with us for the next 200 years?

Mr Hammond: When I was in Brussels the other day, I was reliably informed that the kingdom of Belgium was originally intended to be a temporary construct, but it still seems to be with us. The world has moved on since the Napoleonic wars, as my hon. Friend may or may not celebrate, and I have to tell him that the Government have no plans to abolish income tax.

Mr Speaker: None the less, we are better informed as a result of what the Chancellor has just told us, on two points: Belgium and then the subsequent point. We are grateful to him for that.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): The lowest paid members of the armed forces stationed in Scotland pay less in tax than their counterparts elsewhere in the UK, so why will the Chancellor not stand up for the lowest paid members of the armed forces, either by giving them a tax cut to match their counterparts in Scotland or by giving them a proper pay rise?

Mr Hammond: My understanding is that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence has put in place special measures to ensure that those members of the armed forces who are disadvantaged by Scotland's

higher income tax rates are compensated, in order to avoid a situation where they regard postings to Scotland as hardship postings.

Leaving the Customs Union and Single Market: Scotland

10. **Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Scotland on the economic effect on Scotland of the UK leaving the EU customs union and single market. [908130]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The Government are committed to delivering a deal that works for the whole of the United Kingdom—for every country and region within it, including Scotland—and Treasury Ministers of course have regular discussions with the Secretary of State for Scotland on just these matters.

Alison Thewliss: The Fraser of Allander Institute reports today that many firms are still ill prepared for a no-deal Brexit, that the worst-case scenario is the equivalent of making 100,000 people in Scotland unemployed, and that we face a recession double the size of that which Scotland experienced in the crash. Does the Minister not agree that the only way out of this Government shambles is to accept that staying in the single market and the customs union is the best compromise we can get?

Mel Stride: The best deal for the country, and indeed for Scotland, is the one that the Prime Minister has brought forward, and which she is now looking at with our European partners in Brussels: one that sees a free trade area right at the heart of our arrangements; that has no tariffs between ourselves and the EU27; that gives us control of our borders; that makes sure we put an end to sending vast sums of money to the European Union; that gives us control of our laws; and that enables us to conduct our own international trade affairs.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): Does the Minister agree that what is of equal importance are the economic relationships within the UK, and that initiatives such as the borderlands growth initiative are a priority for the people of the borderlands region?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is entirely right. That is why in the last Budget, Scotland benefited from £950 million in additional Barnett funding, and why we are investing £1 billion in up to six new city deals, including in the borderlands area—some of those deals have been concluded and some are under discussion.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): One of the many flaws in the Government's analysis of the impact of Brexit on the regions and nations of the UK is that they did not tell us precisely what the GDP reduction would be compared with the status quo. Will the Minister now correct that and tell us how much worse off in GDP terms Scotland will be if we pursue the Brexit deal compared with the present day?

Mel Stride: These are estimates, of course, not forecasts. I can tell the hon. Gentleman that there would be no impact on output in Scotland in the long term—15 years from

the end of the implementation period—if we compare the White Paper deal with the situation as it stands today.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): According to the Scottish Government's own website, 61% of Scottish exports come to the rest of the UK and only 17% go to the European Union. Does the Minister therefore agree that Scotland's economic interests are best served by remaining part of the United Kingdom?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is entirely right. The Scottish National party would like the country to stay in the EU, which would, for example, severely disadvantage the Scottish fishing industry. We have negotiated a very advantageous situation in terms of having control of our fishing as an independent coastal state. The point my hon. Friend makes is also entirely right: if Scotland were to be independent there would be frictions at the border between ourselves and Scotland, which would not assist with trade.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): On 19 November, the Exchequer Secretary told us that the Government's analysis would contain a comparison between the Prime Minister's deal and the status quo, and that it would contain insight from external stakeholders. It contains neither of those things. The Treasury Committee this morning produced a report that expresses disappointment that the Prime Minister's deal has not been analysed. Yesterday, businesses lost 2% of their value. UK firms have no sympathy for a UK Government who are feart to put their shoddy deal before the House. Will the Chancellor stand by the words he said previously that "remaining in the European Union would be a better outcome for the economy"?

Will he find some backbone and make that case in Parliament?

Mel Stride: The cross-government departmental analysis shows clearly that the outcome of no deal would see the United Kingdom disadvantaged by 8% of GDP compared with the deal negotiated at the moment in the withdrawal agreement. The best option identified in the analysis is the current deal.

Kirsty Blackman: The analysis does not model the deal. That is what the Treasury Committee says and that is what we are saying. It models Chequers; it does not model the Prime Minister's deal. The Minister cannot stand there and make that case to the House.

Because the Prime Minister pulled the vote this week, businesses are accelerating their contingency no-deal Brexit plans. They are heightening their preparations for an emergency no deal. The legacy of this Government will be lost investment, lost growth and lost jobs. Surely the Chancellor cannot think it is acceptable that, just to save the Prime Minister's job, hundreds of other people have to lose theirs?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady suggests that the analysis does not model the White Paper deal. It does exactly that, but it does it in terms of the future relationship and the political declaration which, as she will know, is a range of potential outcomes—so that is entirely what the analysis does. As I say, what it shows is that the deal we have negotiated with the European Union is the best

deal available for the things that she and I hold dear: growth across our economy, growth in Scotland, jobs in Scotland and even lower unemployment in Scotland. The Scottish National party should now row in behind this deal to make sure that we do the best for the whole of the United Kingdom.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Scotland, just like the rest of the UK, has a substantial and successful financial services sector that is heavily dependent on market access to the EU. Will the Financial Secretary confirm that under the terms of the Government's Brexit deal the financial sector gets no greater degree of market access than the equivalence arrangements that are already on offer to any third country, including for sectors such as insurance where no comprehensive equivalence regimes exist at all?

Mel Stride: I can enlighten the hon. Gentleman, although it is contained in the documentation that has come out of the negotiations. There will be an enhanced equivalence regime in respect of financial services. It is there in black and white. I am very happy to speak to him after questions and take him through the relevant paragraphs.

Air Passenger Duty: Domestic Flights

11. **Sir Hugo Swire** (East Devon) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the airline industry on air passenger duty on UK domestic flights. [908131]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): The Government meet regularly with the airline industry to discuss a range of issues, including the future of air passenger duty and the domestic aviation market. I met a number of UK-based airlines earlier in autumn prior to the Budget.

Sir Hugo Swire: I make no apologies for continuing to lobby Treasury Ministers on the iniquity of air passenger duty and the discriminatory application of it to Flybe, based in my constituency at Exeter airport, which is the UK's largest domestic carrier. Will the Treasury look again at Flybe and its particular set of circumstances?

Robert Jenrick: My right hon. Friend is nothing if not persistent, but we are not able to vary air passenger duty under EU state aid rules for different regions of the United Kingdom, including the south-west. That will change, or may, depending on the final state of things once we have left the European Union, but we have taken action in government: we have frozen short-haul rates for eight years in a row and exempted children going on family holidays, including to the south-west.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his response. He is well aware of the issue for Northern Ireland—the disadvantage that we have and the advantage that the Republic of Ireland has. Dublin airport has grown tremendously over the last period of time, so has he had any opportunity to speak to those in charge of Belfast International airport or Belfast City airport to gauge their opinion on how we can grow the economy?

Robert Jenrick: My right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary visited Northern Ireland earlier in the year and met representatives of the aviation sector. We announced at the Budget that we will be proceeding with a technical working group to look into and analyse further the remaining issues with respect to the hon. Gentleman's proposal to devolve air passenger duty in Northern Ireland.

EU Withdrawal Agreement: Manufacturing Sector

13. **Julie Elliott** (Sunderland Central) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the fiscal effect of the EU withdrawal agreement on the manufacturing sector. [908134]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The Government have undertaken analysis to understand the impact of different EU exit scenarios on public sector net borrowing, which is a UK-wide metric, and we have published an assessment of the economic impact of EU exit on different sectors. For example, the analysis shows that manufacturing sectors are estimated to have a significantly higher output in the White Paper scenario than under the no-deal scenario.

Julie Elliott: I thank the Minister for that response, but is it not true that Office for National Statistics figures in the last few months have shown a 0.9% decline in manufacturing and a worrying 6.6% decline in the automotive sector? What are the Chancellor and the Minister doing to provide certainty to businesses in this area about the impact of this Government's chaotic Brexit policy?

John Glen: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's question. The automotive issue is related to other factors, including diesel. The Government are focused on investing in infrastructure in the north-east. I think that she would be very pleased to know that since 2010, we have had 66,000 new jobs in the north-east as a consequence of more business growth.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I can introduce my hon. Friend to manufacturers who find it significantly easier to export to the rest of the world than to the EU. Is there a lesson in that?

John Glen: I think my right hon. Friend is right to say that the Treasury is looking at growth opportunities across the whole world, and that is why the Chancellor set out in his Mansion House speech the aspiration to have global financial partnerships that make the best of those opportunities.

Mr Speaker: I am perfectly open to the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) coming in on this question if he is minded to do so, but I am not psychic, so I cannot anticipate his wishes. He needs to stand if he wishes to do so.

14. [908136] **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): The Government's Brexit shambles are making it more difficult for businesses in my constituency to function, risking jobs and livelihoods. Yesterday's last-minute withdrawal of the meaningful vote has resulted in more uncertainty for businesses, which cannot plan for the future. How can any Chancellor justify making people worse off, not just in Bedford, but throughout the country?

John Glen: There is considerable analysis from the Bank of England and the Government's analysis of the long-term effect of the different options, with a significant reference paper demonstrating the different scenarios and what lies behind them. The Government are seeking to deliver on the decision of the British people in the referendum in a way that maximises the opportunities for the British economy.

Support for Businesses and Entrepreneurs

15. **Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What steps he is taking to support businesses and entrepreneurs. [908137]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): This Government are determined to make the UK the best place in the world to start a business. We are keeping taxes low and helping businesses and entrepreneurs to access the support that they need. We have cut corporation tax to the lowest rate in the G20 and made changes to business rates that will be worth over £13 billion by 2023.

Jack Brereton: I thank the Minister for that response. Walker's Nonsuch, a family business in my constituency since 1894 and England's finest toffee producer, enthusiastically welcomed the increased annual investment allowance. Does he agree that it is essential to continue to reduce tax on companies so that they invest in new equipment, increase productivity and create more jobs?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. While the Labour party wants to increase taxes on business, including on small businesses, we are cutting them, and the increased annual investment allowance will enable businesses such as the one in his constituency to invest in plant, machinery and new technology to drive it to future success.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The broken business rates system is having a seriously detrimental impact on our high streets, and that is seen right across York. Will the Minister meet me and York Retail Forum to discuss the impact it is having on York and, in particular, the proposals it wants to see on turnover tax?

Robert Jenrick: I would be happy to meet the hon. Lady. We announced in the Budget that 90% of smaller retailers, including many in her constituency, would see a 30% reduction in their business rates, and the future high streets fund is designed exactly for communities such as the one she represents.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that keeping the VAT threshold at £85,000 demonstrates that the Government are firmly on the side of West Oxfordshire's small businesses?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The VAT threshold in this country is high by international standards. We have retained it at that level to support small businesses, which this Government will always champion.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): Small businesses and subcontractors are still carrying the can for the collapse of Carillion. In the light of Interserve's latest trouble, can the Minister update us on his Department's

liaison with it as a client, and say what level of risk the taxpayer and small businesses have been put to by Interserve's latest attempts to stay afloat by refinancing its debt for equity?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman raises an important question. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office is working closely on this matter, as he did with respect to Carillion. We want a wider base of companies supplying the Government and the public sector, to ensure that we have a resilient public sector in the eventuality that such situations happen again.

Children's Services

17. **Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the adequacy of funding allocated to local authorities for children's services. [908139]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): We have increased the overall spending on early years and children's services to £12.7 billion.

Liz McInnes: My local council, Rochdale Borough, predicts an overspend of £4.5 million this year on children's services, with a predicted total overspend in England of £840 million, so will the Chief Secretary now admit that £84 million—just one tenth of the total overspend—goes nowhere near addressing this local and national crisis?

Elizabeth Truss: The £84 million is specifically to roll out pilots and projects that we know have worked to reduce demand on children's services and make sure children get a better outcome, but at the Budget we also put in an extra £410 million, which councils can spend on either adult social care or children's social care.

Mr Speaker: It is always worth staying for topical questions, if colleagues are interested.

Topical Questions

T1. [908146] **Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): My principal responsibility is to ensure economic stability and the continued prosperity of the British people, and at this juncture the best way to achieve this objective is to back the Prime Minister's Brexit deal, ensuring a smooth and orderly departure from the EU, delivering on the decision of the British people, securing a close economic partnership with our most important trading partners and protecting the jobs and living standards of our people. The deal will allow us to come together again and assure Britain of the brighter future it deserves.

Layla Moran: Modern universities will be hit hard by the unexpected changes to the teacher pension scheme. In fact, one is predicting a 5% reduction in its workforce, including around student support. Can the Chancellor give any assurances to universities struggling to cope with this change?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): The changes to public sector pensions have resulted from increases in contributions that will ultimately benefit lecturers retiring from university and retiring teachers. We are looking, through the Augar review, at the question of higher education funding overall, but ultimately it is for universities to find that extra money.

T4. [908149] **Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): On Saturday in my constituency I met Tom, a student at the University of Gloucestershire, who shares my concerns that online digital marketplaces, social media companies and search engines should pay their fair share of tax. What steps are being taken to ensure that they do precisely that?

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): I thank my hon. Friend for that very important question. The Government recognise that the current international tax regime is not fit for purpose when it comes to taxing certain types of digital platform-based businesses—the types to which my hon. Friend has referred—and we are therefore working with the OECD and the European Union to arrive at a multilateral solution to ensure that the right tax is paid. However, we have made it clear, and the Chancellor made it clear in the Budget, that in the event that we do not secure a multilateral agreement, we will move ahead unilaterally by 2020 to ensure that those businesses pay a fair share of tax.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): The merely synthetic construct that is before the House has nothing to do with the real concerns of my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) and my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman). It is the dodgy deal—the tuppence-a-penny Brexit deal—of the Prime Minister. I am led to believe that the Chancellor has ostensibly, but forlornly, attempted to mitigate the Prime Minister's disastrous handling of Brexit. If that is the case, will he continue his endeavours by using the powers in section 31 of the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Act 2018 to maintain the UK in a customs union with the EU?

Mr Hammond: It is not the Government's policy to maintain a permanent customs union with the European Union. Opposition Front Benchers often offer a customs union as if it were a magical solution, but it will not deliver us frictionless borders; it will introduce regulatory friction at our borders with the European Union, and it will introduce regulatory friction between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Peter Dowd: The Chancellor's answer shows that, just like Parliament yesterday, we have been treated with contempt by him, and he has been treated with contempt by the Prime Minister and brushed aside. Let me ask him again: in the national interest—not the Tory party's interest, or his own interest—at what point will he break cover and use the powers in section 31 of the Act which he initiated and which his Ministers guided through Parliament? Or is this just another Tory parliamentary sham?

Mr Hammond: Those powers are there specifically to deal with the customs union that we will need to create with the Crown dependencies, not for the purpose that the hon. Gentleman is suggesting.

T7. [908152] **Bim Afolami** (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I have been listening carefully to these questions, and it strikes me that from members of all the Opposition parties we hear pleas that business wants uncertainty to end, but at the same time they have been deliberately seeking to provoke chaos by not supporting the Prime Minister's withdrawal agreement. Does the Chancellor agree that they are playing political games with the lives and jobs of the British people?

Mr Speaker: Order. I know that the hon. Gentleman was trying very hard, but—forgive me: I say this by way of kindly counsel to the hon. Gentleman, who is a new Member—questions must be about the policies of the Government, as the Clerk has just swivelled round to remind me, and not about the policies or tactics of the Opposition. We will leave that there, and come to Helen Goodman.

T2. [908147] **Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Further to the answer that the Chancellor just gave my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), may I point out that the Father of the House, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), pointed out last week that if we were to be in a customs union, we would need to have the same regulatory standards as the Europeans? That is true, because they fear unfair competition through a regulatory race to the bottom. If the Prime Minister does not succeed today, will the Chancellor revisit that option?

Mr Hammond: I am very confident that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will succeed in the mission that she is undertaking today, and I look forward to her reporting to the House on the progress that she has made.

T8. [908153] **Priti Patel** (Witham) (Con): Lower taxes and a simplified tax system are crucial to long-term economic growth and competition. Will the Chancellor consider introducing new tax reforms in the future, including a combination of income tax and national insurance, to improve the efficiency of our tax system?

Mel Stride: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend about the importance of low taxes. Under this Government, corporation tax has been reduced from 28% to 19% and will be further reduced to 17%; and through the increase in the personal allowance that was announced in the Budget, we have taken about 4 million of the lowest-paid out of tax altogether. As for my right hon. Friend's specific point about aligning national insurance and income tax, that is a very complex thing to do. There would be a considerable number of losers, as well as some gainers. However, the Office of Tax Simplification has looked into it in the past, and we will keep it under review.

T3. [908148] **Sandy Martin** (Ipswich) (Lab): Given this country's £5.9 billion net trading surplus with the EU in insurance, will the Chancellor take the opportunity of the demise of the withdrawal agreement to make financial services a part of the Prime Minister's next attempt at a Brexit deal?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The City is very content with the deal we have on financial services, under which we would seek and secure

enhanced equivalence decisions six months before the end of the implementation period, and the degree of dialogue with and support from the City has been constant throughout.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Given the £900 million of additional funding for the Scottish block grant announced in the Budget, what discussions has the Chancellor had with the SNP Scottish Government about following his example and cutting business rates?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I have regular meetings with the Scottish Finance Secretary, and of course the Scottish Government have the opportunity in their budget tomorrow to match the business rate cuts we have made in England.

T5. [908150] **Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I met the travel association ABTA this morning and it had two requests for the Chancellor: first, that he rules out no deal, because implementing no deal preparations potentially puts its smaller members out of business; and secondly, to hear from the Chancellor and Government when the immigration paper will be available, because without it ABTA members can make no business plans.

Mr Hammond: I think I have been perfectly clear and consistent in expressing the view that no deal would be a very bad outcome for this country, and I will do everything I can to make sure that that is not an outcome we face.

A White Paper on the Government's future migration policy will be published shortly.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): When criticising a Labour Budget in 2005, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor said that the taxpayer

"is entitled to be protected from retrospective or retroactive legislation."—[*Official Report*, 7 June 2005; Vol. 434, c. 1139.]

but through the 2019 loan charge, that is precisely what HMRC is now doing to thousands of people who acted in good faith and in accordance with the rules at the time. May I urge my right hon. Friend once again not to backdate the charge to before 2017?

Mel Stride: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, but I have to fundamentally disagree with him. The arrangements entered into around disguised remuneration, for which the loan charge is being applied, were always defective at the time they were being used. They have been taken through the courts many times over many years by HMRC and been found to be defective. They also went through, in a particular case, the Supreme Court—the highest court in the land—and the scheme was found to be defective. So this is not a retrospective measure, but it is a question of tax fairness, and of course those who are involved can come forward and have discussions with HMRC, who, where there are difficulties around payment, will be sympathetic and enter into time-to-pay arrangements to make sure those people are protected as well as paying the right tax.

T6. [908151] **Graham P. Jones** (Hyndburn) (Lab): IPPR North's analysis has shown that in the south £326 per head is spent on infrastructure, while only £156 per

person is spent in the north, and small towns like those in my constituency have been hit the hardest, with lack of infrastructure and the withdrawal of public sector services. We now find out this week that there will be a third bailout for Crossrail 2, costing £2.1 billion; the Government are simply going to give it a cheque. When is the north-west going to get a £2.1 billion equivalent?

Mr Hammond: First, I should make it clear that the additional support we are providing to Crossrail is in the form of a loan that will be repaid to the Government by London, so it is London taxpayers and London farepayers who will meet the cost of the overrun. The north-west is now the second-highest region in the UK for transport investment: per capita investment has risen from £648 per year between 2006-07 and 2009-10 to £1,129 a year between 2014-15 and 2017-18.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): It is very welcome that today's figures show that wages are rising, unemployment is falling and we have a record number of people in work, but we still need more good jobs in Leicestershire. So, when the Leicestershire industrial strategy comes forward with exciting plans to boost the life sciences and small satellite manufacturing, will the Treasury look closely at getting behind it?

Mr Hammond: The Treasury will look closely at that.

T9. [908154] **Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): At our border, we need to ensure that we have security while securing freedom of movement of goods and people as well as gaining revenue. The head of HMRC has said that it will be almost impossible to do all those things if we crash out without a deal. The Chancellor keeps talking about a deal, but we are just over 100 days away from potentially crashing out, so what conversations is he having to ensure that we are not hit in the pocket as a result of a lack of revenue?

Mr Hammond: We have made it clear that we will first prioritise the security of the UK, and that we will then prioritise the flow of trade. We will not prioritise the collection of customs tariffs. The hon. Lady will be aware that these are tariffs that we are not currently collecting; they would be additional revenues. We will treat that as something that we can do in slower time, if the situation arises.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): Later today the House will debate fuel poverty. Does the Chancellor agree that the greatest lever that we can pull to alleviate the challenge of fuel poverty is to incentivise home energy efficiency? Will he look at what the Treasury can do to address that?

Mr Hammond: That is certainly one of the levers that we can pull, and I am happy to look again at how we support home energy efficiency.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): When will the Government bring forward proposals to allow well-funded credit unions to provide low-cost credit cards and low-cost car loans, and to invest in other social programmes such as energy co-operatives and housing schemes?

John Glen: Following on from the Budget, we have a series of measures to assist credit unions to expand their role in delivering affordable credit across communities. We have a scheme of work over the next three months to pilot interest-free loans and prize-linked saving schemes, to help credit unions to grow as they have been doing in recent years.

Joseph Johnson (Orpington) (Con): What do the Government make of the Centre for European Reform's report this week that warned of a 60% fall in UK financial services exports to the EU in the event that we lose access to the single market and put a free trade agreement in its place?

John Glen: The City remains very concerned to secure a deal in order to maximise the strong relationship that we have with the EU and with the rest of the world.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What impact will Brexit have on our universities, particularly in Coventry? More importantly, our universities do projects with Europe and also work closely with the manufacturing industry, including companies such as Jaguar Land Rover. What are we going to do about that?

Mr Hammond: Our university sector is a vital asset to the UK. Over the past decade we have seen the universities working much more closely with industry, and that relationship is having a positive and advantageous effect on the growth profile and the technology uptake in the economy. As we leave the European Union, it is vital that our universities are able to go on exchanging students and teaching staff with European institutions, and we will do everything we can to ensure that that happens.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. I think we should hear from my favourite estate agent. I call Mr Kevin Hollinrake.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Banks that are guilty of the scandalous mistreatment of small businesses are allowed to design and oversee their own redress schemes, including determining the level of compensation paid to the victims. Does the Minister agree that Parliament and the regulator should take control of those processes?

John Glen: I have always said that the banks need to do more to restore their relationship with SMEs, and I welcome the scheme that UK Finance has announced to address unresolved historical complaints. I look forward to meeting my hon. Friend next week, with the Chancellor, to discuss the Government's position.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The Inverness and Highlands city region deal was agreed a little while ago, and that is very good news. A whole shedload of money has been spent on Inverness—well done, Inverness!—but precious little has been spent on the outlying areas, including Wick and Thurso. That is surely not in the spirit of the deal. Should there not be an audit of this kind of deal in future?

Elizabeth Truss: We are doing city deals right across Scotland and they are having huge benefits for the local economy. We have also announced in the Budget a freeze

in whisky duty. The question now is how the Scottish Government will respond to that in their budget tomorrow. Will they cut income tax, and will they also cut business rates?

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): How many more trees will be planted as a result of investment announced in the recent Budget?

Mr Hammond: A very large number. I will go back to the Treasury and write to my hon. Friend with a precise figure.

Mr Speaker: Can I politely suggest to the Chancellor that if he were to lodge a copy of his reply with the requisite statistical information in the Library, I do not say that he will be garlanded, but he might come close to it?

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I am sure that the Chancellor will be as concerned as I am by the words of the chief inspector of schools, Amanda Spielman, who said that cuts to funding are hitting the sustainability and quality of our further education colleges. Instead of doing an impression of the Grinch, will the Chancellor be our Father Christmas and give our FE colleges the funding and presents that they want for Christmas?

Elizabeth Truss: We have protected the funding of FE colleges since 2015. We are also investing £500 million in T-levels and improved technical education. More low-income students are going to university and getting high-quality apprenticeships.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I welcome the extra £1 billion for the armed forces that was announced in the Budget. Does my right hon. Friend agree that only this Government's sensible management of the economy has made that possible?

Mr Hammond: Yes. There cannot be strong defence without a strong economy.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): In the next two months, the Royal Bank of Scotland will close all but 56 branches in cities across England, leaving banking deserts in towns and rural areas like mine. What is the Chancellor doing to use the Government's shareholding to exert public pressure on RBS and ensure that we have no banking deserts?

John Glen: The Government hold a 62.3% shareholding, but we do not run the bank. Decisions on the branch network are a matter for the bank.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware that one of the most successful companies in our country, Johnson Matthey in my constituency, is committed to having a fair-deal, not a no-deal Brexit because it feels that it is vital that there should be an orderly retreat, not chaos? Does he agree that the Prime Minister's deal would achieve that?

Mr Hammond: Yes, and that is indeed the express view of the vast majority of businesses in this country.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Will the Chancellor work with the Minister for the Cabinet Office and the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to support my ten-minute rule Bill on project bank accounts for Government projects? It will protect small businesses from losses when tier 1 suppliers such as Carillion and Interserve collapse.

Mr Hammond: I am happy to look further at the hon. Lady's Bill. It is an interesting idea and I know that the Cabinet Office commercial secretariat has been looking at her proposals.

European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018: Statutory Obligations on Ministers

12.42 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Attorney General to make a statement about the Government's obligations under section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): I recognise that this question was the subject of much discussion and some speculation yesterday, so I hope to be able to put the minds of the right hon. Lady and other hon. Members at ease.

Put simply, in keeping with the clear intention of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, the Government will ensure that the question whether to accept an agreement is brought back to this House before 21 January. If Parliament accepts that deal, we will introduce the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill to implement the withdrawal agreement in domestic legislation.

If Parliament were to reject the deal, the Government would be required to make a statement on our proposed next steps and table a motion in neutral terms on that statement. Following the passing of the amendment to the business of the House motion last week, that motion will be amendable. It is our clear intention that this House will consider the matter before 21 January, and have the opportunity to decide on the deal.

Let me also say this clearly: in the unlikely and highly undesirable circumstances that, as of 21 January, there is no deal before the House, the Government would bring a statement to the House and arrange for a debate, as specified by the law.

I am confident that we will have a deal that the House can support. I hope that the statement puts to rest hon. Members' concerns about the Government's commitment to meet the spirit, as well as the letter, of the withdrawal Act, and to respect the will of the House.

Yvette Cooper: I thank the Minister for those assurances but, in the current circumstances, they are not enough. I asked this urgent question of the Attorney General because we need to know the Government's legal interpretation of section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act and we need to be assured that, as well as legally, the Government will abide by the spirit of the Act. Now that the Government have pulled the vote, we do not know when a vote will come on the deal, or even whether a vote will come.

No. 10's official spokesman said this morning that the vote would come by 21 January, and the Minister has said that it will come by 21 January. However, yesterday morning the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, who is sitting on the Front Bench, confirmed that the vote was 100% going to happen. Yesterday, at 11 am, No. 10's spokesperson said that the vote "is going ahead." By 3.30 pm, the Prime Minister had pulled it.

The Minister's warm words are therefore not enough, when so much is at stake. Who knows? This goes for the Cabinet and for all Conservative Members, too. None of

us knows whether the Prime Minister is going to pull the vote again, or whether she is even going to table a vote on the deal again.

If we get to 21 January and there is no deal, the agreement of Parliament was that the Government should make a statement, that Parliament should be able to vote on it and that it should be amendable. The Minister says that, in the unlikely event that there is no deal, that would happen. However, we need an urgent assurance from the Attorney General that the Government will not find a loophole in this by saying that there is a deal, even though we have not voted on it, and thereby avoiding the requirements of section 13 subsections (7) to (11), which would require a vote by 21 January.

In other words, if the Government never quite get round to offering a vote on this deal until it is too late, but also do not have a vote on no deal, keeping us in limbo—no vote on the deal and no vote on no deal—it would be a constitutional outrage. It would upend the spirit of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act and, much worse, it would either let the country drift or force the country into no deal without a parliamentary vote.

We need written assurances from the Attorney General on the Government's interpretation of the Act, and we need the assurance that, even if there has been no vote on this deal and even if the Government still claim that the deal applies were there to be no vote on it by 21 January, the Government will still abide by section 13 subsections (7) to (11) and ensure there is a statement and an amendable vote on their plans, including on whether or not this means no deal, and that it will happen, under any circumstances, by 21 January.

I make no apology for my purpose in asking this urgent question. I already think 21 January is far too late for businesses and for Government Departments, which will already be thinking that they have to chuck everything at preparing for no deal. I want to stop this country careering into no deal, either by accident or by the deliberate intention of the Government, with all the damaging consequences for jobs, for prosperity and for our national security, without Parliament having a say and without Parliament being able to stop that happening. Even if other Members do not agree with me in that purpose, I hope that they will agree that this Parliament cannot be ignored, which is why we need the Attorney General's written advice.

Mr Walker: I have great respect for the right hon. Lady. I understand that she came to this House expecting to have a row about the Government's interpretation, and I understand the questions she has just asked. I am responding to this urgent question because my Department is responsible for the legislation that enacts the deal, and I have given her our very clear interpretation of that legislation, which is that we will have a motion before the House by 21 January, in all the different scenarios I talked through in my statement.

The answer to the right hon. Lady is very clear. We respect the decision made by this House that the Government should come back to the House with a motion in the event that no deal had been agreed or in the event that this House had rejected a deal. That is clear from my statement.

What we are therefore saying is that there will be a motion by 21 January, and I agree with the right hon. Lady—I would much rather it were, and I fully expect it

[Mr Robin Walker]

to be, sooner. I fully expect this House to have the opportunity to debate a withdrawal agreement that it is able to support. So let us work together to achieve that, but let us not allow some of the conspiracy theories and the scare stories that have been told about this to run away when I have just clarified the Government's position.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): I have great sympathy for the points made by both the Minister, who is acting with integrity, as he always has done in his parliamentary career, and the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). It is unquestionable that this Parliament must have a say—a meaningful vote—on the deal, or no deal, that comes about. Can the Minister give a categorical assurance that there will be no trickery by the Government to stop Parliament from having a say?

Mr Walker: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's words, and I am happy to give that categorical assurance. As my statement reflected, we will be putting a motion before Parliament, even in the circumstances that no deal was before the House, but I strongly believe and expect that there will be a deal before this House, which I will be urging Parliament to support.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) for applying for this urgent question and to you, Mr Speaker, for granting it. I am grateful for the Minister's response, but the reality is that the Attorney General should be here to speak about the legal implications of this agreement. Yesterday, the Prime Minister used the phrase "an accidental no deal" in this House. The fact that she used that phrase is itself evidence of a dereliction of leadership. Section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 is therefore crucial to this House's ability to prevent a chaotic no-deal outcome, which would do enormous damage to our security, economy and society.

I wonder whether the Minister can answer the following questions. The Prime Minister's official spokesperson has reiterated today that the Government will bring back the meaningful vote by 21 January, but is it not completely contrary to the national interest for the Prime Minister to run down another six weeks on the clock when all she is seeking is reassurances and clarification on a document that Parliament already understands? If we are relying on the Government's word or, to use the Minister's phrase, "clear intention" that they will keep to the 21 January deadline, rather than the clear force of the law, does he not understand that in this week of all weeks that constitutes no reassurance at all?

Yesterday, the Prime Minister could not properly answer questions about the legal force of the 21 January deadline, and the Leader of the House could not properly answer questions about the legal status and force of the amendment from the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve). The reassurance that was just given by this Minister means nothing without the legal backing of the Attorney General, who is not here. Is the truth not that this decision to pull the vote was made in panicked haste, without thinking through the economic, political and constitutional implications for our country?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman made my point clearly when he said that the Prime Minister's spokesman has said the same thing as I said this morning from the Dispatch Box—that there will be such a meaningful vote before the House before 21 January. The hon. Gentleman also talked about acting contrary to the national interest, and I think we are clear on what acting contrary to the national interest is. It is Labour's approach of blindly opposing any sensible steps taken by the Government to secure a deal, while proposing no alternatives.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his statement, but may I just pick him up on a couple of points? First, the section 13 procedure presupposes that the Government have an initialled deal with the EU, and of course we have such a deal, which is why we started debate on it last week, for the purpose of deciding whether the House should or should not approve it. In those circumstances, can he provide an assurance to the House that if the initialled deal is continuing in its current form, as initialled, the House can complete its consideration, not on a day just before 21 January but expeditiously, as was clearly provided for in the 2018 Act? Secondly, may I take it from what he has said that the amendment that was tabled to the procedure under section 13 to allow for amendable motions thereafter is now fully accepted by the Government, as it should prevail in future?

Mr Walker: Yes, and I commend my right hon. and learned Friend for the points that he has raised. I agree with him; I have given that commitment from the Dispatch Box with regard to his amendment, which does mean that the motion would be amendable. As for the House being able to complete its considerations expeditiously, we all have that in mind. The Prime Minister has made clear her determination to seek out those assurances, listening to the concerns that have been raised in the House, and then to come back swiftly to this House so that we can complete those considerations.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): This is a Government who have been found in contempt of Parliament and who continue to demonstrate their contempt for parliamentary democracy on a daily basis. Clearly, they prefer to communicate with MPs through the lobby briefings rather than on the Floor of this House, and they are trying to evade their legal responsibilities by failing to have the Attorney General here to answer this question and putting the Minister up. I see that the Solicitor General is on the Front Bench and engaged in anxious conversation. Why was he not put up to answer this question?

It has been made clear in the past 24 hours by many member states of the EU, and by Jean-Claude Juncker and Donald Tusk, that there is no question of any meaningful renegotiation. So may I ask the Minister now for a cast-iron guarantee that the initialled deal will be brought back to this House for a vote before 21 January—and if so, on what date? Can he also guarantee that that motion will be amendable? If he cannot give me that cast-iron guarantee, will he look seriously at the possibility of putting this deal to the people of the four nations of the United Kingdom to see whether they want this deal or whether they would

prefer to stay in the EU on our current terms and conditions, as the European Court of Justice made clear is possible yesterday?

Mr Walker: The hon. and learned lady should pay attention to what I have already said in my statement, which is that we will be bringing a motion before the House, either on this deal, as I would much prefer, with the assurances that the Prime Minister will by then have won, so that this House can vote on that, or even in the circumstances that that were not on the table. She raises the idea of a people's vote once again, and we very clearly had a people's vote. We had that people's vote across the whole of the UK in 2016, and it is our duty as Members of this House to deliver on that.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for his clarifications, but may I press him on one point that I do not think he covered? Is he confirming that if there is, under section 13(8), a statement at some point before 21 January, as there must be under that section if the Prime Minister has by then concluded that she cannot complete a deal, that statement will be accompanied by a motion which, though in neutral terms, will be amendable? Or did his point about the amendment cover only a statement and motion under sections 13(1) and 13(4)?

Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend is typically meticulous in his questioning. My understanding is that the intention of the House in passing that motion is that it should be amendable in all three cases set out in section 13.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I am afraid the Minister, for whom I have great respect, has not wholly succeeded in his aim of providing reassurance to the House, because what we learned yesterday is that today's assurances can disappear tomorrow like a puff of wind. Can he clarify the following? If the withdrawal agreement comes back—the Government say that it will—before 21 January and is defeated, legally speaking, for the purposes of section 13 of the 2018 Act, is there still “agreement in principle” with the European Union? This is a very important point in view of the previous question that was asked, because even if it is defeated, for the purposes of the Act the only thing that is referred to as “agreement in principle” has been reached. The Prime Minister and the Government said, I believe on 28 November, that agreement in principle had been reached. So can he clarify that that remains the case, even if the withdrawal agreement is defeated?

Mr Walker: I have great respect for the right hon. Gentleman and the work that he does with the Select Committee, but I must say that in this case I do not share his interpretation. Section 13 is very clear: in scenarios in which either a deal had not been reached or a deal had been voted down, a statement would be required. That is my understanding of the commitment that we have made. We would need to come to the House and have that vote, even in circumstances in which a deal had been brought before the House and turned down.

Joseph Johnson (Orpington) (Con): Just to press further on this point, will my hon. Friend clarify, in the light of the Prime Minister's statement yesterday, whether the Government still maintain that a political agreement

has been reached in line with the statutory statement presented to Parliament on 26 November? As things stand today, do we still have a valid initialled deal?

Mr Walker: The Prime Minister has been clear that of course we have reached an initial deal with the EU, but she has listened to the concerns of this House and gone back to seek to discuss that deal and to seek assurances on it. I think that means that she will want to put before the House a deal with those assurances and to ensure that the House has its meaningful vote on that arrangement.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): I have some sympathy for the Minister, because he is doing his best to give the House assurances about what is likely to happen, but the fact is that he is appearing on behalf of a Prime Minister who has completely shredded her credibility by doing what she did yesterday. She was prepared to send out her Cabinet colleagues to make one assertion with confidence in the morning, while she was plotting to reverse it at the same time as she had them in front of the TV cameras. Despite the Minister's personal integrity, why should we believe a single thing that he tells us today?

Mr Walker: I believe I am standing here on behalf of a Prime Minister who is seeking to do the right thing for the country—to bring us together and to secure an agreement that is in our best interests and that this whole House can support.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): My hon. Friend has been absolutely crystal clear that there will be a meaningful debate and a meaningful vote. Does he share my concern that Opposition Members are more interested in driving damaging uncertainty than in supporting the Prime Minister, who is trying to deliver the best deal for this country?

Mr Walker: Frankly, I do share that concern. We see today this focus on process rather than outcomes. We should all be focused on getting the best outcome from this whole process.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Unfortunately for the Minister—he should not take this personally—any assurances that the Government give have the half-life of one of those isotopes that we are all so worried about. He must be aware that there will be absolute uproar in the House if the Government try to engineer, by trickery or chicanery, avoiding having a vote on this deal. Will he give us a categorical assurance that if we do get to vote on the deal and, as is expected, amendments in support of a people's vote are tabled, the Government will not seek to thwart any such amendment or vote?

Mr Walker: To have a suggestion from the Liberal Democrats of assurances not being worth the paper they are written on is quite strong. The House has already voted, many times, on a second referendum, and every time the idea has been defeated, because clearly the majority of Members of this House want to respect the people's vote that we had in 2016.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): After we get the vote and vote for the agreement, at what stage can we subsequently walk away from trade negotiations should the terms prove sufficiently unattractive?

Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend asks me a question that is well beyond the scope of this urgent question, so I shall not attempt to answer it at this time.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Why would anyone believe a word that the Government say about when the vote will take place when Ministers have spent weeks promising that the vote would be today, and when the Prime Minister's only hope of survival is to delay the vote till the last possible minute to try to force MPs to change their minds?

Mr Walker: I simply do not agree with the hon. Lady's narrative. The Prime Minister has been clear that she has listened to the House. She understands the concerns throughout the House and wants to take them back to European counterparts to make sure that we have the best deal before the House. She will then bring that back here and put it before the House for us to decide on.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: That was a very engaging wave from the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), but it is not the normal means by which to procure the attention of the Chair. It would be a pity to squander the right hon. Gentleman at such an early stage of our proceedings, so I shall come to him in due course.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): In 108 days we run out of road, and the only red line that has not been laid down is the one in front of the cliff's edge, over which we would fall into a chaotic no deal. I urge the Minister and the Government to bring forward the meaningful vote to next week, because by then at least we will know what cosmetic changes have been made in Brussels.

Mr Walker: I say gently to my hon. Friend that we should make sure the Prime Minister has the opportunity that she seeks to get the best deal in front of this House, and that we have the assurances we need so that the whole House can get behind the deal. My hon. Friend is a great champion of working across party lines; we ought to be taking this matter forward in a cross-party manner that delivers for the whole country. I do not believe that it would be right to rush into having a vote of this nature before we had sought those assurances.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): But given the fact that the NHS and thousands of businesses throughout the country will have to start to implement their plans for no-deal contingencies before Christmas, would that not be grossly irresponsible? What possible reason can the Minister give for refusing to hold the rest of the debate and the vote next week?

Mr Walker: The right hon. Gentleman should be working with us to provide the certainty and stability that the NHS and many others want by securing the agreement and the implementation period that it provides. That would be in the best interests of all the organisations of which he speaks.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I cannot wait any longer to hear the mellifluous tones of the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey).

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I fear I have raised the bar too high, Mr Speaker.

It seems unlikely that the Prime Minister will get any substantial changes to the withdrawal agreement, so it is beginning to look like she has withdrawn the vote for her benefit, not for Parliament's benefit. Is it not time to bring back the withdrawal agreement, have the vote and allow Parliament to make a decision? Like the Minister, I do not favour a second referendum. I would like Parliament to reach a conclusion on Brexit.

Mr Walker: We are all clear that Parliament will have its crucial say in this process, which is why I made this statement to make it clear that there will be a meaningful vote before Parliament. I agree with my right hon. Friend that the date of 21 January is at the back end of when we want to see that vote. We want to see it come sooner, and I am sure that the Prime Minister will strive to ensure that she can bring it to the House even sooner than that.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): I have considered the withdrawal agreement in good faith, but time after time the Prime Minister has broken her word, and over the past two and a half years she has sought to withhold information about the impact that the different options will have on us from not only the House but the public. I have businesses in Wigan that are not bidding for contracts because they do not know whether they will be able to deliver them, I have thousands of food manufacturing jobs at stake, and I have smaller food manufacturing firms that will go under if no deal becomes a political reality. Will the Minister begin to restore some trust among Members of Parliament, whose votes the Government still supposedly seek, and tell us today, categorically, that the Government will explore every option, including the extension of article 50, before they will allow the country to leave the EU with no deal at all?

Mr Walker: We have before us an option to make sure that we leave with a negotiated deal with an implementation period. The Prime Minister is seeking to improve that deal still further to make sure that the House has the best option to move forward on an orderly basis. That is the route that we should take.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I genuinely believe that there are Members on the Labour Back Benches who, like me, want to avoid a no-deal Brexit and the risks of a divisive second referendum. I therefore urge the Minister, whom I know to be a thoughtful listener, to spend some of the time that has become available in his diary with some of those Labour Back Benchers, to see whether their concerns can be addressed.

Mr Walker: I am always happy to take my hon. Friend's advice, and I would certainly be happy to do that.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): There are circumstances in which, under section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, the Government are required to make a statement on how to proceed by 21 January. Those are if the Commons decides not to approve a deal presented by the Government,

or if no agreement in principle can be reached. But the House of Commons Library, in its note prepared overnight on this, says:

“If the Government maintains that its political agreement persists, the requirement to make a statement could be avoided.”

That is why Opposition Members are suspicious. Is the Government’s strategy to continue to give us a meaningful vote, or is it instead to run down the clock and, in the face of no deal, in the words of “The Godfather”, make us an offer that we can’t refuse?

Mr Walker: The right hon. Gentleman asks an important question, and I think I have already provided the answer. Let me just repeat the line towards the end of my statement in answer to this urgent question: in the unlikely and highly undesirable circumstances that, as of 21 January, there is no deal before the House, the Government would bring a statement to the House and arrange for a debate, as specified by the law. That answers his question precisely.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): Section 13(2) provides that the meaningful vote should, so far as practical, be held before the European Parliament decides whether to consent to the withdrawal agreement. The withdrawal agreement has been concluded, but not approved. Will my hon. Friend assure the House that the meaningful vote will take place before the European Parliament makes that decision?

Mr Walker: Yes, I am happy to give my right hon. Friend that assurance.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): This whole situation is bonkers and the public are, frankly, fed up with this carry-on. We already know the impact that it is having on the academic sector, so will the Minister confirm that allowing this to drag on into the new year is simply unacceptable to the electorate? Will he categorically rule out the possibility of the Government waiting until March before announcing no deal?

Mr Walker: I could not have been much clearer in my statement earlier that we will be having a meaningful vote before 21 January. I am very clear that I want the Prime Minister to go and get the assurances that she seeks and to come back to this House as soon as possible, and I am sure that that is exactly what she intends to do.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I refer Members to my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

This is important not only for everybody in this country, but for the people in Gibraltar. Will my hon. Friend first reassure me that the initial deal still exists as of this moment and is still a legal deal on the table, because that certainty is really important for them; and, secondly, take on board the fact that, for those of us who want to support the deal, the sooner that it is brought back the better, as we wish the Prime Minister well in what she is trying to do?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. He and I have both recently heard directly from the Chief Minister in Gibraltar, who is very clear in his

support for this deal because he thinks that it meets Gibraltar’s key interests and preserves British sovereignty. Those are crucial points, which I look forward to supporting when the deal returns to the House.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I am sorry to sound suspicious, but the Minister has used two words in his statement that make us all suspicious. They are “assurance” and “reassurance”, which we have heard time and again from this Government, and then they have reneged on them. Given that a vast majority of MPs in this House wish to prevent no deal—indeed, the Chancellor repeated that in Treasury questions just before this urgent question—will the Government either rule that out now, or bring a motion to the House so that we can vote on it and rule out a no-deal scenario?

Mr Walker: What we are talking about is section 13 of the withdrawal Act, which this House has already debated. What I have delivered today is the Government’s clear interpretation of that and the fact that there will be a meaningful vote in this House.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Will my hon. Friend confirm that motions of this House, amended or otherwise, do not override the law?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend is, of course, right that the law has a senior and more important effect, but what we are talking about here is the law. We are talking about the EU (Withdrawal) Act 2018.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will understand that yesterday shredded all the good will that was left in the House on assurances such as these. I listened to the Attorney General last Monday when he told this House that he had

“a solemn and constitutional duty...to advise it on these legal questions objectively and impartially, and to place such legal expertise as I have at its disposal. The historical precedents strongly support that view. The House may be sure that I shall discharge this duty with uncompromising and rigorous fidelity.”—[*Official Report*, 3 December 2018; Vol. 650, c. 546.]

The fact that he is not here today to give that legal weight to what the Minister is saying is a concern to all of us who have to go back to our constituents to explain what on earth is happening in this place. Can the Minister therefore confirm that the Attorney General has consulted him on what he has said today, and that he will publish any legal advice that he has given in the light of yesterday’s rulings and what happens on section 13?

Mr Walker: I am sure that if the hon. Lady were to approach the Attorney General, he would discharge all those responsibilities, but this question was about an Act for which my Department is responsible. Of course it is right that I should be at the Dispatch Box as a Minister in the Department for Exiting the European Union to answer questions on our legislation.

Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): The leader of the Labour party regularly attends meetings of his European socialist colleagues, many of whom are actually in Government. Is the Minister aware of anything positive whatsoever that has come out of those meetings to facilitate the deal and help to deliver on Brexit, or is

[Mr Robert Goodwill]

the Labour party, as far as delivering a workable Brexit is concerned, part of the problem, not part of the solution?

Mr Speaker: Order. I am most grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his inquiry, which suffers from the rather notable disadvantage that the Leader of the Opposition has no responsibility for the formulation of policy or for the continent-wide attempts to secure an agreement. Therefore I emphasise, on advice, that there is no responsibility on the Minister to attempt to answer what was no doubt a well-meaning, but, in practical terms, disorderly question.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm once again for the benefit of this House and for the people in the country who will read his remarks and listen to what he has said that there are absolutely no circumstances—no legal interpretation, no scenario that may crop up over the next few days or weeks—that will deny this Parliament the opportunity to vote on whatever the Government come back with? I say to the Minister that, as he has heard from Members across the House, trust in the Government is such that he has a lot of work to do to make people believe him.

Mr Walker: I am very happy to say that the short summary of my statement is that there will be a meaningful vote. There will be a meaningful vote in all circumstances, so I am happy to give the hon. Gentleman that assurance.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): My hon. Friend referred to the withdrawal agreement Bill that would follow a successful vote for the agreement. Does he agree that that will be a major piece of constitutional legislation covering some important issues such how citizens' rights are embedded, what the legal base is for laws during the transition period, what the duty on our Supreme Court is in terms of Court of Justice decisions, and so on? What steps will he take to make sure that there is an opportunity to consult widely on that, and that we are not left with inadequate time to consider those very important points?

Mr Walker: My right hon. and learned Friend makes an important point: that will be a crucial piece of legislation as we move forward. Of course it is right that the House should have its meaningful vote first before the introduction of the withdrawal agreement Bill, but we have been doing a huge amount of work to prepare that legislation. We have published a White Paper on it, and we shall continue to engage with the House and its Select Committees on it.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Prime Minister has mentioned on a number of occasions recently, including in her statement yesterday, that it is her deal, no deal or no Brexit. How are the Government preparing for the Prime Minister's third option? If she is not taking it seriously, why would she mention it?

Mr Walker: I think the Prime Minister has been very clear that that is a political comment about the outcomes if other people were to take control. We are very clear that we will not be revoking article 50—my Secretary of

State made that very clear yesterday—so it is a question of having an orderly withdrawal with an agreement, or no deal. The orderly withdrawal with an agreement is the preferable of the two options.

James Heapey (Wells) (Con): It is absolutely right that you, Mr Speaker, your Clerks, the Library and the Government will want to agree on the rules arising from the legislation thus far passed, so that we can have certainty over the Brexit endgame. But that endgame is the most chaotic and uncertain scenario imaginable within the entire Brexit process, so are we not better finding common ground now so that we can support a deal and deliver Brexit for the British public?

Mr Walker: I wholly agree with my hon. Friend, who makes an important point. It is really important that this House now works together to ensure that we can find that common ground and improve the withdrawal agreement when it is brought back to this House.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): The Government's credibility is in threads. If this country faces a no-deal exit from the European Union, the fault and responsibility will lie squarely with the Government, particularly the Prime Minister. Having listened to the Minister this afternoon, is it not the case that what we are now facing is not a meaningful vote, but a blackmail strategy?

Mr Walker: Absolutely not. I have made it clear that this House will have a meaningful vote under all circumstances, but it is incumbent on MPs on both sides of the House to remember what they promised to their electorate—that is, delivering the outcome of the referendum and getting a good negotiated deal. That is something that we should all be supporting when the withdrawal agreement returns to this House.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): If Opposition Members continue to oppose any of the very generous compromises that have been put forward, at what point will he withdraw the offer of £39 billion for the bureaucracy in Brussels and spend it preparing for the full, clean, World Trade Organisation Brexit that over 17 million people have voted for?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend always makes his point with great force and power, but today I am talking about the Government's commitments to this House and how we will meet them; that is what I want to focus on. We have put before the House a withdrawal agreement, which of course includes settling our dues with Brussels, but crucially also ending them and taking control of our money as we leave the EU.

Dame Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday the Prime Minister failed to put before the House the deal that she herself described as the “best possible negotiable deal”, and now she is travelling the capitals of Europe pleading for help. There is a growing sense of chaos in the country, and a feeling that the Government are simply not in control. Does the Minister agree that one of the options he should be considering is putting this issue back to the people with an option to stay in the EU—the best deal we have?

Mr Walker: I do not agree with the hon. Lady. It is incumbent on us all to remember that it was this House that legislated for the referendum, and that promised people their views would be listened to and followed. It is therefore for us to deliver on the outcome of the referendum, as both our parties promised in their manifestos just last year.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): It is vital that the House has its say on this crucial issue, so I am grateful for the Minister's assurances, but 21 January is nearly six weeks away. Does he agree that that should be a deadline, not a target? If this matter can come back before the House, it should. We need to resolve this at the earliest possible opportunity.

Mr Walker: I am happy to agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The problem is that nobody believes the Government anymore. That is exactly why the Attorney General should, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) said, be forced to come to the House and to put in writing the assurances that the Minister has given. Today the Minister has simply been put up as chaff for other Ministers above his pay grade who, quite frankly, are willing to resort to any level of trickery and contempt for this House. That is the reality. Speaking of trickery, will the Minister be very clear about whether any EU member states or European Commission officials were informed of the plan to pull the vote before the Cabinet discussed it and before this House was told?

Mr Walker: I have to say that chaff is a new description for me that I am honoured to receive from the hon. Gentleman. I am here to be very clear about the Government's interpretation of section 13 of the withdrawal Act and to answer that we will have a meaningful vote. I am not here to speculate on other matters.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): The contempt with which this Government hold Parliament seems to know no bounds. The answers of the Minister today suggest that it is either their way or the highway. That is not good enough. Parliament's voice must be heard on this issue. Apart from the Minister's word, what actual consequences are there if the Government do not bring a vote to the House of Commons by 21 January? There seem to be no consequences for holding Parliament in contempt, nor for pulling the vote that should have taken place today, so what will the consequences be if the Government do not bring a vote to the House before 21 January?

Mr Walker: The Government will bring a vote before 21 January.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Yesterday we had a significant judgment from the European Court that opens up another option, so when the Minister tells the Attorney General that we want written advice, can the Attorney General take into account yesterday's judgment in what he sends us?

Mr Walker: I am sure that the Attorney General takes into account all the judgments of the European Court of Justice, but I do not believe that that changes the policy of the Government, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made very clear yesterday.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The date of 21 January is a long way in the future, particularly for those EU citizens whose lives are on hold and who are struck with uncertainty. The Minister said that he thought that the vote could be brought back a lot earlier than that. Could we hear a bit more of the Minister's thoughts? Given that there are more than four sitting weeks until 21 January, why can we not have this vote before we break for the Christmas recess?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman will know that the date of 21 January is set in the Act because that is what Parliament decided should be in the Act. I have been very clear that I would like to see this voted on before then, and I think that many Members across the House would like to see that. The hon. Gentleman talks about the important matter of European citizens. The deal that we have negotiated is the best way of securing their livelihoods and allowing them to continue as before, but of course the Government have also made significant commitments about the unilateral steps we would take, even in the absence of a deal.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): This week's events have meant extra cost and extra disruption for business and public services. Can the Minister help me to understand why we are expected to believe his assurance that the Government will bring forward a vote before 21 January, in several weeks' time, when we were unable to believe the word that was given by Government Ministers yesterday morning that there would be a vote today? May I also invite him to use a different expression? Rather than saying, "We will have a vote before 21 January", can he tell us in legal terms that this Government must have a vote before 21 January?

Mr Walker: I have been very clear in my statement that the Government want to follow both the spirit and the letter of the law. I think that is the answer to the hon. Lady's question.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I think we all have a fairly shrewd idea that no amount of sugar-coating is going to salvage this deal. It is dead in the water and is highly likely to fail when it does meet the test of a parliamentary vote. Given that that is the situation, what contingencies are the Government planning? They have agreed that it would be disastrous for us to crash out with no deal, so are they ruling out any option, including potentially unilaterally revoking the article 50 declaration?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman talks about contingencies. Of course, a huge amount of contingency work has been done, including by the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris). We are very clear that the best way forward is to secure a deal to ensure that we have the best deal possible, and that is exactly what the Prime Minister is fighting for.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Given the dysfunctional and duplicitous behaviour that we have seen in the last few days, would not it be best if the Government listened to the very wise words of the former Conservative Prime Minister Sir John Major, speaking in Dublin today, who has asked for the revocation of article 50?

Mr Walker: No, I do not believe that it would be best. We have to remember that we were all elected on manifestos that respected the referendum result, and we have to deliver on that. I do pay heed to Sir John Major, when he makes the point about how important it is that we protect the peace process and the Good Friday agreement. That is exactly what we seek to do through the negotiations with the EU.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Government's handling of this whole thing has been woeful. After yesterday's shambles, I met staff of Reckitt Benckiser this morning, who told me that they are having to step up the preparations for a no-deal scenario, having received a letter from the Health Secretary saying that there could be problems at the ports for up to six months, which would mean major problems for pharmaceuticals and getting raw materials into the country. Is it not time that we now actually get on and have the vote? The Prime Minister will not bring back any major change to the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration; let us have the vote before Christmas, and then we can see what we need to do next in the new year.

Mr Walker: I regularly meet pharmaceutical businesses to talk to them about the Government's plan for a deal, and also no-deal contingency planning such as that which the hon. Lady talks about. I recognise that the industry strongly supports securing a deal that provides an implementation period that provides a clear pathway ahead for trade. We want to see that delivered. I think it is right that the Prime Minister should seek to put the best possible deal before this House.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The success of Jaguar Land Rover in my constituency has transformed the lives of thousands of workers, but they now face a bleak new year. Six weeks more of uncertainty take us ever closer to the cliff. Pending Parliament deciding where we eventually go, we must rule out no deal. Will the Government therefore call a vote next week on no deal-no Brexit?

Mr Walker: I have been very clear that the Government will allow a meaningful vote that will follow the letter and the spirit of the withdrawal Act. However, the best way to ensure the certainty that businesses crave is to make sure that we support across this House a withdrawal agreement that secures the implementation period and secures a good trade deal for our country.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Figures from yesterday show that the Minister's Government spent £100,000 on social media promoting the Prime Minister's deal before withdrawing it from the vote. Will he do two things? First, will he apologise for squandering public money in that way; and will he also give a guarantee that he will waste no more public money on pointless propaganda during this needlessly extended process?

Mr Walker: The Government are absolutely right in seeking to secure a deal that is in our national interest—in the national interest of the whole of the United Kingdom—and we should continue to do so.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister acknowledge the enormous disquiet not just in all parts of this House but outside this place, across our country, that the expected vote today was pulled, despite repeated promises that it was 100% going ahead? We have heard from Europe that there is no chance of any change to the deal. Will his Government now take responsibility, stop this uncertainty—which, as he will have heard from countless colleagues, is having such a detrimental impact on our businesses and also on our nation's mental health—and commit to bring forward the vote by Christmas so that we can all start 2019 with some certainty?

Mr Walker: The hon. Lady has called for certainty. The best way for certainty is that this deal is brought back to this House with the assurances that European capitals are already saying that they can give to aid its ratification, so that we can all get behind it, back it and provide that certainty.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): Yesterday's fiasco has done further damage to this country's once proud reputation for stability and good governance. Could the Minister explain to the House how another 40 days of drift and dither is going to help to restore that battered reputation?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman, who once had aspirations to lead the Opposition, might have provided perhaps less drift and dither from the Opposition Front Bench. But what he would not have done, I think, is actually do what the Labour manifesto promised to do, which was to deliver on the outcome of the referendum.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I told my constituents in Bristol West that I will be voting against the Government's deal and voting against no deal this evening, but the Government have pulled those votes, and yesterday the Minister's boss said that he would not be revoking article 50. So is not the truth that this Government are trying to hold a no-deal Brexit gun to the country's head?

Mr Walker: No. I respect the fact that the hon. Lady has always been consistent in her views on this issue; of course, it is right to point out that those views conflict with the promises made in the last Labour manifesto. This Government are very clear—we want this House to be able to vote on a deal, we think that that deal will be in the interests of our country, and we will bringing that deal back to this House to vote on it.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): After yesterday's shenanigans and—let us face it—a total abuse of power by the Executive, all trust in this Government has broken down. So while I believe that the Minister is being sincere, will he, to restore trust, promise to have the Attorney General's legal advice on section 13 of the withdrawal Act published, and also call for the article 50 clock to be stopped on this process?

Mr Walker: We have been very clear on our interpretation of section 13 of the withdrawal Act. This House will have a vote. We are committed to that meaningful vote in all the circumstances envisaged by section 13 of the withdrawal Act.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Minister has to understand that the reason why Members on both sides of the House have little faith in what he is saying is that he keeps answering by saying that with section 13 there will be a vote. The reality is that there was a business motion last week where it was agreed that there would be a vote today, and the Government have reneged on it, which is why we do not trust them. The language that he has been using in answering these questions is extremely important. He said that he hopes for a vote before 21 January, that he hopes for a vote shortly, and that 21 January would be the back end of when he would expect there to be a vote. He clearly knows something, so will he set out now when the vote will come?

Mr Walker: I am very honoured that the hon. Gentleman believes I know something. I would encourage him to read the urgent question that I have been responding to.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Government are relying on the House trusting them in bringing forward a meaningful vote in the future, but yesterday's escapades suggest that they are not always dealing from the top of the pack. The Leader of the House came here yesterday and collapsed the business without making any reference to that at all, and it was moved by a Minister of the Government just shouting "Tomorrow". It would help to restore some of that trust—although that is a very difficult thing for the Government to do—if they were to promise never to do that again in this process and give this House the opportunity to vote on any future changes in the business motion.

Mr Walker: I would gently say to the hon. Gentleman that he is very generous in giving me such wonderful powers to make commitments on behalf of the Government for evermore. I have been clear today about the meaningful vote that this House will have, and clear about our interpretation of section 13 of the withdrawal Act. I think that colleagues across the House should take that very clearly as the Government's intention as to what we are going to do. I would therefore gently appeal for the trust that he talks about.

Cannabis (Legalisation and Regulation)

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

1.37 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to legalise the possession and consumption of cannabis; to provide for the regulation of the production, distribution and sale of cannabis; and for connected purposes.

Over the past few weeks, three of my constituents have, individually, come to see me to discuss cannabis. All three suffer acute continuing pain. One has fibromyalgia, osteoarthritis and IBS. He had been prescribed Fentanyl, which we know is highly addictive and potentially fatal. He stopped taking it out of fear of the consequences. Cannabis offers him essential pain relief, but he has no option but to buy it illegally. He knows that, at any time, he could face arrest and prosecution. Following the Government's reforms allowing for the prescribing of cannabis-based products for medicinal use, he went to see his GP to get a prescription. He was told that they—the GPs—were all under instructions not to refer patients to the pain clinic because there is no evidence of therapeutic value. Yet something as dangerous as Fentanyl remains available.

Another constituent, who has rapidly advancing Parkinson's disease, also uses cannabis. It is the only thing that helps him. He has also been told by his GP that he cannot be referred to a specialist for cannabis to be prescribed. So we leave this man, who is acutely unwell, having to break the law in order to get relief from pain. This is surely cruel and inhuman.

The third man, in his 50s, finds that cannabis is the only thing that offers him respite from pain following an injury to his leg. He has a lifelong allergy to codeine. Other painkillers have caused serious problems with his kidneys. But cannabis works for him. Fearing the risks of buying from a street dealer, he bought some over the internet. He then faced a police raid. Despite my pleas to the police that giving him a criminal record would not be in the public interest, last week he was given a caution. This man has been a law-abiding citizen all his life. He has found this whole thing acutely distressing. He fears that the consequence of the caution is that he will not be able to visit his son in Australia. The treatment of this man is shameful. What is the point of doing this to him? What is the possible public interest?

Across the country, people like my constituent are left with no option but to break the law. The Government's reforms raised expectations but have dashed hopes for so many people. The approach taken by the Government is so restrictive that the numbers who will benefit are minuscule. If someone is lucky, they might live in an area where the police force takes an enlightened approach. Chief Constable Mike Barton in Durham has effectively decriminalised cannabis for personal use. A recent parliamentary answer I received reveals that, in some areas, prosecutions and cautions have plummeted. Surely we cannot justify this postcode lottery, where two people behaving in exactly the same way are treated differently depending on where they live. One will be forever tarnished with a criminal record, and the other will not. It is clear that the recent reforms are not working, so the Government should look in the round at the harm that prohibition of cannabis is causing across the country and try to come up with a more enlightened approach.

[Norman Lamb]

In Canada, Justin Trudeau's Liberal Government have implemented a new legal, regulated market for cannabis for recreational and medicinal use. Their approach is instructive. In June 2016, the Minister of Justice, the Minister of Public Safety and the Minister of Health jointly set out the key principles that should guide reform, including: protecting young people by keeping cannabis out of the hands of children and youth; keeping profits out of the hands of criminals; preventing people from receiving criminal records for simple cannabis possession offences, which reduces the burden on police and the justice system; protecting public health and safety by strengthening the law with respect to serious offences such as selling cannabis to minors and driving under influence; providing support for addiction treatment, mental health support and education programmes to inform people about the risks; and access to quality-controlled cannabis for medicinal purposes. Surely those principles should guide us too. Carrying on as we are has dreadful consequences.

I want to make four key points. First, nowhere across the world has prohibition worked—cannabis is available everywhere. Secondly, people have no idea what they are buying. We know that leaving supply in the hands of criminals puts teenagers in particular at risk. They are most susceptible to suffering mental health consequences, including psychosis, from regular use of potent strains available on the street. The widespread use of those dangerous strains is the result of our failure to regulate. A regulated market would allow Government to control the safety and potency of cannabis sold by legal vendors. Through a misplaced desire to be “tough on drugs”, we leave teenagers vulnerable to exploitation from sellers who have no interest at all in their welfare. Through inaction, Government and Parliament are culpable. If something is potentially dangerous to children and young people, we must control it and regulate it, not leave it freely available from those keen to make a fast buck.

Thirdly, we know that the illegal market for drugs generates extreme violence in many communities, and particularly the most disadvantaged. If a supplier faces competition, they do not resort to the courts to protect their market; they use extreme violence. Thousands of people have lost their lives as a result of illegal trade in drugs in countries such as Mexico, but on the streets of our poorest communities, violence is meted out regularly. Young vulnerable teenagers get caught up in this violent trade and cannot escape. It does not have to be like this.

Fourthly, we still criminalise thousands of people every year, taking up precious police time that could be used to fight serious crime. Careers are blighted for using a substance that no doubt many Members on the Government Benches have used at some stage of their lives. Meanwhile, the most harmful drug of all is consumed in large quantities right here in this building. Alcohol leads to violence on our streets and behind closed doors in people's homes. It destroys families up and down our country, yet we tax it, and the Exchequer benefits enormously from it. Is there not a dreadful hypocrisy in the fact that we allow our drug of choice, while criminalising people who use another, less dangerous drug, many for the relief of pain?

My Bill offers a more rational alternative to this mess. With strict regulation of the growing, sale and marketing of cannabis, with an age limit of 18 for the purchase and consumption of cannabis and with clear controls over potency of what is sold in licensed outlets, we can at last start to protect children and teenagers. We can at last treat with dignity and respect all those who suffer acute pain or who have conditions such as multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's and epilepsy. We can end the shameful treatment of these people as criminals.

We can at last end the extraordinary practice of handing billions of pounds every year to organised crime. We can instead start to tax the sale of cannabis, so that revenues can be used for good purpose—public health education, the NHS, schools and the police. We can start to take some of the violence and intimidation off our streets and restore order in our poorest communities, and we can free up police time to focus on serious crime. This is rational, evidence-based policy making. It is time for this country to act on the evidence and to protect children and young people from harm.

1.46 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): First, I want to pay respect to the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) for introducing the Bill. He has a long record of campaigning on this important issue, and while I strongly disagree with him, I respect his desire that something be done to address it.

I am sure we can all agree that something needs to be done about the current situation with cannabis use, which is wrong, unsustainable and doing a great deal of damage to our society, but I do not believe that liberalising and decriminalising it in this way is the answer. My view is largely informed by my experience of seeking to help and support people who have been regular users of cannabis. I have seen at first hand the lives that it wrecks, the impact on mental health and the cost to not only the individual but their families, their communities and wider society.

I was slightly confused by the line that the right hon. Gentleman took. He seemed to be confusing medicinal use of cannabis with recreational use. The Government should take great credit for the progress made recently on allowing the medicinal use of cannabis products. That is absolutely right, and I believe it has a great deal of support across the country. I agree that more should be done to ensure that cannabis for medicinal use gets to the people who really need it, and that more needs to be done to get medical professionals on board and adjusted to the new regime. However, the new measures were only introduced a few weeks ago, on 1 November, and we need to allow more time for the changes to come into effect before we take a huge leap of faith towards decriminalising cannabis altogether.

My concern is that, by liberalising cannabis use, we would send precisely the wrong message to our young people. We would be giving them the message that cannabis is safe and okay to use. We need to make very clear that cannabis is a dangerous drug and that there is no safe consumption of cannabis in an uncontrolled, unregulated way. We are clearly in the midst of a war on drugs, but we will not win the war by raising the white flag, giving up and surrendering. No war has ever been won by surrendering.

The impact of regular cannabis use on mental health has been well established. There is strong evidence to demonstrate that frequent use of cannabis is linked to the inducement of psychosis. One study in south London revealed a threefold increase in the risk of individuals having a psychotic disorder among regular cannabis users compared with those who do not use cannabis.

In recent years, we have seen a steady reduction in the use of cannabis: over the past 20 years, it has declined by 30%. YouGov polling conducted this year indicates that legislation could significantly disturb this overall downward trend. Over a quarter of people under 25 who have never tried cannabis indicated that they would definitely try it, or be likely to try it, if it were legalised. That is over 1 million 18 to 24-year-olds. Of those who have used cannabis before, well over a third of 18 to 24-year-olds said that they would be more likely to use it more regularly if it were decriminalised.

I believe that legislation would send the very wrong message to our young people that cannabis is okay to use. I think we all understand that for many people the use of cannabis is a gateway drug to more serious and more damaging drug use. It would be absolutely wrong to send the message that somehow cannabis is okay, because of where that would lead for many people. As with most laws, the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 is adhered to by the vast majority of people, but it is ignored by some. We must not forget that the current law deters a great many from drug use, which serves a very important public interest.

However, this is no endorsement of the status quo. We all have at least some common ground. It is intolerable to see our young people hurting themselves or ending their lives prematurely because of the effects of this dangerous drug. Our approach must be bolder. We must offer more meaningful support and aim to drive down consumption yet further. This will not be achieved by a new website or a helpline. We need to intervene and challenge, using experts in the field of drug use, recovered addicts and recovering users, who can reach out and offer a real prospect of change for users.

A procedure that replaces the current system of issuing a relatively ineffectual warning or punitive fine given by a police officer with the alternative of offering diversion through attendance at a local drugs awareness day would have a greater impact in reducing use. Part of what is currently charged as a fixed penalty notice could instead go to local treatment providers to pay for such a service.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to the situation in Canada. Interestingly, on the eve of the legislation being introduced in Canada, an article published in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* called the legislation “a national, uncontrolled experiment in which the profits of cannabis producers and tax revenues are squarely pitched against the health of Canadians.”

Yes, we can learn from experiments taking place elsewhere, but we do not need to risk the lives of some of our most vulnerable residents in doing so.

This is one of the many substances that plague our communities and rob both young and old—and, predominantly, the most disadvantaged—of a full life. We must commit to doing more, to having a person-centric approach, to showing compassion, yet keep the decisiveness of the criminal law in intervening when the public

interest demands. I accept that there is a trend in other nations to legalise cannabis, but the evidence at this stage is still very mixed.

Decriminalisation is at best a risky step for us to take. While I understand the desire for something to be done to address this issue, I do not believe that liberalisation in this way is right for our country at this time. We need to do better for our young people, but giving up the war on cannabis is not the way to achieve it. I cannot support this Bill, and if the House does divide on this issue, I will vote against it. I encourage other Members to join me in not allowing this Bill to progress.

Question put (Standing Order No. 23).

The House divided: Ayes 52, Noes 66.

Division No. 275]

[1.55 pm

AYES

Antoniazzi, Tonia
Black, Mhairi
Blackman, Kirsty
Blunt, Crispin
Brown, Alan
Burden, Richard
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Cherry, Joanna
Clwyd, rh Ann
Cowan, Ronnie
Crawley, Angela
Day, Martyn
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Edwards, Jonathan
Fabricant, Michael
Farron, Tim
Gethins, Stephen
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goldsmith, Zac
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Hendry, Drew
Herbert, rh Nick
Hobhouse, Wera
Hopkins, Kelvin

Jardine, Christine
Jenkyns, Andrea
Kawczynski, Daniel
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Law, Chris
Lucas, Caroline
Mann, Scott
Mc Nally, John
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McGinn, Conon
Moran, Layla
Murray, Ian
Percy, Andrew
Poulter, Dr Dan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Sheppard, Tommy
Stephens, Chris
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williamson, Chris
Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Ayes:

Tom Brake and
Jamie Stone

NOES

Amess, Sir David
Blackman, Bob
Bone, Mr Peter
Bridgen, Andrew
Bruce, Fiona
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Coyle, Neil
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Double, Steve
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Elphicke, Charlie
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Gapes, Mike
Girvan, Paul
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Graham, Richard

Gray, James
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Hoey, Kate
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jones, rh Mr David
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Mr Chris
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Linden, David
McGinn, Conon
Mills, Nigel
Murray, Ian
Offord, Dr Matthew
Paisley, Ian

Pritchard, Mark
Quince, Will
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Simpson, David
Smith, Henry
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Spellar, rh John

Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Tomlinson, Michael
Umunna, Chuka
Vickers, Martin
Walker, Mr Charles
Wiggin, Bill
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wragg, Mr William

Tellers for the Noes:
Sir Mike Penning and
Andrew Selous

Question accordingly negatived.

Exiting the European Union: Meaningful Vote

Emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

2.6 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Prime Minister's unprecedented decision not to proceed with the final two days of debate and the meaningful vote, despite the House's Order of Tuesday 4 December 2018, and her failure to allow this House to express its view on the Government's deal or her proposed negotiating objectives, without the agreement of this House.

I have had the privilege of serving this House for 35 years, and I have had strong disagreements with every Prime Minister who has served in that time—it is all there on the record—but I have never, in all those years, witnessed such an abject mess as this Prime Minister is making of these crucial Brexit negotiations and in presenting her deal to the House. Most Prime Ministers lose votes and get things wrong, but yesterday she demeaned her office by unilaterally taking her discredited deal off the table and running away, rather than facing the verdict of this House. We should have been voting on it today. There is nothing wrong with standing by your principles, but this deal is not one of principle—or apparently not one that she is prepared to stand by, anyway. Yesterday the Government did not even have the decency to allow a vote on withdrawing the business. The Prime Minister let down all MPs and the people we represent, on both sides of this House, the overwhelming majority of whom know that this deal is dead and want to get on with putting a realistic solution in place.

I want to thank my colleagues in the Labour party who supported the application for the debate yesterday, and colleagues in all the other opposition parties who supported it, and indeed Conservative Members, on both sides of the debate, in order to ensure that a vote could take place.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the frequency with which the Government hold this Parliament in contempt, and the ease with which they mislead the British public, is frankly appalling and pathetic? *[Interruption.]* It is true. It is now alleged on BuzzFeed that the Prime Minister told top EU officials that she intended to pull the Brexit vote 24 hours before she told senior Cabinet members. Does my right hon. Friend agree—

Mr Speaker: Order. I had wanted the hon. Gentleman to complete his intervention. I remind the House that interventions should be brief, not mini speeches, because there is a lot to get through and 32 Members want to contribute after the principal speakers.

Jeremy Corbyn: That news is very disturbing indeed. The House should be told first—not the media, not anybody else.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is not just BuzzFeed that reported that, but the *Daily Mirror*. I myself have been told that the Prime Minister spoke to a number of EU member states and

officials before she spoke to the Cabinet and the House to say that the vote would be cancelled. Does my right hon. Friend agree that what I have been told is shocking: that apparently the addendum the Prime Minister is now seeking was drafted weeks ago, before we even started the debate in this House?

Jeremy Corbyn: The whole process gets curiously and curiously, Mr Speaker. This is no longer a functioning Government and the Prime Minister must admit her deal is dead. Her shambolic negotiations have ended in failure and she no longer has the authority to negotiate for this country when she does not even have the authority of her own party.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Does the Leader of the Opposition not accept that it is rather strange for the Opposition to criticise the Prime Minister for not seeking clarity on the backstop but then, when she does go to Brussels to do just that, criticise her for that very action?

Jeremy Corbyn: I am absolutely full of admiration for the hon. Member's ability to keep a straight face while she asked that question.

Parliament may not have had the chance to vote down the Prime Minister's deal, but if she had put it before the House I think we all know it would have been defeated by a very significant margin indeed.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is not just that the Prime Minister let down the House and our constituents? Taxpayers have been paying the price, with reports that £100,000 was spent in the past week on Facebook advertisements supporting her deal. Her Ministers were sent around the country, and all of us have spent time and resources consulting our constituents. We have all been let down. We have not been able to express our view and their view in a vote in this House.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister has indeed wasted £100,000 of public money in just seven days on Facebook adverts trying, and failing, to sell this dog's dinner of a Brexit deal. There were days when both the Prime Minister and I served as local councillors. Had we spent public money in that way, we would have been surcharged for a waste of public money without proper approval.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman is of course right: the Government are an absolute shambles. They have failed the country and they are in contempt of Parliament. Will he not do the right thing now and table a motion of no confidence in the Government, so that we can be shot of them?

Jeremy Corbyn: I have tabled this motion today, which the hon. Gentleman supported. We have no confidence in the Government. We need to do the appropriate thing at the appropriate time—have a motion of no confidence to get rid of this Government.

The Prime Minister not only failed to convince the public; she now seems unable to convince the European Union to accept any meaningful changes to her proposals.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): If the right hon. Gentleman followed the debate, he will have noticed that he had complaints about the backstop, as did most of the 164 speakers. Is it therefore not right for the Prime Minister to go and see if she can mend it? If he disagrees with that, why?

Jeremy Corbyn: I thought that was a really valiant attempt to defend the indefensible. It is utterly ludicrous. Everyone knew the date the vote was going to be put. The whole world knew about it. We now hear that apparently the Prime Minister was trying to arrange some backroom deal ahead of it and then pulled the vote, but she did not bother to tell an awful lot of other people that she was doing so. I do admire the right hon. and learned Gentleman's attempts at defending what is completely indefensible.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Last week the Government were found to be in contempt of Parliament. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if the media were briefed before this House, that is further contempt for this Parliament?

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister cancelled the Cabinet meeting this morning—presumably she is worried about whether she has a majority there or not—and apparently many of her Ministers are very upset. I cannot say I blame them. At least a dozen were sent into TV and radio stations yesterday morning to deny the Prime Minister would pull the vote, before somebody helpfully phoned from Downing Street to pull them out of the studios to say the line had changed. That is an extraordinary way of not running a Government. The Northern Ireland Secretary was quoted as saying that the UK must move on with Brexit or risk being riven with division, shortly before the Prime Minister decided not to move on with Brexit. This is the same Prime Minister who said hers was the best deal and the only deal. If that is the case, what is she doing today in Europe?

This runaway Prime Minister is not even seeking to negotiate. She confirmed that she is only seeking reassurances. Our Prime Minister is traipsing around the continent in pursuit and search of warm words—when she can get out of the car to hear them. It really is, if I may say so, Mr Speaker, the unspeakable in pursuit of the unwritten—a waste of time and a waste of public money. Because of her own unworkable red lines, the European Commission says it will not renegotiate with her. The Prime Minister also concedes that she is not negotiating either, so what on earth is she doing travelling from capital to capital in Europe? I am sure it cannot be Christmas shopping, so what on earth is she doing in Europe? Worse than that, it shows that once again she is simply not listening.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): In ensuring the integrity of our Union, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the only way we can deal with the backstop is to amend the legally binding text of an international agreement?

Jeremy Corbyn: The red lines the Prime Minister set out on the backstop became impossible. Because of her bungled negotiations, there is a greater chance of entering

[Jeremy Corbyn]

into an indefinite backstop. That is one of the reasons why we would vote against it, as I believe the hon. Gentleman would.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): There are legitimate concerns about the Northern Ireland backstop, but does my right hon. Friend agree that it is not only the backstop that is a problem with this deal? Can he remember a time in British history when the Prime Minister and the Chancellor recommended a course of action that, like their deal, would make people worse off according to their own analysis?

Jeremy Corbyn: I cannot recall a time when any Government have come to the House to promise something that will make people worse off and then blindly continue to go ahead with it. It is not only the backstop that is a problem. Many will not vote for a blindfold Brexit on the basis of a 26-page wish list attached to it. It fails to guarantee the frictionless trade that the Prime Minister promised. It fails to maintain our membership of vital agencies and programmes. It fails to ensure that our rights and protections will be kept in place. It fails to provide a comprehensive customs union with a UK say. On the latter point, I welcome the endorsement of a permanent customs union by former Brexit Minister Lord Bridges, who said that it could be the basis for a parliamentary consensus.

Yesterday, following her statement, the Prime Minister failed to answer a single one of my questions, so last night I wrote to her, together with the leaders of the Scottish National party, Plaid Cymru, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens. We set out five questions to the Prime Minister. Sadly, she is not here to answer them. Therefore, Mr Speaker, when she returns from her strange stage-managed foray to Europe, I hope she will reply promptly to the five Opposition parties who wrote to her.

While the Prime Minister sends our country into Brexit-induced paralysis, the coming winter threatens the deepest crisis in our NHS. Homelessness and rough sleeping continue their unrelenting rise. The local government funding settlement is delayed yet again, meaning our very hard-hit councils cannot start budgeting for next year and neither can the police—facing rising violent crime because their funding settlement is delayed, too. Another Government contractor, we learn, is at risk, and thousands of jobs, too, as Interserve teeters on the brink of collapse; and all the while, the economy is slowing—high streets in crisis, shares tumbling, the pound plummeting. This is not strong and stable government—it is weak leadership from a weak Prime Minister.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Some people say that talk of poverty and food banks is a distraction from Brexit. Given the impact on food prices, does not my right hon. Friend think that actually, it is the central issue?

Jeremy Corbyn: Poverty is the central issue in this country. As the UN report pointed out, 14 million of our fellow citizens are living in poverty. More will be

rough sleepers than for many, many years over this Christmas, and we have hundreds of thousands of children living in insecure, temporary accommodation, many of them very hungry over this Christmas. That is not a good look and we should be having a Government who are concentrated on reducing the levels of poverty in this country.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the £100,000 given to Facebook—spent on Brexit advertising—by the Government could have been given to all our constituencies to alleviate food poverty?

Jeremy Corbyn: Indeed; £100,000 would help a lot of food banks get more food in order that the hungry can get something to eat.

If the Prime Minister comes back with nothing more than warm words, then she must immediately put her deal to the House—no more delays, no more tricks; let Parliament take control. If not, then frankly she must go. We cannot tolerate delay any longer. With a legally enshrined exit date of 29 March 2019, just over 100 days away, we cannot allow this shambles to endure, and neither can we risk falling into a no deal.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): In addition to the farce that was facing the country yesterday, one of the biggest consequences will be the impact that this has on the 22,000 EU nationals living in my constituency. The settled scheme status is still being developed. The Home Office app for registration has been branded absolutely “useless” by academics. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the limbo facing this House will have great, distressing consequences for our EU nationals in our constituencies?

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention and compliment her on the work that she does on behalf of her constituents. All of us represent EU nationals, some in greater numbers than others. We all know the horror and stress that they have been through over the past two and a half years—the stress where one partner comes from one part of Europe and the other from Britain, and the stress on those children is huge—which is why, straight after the referendum, on our behalf, Andy Burnham moved from this Dispatch Box a motion guaranteeing permanent rights of residence for all EU nationals. That was agreed on a non-binding motion. Two and a half years later, we still have not had the absolute legal certainty from this Government on the protection of those EU nationals. They deserve it, and we also need to recognise that they have made a massive contribution to our economy, to our way of life, to our health service and to all our public services. We should thank them for it and assure them that they have a permanent place in this country, whatever the outcome of these particular rounds of talks.

We will work across this House to prevent any further damage to our economy, to our international standing and to our democracy, so I say to the limited number of Government Back Benchers opposite: let Parliament have a say on this shabby deal. Let Parliament take back

control of it, because this Government have lost the ability to lead, the ability to negotiate and the ability to speak for this House in those negotiations.

2.24 pm

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): The Leader of the Opposition spent most of his speech attacking my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. I think it is perhaps worth reminding him and the House that in the last two months alone, my right hon. Friend has spent more than 22 hours at this Dispatch Box making statements and answering questions from right hon. and hon. Members in every corner of this House, predominantly about the question of EU exit—*[Interruption.]*—and the deal that she negotiated. She has made, in that time alone, six full oral statements dedicated to that subject and opened the debate in this House on 4 December—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. There will be plenty of opportunity for other hon. and right hon. Members to speak in the debate, and indeed, to seek to intervene, but the Minister for the Cabinet Office must be heard.

Mr Lidington: I think anybody who has observed my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in action, both in her current office and in the other offices she has held over the years, will be in no doubt about her commitment to parliamentary accountability, whatever the cost to her in terms of the time that you, Mr Speaker, rightly say that she should be spending—and she accepts that she should spend—in answering questions from colleagues in every party in every corner of this House.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I think that nobody doubts how much effort the Prime Minister has put into the entire process of Brexit, but in the end, what matters to people outside here is not effort but results. This House ought to have the chance to vote on those results.

Mr Lidington: As I shall say shortly, this House will indeed have that opportunity.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): After all the debate, what the businesses, farmers and consumers—all the people in my constituency—want to know is when this matter is going to be resolved. It would have been resolved tonight had we had that vote. What date will we have this vote?

Mr Lidington: What the businesses and farmers whom I have talked to in Wales, and in my constituency and many other parts of the country, have said is that they want hon. Members from every political party to get behind the deal and get it in place as rapidly as possible, so that they can have the certainty and clarity of the transitional period and can plan investment and job creation decisions that are currently being held while that uncertainty prevails.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that, while the Prime Minister may have had plenty of time to speak about this, we have not? We did have 15 hours of debate in which we could have presented the case for our constituents—for me, that includes the university sector,

the automobile sector and the science sector. Two Ministers have gone who used to cover those portfolios because they can now see the effect that this is going to have. Does he not understand the intense frustration on the Opposition side with this Government, who will not let us speak up for our constituents?

Mr Lidington: For the reasons that I have already set out, there have been many hours already, including the three days so far of debate on the meaningful vote, in which Members of Parliament from all parts of the House have been able to express those views.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Lidington: I will give way to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), from the Scottish National party, then I will make progress.

Pete Wishart: It is always good to see the right hon. Gentleman at the Dispatch Box, but perhaps he can explain exactly what the Prime Minister is doing. She has heard what the EU leaders have told us; they are not prepared to negotiate this deal. Should not this Prime Minister, the worst dancing queen in history, come back here and face her Waterloo?

Mr Lidington: Ah, the hon. Gentleman has been crafting that one for quite a time, I can see. He asked what my right hon. Friend is doing. The answer is that she is responding to the points made to her again and again by Members of this House, because in the statements and the exchanges that followed, and in the debates that we have had so far, hon. Members have expressed criticisms, usually focused—not exclusively, but for the most part—on one issue: the so-called backstop on the Irish border. Again and again, right hon. and hon. Members in all parts of the House have asked her to go back to EU member states and the Commission to seek changes, and in particular, to provide assurances that the backstop would only be temporary. That is exactly what my right hon. Friend has done.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): It was very clear from the first three days of debate—colleagues have not been backwards in making themselves available to the media as well to say how much they disagree with the deal—that the House was not going to pass it, so surely the Prime Minister has done exactly the right thing in going back to Europe to get a better deal to put to the House in due course.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend puts it well. As I have said, the Prime Minister is responding to the wish expressed by many Members of the House.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman and I both entered the House at the same time, and I doubt that either of us has been in a situation quite as dangerous and fraught as this. Surely he will agree that, after yesterday, the Prime Minister has shredded her credibility and that many people on both sides of the House now find it almost impossible to believe a word she says. She asserts one thing one day and the opposite the day after. She sends her Cabinet out to assert that the vote is going ahead even as she is planning to pull it. Surely he must understand that we cannot go on with this Prime Minister at the helm.

Mr Lidington: No, I reject that completely. Let us look back over the last week. My right hon. Friend returned from the G20 in Argentina the Sunday before last; she gave a statement to the House on the Monday; then she both led the debate on the meaningful vote and listened to the many interventions made; and then, as well as paying attention to what was said in the House on subsequent days, she talked to a number of Members from different political parties and came to the decision over the weekend that she announced to the House yesterday.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): Is the problem not now that Ministers do not know themselves whether they are telling the truth to the House of Commons because they are not being told the truth by the Prime Minister? This is now a question of trust, and that is why the DUP is not supporting the Government. It is not just a question of policy detail; it is a question of breaking trust. Ministers do not even know any more when they are telling the truth.

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend convened the Cabinet by telephone conference yesterday morning to tell all members of the Cabinet about the decision she had come to, and the Cabinet agreed to support and endorse that decision.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster said that Members had asked for assurances about the backstop. Will he accept, even at this late stage, that assurances will not suffice? Unless there is a fundamental alteration to the text of the withdrawal agreement and to the advice given by the Attorney General himself, it simply will not suffice.

Mr Lidington: I am in no doubt about the view expressed by the hon. Gentleman and his DUP colleagues. He will understand that I am not going to prejudge the outcome of the conversations the Prime Minister is having with other European leaders, but she made it clear yesterday that nothing was ruled out in those conversations.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Does the deputy Prime Minister agree that had we had the vote today, he would have known the views not of a few Members but of the House? Would that not have strengthened the Prime Minister's negotiating position, as she could have gone back and said that the House had rejected the proposal?

Mr Lidington: As she said yesterday, the Prime Minister was in no doubt, having listened to the debate, read *Hansard* and held direct conversations with Members of Parliament across the House, as to what the outcome was going to be.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): It seems to me that we have two options—either a Parliament like the European Parliament, where everything is agreed in advance and what someone says in the Chamber does not affect anybody's opinion or change anything, or a Parliament like this Parliament, where debate is dynamic and Ministers listen to what is said. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is a better place to be?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) reminded us that she and I had been here for a few years now. I have sat through exchange after exchange in this

Chamber—with each main party, at different times, in opposition or in government—where the demand has been that Ministers respond to the debate in the House and the calls made upon them, yet when my right hon. Friend does that, the clamour of criticism increases further.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Lidington: No, I will not give way. [HON. MEMBERS: "Give way!"]

Mr Speaker: Order. An enormous amount of noisy burbling is being directed at the Minister by right hon. and hon. Members. I have known him for 21 years in the House, and for a decade or so before that, and in my experience he is an unfailingly courteous Minister, and he must be heard.

Mr Lidington: I have given way a fair number of times. I am conscious that many of my hon. Friends, and many hon. Members opposite, are seeking to intervene, and I will try to give way further, but I am conscious, Mr Speaker, that you told us that more than 30 Members wanted to take part in this debate. I will therefore make some progress, and then I will look for an opportunity to give way again.

The right hon. Gentleman the Leader of the Opposition and many other Members on both sides of the House have made the point that the House wishes to bring this matter to a head and to have a definitive vote, and of course it is a requirement under the EU withdrawal Act that a meaningful vote take place before the Government are able to ratify any deal with the EU—a deal in the form of a withdrawal agreement under article 50 of the treaty on European Union.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Lidington: I want to reiterate what I think the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), made clear earlier this afternoon: the remaining stages of this debate and the votes have not been cancelled; they have been deferred. The business of the House motion that governs the debate, including the amendment successfully moved by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), also remains in force. The terms of that business of the House motion could be changed only if the House itself either amended the motion or passed a new motion to supersede the one currently in place.

Mr Francois: My procedure is a bit rusty, but am I right in saying that the motion as drafted can be amended only by a Minister of the Crown? If the Government wanted to put back the vote because the Prime Minister wanted more time to go to Europe—admittedly, she has only had two years—the honourable thing the Government should have done yesterday was come to the House, table a revised business motion to put the vote back, say, one week, argue to the House why they needed that extra time, and then put the motion to the vote. That would have been the honourable way to proceed. Why did the Government not do that?

Mr Lidington: While it might be for the Government to table any amendment to the business of the House motion, of course such an amendment would carry only if the House as a whole voted to approve it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Francois: Will my right hon. Friend give way again?

Mr Lidington: If my right hon. Friend will forgive me, I will try to answer his question.

Mr Francois: We cannot vote on it if you don't bring it forward.

Mr Lidington: I am trying to answer my right hon. Friend's question. Just as the business of the House motion that currently governs the debate was open for debate and was then approved by the House in order for it to take effect, those provisions would also apply to any subsequent change in the terms of that motion, so it would be a matter for the House as a whole.

As for my right hon. Friend's second point, we do not know for certain at this stage what the outcome of the talks that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is having today with other European leaders will be, or what the discussions and conclusions may be of the European Council that is scheduled to take place later this week. The judgment that we have made as a Government is that in those circumstances, it would be right to come to the House as soon as we have that certainty.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Lidington: I want to make it clear that, as the Prime Minister said yesterday and as the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), said earlier today in response to the urgent question, the Government will bring the debate and vote back to the House by 21 January at the very latest. As my hon. Friend said during the exchanges that followed his response to the urgent question, we see that date as a deadline and not as a target.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Lidington: I will give way to the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), because he has been trying to intervene for a long time.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster for giving way. As he knows, I have a lot of respect for him, and he has a tough gig today.

The reason for this postponement and delay is, of course, so that the Prime Minister can go away and negotiate some magic piece of paper. Can the right hon. Gentleman tell me whether any member of the Cabinet had seen or discussed a draft of the addendum or codicil that the Prime Minister is seeking at any point in the last few weeks before she decided to postpone the debate?

Mr Lidington: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's kind words, but, as he will understand, I am certainly not going to talk about the discussions that take place during Cabinet meetings.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I am slightly confused by what the deputy Prime Minister is saying. He seems to be suggesting that we will be restarting the old debate.

Presumably that means that none of the Members who have already spoken will speak again and that all the elements of the business of the House motion that we have already carried will continue; but surely to God, we must do that before Christmas. We cannot let this roll on and on while businesses are wasting time, money and energy making plans for something that may not come to pass.

Mr Lidington: I will go this far with the hon. Gentleman: my view, and the Government's view, is that we need to push on with this sooner rather than later, but that we need to know the outcome of the discussions that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is having before we determine the exact timing of those future days of debate. Let me also reiterate that, as both the Prime Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester have said to the House, the Government regard the obligation, in the event of no deal being agreed, to make a statement in line with section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act as a solemn commitment that still stands.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that greater than the political crisis that has been created is the economic crisis? Already, in the last 24 hours, 2% has been knocked off the value of the pound. Is that not a reason to press ahead with the vote?

Mr Lidington: I am second to no one in wanting this issue to be resolved as rapidly as possible.

Emma Reynolds: Why will the Government not rule out no deal, given the catastrophic impact that it would have on businesses, jobs and people's livelihoods? If he will not rule it out, will he tell us how much more taxpayers' money is going into planning for no deal because of the delay that has been caused by the Government and the lack of a vote today?

Mr Lidington: It cannot be ruled out, because the removal of no deal from the table requires the ratification of a deal of some kind at Westminster, and it requires ratification by the European Parliament as well. Just as any business would expect to maintain contingency plans for all eventualities, even unwelcome and unlikely ones, the Government have a responsibility to maintain their contingency planning against that eventuality.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): The truth is that this is not an isolated incident but a pattern of behaviour. Parliament has been frustrated and blocked at every turn. Whether the issue was the role that Parliament would take in the debate and deliberations, the legal advice that we consider in making that decision or our having a vote at all, Parliament has been frustrated at every step. If there is to be a continuation of the debate that has already taken place, it will mean that whatever change is made and whatever format is adopted, I will not be able to debate it on behalf of my constituents, because I took part in the debate last week. How can that be right and fair?

Mr Lidington: As I have said, the Government, and the Prime Minister personally, have been extremely committed to this, which can be demonstrated by the number of hours that have been spent in Parliament discussing these issues and responding to questions.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): We have heard a lot from Opposition Members about the value of the pound. Some of them are becoming quite interested in economics all of a sudden. Does my right hon. Friend recognise that one reason why the value of the pound has been falling is the sniff of a Labour Government, which would see capital flight from this country as we have never seen it before? Even the sniff of it is a foretaste of what would happen if the Leader of the Opposition ever got his hands on No. 10.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is right, and he is not the only one to express that fear. It is an opinion voiced strongly by businesses large and small in every part of the United Kingdom. The thought of a Labour Government who saw the economic policies of Cuba and Venezuela as models to follow should scare anyone who is interested in jobs and investment in this country.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman has been asked this question twice, but he has not answered it. I will give him a third chance. Is the Government's proposition that when we return to this, the previous debate will continue—in other words, there will be two more days and then we will have a vote—or is there to be a fresh debate? Which is it going to be?

Mr Lidington: It is a fair question, and while I am not able to give the right hon. Gentleman an absolutely clear answer, I genuinely want to be as helpful as I can on this point. The default position is that the current arrangements, including the business of the House motion, remain in place. One of the things that the Government will have to determine, depending on the outcome of the European Council and the discussions that the Prime Minister is having, is whether, in the context of the statutory requirement for the Government to hold a meaningful vote under the European Union (Withdrawal) Act, any changes that may have been made are of a character that requires the debate to be started from scratch rather than continued. Until we know the outcome of those talks, it is impossible for me to provide greater clarity, but I hope the right hon. Gentleman will accept from me that that is the best answer I can give in trying to be straight with him.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. He is being extremely generous with his time. Can he confirm that, because the vote has now been deferred, the immigration White Paper, which we have been promised since the summer, will be in front of Members before we vote on this matter?

Mr Lidington: Obviously it will depend to a considerable extent on when the debate and vote on Europe come back to the House, but I spoke to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary about this again today, and he says that he expects to be in a position to publish the White Paper very soon.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Lidington: I will give way to the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), but then I will make some progress

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Gentleman—he is being very generous. A moment ago, he said that the only way to take the risk

of no deal off the table was to ratify the deal. I know that he is a very honest man. Surely he must acknowledge that there is a third way as a result of yesterday's decision by the European Court of Justice, namely to revoke the article 50 notice. He may not wish to do that, but surely he will acknowledge that theoretically it is a third way to avoid the possibility of no deal.

Mr Lidington: The hon. and learned Lady is right: in the wake of the court's decision, that is a legal and constitutional possibility. But the Prime Minister made it clear again yesterday that it is not the Government's policy, and indeed not just my party but the Labour party committed last year to respect the result of the 2016 referendum.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): While this debate is interesting, it is ultimately futile in having an impact on public policy. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if the Leader of the Opposition really believes things to be as bad and rotten as Labour says they are, it is surprising that we are not here today debating a vote of no confidence in Her Majesty's Government, rather than faffing around with a Standing Order No. 24 debate?

Mr Lidington: That is a very reasonable question, but it is not for me to answer it; as I understand it, the Leader of the Opposition has the right to respond briefly at the conclusion of this debate, and he might well seize the opportunity to give my hon. Friend the answer he seeks.

When the debate and vote come back to this House, the whole House will have to face up to some choices, because the decision in 2016 that this country should leave the EU has consequences. The idea, which still persists in some circles, that we can have all of the benefits of EU membership without accepting the obligations that go with it is a fantasy. Hon. Members in all parts of the House need to face up to that, and I suggest that it is a truth known to any Opposition Member who has either negotiated within the EU while serving as a Minister or worked for one of the European institutions.

When the Leader of the Opposition responds to this debate, I hope he will use the opportunity to explain in greater detail something about his own position. At the moment he asserts that he wishes for a comprehensive and permanent customs union between this country and the EU, with a British say in future trade deals—a wish that, however desirable, cuts across central elements of the European treaties, most notably the common commercial policy. He asserts that we should use the transitional period to renegotiate the deal, dismissing the reality that the transitional period does not exist unless and until the deal has been ratified.

The right hon. Gentleman says he would solve the issue of the backstop with a customs union for the whole of the United Kingdom, disregarding the fact that that would not solve it because the need for common regulatory standards would remain. He argues that we should have a comprehensive free trade agreement with the EU without any commitment to EU state aid rules, but member states and the Commission could not have been clearer that that runs contrary to the most fundamental principles of the European treaties and of the practice and policy of successive Councils and Commissions over the years.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): My right hon. Friend makes a powerful point. I think it needs to be recorded that if any Member of this House deserves the highest recognition, it has to be him, because he has consistently come to the Dispatch Box and made his case eloquently and powerfully. I gently say to him, however, that he is right that we need to be honest about the choices our country faces, but the problem is that we are only having that debate now, at the end of the process, instead of at the beginning. I remind him of the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), who said from the Dispatch Box two years ago when he was Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union that he was confident he would negotiate a deal that would convey the “exact same benefits” that we currently enjoy as a member of the single market and customs union. That is the problem: too many broken promises, too many promises that cannot be delivered.

Mr Lidington: That is why, when the House comes to debate these matters again and vote on them, every Member, whichever side of the House they sit on and whichever party or part of the country they represent, must be aware that if they vote to reject the deal the Prime Minister has negotiated, they will also need to judge what alternative would both be negotiable with the EU and command a majority here.

I have to say that colleagues of mine and Opposition Members who have expressed strong views on European matters need to understand some home truths. Some have urged that we should simply press ahead, leave without any deal and move straightaway to WTO terms. Hon. Members attracted by that option, perhaps on grounds of sovereignty, need to weigh the political attractiveness to them of that option against the fact that trade on WTO terms would do serious harm to our automotive, aerospace and agricultural sectors among others, and that at worst a sudden severing of preferential trade access in less than four months’ time would be hugely disruptive and harmful to our economy, with a direct cost in jobs and investment.

Those who advocate, by contrast, a different model for our future relations, whether Norway and the customs union or a Canada-style classic free trade agreement with the EU, have to address the reality that a withdrawal agreement covering citizens’ rights, a financial settlement and the question of the Irish border is an unavoidable gateway to negotiations on any of those outcomes. Because there will be a risk, whether large or small, of a gap between the end of the transitional period and the new partnership coming into effect, a backstop—an insurance policy of some kind for the Irish border—will also be an unavoidable part of such a withdrawal agreement.

Then there are those who urge a second referendum in the hope of reversing the decision of 2016. I have come to terms with the decision the people took, although I think the whole House knows that I hugely regretted it at the time. Those who champion a second referendum have to confront the fact that such an outcome would certainly be divisive but could not guarantee to be decisive in ending this debate. Further still, colleagues who champion that approach should not underestimate the damage that would be done to what is already fragile public confidence in our democratic institutions.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is determined to do everything in her power to secure the safeguards and assurances for which so many right hon. and hon. Members have called, and, as at every step in these negotiations, she is motivated by the national interest and by nothing else.

When we know the outcome of the talks now under way, the Government will bring the debate and the decision back to Parliament. At that point not only the Government but the House—every Member here—will have to confront the hard but inescapable choices that face our country today.

2.59 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, the right hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington). Those 35 minutes were a valiant attempt to defend the indefensible. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) on securing this necessary debate. What we witnessed yesterday was an act of pathetic cowardice by the Prime Minister. She is more focused on saving her own job and her own party than on doing what is right for Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom. She is a Prime Minister who is intent on railroading through a deal that will make people poorer. She promised that she would take back control, but this is a Government who are out of control. They are out of their depth and increasingly running out of time.

Back in 2014, Scotland was promised the strength and security of the United Kingdom, but instead we have been treated with contempt and left with a Westminster Government in chaos and crisis. The Prime Minister promised an equal partnership, but instead she has silenced and sidelined the will of the Scottish people, the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament. Last week, this Government were found to be in contempt of Parliament. Yesterday, the Prime Minister proved that her Government had no respect for Members of this place and continued to show her utter contempt for Parliament as she pulled the meaningful vote from beneath our feet. Why did she do this?

This Prime Minister has denied Parliament the right to debate and vote on her deal because she knows something that we knew weeks ago—namely, that her deal is dead in the water. It is a non-starter. She has lost the confidence of those on her own Benches. Today, we should have voted on the Government’s motion, voting down the Prime Minister’s deal and signalling that this House had no appetite for it. That would have allowed Parliament to move on, and to make the point that there are alternatives to the Prime Minister’s plans and that we could stay in the European Union, particularly given the fact that all the scenarios in the UK Government’s own analysis show that we will always be worse off with Brexit. Instead, we have a Prime Minister who has shown her contempt of Parliament. Our right to vote down her plans have been removed on the whim of the Prime Minister. Where is the parliamentary democracy that we hear about? The decision that Parliament voted for to have a meaningful vote has been withdrawn on the say-so of the Prime Minister, but we do not live in a dictatorship.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The right hon. Gentleman’s constituents, like mine, view these proceedings with amazed misunderstanding

[Jamie Stone]

and shock. Does he agree that the failure to hold the vote today, and the continuing delay in getting a vote, are dangerous for this institution and its standing? Let me go slightly further and suggest that this is also dangerous for the proper working of democracy in the UK.

Ian Blackford: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I know that many businesses throughout the highlands and islands are saying that they are particularly worried about their ability to attract labour. We benefit from the free movement of people, and the economic prosperity of the highlands of Scotland has been endangered by the wilful actions of this Government.

Seema Malhotra: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that yesterday's decision by the Prime Minister impacted not only on this House but on the markets and our economy? Investors have said that the pound experienced its worst day since the 2016 referendum, and that the Government had

"left investors completely in the dark about what happens next".

Others went on to say that the delay was

"kicking the can further down the road",

and that

"we would not be surprised if Brexit uncertainty—which we estimate has knocked 0.5 percentage points off growth since the referendum—starts to weigh more heavily on the economy."

We can take this directly to the Prime Minister's door.

Ian Blackford: I have to say to the hon. Lady that we should reflect carefully on what has happened over the past two and a half years. The pound fell right after the Brexit referendum, and it has been under pressure ever since. We know that the UK has fallen to the bottom of the G7 growth league over the course of the last couple of years, and that inflation has been higher. We also know that there has been an impact on people's pockets, and that households are already an average of £600 worse off as a consequence. Each and every one of us has a responsibility to take the right actions to deliver sustainable economic growth. When the Government know, from each piece of analysis that they have conducted for all the scenarios, that people are going to be poorer under Brexit, they have a responsibility to be honest with people about the risks involved.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I commend my right hon. Friend for his powerful speech. Does he agree that the most disgraceful and despicable thing about what the Prime Minister has done by interrupting our consideration of her plans is that yet again she has not taken the opportunity to reach out across the House to listen to people and to revise those plans, and that she has instead engaged in a sordid exercise to placate the ultra-right wing of her own party?

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend is spot on. The Prime Minister has missed opportunity after opportunity to take on the extreme Brexiteers in her own party. Let us go back to the time when she called the general election and came back with a minority Administration. She had a responsibility at that time to seek to work across the House and to work with the devolved institutions. At no point has she sought to do those things. The reason that we are in this situation, and that the Government

are facing such a heavy defeat, is that they have placated nobody, and that is because of a lack of leadership on the part of the Prime Minister.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ian Blackford: I want to make some progress, because I am aware that many people want to speak.

The Prime Minister should not have the ability simply to halt proceedings in the middle of a five-day debate. Our constituents and the rest of the world must be looking on aghast at what took place here yesterday. We now know that we might not get to vote on these substantive matters until 21 January—the last conceivable date for such a vote. The Prime Minister is trying to make this a binary choice between her deal and no deal. That is unacceptable and this House cannot let that happen. The Prime Minister cannot succeed. This is a complete dereliction of duty. Running scared from the truth, this Government have backed themselves into a corner and are refusing to take a road out. The Scottish National party has been firm: our position is that we want to remain in the European Union. We want to continue to enjoy the socio-economic benefits of working in partnership with nations right across the continent. We respect the fact that England and Wales voted to leave the European Union, but we ask the Government to respect the fact that Scotland did not.

It is now more notable than ever that this Government do not care about respecting the will of the people of Scotland. They do not care that £1,600 will be lost from the pockets of people across our country, that 80,000 jobs will be put at risk, or that our businesses, farmers and fishermen will be put at a differential disadvantage. The Tories think they can do whatever they want with Scotland and get away with it. Had the SNP been able to vote on the Prime Minister's deal today, we would have voted it down. This deal will rob our country not just of economic opportunity but of stability. We in the SNP cannot countenance that. I want to put the Prime Minister on notice that the SNP will not, today or any other day, back her deal or any other deal that makes Scotland poorer.

While the Prime Minister travels around Europe today, she will be scrambling for fluff, for padding and for eloquent phrasing to appease those in her own party who are anxious about parliamentary sovereignty. They are not anxious about the economic future of the nations and regions of the UK. This is still a Tory battle of ideological motivations. Two years down the road, the Tories are sleepwalking into the abyss. They are fighting among themselves, distracted by rhetoric and avoiding reality. Fuelled by a desire to win the hearts and minds of her colleagues, the Prime Minister focuses her efforts on uniting her divided party rather than on protecting the rights and livelihoods of citizens across the country. This is an absolute mess, and the stakes are high.

Let us not lose sight of what is at risk. The eyes of the world are on this place. World leaders, our constituents, businesses and others watch on, holding their heads in their hands. It is incumbent on us all—each Member of Parliament here today—to recognise the severity of what has taken place over the past few weeks. We have a Prime Minister who inadvertently misled Parliament, who has been found in contempt of Parliament and who has snatched away Parliament's right to vote, silencing our voices to save herself from the shackles of defeat.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman accuses the Prime Minister of ignoring Parliament. Yet has not she done the opposite? She has listened to the views expressed across the House, heard that there is disagreement with the proposed deal and therefore gone away to try to change it. She has listened to and respected, not ignored the House.

Ian Blackford: I am almost lost for words. The hon. Gentleman does not accept that the House voted for a meaningful vote, the Government introduced the timetable for it, yet the Prime Minister disrespected Parliament.

We have reached a critical point. It is crystal clear that the Prime Minister is focused on running down the clock. Rather than buying time, she wants to run out of time. Her strategy now seems to be to present a binary option—her deal or no deal. That is not the case before us. Let me be clear: the Prime Minister has options, but she will not take them. She has checked out of listening mode. Despite facing resounding defeat, she is burying her head in the sand. We cannot let her. We cannot stand for this treatment. The Government cannot be allowed to treat this place with contempt.

That is why I wrote to the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), alongside Plaid Cymru, Liberal Democrat and Green colleagues, to urge him to table a motion of no confidence in the Prime Minister. I say respectfully to the right hon. Gentleman that he will have our support if he tables a vote of no confidence. It is time for this Prime Minister to go. This is a time not for floundering, but for leadership. The Prime Minister has shown nothing but contempt.

We need answers. When will the House get to vote on the deal? Yesterday, the Prime Minister offered no assurances on the timeline. If her plan is to run this to the wire, to take all other options off the table and rob Parliament of its say, she should be ashamed of herself.

Today's Treasury Committee report expressed disappointment that the Government's analysis did not model the deal. It also affirms that UK firms have no sympathy for a Government too frightened to put their deal to a vote, despite the fact that UK firms lost 2% of their value yesterday with the pound's fall. Business is losing faith. The Prime Minister has put us in an economically and constitutionally unsustainable position. The SNP will not stand by while the clock ticks down. We will not allow the Prime Minister a free hand to reduce our options to a binary choice. Parliament cannot allow that. We must now take back control. It is time for the Prime Minister to move aside and let Parliament lead or let the people decide.

I say respectfully to the Leader of the Opposition that we want to work with him. We have a choice to put this matter above party politics, bring it to an end and bring this shambolic Government to an end with a motion of no confidence.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I must advise the House that no fewer than 31 hon. Members have indicated a wish to catch my eye in this relatively short debate. In consequence of that level of demand, there will have to be a four-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches with immediate effect. I am sorry, but that is the way it is.

3.13 pm

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): It is a measure of a person, a Government, or a Parliament how they deal with a crisis. I will leave the Government to one side. Parliament needs to think carefully about how we are seen in the midst of this serious situation. As I said two weeks ago, it is easy to criticise somebody else's deal and stay entrenched in the positions that we have held over the past two years. I heard what the Minister for the Cabinet Office said about moving his position and I have done the same: I wanted to remain in the EU, but that was not the result of the vote; it was not how people in this country voted in 2016. We can carry on rerunning the same debates or work out how to build a consensus, move forward as a Parliament and set an example to the country.

We should be clear about how this House is seen. I cannot be the only Member who has had said to them in the past 24 to 48 hours, "If you lot can't sort this out, you have no right to be there at all." That will come back to bite us all at the next general election, regardless of the positions we have taken on the matter. It is easy to say, as the motion does, that this House wants a vote, but we need to be clear about what we would do with it.

It is obvious that the main position in the House is that we do not want no deal. However, for that to happen, we need something else to put on the table for this House to approve. I am glad that the Treasury Committee report, which was published today, has been mentioned. There is no time to go into it, but the economic damage that no deal would cause is clear.

It is also obvious that parliamentary opinion must be tested sooner rather than later. The main frustration to Members of all parties with yesterday's decision is that that test has been put off. Members of Parliament have to be more aware of the broader views than our constituents. It is inevitable that those who voted in 2016 or in a general election vote according to what is right for them and their families. Why would they do anything else? However, Members of Parliament cannot vote in Divisions solely on the basis of what we think. We have to think as representatives of our constituents.

Clearly, there are three main views, at least in my constituency: reject the deal and have a second vote; reject the deal and either renegotiate or accept no deal; or support the Prime Minister's draft agreement. The Leader of the Opposition said, "We will work across the House." What does that mean? The leader of the SNP has basically just said the same thing. What does he mean by that? The time for talking is over; the time for action by Members to avoid no deal is here.

I do not know how we test parliamentary opinion if we do not have a vote. Perhaps we need to set up a special Select Committee of senior Members of Parliament to hammer out what we mean. Perhaps it is time for some sort of Government of national unity. Perhaps it is time for a free vote on the deal, avoiding the usual party political constraints.

However, I do know that with 108 days to go until this country leaves the EU, if the Government cannot sort out this matter of great national importance, Parliament must step in, stop posturing and get down to work to hammer out a deal.

3.17 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Yesterday was undoubtedly a day of humiliation for the Government, but from today, we have a different task, which is to avoid humiliation for the nation. We will have to see what the Prime Minister brings back from her talks, but I doubt whether any piece of paper, any codicil or any exchange of letters will save the current withdrawal agreement and political declaration from defeat here. In those circumstances—the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) drew attention to this—there are broadly two choices. The first is that the Government abandon their red lines and apply to join the European economic area and a customs union. That would solve the problem with Northern Ireland, ensure the continuation of friction-free trade, give us many things that are mere aspirations in the political declaration and provide reassurance to businesses, but there would be consequences, including in relation to free movement.

The second option is to put the question back to the people. That could include the Prime Minister putting her withdrawal agreement to the people in a vote. We would need legislation for that and therefore Parliament would have to decide what the questions are. Let us be frank: that is not without difficulty or risk. What would the question or questions be? If there were more than two, what voting method would be used? How could another referendum command legitimacy? It seems clear that we would get to that point only if all other options had been tried and exhausted.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, whichever path we end up going down, the first stage should be to rule out no deal, which would be deeply damaging to manufacturing industries, to exports and to our police and security co-operation?

Hilary Benn: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend, and I was just coming to that point. There are two other tasks that we now have to face. One is that we will have to apply for an extension of article 50, because if either of those two courses of action is pursued by the Government, or by the House in the absence of Government leadership, we will require more time.

Secondly, we must address, as the very first thing, the point my right hon. Friend has just raised, which is to make it clear that we will not leave the European Union without an agreement, because the Government say it would be chaotic and damaging. I do not believe that any Government would be so irresponsible as to take us out of the EU without an agreement, and I do not think Parliament would allow it to happen, so why should we carry on pretending that it might happen? The sooner we take it off the table, the better it will be, above all, for businesses that watch this mess and say, “We would just like to get on with selling things, making things and exporting things. Can you please give us some clarity and certainty about what is going to happen?”

Vicky Ford: The right hon. Gentleman is making a passionate plea to buy more time for negotiations. Does he not agree that there is a huge risk, because the European elections mean that everybody on the other side of the negotiating table is likely to change in the

European Parliament and the European Commission? It is therefore important to finalise these negotiations before the European Parliament breaks for its elections.

Hilary Benn: I do understand the risks that the hon. Lady raises, but the Government should have thought much earlier about what they were doing. She knows, and she cannot deny the fact, that for two years Ministers have bickered and argued, which is part of the reason we are running out of time. It was not until July 2018 that the Government finally came forward and said what they wanted to ask of the European Union after two years. We cannot undo that, and I am trying to focus on the future and on what we will have to do next.

There are those in this House who will object to either of those courses of action because they believe that we should leave without a deal, but they need to make up their mind. I am not sure whether they want a Canada-style Brexit, as the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office said. Is it an orderly WTO Brexit? But he drew attention to the damage that would do, such as to our manufacturing industry and our car industry. What kind of side deals? How will the Government agree them? Or is it the rush out, slam the door and shout over our shoulder as we depart, “You can forget about the money!” kind of Brexit that we have heard advocated by certain Conservative Members?

My final point is that we are running out of time. That is why the Prime Minister needs to come back here next week and give us a chance to vote on her deal, because the sooner the House can pass judgment on it—and if it is defeated—the sooner we can get on to the task we will then face. Only when we have done that can we face up to the hard choices. As I have told the House before, all of us in this Chamber will have to compromise if we are to find a way through the mess that our country is now in.

3.23 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I will return to one or two of the points raised by the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn).

To overcome the present paralysis, we must all face some truths that perhaps even a majority of the House are finding difficult to face. I would have voted against the withdrawal treaty, because it is the very antithesis of taking back control, but the truth we have to face is that the result of this referendum was not some “exotic spasm,” as expressed by the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable), or any other kind of freak accident. It was the logical expression of the accumulation of decades of resentment about how this country has become subject to an out-of-touch political elite who have become happy to subjugate national democratic accountability to an unelected, unaccountable group of commissioners and judges in the EU. That is what the referendum was about.

Now I hear some Members, like my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), openly arguing for remaining in the EU, as though the referendum could somehow be ignored. That way madness lies for our country. It would be a final vindication of those who would argue that votes never count and democracy can change nothing.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): If my hon. Friend listened to what I am arguing, he would realise that I have said repeatedly that I think we are embarked on an exercise in self-mutilation, but that I recognise that, if that is what people want now that the self-mutilation is so apparent, then that is what they will indeed have. What I am not prepared to do, as a Member of this House, is to carry it out myself without going back and asking them if that is what they really want.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Let us now dispose of the dangerous idea that there can be some disingenuous second people's vote to try to force remain back on to the agenda. Who with any authority suggested in 2016 that the question would be only a dry run?

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Boris.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: No, he did not.

The House of Commons voted by 544 votes to 53 to give a clear choice of remain or leave to the voters. The 2016 referendum was the people's choice. Before there is a fresh motion, I gently remind the House, as one who campaigned for and voted leave and on behalf of the majority who voted in the referendum, that we voted leave and we want leave. Despite all the false warnings that a leave vote would wreak havoc on the economy, a majority of us voted to leave. We represent at least 400 of the constituencies represented in this House. We also represent a broad cross-section of society.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Is part of the problem not that a lot of the people in charge of these negotiations do not accept the result of the referendum? Michel Barnier has been heard recently to say that negotiating with the British is like negotiating not with a country that is trying to leave the EU but with one that is applying to join it. I wonder why he feels like that.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Because too many people leading these negotiations do not have sufficient faith in the people, economy and future of this country. Who gave a mandate to this House to set itself above the people? Nothing could be better calculated to sow despair and cynicism about politics and politicians, or about this House, or about the credibility of our democracy, than for this House to fail to understand what the word "leave" means; to argue that leave voters must have their motives dissected and psychoanalysed; or to try to prove that we really did not mean leave, that we were voting about something else or that it was all too complicated for the little minds of the voters. There is no ambiguity in the word "leave" which this House placed on the ballot paper.

When we resume the debate, let us share ideas about what kind of relationship the UK might have with the EU after we have left, but leaving the EU means, at the end of it, becoming once again an independent sovereign state. "Leave" does not mean bringing back the same treaty, costing billions for nothing in return, that installs the EU Court of Justice in some superior position over the agreement or that holds the UK hostage to what the EU might decide about our future; or remaining in a single customs territory or subject to an EU rulebook.

The prospect of bringing an acceptable withdrawal treaty to this House is also about making it clear that the UK is preparing and will be prepared to leave the EU on 29 March without a withdrawal agreement, to trade on World Trade Organisation terms. The only alternative is to lie down and submit to the will of the EU, which seems to be the policy of an increasing number of people in this House

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con) *rose—*

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I am not giving way. Everyone can see that most countries are outside the EU and, do you know what, they are absolutely fine. Our overriding duty should be to work together to implement the decision and to forge a new consensus about the future of this great nation which reflects the way in which the vast majority of the constituencies in this House voted. The UK is a resilient nation, which has faced far greater challenges to our survival, prosperity and independence than the short-term practical and administrative challenges of leaving the EU. This is not an economic crisis like the 1970s oil shock or the 2008 banking crisis. This will not cause rampant inflation or leave people wondering whether the ATM will deliver their cash. This is not a decision to go to war. It is not a terrorist attack. What this House needs to show is more faith in the people and the way they voted, and more faith in the future of this country. If we sell ourselves short in this House, we are selling the British people short.

3.30 pm

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I am grateful for your patience, Mr Speaker, as yesterday I had no voice. But today I do have a voice and I am going to use it. I was a proud Member of the European Parliament between 1979 and 1984. I am an internationalist. I believe that countries can achieve more by working together and trying to understand each other than by arguing and fighting each other. As an MEP, I became acutely aware of the importance of human rights and of countries that had fought each other in two world wars sitting together to bring about a lasting peace for Europe, of which the UK is a part and will always be a part. The EU has been a vital instrument in maintaining that peace, protecting our fundamental rights and rule of law, and increasing our national security and prosperity.

The Prime Minister has argued ceaselessly in the past few weeks that she has negotiated a withdrawal agreement that will allow us more control over issues such as immigration, while maintaining close ties with the EU, particularly in the economic sphere. Yet the leader of the Labour group in the European Parliament, Richard Corbett, points out that the political declaration on the future relationship between the UK and EU—rather crucial, one would have thought—cobbed together almost as an afterthought, sets out a 26-page to-do list, settling very little.

In essence, this Parliament is being asked to support a blindfold Brexit. Let us be clear that the Prime Minister's deal means that most crucial issues would be settled only after Brexit, when the UK's negotiating position is weaker and when we are no longer a member state, and in the context of an agreement that will need the ratification of every national Parliament of the 27, making it even more vulnerable. Our Parliament is invited to take part

[Ann Chwyd]

in a lucky dip—to give the go-ahead to Brexit without knowing what it means for key issues such as the final customs and single market arrangements, cross-border law enforcement mechanisms, participation in European research programmes, access to funding from the European Investment Bank, regulations for cross-border transport, data sharing, student exchanges, defence and security co-operation, and much else. The deal is a sham, and this whole procedure has been a farce. The Prime Minister is trying to sell her deal as better than no deal. She is delaying this vote in the hope that Parliament will run out of time and be forced into backing it. But Parliament now needs to make it clear that the choice is not just between no deal and the Prime Minister's woeful deal, which she has herself now acknowledged as such, having gone to European capitals not only with her handbag but cap in hand.

Like all hon. Members, I have received a lot of correspondence asking me to support this deal and other correspondence asking me to support other things. But the vast majority are asking me to vote against this deal and support a people's vote, with the latest polls putting Wales at more than 50% in favour of remain. The two leave options on the table are dangerous, and people need to be given a choice, now that they see what options are available, between no deal, the Prime Minister's deal, or remaining. The only viable way ahead is a people's vote. I want to stay in the EU, but it must be for the country to decide.

3.34 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): The Prime Minister has now reached the cliff-edge of resignation. I believe that she may well have to resign. Yesterday's events—running away from the vote and then off to Germany, Holland and the EU—was yet another humiliation for the United Kingdom. She is clinging to the wreckage. She has reached the point of no return. The pulling of the vote yesterday was an insult to the House of Commons and an admission of the failure of the withdrawal agreement itself. It has magnified the contempt of the House displayed in respect of the Attorney General's opinion, and that issue itself remains incomplete, because we have not had answers that we have asked for. We have not had answers from the Prime Minister to the questions I have asked her in Committee and on the Floor of the House. The agreement has all the characteristics of a dead parrot.

The Prime Minister's reply to me yesterday about breaches of the ministerial code simply did not begin to answer my complaint about whether the Law Officers' opinion was fully and properly sought in good time in relation to the fundamental issues that lie at the heart of the withdrawal agreement, our relationship with the European Union and the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. These issues go beyond the backstop. The withdrawal agreement fails on every fundamental test. The vote is needed now. There is also the question of the incompatibility of the Act with the mere treaty itself, which is the withdrawal agreement, and of the constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom itself.

Public trust in our democracy has been shattered. On Sunday, a poll of 10,000 people showed that 63% of all those who took part had no faith or trust in the Government's withdrawal agreement. There have been

broken promises and misleading statements, breaches of Cabinet collective responsibility, and failures to comply with the ministerial code and the Cabinet manual, not to mention the Commons resolution on the publication of the Attorney General's full and final legal advice.

There are a vast range of unresolved matters for which it was necessary to have the meaningful vote today, including the question of the transitional arrangements; the indefinite nature of any such extension; the financial framework after 31 December 2020, including the manner in which our own resources would be dealt with and the loss of the rebate itself; the question whether or not we can implement trade deals after the end of the transitional period; and the extent to which we cannot control our laws. All are as important, in their own way, as the backstop. The sovereignty of this House and our control over our laws is fundamental. It is what this Parliament is all about. It is how it has evolved to its greatness. This is the issue. Further discussion of the backstop in the secret rooms of Holland, Germany and Brussels will not resolve these questions.

As I conclude, I call to mind John of Gaunt's famous speech in which he declared that with "rotten parchment bonds" this country:

"Hath made a shameful conquest of itself."

This withdrawal agreement does just that: it is a breach of trust and a betrayal. This clutching of straws and running away from the vote is contemptible.

3.38 pm

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Yesterday's shameful episode has left many in this House and outside in bewilderment, scratching their heads and virtually at a loss for words as a result of the pulling of the vote. None the less, from the rubble of yesterday there is still the possibility, slim as it may be, that something can emerge. If I work out from today to the date that is currently being touted, 21 January, it seems to me that there are 40 days and 40 nights to lose oneself in the wilderness. I do not know what will emerge at the end of that, but I do know that the prophet Moses delivered something—I would not wish to liken the Prime Minister to the prophet Moses, but we will wait and see.

Chris Bryant: The problem with the 40 days is the temptations that come to individual Members when they are given assurances and then do not see solid real change to the withdrawal agreement that is legally binding.

Mr Campbell: Yes, indeed. That is a very good point.

I want briefly to go through what we have been left with at the moment. It would appear that there are still those who want to try to align the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, with the euro state—that cabal that still rules in Brussels. Who knows what will happen? I know that, some time ago, there was mention of the European parliamentary elections. We do not know what will happen, but we know that they will take place two months after we are scheduled to leave. We know that, over the past 18 months, the direction of travel in many of the countries involved has been a lurch to the far right, and we wait to see what next June will bring. I am not sure whether people will want us to be aligned with those countries—to Poland, to Hungary,

to Wilders in the Netherlands, to France, to Germany and to Italy—when we see what comes from those elections.

In the closing moments of my speech, I want to address the issue of the backstop. Much has been made of it. One year ago our Prime Minister made a fundamental mistake, which was to accept that a deal could be done only with a backstop that had to be incorporated as part of the deal. Unfortunately, the EU and the Irish Government have sold our Government the line that the backstop is necessary to prevent a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. I have stated this on numerous occasions in this House: there are 643 Members who take their seats in this House, 642 of whom live further away from the border than me. This is about not what I think about the border, but what I and others know about the border and its historical significance.

Antoinette Sandbach: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that current opinion polling in Northern Ireland indicates that the backstop may well be irrelevant in due course, because people are moving towards the idea of a united Ireland in the face of Brexit?

Mr Campbell: The hon. Lady should not pay too much attention to opinion polls. The one she should pay attention to is the one that took place two years ago. I would be happy to face any vote in Northern Ireland about where our future lies.

It does not matter whether a backstop comes under WTO rules, under the guidance of the EU or under the insistence of the United Kingdom Government, because no infrastructure established at the border can work. A backstop is totally and utterly unnecessary, because it cannot work. There are 290 crossing points on under 300 miles of land border in Northern Ireland, so no structure of any kind, anywhere, can work. That is why we do not need a backstop. People would treat the infrastructure with disdain and contempt, because they could avoid it so easily. If we had six, 16 or 26 manned roads across the border—forgetting about the possibility of threats to the people who would man those roads—all of those who lived there, worked there and traded there would know 100 ways to get round the infrastructure without having to go through any customs checkpoints, so there is no point to any backstop. We have been led into a trap. A backstop created by the EU that is null and void and that cannot exist will not prevent any border from coming about.

The only border that exists is a land border between the United Kingdom and the Irish Republic, which will endure long after we have left the EU, long after WTO rules come in—if they ever come in—and long after the United Kingdom has eventually worked out the way for our country to be an extraneous independent nation state that trades and has good, friendly relationships with those inside and outside the EU. That is our future. We need a better deal, and the Prime Minister needs to bring that back from Brussels if she can do a magic trick that I believe is beyond her.

3.45 pm

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), but I shall try to confine my remarks to the issue on the Order Paper, rather than the more general debate on the merit of the Government's deal.

I supported this debate because I happen to agree that what happened yesterday was essentially pretty unprecedented. We have a deal before this House, and this House was in the middle of considering it. The terms under which the EU withdrawal Act passed through the House were an absolute and clear undertaking by the Government that Parliament would be involved at every stage, and that as soon as the deal had been reached it would be brought expeditiously to us—indeed, so much so that some people wondered if it might not appear in the House almost too early, before we had the opportunity to consider it properly. We were in the middle of that consideration.

I fully appreciate my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's difficulty. If by going away and speaking to our European partners she will be a position to achieve some change to the deal that she can properly bring before the House, I can understand why she may have wished to interrupt its consideration. But I really do worry about the implications, because although I listened carefully to my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office, the Government appear to have given themselves very considerable latitude as to when this business might return to us. If it is clear by Monday of next week that the Prime Minister has not changed the terms of the treaty, I would expect that this House's consideration of the business ought to resume at once, because it is not in the national interest that we should be prevented from expressing our view on the deal as soon as possible. That is my principal concern.

I was reassured by some of the things I heard this afternoon about the Government's intentions, but it would simply not be acceptable for the debate to resume on 19 January. I just wanted to make that point, because it seems to be key.

Chris Bryant: I wonder whether the right hon. and learned Gentleman has heard the view expressed by some Government Whips that if the Prime Minister has not really got anything out of this week, there would be no point in Parliament sitting next week at all, and that the Government would therefore announce on Thursday that we were not going to sit next week. He will of course be aware that we would have to have a vote on that.

Mr Grieve: I am quite clear that the urgency of the situation that we face, and the divisions both in the country and within this House make it imperative that this House should be able to pronounce on the deal that the Government bring forward.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend makes eloquent points, as ever, but is not the fundamental issue here that we have a Brexit nation and a remain Parliament? However eloquent his points are, there is an emotional desire on the part of him and other Members not to respect the mandate of the British people, and that mandate is a critical one if we live in a democracy.

Mr Grieve: For two and a half years now, we have watched the process of trying to implement the result of the 2016 referendum, and if there is one thing on which I hope we might be able to agree, it is that it is perfectly plain that it is proving extraordinarily difficult to do.

[Mr Grieve]

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, mindful of the risks of economic damage and damage to our national security and wellbeing, has laboured long and hard to try to get a deal. Yet the reality, which has become quite clear in the last week, is that when that deal is examined, it contains numerous flaws and places us in a new and complex legal relationship with the EU, which in many ways, on any objective analysis, appears to be rather less desirable than remaining in it.

I appreciate that there are hon. Members, including some of my hon. Friends, who believe that there is some clean and easy way through this process. I simply make the point that each of us as Members of this House has a responsibility to our constituents, but also to ourselves, to make judgments on what is for the best for our country. That is what I will continue to try to do, while respecting, or doing my best to give effect to and think through the consequence of, the referendum.

But I say to my hon. Friends that at the end of the day, it becomes clearer and clearer to me that it is unlikely that there is going to be agreement in this House on the model that we want, because of the inherent difficulties that flow from Brexit itself. In those circumstances, I can only repeat what I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) about why I support a referendum. It is not because that presupposes a single outcome—after all, it might go against my own arguments—but because at least it provides a way of resolving this that I happen to think would be rather less divisive than the interminable debate that is going to beset us here, even if we leave on 29 March, for the next two and half to five years.

Mr Seely *rose*—

Mr Grieve: No, I will not give way again.

That is the true problem that we face. The alternative, I suppose, is that this Government may collapse and we may have a general election, but I have to say to my hon. Friends—indeed, even to Opposition Members—that I am not sure that in itself will solve the conundrum that we face.

As I say, what I would ask of the Government at the moment—I do not wish to labour these points—is that we are given the necessary space to debate this rationally, because one thing that has worried me in the past 12 months has been repeated attempts to close down opportunities for debate in this House by short-circuiting the process, and that has done us no good at all. Some of us have had to fight really hard to make sure that the process has been followed properly, and have been reviled at times for doing so—yet the evidence shows, I am afraid, that we were right. For that reason, I will try to continue in the same fashion. If we have the right process, we will come up with the right answers.

3.51 pm

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): Unlike most of my colleagues on the Opposition Benches and, indeed, some on the other side, I did not view our vote to leave the European Union as a national shame. I did not view it as an embarrassment, I did not apologise for it, I did not hide from it, and I did not ultimately try to reverse it.

I was very proud that it was the greatest exercise in democracy of my lifetime. I was so proud that 70% of constituencies with a Labour MP voted leave, and that even in London the leave vote was greater than the vote given to Sadiq Khan when elected as Mayor.

I felt humbled by all those who had never voted before but came out because this time they knew their vote really would count. People had been told that if they voted leave they were stupid, they did not understand, they were racist—

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): I agree with my hon. Friend that people being called stupid was completely wrong. Does she agree that people in North Tyneside, although I did not agree with the way they voted, were right when they made a decision against unscrupulous work practices and foreign agencies bringing in European workers denied a proper rate of pay and denying local people jobs?

Kate Hoey: My hon. Friend is quite right. It was quite shocking just how those people were ridiculed by so many people on the remain side. They voted to leave and they showed their confidence in the future of our country.

Two days after the referendum, my 95-year-old mother, who was desperately keen to get us out of the EU, said to me, “Catharine”—because that is what I am called by the family—“you know, dear, they will never let us leave.” I said, “No, Mum—we live in a democracy.” How wrong I was. If only, on 24 June 2016, we had all come together determined to make the most of our new opportunities, we may not have found ourselves in this position. Too many people continued to find every legal impediment to delay and try to thwart the decision of the British people.

I am very sorry that, as it turns out, it almost seems as though the Prime Minister has acted like she is one of those people. I believed her when she said that Brexit meant Brexit, but I was wrong. I believed her when she set out her red lines in her Lancaster House speech, but I was wrong. I believed her when she said that no deal was better than a bad deal, but I was wrong. Most of all, as a strong supporter of our United Kingdom and Northern Ireland’s place within it, I believed her when she said that there would never be a border down the Irish sea, but I was wrong.

When it comes to caving into the EU, it seems that our Prime Minister went wanting to be nice and did not stand up for our country. When histories are written of this period, as they will be, they will revolve around the question of whether the border in Northern Ireland was a true stumbling block or just a convenient excuse. The hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) gave very clear evidence of why everything that has been said about the border was wrong.

Dr Julian Lewis: Is the hon. Lady aware that when the Prime Minister came before the Liaison Committee a few days ago, I asked her nine times in seven minutes who would actually erect a border—whether the Irish would, whether the British would or whether the EU would send in its army to do it? She refused and declined to answer that question every time, because the answer is that no one would ever put it there.

Kate Hoey: The right hon. Gentleman is right. The EU has said clearly that even in a no-deal situation and under WTO rules, there would not need to be a hard border, and therefore there is no need for a backstop. Anything that the Prime Minister comes back with—more reassurance, more letters and more white bits of paper—will not be accepted unless it is in a legally binding agreement. The political choice was taken by the Government to treat the border as an insoluble problem.

A majority in my constituency voted to remain—not everybody, but I acknowledge that. I always say that the third of my constituents who voted to leave in London were in a minority, but they have a right to be represented. It was a national referendum with a national decision to be implemented. I can now say with certainty that virtually none of my constituents in Vauxhall, whether leavers or remainers, has asked me to support this deal.

Whatever is said about the political declaration and all its fine words about intentions for the future, it is not a legal document, and it is therefore meaningless. How could we, as a United Kingdom, have got into a situation where our Prime Minister wants to sign a legally binding agreement giving away £39 billion in advance of any trade negotiations? It will be seen by most members of the public as mind-blowingly stupid.

We hear so much about how clever our civil servants are and how wonderful their advice must be. Frankly, I think they are very clever. They have helped to do what the EU wished and supported a deal that is more in line with the view of the elite—that we never should have left. They have worked so hard to keep us as closely aligned to the EU as possible and then sell it as the best deal we can get. As a remainder herself, the Prime Minister has never really understood why people voted to leave. I am afraid that the EU has seemed to run rings around her.

It is hardly surprising that, after 40 years, we are now so intertwined with the EU that it is difficult to untangle. Those calling for a second referendum when the first has not been implemented should remember that during all those years—I have been here for nearly 30 of them—Parliament signed up to one treaty after another, without ever asking the people of our great country whether they wanted to sign away their sovereignty. Millions of Labour voters will feel utterly betrayed if Labour now backs a second referendum, and certainly one with “Remain” on the ballot paper.

I cannot vote for this deal. There are lots of things in it, as well as the backstop, that I cannot support. I expect the Prime Minister or another leader of the Government, if we cannot get a general election, to go and ask for something much better. If we cannot get that, I do not fear World Trade Organisation rules. There is hysterical fear-mongering going on about how we cannot leave on WTO terms. I would support that, and I think that that is what we will end up doing.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. On account of the level of demand and because I am keen to accommodate as many remaining would-be contributors as possible, I am sorry to announce that the time limit must be reduced with immediate effect to three minutes. I call Nadine Dorries.

3.59 pm

Ms Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I cannot boil an egg in that time.

I was struck on my train journey this morning at how everybody in my carriage was talking about Brexit. It was the first time that had happened. One woman announced that she had watched the BBC Parliament channel for the first time ever yesterday and expressed her amazement that she had not even known it existed. I was absolutely struck by how well informed my fellow passengers were, and the main thread of their conversation was to keep asking questions why. I lifted my copy of *The Times* newspaper up over my face—I could feel myself burning with embarrassment—just in case I was recognised. The questions were: why did the Prime Minister think she could get a better deal on a flying visit than the one she had been able to get over the past two years; if a better deal was available, why had it not been reached already; and why had the Prime Minister insisted all along that this was a great deal until yesterday? They were confused. The most pointed question of all was: why did the Prime Minister stop the vote yesterday, and what was that all about? If the outcome of the vote was absolutely known, why was it stopped? Of course, we know the answers to those questions, but it struck me how the general public would not understand why that happened.

I am also struck by the fact that the Prime Minister has gone to the EU—this is a mild humiliation for her and I think she has been badly advised to do so, but I will say more about that in a moment—to get reassurance about the backstop. She is not going to be given reassurance about the backstop. At the moment, she is going to be given a letter of intent about the interpretation of the withdrawal agreement. That is going to make no difference to anybody in this place whose main concern is the backstop. In fact, Juncker has said this morning that he is going to give no concessions whatsoever. The withdrawal agreement will not be looked at and will not be reopened. Even the Moldovans have an exit clause in their trade agreement. We need to get the Moldovan negotiators over here, because they seem to have done a much better job.

In my last few seconds, I want to say that I think the Prime Minister is being very badly advised by third-rate advisers in No. 10. I saw our Whips Office criticised in the papers today, but it is nothing to do with the Whips, who are also having to deal with the same third-rate advisers. The Prime Minister is deploying all sorts of tactics, such as sending Ministers out and spending lots of money—and I would not be surprised if Parliament does rise this week—but it appears to me that the Prime Minister is in a bunker: she is starring in her own episode of “Downfall”, and we all know how that story ends.

4.2 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I have had my opportunity to speak in the five-day debate, but many Members have not, and the position they have been put in is unclear and, indeed, entirely unacceptable. Democracy delayed is democracy denied. The Prime Minister is playing a potentially catastrophic hand by delaying the vote on her deal, as has been outlined repeatedly during this debate. It is abundantly clear that her tactic is, yet again, to delay and delay until, at the very last chance, we are railroaded into accepting her deal—reducing the meaningful vote into this meaningless mess.

Today, the Prime Minister is hawkling her views around the 27 again, which is futile. The deal itself is not negotiable, as we have heard. The Prime Minister may

[Hywel Williams]

get the appearance of a clarification on the political statement, but despite all its fine words, the political statement is just a statement of intent. She will satisfy no one.

I believe a motion of no confidence should be brought forward at the earliest possible opportunity to provide enough time to pursue another course. For us in Plaid Cymru, the Prime Minister's actions make the case for a people's vote all the stronger. That vote must be a choice between the deal that is on the table and to remain. There is no majority in this place for anything else, such as the fantasy of our leaving with no deal at all. Significantly, the Prime Minister's deal has been decisively rejected by both the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament. It must be put to the people.

The no-deal option is not acceptable to this House, and from his words earlier, neither is it acceptable to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. We would not be at liberty to do as we please in the world, as some suppose, and it would be disastrous for the people of the United Kingdom, particularly poorer people and those in areas seen as peripheral. As an example, I am thinking in particular of farming in Wales. Tariffs against our farming interests would devastate the industry both in Wales and through much of upland Britain.

Finally, we must not be satisfied just to remain. Wales and other parts of the UK have suffered enough from poverty, and from the austerity that has provided advantages for the few and fundamental economic injustice. This crisis must be a turning point. A vote to remain has to be a vote to reform, to renew and to regenerate; it cannot be a vote simply for the Europe that is, but for the Europe that can be—social, democratic, decentralised and diverse.

4.4 pm

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): I left work last night embarrassed to call myself a Member of Parliament. The Government are not without blame—the deal is far from perfect and our Brexit journey could have been managed better—but yesterday evening, footage was being shown all around the world of the Mace being taken, apparently because MPs, although legions of them have been on TV to say that they could not vote for the deal and the Prime Minister needed to do better, were outraged that she wanted to go off and do exactly as we had instructed.

It turns out that, for too many of us in this place, the politics matters more than the reality. Very few of those who intended to vote against the deal really wanted the Prime Minister to go off and do any better; they wanted no deal, or no Brexit, or a second referendum, or a general election, or a new Prime Minister. The divisiveness of no deal or no Brexit seems to matter not one bit. The mockery that a second referendum would make of our democracy seems to matter not one bit. The reality that a change of Prime Minister would still mean that someone had to captain the same ship through the same storm seems to matter not one bit, and the fact that the Labour party says it wants a general election, but still has no idea what its Brexit policy is, let alone how it would negotiate it, seems to matter not one bit either.

So here we are, angry that we did not get a vote on whether we should have a vote, having a debate about not having a debate. There is no majority for anything

and, as far as I can tell, there is little desire to find a majority either. At the most important parliamentary moment in decades, we are digging our trenches deeper and refusing to find compromise. In the past few weeks the Prime Minister has travelled around the country, trying to sell her plan. She has spent hours in this place doing the same. Now she is travelling around Europe, trying to articulate Parliament's requirement that we get something different.

Despondent, last night I read an early draft of my maiden speech, written just three and a half years ago. It was filled with hope: hope for what our Government could do, and hope for what this Parliament can do. We have all agreed that this is not how it should be. Deep down, we all know that we can do better, but only if we climb out of our trenches and reconsider all options, especially the Prime Minister's deal. The Christmas present that the nation seems to want above any other is for us in this place to rediscover the art of the pragmatic compromise. That is not weakness; it is leadership.

4.7 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): The Minister today, and the Prime Minister yesterday, talked about the importance of honesty in the debate. I agree, but my contention is that a lack of honesty and candour about the reality of what the Government are trying to do has been largely responsible for their ending up in this position.

Let us take the issue of the backstop. The backstop is only there if a treaty is not agreed that does the same job as the backstop, which is to ensure such a degree of customs and regulatory alignment that there is no need for a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Have the Government really been honest about what that means for any treaty that is agreed instead of the backstop? Have they been candid about that? I do not think so. Do we really think that the Government have been candid and honest with themselves, their own Back Benchers or the country about the implications of what they agreed to this time last year, when they agreed that the backstop or something like it would be there? I do not think so.

What the Government agreed was such a degree of alignment, which is now beginning to be reflected in the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration, that instead of taking back control as the referendum was supposed to do, people can now see that this is an enormous transfer of sovereignty from the UK to the European Union. It sets a future for us as huge European rule takers. I agree with the Minister about honesty and candour, but I do not think it has been there.

The second point is about process and trust. I do not want to repeat the exchanges during the urgent question earlier, but there is now a real suspicion that what the Government will try to do is not bring forward an early resumption of the debate, but instead run down the clock, so that this decision is not made on the basis of the merits of the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration, but rather set against the disaster of no deal. To do that is simply to hold a gun to Parliament's head. Are the Government really going to say, "If you don't vote for what we propose, we are due to start stockpiling food"? That is hugely irresponsible with the public, industry and business.

The final point about honesty is this: the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, the right hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington) says we have to face up to the implications of the alternatives. The challenge I put to him and to his fellow Ministers is to ensure that Parliament can vote on those alternatives. I agree with him: we should be responsible for the consequences of them.

4.10 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): This is an extraordinary use of parliamentary time. After having called for more consideration of the content of the withdrawal agreement, voices from both sides of the House are now asserting that a pause in proceedings is wholly unacceptable. If Members really want to get to an agreement, then this pause in proceedings could be exactly what we need to resolve some of the issues that have already come out in the debate, however inconvenient that may be to Members.

The factions in this place really need to take a long, hard look at themselves in the mirror: the Brexiteers, the no dealers, the ones who want to reverse article 50, the ones who want a second referendum, the ones on the Labour Front Bench who want a general election, and the ones who fancy their chances as Prime Minister. Members need to grow up collectively and realise that any agreement requires compromise. That is what the Prime Minister is seeking to achieve.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Miller: I will not give way to the hon. Lady, because there are lots of Members who want to take part in the debate.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington) was absolutely right when he said that we have to face some home truths, particularly those who are intent on rejecting this deal. Home truth No. 1 is that no deal is still on the table and no Government can take it off. EU citizens here and UK citizens abroad are at risk of having no support—none of the support all of us have been calling for over the past two years—and we risk the worst damage to our economy. A second referendum would not only split our country down the middle; I believe it is an abrogation of our responsibility when we were elected last year on a mandate of implementing Brexit.

The withdrawal agreement is, like it or not, what Brexit looks like in reality—backstop and all. To get an agreement, the Prime Minister is entirely right to pause the debate. It is our job to minimise the risk of the UK leaving the EU, and the Government owe it to the House to have the best deal to put to a vote. Rather than focusing on the sensibilities of the House of Commons, I will focus on what is best for our country. The Government are clear that there will be a meaningful vote and debate, and that they will try to resolve some of the issues around the backstop. As Members it is our duty to come to an agreement—not to pass the buck and certainly not to duck our responsibility—to get a way to leave the EU that is acceptable to both sides of the House.

4.13 pm

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I want to start by recognising the amount of time you have spent patiently and diligently in the Chair, Mr Speaker, doing your best to defend the integrity of this place. It would appear, however, that the Government could not care less about the integrity of this place.

Some 97% of all constituents who contacted me about Brexit were against it. Scotland as a whole voted to remain. That was ignored. The Scottish Government then produced a sensible plan with a reasonable compromise. That was ignored. This UK Government have been held in contempt of Parliament for deliberately trying to conceal facts, yet there is not a hint of embarrassment on the Government Benches. There is not a hint of regret or even of awareness of the damage they are doing.

For the Government to set a date for this meaningful vote and say that they would not pull the vote, only then to pull the vote and use the archaic processes of this place to prevent a vote on whether to have the original vote pulled, shows just how much of a fankle this Government have got themselves in. To top it all off, the day finished with a woman with a sword chasing after a guy stealing a big stick. Is it any wonder that the rest of the world are looking at this and laughing? They are looking at this and wondering what could be going on, and is it any wonder—I will say it again—that Scotland has the option to get better than this? We have another option on the table.

My friend and former colleague, Miriam Brett, summed this up perfectly:

“This entire farce is emblematic of Britain’s broken democracy. A referendum held to appease an Etonian boys club was won on the back of financial corruption of elites, and when half of the countries involved vote remain, it makes sod all difference.”

I join the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford)—otherwise known as Ian—in calling on the Leader of the Opposition to bring forward a no-confidence motion at the earliest opportunity, because if we are genuinely to look at ourselves and say that this display that we have seen for the last two years, never mind the last week, is the best that we can do, then by God, I cannot blame Scotland for taking the opportunity of independence.

4.15 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): It has been suggested today, particularly by the Opposition, that the decision yesterday to postpone the vote showed a disrespect for the House and showed that the Prime Minister was not listening. I respectfully disagree with that analysis. It became very apparent in the three days of debate that we had that there were very grave concerns on both sides of the House that the withdrawal agreement, as drafted, not only would not pass, but would not pass by a very large majority. Given the gravity of the matter before us and the desire to get on with this quickly, it seemed to me the right thing to do to pause the process while the Prime Minister attempts to remedy the defects that hon. and right hon. Members had identified. In doing so, she had listened to the concerns that were being raised, and I hope that she will be able to address them.

There will, of course, be a vote. No one is attempting to duck a vote—a vote will come and Parliament’s voice will be heard—but I agree with the points made by the

[Chris Philp]

right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) a few moments ago regarding the timing, because 29 March will be upon us pretty quickly, and it would not be responsible of the Government to take an unduly long time to come back to the House. If they do—and in my view, 21 January would be an unduly long time—we as a Parliament, and indeed, as a country, will not have the time to prepare ourselves for whatever the future may hold. So I say to Government Front Benchers: please bring this matter back before the House extremely quickly, so that we have the time to deal with this with as much notice as we can possibly manage.

I also say to Government Front Benchers that, in order to address the concerns that colleagues have been raising, particularly in relation to the backstop, whatever assurances the Prime Minister is able to obtain will have to be legally binding. I very much hope, as she speaks to other European leaders today, tomorrow and at the European Council on Thursday, that such assurances can be found in a legally binding form.

The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) mentioned some of the ways forward, such as the Norway option. Let me put it on record that I think the Norway option is a terrible option, in that it entails all the obligations of European Union membership—unlimited free movement, full budget contributions and being rule takers across the entire economy—without any say at all. There is no question whatsoever that I would ever contemplate voting for such an option.

4.18 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): We live in unprecedented times. There have been 20 ministerial resignations and many, many more at Parliamentary Private Secretary level, and the Government have been found to be in contempt of Parliament—the first Government ever to be. No one even seems to bat an eyelid any more. Then, we had the events of yesterday. Yes, the Prime Minister may have spent 22 hours on her feet answering questions on all this, but we are still none the wiser. We have no concrete date for when that meaningful vote will ever come to fruition. Every time legitimate scrutiny is performed by Opposition Members, we are shut down and told that it is political point scoring.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con) *rose*—

Dr Huq: I will not give way because a lot of people want to speak.

The Government are crippled by indecision and paralysed by Brexit. Labour was accused of constructive ambiguity when trying to steer a course for both the 48% and the 52%, but now the Government have adopted the same strategy, trying to scare people into supporting their deal by invoking either no deal or no Brexit, depending on who they are talking to—they cannot both be right. Or are they trying to bore us into accepting their deal by saying that the British public are bored of this, even while refusing to make a fresh assessment of what the British public think now?

Of the 164 hon. Members who spoke in the debate, 122 were against the deal. This is a decision bigger than on any piece of legislation, any Budget, anything that

any of us has voted for, but it seems that the Government do not want to play ball and follow the parliamentary rules. Every time I have raised the question of a people's vote with the Prime Minister, she has told me that it would corrode trust in politics and politicians, but can she not see that she is doing just that—corroding faith in democracy? She has whipped MPs to abstain on Opposition day motions—I think it all started with Andy Burnham's motion on how people are not pawns and should not be used as such in the negotiations. The Government have been forced to publish legal and economic advice. We now know why, having seen that advice. They have been found in contempt of Parliament. And all that before yesterday marching us all to the top of the hill and then pulling the vote at the last minute.

Democracy is not just about turnouts at general elections; it is about votes in this House, and we surely cannot have a Government who decide not to take part when they see that they cannot win. Our unwritten constitution may not have formal checks and balances, but it relies on trust, and that is slipping away from the Government. They are clocking up air miles rather than votes and ditching openness and transparency. Any decision should be taken only when people are in full command of the facts, but this Government believe the opposite. The only way to resolve this is by holding a people's vote to see if the will of the people in 2016 is still the will of the people now.

4.21 pm

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): As you will recall, Mr Speaker, there have been many debates and statements in this House—there is no debate about that—but Parliament has never been fully involved in trying to build a compromise and find a way of delivering on Brexit. That involvement should have come at the beginning of the process, but ironically is taking place now. Unfortunately, my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) are no longer in their places, but for them to speak about compromise at this late stage—perhaps they do not know or have failed to understand all that has taken place in the last two and a half years—was at best unfortunate.

It gives me no pleasure to say this, but the fault lies fairly and squarely in the leadership—or lack of—at the highest levels of Government, in the Cabinet and in my party. In numerous conversations and meetings, Members of this place who supported remain went to the Prime Minister and spoke at length about how she could deliver the result of the referendum while keeping this place together, building a consensus and doing the right thing by seeing off those who were never going to be bought off or satisfied and who only wanted their hard Brexit.

Some of us begged the Prime Minister to her face to reach over the top of the Labour Front Bench, who have been pitiful in their supposed role as Her Majesty's Opposition, and form that consensus, which undoubtedly existed not just among Labour's Back Benchers but down there with the SNP, whose Members have always said they would vote for and support staying in the single market and customs union. We tried to establish that very early on, but instead, like the 48%, we were cast aside and the Prime Minister made the terrible mistake of always trying to appease the members of the ERG, who now act as a party within a party.

I will not repeat the wise words of my friend the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), but to make matters worse, instead of candour and honesty, we got stupid, irresponsible slogans such as “Brexit means Brexit”, when nobody knew what on earth it meant. Worst of all, we were told that no deal was better than a bad deal, and now we are surprised that we are trying to persuade people that no deal would be the very worst outcome. It was only in the last moments, having exhausted all other alternatives, that we landed on a people’s vote. It is now the only way out of this mess.

4.24 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Well, Mr Speaker, what a day!

Since 1992, when I first entered politics on the old Clydebank District Council, I never thought for a moment not only that I would sit here representing one of the greatest constituencies in these islands, but that I would listen to Members on the Government Benches—with the exception of the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), I must admit—threaten the Democratic Unionist party with a united Ireland. That is a way to win friends and influence people. Then there was the position yesterday on the Floor of the House of Commons when the vote was pulled. Parliamentary democracy might as well have ended with a coup d’état by the Government of the United Kingdom. It is an extraordinary position when the Executive fundamentally undermine the authority of the legislator. Anyone here who has not read a single book on political theory might as well go and read one now, because that is where we are in terms of the democratic deficit in this political state.

It may come as no surprise that Scottish National party Members have been consistent in our support for the single market and the customs union, rather than making back-door deals like others. I think that even the official Opposition have approached members of the DUP, who do seem to be winning friends and influencing people. Good luck to them. They at least received the offer of a backstop; we did not, although we voted overwhelmingly to remain, and not only in my own constituency. I have no doubt about supporting remain, given that the industrial working class of West Dunbartonshire voted overwhelmingly for it, but they also voted for their country to be an independent sovereign nation with a family of European nations.

Then there is the very idea that we should be joining the European economic area—the Norway plus plus plus/TK Maxx model. I was reading Fintan O’Toole in *The Irish Times* this morning. He explained that the EEA is not just about Norway, and told us that we must not forget the Grand Duchy of Liechtenstein. He wrote that

“the Liechtenstein constitution... grants a veto over all laws to His Serene Highness Hans-Adam II, Prince of Liechtenstein”.

There may be some in this place who would want to hand it over to him—an unelected, unaccountable hereditary absolute monarch—but I do not.

I say to the Leader of the Opposition, “Do us all a favour and table a motion of no confidence”, because I have every confidence that my constituency will not only vote for the Scottish National party but vote to remain in the European Union—and the time may come for my nation to take its place once again as an independent sovereign country.

4.27 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes). I am not sure that I can quite follow his passion, but I will do my best.

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me five minutes outside the Chamber. I was very embarrassed to have to go very late to an Anglo-French meeting. A number of French people, including mayors from the north of France, were attending the event along with others from the south of England, and we were working together to try and re-energise our respective coasts. I tried to explain to those people why I was late; that we were having a debate about why we had not had a debate yesterday, and we were going to have a vote on why we had not had a vote last night. Luckily, a French translator was on hand, but I said, “Don’t worry about that”, because none of the English audience would really understand it either.

I was particularly keen to speak this afternoon. I have been blessed in a way, because I have heard from other Conservative Members who have very different views on how we should be leaving the European Union, or whether we should be leaving at all. I respect those views, but I am also reminded that we need to find a way through this. My great concern is that, as Parliament takes control, it is quite clear that Parliament cannot find its own consensual voice when it comes to what that control should be. It is all well and good for my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) to say that leave means leave—that was effectively in our manifesto, and that is where we should be going—and it is all well and good for my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) to say that we should look towards a second referendum. It is also all well and good for my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry)—my great friend—to say that we should remain in the single market and the customs union. But I am also reminded that 83% of voters in the election voted for the Labour party or Conservative party manifestos that said that we would not be doing those things. So there is a mandate to leave on the terms I would advocate.

“Compromise” is not a sexy word, but we all need to embrace it as we proceed through this very difficult situation, because 52% of the country voted to leave, and of course they wanted to go, but 48% did not. What this agreement gives to those 48% is a relationship with the EU that will last: it will go deeper in some terms, but in other terms will recognise the referendum result. That is what I told the French delegation today. I said, “We want to continue to work with you, and work deeper.” But for those 52% who wanted us to exit, the democratic right was exercised and that means leaving, but it does not mean leaving with no deal at all.

So I ask right hon. and hon. Members, if they are concerned about business uncertainty, about jobs, about security and about their constituents’ livelihoods, please embrace compromise and find a way through.

4.30 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I have had the honour and pleasure of serving Battersea for little more than 18 months, but it is clear to me, as it is to Members

[Marsha De Cordova]

across the House, that the behaviour of this Government is unprecedented—unprecedented in their chaotic approach to managing Brexit, unprecedented in their contempt and disregard for Members of this House and the people we represent, unprecedented in their Ministers saying one thing and then going on to do another. At each stage of their handling of Brexit, the Government have attempted to avoid scrutiny and duck responsibility. They have tried to deny us a meaningful vote on the deal, they have tried to withhold legal advice, and they have tried to keep the economic impact assessments out of the public domain, and now the Prime Minister has pulled the meaningful vote just days after promising she would not do that, and just hours after her Government Ministers said she would not do it. It is a shameful record for any Government, but especially for this dysfunctional Government confronted with the magnitude of the political issue of Brexit.

I am angry not just because the Government are undermining parliamentary procedure, but because I know that my constituents are both angry and alarmed at what they see happening. I have received thousands of pieces of correspondence from constituents calling on me to reject the Prime Minister's deal, and I have written back to each and every one of them saying I will vote against it; what do I tell them now? We are told that the vote will come before 21 January 2019, but that will only heighten fears of a no-deal scenario. My constituents need reassurance, but with this Government and this Prime Minister that is not something I can give.

My constituents need a Government who will not only sort out this Brexit mess but solve the other crises facing our country: the housing crisis, the crisis in social security, the crisis in our NHS.

Dr Allin-Khan: In pulling this vote, the Government continue to betray our children, our hospital patients and our much valued NHS workforce. The Prime Minister is running scared, unable to face a debate either in this House or on the television. Does my hon. Friend agree—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry to be unkind to the hon. Lady, but a large number of colleagues want to speak, so interventions should be brief.

Marsha De Cordova: My hon. Friend makes a good point.

Yesterday the Prime Minister again said that she wants to tackle social injustices, so may I recommend that she begins by reading and then accepting the conclusions of the UN report on extreme poverty? Eight years of her Government's austerity policies have devastated our communities and devastated disabled people.

This Government have no answers to the challenges we face on Brexit or anything else. Their only achievement is to unite people in opposition to them. It is downright shameful that they have pulled the meaningful vote. Parliament must be given a meaningful vote on the deal. The Government must provide that guarantee. I know that many Members on the Conservative Benches share that view, so when the Prime Minister returns with no significant changes—as Jean-Claude Juncker said this morning, there is “no room whatsoever” for the Prime

Minister to renegotiate her deal, and I understand that Angela Merkel has said almost the same thing—if this House finally gets the right to reject the deal, given the chance I urge Conservative Members to support a no-confidence motion.

4.34 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): My constituency voted to leave the European Union, and I also voted to leave. I was elected as an MP almost exactly two years ago, shortly after the referendum, and I gave my maiden speech in the article 50 debate. I have consistently believed that, as the representative of my constituents, I must ensure that the Sleaford and North Hykeham voice on this matter is heard in this Chamber and that Brexit is delivered. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) that there is a significant challenge for the Government in delivering Brexit within a remain Parliament.

I have done a lot of listening to those local voices since the details of the deal first broke last month, and I have engaged with members of my association, with local residents, and with the hundreds of constituents who have got in touch with my office. Across all those conversations, there has been a common thread of concern. Whether they voted to remain or to leave in 2016, my constituents are concerned about the risk of entering into a backstop arrangement that could last indefinitely and that could not be left unilaterally. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General said, that is too great a risk to bear.

Many have asked the Prime Minister to listen to these concerns, which have been expressed privately and publicly, including in this Chamber. Members on both sides of the House have talked about the pressure of time and the need to ensure a good deal before 29 March 2019, and I agree with that. We have had three days of debate on this issue, and the will of the House is clear to everyone. I do not believe that having a vote would tell us anything we do not already know. Common sense recognises that the Government were faced with two options. They could continue to listen to the debate for two more days and then have a vote, the result of which was already known, or they could use that time to go back to the EU and change the offer to reflect the concerns. Clearly, improving the deal has to be the priority for all of us.

Opposition Members might prioritise a vote so that they can point and jeer and score political points, but the people of this country want us to get on with delivering the Brexit that they voted for. In my view, the right attitude is not to play politics but to consider what is best for this country and for our constituents, and to wish the Prime Minister and the Government good fortune in their negotiations with Brussels. I hope that she can come forward with a better deal from the EU, and I hope that other right hon. and hon. Members will wish her the best as well.

4.37 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I agree with the Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), on one thing, which is that this is an abject mess. A rather unattractive feature of the Brexiters in this debate is

that they tend to blame everyone but themselves for the mess. They are seeking to blame the civil servants, the professional advisers and indeed the remainers for the mess that they themselves have created. We saw the Prime Minister's spin operation over the weekend, when she said that she would press her deal to a vote. She marched all her second lieutenants up the hill but then left them stranded under fire while she slipped back down the hill under the cover of darkness.

I am pleased that the deputy Prime Minister is in his place. He has talked about the Prime Minister's Stakhanovite work ethic, but people who know their history will know that the production figures did not quite represent the large figures that were put forward under that regime. I am sorry to say that her productivity has been rather less than her air miles would suggest.

I must point out to the Leader of the Opposition that I am rather perplexed. As the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) said, we are having a debate about not having a debate, but many Opposition Members—certainly those in the Scottish National party—were rather expecting the Leader of the Opposition to initiate a no-confidence debate today. He has been in the House even longer than I have, and I am sure that he would agree, after the past week in which the Government have been defeated three times, found to be in contempt of Parliament for the first time in history and pulled the vote at very short notice yesterday, that he has never seen a Government quite so rudderless, ill-disciplined and leaderless as this one. I say to the Leader of the Opposition that it is time to stop hiding behind process, to discover his inner lion, to throw down the gauntlet and to table a motion of no confidence. Many Opposition Members would back him.

I hope that the deputy Prime Minister will guarantee that we will vote on the Prime Minister's deal next week, and that a legislative means of ruling out no deal will be provided because of the damage that it would cause business, and to prevent us from descending further into the vortex of disarray and disillusionment.

4.40 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): William Butler Yeats wrote poetry about not being able to write poetry. Today, I am debating not having a debate yesterday, but I will take my three minutes where I find them.

The country is tired of politicians wasting time bickering. People want us to get on with delivering a practical Brexit that protects our interests and honours the vote. The House has made clear its deep concerns about the proposed withdrawal agreement, most of all the Northern Irish backstop. Having taken that on board, rightly but late in the day, the Prime Minister was correct to pause the parliamentary process and go back to Brussels. If opponents of the deal had been arguing in good faith, surely they should welcome that effort, wish her every success and reserve judgment until we see what changes can be negotiated in Brussels.

Opponents of the deal need to be honest with us and the voters about the options if the deal is rejected. As I see it, they would be no deal, Norway forever or a second referendum. Supporters of the first course of action should recognise that the House does not support no deal. I understand that some of the direst predictions could be averted through careful management and negotiated bilateral agreements with the EU, but none

the less, I share the view that that represents an unacceptable risk to our economy and to British employers. I still believe in experts, although some seem not to.

The only realistic alternatives to the Prime Minister's deal at this stage are a softer Brexit or no Brexit. As for the so-called Norway option, it is a bad fit for a country such as ours. For starters, what began as "Norway for now" has become "Norway forever" as the EEA nations have made it clear that we will not be welcome to use their arrangements as a stepping stone to the bespoke deal we need. In fact, because it will still need to include the backstop, the Norway plan is in many senses much worse than the withdrawal agreement, not least because it involves continuing payments into the EU budget and abandoning any attempt to control freedom of movement.

Finally, a word to those pushing for a second referendum: in the previous Parliament, the House voted overwhelmingly to pass the decision on our EU membership to the British people. The Government made explicit promises to honour the result. Conservative and Labour manifestos said the same. The push for a so-called people's vote stands in a long and dishonourable tradition of electorates who disappoint Brussels being told to vote again. I strongly believe that a second vote would deliver the same result as the first at the price of further dividing our country and our society.

4.43 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): We are in a painfully predictable situation. We all knew, when article 50 was triggered, that there was a time limit. That is why I voted against it. We all knew that there would be French and German elections that would get in the way of negotiations, and then the Prime Minister called her own election, so there was less and less time. The then Brexit Secretary said that everything would be fine and that we would easily negotiate a deal that would give us exactly the same benefits as we have.

Here we are, two and a half years after the referendum and the deal is not yet cooked, so we are putting it back in the oven for a few more days, with a bit of salt and sugar, hoping it will come out and everyone will eat it. However, the reality is that some people want more salt and others want more sugar. The deal, whatever it is, will not be agreed in this place. The hard Brexiters—the loony-tunes, let's-Brexit-without-a-deal people—will never agree it. The hardcore remainers will not agree it, saying that we are better off with what we have.

I believe that Brexit is a betrayal of Conservatism because it gets rid of the best trading model in the world. It also gets rid of the United Kingdom Union because if we exit without a deal, there will necessarily be a hard border, otherwise there will be nothing to prevent migration. It will simply not work.

Brexit is a betrayal of socialism because, inherently, it will mean a smaller economy—a smaller cake to be divided more equally by a future Labour Government. It will mean that a subsequent Tory Government could reduce workers' rights and environmental rights beneath EU standards, and socialists should oppose it.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Geraint Davies: No, I will not. Other people want to speak.

[Geraint Davies]

The Prime Minister is trying to kick this into the long grass, but the area of long grass is getting smaller and smaller because the lawn mower of article 50 means there are only a few weeks left. The reality is that any Brexit will mean we have less money. We will not have the £350 million a week. We will have to pay the divorce bill. We will have less trade. We will have fewer jobs. We will have less control because of Henry VIII powers and because we will have to obey EU rules. There will be just as much immigration but from different places.

The ECJ has decided that we can now revoke article 50. If we do not have a deal by 21 January and we face no deal, we should revoke article 50 and stay in the EU. If we have a deal, any sort of deal, we should put it to the people by deferring article 50 so that they can decide whether they want the deal on the table that the EU will accept, because we will not agree it here. If they do not want it, and if they find it better to stay in the EU, we should stay in the EU. I very much hope we stay in the EU, as we would be stronger, fairer and more united, and there would be a better future for all our children.

4.46 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): During the 2016 referendum many Members of this House on the leave side told leave voters that, if we left, we would be voting to leave the EU, not voting to leave Europe, and they promised that co-operation on trade and in areas like science, student exchanges and security would all continue. It is precisely that deal that the Prime Minister has sought to negotiate, but when she brought the deal to this House, many colleagues raised the issue of the backstop. It was not just the former Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) who raised the issue of the backstop; it was also raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), the former Chief Whip, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), the esteemed former Defence Secretary. They all raised the issue of the backstop. *[Interruption.]*

Hello, Father Christmas. *[Laughter.]* Actually this is not a time for laughter. *[Interruption.]* Mr Speaker, Father Christmas was behind you. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I understand the merriment, but I want to hear the hon. Lady.

Vicky Ford: If possible, I would like a little extra time for that.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I hope it is a genuine point of order, and not a point of frustration.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Is it in order for Father Christmas to save Brexit?

Vicky Ford: During this debate, even my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady), the chair of the 1922 committee, urged the Brexit Secretary and the Prime Minister, in the strongest

possible terms, to redouble their efforts to get reassurance on the backstop. Our Prime Minister has gone back to ask EU leaders to work again on the backstop, because Members of this Parliament instructed her to do so. Hard Brexit brings real risk, and rejecting the referendum result also brings real risk.

The proposals from the Labour Front Bench promising the exact same benefits as the single market without the obligations are fantasy fiction. This is not a game. The risks faced by our constituents are real. I urge Members on both sides of the Chamber to stop criticising our country's negotiators. Members should roll up their sleeves, wrap a cold towel around their head and work out what sort of deal they can support, because unless we find support for a deal, our constituents and our neighbours across Europe will never forgive us.

4.49 pm

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): I made it clear to my constituents that I would not be supporting the Prime Minister's deal. The deal locks us into purgatory, and a few added pages in the appendix will not change that. Whether we said yes or no to Brexit, nobody voted for this.

How can we believe anything this Government say? Yesterday played out the Prime Minister's contempt for Parliament and for the people we represent. It is their Parliament she smothers and ignores. Her humiliation now risks becoming the country's humiliation. In what possible scenario do her latest actions help us negotiate a better deal, as we step closer to a no deal? But I fear a more cynical move in the Government's motives. After running the clock down, and two years of excluding the country from making a deal together, the Prime Minister refuses to express the realities of Brexit compared with its rhetoric and will not say when the meaningful vote will be—or, indeed, whether it will be either meaningful or a vote. Threatening no deal if it is not her deal is a confection. Such an approach is straight out of a mis-selling scandal; it is, "Take this now or lose everything. Now or nothing. No other choice", but it will not wash.

Far from taking back control, the Prime Minister stands in the way of control. Britain said yes and no to Brexit. Some 3,000 leavers and remainers in my constituency have taken my Brexit survey, with an 80% combined view that the public or Parliament should have a final say on the deal, compared with just 11% for the Prime Minister. I understand sentiments such as, "Why aren't we there yet?" or, "Get on with it", but this is too important to lose patience with. It is too important to be told, "Time's up, everyone out." The Prime Minister has not united the country because she cannot unite it with the approach she has taken on the one job she had. She should bring her deal back to Parliament next week, conclude the vote and have Parliament decide what is next, including whether we should ask for further instruction from the people. If she cannot sell her deal, it is not worth buying, but all efforts now must be to activate this place, our Parliament, to protect against a no deal.

4.51 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): After the referendum, I had several public meetings with my constituents and they told me that they thought we should have a cross-party negotiating team. The Prime Minister's strategic process error has been the failure to

build consensus across party, across the House and across the country, culminating yesterday in pulling the vote. It is simply wrong for her to threaten us with a catastrophic no-deal exit if we do not accept her approach. Constantly prioritising the unity of the Tory party and pandering to the European Research Group was doomed to fail; they are happy with no deal—they have already stashed their cash overseas.

So what should we do now? I am not going to say that everything in the Prime Minister's deal is bad. Some colleagues say that it is too late for a renegotiation, but I am not sure about that. We should take a leaf out of Leo Varadkar's book and change the red lines, most obviously the obsession with the ECJ. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster said that those of us who wanted to stay in the customs union, which is very popular with the public, needed to be honest that that would mean common regulation. Quite honestly, I am happy to stay in the social chapter, with the environmental standards, and the industrialists in my constituency tell me that they want the European Medicines Agency and the European customs agency. Furthermore, this would make a significant difference to our European partners, because they are worried about regulatory arbitrage: that we are going to compete with them unfairly by cutting regulations and red tape.

I must confess that I am nervous of the Norway option, because it means free movement without getting a seat at the table. We must avoid a catastrophic no deal. If that means we need to have a people's vote in the end, so be it. I do not believe it is undemocratic to vote again. The truth of the matter is that we all know more than we did two and a half years ago. But I have a warning to the super-remainers as well: staying in the EU will not mean everything in the economic garden is lovely. We must do more for people on low pay. For example, we need to strengthen the trade unions.

4.54 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I was one of the MPs down to speak yesterday, on what should have been the fourth day of the debate on the withdrawal agreement. Hundreds of constituents have contacted me about the agreement, with the vast majority—some 81%—urging me to vote against it. I wanted to articulate in my speech in that debate the reasons why the people I represent are so worried. They are concerned about jobs, the economy, security and our international reputation. I did not get my chance, though, and my constituents were denied a voice because, as we all know, yesterday's debate just did not happen. I represent a constituency in which the majority—60%—voted to leave the EU in the referendum, yet the Prime Minister has achieved what seemed impossible two and a half years ago: she has united both sides of the referendum debate in Heywood and Middleton in opposition to her deal.

We have a Government in chaos. Last week, they were found to be in contempt of Parliament, but it seems that that means nothing. The Government have just carried on regardless. There is no clarity about when the debate will be resumed and the meaningful vote held. In a letter to her MPs on 25 November, the Prime Minister said that she had

“negotiated the best possible Brexit deal for the whole United Kingdom. It is now for MPs to decide: back this deal and honour the referendum result...or vote against it and take us back to square one”.

She also said:

“EU leaders have made it clear today that this is the only deal on the table.”

That was two weeks ago, so what has changed? How has the “best possible Brexit deal” and the “only deal” morphed into something over which the Prime Minister is now trailing around Europe seeking reassurances?

The Prime Minister said that to vote against the deal would take us back to square one. Well, square one seems a better place to be than where we are now. Right now, we are not even on the board.

4.56 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Seventy years ago, at the beginning of 1948, Czechoslovakia stood as the only democracy in eastern Europe. By the end of that 12-month period, it had slipped into becoming a totalitarian satellite state of the Soviet Union—not by force, but instead by political actors who casually discarded democracy as the days turned by. All of which was, of course, egged on by the power of a foreign nation. That is not to say that we face the same dark fate that Czechoslovakia faced, but the background music does not bode well. Indeed, it raises significant alarm bells.

We have had, up to now, Government-supporting newspapers calling judges enemies of the people; Conservative Members using the language of treachery and some even casting doubt on your neutrality, Mr Speaker; and MPs accusing sitting judges of political activism. This is the language of a despot, whether they like it or not. Not once have the Government lifted a single finger to come to the defence of the right of judges or Members of Parliament to go about their business freely, in the way the public rightly expect them to do so.

The truth is that Parliament has become an irritant to this Government. They behave like a tin-pot republic with a Queen on the throne. They have tried to frustrate Parliament here in this House using arcane procedures or, indeed, in the courts. We even had the extraordinary scenes of the UK Government taking the Scottish Parliament to court over the passing of their own Brexit continuity legislation. We now have a Government who hobble from Division to Division, wondering every day whether it might well be their last—and so they should.

I welcome any opportunity to highlight the Government's failings—

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I thought my hon. Friend might welcome that opportunity! Is not the irony in all this that the Brexit referendum was supposed to be about taking back control, but in fact power has been seized by Whitehall?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Parliament is finally starting to assert itself, and rightly so.

I welcome any opportunity to highlight the miserable failings of this Government, but this debate today is no substitute for a vote of no confidence. We have a Government who have gone from dying on their feet to quite literally dying on their knees by the hour. This is not the time for pusillanimous opposition from the Opposition Front Bench. What is needed is real leadership. What is needed is a motion of no confidence. The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) can

[Stewart Malcolm McDonald]

grin and stare over his glasses all he likes, but he should bring that no-confidence vote forward and the SNP Members will see him in the Lobby.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The Leader of the Opposition will be called no later than 5.3 pm.

5 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald). I strongly agree with him that, often, we recognise democracy only in its breach.

The Government's decision to prevent this House from voting on and debating their deal is reckless and ideological. It is reckless because it pushes that vote closer towards the no-deal deadline, and it is ideological because the Government have chosen to focus on criticism from just one perspective—those who dislike the backstop—not least the ERG group on their own Back Benches. Yet there are far more significant problems with this deal—problems that hundreds of my constituents have contacted me about and that I would have had the chance to articulate had the Government not pulled the debate and vote on these measures.

First, the deal guarantees no long-term certainty for customs arrangements, which is so important for firms such as BMW at Cowley in my constituency with a highly complex supply chain. Secondly, it fails to secure processes for regulatory alignment in the future, so no block on our country becoming the polluted, precariously employed, deregulated man of Europe. Finally, we still have no certainty for our EU friends and neighbours. I have still had no response from the Prime Minister about whether failure to exercise EEA treaty rights could be used to deny settled status, and we still have no certainty over immigration procedures for the scientists, researchers, doctors, nurses and other workers who are so desperately needed in my constituency and, indeed, across our country.

The Government should be seeking to build consensus on these and other issues, not tacking to the political right. If this Government cannot or will not renegotiate the deal in a sensible rather than ideological direction and they are not willing to stand aside then they should not rule out any option to inject democracy into this process.

I counsel Members in this House to exercise caution. I have heard some Members, and even some Ministers, describe another referendum as “a politicians’ vote” even though they know that it may turn out to be the only route to take to resolve an otherwise irresolvable impasse. I have heard others castigate what they call an elite establishment that they form part of themselves.

Last week, we saw the Leave.EU campaign present George Soros, of all people, as part of an imaginary conspiracy to thwart Brexit. The unpleasant insinuation was very clear. Members in this place must not allow themselves to become carriers for those seeking to stoke division among the British people. The rise in hate crime that has scarred our communities must be stemmed and we, with our privilege of political power, must never shirk our responsibility to reject that hate.

5.3 pm

Jeremy Corbyn: I called this debate because we should be having the proper vote this evening at 7 o'clock. Instead, the Prime Minister has disappeared, allegedly looking for assurances somewhere, and all of her Ministers here are incapable of telling us when the actual vote will be. Is it to be next week? Is it to be 21 January? When will it be?

What we have had over the past two and a half years is a Government exercising their contempt for Parliament by the legislation that they have brought forward, with its proliferation of Henry VIII clauses, culminating, historically, in a vote by this House finding them to be in contempt of Parliament itself.

The purpose of this motion today was to allow this House to express its anger at the way in which the Government have treated it. It has also provided a way for many Members on both sides of the House to express their concerns. There is not much support for the Government's strategy here, not much support for the way that the Prime Minister has run away from this particular issue. Parliament needs to assert itself. This Government are in contempt of Parliament. They are not taking Parliament seriously and are in danger of leading us into a no-deal cliff-edge Brexit, which will be incredibly damaging for the whole country. Today Parliament needs to assert itself. Tomorrow the Government need either to bring a vote here, or to get out of the way and let somebody else take this issue seriously and negotiate properly on behalf of this country.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 0, Noes 299.

Division No. 276]

[5.4 pm

AYES

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Mr Alan Campbell and
Nick Smith**

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn

Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil

Crausby, Sir David
 Crawley, Angela
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Cunningham, Mr Jim
 Daby, Janet
 Davey, rh Sir Edward
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Geraint
 Day, Martyn
 De Cordova, Marsha
 De Piero, Gloria
 Debonnaire, Thangam
 Dent Coad, Emma
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Drew, Dr David
 Dromey, Jack
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eagle, Ms Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Ellman, Dame Louise
 Elmore, Chris
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farrelly, Paul
 Farron, Tim
 Fellows, Marion
 Field, rh Frank
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flint, rh Caroline
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Frith, James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gaffney, Hugh
 Gapes, Mike
 Gardiner, Barry
 George, Ruth
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Godsiff, Mr Roger
 Goodman, Helen
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Grogan, John
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hanson, rh David
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayman, Sue
 Healey, rh John

Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
 Hill, Mike
 Hillier, Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hoey, Kate
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Hosie, Stewart
 Howarth, rh Mr George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, Diana
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham P.
 Jones, Helen
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Sarah
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Killen, Ged
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Laird, Lesley
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, rh Norman
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Lee, Karen
 Leslie, Mr Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lewis, Mr Ivan
 Linden, David
 Lloyd, Tony
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lucas, Ian C.
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Mann, John
 Marsden, Gordon
 Martin, Sandy
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McInnes, Liz
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim

McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Owen, Albert
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pidcock, Laura
 Pollard, Luke
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Lucy
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rashid, Faisal
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Emma
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Rowley, Danielle
 Ruane, Chris
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Ryan, rh Joan
 Saville Roberts, Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughtier, Andy

Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Eleanor
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Laura
 Smith, Owen
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sweeney, Mr Paul
 Swinson, Jo
 Tami, rh Mark
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Keith
 Vaz, Valerie
 Walker, Thelma
 Watson, Tom
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitfield, Martin
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Williams, Hywel
 Williams, Dr Paul
 Williamson, Chris
 Wilson, Phil
 Wishart, Pete
 Woodcock, John
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Vicky Foxcroft and
Nic Dakin

Question accordingly negated.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP):
 On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am reluctant to raise this point of order, having spoken to you about it at the side of the Chair earlier. I should say that I have given the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner), who is the subject of the point of order, advance notice of it by email and, a few minutes ago, in person.

During proceedings earlier, when the Leader of the Opposition was opening his emergency debate, he took an intervention from a Democratic Unionist party Member, the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), and during the response of the Leader of the Opposition, I said to my colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), that I wished the Leader of the Opposition would answer a question.

[Stewart Malcolm McDonald]

That prompted the hon. Member for Bolsover to turn around to me and call me “a piece of shit”. He then went on to defend that, telling a journalist that he was just putting me in my place.

As you know, Mr Speaker, I had no desire to raise this formally with you—[*Interruption.*] If Members will listen, they will learn something. I had hoped to deal with it informally, as you suggested. However, given that the hon. Gentleman shows no sign of having any regret about it, will you reaffirm that it is wrong? Will you reaffirm that Members on both sides should be able to go about this place without being at the tail end of that kind of abuse?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I did counsel that this matter should best be addressed outside the Chamber, perhaps through the usual channels. What I would say to the hon. Gentleman is twofold. First, I hope he will understand that, although I am not in any sense arguing the toss with him or disputing the veracity of what he has said, I was not there and I do not know. I would not presume to comment on a conversation that I did not hear. That is the first point.

The second point is really underscored—over decades, if not centuries—by successive editions of “Erskine May”. In essence, it is this: at this place’s best, moderation and good humour are the defining features of parliamentary conduct. We should be able to disagree with each other agreeably or reasonably agreeably. I do not favour anybody being abused.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman will understand if I say that I have a very high regard for him, but I have known the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) for 21 years and I hold him in the highest esteem. I am not going to stand here and criticise a Member from the Chair for conduct that I did not witness. I have made the overall point, and I think it would be best if I leave it there. I appreciate that the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) has raised his concern, if that was what he felt he had to do. May we leave it there for today? Thank you.

If there are no further points of order, we come now to the Ivory Bill (Programme) (No. 3) motion—[*Interruption.*] Order. I am sure the House is extremely interested in this motion, as of course it should be.

IVORY BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 3)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Ivory Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Orders of 4 June 2018 (Ivory Bill (Programme)) and 4 July 2018 (Ivory Bill (Programme) (No. 2)):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement at today’s sitting.

Subsequent stages

(2) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(3) The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—(*Dr Thérèse Coffey.*)

Question agreed to.

Ivory Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

Clause 2

PRE-1918 ITEMS OF OUTSTANDING ARTISTIC ETC VALUE
AND IMPORTANCE

5.24 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to consider Lords amendments 2 to 78.

Dr Coffey: It is my great pleasure to be able to open Commons consideration of Lords amendments to the Ivory Bill.

I thank the House for its kindness while I recovered from my illness, and particularly the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley), who has successfully taken the legislation through to this stage. The Bill is already having an impact internationally, with action on ivory sales now being consulted on or committed to in Cambodia, Laos and Singapore, while the Australian Parliament’s federal inquiry into ivory urged the Australian Government to follow the UK’s approach, which it described as “a model of best practice.”

The Government made a number of amendments to the Bill during its passage through the other place, in response to the Committees of that House and individual peers. Following careful consideration of the reports of the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee and the Constitution Committee, the Government tabled a number of amendments to address the concerns raised. The Government also tabled amendments on conclusion of its consultation with the devolved Administrations, to recognise the devolved aspects of the Bill, and in response to concerns raised in the other place over matters of insurance. In setting out the reasoning behind the Lords amendments today, I will focus my remarks on the effect of the amendments. I should point out that many minor and consequential amendments are a direct consequence of the substantive amendments.

The first amendments I will turn to in this group concern powers to make regulations. Amendments 1, 5, 7, 8, 18, 20 and 66 reflect recommendations made by the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee. One of the recommendations was that negative resolution regulations should be used instead of guidance to set out certain matters. Amendments 1, 5, 8 and 18 have been made to replace references to guidance with regulations. Amendment 1 refers to the Secretary of State’s power to specify any other matters, in addition to rarity and importance, that experts should take into account when assessing an item for exemption under clause 2. Such other matters will now be specified in regulations, rather than guidance. Amendments 5, 8 and 18 will require that regulations rather than guidance are used to specify any additional information, beyond that already listed in the Bill, that an applicant must provide when applying for an exemption certificate under clause 2 or registration under clause 10 respectively.

Amendments 7 and 20 remove two powers to issue guidance. Those pieces of guidance would have set out how applications for exemption certificates and registrations must be made, for example requiring that applications be made electronically or online. The Government have decided to allow maximum flexibility with regard to how applications may be made, and therefore consider that these powers are no longer necessary. While we expect the majority of registrations to be made online, there will be the facility for owners to request forms by telephone or post. I would like to reassure the House that, while important details will be set out in regulations, the Government will also produce detailed information for users to explain the new system.

A second recommendation made by the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee was that the Government should include in the Bill more details about the appeals process. This appeals process is for appeals against the refusal or revocation of an exemption certificate applied for under clause 2. Amendments 10, 11, 13 and 14 provide these further details. The amendments name the first-tier tribunal as the appeal body and set out the main grounds for making an appeal, and the powers of the tribunal.

I turn to the amendments to the powers conferred on officers of the regulator. The Bill refers to these officers as “accredited civilian officers”, and I will do the same. Amendments 21 to 53, 58, 61 and 74 to 78 were made in response to concerns raised by the Constitution Committee, and by other peers, which was concerned about the powers of accredited civilian officers. The Government considered these concerns carefully and have put forward amendments 46 and 47 in response.

Those amendments create after clause 22 new clauses that confer powers of entry and other powers on accredited civilian officers. All other references to powers conferred on accredited civilian officers are to be removed from the Bill, ensuring that their role as assessors of compliance is clearly defined and separate from that of police and customs officers. That is a careful balance, as without accredited civilian officers the duty of assessing compliance would fall solely to the police.

As a result of the amendments, an accredited civilian officer would no longer have the power to enter a premises using a warrant. This will be available only to police and customs officers. An accredited civilian officer would, however, be able to enter a non-dwelling premises that they reasonably believe to be connected to ivory dealing, such as a shop or a warehouse, for the purpose of assessing compliance or if they reasonably believe that there is relevant evidence on that premises. They must give reasonable notice prior to entering.

5.30 pm

Having entered lawfully, the officer will have the power to examine items, for example if they believe that the item contains ivory, and the power to request documents such as exemption certificates or registrations. Also, if they were to identify an item or document that they believed to be relevant evidence of an offence, they will have the power to seize that item or document. I can confirm that the accredited civilian officers will be officers of the Office for Product Safety and Standards. I hope that the House is assured that they would be able to carry out all the duties necessary for assessing compliance, ensuring proportionate but effective enforcement of the ban.

I now turn to Lords amendment 54, which deals with insurance transactions. The amendment would insert a new clause after clause 33 to ensure that any insurance policy for or covering an item containing ivory that is in existence before the prohibition on dealing comes into force is not affected by the Bill. It will also mean that the acquisition, or disposal, of an ivory item by a regulated insurer as the result of standard insurance activities will not be covered by the prohibition. The insurance company will not, however, be permitted to sell the item on to a third party, as opposed to returning it to the original owner, unless that item meets one of the categories of exemption and is registered or certified as such. The new clause also covers transactions between insurers and reinsurers.

The remaining Government amendments address devolved powers. In line with the devolution settlement, the UK Government have engaged each of the devolved Administrations from the outset. The Governments of Scotland and Wales have both expressed their support for the Ivory Bill. We have also engaged positively with the Northern Ireland Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. The two devolved Administrations issued legislative consent motions ahead of Third Reading in the House of Lords and the appropriate official procedure was also followed with respect to Northern Ireland. This engagement concluded that dealing in ivory items either within a devolved country or between a devolved country and another part of the UK is a devolved matter. The amendments therefore protect devolved interests by ensuring that most regulations under the Bill that apply in relation to Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland may be made only with the consent of Welsh Ministers, Scottish Ministers or the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland. The appropriate national authority would also have the power to make regulations, for example if they did not give consent for the Secretary of State to do so.

We agreed to a minor amendment, Lords amendment 16, which specifies Scottish Ministers as the appropriate body to publish a list of accredited museums. The change was requested by the Scottish Government as a reflection of the different status of Museums and Galleries Scotland to Arts Council England, and does not alter the effect of this provision.

Before closing, I reiterate my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield. I also thank my noble Friend Lord Gardiner for the work he did in the other place. I want to put on record our thanks to the many officials who worked on the Bill, and to the Opposition, who were very constructive in Committee and in taking it to this stage. I hope that I have explained to the House the effect of the Government amendments tabled in the other place. I have not referred to each of the 78 amendments individually as the majority are minor and consequential, but I hope that this House will agree with the other place that amendment 1 and amendments 2 to 78 be made.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Both the Asian and the African elephant are threatened with extinction. Just over 350,000 African elephants were counted in 2016, but that is over 100,000 fewer than in 2006. There is no reason to suppose that the number of elephants is not continuing to decline. The decline is almost certainly

[Sandy Martin]

due to poaching for ivory. No species can continue to lose numbers at that rate without eventually becoming extinct. Unless there is a step-change in the rate at which African elephants are being poached, there will not be any African elephants in the wild in 30 years or so. We cannot possibly stand by and see such an iconic creature become extinct.

CITES estimates that 40 tonnes of ivory were illegally traded in 2016, which is the highest ever recorded. If the trade continues, the poaching will continue. The UK needs to be at the forefront of measures to stop this trade, to prevent the illegal trade that comes through markets in the UK, to enable other countries to close loopholes that traders linked to this country can exploit, and to provide an example to others.

Despite the existing laws governing the ivory trade, the UK is still a major exporter of ivory products. So long as it is legal to trade in pre-1947 ivory without a permit, and to trade in post-1947 ivory with a permit, it becomes far easier for illegal traders to disguise their fresh ivory as antique. Thirty-one per cent. of the total EU exports of ivory items between 2005 and 2014 came from the United Kingdom, and we know that there is a substantial illegal trade, because seizures have continued, and indeed increased, between 2010 and 2014. All those facts led to the consultation that preceded the Bill, and the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall) and the Minister made moral and consensual judgments in allowing and encouraging the evolution of the Bill.

The fundamental problem with the pre-existing legislation on the trade in ivory is that it gives far too wide an exemption for there to be any chance that the trade will come to an end. If, as is intended, the trade in fresh ivory is to cease completely, the expectation that there will be any legal supply of ivory also needs to cease. We need to close down the demand for ivory by rendering the whole trade morally, socially and legally unacceptable. In these circumstances, it is understandable that there are some who find any exemptions unacceptable. The Labour party would tend to support the narrowest possible range of exemptions, and during the passage of the Bill, several attempts have been made to reduce the scope of exemptions. However, during the Bill's passage through the Lords, all the possible loosening or tightening of these exemptions has been debated, and it would be unhelpful to try to unpick any criteria now.

The Lords amendments that would make the operation of the Bill more effective are most crucial to achieving the closing down of the ivory trade, and we are pleased to see that these amendments are being proposed by the Government. It is entirely right that the details of the operation of the Bill should be laid down in regulations. It is sensible to limit the powers given to accredited civilian officers, and we wholeheartedly support the amendments that the Government have accepted. When there is an appeal against the refusal or revocation of an exemption certificate, it is sensible and effective for the appeal body to be the first-tier tribunal and for that to be on the face of the Bill. I put on record my party's gratitude to all the Members of the upper House who have helped to steer this Bill through, and in particular, to Lord Gardiner of Kimble and Baroness Jones of Whitchurch.

One issue, however, was raised repeatedly before and during the passage of the Bill: other animal sources of ivory. For the purposes of the Bill, ivory is defined as being from elephants. There is a very real danger that the number of other animals killed for their ivory will increase to try to maintain a supply. This particularly relates to other animals in the CITES schedule of endangered wildlife: walruses, narwhals, hippopotamuses, orcas and sperm whales. We would argue that whether or not there is a consequential increase in the killing of these species, it is wrong and damaging to their chances of survival for trade in the ivory derived from these creatures to continue.

We all want the maximum protection for elephants to commence as soon as possible, so it would be unhelpful to make any attempt to disrupt the Bill's progress now. However, the opportunity to extend the definition of ivory, and hence the range of species protected by the Bill, rests with the Secretary of State through the making of regulations under the affirmative procedure. We urge him to take that opportunity as soon as possible to cover all the relevant animals in the CITES schedule, as well as others, such as warthogs. Unicorns are apparently very popular at the moment, although, of course, they do not exist. What a terrible shame it would be if, because of our inaction, narwhals, whose horns quite possibly prompted the invention of the unicorn myth, were themselves to become non-existent.

All those who want to live in a world that possesses a rich variety of living animals will welcome the passage of the Bill. By passing it, this Parliament will be making a powerful statement that will carry weight throughout the world, but for that weight to have maximum impact, the Government must use all the instruments and influence at their disposal to persuade other countries to take a similarly strong stance, so that we can stamp out the international ivory trade for good.

I echo the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) on Second Reading. We must send a clear message at home and internationally that the only ivory we will value is that on a live elephant in the wild. I would like to see a world in which all those attributes that make our diverse species so varied and special—turtles' shells, tigers' stripes, ostrich feathers, butterflies' wings—are appreciated in their proper place, as part of the living creature, and not by killing the animal and cutting off part of its body. We are taking an important step forward here today. Let us not stop with elephants.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a privilege once again to speak on this historic Bill, and I am delighted to see the Minister back in her place, because she has contributed so much to its progress over such a long period. The Scottish National party welcomes that progress and the Lords amendments, which we believe offer clarity and strengthen the processes set out in the Bill. We are also extremely keen that through the Bill the UK continue to show best practice and leadership throughout the world on the work that has to be done to protect species.

We are working together to implement stringent measures to protect and conserve populations of elephants and other endangered species for future generations. The survival of the species is the most important thing and must be realised, so the Bill must be as strong as possible. I want to thank all the members of the Public

Bill Committee, who worked so consensually throughout the process. I consider my input into this important process to be one of my proudest achievements in Parliament so far, and I would like to thank everybody for their approach.

We heard compelling evidence in Committee about the unscrupulous nature of ivory poachers. They will stop at nothing, leaving no ivory-bearing species safe. In fact, they trade in death. They also undermine poor and vulnerable communities in developing parts of the world, moving from species to species to make their money. I would like to hear what work the Department for International Development is doing, and what expertise it can lend, to ensure that we protect those vulnerable communities, show leadership and protect people's jobs and livelihoods, because poaching affects some of the most vulnerable and poorest people in our world.

My daughter has been doing a project in school on narwhals and is very interested in making sure we do all we can to protect not only elephants but narwhals and the other species impacted by ivory poaching. Like me, she would most definitely like to see progress made for all the species affected. The fact that young people are so engaged with this work shows how important it is to future generations and what an historic Bill this is.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on leading on this issue for the SNP. We are all pleased and proud to see the Bill, which was a manifesto commitment at the last election certainly for our party and, I believe, for other parties. It is important to many of my constituents that animal welfare issues are taken very seriously. As she highlights, the importance of that in developing countries cannot be overstated either. It is important that these creatures be protected for future generations, and it is good that there is consensus around the Bill, despite everything else that is happening in politics today.

Dr Cameron: I thank my hon. Friend for what he has said. I think that that is extremely important. This is a truly historic day, although not, perhaps, in the way that we expected it to be.

Scottish National party Members and our constituents throughout Scotland want the Bill to be as strong as possible, so we welcome the news that there will be regulations rather than guidance. We also welcome the clarity on the appeals process, and the clear and definitive guidance on the regulatory powers of the accredited civilian officers.

5.45 pm

I want to record my thanks for, and appreciation of, the consensual way in which the Secretary of State, the Minister and the Government in general have engaged with the devolved Governments, particularly the Scottish Government. A collaborative approach brings out the best in all our Parliaments. We want to ensure that the Bill has resonance throughout the United Kingdom and is applied as stringently as possible. We have worked extremely hard to reach this point. I thank all who have been involved for working so well together. I also pay special tribute to the voluntary and other organisations that work in animal welfare and have lent us their support, advice and expertise to ensure that the UK can proceed with the Bill, and that it is a historic development that will protect species for future generations.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): It is a bit strange to be discussing a subject like this today, but we are, and I think we should recognise how important the Bill is. I congratulate Opposition Front Benchers, and indeed the Government, on their work.

I was particularly struck by what the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) said. The Chamber should be much fuller than it is at the moment. As she said, what we are doing here is historic. She mentioned her daughter; unfortunately, for me it is grandchildren. As I have asked in other debates, are we to be the generation that sees the obliteration from our planet of some of the most remarkable species that have ever existed? Today we are debating the elephant, but what will people be saying in 20 or 30 years' time? Every year 20,000 African elephants are poached and slaughtered just for their ivory. The Bill relates to our own country, of course, but hopefully it will act as an inspiration and a lead for other countries.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Is it not the case that the Chamber is normally full when we disagree and often empty when we agree with each other? There is an upside to the fact that there are not many Members in the Chamber: the Bill is proceeding by agreement.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is something nauseating about a person who would slaughter an endangered animal to produce a trinket?

Vernon Coaker: I absolutely agree that that is nauseating. It is also nauseating that people post photographs of themselves engaging in so-called trophy hunting. As for the right hon. Gentleman's other point, it is not really a question of whether we agree or disagree. I am attending the debate because I agree with the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow that the importance of this issue should be recognised across the House. Of course there is no disagreement about it—I do not think it is a party political issue. Every single Member of Parliament is appalled by the prospect of elephants and other species being slaughtered for their ivory, and the Bill is an important step forward.

I visit school after school, as do all Members, and meet young people after young people, from all walks of life, who are simply sickened by what is happening. Unless we as a world wake up, these animals—whether they be elephants, whales, giraffes or any other species—will become extinct. It is all very well for us to say “It is difficult, and it is tough”, but the Bill is a step forward, so I am not criticising the Government. It is tough and difficult, but we must not be the generation that sees the end of these species on our planet.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): We have a degree of unity in this debate, and I think we all agree about this elephant ivory Bill, but those of us who were on the Bill Committee and who spoke in previous stages in the House argue that the protection is not the same for the other species we talked about—I mentioned the narwhal in Committee and in the House, and there is also the rhino, the walrus and others. Is it not a failure that we are not including all those species in the Bill?

Vernon Coaker: Of course that is a weakness in the Bill, but the Minister and our Front-Bench spokesperson, my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin),

[Vernon Coaker]

mentioned—this is my understanding, too—that the Secretary of State has committed to consulting on extending it to other species. I say to the Secretary of State that this is urgent. Public consultation can take a year or two years before the Government review it. I say to the Secretary of State—I know that he and I agree on this issue, if not others—that there is an urgency about this and we have to get a move on.

I say to our own country and the world that we need to wake up. If we do not wake up, our children, our grandchildren and our great-grandchildren will say to the Secretary of State, to my hon. Friends on the Opposition Front Bench, and to me and other Members here, “What were you doing? What did you do? How did you stop this?” And everybody will say, “Well, it’s terrible and awful and a disgrace.” That is not good enough—we all need to use the sickening feeling we have to demand more of ourselves and this Parliament.

The last point I want to make is that today and other days have obviously been dominated by discussions about Brexit, but our constituents often ask us what else is happening while that debate is going on. I hope that at least some of the comments made in the Chamber about the important step forward being taken through the Bill will be reported, and that some of the young people out there—whether in the school of the daughter of the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow, my grandchildren’s school or others—will learn that this Parliament has been listening and trying to do what we can to ensure that the great animals, including elephants, are saved for future generations.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I also welcome the move to put this legislation in place, and I welcome the Lords amendments, but for those of us who served on the Bill Committee there are still some questions, which were referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin). I want to ask about some of the things I was banging on about during the previous stages of the Bill.

First, we talked about the enforcement of the legislation, particularly in respect of online sales, which can be difficult. Secondly, I would like to know about the future funding of the National Wildlife Crime Unit after 2020. Can the Minister give us some clarity and assurances on that? Most importantly, as other Members have mentioned, there is the question of when the Government expect to launch the consultation on extending the scope of the Bill to animals such as hippos and narwhals. If we really want to end the trade in ivory it is imperative that there be no debate about what kind of ivory it is and whether it is covered by this Bill. I urge the Secretary of State to clarify that point.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I also welcome the Bill and congratulate the Government on bringing it forward, and our Front-Bench team as well, but I think everybody would say that it is just a step in the right direction and there is still a huge amount of work to do. We know about legal trophy hunting, and I would like the Government to clamp down on individuals who are still offering tours on safari to take out these wonderful beasts. I echo what my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) said: there is an imperative on

our generation to stop this. We all know of American tourists who come over here—I had the misfortune once of meeting somebody who said, “My daughter’s into hunting, you should see what she’s taken down”, and showed me sick photos of bloodied beautiful bears and lions that she had killed in the Serengeti and elsewhere in Africa. That has to stop, and I hope that the Government will look again at this issue.

I also hope that the Government will go beyond the ivory trade and look at other wonderful animals, including whales. I hope that they will ban items such as whales’ teeth, for example. I hope that they will create a real stigma around trophy hunters, so that when people show trophy hunting pictures others will find them sick and distressing. I am picking on Americans here, but I have seen elected officials with pictures on their walls of hunts that they have taken part in. That has to stop.

I hope the Government will also recognise that this trade is bringing about criminality and mafia practices. I hope that this is just the start of a wider debate, that the consultation will be short and that the Government will bring forward extra legislation very soon to ban trophy hunting and the companies that send people on hunting tours.

Dr Coffey: With the leave of the House, I shall respond to the hon. Members who have asked questions about various elements of the amendments. First, I should like to say that 11 December will linger in my mind because we have now reached this stage, and I hope that once the House has agreed to these amendments, Her Majesty will give us Royal Assent very soon. I also want to commend the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, who has really been pushing this agenda. Indeed, he is now the chair of the Ivory Alliance 2024, a global organisation that is trying to ensure that this kind of legislation can be spread around the world in order to stamp out the demand for ivory totally.

The hon. Members for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) and for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) asked about other species. We have committed to gathering evidence on the trade in ivory from other species as soon as is practicable after Royal Assent. It is important to state that any extension of the Bill through secondary legislation needs to be robust and evidence-based, and also that our original consultation was only on elephant ivory, so we will need to ensure that we consult appropriately and get the full evidence before deciding on the next steps. It is also fair to say that, while we have not been too presumptuous, we have already initiated all the work that needs to be done to get that further work under way. The IT projects are under way, for example, and we are working on other elements, although we have not yet started writing the secondary legislation referred to in the Lords amendments that the House will be voting on today.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) asked about international elements of this. We should be proud of our record around the world on these matters, and the Government agree about the importance of sustaining and supporting work to suppress demand and ensuring that we proactively fund a range of training for anti-poaching efforts. We also acknowledge the importance of supporting sustainable livelihoods in the communities affected. The Department’s illegal wildlife trade challenge fund has supported 47 projects

with a value of more than £40 million in developing countries, and we continue to work not only with the Department for International Development but with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence on those activities. We also continue to make the case in the European Union for doing even more.

The hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) asked about enforcement in relation to online sales. The Bill has been drafted from the outset with online and physical sales in mind. It prohibits commercial activities involving ivory, regardless of where those activities take place. Clause 12 makes it an offence to facilitate the breaching of the ban, and that could cover online sales forums that allow sellers to advertise items, make contact with buyers and accept payments. She also asked about the National Wildlife Crime Unit. Our Department currently co-funds that unit with the Home Office and the police. She will be aware that we have to agree our spending review for future commitments, but I know that the NWCU is highly valued and I am sure that we will want to continue to see its work proceed.

I hope that I have outlined to the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) the actions that are already under way, and I agree with him that this will be an important piece of legislation. The Bill is so important, and I am very pleased to have been part of it. The House should take great pride in it and in ensuring that we continue to save wildlife, wherever it may be.

Lords amendment 1 agreed to.

Lords amendments 2 to 78 agreed to.

Fuel Poverty

6 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): I beg to move,

That this House has considered fuel poverty.

I hope that no Members will leave the Chamber during such an important debate. I have just spilt a glass of water over the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and I apologise. *[Interruption.]* Yes, it is not the worst thing that has happened to Members today from what I have heard.

Fuel poverty is debated annually in the House. Let me give some background to that. Our 2015 fuel poverty strategy for England committed us to ensuring appropriate parliamentary scrutiny as we take action to tackle fuel poverty. That commitment to transparency is why we created the Committee on Fuel Poverty and why we hold the annual debates.

The problem of fuel poverty crosses party lines and needs action from many different stakeholders. I welcome all contributions today and the positive way in which I know they will be made. I am looking at the shadow spokesman when saying that and pleading with her to show her usual grace and dignity in opposing me.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I am afraid that the Minister cannot expect quite so much grace and dignity from me—I apologise. To be serious, there is good reason to be deeply concerned about the fuel poverty statistics because we have just heard from the Office for National Statistics that last winter, the figure for premature winter deaths exceeded 50,000—the highest for more than 40 years. With respect, the Government are not doing anything near enough on fuel poverty, and I want to put that on the record at the beginning of the debate.

Richard Harrington: I would ascribe grace and dignity to the hon. Lady's usual contributions. This is a serious matter. The hon. Lady is right that last winter's severely cold weather included wind-chill factors of minus 10°C and I accept what she says about the statistics. However, I do not accept her assertion that the Government have done nothing about that. If she will bear with me for the rest of my contribution, I will answer her point, and if I do not, I am sure that she will intervene.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I hope that the Minister will say something about rural areas. Fuel poverty is one of the biggest problems for rural areas because of the nature of the properties, which are often older, with older people living in them, but also because the schemes do not reach them. In particular, the energy company obligation—ECO—has completely failed and I hope that the Minister will say something about that. It is a tragedy that people in rural areas are more likely to die early because of fuel poverty.

Richard Harrington: I will indeed mention that. Various groups have lobbied all Members of Parliament to contribute to the debate and I agree with the basis of what they say.

[Richard Harrington]

It is also fair to say that fuel poverty is a devolved matter and that the debate originates from the fuel poverty strategy for England.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Richard Harrington: If the hon. Lady gives me a second, I hope that I will mention the point that she was about to make. Fuel poverty is a problem across the United Kingdom. I am sure that we all have constituents who struggle to keep their homes warm during the winter. The weather has no borders and does not understand devolved legislation. I am sure that the hon. Lady will confirm that.

Patricia Gibson: The Minister has said that measures to tackle fuel poverty have been devolved. The real drivers of fuel poverty are the high cost of fuel—the tax on which is reserved, as he knows—and, of course, people simply not having enough money. We know about the hardship that universal credit is causing, so I would say that the real and fundamental causes of fuel poverty are very much in the power of this Government to tackle, beyond energy efficiency measures.

Richard Harrington: I agree with the hon. Lady. The Government have many different strategies, and energy efficiency measures are one of them. The importance of working together with the devolved authorities on this issue was never in more evidence than during last winter's beast from the east—I see the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) is not in his seat. As temperatures plunged, many households throughout the UK faced broken boilers and frozen pipes. The sustained cold weather made it even more difficult for those on the lowest incomes and in the worst properties to be able to heat their home.

As has been mentioned, last month the Office for National Statistics reported there were 50,000 excess winter deaths last winter. The figure was said by the ONS to be unusually high because of multiple causes, including the virulent strain of flu, the relative ineffectiveness of the influenza vaccine and the colder than average winter temperatures. However, old, inefficient and cold homes, combined with occupants who are vulnerable to the impact of living in a cold home, certainly have been a factor.

The fabric of our building stock cannot continue to be a source of ill health. We have put in place an ambitious framework to tackle this issue, based on energy efficiency being the best long-term solution to tackle fuel poverty.

Caroline Lucas: I do not know how the Minister can say he has put in place something that is so ambitious when no public funds are going into domestic fuel poverty and energy efficiency, for the first time in years. In the past we had Warm Front and other schemes, but right now the Government are putting no taxpayers' money into these schemes.

Richard Harrington: I respectfully disagree with the hon. Lady, and I will outline the £3 billion-worth of Government help.

Our 2017 clean growth strategy sets an ambition of improving as many homes as possible to energy performance certificate band C by 2035, wherever practical, cost-effective and affordable, but the truth is that the most vulnerable must be helped first. We are committed to improving the homes of the fuel poor to band C five years earlier, by 2030, and we have set interim milestones to keep us on track. As many fuel-poor homes as reasonably practical will be improved to band E by 2020, and to band D by 2025.

A key way in which we are delivering energy efficiency measures to meet that ambition is through the energy company obligation, which has led to energy efficiency upgrades to nearly 2 million homes across England, Scotland and Wales since 2013. Recognising the need to support low-income and vulnerable households first, we have taken action to ensure that ECO is targeted at those who need it most.

When the scheme was first introduced in 2013, 30% of ECO spending was focused on addressing fuel poverty, and by 2015 it had been increased to 70%. Today 100% of the energy company obligation is focused directly on low-income and vulnerable households, and we have introduced a new innovative element that will bring down the long-term cost of low-carbon measures.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): The ECO programme has been very successful indeed, but does my hon. Friend agree that it is not just the barrier technologies of insulation in roofs and better windows, doors and floors that make a difference but the introduction of clean tech in homes? Clean tech can often deliver significant savings, too, so I hope that, as a result of the recent consultation, things like smart thermostats will now be included in the ECO catalogue.

Richard Harrington: As usual, my hon. Friend is well informed and well spoken on this subject. I share his hope, and he makes a significant point. I hope he will see this come to pass.

We are also clear that landlords should play a role in upgrading the energy efficiency of the properties they rent out. The private sector regulations will require landlords to improve the energy efficiency of band F and band G properties so that their tenants will be living in properties rated band E or above by 2020. We expect that these regulations, which require landlords to invest up to £3,500 on their property, will enable all privately rented F and G properties to receive support, and about half of these homes will be improved to an energy performance level of band E. This action to tackle the worst homes first—those rated F or G—is consistent with the approach set out in our fuel poverty strategy, but we will be consulting on options to ensure rental properties are improved to the band C target level by 2030. The private rental sector has to make its contribution as well.

We recognise that long-term sustainable solutions such as the ones I have mentioned are little comfort to those who are cold now. It is important to complement this approach with more immediate support, which is why we extended the warm home discount to 2021, so that it can continue to provide more than 2 million low-income and vulnerable households with a £140 rebate off their energy bill each winter.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): The Minister is talking about taking immediate action. It is some time now since the Dieter Helm review came out with a number of recommendations to sort out the chaos of the subsidies going into the alternative energy business, which would take the cost pressure off the most vulnerable households. The Minister does not look as though he has read it. Its approach would take the pressure off the most vulnerable households, so why do the Government not respond and implement those recommendations?

Richard Harrington: I will make one small change to what the hon. Gentleman said, in that I have read that report and I have met Dieter Helm. I will happily send the hon. Gentleman a copy of the recent energy speech that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made. If the hon. Gentleman does not have a copy, I will send it to him with my compliments—I might even get the Secretary of State to sign it for him for Christmas.

We extended the warm home discount to 2021, so that it can continue to provide more than 2 million low-income and vulnerable households with a £140 rebate off their energy bill each winter. In addition, the winter fuel payments provide all pension households—people of pension age in the households—with additional financial support worth up to £300. Cold weather payments also provide relief to the elderly, the vulnerable and those who need extra support with their fuel bills during spells of cold weather. Last year, that alone provided an estimated £98 million in cold weather payments to keep people warm in vulnerable households.

James Heapey: The Minister, or at least the Treasury, will know who receives cold weather payments. Is any measure taken of the energy-efficiency of the homes in which those recipients live and therefore of whether, rather than just spending money every time the weather is cold, we might improve the energy-efficiency of those properties and so reduce the requirement for those payments to be received in the future?

Richard Harrington: If it is acceptable to my hon. Friend, I will write to him on that subject, because I need to speak to the Treasury about its analysis, which is what his question is about.

We are providing all consumers, including the fuel poor, with more control over their bills. The smart meter programme will mean millions of customers will be in control of their energy use, helping them to save money. A new safeguard tariff coming into effect on 1 January will protect 11 million consumers from high bills. On average, households will save £76 a year, with some saving a lot more. Significantly, as a result of these measures, the average fuel poverty gap has decreased from £379 in 2011 to £326 in 2016. Over that five-year period, the total fuel poverty gap has decreased by £88 million in real terms. Although it is important to recognise that progress is being made, we acknowledge that we still have a long way to go. The clean growth strategy included an ambitious set of policies for homes, the extension of energy-efficiency support through to 2028 and at least £640 million per year. We will be reviewing what the best form of support this will be in 2022, and I would welcome the views on this topic of hon. Members here today.

We will update the fuel poverty strategy for England in 2019, and we look forward to receiving good ideas on how we can make further progress. The new strategy will align our work on fuel poverty with our clean growth strategy and industrial strategy. We had always planned for the fuel poverty strategy to be a living, evolving document, because changing technology and innovation will mean that what worked in the past will not necessarily be the best plan for the future.

Graham Stringer: Will the Minister explain to the House why, as smart meters are rolled out in the north of England, we are not getting the most up-to-date and best smart meters, which people in Watford are getting? Why is the north being discriminated against?

Richard Harrington: I thank the hon. Gentleman for saying that my constituents in Watford are doing well out of smart meters, and they are, but the pace of the expansion is under continual review with the suppliers. The Secretary of State's powers were extended in the recent Smart Meters Act 2018 and will be used to encourage take-up of smart meters, which is gathering momentum. I accept the hon. Gentleman's point, though, because it is patchy in different parts of the country.

The main point is that for the first time we have an opportunity to ensure that our fuel poverty strategy is joined up with our holistic plan to improve energy efficiency throughout Britain. The new strategy will focus on better ways of identifying those in fuel poverty and targeting our assistance to them directly. It will help us to identify the most cost-effective means of achieving our target in 2020, 2025 and 2030.

Let me bring the focus back to our main goal, which is to improve the lives of those in fuel poverty. No one deserves to live in a cold home. We have the opportunity next year to set out a refreshed fuel poverty strategy that will lay out an updated plan for meeting the 2030 target. I would welcome hon. Members' views based on their experience of fuel poverty, so that we can work together to set out a new, ambitious plan. This issue transcends party lines and affects us all. I look forward to hearing hon. Members' questions and contributions on this topic.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The House will be aware that this is a necessarily short debate. I hope that we will manage without a formal time limit, but I advise Members who wish to take part to prepare around five minutes of speaking notes, and no more.

6.17 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): As we enter another winter, I welcome the opportunity to stand opposite the Minister in what will hopefully be a collegiate debate. I regret, though, the urgent necessity once again to debate fuel poverty in this Chamber.

Fuel poverty epitomises what a UN statement recently described as the "great misery" that has been "inflicted unnecessarily" on the UK's poor, and in particular on the millions of children locked into a cycle of poverty. The UK is one of the world's largest and wealthiest economies, with all the means at its disposal to eliminate

[Rebecca Long Bailey]

fuel poverty, and yet it is not being eliminated. The latest data shows there were more households living in fuel poverty in England in 2016 than in 2015. The figures were higher in 2015 than in 2014, when in turn they were higher than in 2013. It is not just the extent of fuel poverty that is on the rise, but the depth of fuel poverty—that is, the difference between households' energy bills and what they can afford to pay. Fuel poverty is not only persisting, but getting worse. Members should be in no doubt that this is not an unavoidable fact of life. It is a political choice.

According to the Office for National Statistics, the number of excess winter deaths throughout England and Wales last winter exceeded 50,000. As we have already heard, that is the highest recorded number for more than 40 years. The figures were described by the charity National Energy Action as “preventable and shameful”. According to that same group, at least 10,000 of those premature deaths were due to vulnerable people being unable to heat their homes adequately. I would like Members to reflect on the people behind those numbers. It means somebody's neighbour, somebody's parent, and somebody's child—10,000 people dying before their time just because they could not keep warm.

The terrible impact extends beyond preventable deaths. I have previously mentioned the impact on health. We know that children living in fuel poverty are twice as likely to suffer from respiratory problems, such as asthma and bronchitis, and that fuel poverty is associated with low weight gains in infants and higher levels of hospital admissions in the first three years of life. Adolescents living in cold homes are at five times the risk of having multiple mental health problems. On top of that, there are the negative effects on educational performance, emotional resilience and wellbeing. When combined with the fact that fuel poverty is not evenly distributed throughout the country, but concentrated in pockets of urban and rural poverty, we have the makings of what can only be described as a social crisis. In some parts of my constituency, fuel poverty affects one quarter of all households, and over one quarter of single-parent households. We know that it is a problem locally because, between April 2017 and March 2018, of those people who came to a citizens advice bureau in Salford and Eccles about energy issues, the most common was dealing with fuel debt repayments.

In last year's debate, I stated that 22% of households in Salford have prepayment meters compared with the national average of 15%, so I was particularly troubled by a report this year by Citizens Advice on the phenomenon of self-disconnection by those using prepayment meters. The report found that around 140,000 households in Great Britain could not afford to top up their meter in the past 12 months and that 88% of those households contained a child or someone with a long-term health issue. Half of those surveyed said that keeping their meter topped up was a daily concern, which is particularly shocking when we consider that more than 4 million households currently use prepayment meters.

Fuel poverty is not just an issue for those on prepayment meters. Following an unprecedented number of energy price hikes by suppliers rushing to increase prices in advance of the price cap, about which I will say more later, household energy debt has surged over the past

year by 24%. It is often said that fuel poverty is due to the confluence of three factors that we have heard about very briefly already: low income, high fuel prices, and poor energy efficiency. I wish to say a few words about each.

After a decade of austerity and lost growth, annual wages are still £760 lower than they were in 2008. Is it any surprise therefore that 47% of all fuel-poor households in England are in full or part-time work? For those out of work, the benefits freeze has deepened fuel poverty as families, already struggling on very little, have experienced a real-terms income cut. The industry body, the Energy and Utilities Alliance, has noted that the introduction of universal credit, which leaves households without an income during the five-week changeover, is pushing more people towards making the decision not to heat their home and to face the dilemma of heating or eating. Raising the national minimum wage to £10 an hour, ending the welfare freeze, and reversing cuts to people with disabilities would go a long way to tackling absolute poverty, which is at the root of so much fuel poverty.

On the cost of energy, last month Ofgem finally confirmed that an energy price cap will come into force in January 2019. That is almost two years after the Prime Minister first announced a price cap as Conservative policy, and it is set at a level that is hundreds of pounds higher than the cheapest tariffs available. In the intervening period, the big six energy suppliers have hiked their tariffs, some on multiple occasions. Ofgem has announced that the cap is likely to be revised upwards within months of being introduced.

In addition, wholesale prices are rising, I feel obliged to mention research published just yesterday by the UK Energy Research Centre, which finds that a no-deal or hard Brexit could increase electricity generation costs by £270 million a year. That is another reason, if we needed one, to redouble our efforts in this House to avoid no deal or a bad Brexit deal.

Labour's 2017 manifesto pledged an immediate emergency price cap to ensure that the average dual fuel household energy bill remained below £1,000 per year. Had that cap been introduced in July 2017, it would have saved households £2.85 billion between July 2017 and November 2018.

James Heappey: I know the hon. Lady does a lot of reading into energy policy, so she will know that a price cap can only be a temporary correction to the market. What is her longer-term plan for delivering a fairer energy price?

Rebecca Long Bailey: The hon. Gentleman is very learned on the topic of fuel poverty, and I agree with what he said. The Labour party has persistently stated that an energy price cap is a sticking plaster while the wider energy market is reformed, because it is not currently working in the interest of consumers. It forms part of the wider plan of Labour's energy policy portfolio completely to reform the energy system as we know it.

Network costs represent over one quarter of the cost of a gas and electricity bill, but customers have been getting a bad deal. Citizens Advice estimates that network companies will make £7.5 billion in unjustified profits over an eight-year period. A recent report by the Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit found even more excessive

returns captured by distribution network operators than Citizens Advice had predicted, with the six distribution network operator parent companies posting an average profit margin of 30.4%. By bringing energy networks back into public ownership, Labour would reinvest and pass on to customers the money currently paid out in dividends.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I will make some progress before taking an intervention from the hon. Gentleman.

I turn to energy efficiency. A well-insulated home saves households money, makes homes naturally warmer and more pleasant places to live, and cuts energy use, helping to tackle climate change. At least £1 for every £4 spent heating UK homes is wasted due to poor insulation. Improving the energy efficiency of the UK's housing stock, which is among the oldest and least efficient in Europe, really should be a no-brainer, so how are we currently faring?

According to the Committee on Climate Change, insulation rates have fallen by 90% since 2012. The energy company obligation—known as ECO—which is funded by a levy on bills, is the only remaining domestic energy efficiency delivery mechanism in England. It has also been cut from £1.2 billion a year when it was first introduced in 2013 to £720 million per annum in its second phase, and has been reduced still further to £640 million—effectively a 50% cut. It is therefore no surprise that the Government are off track to meet their targets.

In their 2015 fuel poverty strategy, the Government set a target of ensuring that fuel-poor homes are upgraded to an energy efficiency rating of EPC band C by 2030. But according to the Institute for Public Policy Research think-tank, the Government will not meet their target for upgrading fuel-poor homes until at least 2091. That is why, as a policy suggestion to the Minister, the Labour party proposed investing £2.3 billion a year to provide financial support for households to insulate their homes, and for local authorities to drive take-up and delivery of insulation schemes, in order to bring 4 million homes up to EPC band C by the end of one parliamentary term.

Labour's plans included fully covering the cost of insulation for low-income homeowners and all social housing, which will particularly benefit older people living in fuel poverty and pensioners on low income struggling to cover the cost of sky-rocketing energy bills. This would have delivered savings of at least £270 a year to affected households. As well as this investment, Labour was also committed to tightening the regulation of privately rented homes, blocking poorly insulated homes from being rented out.

I have tried to set out just some of the measures that will tackle the causes of fuel poverty: low incomes, high fuel costs and poor energy efficiency. I am not seeking to make party political points, but rather to indicate the level of commitment needed if we are truly to address the problem, because what is the alternative? Are we really willing to accept preventable and shameful winter mortality at current levels? Are we really willing to accept that we live in a country where some people go to bed early to stay warm, leave the curtains drawn and even paper over their windows? Is it acceptable

that people, often vulnerable people, have to seek out a library, a café or even an A&E department just to stay warm?

I do not believe that anybody in this House wants to see that, but wanting to end fuel poverty is simply not enough; rather, we must be willing to deploy the resources available to us to bring an end to what remains an avoidable indignity for millions.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am afraid that I was over-optimistic about the five minutes. We will need to have a time limit, and it has to be three minutes.

6.30 pm

James Heapey (Wells) (Con): I will rattle through what I have to say very quickly, then, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As both Front Benchers have said, the key to solving fuel poverty is twofold: on the one hand, we reduce the price of energy; and on the other, we help consumers to use less energy. In the two minutes and 30 seconds remaining, I will very quickly whizz through some of the things that we could do that are relatively low-hanging fruit for the Government. First, the costs of running the energy system are growing too much, and we have a number of very comfortable, monopolistic companies that perhaps we could screw down on a little in order to see whether the growth in system costs could be curbed.

Secondly, while the price cap is a useful temporary measure, there is a huge opportunity for market reform in order to take advantage of the very cheap renewable energy that can now be generated, and the flexibility that now exists within the system that can make use of those renewables without the need for quite so much in the way of back-up generation.

We can also make some really good progress on allowing energy and heat as a service to come through as a proposition to consumers. I would like Ofgem to do more to work with the companies that are likely to provide those services so that we can put in place a regulatory construct that will allow consumers to start to take advantage of this sort of initiative very quickly. I know that the Government are leading on the changes to the feed-in tariff, but we must start to look at how we encourage people to generate behind the meter for their consumption behind the meter, because that will reduce their energy costs, too.

But generation is just half of the story—using less is very important, too. Many of the measures I have mentioned, particularly things like heat and energy as a service, will naturally lend themselves to greater energy efficiency, particularly as the companies that are delivering those services are quite likely to want to install the energy efficiency measures within a home or business because they make a greater margin by being able to do that in the most efficient way possible. Lots of companies out there are innovating all the time in terms of what can be put in walls, rooms, doors, windows and floors in order to let less heat escape from a business or a home.

Dr Drew: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need to prioritise the properties that have never been on the gas grid, because they lose out whichever way? I am sure that he has some properties like that in Wells, as I have in Stroud.

James Heappey: Not only do I have lots of them in my constituency—I have just bought one and am in the process of renovating it. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. In rural areas, the deadly combination of solid walls and not being on the gas grid can often mean that fuel poverty is at its most acute in areas that look relatively affluent. Tackling that can and should be a priority, but it is monstrously expensive. When someone is going through the process of renovating a home, they are making lots of decisions, and the energy efficiency measures are by far the least glamorous of those that they choose when the alternatives are things like decorating, carpets and all the other stuff.

Those who live in fuel poverty are having to make choices that we really should not be asking them to make when the technology exists out there for us to help them to use less energy through what we put in their walls, roofs and floors, but also through the tech that we put in their homes that can help them to manage their demand in a really helpful way. I know that the Minister is very focused on this and that the Housing and Planning Minister also recognises the enormous value in setting higher standards so that those who live in social housing have better energy efficiency.

6.34 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I will rush through my notes because other Members want to speak, but we need more time for this kind of debate in the House, not the curtailed version we have tonight.

Far too many people are suffering cold and damp, in fuel poverty, and they should not be doing so. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) pointed out, two of the most important drivers for fixing fuel poverty are reserved to this place: low incomes and fuel prices. Austerity has been one of the key drivers of fuel poverty for people across the nations of the UK. The UN special rapporteur has been mentioned tonight, so I will not cover that ground again, but he said that the

“manifestations are clear for all to see.”

Westminster austerity increases winter austerity for people.

Patricia Gibson: What my hon. Friend is saying is very important. I grew up in a household where the heating was never put on, and I remember trying to do schoolwork with my freezing hands trying to hold a pen. He has talked about the factors that drive fuel poverty. Does he agree that the high cost of nuclear will do nothing but exacerbate the high cost of energy, with the extortionate price rates involved hitting poorer families hard?

Drew Hendry: Indeed. I can only agree with my hon. Friend, and I will come back to that.

The key thing is that universal credit is driving the problems that people face in their houses. They have a genuine problem and have to endure pain in choosing whether to eat or put on the heating. That is not a cliché. It is a fact of life for people living in fuel poverty. Over the past five years and more, we have seen it in my constituency, with people suffering from the pilot of universal credit to its roll-out today.

The worst fuel poverty comes in areas of low income and, typically, rural areas. Unemployment levels are almost irrelevant when it comes to universal credit.

The measures that the Chancellor introduced in his Budget do nothing for those already struggling on universal credit. They do nothing to reverse the cuts and nothing for those who are caught by the odious rape clause. Indeed, they do nothing to address the benefits freeze—even the transition funding will not come into place until next year. The Resolution Foundation has pointed out that the benefits freeze will cost low-income families £210 in 2019-20. Those are poor people, women, ethnic minorities, children, single parents and those with disabilities.

Measures can be introduced to reduce fuel poverty—for example, on insulation. The UK Government cut grants in 2015, and as a result, new insulation dropped by 90%. The new ECO programme is cautiously welcomed, but as green think-tank E3G pointed out,

“At least twice as much support is needed for low income households who struggle with their energy bills.”

It went on to say that the Government of Scotland grasped the importance of energy efficiency and that, including ECO support, they

“invest four times and twice as much per capita respectively in low income household energy efficiency as is invested in England.”

Low-income households need energy efficiency, and they need that to be invested in.

The Scottish Government’s green homes network has helped thousands of people to stay warm and save energy. It is clear to everyone except the UK Government that new industries such as carbon capture and storage and hydrogen need to be invested in. After the betrayal of Peterhead, with that £1 billion project withdrawn, it will not cut it for the UK Government to replace that with 10% of the investment promised. These new technologies need proper investment.

The Energy Saving Trust said that Scotland is not only “leading the way” in energy efficiency but

“regularly outperforms the rest of the UK when it comes to slashing carbon emissions.”

On public and community ownership, Local Energy Scotland, the Scottish Government’s arm, is going forward with local energy projects and community and renewable schemes through the community and renewable energy scheme—CARES. However, Ofgem’s consultation seems targeted to hit homes and businesses that generate their own electricity. The aim, it says, is to shift the burden to others; those who use more will pay less, and those who use less will pay more. That disproportionately hits those in areas of high fuel poverty.

We need fair pricing. People who are living off the grid need to be treated fairly. We need an off-grid regulator, and we need to bring forward payments for off-grid people. In 2012, my former colleague Mike Weir MP introduced a private Member’s Bill, the Winter Fuel Allowance Payments (Off Gas Grid Claimants) Bill, to help bring forward the timing of winter fuel payments to enable people to purchase fuel at a time of year when prices were likely to be lower. Yet this is not regulated.

Ofgem seems more interested in protecting the energy companies. It has also refused to do anything about the differential that households, particularly those in Highland and other rural areas, pay in energy unit prices. In Highland, it costs 4p a unit more for people to pay for their energy than in other parts of the UK. An Ofgem spokesman recently said to *The Press and Journal*:

“Network companies face different costs for serving customers in GB regions, for both gas and electricity. Licenced network operators recover their allowed revenues, set by Ofgem under the”—

RIIO, or “revenue = incentives + innovation + outputs”—“price control arrangements, from customers located within their licensed areas... This is a reasonable way to allocate these costs between customers. Ultimately it would be for Government to decide if changes should be made to these existing arrangements. Typical network costs are around 25 per cent (about £250) of overall energy bills.”

Ofgem is more interested in looking after the energy companies than those consumers who are actually struggling. We need a fair redistribution of these costs, which does not mean costs rising for other people, but actually brings down the level for those who are suffering in rural areas. There is poor value and there are poor services.

In Scotland, despite benefiting from its energy wealth, Westminster has left an energy system in which consumers are struggling to pay their bills. Despite the huge renewable resources—25% of Europe’s offshore wind—and oil and gas tax revenues of £350 billion since the 1970s, investment has been in failing and failed nuclear power. Wylfa, for example, is rumoured to be benefiting from £6 billion in equity and £9 billion in debt funding from this Government. It has a strike price deal that, at £77.50, is way above a fair rate—it is, indeed, below Hinkley’s eye-watering £92.50, but way above offshore wind’s £57.50—and who pays? The consumer—those in fuel poverty.

The Scottish Government are bringing forward their publicly owned energy company, and we look forward to seeing the benefits of that. I will wind up soon, Madam Deputy Speaker, but you must understand that there is a lot of ground to cover in this debate, and we have been given very little time for everybody to do so. We look forward to bringing forward a publicly owned energy company to reduce bills for people in Scotland and to help them out of the poverty trap of fuel poverty, low wages and the crippling application of universal credit and austerity to people in their homes and across our communities. It is time that the UK Government took some responsibility for this and took action to alleviate the pain that people suffer on fuel poverty.

6.42 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I cannot thank the hon. Gentleman who has just spoken by mentioning his constituency because that would use up all of my time.

There are two things that I think are important for the people of Willenhall and Bloxwich who may be suffering from fuel poverty. The first is that, even if they have to insulate their lofts themselves, the cost of that for a three-bedroom property is approximately £300, and *Which?* estimates that the payback would be in two years. That is a saving of £225 per year on their fuel bills, so it is definitely worth the investment. The second is that people do not switch energy provider. To me, it is heartbreaking that 60% of people surveyed a year ago had not switched their energy provider. Doing so would afford them a great opportunity to save money. I would like to say to the people of my constituency, “Please get your loft insulated, and please make sure that you are getting the best deal from your energy provider”.

I would like to talk briefly about my time with the YMCA. When I started working at the YMCA, it had a 72-bed direct access hostel for people who had previously been rough sleepers. It was a revelation to go to that building, which was 60 years old. Originally, it served as a home for men who had come to work in Birmingham and needed somewhere to live. As I have said, it was then used to provide accommodation for former rough sleepers.

The YMCA did not have much cash, so when I got there it still had the original Robin Hood Beeston boiler. The boiler was over 50 years old; it had originally started life as a coal-powered boiler before being converted to run on oil and subsequently on gas. It was probably the most inefficient heating system in the UK, heating a 72-bed hostel, with very poor control—absolutely crazy. I would frequently get there during the summer to find the heating on and the building so hot that the windows were open, because it did not have a sophisticated system.

However, along came Homes England with a grant of £2.6 million. The YMCA was able to raise £700,000 itself and has now introduced a much more efficient heating system. The building has been completely clad to improve the U-values and has had new windows fitted. As a result, the cost of heating the building has dropped dramatically, and when we are talking about people with very low funds contributing through a service charge to heat the building, that is an essential improvement. That is what this Government have done to help.

6.45 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): If ever we needed an example of how the Brexit omnishambles is squeezing out time for important debates on issues that matter to our constituents, this is a perfect case in point. There is so much to say. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on fuel poverty and energy efficiency, I wish we had more time.

For example, a report published by the Institute for Public Policy Research in June showed that the Government are set to miss their fuel poverty targets by 60 years. It is not that the Government do not know how to reverse the situation—indeed, they have even set a goal to do so, in both their manifesto and their recent clean growth strategy. The tragedy is that in recent years the Government have scrapped, reversed or shelved many of the measures that could actually have helped. It is truly shocking that, for example, we are in the absurd situation where the UK Government are not investing any public funds in improving domestic energy efficiency through insulation, particularly in England. In 2018, in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, that is nothing short of a moral failure.

The frustration is that many of us know that tackling fuel poverty by investing in energy efficiency could be a real win-win, bringing people’s fuel bills down, tackling climate change and creating jobs. Despite clear evidence of that win-win-win, the funding for energy efficiency in this year’s Budget was zilch. Quite why the Government can find £30 billion to fix potholes and improve roads but not to keep people warm is beyond me.

Many of us had hoped that the Government would use their response to the national infrastructure assessment to make progress on this issue. They did not. Published

[Caroline Lucas]

quietly alongside this year's Budget, it did not even make reference to the Government's statutory fuel poverty targets, let alone commit to the additional investment needed to meet them. The impact of the Government's complacency will be felt long beyond the effects of fuel poverty today. As we know, a few months ago the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released its latest report, saying that we have just 12 years to halve global emissions if there is to be any chance of meeting the 1.5° threshold.

The Committee on Climate Change has repeatedly made it clear that improving energy efficiency through better insulating our homes is crucial to our existing climate targets. We need those policies now, well before the long-term targets of the Climate Change Act 2008 are amended in line with the latest IPCC report and the Paris climate agreement. The withdrawal of incentives has cut home insulation installations to 5% of 2012 levels. That is a shameful failure, and it has to change. We need a massive programme of home insulation if we are to make a meaningful contribution to the global project of protecting our planet and our children's future. We also need to have not just the big six energy companies, which are profiting from this situation; we should have 60,000 energy companies and more, as they do in Germany. We should have real community energy, not as a "nice to have" but as a genuine, essential measure.

6.49 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): A few weeks ago I had the privilege of chairing a roundtable organised by the all-party parliamentary carbon monoxide group. The roundtable looked at the link between fuel poverty and carbon monoxide poisoning—perhaps not the most obvious link, but one that the various stakeholders around the table, from National Energy Action to the London fire brigade, identified as a real concern, partly because people were bringing in barbecues as secondary heating. We may have heard about that problem with barbecues, but we do not realise that people are relying on them for heating. We also heard about the use of secondary heating options in homes, such as gas fires that are often unserviced. Last year, only 40% of gas fires were reported by households as having been serviced over the previous 12 years, with a key reason being cost. Sadly, too few people are aware of the gas priority services register. I intend to make people in my constituency more aware of it, as well as the warm home discount scheme.

We have to question how we can have got to that position. The fact is that many people in my constituency are suffering because they do not have enough money. Some are on universal credit. They have disabilities, and their benefits have changed. They have choices to make about whether they heat their home or buy food. Some of our local food banks report that people are asking for food that does not have to be heated but can be eaten straight from the can or the packet, because they cannot afford to cook. In an area like mine, where many people suffer from lung conditions, people should not have to choose between heating and eating—it's not on.

Energy costs are currently very high. The default tariff cap might be useful, but it still does not resolve the issue of people not having the facilities or the skill

to work their way around the energy supply market for the cheapest deal. According to the Committee on Climate Change, progress on energy consumption has stalled. As we have heard, insulation rates have fallen since 2012. Current resources are not sufficient to meet fuel poverty commitments or wider energy efficiency targets set out in the clean growth strategy.

As other hon. Members including the Minister have said, winter deaths exceeded 50,000 last year, many of which were due to fuel poverty. Areas like mine in the north-east have been the hardest hit and have the highest percentage of households in fuel poverty in the country. The spikes in winter deaths due to fuel poverty are both preventable and shameful. The responsibility lies with the Government. They must address fuel poverty and energy efficiency in the comprehensive spending review.

6.52 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): It is damning for all of us in this House that the Benches are empty as we debate one of the greatest scandals of our time, fuel poverty.

I first spoke about fuel poverty in January 2011. It was my very first speech in Westminster Hall. That day, I chided the Government for 25,995 winter deaths. Within eight years, that has nearly doubled to 50,100. I know that Ministers like to blame the previous Labour Government, but there is nothing they can say about that—it is on their watch. They are the ones responsible for excess winter deaths and they have a duty to do something about it.

The second time I spoke about fuel poverty was in relation to terminal illnesses. In my constituency, like in many former industrial heartlands, we see large numbers of people with chest and respiratory diseases—chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and so on—which mean that they have to turn up their thermostat because they feel the cold more than anybody else. Further to that, I was shocked to discover that many people who have been diagnosed with cancer or other terminal illnesses, such as motor neurone disease, find themselves in abject poverty. Not only can they not afford to pay their food bills, they are struggling to pay their energy bills.

In that second debate, I specifically asked the Government to consider giving people with terminal illnesses an entitlement to a winter fuel payment during the time they are ill, or even, in the case of motor neurone disease, to the end of their life. The Minister at the time said he would look into that. Unfortunately, here we are seven years later and cancer patients and those with terminal illnesses are still suffering. For them and their families I call on the Government today to make it a priority to give people with terminal illnesses some comfort in their final harsh days.

6.54 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): A quarter of Scottish households are living in fuel poverty. It is clear that that is down to low income and the high cost of fuel. Alongside that, the high cost of nuclear, with the extortionate strike prices involved, is grotesque. Scotland boasts huge renewable resources, including 25% of Europe's offshore wind resources.

I grew up in a freezing cold household, and I remember, when I was doing my school work, trying to hold a pen with freezing cold hands. The Minister will appreciate

that in this day and age, no child and no family should have to live like that. It is time that fuel poverty was tackled in a meaningful way, so that people can enjoy a minimum level of comfort in their homes. That is why what the Scottish Government are doing on defining fuel poverty—we are one of the first European countries to do so—is so important. They have set a target to cut fuel poverty to 5% by 2040. The UK Government must use their powers to do what they can to deal with this fundamental social blight that looms over too many households in the cold, dark months.

6.55 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): In a speech on the same topic early in 2017, I said:

“We are in a cold homes crisis”.—[*Official Report*, 21 March 2017; Vol. 623, c. 822.]

Regrettably, that message remains. A large number of people in our society are living in fuel poverty, unable to live in a warm, dry home, tragically often resulting in excess winter deaths. Living in fuel poverty is miserable, for both the young and old. It increases anxieties and stresses and puts pressure on the already stretched NHS. According to the NHS, the current scale of the problems in England alone costs the health service approximately £3.6 million a day and results in 50,000 unnecessary deaths. The Government have a duty to ensure that everybody in the UK is living in a warm, dry home, and I am grateful for this opportunity to hold them to account on the progress—or lack of it—on tackling fuel poverty.

A year since the last debate, little progress has been made and the Government continue to miss the targets that they set. How did we get to the tragic point where, weeks before Christmas, millions of people will be vulnerable to having a cold, damp home? Under the Tories, we have seen a low-wage, low-productivity economy, with precarious working hours for millions of people, leaving them vulnerable. Coupled with that, we have seen a disastrous universal credit roll-out, forcing millions into food banks. Shamelessly, Tory Ministers have used opening a food bank as a photo opportunity recently, as though the increase in food banks were to be commended.

In my constituency, 41% of children are living in poverty, and the number of food bank parcels given out has increased exponentially. While many cannot rely on a decent pay packet, they are none the less met with increasing living costs. Under a Labour Government in 2007, we saw 2.5 million energy efficiency measures implemented in a single year. That number has fallen off a cliff. This Tory Government are failing those in fuel poverty, and they are failing the people of Britain.

6.57 pm

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): I agree wholeheartedly with the points made about our not having long enough to debate this issue. There were some very interesting suggestions from Members right across the House, including about the personal commitment from the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and a very interesting point made by the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) about targeting winter fuel payments, which have historically been a universal benefit.

However, someone listening to this debate would think that there had been no progress whatsoever. If I may, let me push back against what I think was a

creative, yet factually incorrect, attempt by the Opposition to conflate all sorts of things. In the last full year of the Labour Government, the proportion of households in fuel poverty in this country was 11.9%. That is now 7% lower, and the median fuel poverty gap has dropped by 16% over that time—[*Interruption.*] Those are the facts. The facts are that we know we have more to do—[*Interruption.*] Yes, of course it has been re-based, but let us just focus on what has been delivered in policy terms.

We have halved the number of fuel-poor households living in F and G-rated properties since 2010. I have taken personal responsibility for reforming the energy company obligation, which was only 30% focused on fuel poverty just a few years ago and is now 100% focused on fuel poverty. That means £6 billion of spending over the next decade. It is being focused on rural poverty and is more focused on those who actually need it. We have included disability benefits and allowed for more innovation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heap) said, solid wall insulation is not the way to improve fuel efficiency in many homes. With cross-party support, we introduced the Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Act 2018 to save millions of people money on their energy bills. Of course there is more to do, but I hope that one day we can reach a cross-party consensus on something as important as solving fuel poverty, on which no Government, including the last Labour Government, have a good track record.

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (COMPETITION)

That the draft Competition (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 29 October, be approved.—(*Amanda Milling.*)

Question agreed to.

VALUE ADDED TAX

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

That the Value Added Tax (Place of Supply of Services) (Supplies of Electronic Telecommunication and Broadcasting Services) Order 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 1194), which was laid before this House on 19 November, be approved.—(*Amanda Milling.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Green Deal scheme

7 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents about the green deal scheme. Several of my constituents have lost out through the mis-selling of solar panels by

[Martyn Day]

Home Energy and Lifestyle Management Ltd. The green deal is a Government-backed scheme, obviously, which gave it an air of authenticity that has allowed people to basically be ripped off, left paying off long-term loans that last longer than the life span of the product and paying higher bills than had they never participated in the first place.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of residents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk,

Declares that the Government backed Green Deal Scheme has affected petitioners as we have suffered a detriment both to our finances, our private and family lives; further that many vulnerable residents have invested their life savings in good faith, and others have accrued up to £17,000 in debt to pay for the work that was carried out; and further that in many cases the installer did not apply for building warrants and as a result we are unable to sell our properties or have the assurance that they are safe to live in, or can be insured.

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to ensure that the Government will compensate and protect people who have found themselves suffering a detriment because of the Government backed scheme, and take steps to ensure that this cannot happen in the future.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002304]

Private Parking: Ports and Trading Estates

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

7.2 pm

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I sought this evening's debate to raise awareness of the unethical practice of commercial car parking firms issuing unreasonable parking and trespass enforcement notices against haulage companies in my constituency and elsewhere. I also wish to seek assistance from the Government to ensure that a proper framework is in place to properly address the unacceptable behaviour of commercial car parking enforcement companies, which are damaging the British haulage industry and threatening its profitability and jobs in Suffolk and, increasingly, elsewhere in the UK.

This issue first came to my attention when Magnus Group, a haulier based in Great Blakenham in my constituency, invited me to visit and asked for my support. Magnus Group is supported by in excess of 30 other UK road hauliers that collectively have the backing of the Road Haulage Association and the Freight Transport Association. I am grateful to Magnus Group and Bartrums, another haulage company in my constituency, based in Eye, as well as Anchor Storage Solutions in Kenton and the Road Haulage Association for helping me to prepare for this debate.

I will begin with a little background for the Minister. The examples I will raise are particularly pertinent to Suffolk, and although I am raising concerns on behalf of road hauliers, my constituency being landlocked, I will give examples from the UK's container port in Felixstowe. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) shares my concerns, as does my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous).

Felixstowe port receives in excess of 45%—close to 50%—of the UK's container traffic, so the issues I am raising affect haulage companies not just in Suffolk but throughout the UK. Given the importance that the Government are placing on supporting UK trade as we go through the Brexit process, unethical practices that are affecting the UK haulage industry and its competitiveness must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Trinity Distribution Park in Felixstowe is owned and operated by Trinity College Cambridge and managed by Bidwells, an estate management company, which in turn employs the services of a commercial parking enforcement company called Proserve. Trinity owns much of the land around the port of Felixstowe. To date, it has failed to engage with the concerns of the road haulage industry. It is concerning that it appears to be allowing its agent, Bidwells, to employ an unregulated enforcement company which is using unreasonable practices to manage traffic on and around its property. Roads under the jurisdiction of Proserve at Trinity Distribution Park include Dooley Road, off the A154 at Walton Avenue, the BP garage on the A154 at Trinity Avenue, Blofield Road, Parker Avenue and Fagbury Road.

While the hauliers recognise the need for reasonable enforcement, they object to the unreasonable actions of Proserve, backed by Bidwells. Enforcement, when required, must be conducted in a fair, transparent and reasonable manner. Proserve's actions include levying unreasonable charges and fines on hauliers—£180, rising to £250 if

not paid within 14 days; failing to sign up to a regulated appeals procedure to monitor the appropriateness of the fines and trespass notices that it hands out; applying additional charges if and when fines and trespass notices are challenged—£37.50 per challenge; rejecting, without due process or consideration, many of the challenges to the fines and trespass notices that it hands out to hauliers; blocking in lorries and other vehicles owned by road hauliers, and using the process to issue trespass notices for each hour during which the vehicles are blocked in; and issuing trespass notices for vehicles that have stopped for only one minute, for example when conducting a parking manoeuvre such as a three-point turn.

There are a number of concerns about the legitimacy of the trespass notices themselves. For instance, Proserve has no access to the DVLA database, and notices are therefore issued to businesses on the basis of the livery of the vehicles concerned. Incorrect or no registration numbers are supplied to the hauliers on the notices. Notices and fines are sent to the wrong addresses, thus delaying their receipt by the intended recipients, who incur additional penalty charges as a consequence. There are substantial gaps between the dates recorded on notices and the dates on which they are received by haulage companies, and those delays also lead to additional penalty charges. Proserve claims on its notices that it uses the DVLA to help it to enforce trespass notices. The DVLA categorically denies that, and has advised the haulage companies affected to take the matter up directly with Suffolk Trading Standards.

There are also disturbing stories from a number of haulage companies which tell me that Proserve has told them that it will “go easy on them” if they pay it an annual fee. In effect, Proserve is asking hauliers to bribe it to stop handing out unethical fines. Companies that do not pay the fee find themselves receiving more attention from Proserve, which then increases the number of fines and trespass notices. Proserve seems to be operating what is, in effect, a mafia-style protection racket which penalises hauliers who refuse to comply. Bidwells, the managing agent, appears to stand by Proserve’s enforcement notices and practices, and Trinity College does not even want to know what is happening. It has refused to engage with hauliers who have raised concerns with it.

As I am sure the Minister will know, this practice is extremely damaging to road hauliers and their businesses when they attempt to deliver to and collect from businesses trading from Trinity Distribution Park. Many have either ceased to trade with businesses located there, or are becoming reluctant to do so because of the risk of trespass notices and fines. Felixstowe is the UK’s biggest container port, but the unethical behaviour of a parking enforcement agency is now preventing businesses from operating correctly in the port, and hauliers are finding it difficult to carry out day-to-day operations. The high risk of trespass notices means that the hauliers face having to increase their costs to their customers, pricing them out of the market and preventing them from competing fairly. The knock-on effect to business is that companies’ operations are becoming less efficient and less profitable, and there is an increased threat to local and national haulage and storage jobs.

I have also been provided with legal advice from a company in my constituency, Hemisphere Freight Ltd, which has been affected by the actions of Proserve. The advice is as follows:

“The landowner could be in breach of lease if it has authorised or permitted Proserve to cause obstruction and harassment on the estate roads.

The sub-lease provided does not support the assertion made by Proserve that there is a clause in all the leases to stop vehicles standing or permitting others to stand on any of the private estate roads. In the sub-lease provided, there is not an express clause that prohibits vehicles from queuing.

There is no contractual agreement between vehicle operators and the landowner.

The vehicle operators access the estate roads as licensees of the leaseholders of the premises visited. It is not clear that queuing on the estate roads is a trespass. The fines levied for alleged trespass are not enforceable.”

Because there is no clear legal framework or requirement for Proserve to be part of a trade body, its actions might be illegal but it can still operate in the unethical way it chooses to, and it continues to punish road haulier companies with impunity.

It is also worth reflecting on the direct experience of three companies that are being badly affected by the actions of Proserve and the inertia of both Bidwells and Trinity College Cambridge in tackling its unethical behaviour.

Magnus Group is based in Great Blakenham near Ipswich. Kevin Parker, managing director of the Magnus Group, tells me that it was formed in 1973, has gradually grown and now employs over 140 staff, but he is concerned that the damage being done to the company by the actions of Proserve might pose a serious threat to jobs in the future. Over the past six years, Magnus Group has paid in excess of £7,000 in fines issued by Proserve for both Ransomes industrial park in Ipswich and Trinity Distribution Park in Felixstowe. However, Proserve’s actions have escalated in recent weeks and months in Felixstowe.

Magnus Group has now opted to stop paying these fines after receiving a trespass notice with an unknown registration number on it. When it queried this with Bidwells, the land agent, Magnus was told it was not to be questioned and that the fine was based on the vehicle’s livery. Magnus Group has also received a fine for a vehicle that has never been registered to the company. The advice from Bidwells was that the fine was to be paid as it carried the livery of one of Magnus Group’s customers, Specialized bikes. One such trespass notice, or letter, from Proserve advised that Magnus Group’s licence to enter Trinity Distribution Park has been withdrawn by Trinity College’s agent, Bidwells. Magnus Group has never seen or received any notification of such a notice, nor the need to have a special licence. It has requested on a number of occasions to have sight of the licence, but neither Proserve nor Bidwells have complied with the request, which has thus far been ignored. Proserve’s trespass notice states that Magnus Group has 10 days from service of the notice to pay the full amount. If it does not, legal proceedings will commence in the county court. Magnus Group currently has 18 different letters for different vehicles entering the land in Felixstowe since 19 September, each notice containing a charge of £250 per incident.

The photographic evidence is not clear as to where the vehicles have been photographed. Indeed, many of them appear to be simply vehicles travelling on a tarmac road. Magnus Group has, at present, a number of fines totalling almost £6,000. Some of its vehicle fines have accrued further charges—some total £337.50 per fine

[Dr Dan Poulter]

and one is for £421.50. Magnus Group vehicles have been forcibly blocked by Proserve; while blocked, Proserve has taken photographs of the vehicle and used the photographs to subsequently issue fines. I am sure the Minister agrees that that is far from ethical practice and is certainly not desirable in the UK's leading container port.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I am listening with interest to my hon. Friend's speech. I know these roads and estates as I used to be a surveyor practising in that area, and the roads are not in the best order. Does my hon. Friend agree that this sort of practice, and the poor estate management in not keeping these roads up to standard, is undermining Felixstowe's position as a premier container port in the UK?

Dr Poulter: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. I shall give the House one more example on exactly that point. The issue for the Government to consider is that the actions of Proserve and companies like it are not isolated to Felixstowe. This is occurring throughout the United Kingdom. Specifically in Felixstowe, however, we know that jobs are reliant not only on the port and that many other jobs in Suffolk are linked through the haulage industry. As we look towards Brexit, the position of Felixstowe as the UK's premier container port and the importance of Britain's trade and its exporting and importing capacity is something that the Government should take into account. The behaviour of Proserve is undermining the competitiveness of Felixstowe, and it is potentially putting jobs at risk in Suffolk and elsewhere in the UK that are linked to the port. This is something that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing forward this debate. He is right to say that these things are happening not only in Felixstowe; they are happening elsewhere as well, and clearly no one is safe. Does he agree that excessive private parking enforcement carried out with no sensitivity can cause great distress in what can already be distressing circumstances? One of my constituents was hounded by a private parking company for a fine that was incurred when she was parked at a commercial harbour in Northern Ireland. She had had a heart attack and was taken away by ambulance, so she could not move her car. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that example and others like it show why people and companies get annoyed and angry? These private parking enforcement companies should not be a law unto themselves. They need to be brought under the control of legislation and the rule of law.

Dr Poulter: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. We know from the behaviour of Proserve and from the example that he has just raised that these companies are often operating without any legal framework, and that there is no proper appeals process available to the victims of those companies. I have been talking about the commercial environment, but I believe that he was talking more from a private citizen's perspective. However, the examples are certainly comparable. This is borne out even further by my next example.

Bartrums is a large haulage company in Eye, in the north of Suffolk. Andrew Watton, its chief executive officer, has told me:

"For a number of years, Bartrums haulage have been dogged by over-zealous parking enforcement to the point of almost extortion"—

by Proserve in Felixstowe.

"This enforcement company is not part of any parking enforcement association and therefore has no appeals process to the fines for which they impose. The fines and charges are excessive and when you complain or challenge the penalty via Bidwell's"—

the managing agents—

"you are then charged an additional management fee. Hauliers who fail to make payment of the fine imposed are then banned from site (an area which makes up a substantial proportion of Felixstowe Port). The fines are imposed for stopping anywhere on the carriageway across the controlled area. The fines are in the region of £250...This is under the offence of trespass. Many hauliers across the UK are victim to this sharp practice and growing in number. We have now got to the point of taking group action against Trinity College directly, as previous legal actions against Proserve have failed. This is a restrictive practice, and some select local hauliers in the local area are exempt from these fines, which is anti-competitive."

As I mentioned earlier, companies may be exempted from these fines because they pay Proserve a fee in order to be given better treatment. That does not sound like a fair or ethical way of running a parking enforcement company in a port the size of Felixstowe. It sounds like extortion, because if the hauliers do not pay, they get fined. I hope that the Minister will be able to look into this.

Andrew Watton continued:

"Trinity are obliged to look at mitigating these charges, which they have failed to do."

Trinity College's failure to engage with the process throughout has been woeful.

I want to give one last example. FTS Hatswell Ltd tells me:

"Proserve is a company who work on behalf of the landowners at Trinity Distribution Park...They are issuing trespass notices and heavy fines even if you stop to ask for directions. Last week I got a call from another Haulier whose driver stopped as he had hit something lying in the road".

Yet he still got a fine and a trespass notice. The company continued:

"FTS Hatswell Limited are currently banned from both sites" that Proserve runs,

"and even the BP garage by the estate. They are not able to obtain owner details from the DVLA as they don't belong to a parking enforcement body."

The challenge for the Minister is to meet the three tests that I have set out. Clearly, a parking enforcement company is behaving unethically and affecting hauliers all over the UK. It affects the productivity and functioning of Felixstowe port, which is the biggest container port in the country. I know that the Government will want to address that, given the looming decisions on Brexit and the importance of overseas trade.

Setting aside the inertia and disappointing behaviour of Trinity College and its agents, Bidwells, there are many concerns that need to be addressed. First, the Government need to ensure that all commercial car parking companies are properly regulated and signed up to a trade body and an appeals regulator, who can consider their actions fairly and ensure fairness and transparency in the appeals process. Secondly, we need to ensure that Suffolk Trading Standards is supported to take appropriate action against Proserve, and Bidwells

and Trinity College. Thirdly, we should investigate setting up a proper regulatory system for commercial parking enforcement to support the haulage industry and prevent the unethical and anti-competitive behaviour of companies such as Proserve.

I look forward to the Minister's response and thank her for taking the time to listen to the points I have raised on behalf of the haulage industry in Suffolk and elsewhere.

7.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) on securing this debate on private parking enforcement at commercial ports and trading estates. I am pleased to respond to a debate on a subject that is clearly important to my hon. Friend, his constituents and hauliers. Although there are no major commercial ports in North Ipswich and Central Suffolk, his constituency is close to that great hub of maritime activity and excellence on the Harwich Haven waterway.

That includes one of the country's largest and most important ports at Felixstowe, as well as other significant commercial ports at Harwich International and the port of Ipswich. Together, those ports deal with some 11% of total freight tonnage handled by English ports—36 million tonnes in 2017. They have a significant impact on the local economy as a source of employment and business activity. I am sure that I do not have to convince my hon. Friend and other Members of the economic importance of our ports to our country. They make a massive contribution to our economy and, to put it simply, are the reason why we can thrive as a trading nation. Our ports are our main gateway to the world, handling 95% of all imports and exports, employing 24,000 people and boosting our economy by £5.4 billion a year.

As Minister for maritime, I see the story behind those statistics every day and the enterprise, investment, and commitment to customers that make Britain's ports among the best in the world. I also had the opportunity in May to visit a number of our ports, including Felixstowe, and saw first hand the fundamental role they play.

The scale of the operations at Felixstowe is impressive. The port handles the largest container vessels in the world, some 400 metres long each and holding some 18,000 twenty-foot equivalent unit—or TEU—containers, with 33 cranes to load and unload them. Felixstowe handles some 4 million TEU containers each year. Our other large container ports, including at London Gateway and Southampton, are just as impressive.

Our ports operate on a commercial basis in a competitive environment, including with ports on the continent. They have an impressive record of investment in new facilities, investing hundreds of millions of pounds in new facilities over the past 10 years, with further planned for the future. As my hon. Friend mentioned, their importance will grow as we leave the EU and start to make the most of the new global trading opportunities it brings.

As a consequence of their success, our major commercial ports generate significant volumes of road traffic moving freight to and from ports, with goods for export travelling to our ports and imported goods being taken to their

destinations inland, such as warehouses, distribution centres and factories. Our ports are a key link in the supply chains of our economy. That is particularly the case at ports specialising in shipping containers, such as Felixstowe, London Gateway and Southampton, as well as larger roll-on roll-off ferry ports including Dover and Harwich International.

In most cases, the aim is for a vehicle to spend as little time as possible at the port, often arriving at a set time to pick up or deposit a container before departing shortly afterwards, or arriving at a port to catch a ferry service with as little time as possible spent at the port. The provision of parking for vehicles is not therefore that relevant to such ports. The priority is to ensure that traffic is kept moving smoothly through the port. However, some ports will provide more parking facilities, such as for use by departing cruise passengers. For other mainly smaller ports, car parking for tourists and other visitors can provide an important source of revenue, particularly over the summer season.

Each port is responsible for managing its own car parking arrangements. Some ports may use their statutory powers under harbour byelaws to do that, particularly where parking control is needed to ensure the safe and effective operation of the harbour. Others may use an approach involving private parking contractors.

Whatever the arrangements, they seem to work effectively. My Department receives very little correspondence from members of the public or businesses with concerns about parking arrangements at our ports, although that is not in any way to discount the concerns of my hon. Friend's constituents.

Dr Poulter: I understand that the Minister is reading from a pre-prepared speech, but will she acknowledge that I represent the views of more than 30 haulage companies that have a problem with how commercial parking enforcement is being run at Felixstowe port by Proserve? It is damaging their competitiveness and it is potentially costing jobs. Proserve's unethical behaviour needs to be addressed.

Ms Ghani: I was just about to come on to that. It is important that we understand any potential damage to our haulage industry, which is key to getting freight in and out of our country and to ensuring our ports thrive now and in the future.

If any individual or business has concerns about parking arrangements at ports, those concerns are always best addressed directly to the ports themselves—I understand that my hon. Friend is frustrated by the lack of interaction from the port and the operating company—and it is for the contractor to consider and quickly resolve those concerns.

My hon. Friend's constituents have raised concerns about the way in which one particular private parking enforcement company has been operating at a distribution facility at Felixstowe. I understand that the facility is not part of the port itself but is close to it. He has written to the site's owners raising his constituents' concerns, to which I hope and expect he will get a satisfactory response. Although I would not wish to comment on the specifics of that particular case, improving the way the private parking sector works is an important issue for the Government.

[Ms Ghani]

The private parking industry is currently self-regulating. However, like my hon. Friend, we have concerns about the practices of some private parking companies. That is why the Government are pleased to support the Parking (Code of Practice) Bill, a private Member's Bill tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight). The Bill passed its remaining stages in the House of Commons on 23 November, and it was introduced in the other place on 26 November.

The Bill seeks to create a single code of practice that is applicable to every private parking operator, rather than the current position in which each parking association has a different code of practice and different standards to which it holds its members. By providing a single code of practice, the Bill aims to create clarity and consistency across the industry for both parking operators and motorists. It also aims to raise standards by incorporating best practice as standard across the industry.

I welcome the amendment made on Report, which will allow a single appeals body to be appointed. That is key to some of the concerns raised by my hon. Friend, and it will create a straightforward process for motorists who have received a private parking ticket to follow to appeal.

My hon. Friend raised a number of concerns—one was about penalties. I will be taking that back to my Department so that the roads Minister, the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), ensures that my hon. Friend gets a robust

response. Once again, my hon. Friend highlighted the importance of the logistics industry, and we cannot have it feeling that it is being particularly targeted because of the way it conducts business.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) has joined us in the Chamber. She is already across these issues, and I will make sure that my Department is working closely with hers to ensure that both hauliers and local constituency Members of Parliament are represented appropriately. I hope that my response has assured my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich that the Government are well aware of the issue of parking at commercial ports and trading estates, both in my Department and in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which is also involved in enforcement. I will make sure that the record of today's debate is passed to the appropriate Minister so that they can respond to my hon. Friend, too. We must not forget that the parking code of practice, when it becomes law, should help to address a number of the concerns the Government have about how the current systems works. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue this evening, but I am sure that his constituents will welcome the proposed Bill. I will ensure that the appropriate Ministers respond further on the issues relating to penalties that he raised.

Question put and agreed to.

7.31 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 11 December 2018

[MR GEORGE HOWARTH *in the Chair*]

House of Commons Financial Plan and Draft Estimates

9.30 am

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the House of Commons Financial Plan 2019-20 to 2022-23 and draft Estimates for 2019-20.

It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. This is the first time we have had a debate such as this since 2014, and I think that all members of the Finance Committee feel that it is a shame and a mistake that we have not had one every year. I do not think we are the only people in Parliament who think that the management of the expenditure on the House and the way we do our business in Parliament has for years not been done as efficiently and effectively as it might be. In 2014, the Committee did have a debate of this kind. It took place on the Floor of the House and the expectation was that it would become an annual event. However, because we had general elections in 2015 and 2017, there was no Committee in place to ask for a debate, so we did not have one.

In the end, we are talking about taxpayers' money here. Personally, I would be very critical of the whole way in which we spend taxpayers' money in this country, in the sense that we theoretically have debates on estimates, but we never or very rarely have votes on them. We can only cut the amount of money being spent; we cannot reallocate from one estimate to another. To all intents and purposes, we do not really have a budget in this country, but a Budget statement. We do not have a budget in the sense that most other Parliaments in the world—or, for that matter, most local authorities—would understand the word. Therefore, the Finance Committee, which I chair, thinks it important that at least for this bit, which is the money spent on Parliament itself, we show a degree of discretion and try to get to the bottom of some of the key issues facing us.

We all also want to see far better responsibility and accountability for financial decisions made within the two parliamentary estimates that I will talk about. The two estimates, as I am sure you know, Mr Howarth, are the administration estimate and the Members estimate. The Members estimate is now much smaller than the admin estimate. I cannot for the life of me understand why we still have two estimates. I understand that the Government object to binding these two estimates together, but I cannot understand why. The admin estimate is far bigger than the Members estimate, and having the two separate just seems an unnecessary additional administrative burden.

In relation to the admin estimate, which as I said is far larger, the process is iterative. That is to say that as we advance towards the final estimate being laid, we on the Finance Committee provide advice to the House of Commons Commission, and that informs the estimate that is eventually laid. Quite often in that process, we on the Finance Committee have tried to bring decisions earlier, so that the Commission can be better informed

and we can have a more strategic look at the whole of our finances. Part of what governs that is that we set a remit for the resource element of the admin estimate. At the moment, that assumes zero real-terms growth. That is partly because we have been making some £15.5 million-worth of savings, which we can then reinvest. Those are not just cuts; they are genuine savings. We are doing more for less money and we can then put the money back into the resource element of the admin budget.

We do have some exceptions and I worry, as Chair of the Committee, that the number of exceptions always grows; it never seems to diminish. For instance, we allow ourselves, quite rightly, an exception from the remit for increased scrutiny of Government. Brexit has led to an extra Select Committee. That has a cost, because there have to be Clerks and there has to be Committee time and there are printing costs and all the rest of it. Indeed, in recent years, the Select Committee process has become one of the most important elements of the way we do our business in Parliament, and consequently there has been a dramatic increase in the amount of work that those Committees are doing. The Liaison Committee, which gathers together the Chairs of all the Select Committees, made a passionate plea for an additional £1.3 million this year, and we think that that is an important additional piece of expenditure.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman is outlining his case very cogently. He has talked about the expansion of Select Committees. Does he agree that, hopefully in the very near future, the Exiting the European Union Committee will not have much more to do?

Chris Bryant: Yes, but for a completely different reason: I hope that we will be exiting Brexit rather than Brexiting, although I do not think that that is a matter for this debate, Mr Howarth.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Quite.

Chris Bryant: The second exception that we make—again, I think that it is difficult to disagree with—relates to security. The physical aspects of security in this building and of Members in their constituencies are obviously important, but as we have seen in the last two years, the cyber-security of the parliamentary estimate is also a vital element of enabling the democratic process to proceed. It is not just Russia but China and, potentially, a whole series of other countries that, as state actors, might be seeking to undermine the cyber-security of this place, and it would be all too easy for other people engaged in espionage to attack it. Of course, there have also been the very sad deaths of Jo Cox and PC Keith Palmer.

I am therefore fully aware that it is important to have an exception from the remit for security, but we need to be very clear that we are getting good value for money and that we are not wasting taxpayers' money, even when we are dealing with security matters. I have some concerns about the contract with Chubb and the way it has been administered; I think that the Committee will want to look at that in the near future.

One of the largest areas of exception from the remit is, of course, the major strategic programmes that we have in the Palace of Westminster. There are three such programmes.

[Chris Bryant]

The first is restoration and renewal. Everyone is aware of that—we had a big debate on it. Unfortunately, the delays in delivering it have made it very difficult for us to be clear about exactly when we will be incurring the expenditure. Indeed, the delays in decision making in the House have made it more difficult for the Officers of the House to be able to deliver clear financial decision making.

The second programme is the northern estate programme. That is definitely progressing. We have been involved in looking at some of the suggestions of what there may be, including in relation to the alternative Chamber that will be built, largely on the same basis as the current Commons Chamber but with better disabled access; provision of offices for Members who are being decanted out of this building; and ensuring that the whole of the northern estate within the curtilage is efficiently and effectively used. I passionately support that programme, because I think that at the end of it we will have a legacy for future generations that will improve access for the public to the whole of the parliamentary estate and to the archives.

That is the third programme—the archives accommodation programme. I do not know whether any Members have been into the archives of late, but it is virtually impossible to get there; it is certainly very difficult for any members of the public to get there. The photograph room has never worked since it was first installed, and all the rolled Acts of Parliament, going back to the 14th century, could be far better stored than they are now. They are higgledy-piggledy; they are in time order, but should be far more carefully stored. However, that cannot really happen until such time as we have new provision.

We have also made an exemption—this is new for us—for any decisions made by the House in relation to reports that are being done. The most important example is the Dame Laura Cox report, which has already led to significant public interest, as people want to ensure that Parliament is a safe place for everybody to work and that there is no bullying or harassment. There are costs involved in delivering that review and we are keen to support that, and we will doubtless be keen to support whatever Gemma White QC comes up with, when her review is completed.

In addition, we have allocated £2.4 million for the Sponsor Board, which is up and running in shadow form. I see that one of its members—my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami)—is here in his less shadowy form; certainly his tie is less shadowy than it might be, as usual. The shadow Sponsor Board is up and running, and we are hopeful that it will be able to engage in its work as fast as possible. As I understand it, it is keen to speed up decisions, rather than delay. At the moment, we are talking about not leaving the Palace in the decant until 2026, but there are people who would like that to be brought forward to 2025 if it is physically possible.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): I apologise for missing the opening few minutes. I just want to emphasise the important point about driving things forward. This is not a vanity project: we are doing this work because the building is not safe as it is at the moment.

Chris Bryant: I completely concur with my right hon. Friend, who has been one of the key people seeking to drive this forward, in his role as a Whip and given his responsibility for Opposition accommodation. He is fully aware of the problems there have been throughout the Palace. The new fire doors are absolutely hideous, but they are essential. I am sure that when we get around to restoration and renewal we will have a version of them that performs the same function, but is more in keeping with the building. Finally, we have allocated £3.3 million of the administration budget to the restoration and renewal customer and client team, which builds the occupation for R and R when it comes online.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, which are important to many hon. Members, are funded out of the resource aspect of the administration estimate, as is the History of Parliament Trust. We have tried to be as tough with each of those bodies as possible, to ensure that we are getting good value for money. The only comment I would make about the IPU and the CPA is that in many other Parliaments there is a foreign affairs department with a room to welcome guests from other Parliaments. It keeps a record of who has visited and where MPs have gone on visits. That is available to their foreign office. There is a kind of inventory of all the work that is being done on foreign affairs visits. That does not happen here.

We have a multiplicity of different Committees and all-party parliamentary groups, and all the rest of it. For example, I went to Colombia in September, courtesy of ABColombia. It would have been interesting to have seen which other Members had visited there over the last five years and good to have exchanged information with them before going. Keeping such records is not something that we do, but it is one of the things that we should look at for the future.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Other Parliaments often have friendship groups, as they call them, which are serviced by staff from their Parliament, so there is a continuity to the visits and a base in the Parliament where Members can be serviced, and information collected and retained. That simply does not happen in this country.

Chris Bryant: That is absolutely right. When—if—Brexit happens, it will be all the more important, in relation to other European countries, that Members of this House and the House of Lords will be seen as diplomats or ambassadors on behalf of Parliament. We need to garner the information, ideas and contacts that come through that in the national interest. I worry that we do not do that very well at the moment.

The capital elements of the administration estimate are quite significant. We are talking about £236.8 million. Some of the figures in the report that we have published are slightly different from the figures that we are talking about now, because this is an iterative process. In a sense, the reason for having this debate was to be able to inform those decisions as they go forward to the commission. The two largest elements of this relate to the major ongoing building projects. Of that, £117.4 million relates to the Strategic Estates projects. I think everybody on the Committee would say that we worry about the Strategic Estates. It is not just that the Elizabeth Tower

started off at one price and ended up at a completely different price—incidentally, it ended up being a rather different project. With the stone courtyard project, the money we were allocating for all five courtyards has been taken up on one. I am sure that both the Labour party and Conservative party would have moaned about this, but we also decided to close the cloister—one of the most beautiful parts of the Palace—and move all the staff out more than 18 months ago, yet work has still not started on it, even though it desperately needs work.

Mark Tami: We were told at the time that those people had to leave because that work was essential and could not wait under any circumstances—it was quite an exercise to find somewhere else for those people—only to see it left empty, apart from some building materials that have been left there.

Chris Bryant: That is distressing and worrying. Apart from anything else, it is worrying because it is one of the most beautiful parts of the palace, which is hardly used or visited by the public. I hope that when restoration and renewal is complete we will not have destroyed the beautiful work that was done by Henry VII and Henry VIII. That would be a terrible sadness. The delay is down to capacity in the team and physical capacity on the site. It is not down to somebody being negligent in their job, or anything like that, but it is simply down to capacity. If we are unable to get that work done, there is a danger that we will lose one of the most important architectural aspects of the building.

It is not all bad. The cast-iron roofs project has been extraordinarily successful. It is on time and on budget. It is a massively impressive project. It has basically kept two companies in the north of England afloat over the last few years. The encaustic tiles project has been very successful as well. It is great to see the floors now being sorted out. It is also quite interesting to see people in the shop buying the old encaustic tiles that have been lifted up, thereby bringing a little bit of income back into the Palace as well. They are quite good Christmas presents, Mr Howarth. If you feel like buying one, you can buy me one.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): It is very kind of the hon. Gentleman to give me such advice.

Chris Bryant: All of us on the Committee have a fundamental worry that sometimes, because we have to meet Government pay scales and agreed limits, we end up paying for a lot of consultancy advice. That ends up creating more expense, but because it is sort of off the books, or is not accounted in the same way, somehow it meets some kind of Government requirement. I think this is a false economy. We are desperate to do whatever we can to ensure that we do not continue wasting taxpayers' money in that way.

I should add that we are spending £88.8 million in the capital element of the administration estimate on the northern estate programme. It has been difficult to know when this money will be spent. That is one reason why it has been difficult to get the finances precisely right this year, because we did not know when we would be starting the work. If political decision-making causes delays, it adds to the cost. If the Minister has any role in

making sure that key decisions come at the right time, and that we are not putting off votes, for instance—if she can chivvy the Leader of the House, or whoever makes such decisions—it would be enormously helpful to the finances of Parliament.

The Members estimate relates to Short money, which is available to make sure that Opposition parties can do their job properly. I am glad we won the battle a few years ago to make sure that is adequate. It also pays for the Deputy Speakers' salaries and for the Exchequer elements of contributions to the pensions fund. It stands at £17.7 million, which is a little bit up from £17.1 million previously.

I will finish with a few general points. We on the Committee feel that we do not manage many of these processes well yet, so there is work to do. One issue about the Elizabeth tower, which I have already referred to, was that not enough investigative work was done before we started to let the contract. We then found out that the cables were not in the place that all the maps said they were, which incurred significant extra cost. We were also probably too optimistic about what it was going to cost. We now have a much better estimate of our optimism bias, although I have a slight worry that if we are too pessimistic, that will simply be an excuse for spending more money than we needed to in the first place. It is a difficult balancing act.

Another issue was that, in the end, the contract for the Elizabeth tower was let when there was no Parliament. Everybody ran around asking, "Who made the decision?", but the truth is that it was taken somewhere between the Commission, which still existed because it is a statutory body, the Treasury, the Leader of the House and the accounting officer, who is the Clerk of the House. We need to have much greater continuity when we have general elections. To not have a Finance Committee for the best part of six months is a mistake. There is a strong argument for putting the Finance Committee on a statutory footing, as the Commission is, so it can still exist even when there is no Parliament, because financial decisions still have to be made.

Mark Tami: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; I have served on the Finance Committee and the Administration Committee. We sometimes concentrate on small items that cost very little, and scrutinise them to the nth degree, yet no one is quite sure who actually signed off a massive project.

Chris Bryant: Yes; I never want to have the debate on whether we should put 3p or 5p on the price of a cup of tea ever again.

Mr Betts: What is my hon. Friend's view?

Chris Bryant: I am led by the Committee. It is a serious point that we sometimes obsess about small amounts of money, but, for example, it looks as if the fire safety budget will have gone from £90 million to £160 million, and it is perfectly legitimate to ask who made that decision and at what point a decision was made by a Committee of the House or by the accounting officer. If we cannot match responsibility and accountability, there is a real danger that financial mistakes will be made and significant amounts of money will go in the wrong direction.

[Chris Bryant]

I have already made the point, but I want to labour it, that we are too bound by Government pay scales. That has made it difficult to pay the right price to get the job done in one of the most complicated and difficult buildings and in the context of the most complicated and difficult political decision-making processes. Many staff who work here are admirable—they dedicate themselves to their task as much as any Member of Parliament and work many hours beyond what they are required to do—but, all too often, we end up bringing in experts on consultancy rates and paying more than we need to simply because we are trying to meet the Treasury's rules. That is a mistake.

I worry that the building swamps the work financially. We are talking about spending dramatic amounts of money on the building, but what is really important here is the scrutiny work that we do, the public coming to understand how we do our democratic business and the engagement with the public. There are major projects that should be slanted much more towards the public.

A classic instance is that, of late, people have regularly queued for an hour or two hours—often standing in the pouring rain—to get into the building to watch democracy in action. We simply have to do better on such projects. I have heard lots of different explanations. Sometimes I am told that it is because one of the security arches is not working, or that people are working to rule because they are fed up with decisions that have been made elsewhere in the Palace—who knows? All I know is that the public feel they are getting a pretty rum deal. They are often late for meetings that they are coming to in Parliament. This should be an open place, not one that is almost impossible to get into.

Mark Tami: I certainly agree. After many years of using the Palace, some organisations are questioning whether they will carry on, because of the inability to get people in. After restoration and renewal, we are talking about doubling the number of people who come here, but there is no point having ambitious targets if we cannot get people in safely and more quickly.

Chris Bryant: As always, my right hon. Friend makes my point better than me, so I am grateful.

Finally, the structure is not quite right. It has been some time since the Commission was put on a statutory basis after the Straw review. The Leader of the House is keen to look at having the Commission elected, which I support; I would have the whole Commission fully elected to do a job. It would then function more like a traditional Select Committee and more like a team. That would be a good way to go forward, rather than the process we have now, in which all the members of the Commission are appointed by their respective party leaders, and then there are two external members, who are often the most informed and independently-minded on all the financial aspects but, bizarrely, are not allowed to vote. That system needs to change.

I have already said “finally”, but I will say it again: finally, if anything I have said has given the impression that I am not respectful of the Clerks or the people who work for the Committee, that would be a complete mistake. Myfanwy Barrett is a wonderful woman who has done a sterling job for many years. It is an enormous

sadness to us that she is leaving—but who knows, maybe we will be buying in her consultancy advice later at a much greater price.

Mark Tami: Fiona Channon, who I have dealt with for many years about offices, is also leaving and going to the House of Lords, which will be a great loss to the Commons.

Chris Bryant: I do not want to turn the debate into the Oscars, but I also thank Philip Collins, who has done a magnificent job for us, and Rob Cope, who is our Committee Clerk.

We have done things differently in the last few months. We are keen to make sure that the Commission regularly hears our voice before it makes decisions about key financial matters. In the end, we are spending taxpayers' money and we should do it better.

9.58 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) on clearly putting forward the case and on bringing the report to the Chamber. We are deeply indebted to him for his knowledge and interest in the House, and for his delivery of speeches. The low number of hon. Members present does not reflect the importance of the debate or of the issue. This is not the most dynamic subject, but it keeps the wheels turning, so we need to at least record our support for what has been proposed. I also put on the record my thanks to every member of the Finance Committee for the tremendous work they have done to produce the report.

I will discuss a few issues that I feel are important, one of which is security. I want to reflect on my own offices and the budget for them, including for security. For a number of years—since 1985 and for two years after I became a Member of Parliament—I ran my own business, and somewhat successfully, in that I made my tax returns and paid my tax every year. It was therefore a successful business. It also paid for my holidays and my mortgage over the years. I fully understand the importance of balancing the books. I also understand that we cannot plan for everything, and the hon. Gentleman's introductory comments about the report clearly illustrated that things crop up. The courtyard is one example that he referred to, whereby the costs for one thing took up the money that was supposed to look after five, so again we see the problems that occur.

I have been made aware by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority that my staff would benefit from greater security measures in my constituency office, and I was also informed that the costs for that would be met from an additional budget. How it was to be done was very clear. If every MP was faced with a scenario in which they had to implement new security measures, the cost would be great indeed.

I have discussed with my staff which measures we believe to be necessary, and which can be resolved by small changes that make a big difference in increasing safety levels in the office and in operating a clear zero-tolerance policy on verbal abuse of staff. However, most of my staff are ladies and are unafraid of anybody and stand up for themselves. I might be their boss, but I know my place in life and although I give them instructions

about what to do, they tell me what they think. There is nothing wrong with that; there is a good, fair and clear exchange on how things are. However, it is my responsibility to address any safety concerns and over the years I have tried to do that; indeed, I believe that I have done that to their satisfaction.

How much more was that the case for this place in dealing with the breach of Westminster Bridge, which was a direct attack on Parliament and which the hon. Member for Rhondda mentioned? We all know that; the attack is clear in the minds of those of us who sat imprisoned in the main Chamber during that time. I will advocate day and night for resources for security to ensure that this place is as safe as is possible, not simply for us as MPs but for every staff member in this House, who turn the wheels and ensure that this House operates at a very high level.

For that reason, I believe we must be fully accountable for, and transparent in, expenditure, and the general public must be made to understand that the money to run the parliamentary estate is not spent on giving us all our own butler. The report says:

“The Administration Estimate funds expenditure arising from the general administration of the House of Commons and activities undertaken to meet Parliament’s objectives and associated commercial activities. This includes, for example, the cost of House staff, office accommodation in Westminster, running and maintaining the Parliamentary estate, printing, security, broadcasting, IT and catering.”

All those activities turn the wheels and make this House successful. However, we must be able to address security issues as well.

The other issue I will raise is the House’s decision to support the comprehensive restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster, which has resulted in a significant ramping-up of activity over the course of the year. Along with the resource implications of other capital projects, such as the northern estate programme, it has resulted in a net increase of £85.5 million on the 2019-20 baseline that was agreed last year.

We understand the issues, but sometimes we are stuck betwixt two things: improving the House and making sure that it does not decay further, while at the same time making sure that we can still operate in it. That is the big question that the Members of this House have to answer.

The fire doors are an example. I met a lady this morning at nine o’clock for an interview that I was doing. We went through the fire doors and she said, “When did these come into place?” The hon. Member for Rhondda referred to them as well. They are not the most attractive, to be honest, but they are effective; they have a job to do and they clearly do it. The safety of those in this House is very important. The House of Commons is crumbling in parts, including its stonework, plumbing, electrics and much else, but at the same time we must ensure that we can continue to operate in this House.

If we are to save this wonderful piece of history, and my opinion is that we must secure this massive attraction and physical bastion of democracy—or at least that was my opinion until last night’s antics, which have thrown everything into question about whether we are truly democratic in this House. However, that is not the debate for today—although what happened last night

does annoy every one of us, and if people are not annoyed, there is something wrong. That is all I can say. However, that is another debate for another time.

It is my belief that we should withhold the voluntary divorce payment to Europe and take care of our own pressing needs in this place. Again, that is just my suggestion for this debate and how I feel.

Many others in this House feel the same way. I did not sit on the Committee but, as Members will know, I take an interest in the things that happen in this House. I take an interest in the report that the hon. Member for Rhondda has put forward and I am also interested in all the thoughts and ideas put forward by all the members of the Committee.

To conclude, I support this report and its recommendations, as well as the thought and effort that went into bringing it forward. There is a need for enough funds for it to be implemented, but there must also be enough funds to ensure that all of us, at every level and in every Department in this House, economise in every way, when that is possible. I am an Ulster Scot. Some people say that every pound is a prisoner. Maybe it is; I do not know, but we are thrifty. We are careful about how we spend our money. When it comes to looking after the money for this place, we must economise where possible, and do what we expect everyone out there to do, who are doing it every day—stretch the pound until it squeals.

10.6 am

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): As always, Mr Howarth, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I came to Westminster Hall today hoping to be presented with a long-service award; I think that I have been on the Finance Committee since the 2005 Parliament. The hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), who is not here today, has been an assiduous member of that Committee and I think that he has been on it, too, for most of that time. Collectively, we have quite a good memory as to how things used to happen, and I will come back to that in a minute.

It is absolutely right that we should have this debate. As said by the Chair of the Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), there has been a gap in having a debate to which all Members can contribute. Next year, we can hopefully go back to having the debate on the Floor of the House, with an amendable motion, hopefully to get more interest from colleagues. That is where we set off and it would be helpful again in the future. The problems around renovation and restoration, including the decision making on it and the complexity that programme has introduced to the budget process, have somewhat handicapped us this year, but I hope we can get back to that arrangement in the future.

I also echo what the Chair of the Committee said when he asked why we need two estimates. When Members estimates dealt with all Members’ expenditure—their expenses, as they are often referred to—one could perhaps understand why there was a need for two estimates. Now, however, that work is carried out by IPSA and the Members estimate is such a small amount that it needs to be absorbed, so that we can get away from the need for two separate sets of accounts.

[Mr Clive Betts]

The Chair has also gone through some of the issues that the Committee has been dealing with, but thinking back to when I joined the Committee in the 2005 to 2010 Parliament, what is remarkable now is that we actually have a budget. Believe it or not, we did not have one then. If I said that the finances of the House were run worse than those of the most inefficient district council, I would be exaggerating—I would say the most inefficient town council. It was that bad.

Money got spent, nobody properly accounted for it and there was no proper monitoring. What we have now is a budget agreed each year, which is clear. We monitor against the budget; we have a forward plan; we have a framework for the budget, including criteria in which we lay down what is acceptable in terms of increases for future years, based on inflation, plus any exemptions that are brought forward, such as the Brexit Committee, increased scrutiny or security; and we have an efficiency programme as well.

There have also been efforts to raise extra income, which have been successful in many respects, through catering. We have also tried to bear down on costs. I think that we will have the lowest ever subsidy for catering this year and that is entirely reasonable. We put some subsidy in, because the catering by and large is used by the staff who work in this place, and any reasonable and responsible employer would provide that degree of subsidy for people who do not have a choice about where they eat, particularly at lunchtime.

We should recognise that all those things are a great improvement. By and large, I am pretty comfortable that we are in a good place with the revenue budget. There will be arguments, challenges and disagreements about particular amounts of money, the exemptions to expenditure control and whether efficiencies are going quickly enough, and it is absolutely right that we bear down and put extra pressure on those issues. By and large, however, I think we are in a reasonable place, and can justifiably say, and be content with the fact, that the budget is well managed and scrutinised.

On the capital programme, the situation is not quite as rosy. We can go through a number of the examples that have been highlighted. All the time, we have the challenge of getting to grips with exactly what is going on with some major projects. Hopefully, we now have systems in place that are learning lessons from past mistakes, but we can go around and see the evidence, can't we? At some stage, there is a story to be told about the Portcullis House roof. I have always said that if someone wanted a page in *The Mail on Sunday* on that roof, they would probably get at least two pages and a colour supplement to match. It is not right yet, is it? It will be even more interesting when we come to replace it. How will it be replaced? It needs replacing at some point. That fundamental issue was not thought of when the roof was designed and constructed. No one here now is to blame, but there are clearly lessons to be learned.

On the Elizabeth Tower, hopefully lessons are being learned. Ultimately, the work probably needed to be done. It is probably the right project, and what is being done now is value for money, but how we got here is not a good example. We have the fire safety work. Again, it needed to be done, but how we got to the sum is not a

good example of financial control. There are the problems with the stonework, and the contracts that have now been suspended, following all the difficulties that have been experienced. Then there is the contract for the sprinkler systems that went with the fire safety. There, again, is a story about how a project was designed and controlled. It does not make happy reading. There are lessons to be learned.

On the other side, we simply must accept that there will always be difficulties and challenges when dealing with this type of building. The very fact that every time we set off on a project it is almost certainly a one-off—it will not have been done for many years, and hundreds in some cases—and we will find things we did not expect. The unexpected will always happen. We are in a listed historic building with lots of construction workers around, and Members of Parliament and the public want security. It will never be easy to do construction work in this place. That is a reality, so it will probably never be possible to absolutely nail down the cost of a project right at the beginning and to know where we will get to at the end. We will find new issues and challenges and it will be difficult, but there are lessons we must learn, and be shown to learn, if we are to retain the confidence that public money is being properly spent.

I echo the comments of the Chair of the Finance Committee about the issue of paying staff properly for this sort of work—I have gone on about it ad nauseam, I know. It is a problem. The reality is that in certain areas—construction and IT systems—we are competing with the private sector in London. There is great pressure for those services and we end up bringing in contractors and agency staff and paying more than we would if we appointed people to the House service. In the end, it is a matter of being more flexible about the rules within which we have to operate, regarding the comparison between our pay grades and those of the civil service. That is a challenge we must recognise, and the unions have brought it to our attention. That is not in any way to denigrate the other people who work in the House—exactly the opposite. The Chair of the Finance Committee is absolutely right that we should give them great credit for the service they give us, right across the field, and for their dedication to working for the House, for us and for democracy. That should be put on record.

There have been comments about R and R and the northern estate and I will not go into what has already been said, but I am concerned about the considerable complications of the shadow R and R arrangements. The little draft diagrams about decision making under the arrangements are very challenging indeed. I also sit on the Members Estimate Audit Committee, and the other day I asked the National Audit Office whether, if there were a problem with the shadow R and R arrangements, it could be certain, as our auditor, of identifying where responsibility and accountability lay. I think it would be hard pushed to do that. It has gone away to consider it, but it is a worry, and we are heading for problems if we set up a system in which we cannot point with absolute certainty to where decisions are made and accountability rests. Everyone always blames everyone else when something goes wrong, so there is a challenge there that we ought to think about. I do not know how to get around it, because until we get to the final stage of the statutory arrangements it is very

difficult indeed, but the shorter the period of shadow arrangement the better, and the less chance of things going wrong.

I have two final points. I first thank the Chair of the Finance Committee for how he has chaired the Committee this year. We perhaps set off with a different idea of who the Chair should be, but I nevertheless thank him for the inclusive way in which he has run the Committee. We have worked together to address some of the issues and I put on record my thanks to him. Also, the Chair rightly mentioned Myfanwy Barrett, who is leaving us. I have worked with her with various hats on, on the Finance Committee, as a pension trustee on the House of Commons Members' fund, and on the Audit Committee, and she appears at all these meetings to give us very appropriate and sound advice. I talked initially about how we used to do finance in this place and how we now have proper systems in place, and much of the credit for that goes to Myfanwy. She has changed the system and brought us into line, with proper arrangements with which appropriately to run the finances of this place. We can all be pleased about that. I am sorry she is going, but I wish her well and thank her for what she has done for us. No doubt there will be opportunities to thank her again in Committee, but this is probably the only chance we will get in the wider forum of Parliament, so I would like to put that on record.

10.17 am

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure, as ever, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth.

I suspect that members of the Finance Committee will be wondering, "Who on earth is this guy? He isn't the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts". I bring the apologies of my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), who had hoped to be here but has had to remain in Scotland due to family illness. I am sure that I speak on behalf of all of us here in Westminster when I wish him well.

When I spoke to my hon. Friend last night, he said he was grateful to me for taking on this speaking commitment about "one of the driest Committees in the House", but I have to say that having sat through the debate, I have often found myself saying, "Be still my beating heart". I sit on the Procedure Committee, so this is positively exciting—I might speak to my chief Whip to see whether I can get a swap. In all honesty, I am grateful to the Finance Committee for its report, which was very illuminating at 1 o'clock this morning when I read it. I will touch on that in a moment.

The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) is absolutely right about the need to be diligent about how we spend taxpayers' money, and that the scrutiny of the process in the past has been less than satisfactory. Wearing my Procedure Committee hat, I know that there are issues with how Committees are set up—particularly after general elections, when the scrutiny is not there. The public look to us, as Members of Parliament, to lead that scrutiny. It takes several months at a time to get Committees up and running, and that is a very different context from that of the Finance Committee. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for putting that on the record.

The hon. Gentleman was also absolutely right to pay tribute to the Clerks and the House staff, who do a magnificent job—I know he intended to do that, although

it came towards the end of his speech. I certainly felt that yesterday, when watching the chief Clerk chairing what was a very volatile day. We really do get our money's worth out of those guys. The hon. Gentleman was right to place that on the record.

I shall sum up the contributions. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about security and the importance of looking after our staff, not just in our constituency offices but here in the Palace—the staff here are the real heroes of the House. He went on to speak about restoration and renewal, which I will touch on, and he said that perhaps some of the issues could be solved if we withheld our payment from Europe. I am not necessarily sure he will find agreement from me on that.

I was not aware that the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) had been on the Committee since 2005. If my heart is beating very fast from just one debate, goodness knows what that amount of time serving on the Committee does for the soul. The hon. Gentleman spoke about the importance of learning from past mistakes, and had some fairly sage advice in regard to Portcullis House.

That brings me nicely to my own contributions to the debate. I have looked at the front page of the report and seen the draft estimates, or the financial plan to 2022-23. As a Scottish National party Member of Parliament, I make no apology for not intending to be here in 2023. That is not because I plan to lose my seat; it is because the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) and I will be surplus to requirements, because Scotland will be an independent country and we will not need Members of Parliament down here. Perhaps that would be a good way of saving money.

The Minister is in her place; I have a standing engagement with her on Wednesday mornings, as the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) is trying valiantly to bring through a Bill that would stop the Government from reducing the number of Members from 650 to 600. It is interesting that the report talks about increased scrutiny throughout, whereas the Government are trying to reduce that scrutiny. Page 10 talks about what is probably the biggest elephant in the room: the decision to leave the European Union—well, it is not an elephant in the room, because we are all talking about it. We can clearly see that the implementation of that decision has an impact on the budgets in the report.

There are certain things for which the Scottish National party would clearly support increased budgets, some of which I have touched on, including security and perhaps the independent grievance process. However, I am accountable to my constituents back home, and I find myself talking to them about this place and the eye-watering sums being committed to restoration and renewal. The hon. Member for Rhondda spoke about building a replica Chamber; the fact that we are building a Chamber that looks exactly the same as the current one when that Chamber is so unfit for purpose sends a clear signal to ordinary members of the public.

We are recreating Division Lobbies that we can troop through. People regularly come to this place on tours, and I explain to them how we conduct our votes, walking through corridors—I mean, what an absolute waste of time! It is great that we have invested in the education centre, but the ironic thing is that when the children there cast their votes, they do so using an

[David Linden]

electronic keypad. How much time is wasted by the fact that we have Clerks sitting in the House for numerous votes as we walk around and around?

Chris Bryant: I sympathise with some of the arguments that the hon. Gentleman is making, particularly because at the moment, as I understand it, one in 10 Division lists is wrong. The new system is more difficult to use than the old paper system, although I am not arguing in favour of going back to the paper system. I like us gathering in the Lobbies, as it means we have an opportunity to see Ministers and all the rest, but by now we should be able to use our thumbs or our fingerprints to vote in the Division Lobbies, as we do for our phones, and still be counted through by the Tellers.

David Linden: I have a huge admiration for the hon. Gentleman. He is one of the great custodians of the traditions of this House, and there is a place for respecting those. He has spoken about being in the Lobbies with Ministers as a great thing, but I can think of probably only one occasion when I have been in a Lobby with Ministers. As an Opposition MP, it makes not a jot of difference to me, because I am seldom in a Lobby with a Government Minister.

We have to think about how we are spending money. There has been some chat about the new fire doors that have been put in place; I managed to provoke a degree of ridicule—based on my part, largely—a couple of months ago when I had an interaction with the Chair of the Administration Committee, the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), who could not understand what I was saying. The point I was making was about disability access in this place.

We have just spent what was presumably a lot of money on upstanding fire alarms. I gather that the reason for that is the wiring in this place, but now a person cannot turn a corner in the main Palace because of these obstructive upstanding fire alarms. In one respect, we send strong signals about this place being fine for somebody with a disability, yet because we are trying to adhere to the customs of this place we have those ridiculous, massive alarms, which I suspect came at great cost.

I was speaking about restoration and renewal. I make no apology for the fact that I would be quite happy to see us decanted to a sports centre in Milton Keynes, although I know that, for some people, being on the banks of the Thames and in the big House of Commons is a status symbol.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is talking about decanting to a sports centre in Milton Keynes. Would he be happy with decanting the Scottish Parliament to a sports centre in Glasgow or Perth? Of course, the construction of that building went 10 times over its planned budget. Rather than disrespecting the Parliament of our country—which it still is, unless the hon. Gentleman gets his way—he should focus on scrutiny, to make sure money is spent in the right way so that this Parliament is the most accessible Parliament for all the peoples of the United Kingdom.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. I think it is best if we stick to the terms of the motion.

David Linden: I am very happy to stick to your guidance, Mr Howarth, and will not take any gratification from having managed to provoke a PPS into speaking from the Back Benches. The reality is that I would be happy for us to meet in Glasgow, Edinburgh or Liverpool. The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire is fond of saying that this is the United Kingdom Parliament, but it seems to me that we are very London-centric, and some of these cost issues arise because we are so determined to be in the absolute centre of London.

I have already mentioned security issues; the hon. Member for Rhondda touched on some concerns, and I would echo some of them. There is clearly a focus on making sure that our security is very strong. I probably feel most secure when I am here in the Palace of Westminster; I feel a lot less secure when I am sitting in Baillieston library—that is not necessarily concern for my security, but for that of the staff who are with me. I am very happy to endorse the security budget.

I did not intend to speak for nine or 10 minutes, but it is possible to go down a rabbit warren on this subject, and it does get quite interesting. I will close by saying that at a time when austerity is not over, and our constituents are struggling with austerity, we need to be mindful about the decisions we make. As a fairly new Member of this House, I am not always convinced that we get value for money. Nevertheless, in all sincerity, I pay tribute to the Finance Committee for carrying out a job that I am sure can be very dry, but is none the less very important.

10.27 am

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. Much like the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), I came rather late to the honour of responding to this debate, and found myself at a late hour on Monday evening doing something completely different than I had planned. However, like him, I have found the debate fascinating, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for leading it.

At the outset, I will highlight some areas of success. We often talk about areas of failure when we talk about such topics, but there have been areas of success over the last few years. However, I will first pick up on an area of great concern: the absence of a Finance Committee over a six-month period during an election period. I think that is something that we would like to hear about from the Minister.

As a lifelong NHS bureaucrat, I have had to come to some documents quite late in time. Yesterday evening, when I was given the report, I first turned to the appendix to see whether anything was hidden in there. True to form, in the planning for 2019-20 on page 11, in the high-level planning assumptions, the first thing I read was this:

“The political temperature is high and this may spill over into other areas”.

I trust that the Minister will be able to outline to us how she sees that working over the next couple of years.

I welcome the opportunity to debate these estimates, because as I said, I spent my previous life as an NHS manager, and I am also a former member of the Public Accounts Committee. In our public services and on the Public Accounts Committee, we expect public bodies to

behave to the highest standards. We expect them to demonstrate good financial planning, monitoring and accountability, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda said, also to demonstrate value for money. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) is a local government expert. Across the land, we expect our councils to demonstrate value for money, so it is imperative that we do so in this place.

We know that over the next few years Parliament faces a number of significant policy matters and events that will have a bearing on the budget. They include Brexit, restoration and renewal, the refurbishment of the northern estate, the review of the parliamentary archives accommodation, the implementation of the digital strategy, the significant increase in the employers' pension contribution, pay and reward strategy beyond the current pay deal, enhancing security around the parliamentary estate, and developing cyber-security and technology infrastructure. It is quite a list.

The House debated and voted on restoration and renewal in January, and we would all agree that the Palace of Westminster is in need of restoration and renewal and that a number of issues need to be resolved. We have agreed the decant ahead of the refurbishment work and the work going on with the sponsor body, as we heard earlier. Anyone who has visited the basements and the full extent of this place will know how urgent that work is. A couple of years ago, I had the great pleasure of visiting to look at those places. The conditions in which we are expecting people to operate to service this place and make it work are unacceptable. It is vital that that work continues.

Anyone who knows the history of when Mr Barry and Mr Pugin were doing the original work on this place will know that restoration and renewal is a huge project for the country that will elicit great interest, and it needs to be done properly. We have a massive opportunity for skills development, for apprenticeships, for good employment practices and for reviving great skills that have been lost in this country. We need to be an exemplar not only for the country, but for the world in how the work can be done to make this Parliament fit for the 21st and 22nd century, although we may lose the hon. Member for Glasgow East and his colleagues. Jobs and skills can be developed in Bristol, the Rhondda, Sheffield, Northern Ireland and Scotland. There is a massive opportunity for our country, and I would like to see us do that.

Chris Bryant: We have not discussed this important point in our Committee—it is important for the R and R project—but there will be an enormous shortage of staff, in particular to do some of the craft functions that will be needed around the building. We should be setting up parliamentary building apprenticeships in large numbers and ensuring that there are academies across the country so that every different constituency in the land has some investment in the restoration and renewal project.

Karin Smyth: I am grateful for that intervention. After I visited a couple of years ago, I did a report in my local newspaper on that very subject. There is great interest in our cities, regions and rural areas in some of the skills that have been lost. We can see when we visit those facilities—I remember seeing it in Sheffield—that

in the past people could demonstrate pride in their work and imprint that in this place. It would be magnificent to see young people and older people throughout the country develop those skills and then bring them here to do that work, and there is great interest in that. It is about how we manage that positively but also, critically, demonstrate that we are doing so on a good cost basis and with value for money.

Security and access to the estate are important. Changes to the estate as a result of restoration and renewal and the northern estate programme will require additional resources and security measures. We all have strong memories of the March 2017 attack. A number of security projects have arisen from the Murphy review following that attack. We note that that work is due to be completed by summer 2021, but cyber-security remains a high risk. We know that from last week. The House will continue to face cost pressures from that, but security is critical to the work we do here.

The medium-term financial plan should enable the House service to support Parliament, deliver our specific objectives and demonstrate how the service will become increasingly effective and efficient over time. The strategy is currently being refreshed and the three existing strategic objectives are expected to be expanded to four: facilitating effective scrutiny and debate, involving and inspiring the public, securing Parliament's future, and valuing every person. Those are important objectives.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is talking about an important subject, and it is important that it is recorded in the debate. The traditions, history and procedures we have in the House are perhaps unique to this place, but they have been the inspiration for many other democracies across the world. I think the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) referred to that. It is so important that we retain those things in the House. We are a modern society, but we should also keep our traditions for democracies across the whole world.

Karin Smyth: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that contribution. I enjoy the traditions, and I agree in large part that they are important, but the evolution of new traditions is also important. I have visited the Scottish Parliament building and the Welsh Assembly this year. I have also been to Stormont twice. It was fairly quiet, but the building is magnificent, as are the others. I take on board the issue about cost, but we should be evolving by learning from all parts of the United Kingdom about how they are operating in a more modern setting. I have heard my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda talk about the learning from Parliaments across the world. There has to be a way of preserving some of those traditions while making them work for the later part of the 21st century and into the 22nd century, which none of us will be here for. I hope we can bequeath something good to those who follow.

The investment plan sets out the bicameral plans for investment in strategic programmes, estates and digital. As we have heard, the bulk of that work is split into three areas: work on the Elizabeth Tower and fire safety, which is something we all would welcome; work on the northern estate; and the restoration and renewal programme, which we have talked about. I echo the comments made previously. It is important that that work is transparent and that we understand how it is happening. I am

[Karin Smyth]

slightly alarmed to hear some of the comments about how projects are managed and the difficulty the Committee has had in following some of the decision making and the finances. These are substantial projects and we need to be assured that they are being well planned and monitored and are value for money. I agree that discussion at least annually is valuable. I would be interested to hear from the Minister why that could not happen.

On the Public Accounts Committee, we visited the Major Projects Authority, which is part of the Cabinet Office, as the Minister will be well aware. The learning and understanding of how to manage major projects is great within parts of government. There needs to be a way of taking the learning from places such as the Major Projects Authority and the work going on in the Cabinet Office and making it applicable to the work of this place. It is not acceptable that we ask other people, other public bodies and spenders of taxpayers' money to operate in one way and then we operate in another. Although I am late to it, I am slightly alarmed that that does not seem to be happening. I echo what my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East said about looking at the role of the National Audit Office. Its reports on decision making and accountability are very clear and easy to follow. If the NAO cannot find its way through it, something is clearly wrong.

In concluding, I thank all the staff who are involved in all aspects of the work to make this place operate. I thank members of the Finance Committee for publishing this report, for the important work they do behind the scenes, which most of us perhaps do not see, and for their diligence in bringing that work before us this morning. The Opposition support the recommendations of the Finance Committee and welcome the chance to debate and scrutinise this report.

10.38 am

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): I am sure that this cannot make up the full set of all those who were reading this report late last night in preparation for this morning's debate. I thank hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions today, and I am pleased to be here to participate in this important debate on the House of Commons financial plan and draft estimates.

I apologise straight away that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House is not here. By rights, she should be responding to this debate. I am happy to be here in her place, and I know she spoke last week to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), the Chair of the Finance Committee, to explain that she would not be able to be here today. She would like me to convey her apologies again this morning. She will be following the debate very closely through *Hansard*, and I will ensure that key points are brought to her attention.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this Westminster Hall debate. I pay tribute to his hard work in chairing the Finance Committee and his dedication to the work on the finances for this place. I also thank him for his work with the Government in the cross-cutting parts of the draft estimates where work needs to be done in conjunction with my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House. As a member of the House of

Commons Commission, she has asked me to thank the Finance Committee for its report, which represents the Committee's provisional advice to the Commission, and the Members Estimate Committee for the 2019-20 to 2022-23 medium-term financial plan and the 2019-20 Administration and Members estimates. I am absolutely sure that she and all other members of the Commission and of the Estimate Committee will want carefully to consider the points made by Members today. I am also sure that they will want to carefully consider the thanks that have been expressed to the staff of the Committee and connected teams.

The Government continue to support a well-run House of Commons and share its drive to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the service. A high-quality service in support of Members' duties is integral to the success and strength of our democracy and supporting processes. It is vital that all of us—Members and their staff, staff of the House, and the public—see that this House is committed to the delivery of a service that is both first class and excellent value for money. Today's debate invites the House to consider those issues.

The purpose of the debate is to give Members the opportunity to comment on the advice before it is finalised, as the hon. Member for Rhondda set out in his opening statement. This annual debate on the draft estimates began in the previous Parliament and took place in 2012, 2013 and 2014 in the main Chamber: a point made by the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts). It subsequently fell into abeyance and so this is the first debate of its type in this Parliament. I know that the Chair of the Finance Committee submitted this as a Backbench Business debate, so we are here in Westminster Hall, but I hear the point about how it ought to be held in the Chamber. Perhaps that can be considered for the future. The fact that we are having this debate is to be welcomed because it allows the issues to be properly looked at in addition to the work of the Committees involved.

I want to thank the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), who spoke on behalf of the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), and the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Sheffield South East for their contributions, in addition to the Chair of the Committee for setting out the issues.

A question was asked about why the two estimates are separate. It derives from legislation, so it could be regarded as a shared responsibility between the House and the Executive. It was argued that the two estimates could be combined, and there might be value in doing so. I understand that trying to merge them was the subject of a private Member's Bill in 2016, when points were made on both sides of the argument. However, there was a desire from the Treasury to be able to continue to offer the right level of scrutiny and support to the House of Commons to be able to manage the expenditure, which would not be possible if the two estimates were merged. I am happy to ask colleagues to look further at those issues, which are not in my current brief.

Mr Betts: How and to where will the Minister report back? It seems nonsensical. I cannot see why scrutiny should be any weaker if there is one estimate rather than two.

Chloe Smith: Indeed. I shall ask my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House to come back to the Chair of the Committee on that point so that it can be made clear.

On the question about the statutory footing of the Finance Committee compared with that which the House of Commons Commission enjoys, the Commission's statutory footing gives it the authority that it needs to make the decisions that we ask of it, whereas the Finance and Administration Committees are advisory bodies. Clearly, there would need to be some consultation across the House to be able properly to scope such a decision to put those two advisory bodies on to a statutory footing. I know that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House is keen to see a more democratic governance structure, which goes back to a point that was also made during the debate. I think she will listen carefully to the points made today and will wish to come back to the Chair of the Committee on that point about the statutory footing.

Chris Bryant: I kind of get that the Finance Committee is advisory, as is the Administration Committee, but the only gritty examination of the finances is done by my Committee. I previously sat on the Commission and it simply does not have the time to devote to finances because it deals with hundreds of other issues, so it would be in our long-term interests to change that pattern. Also indicative is the fact that not a single member of the Commission is here today. I have no beef with either the shadow Leader of the House or the Leader of the House. I know they are busy in shadow Cabinet and Government Cabinet. I fully understand that, but it is not great when not a single member of the Commission is here.

Chloe Smith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for putting those points on the record today. It is helpful that this debate has taken place so that that can be done. I will absolutely make sure that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House responds and discusses the issues with him so that they get proper scrutiny.

On the question of how frequently the Committee has been able to meet and how frequently the debate has been able to take place, there is a general point about how quickly Select Committees can be set up in any new Parliament, and of course the Government wish to see that done as quickly as possible and would support promptness in that setting up. Again, I shall ask my right hon. Friend to look at that point.

There are two remaining points to deal with. One is that of Government pay scales being too restrictive to allow work to be done properly. I suspect that that sits in the discussions that need to take place on restoration and renewal rather than in this debate. Once again I will ensure that my right hon. Friend hears what has been said today. As a general point on the pay scales, they exist to try to get consistency across the public sector and value for money for the taxpayer, which are well understood and respected points. However, I hear what has been said today about the specialisms sometimes required in the work that needs to be done within restoration and renewal.

The hon. Member for Bristol South was very kind to acknowledge the good work done by the Major Projects Authority. I thank her for that and will pass it on to

colleagues in my Department. She suggested that expertise could be shared and I will be happy to see what can be done on that.

On some other areas more generally that I know the Leader of the House would want me to touch on, the first is restoration and renewal. The Finance Committee's report explains that the primary reason for the difference between this year's and last year's MTFP is because of the House's decision earlier this year to support comprehensive restoration and renewal of the Palace. I know that the Leader of the House has been determined to get on with that job, and the Government published the draft Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill in October, to give effect to the resolutions passed earlier this year.

The Bill will facilitate Parliament's decision to set up a sponsor board and delivery authority to progress the comprehensive programme of works. It has been developed in close consultation with the House authorities and will, I hope, put in place the rigorous and transparent governance structure that we need to drive that work forward, while ensuring that we focus on value for money for the taxpayer. There cannot be a blank cheque for the work; the Government and Parliament agree that it must represent good value for money. We look forward to the report from the Joint Committee that is currently considering the draft Bill.

Following the work taken forward on a cross-party basis and led by the Leader of the House on bullying and harassment, the Government strongly welcome the provisions made, which are represented in the report, to support the introduction of the new independent complaints and grievance scheme. That is important to ensure better training, new human resources support and, crucially, the two new independent helplines and investigative services that underpin the new behaviour code. That is essential to ensure that we are supporting those who experience bullying or harassment, and to change the culture here in Westminster for the good, and for good.

I thank colleagues who have contributed to the debate, and emphasise just how useful it is for members of the commission and the Members Estimate Committee. Present or otherwise, I am sure that they will look at the debate carefully in *Hansard*. We can all agree that ensuring responsible and sustainable delivery of services for the House, while allowing for efficiency and value for money, is essential. I again thank the hon. Member for Rhondda, and I will ensure, as I have already undertaken, that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House is made aware of today's contributions.

10.51 am

Chris Bryant: I am grateful to all hon. Members who have contributed. I will respond to a few points, but first I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts); since my back was patted, I want to pat his too. The Finance Committee is not necessarily the Committee that one expects to join when one arrives in Parliament, but ensuring that we properly scrutinise our finances is one of the most important things that we do as MPs. It is not something that the House of Lords can do; we are there to do it, and we are therefore an important Committee. I am grateful for the longevity of my hon. Friend's service. That always makes him grimace, because he thinks that I am paying tribute to him beyond the grave.

Mr Betts: Not quite.

Chris Bryant: No, not quite. Anyway, I am grateful.

I will respond to some of the earlier comments about R&R, or whether we should value this building or go off to a park in Milton Keynes—people always choose Milton Keynes. The problem with the argument for moving out of here and going somewhere else entirely is that because our system has the Executive within the Parliament we would effectively have to take the whole of Government with us as well.

I know that people argue, as I have myself sometimes, that Britain is far too London-centric, and that too much of the economy is focused on London and the south-east. However, the truth is that moving the whole of Government out of London to some other place, building some massive building, buying an enormous site and then providing accommodation for all those people would be more expensive than staying here, not least because this is a world heritage site. It is one of the most recognisable buildings in the world. We would still have to maintain it, even if we were going to hand it over to someone else anyway.

There would therefore be no cost saving. There may be political arguments, which I do not share, about the Union from the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), and about other elements. However, in the end I do not think that there is any real alternative that is financially advantageous to the taxpayer that involves moving us out of the Palace in the long run. The hon. Gentleman also said that we will build a Chamber exactly like the one we have at present. There may be many good reasons for changing the way in which we do our business, but restoration and renewal is not one of them.

If we want to make changes, that is perfectly within the will of the House, but it is up to the House to make those decisions, rather than to have them foisted upon us because of some kind of building project. As I understand it, the Clerks are already working on IT so that we will be able to vote in the Division Lobbies with our thumbprints or fingerprints, instead of having to walk through and tell them our names and all the rest of it.

As for the main substance of today's debate, it is important that we scrutinise the finances of the House. They are not the biggest numbers in all Government expenditure, but they are very significant numbers, and over the next few years they will grow rapidly. One of the concerns of our Committee is that there is not much transparency about where decisions are made and whether they have been good decisions. As we move into the process of restoration and renewal, there is a danger that, if there is an extended period with a shadow

Sponsor Board and a shadow delivery authority, where decisions are actually being made on very dramatic amounts of money will be even more opaque.

For instance, major decisions are being made on the northern estate project, which at the moment is not part of the restoration and renewal project, regarding the design, how many floors there should be, and what planning applications we should be submitting. Those decisions are currently being made somewhere between the Finance Committee, the accounting officer, and the commission. The shadow sponsor body will start to make key decisions, but, because it will not have statutory effect until the law is brought in, those decisions will have to be ratified by the Finance Committee advising the commission.

If that period goes on for too long, there is a danger that we will end up with bad decisions, uncertain outcomes and uncertain delivery of the project and the finances. The Government can make a material difference to that by introducing the legislation. We have it in draft form at the moment, and we are delighted that that has sped up a bit, thanks to the Leader of the House. However, we need to ensure that in the next Session we get on with passing that legislation as fast as possible.

The one caveat I add is that we should consider very carefully the fact that until 2004 the Palace, like all other royal palaces, was its own planning authority. Since 2004, we have not been our own planning authority, and we are subject to the planning decisions of Westminster City Council. We have a very good working relationship with the council at the moment, but in essence the project will completely dwarf its whole planning department. To all intents and purposes, we will be paying for a new planning department foisted on Westminster City Council. There is an argument for us saying, "Frankly, we should just have it in house, rather than being subject to Westminster City Council."

I say that because one of the key decisions that is yet to be made concerns the lighting in Westminster Hall; I think that battle has been going on with the planning authorities for the best part of 12 years. That is why we still have hideous arc lamps on the side, on chunks of scaffolding poles, in one of the most beautiful buildings in Europe. If we are unable to make timely decisions, we will end up making more expensive decisions. We need at least to examine whether we should make ourselves our own planning authority.

I am enormously grateful to all those who have taken part in the debate and, in particular, to Myfanwy and her team, who are admirable.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the House of Commons Financial Plan 2019-20 to 2022-23 and draft Estimates for 2019-20.

NHS: Hysteroscopies

10.59 am

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered NHS treatment of patients requiring hysteroscopies.

It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. We know that hysteroscopies save lives, but all too often they cause excruciating pain and humiliation because some of the women who need them are not treated with the dignity, respect or even humanity that they deserve.

As hon. Members will know, a hysteroscopy involves the insertion of a camera into the womb, past the cervix, to look for abnormalities and potentially enable a surgeon to remove them. It can be used to rule out a diagnosis of cancer when women are experiencing heavy periods, unexplained bleeding, repeated miscarriages or difficulties in becoming pregnant, and it is a core part of the treatment for debilitating conditions such as fibroids and health risks such as polyps in the womb. However, for some women patients it causes severe pain, a sense of violation and lasting trauma.

The NHS website states:

“A hysteroscopy is not usually carried out under anaesthetic... Taking painkillers such as ibuprofen or paracetamol... can help reduce discomfort after the procedure.”

Unfortunately, many women experience severe pain during hysteroscopy. It is usually done with little or no anaesthetic, and many women are told nothing to prepare them for the agony that awaits. I have passed the Minister many dozens of anonymous cases from women who have experienced terrible pain at the hands of NHS surgeons and were ill-informed or misinformed about the pain risks and offered little or no pain relief. I am glad to say that she has always received those stories with sympathy, empathy and understanding, but I am receiving more and more of them all the time.

This is not an issue that gets huge acclaim or interest in the press. People are finding our campaign and Facebook page simply because they need to. I will put just two experiences on the record today.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As my party's health spokesperson, I am interested in all health issues, but particularly in this one, so I commend the hon. Lady for securing the debate. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines published in March recommend that women should be offered an out-patient hysteroscopy if they have symptoms or risk factors associated with gynaecological conditions. Does she agree that that recommendation has not been translated into GP referrals? More must be done to ensure that those in need of the procedure, for the purpose of early diagnosis or the removal of issues, are referred and treated in an effective manner. It has to be done early, and that is where we fall down.

Lyn Brown: I entirely agree, but the importance of early action is sometimes used to encourage or even force women to stay with a procedure that is causing them great pain because of the fear of what might happen afterwards. If the hon. Gentleman gives me a moment, I will illustrate that point.

In October, I heard from Jenny, who has undergone two hysteroscopies, both of which were traumatic. She told me:

“My first experience was shocking. I wasn't prepared for it. The doctor didn't warn me at all, and during the procedure I experienced the most unbearable pain ever and I almost fainted. I rose up from the bed that I was on and I shouted out. It felt like my insides were being ripped out. I wasn't given the option to stop nor was I given any support.

The nurse was behind the doctor throughout the procedure and just watched as I suffered. After the procedure my legs were like jelly. I felt faint and in pain but I wasn't even helped off the bed, I wasn't even given a sanitary towel to help with the bleeding. I left the room and drove myself home in that state, I'm lucky I didn't have an accident. I felt traumatised, in a state of disbelief and shock.”

What is even more shocking is that Jenny's second hysteroscopy was also traumatising, even though she now knew the risks and had taken steps to ensure that the same thing would not happen again. She explained to her doctor what had happened and requested a female doctor the next time. Her doctor said that she would write that on the referral, and at her pre-hysteroscopy appointment Jenny was told that she could have an injection to numb the area. She was reassured and trusted the female doctor to be more careful, but the procedure was—again—horribly traumatising. Jenny said:

“My god it was shocking, I once again shouted out and raised from the chair this time. The nurse was trying to calm me down... while the doctor said she would stop at any time but she needed to go in again and take a biopsy. I was told that if she didn't... the procedure would be incomplete and I would be left worrying that it could be cancerous. So I endured more excruciating pain.

I wasn't given the option to come back and have the procedure done under general anaesthetic, which I have now found out could have been an option. I felt tricked into having the procedure.

I suffered with terrible pain for a week after. Mentally I was left traumatised and still am to this day.”

Understandably, Jenny is now scared about any gynaecological procedure—including smear tests, which she knows are essential for her health.

This autumn, Annie got in touch. Annie had had ultrasounds and smear tests before; like many others, she was given literature about her hysteroscopy that made her think that it would be no different. She was advised just to take paracetamol and ibuprofen before the appointment, and she felt confident. She told me:

“As the procedure began, I felt instant pain, so unexpected and intense that I began to cry and panic within seconds. I was asking the nurse if this was normal as I was so scared there was something wrong, and she nodded to reassure me. I couldn't get my words out, I was panicking, going into shock. She offered me her hand to squeeze through the pain. I tried to be strong, but I couldn't, I was yelling out in pain, shaking and crying.

The nurses were telling me to relax my legs but it was impossible. When the Dr began the biopsy it was by far the worst pain I have ever suffered. I was hyperventilating and the nurse was telling me to breathe, but I couldn't. I endured pain for 15-20 minutes.

I was asked to wait before I stood up, and I was so traumatised and sobbing, I just couldn't move.

After a couple of minutes I got up and had to put on a sanitary towel and get dressed. It was hard—I was disoriented and shaking.

I sat with the Doctor who told me that due to it being too painful I have to have polyps removed under general anaesthetic. I could barely talk to him due to shock and tears. I wasn't even offered water, and nobody asked me how I was getting home.

[Lyn Brown]

I cried from leaving the hospital at 2 until my wife arrived home at 6, at which point I broke down uncontrollably in her arms. I felt violated and abused, and the procedure felt very very wrong."

As we know, women are still having these terrible experiences. I received another story in the past two weeks, but I do not have time to share them all. Women are still leaving NHS care feeling violated, and it ain't going to stop unless we choose to stop it. I am very grateful to the Campaign Against Painful Hysteroscopy for providing support to those women and making sure that they are heard. The campaign group's petition has received more than 47,000 signatures, which demonstrates that this is not an unusual, occasional thing.

We have four asks. First, if we are to stop patients from being violated or misled, all NHS trusts need to provide accurate information that enables women to give genuinely informed consent. I was pleased to hear from the Minister that her Department is developing tools to improve hysteroscopy care; I look forward to hearing her elaborate on those tools, but involving patients will be essential to making them work. The campaign wants to see a new patient information leaflet made available across the NHS. Campaigners have been working with the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and with specialists to create an appropriate leaflet that patients who have had negative experiences of hysteroscopy have helped to write, but it still needs to be rolled out.

The leaflet needs to be honest with patients. It needs to warn that there is a real risk of severe pain during out-patient hysteroscopy, and explain the risk factors that make pain more likely. They should tell patients that they have the right to ask for the procedure to be stopped at any time and for it to be rescheduled with a full anaesthetic. Hospitals should no longer have any excuse to hand out literature stating there will only be "mild discomfort, just like a smear".

After they have read through the leaflet, patients should be given an opportunity to discuss with a trained doctor what is going to happen during the procedure—whether a sample is going to be cut out for a biopsy, the risks involved, and the anaesthetic choices available. The campaign suggests that both patient and doctor should then sign a consent form to confirm the discussion has taken place and the choices the patient has made.

Our second ask is for improved training to enable better and more consistent care. We know that hysteroscopy can be a painless experience for women—some women will experience little pain from hysteroscopy even with minimal anaesthetic—but as we have heard, for others it will be like torture. There are some risk factors—older women and women who have never had children are far more likely to experience severe pain during hysteroscopy—but we cannot tell in advance what someone will experience, and that means we have to improve the guidelines and raise standards through training. The current national guidelines, produced by RCOG and the British Society for Gynaecological Endoscopy, do not recommend several forms of anaesthetic that I am told could be helpful. That has to be looked at, because, for some patients, stronger forms of anaesthetic might be the only way to have a hysteroscopy without experiencing severe pain.

Once we have changed the guidelines, investment in training will be needed to embed new best practice across the NHS. Hysteroscopy nurses should be routinely asking for patients' pain scores during the procedure, so that informed decisions can be made about whether to continue or to stop. We need to audit pain scores and keep records of how comfortable the surgeon was with continuing, so that we can monitor whether more training is necessary. It should be a basic element of training that hysteroscopy teams should simply stop the procedure if a patient is suffering severe pain—not just hold them down—and reassure the patient that the procedure will be promptly rescheduled with more effective anaesthesia, rather than using the threat of possible undetected cancer to encourage her to continue.

Our third ask is for enough resources to enable all NHS bodies, everywhere in the country, to give women the choice between different anaesthetics when they need a hysteroscopy. The problem is not just flawed guidelines and inadequate training. Trusts may be loth to enable anaesthesia beyond over-the-counter painkillers or local anaesthetic simply because other methods are more expensive. Some are in-patient procedures, and some require clinicians to have specific training, and we all know that that comes with extra costs.

Our fourth, and possibly most important, ask is for a change to NHS incentives for hospitals. According to the information we have, the Department of Health's quality, innovation, productivity and prevention tariff encourages trusts to promote hysteroscopy without anaesthetic, rather than offering an open choice to women. Annex F to the 2017 to 2019 national tariff payment system is explicit:

"For...diagnostic hysteroscopy...the aim is to shift activity into the outpatient setting."

The best practice tariff

"is made up of a pair of prices...one applied to outpatient settings, the other to...elective admissions. By paying a higher price for procedures in the outpatient setting, the BPT creates a financial incentive for providers to treat patients there."

The national target is for the risky out-patient hysteroscopies to increase to 70% of the total, up from 59%. The Department for Health is not working to reduce pain and trauma for women—it is incentivising hysteroscopies without effective pain relief and is taking our choices away. It has to stop, and I hope the Minister will look at how she is going to stop it.

Those are our four asks of the Government, and I think the Minister will agree with me that they are entirely reasonable. I do not believe they would be massively expensive to implement, and we should also consider that current NHS practices may not be cost-effective. Women who have undergone a painful hysteroscopy may not return for other gynaecological tests and procedures. If they do not have those early preventive interventions, more costly interventions will be needed later.

Some action has already been taken. The issue has been raised with the national medical director of NHS England. I thank the Minister for that, and for launching her women's health taskforce, which I would be interested to hear more about today.

I would like to say something about the history of the hysteroscopy campaign and the amazing women who have led it—I am delighted to see some of them in the

Gallery today. With their support, I have regularly been raising this issue in the House for four years now. I cannot say progress has been easy or swift. At times I—we—have been ignored by the Government, despite strong cross-party support every time I have raised the issue. I have been left concerned that officials at the Department of Health, and some senior NHS managers, have not been willing to engage with the problem of women's pain when the NHS is under financial stress.

However, this last year has been more hopeful. The Minister met me and a core group of campaigners last year, and listened with compassion to their stories. I believe she has taken this cause as her own. I am waiting with bated breath to hear what she is going to say today, and to hear about the rapid and dramatic progress we are going to be able to make on this issue over the coming year.

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. It is an even bigger pleasure to respond to the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown). I pay tribute to the work she has done to highlight this issue, which has affected many women over many years who have been left to suffer in silence.

As the hon. Lady said, there were 47,000 signatures on the campaign petition, which is an indication of just how many women have been badly affected by what is actually a common procedure. It does not matter that it is only one in four, which is probably the most generous estimate. It could be as low as one in 10; it does not matter. We are talking about individuals who have been badly affected and who have been traumatised to the point where it effects their ability to look after themselves in the future. Frankly, it is no value to the NHS to leave those women suffering in silence, and I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for sharing the experiences of the women who have been brave enough to come forward.

The hon. Lady set me a challenge. She is quite right to demand swift action, because this has been going on for many years. She had four asks. On the first two, I will work with her and the campaign to make sure we can deliver them. They are extremely reasonable, to be brutally frank. On her third ask, we need to make sure that we have sufficient resource to enable women to exercise genuine, informed choice about how they take this procedure. On the fourth ask, about the tariff, notwithstanding the guidance about what might be best practice in most cases, we need to make sure that the tariff does not encourage perverse incentives that will disadvantage women. At the heart of all this, we need to ensure that running through every piece of treatment for women with gynaecological conditions is the ability to make informed and empowered choices—genuine choices. In that respect, I see the hon. Lady as a strong ally in working towards far better treatment for all women at the hands of the NHS.

The hon. Lady has given a great voice to people who have been through such terrible experiences. She again shared some of the distressing accounts of women for whom current practice has not been good enough. She is right that in the past not enough attention has been paid to a common procedure that generates harm to far

too many women. I hope that the very fact of our debate today will shine a light on the situation, because the more we can do to spread awareness, the more women are empowered to look after themselves when facing treatment in the NHS. I hope that she will take some reassurance from the fact that I will continue to work with her to improve women's health outcomes.

I also want to put something else on the record: the hon. Lady talked about a complete lack of humanity in how those women were treated. I would not be the first to say this—I have spoken to many female colleagues across the House as well—but we often feel that, when our reproductive organs are not being used for the purpose of having children, they are just an inconvenience. The NHS needs to do better. She mentioned my women's health taskforce, and it is very much at the heart of that. As we go through life, the virtue of having our reproductive organs brings morbidities which are not always treated well in the NHS. We need to do better.

Hysteroscopy, as the hon. Lady explained, is a useful tool in the diagnosis and treatment of a number of conditions, such as the investigation of heavy menstrual bleeding, which affects as many as one in four women between the ages of 15 and 50. That gives some indication of just how many women might consider the procedure. Hysteroscopy is also used to treat fibroids and polyps, which are conditions that can cause long-term symptoms of pain and discomfort. The procedure is without doubt useful in treating women, so hysteroscopies have a role, but as she illustrated beautifully, they can be invasive and traumatic. We need only think about what the procedure involves to understand how traumatic it can be when it becomes painful.

Women's least expectation of going through the procedure—this is crucial—is that they should be treated with sympathy and respect. They should also have full understanding before undertaking such an experience. As the hon. Lady explained, however, often women find themselves in profound shock at what is happening, and it does not always take place in the most appropriate setting. We clearly need to do better. Information is crucial in that regard: we need to ensure that nothing comes as a surprise.

I encourage women to access the NHS webpage on hysteroscopy, which includes information on what the procedure involves, the likely recovery period and the alternative procedures available. It notes that experiences of pain during a hysteroscopy can vary considerably from one woman to another but—the hon. Lady highlighted this point—I do not think that it properly reflects that, for women who have never had children, the pain can be particularly acute. We should consider the question whether it is ever appropriate for women who have not had children to have the procedure. Clearly, from the evidence she has presented to me, that is where the highest risk is.

I also feel strongly that merely giving information is not enough. Not only is this about providing clarity about what will happen and whether there are decision points for patients—some women will experience little or no pain, but for others it can be severe. We should also remember that for some women the hysteroscopy might be a first encounter with gynaecological services and that some might need to confront past pain or

[Jackie Doyle-Price]

trauma. The hon. Lady has illustrated that well today. It is concerning when medical professionals do not prepare patients for the treatment in a sensitive way.

I fully agree with the hon. Lady that when a woman is clearly suffering during the procedure, it should be stopped. In any case, consent means that at any point people should be able to request that a procedure is stopped. It horrified me to read some of the accounts that she shared, such as women being held down and told, in essence, “You’ve got to continue this treatment or it will be worse for you.” That sort of conversation does not belong in 21st-century Britain in our fantastic NHS. I think we would all agree, women need to be treated better in that regard.

I also agree that we need better training on pain relief and managing women who are to have what can be a traumatic procedure. For practitioners, gynaecological procedures might be an everyday thing, but us women who present ourselves for such a procedure might have to have an out-of-body experience to go through it, because it is not comfortable—[*Interruption*—excuse me—to have people engaged in that. We need more sensitivity—[*Interruption*.] Excuse me, Chair, I have a terrible cold.

The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists has produced a guideline to provide clinicians with evidence-based information regarding outpatient hysteroscopy—[*Interruption*.] Excuse me—[*Interruption*.]

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. The Minister is clearly in some distress. She must feel that she has more to say, but it would be perfectly in order if she wished to conclude the debate at this point. How can I put this? In these troubled times, it is really nice to see the amount of co-operation taking place across the Chamber. We have established that there is a consensus, so if she feels that she is still in some distress, it is perfectly acceptable if she wishes me to put the question, or we can continue—it is her choice.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I give way to the hon. Member for West Ham.

Lyn Brown: I am really grateful to the Minister for her response thus far. I have found her, to be honest, to be the only Minister I have been able to have proper

conversations with about such issues who has understood them. I am grateful. However, I honestly believe that we need to do something about the fourth ask. I am a fairly strong woman, but even I was in such a position: I had requested a hysteroscopy with general anaesthetic, but the hospital spent an hour of its time trying to talk me into having one without anaesthetic. I am in a high-risk category of being an older woman and of not having had a child, but I had to beat off the medic who was trying to use every piece of emotional blackmail that she could to get me to agree—the cost to the NHS, taking up resources, the possibility that I had cancer or of a long wait, and so on. It was an uncomfortable conversation. If we do not get rid of the perverse financial incentives, even women as strong as me will be browbeaten.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I thank you, Mr Howarth, and the hon. Lady for the generosity of allowing me to recover myself. We can tell it is December, because we all have colds—thank you very much.

In the short time I have left, I will address the specific issue of the tariff and the possible incentives, which I know the hon. Lady is particularly concerned about. She is right that there is a best practice tariff that incentivises care in a day-case setting with no anaesthetic, just pain relief. That tariff is agreed with the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, but it is revising its guidance. I want to engage the hon. Lady and the campaign group in that process through the women’s health taskforce, so that we can all satisfy ourselves that the guidance is appropriate. She is absolutely right: if someone such as her or me—women Members of Parliament—cannot look after ourselves, neither can anyone else, and I have heard many tales of people often feeling diminished at the hands of the NHS. She and I have the opportunity to use our voices to ensure that women get a better deal.

I again thank the hon. Lady for all her work. I look forward to continuing to work with her to ensure that all women who face that procedure can do so with sensitive treatment and appropriate pain relief.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Leaving the EU: State Aid, Public Ownership and Workers' Rights

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered state aid, public ownership and workers rights after the UK leaves the EU.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and to have been selected to sponsor this important debate. I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) and the Minister. Their presence underlines the importance of this issue.

I do not need to spell out that we are having this debate in the context of what appears to be gridlock in Parliament. There is no clear consensus about what priorities should shape our future relationship with the EU. Today was supposed to be a day on which we made at least one decision, but even that is no longer the case. I wanted this debate to take place outside the main Chamber to ensure that its content was not considered purely in the context of the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration. Instead, I wanted it to inform the wider, ongoing debate about what the future relationship might look like.

I have chosen to consider these three policy areas for three reasons: first, because they are tools with which the UK Government could transform our economy and society for the better; secondly, because I believe that there is public support for their use by the UK Government; and, thirdly, because I am concerned that there is some friction between the effective use of these tools and EU law. This year, research by the Institute for Public Policy Research concluded that the public want to take back control and expand the role of the state, not reduce it. It suggested that there is no mandate for a buccaneering Brexit based on a race to the bottom in pursuit of even freer markets. Instead, the public want higher environmental standards, tougher regulation and a greater use of state aid, even at the cost of freer trade.

For balance, I want to make it clear that I am not suggesting that EU law bans all forms of public ownership. Nor am I suggesting that the EU prevents all forms of state aid. Indeed, there are several exemptions, and where there are no exemptions a member state can seek the approval of the European Commission. I will come on to workers' rights later in my speech, but I acknowledge that the EU has sought to create a floor for minimum employment standards. In theory, it should prevent a race to the bottom. Those are, without doubt, important safeguards.

I was more than troubled to read that the withdrawal agreement referred only to the non-regression of labour standards. I am deeply worried that exiting on that basis would leave the British workforce exposed to the risk of seeing their statutory rights gradually eroded or falling behind those of their European counterparts.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. She is right to have secured this debate in this Chamber. Before she moves on to employment

rights, I want to take her back to state aid. How does she think it will be different, given that the UK helped to develop the EU's state aid rules, and the withdrawal agreement says that there will be a level playing field, which suggests that the sort of things we see now will be incorporated?

Laura Smith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I will come on to that issue, and specifically the level playing field, later in my speech. I hope that I will answer his question shortly.

One would have to be wilfully blind to argue that there is no tension between EU law and the pursuit of a heightened role for the state in our economy. For now, I want to move on to discuss public ownership, which can take various forms. I am not advocating organisations that are owned by the Government but behave in the same way as for-profit companies, focusing on financial goals and insulated from democratic control, but the dogmatic obsession with privatisation in the UK in recent years has been exposed as a failed and outdated ideology. Hon. Members no doubt represent workers in their respective constituencies who were affected by the collapse of Carillion, which cost the taxpayer at least £148 million. There were also the failures of the east coast main line and Northern rail services, and the emergency takeover of Birmingham Prison—the list goes on.

Our public services have been siphoned off and are run by private companies interested only in extracting profits to line the pockets of their shareholders, instead of reinvesting them to improve the service or reduce consumer bills. The privatised water companies have paid out £18 billion in dividends to shareholders over the past 10 years.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very important point about how water companies work. In Wales, we have Dŵr Cymru—Welsh Water—which is a publicly owned company that reinvests in the water network and reduces people's bills. There are very real examples of how water companies can work for people, and we have the best example in Wales.

Laura Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for that example.

In the name of efficiency, our public services have been handed to those offering the cheapest services, often at the expense of our public sector workers, who have paid the price with their pay, their terms and conditions and even their jobs. Public ownership does not just bring an end to such bad practices. Done right, it can be used to combat inequality, political disenfranchisement and underinvestment.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. If she wants a good idea of what workers' rights will be like if we come out of Europe, she has only to look at the recent anti-trade union laws passed by the Government. That will give her a good idea of what will happen to workers' rights. She talks about privatisation, and Crossrail will now cost an additional £2 billion. These are the issues that we have to consider. My third point is that there is no guarantee that the national health service will survive in its present form when it is opened up to predators from the United States. These are the issues

[Mr Jim Cunningham]

that, at the end of the day, affect people's jobs and livelihoods. There is no attempt whatever to provide future funding for university research and development, which affects manufacturing in this country in a big way—I asked the Chancellor a question about this this morning. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Laura Smith: I agree with the points that my hon. Friend makes, and I share his concerns.

Economic democracy can empower groups and individuals who are otherwise excluded. Involving workers, the public and other stakeholders in economic decision making has both societal and economic benefits. Democratic participation can also enhance the effectiveness of publicly owned enterprises by tapping into grassroots forms of knowledge and the direct experience of employees and users of public goods and services. Democracy, if we are to view it as a vital part of popular sovereignty, must extend far beyond the ability to elect Governments every now and then. The active exercise of individual worker and community member ownership rights is a prerequisite of genuine democracy.

If those campaigning to leave the EU were at all serious about taking back control for the British people, they will recognise the role that democratic public ownership can play in tomorrow's economy. It can be used to mobilise our economy in pursuit of other policy objectives. For example, democratic public ownership of our energy system could allow us to put tackling climate change at the heart of our energy system in a radical way, while protecting the industry's workers throughout any energy transition. It is popular: opinion poll after opinion poll demonstrates that the public are crying out for more public ownership, even given the option of "whatever works".

EU law specifically allows for the public ownership of a service provider, yet the treaty that contains that provision also sets out an economic policy based on an open market economy, with free competition and the liberalisation of services given special status. Some commentators have suggested that remaining subject to EU law will make the reversal of market liberalisation highly problematic for a UK Government who wished to do that.

To take the postal service as an example, the third postal services directive, adopted in 2008, established a clear floor for the postal market, ensuring that collection and delivery take place at least five days a week. At the same time, it has promoted competitiveness for its own sake, which has driven down standards and posed a threat. It fails to see the market as a natural monopoly, and insists that it must remain fully liberalised, restricting the UK Government's ability to eliminate the market to sustain the publicly owned provider.

Although public ownership of the carrier is not prohibited, it is difficult to see how a UK Government who remain subject to EU law could create a public monopoly with workers and service users at its heart, and with the necessary cross-subsidisation to allow such services to thrive. As far as I am concerned, a true level playing field would establish regulations to ensure that private sector carriers could not undercut prices, and would include a re-establishment of collective bargaining, which I will mention later.

There are similar challenges in the energy sector. The European Court of Justice's Essent ruling found that the Dutch ban on private ownership of shares in the energy sector amounted to a breach of free movement of capital. The experience in Germany shows that it is possible to create publicly owned energy companies to rival private energy suppliers, but only within the parameters of EU competition law. The recent fourth railway package poses similar challenges in the rail sector.

I briefly draw hon. Members' attention to a recent dispute at Royal Bolton Hospital. In *Alemo-Herron*, the ECJ ruled that private employers that take on the provision of public services cannot be required to pay transferred staff the pay rises that they would have had if they had remained in the employment of the public sector. By prioritising the rights of private companies to business freedom over the rights of workers who find themselves in that situation, EU law creates a financial incentive to privatise our public services.

On state aid and public procurement, I recognise that the UK has not made full use of the flexibilities on offer to it as a member state. As with all other aspects of the debate, I do not blame the European Union for the pursuit of neo-liberal policies by successive UK Governments. This Government have certainly not needed any encouragement in that respect. I also accept that there will always have to be some rules to facilitate fair trade, but the EU state aid rules are far more stringent than those in the WTO subsidies regime.

Earlier this year, I called on the Government to provide funding to cover the cost of pay owed to care workers who were found to have been paid less than the minimum wage. The failure to do so risked bankrupting care providers and putting many vulnerable people at risk. The Government, however, had to discuss the issue with the European Commission because of concerns that state aid rules would prevent them from taking such action. I am not sure whether those discussions reached a conclusion before the Court of Appeal's July ruling.

In addition to restricting the UK Government's ability to react to certain economic events that threaten our industries, those state aid rules can restrict our ability to intervene proactively to support individual industries or domestic supply chains as part of a comprehensive industrial strategy.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way and congratulate her on securing the debate. She is making some fair points, but I take issue with the last one. There has been a very effective deployment of state aid to expand broadband provision throughout the United Kingdom, which she surely welcomes as a positive boost to the UK's infrastructure, and to help our public services. There are some good stories to tell, despite the general recognition that the level of state aid in the UK is much lower in comparison with that in many other EU countries.

Laura Smith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I know everybody says this, but I will come to that later, when I address broadband specifically. I agree that improving that infrastructure is essential.

The recent research from the IPPR that I mentioned earlier concludes that the public place more weight on returning powers to expand the use of state aid than to

deregulate, with 53% showing a preference for allowing the Government to support and protect our industries, while only 26% preferred conformity with EU state aid rules to secure a far-reaching EU trade deal.

The variation in WTO-plus agreements suggests to me that a bespoke trade deal could, in theory, include room for structural subsidies. Those could, for example, support industries of particular national value or natural monopolies, where cost reductions would be beneficial and would have no impact on other countries. In that sense, Brexit offers an opportunity to redefine what a true level playing field looks like.

The Communication Workers Union suggested that there would, in theory, be a strong argument for rolling out superfast broadband everywhere, supported by the state, which takes us back to the point made by the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter). Not only is that a natural monopoly, but it is a driver of social and economic wellbeing, as he pointed out. A similar argument could be made for our post office network.

With regard to the withdrawal agreement as it stands, the Attorney General has made it quite clear that in the backstop, restrictions on state aid are hardwired, and new restrictions could be introduced even if they are not in our national interest. I would be grateful if the Minister clarified whether he expects our future relationship with the EU to be substantially different or based on a parallel system. In the same way, the EU procurement directive is far more restrictive than the WTO agreement on government procurement. I would support, for example, limiting eligibility for public procurement contracts to companies that can demonstrate ethical maximum pay ratios and gender pay ratios, yet the EU procurement directive raises questions as to whether that would be compatible with single market rules.

There will undoubtedly be risks to workers' rights if we leave the EU. Parliament is currently considering a deal that refers only to "non-regression", when it would surely have been possible to ensure that British workers enjoy at least the same statutory rights as their European counterparts, as part of what I would describe as a genuine level playing field. We must also consider collective bargaining. I do not want to stray into a debate on the benefits of collective bargaining, but suffice it to say that I believe that rolling out sectoral-level bargaining will bring far more than just improvements to workers' wages or employment conditions, and, alongside other reforms, it can give workers a real stake in their industries, and is another prerequisite for democratising our economy.

Chris Elmore: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way again, and she is making some important points. She has talked throughout about a level playing field for workers' rights and state aid. Does she agree that it is extremely important that the UK Government work with both the Scottish and Welsh Governments where there are devolved responsibilities, to ensure that there is a level playing field? That applies particularly to future funding for communities such as mine, which received objective 1 and objective 2 status, and where Welsh Government Ministers are responsible, for example, for the NHS pay structure and, from next year, for teachers' pay?

Laura Smith: I am grateful once again to my hon. Friend, who makes some excellent points on devolved Governments.

Long before the formation of the EU, British workers' rights were largely gained through industrial organisation and collective bargaining. Many statutory rights that have been introduced have simply extended those rights so that they can be enjoyed universally by workers not covered by those collective agreements and contractual rights. Although I do not blame the EU for the declining role of trade unions in the British economy, I am concerned that it is heading in the same direction.

The level of collective bargaining coverage is falling across Europe, under pressure from troika policies. To highlight the direction of travel, a report prepared by the European Commission's directorate-general for economic and financial affairs lists the following "employment-friendly reforms": decreasing bargaining coverage; decreasing extension of collective agreements; decentralising bargaining systems; removing or limiting the favourability principle; and overall reduction of wage-setting power by trade unions. The same report lists other reforms not related to collective bargaining, including loosening the conditions for dismissals and decreasing notice periods and the level of severance payments.

We must also consider the fact that under EU law the four freedoms of business—to provide services, establish business, move capital and move labour—trump all other rights. I have already highlighted the Alemo-Herron case, in which the right of workers to the benefit of collective bargaining found in the UN charter, the European convention on human rights and the International Labour Organisation declaration was not mentioned. Also, the more well known cases of Viking and Laval, amplified by the Holship ruling, reinforce the fact that under EU law the right to take industrial action will always be treated as subservient to the four freedoms. Furthermore, the directives passed by the EU on individual employment rights have been limited in scope. For example, the agency workers directive appears helpful in principle, but is reported to have led to a massive increase in the number of agency workers across Europe who do not enjoy the same full rights as their directly employed counterparts.

That is not to dismiss the significance of EU-derived employment rights and, as I have said, I am more than disappointed to see that the Brexit deal as it stands refers only to non-regression. Our existing rights must be protected, and safeguards should have been included to ensure that British workers never fall behind their European counterparts, as part of that truly level playing field. However, as hon. Members look for alternatives to the discredited deal, we should also be conscious that the EU is not the beacon of workers' rights that it is sometimes made out to be.

To conclude, I ask that for a moment we consider the historic vote to leave the EU. The national turnout was the highest ever for a UK-wide referendum and the highest for any national vote since the 1992 general election. Despite the main parties campaigning to remain and interventions from all sorts of interested parties about the impact that leaving would have on our economy, the public voted to leave the EU, albeit by a small

[*Laura Smith*]

margin. In my constituency, that margin is estimated to have been somewhat wider, at 41% to remain and 59% to leave.

I am sure that everyone present is also aware of the research conducted by Lord Ashcroft that concluded that the three lowest social groups voted to leave by a majority of two thirds. In that same poll, the single reason most frequently given for voting to leave was the principle that decisions about the UK should be taken in the UK. One year later, more than 80% of voters cast their vote for parliamentary candidates representing parties promising to respect the result of the referendum—a promise that I also made to the constituents whom I represent.

Since June 2016, I have done a lot of reflecting about what the result really meant. In the end, I decided that many complex and interacting factors probably influenced it, and that making sweeping generalisations would be unhelpful. One thing I concluded, however, as I am sure everyone present did, is that to ignore the result would be a profound and unforgiveable mistake. The referendum was an extraordinary exercise of democracy. If the result in 2016 was anything, it was a demand for change by those who benefited the least from our economic status quo. What is more, it was an expression by a majority of the electorate—however small and for whatever reason—that that change was best achieved with the UK outside the EU.

Even if hon. Members do not feel that expanding public ownership, state aid or workers' rights are desirable policies, I ask them to consider the long-term consequences of lending support to any deal that further hollows out our democracy or locks us into the economic status quo. I therefore strongly urge Members to reject the single market, along with its legal framework, should such an option appear before the House. To do so is not to retreat into isolationism, protectionism and nationalism; on the contrary, it could herald the beginning of a new internationalism.

Of course we want the fullest access to all markets for our businesses, but the expansion of international trade, including in services, has not required a single market or a similarly restrictive framework. We must be vigilant to ensure that any other deal includes the necessary protections, clarifications and exemptions, so that we can use such policy tools effectively to rebuild and empower our communities, our public services and our economy in every region of the UK. I believe that there is public support for a new type of economy, one in which the state plays a more active role, in which ownership by, and accountability to, the public is included, and in which those who work within those industries are rewarded properly for their labour.

2.55 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is, as always, a great pleasure to see you in the Chair for this afternoon's proceedings, Mr Hollobone.

I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) on securing this debate. In some respects it is timely, because the actions of the Prime Minister yesterday have perhaps moved us a little closer to a no-deal scenario, which would be catastrophic for jobs and our communities, although my argument is that that is not a new phenomenon.

The British Government have left key Scottish industries without support for decades, and are now set to subject our firms to a Tory Brexit race to the bottom. Communities in Scotland, whether those of Linwood, Ravenscraig or Methel, know fine well that British Governments simply cannot be trusted to protect jobs and people's livelihoods. I welcome the opportunity to shine a bright light on the stark contrast between the privatisation-obsessed British Government and a Scottish Government who believe in a thriving, healthy public sector. Westminster, not the EU, sold off our public services.

Thanks to the Scottish National party, Scottish Water, the island ferries and our NHS have all remained in public hands. In sharp contrast to the increasing health privatisation by Westminster Governments, the SNP Scottish Government have kept, and will always keep, Scotland's NHS in public hands. Unlike water suppliers elsewhere in the UK, Scottish Water has remained a statutory corporation that provides water and sewerage services across Scotland, and it is accountable to the public through the Scottish Government.

Caledonian MacBrayne is the major operator of passenger and vehicle ferry services between the mainland of Scotland and the 22 major islands of Scotland's west coast. Glasgow Prestwick airport is also operated on a commercial basis, at arm's length from the Scottish Government, in compliance with European Union state aid rules, and Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd is a public corporation wholly owned by the Scottish Ministers, which operates 11 Scottish airports that are vital to the social and economic welfare of the areas that they serve—some of the most fragile communities in our country. The reality, however, is that they are loss making and supported by subsidies from the Scottish Government.

The Scottish Government are also pressing ahead with plans for a national investment bank and a public energy company, supporting our position as a leading EU mixed economy. Last September, the First Minister announced plans to establish a Scottish investment bank, and we may hear more about that later this week. On a personal level, as someone who wants to see much more state ownership, I am genuinely delighted that the Scottish Government are on track to deliver their ambition of a public energy company by the end of the Parliament in 2021. Even better, there will be a public sector bid to run the railways in Scotland—long overdue, in my view. In Scotland, we have a good story to tell about our commitment to workers' rights, protecting jobs and putting more services in public hands.

I now turn to the real threats to workers' rights as a result of our exit from the European Union. History shows us that the EU has forced successive Westminster Governments to improve workers' rights. Such rights must not be put at risk by a Tory Brexit race to the bottom. It is important that we reflect on them and take stock of just how much EU membership has improved workers' rights. For example, the EU's working time regulations were introduced in the UK in 1998, meaning that employees cannot be forced to work more than an average of 48 hours a week and should get a rest time of at least 11 consecutive hours. Equal pay between men and women has been enshrined in EU law since 1957, and the 1992 EU pregnant workers directive guarantees women a minimum of 14 weeks' maternity leave.

Make no mistake: leaving the European Union and allowing the British Government to take charge of those rights is a deeply retrograde step that will lead to a

bonfire of workers' rights. That is why, even at this late stage, I appeal to Members on the Conservative and Labour Benches to join us to end the Brexit chaos. If they do not, or will not, they should not be surprised when Scotland unhooks the tow bar and takes us on a different path of independence.

2.59 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) on securing this important debate. I declare my interest as a proud lifelong trade unionist.

This debate is especially important because when the Prime Minister addressed the House yesterday, she gave the impression that the only concerns about her deal came from her own Benches and related entirely to the backstop. Let me say clearly and loudly to the Minister that is not the case for my constituents and working people across the country who want an agreement that protects both their jobs and their rights in those jobs. I will focus my speech on that.

Equality for part-time workers, maternity and paternity leave, health and safety standards, protections from discrimination and harassment, equal pay terms and regulation of working hours are among the basic labour standards won by the labour movement—not just in the UK, but across Europe—that are under threat from a Tory Brexit. The Minister may deny that but his colleagues have given the game away. The International Trade Secretary—the last man standing of the Prime Minister's original three Brexiteers—was clear about his vision when he said:

“we must begin by deregulating the labour market”,
and that it is

“intellectually unsustainable to believe that workplace rights should remain untouchable”.

The former Brexit Secretary, the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), put it more bluntly when his book described British workers as
“among the worst idlers in the world.”

The track record of this Government speaks even louder than those words: a damaging and draconian Trade Union Act that attacks representatives of millions of working people across the UK, for instance. Tribunal fees caused a staggering drop in the number of workers able to bring claims against exploitative bosses. It is the same story even on an issue as basic as ensuring waiters can keep their own tips. If the Minister's answer is to trust the Government, the people of Barnsley will regard that as little more than a joke. The withdrawal agreement gives us almost nothing in the way of legal safeguards; instead, it gives Ministers power to repeal, dilute and cut employment rights after we leave.

I will take the liberty of anticipating the Minister's reply and deal with the so-called “non-regression” clause that my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich mentioned. Even during the transition, it leaves us exempt from any measure whose deadline falls beyond the end of the phase, leaving British workers falling behind our European counterparts even before we have fully left. Even worse, non-regression clauses of this sort have been found deeply flawed in a series of court judgments. I will not recite the legal precedents in full,

but they have been described as a “fallen fig leaf” by leading legal commentators. The article in the agreement is for the stated purpose of

“ensuring the proper functioning of the single customs territory” rather than protecting workers' rights in itself, limiting it even further.

The Government could have given us a standstill clause, which would have given them a legally binding duty that workers and trade unions could enforce in the courts, but they decided not to. The Attorney General confirmed to the House last week that the

“non-regression clauses...are not enforceable either by the EU institutions or by the arbitration arrangements under the withdrawal agreement.”—[*Official Report*, 3 December 2018; Vol. 650, c. 559.]

He made clear that he thought that was a good thing. That is a stark and telling contrast to the far tougher and enforceable requirements on state aid that my hon. Friend referred to. No wonder the Institute for Public Policy Research, among others, concluded that the non-regression clause was

“not sufficient to maintain current protections”.

Then, there is the political declaration. We have often heard on Brexit that the devil is in the detail, but the problem with the political declaration is that there is no detail. It does not even have legal effects. Any new Tory Prime Minister—hardly an unlikely prospect, from what we see of the party opposite me—could just rip it up. Its only reference to workers' rights is in the section on “open and fair competition”, which tells us exactly how they are seen—simply a way to maintain fair competition.

We have always said that we want a future relationship where rights and protections are defended, preventing a race to the bottom. This agreement threatens to do the very opposite. It opens the door to a future where labour standards come second to the interests of big business, rights at work are watered down and a Conservative Government can dismantle yet more protections for workers and unions. The people I represent in Barnsley voted very clearly to leave. I respect that decision, but I do not believe they voted for a reduction in workers' rights, jobs and prosperity. The question is not whether we leave but how we leave.

3.5 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I will not hold up the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) for very long, but I have just a couple of points that are too long to make as interventions; therefore, I felt the best thing to do would be to speak.

To pick up on the question of rights, a number of hon. Members spoke about a bonfire of rights that will come about as a result of our leaving the European Union. However, there is another organisation responsible for protecting those rights: the Council of Europe. We ignore that at our peril. I know that it is seen as a great thing in this country that we send no journalists along to Council of Europe meetings—we send along our delegation, if they can be spared by the Whips Office, but it is always a secondary thing—and yet the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) mentioned a case that was heard by the European Court of Human Rights. That does not belong to the European Union; it belongs to the Council of Europe, an independent organisation set up in 1948 with the aim of protecting

[John Howell]

human rights in Europe. The ECHR, which the Council of Europe looks after, is a unique body. It is one where we, as council members, elect the judges to serve for individual countries, so it has a democratic legitimacy.

I think back to the various meetings that we have held over the past few years, and I can assure the hon. Lady that employee rights, whether in specific circumstances or more generally, have been on the agenda for discussion on many occasions. For example, on at least one occasion we have looked at the rights of employees to access information about themselves and their cases, in order to take forward what they want to do. This conversation seems to be a bit one sided. So far it has not looked at the bigger picture or taken into account what the Council of Europe does.

Stephanie Peacock: I think I am right in saying that the hon. Gentleman is arguing that the Council of Europe can help to protect workers' rights, but the people I represent, and a lot of those who voted to leave, voted so that this place could protect workers' rights. Surely, it is the democratically elected Government's responsibility to ensure that workers' rights are protected.

John Howell: That is an interesting question. We give up our rights to decide things for ourselves in a number of situations. We give up the right to our own sovereignty by belonging to the United Nations and to NATO. To a certain extent, we give it up by belonging to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Most importantly, we give up our rights to some aspects of our sovereignty by being members of the Council of Europe. It is not right for the hon. Lady to look at this issue solely in terms of one or two organisations; she needs to look at a third organisation—the Council of Europe—which is there to provide just that sort of reassurance to people about their human rights, which I think she and her colleagues are, and have been, looking for.

I want to touch on Birmingham prison, which the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich opportunely mentioned in passing. This morning I participated in a Justice Select Committee sitting in which we questioned senior members of the Prison Service about what happened at Birmingham Prison. A key point relates to provisions in the contract with G4S not to hold it to account in many ways that we would normally expect. All of us, on both sides of the political fence, questioned those witnesses about the legitimacy of excluding those areas from the contract and how they could manage them.

Birmingham Prison is a good example of the mixture of public and private collaboration, in that we have public collaboration through the Ministry and the Department, which hold those running the prisons to account rather than having to run them themselves. We asked about the extent to which windows had been broken and not fixed, and why no one had been held to account and what had happened. At the end of the sitting we specifically asked the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice what would happen at the end of that examination. We got a firm statement that the contract would possibly at some stage go back to G4S when we could all be assured that it would be able to keep prisoners in the state in which we would expect them to

be kept and look after them properly. That is a good combination of private and public sector partnerships in action.

3.11 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, particularly as I was not on the speakers list. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) for making such a strong case. I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) on the Front Bench and I welcome the new Minister. I hope he enjoys his portfolio for as long as it lasts.

I want to make three brief points that it is important to make, as they sometimes do not feature in debates. Although we are here in this important debate to escape from Brexit, it very much relates to Brexit or what might result from it. First, when I have been involved in trying to save companies and looking at how the public sector can get involved in that, I have always been told that we cannot do so because of state aid rules. I have never understood what those state aid rules are. I am sure that there are state aid rules that apply, and that the European Court of Justice or the European Court of Arbitration—whichever it is—can eventually adjudicate on whether public money was used properly, but that is at best years down the line.

My point is that the argument about state aid rules has always been used to effectively allow national Governments—in this case ours—a cop-out, when what they are really saying is, “We don't want to help this company or industry, and we now have a wonderful excuse that gives some credibility to our rationale for so doing.” It was applied to steel in Redcar, and I can cite local cases where it was up to the national Government to put their money where their mouth was and where, if they had really wanted to save a company or industry, they could have.

I know a little about the agriculture industry and the different boxes—the amber, the red, the green and the blue. This relates not only to the EU, but to the WTO, and I was pleased to hear what my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich said about that. We know that the WTO rules are laxer, but this is about the framework within which the EU wants to operate. The most subsidised agriculture system in the world is in America. Where did the term “pork-barrel politics” come from? It is about putting money into the American mid-west to win elections. It is against any notion of free and fair trade, so I take it with a pinch of salt when I am told that state aid rules are so restrictive that we cannot do anything.

In many ways I see that in contract law. Perhaps the days are long gone, but when we put forward a contract, the Official Journal of the European Union was always waved in our face and we were told the contract had to go through a system of rigorous assessment, yet when it came down to it, we could employ local labour when we wanted to, but that was always seen as not being possible.

My second point is about fairness in the application of state aid. I am grateful for the Library's papers on this. When we look at state aid as a percentage of GDP, we are always in the bottom quartile. We choose not to invest anything like the sums of money that other countries do in supporting our industry. That must be

the case because so many of our railways, water companies, waste companies and energy companies are owned by foreign national concerns—even nationalised concerns. So something happens elsewhere within the EU that, again, we choose not to follow as a national state. I worry that we use the EU as an Aunt Sally. Other countries seem able to control our major companies through their public sectors. Nothing illustrates that more than Hinkley Point, which we have effectively handed over not only to the French state, but to the Chinese state, which is funding it. Of course, China is not part of the EU, but it is part of the WTO, and I would love to know why, when we try to do things in this country involving the public sector, we are so much more constrained.

Thirdly, I share my hon. Friend's concern, and I worry about where we will go after the end of March if we are out of the EU or whatever state we will be in. There is an inclination that we could witness a race to the bottom. I worry, for example, that our regulatory framework will be overseen by the Competition and Markets Authority, which, from my experience, has no real interest in labour standards or trying to protect trade union rights, which my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) talked about. We ignore that at our peril and might find not only that we have leapt from the frying pan into the fire, but that the fire has completely engulfed us. There will be the threat of a race to the bottom. The idea that we will become a global nation basically means that we will simply cut our wages and conditions, which will apparently yield a wonderful competitive advantage.

I have made those three points because the debate is important. It is apposite because it comes on the back of all the other shenanigans that have been going on over the past few days about whether we are leaving and on what terms. This is important. The British public might be asked for a second opinion on our relationship with the EU. It would at least help if we could put to them what really goes on, rather than some of the myths that seem to be continually put across about what we can do and what we choose not to do.

3.19 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. As you can hear, I am going to battle through my speech this afternoon. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) has called me a “wee sow!”—all I can say is that interventions will be very much encouraged during my remarks. First, I thank the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) for securing this debate, which is timely, given the game playing that we have seen over the past couple of days by the Government.

Yesterday I was expecting to address the House on the deal, but we found out that the debate was cancelled. Another reason why the debate is timely is that yesterday I was going to make the argument I made during the EU referendum campaign—to remain and reform. I understand the Lexit argument that the EU can be seen as a capitalist club, but my view was then, and is now, that the answer to neo-liberalism is not to leave for more neo-liberalism and deregulation. I fear that that is happening and very much regret that successive UK Governments, but particularly Conservative ones, have had a disgraceful record on applying for EU social funds. It is worth reflecting on that.

The hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), my friend and trade union comrade, made a point about people in lower income brackets—the same ones who would have benefited if former UK Governments had taken a more proactive approach on EU social funds. I am thinking particularly of the one for food poverty. However, the UK Government did not apply, so France and Germany got €450 million from the EU to help with food poverty, and because the UK did not apply it got the same amount of money as Malta, which was €12 million. Like many others who have spoken, I have a concern that we could end up with the UK leaving the EU and signing trade deals that would make the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership look moderate.

The debate is timely also in relation to the current Government's direction of travel on public sector delivery and the management of the economy. Already, Carillion, which was providing public sector services, has collapsed. I have previously warned here, and in written questions, about issues with Interserve, which looks like being the next Carillion.

We are also in the ludicrous position where the current Government are considering privatising veterans' services. This must be one of few nations that would even consider that. We know the current Government's approach to workers' rights because of—to correct my friends in the Labour party—the “anti-trade union” Act, which is what we should call the Trade Union Act 2016.

The Government, following the passage of the 2016 Act, were forced to consider e-balloting, but almost three years down the line they have done nothing to help with e-balloting for industrial action ballots. That is relevant to the present debate because if the EU referendum had been conducted according to the same rules as a trade union industrial action ballot, it would not have been possible to prosecute Brexit. The result would have failed to comply with the 40% rule that the Government insist on applying to trade unions in industrial action ballots. I shall take a sip of water now, Mr Hollobone—if no one is keen to intervene on me.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East has said, over the past few decades Westminster Governments have left key Scottish industries, and industries across the UK, without support. There is now a real fear that we face a Tory Brexit race to the bottom. In decades when Thatcherism, it has been said,

“swept like a wrecking ball through the mines, the steel industry, the car factories, shipbuilding and engineering and oversaw the demise of the communities which had built their livelihoods around them”

it was the Conservative Government who referred to miners as “the enemy within”. It was often felt that the same sentiment was directed towards many working communities. That Government's attitude to many of those communities can be summed up by the classic Proclaimers song “Letter from America”:

“Bathgate no more
Linwood no more
Methil no more
Irvine no more”.

Let us not forget that the period from 1981 to 1983 was the worst recession since the 1930s, destroying one fifth of the industrial base and doubling unemployment. That was before war was declared on the miners. The

[Chris Stephens]

Linwood car plant in Renfrewshire closed in 1981 with the loss of 4,800 jobs. Plessey Electronics in Bathgate closed in 1982. Leyland's lorry factory in Bathgate closed in 1986 with 1,800 jobs lost. Ravenscraig steelworks closed in 1992 with the loss of 1,200 jobs. Various Clyde shipyards wound down or closed, including Scott Lithgow in Greenock in 1988.

David Linden: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Chris Stephens: I am relieved to find that someone wants to intervene on me.

David Linden: I am grateful to that wee sowl my hon. Friend; my question is in 22 parts so he may as well take a seat, to quote "The West Wing".

In all seriousness, my hon. Friend is rightly listing the communities decimated by the horrific economic policy of the Thatcher Government. Does he understand that there is a clear correlation between many of the communities he named and voting yes to independence in 2014? They realised that the only way they could get fairness in a rejuvenated local economy would be through their own Government having the power to act.

Chris Stephens: As someone representing the constituency with the second highest individual number of yes voters in the 2014 referendum, I think my hon. Friend is right. The reason why the issue is important is that European Governments supported their steel industries against cheap imports. They supported their industrial base at a time when the UK did not. There are fears at the moment, with the current Government refusing to match Scottish Government funding for the Tayside deal to support Michelin workers who face job losses. It just goes to show that the "nasty party" tag is still alive and well.

The Scottish Government have had to intervene to help commercial shipbuilding on the Clyde, finding a new buyer for the Ferguson shipyard, and they have also intervened in relation to securing a new owner for the steelworks. For the first time, following a campaign and the amendment of the law, the Scottish Government have secured the power to allow a public-sector bid for a rail franchise in Scotland. It was Westminster that sold off public services, not the European Union, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East described very well. It is the Scottish Government who are pressing ahead with plans for a national investment bank and public energy company.

Workers' rights are a passion of mine. I was a trade union activist before I arrived in this place. It was the European Union that forced successive Westminster Governments to improve workers' rights. The pregnant workers directive of 1992 guaranteed women a minimum of 14 weeks' maternity leave, and that forced the then Labour Government to go further.

The European Court of Justice made it clear that any discrimination against a woman because of pregnancy or maternity leave is sexism and should be treated as such. It was EU law that provided that parents must be allowed 18 weeks' unpaid leave from work to look after a child. The equal treatment directive led to UK law banning discrimination on the grounds of age, religion

or sexual orientation. Indeed, that directive is helping many women, particularly in the public services, to make equal pay claims. I am grateful for that, and should declare that I am currently an equal pay claimant against my former employer—but I shall move swiftly on.

EU rules adopted in 2008 provide that temporary workers must be treated equally with directly employed staff, which includes the giving of access to the same amenities and collective services. We know from research that 41 of the 65 new health and safety regulations introduced in the UK since 1997 have come from the European Union. The Scottish National party takes the issue of tackling exploitative working practices extremely seriously, and we oppose the "anti-trade union" Act 2016.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East is campaigning for the UK Government to stop discriminating against young people and ensure they get a real living wage. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) is promoting the Unpaid Trial Work Periods (Prohibition) Bill, and I recommend the well-crafted and beautifully written Workers (Definition and Rights) Bill that seeks to simplify the status of workers in law and eliminate zero-hours contracts. I thank everyone who has contributed to this debate. SNP Members oppose neo-liberalism. We do not see Brexit as a way to enhance neo-liberalism, and if it turns out to be it will be a disaster for this country—it will be a disaster for the United Kingdom.

3.30 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) on securing this important debate, which is now the only piece of Brexit business tabled today—not what I was expecting.

State aid, public ownership, and workers' rights are the critical building blocks of our nation's economic model, and getting them right will be crucial to our future prosperity and the nature of any post-Brexit settlement. As my hon. Friend expressed so clearly, the Brexit vote has exposed the flawed foundations of our economic model. After decades of crying that "there is no alternative" to neo-liberal privatisation, laissez-faire economics, and deregulated labour markets, it was a Conservative Chancellor who, after the Brexit vote, threatened to "change our economic model". Of course, he was actually proposing an acceleration of neoliberal reform without the constraints of European law—a "race to the bottom" in workers' rights and protections, as the Leader of the Opposition put it in Lisbon last week.

The European Union delivers and guarantees important rights to British workers that we cannot allow to be taken away, but it has not always fulfilled the promise of a social Europe. I was also in Lisbon last week, representing the British Labour party at the congress of the party of European Socialists. I told them that no matter what happens with Brexit, we must all fight for socialist values within Europe: strengthening the rights of workers and trade unions, and ending austerity and wage suppression.

Yesterday in France President Macron finally recognised that French working people need higher incomes, not lower ones, if France is to prosper. It should not take riots in the street for our leaders to get that point. Here in Britain the real issue underlying Brexit is that working people want and deserve real rights, a real voice, and better lives. The Brexit deal must therefore defend what we have won in a European context by upholding workers' rights and social protections, and if Brexit does not mean that, it is a total fraud against working people. The deal must also allow us to make further gains in the context of our continuing economic relationship with Europe, whether by strengthening European works councils, or restoring public ownership of public goods. That is what the Leader of the Opposition meant when he said in Lisbon:

"As socialists and trade unionists, we will work together to help build a real social Europe, a people's European socialist Europe".

What should that mean in practice for state aid, public ownership, and workers' rights? As many hon. Friends have eloquently said, Labour Members reject the Government's position that the best the state can do for the economy is get out of the way of the private sector. In the words of the renowned economist Mariana Mazzucato, we believe in an entrepreneurial state that stands shoulder to shoulder with the private sector. We are not talking about uneconomic subsidies for dying industries or failing firms; we want targeted interventions that support a prosperous, competitive, growing, and technologically driven economy that works for all. Yes, that should include public ownership where there is a natural monopoly or important public goods are at stake. Mazzucato also observed that, much like taxation and regulation, state aid rules are often used as an excuse for no investment and general inertia, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) pointed out, that is particularly true for the UK Government. One example of that is in my region, the north-east, where the steel sector was allowed to decline and suffer because of Conservative inaction.

The UK has never gone as far as European Union law allows to enable the state to support the UK economy. As a percentage of GDP, we spend far less on state aid than our European neighbours—roughly 0.3%, compared with 0.6% in France and 1.2% in Germany. Public ownership is common on the continent, guaranteed by article 345 of the Lisbon treaty, which allows countries to make their own decisions on ownership. SNCF is France's national state-owned railway company, and the German energy sector is experiencing a return to public and communal ownership. In this country we have Scottish Water, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden). Some French and German public companies even own parts of our privatised utilities, and in that far-left enclave, the Netherlands, private ownership of water companies is illegal.

Although it is true that European Union member states are bound by a requirement to provide aid only on the basis of a level playing field, public service compensation does not constitute state aid when it applies to services of general economic interest. Those are economic activities that deliver outcomes in the overall public good that would not be supplied by the market—or would be supplied under different conditions

regarding objective quality, safety, affordability, equal treatment or universal access—without public intervention. That could refer to a number of services, so will the Minister commit to report back to Parliament on which of our services of general economic interest we need to protect?

Before entering Parliament I had a job as Head of Telecoms Technology for Ofcom, the communications regulator, and I spent many months comparing our use of provisions for services of general economic interest with the way they were used by our European neighbours. I can confirm to the House, and especially my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich, that we do not use such provisions. The Government do not even seem committed to protecting our public services in new trade deals. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that future trade deals do not threaten the public ownership of crucial national assets such as our NHS?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) remarked, regardless of whether people voted leave or remain in the European Union referendum, no one voted for worse rights at work. Well, at least not at their work. Members of the European Research Group may well have voted for worse rights for others, while wishing to retain and indeed expand their privileges as parliamentarians. They want working people back in the middle ages, but not the sanctions that MPs received at that time. A poll commissioned by the Institute for Public Policy Research in February this year found that more than 70% of people want European Union rights at work to be strengthened or maintained after Brexit—more than double the number who thought they should be watered down.

The Prime Minister has repeatedly promised to maintain workers' rights post Brexit. For example, she said at her party conference in 2016 that

"existing workers' legal rights will continue to be guaranteed in law—and they will be guaranteed as long as I am Prime Minister."

Only last month, she assured the House that her deal successfully safeguarded workers' rights. Yet, as colleagues pointed out, this Government repeatedly voted down Labour amendments to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill that would have required primary legislation if future Governments sought to reduce workers' rights. With that rejection, our rights are left vulnerable to deregulation by ministerial diktat.

By not allowing new European works councils to form or having a contingency plan to replace them, the Tories would leave British workers at a disadvantage to their European Union colleagues. Will the Minister commit to reversing the decision to scrap European works councils?

The Government's withdrawal agreement contains significant flaws with regard to workers' rights. As was pointed out, one of the provisions of the backstop is a non-regression clause on labour standards, which would prevent either party from lowering protections below their current levels. However, it allows for some divergence, meaning that a UK Government would still be able to water down workers' rights—a worrying possibility given this Government's track record on labour protections.

Moreover, the non-regression clause would not require us to update our labour legislation alongside the European Union, meaning that over time we could end up with significantly poorer protections. That is a real concern

[Chi Onwurah]

given the growth of the so-called gig economy. Only last month, Tory MEPs joined the UK Independence party in voting against new rights for gig economy workers in the European Parliament. Will the Minister commit to updating workers' rights in line with European best practice following the end of the transition period?

My party has pledged to protect workers and their hard-won rights, reject no deal as a viable option, and negotiate transitional arrangements to avoid a cliff edge for the UK economy and workers. We have pledged to ensure workers are represented on company boards and to require firms with more than 250 employees to set up ownership funds, making workers part-owners of their companies.

My party will make full use of the powers the state has, and should have, to build an economy that supports workers' rights, trade union rights, innovation and industry in every region of our country, and that works for my constituents in Newcastle and for the constituents of the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell)—in short, an economy that works for the many, not the few.

3.42 pm

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) for securing this important debate. There were passionate and learned contributions from the hon. Members for Glasgow East (David Linden) and for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), from my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) and the hon. Member for Glasgow South—

Chris Stephens: South West.

Chris Skidmore: Apologies—the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens). I was deeply impressed by the hon. Gentleman's ability to speak through his vocal impairment; he was cutting quite loudly through it by the end of his speech. We also heard from the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) and, last but not least, the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), whom I thank for his generous congratulations on my fifth day in my new role.

Chi Onwurah: I regret that I did not take the opportunity to welcome the Minister to his new role and I wish him every success for the period he occupies it.

Chris Skidmore: I am deeply grateful for those kind words. I am getting stuck into the job by appearing at this debate, but I am here to represent the views of my Department as a replacement Minister. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), the Minister for Small Business, Consumers and Corporate Responsibility, sends her profuse apologies that she has been unable to attend. She is representing the Department in the debate on the Accounts and Reports (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018 in Committee corridor. I am here in her place to represent the Department's views.

Let me start with what state aid rules are and why they exist, what is and is not state aid, and when it is allowed. Put simply, state aid is Government support or

subsidy of an economic operator that gives it an advantage it could not get on the open market and distorts competition in the single market. The EU has tough rules governing the way subsidies can be given, to stop companies from getting an unfair advantage over their competitors and to ensure that countries with deep pockets do not subsidise their companies to the detriment of companies in other member states. However, where there are good policy justifications for state aid—where the benefit from giving aid outweighs the potential harm of a subsidy—the rules enable aid to be given.

Not all Government spending is aid. In fact, less than 1% of UK Government spending meets the technical definition of state aid. The state aid rules are about supporting fair and open competition, and the UK has long been a vocal proponent of them. The rules exist to stop countries from subsidising their industries unfairly, which would put businesses out of business and workers out of work.

A second misconception is that state aid rules prevent nationalisation. As long as the Government do not pay more than the market price for any assets acquired, the rules do not prevent that. However, the rules oblige the state to act as a normal market investor. That is good, because it prevents public authorities from unfairly distorting markets. State aid rules are neutral on public ownership and on the detail of spending decisions.

State aid rules are also fundamental to any free trade agreement. The political declaration on the framework for the future relationship between the EU and the UK recognises that. Free and fair trade is not possible if one party is able to subsidise without restraint. In a single customs territory that allowed the free trade of goods, as provided for in the draft withdrawal agreement, neither the EU nor the UK would be able to apply tariffs as measures against unfair subsidies by the other party. To ensure fair and open competition, it is absolutely necessary for the same state aid rules to apply consistently within the single customs territory, not to be frozen or disapplied for one bit of it.

I turn to workers' rights, which have been the predominant topic of discussion. It is important to be clear that we are not making a choice between protecting state aid rules and protecting workers' rights. As a responsible Government, we will work both to prevent unfair subsidies and to protect the rights of workers. The UK—we had several history lessons through some of the learned contributions to the debate—has a long-standing record of ensuring that workers' rights are protected. Those include employment and equality rights, and protections for health and safety at work.

The decision to leave the European Union does not change that. This Government have made a firm commitment to protect workers' rights and to maintain the protections covered in the Equality Acts.

Chris Stephens: Can the Minister tell us when the Government plan to publish their proposals in response to the Taylor review?

Chris Skidmore: In terms of the Government's commitment and the commitments I am giving today, I reflect that the Prime Minister said recently in the House that

“we already go further than EU minimum standards, including on annual leave, paid maternity leave, flexible leave, paternity leave and pay, and parental leave, because we know that the first

responsibility for protecting those rights sits with...Parliament. As we take back control of our laws, we will not only honour that responsibility, but go further still...by implementing the recommendations of the Taylor review. So we will not just protect workers' rights: we will enhance them."—[*Official Report*, 4 December 2018; Vol. 650, c. 760.]

The Government have been clear that they will take the recommendations of the Taylor review forward.

Stephanie Peacock: Further to the intervention by the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), the Minister has not given the House a date. If he is that committed to the response, can he tell us when it will be?

Chris Skidmore: I appreciate the hon. Members' request for a specific date. I will have to fall back on a position of ensuring that my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood, the responsible Minister in this policy area, will write to both the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Glasgow South West setting out clearly the next stages and the time frame for them.

Given our record in comparison to the EU standards in many areas, it is not surprising that Eurofound, the EU agency for work-related policy, ranks the UK as the second best country in the EU for workplace wellbeing, behind only Sweden, and the best country for workplace performance.

There has been some discussion about the EU withdrawal agreement. That will ensure that workers' rights enjoyed under EU law will continue to be available in UK law after we have left the EU. That includes rights derived from EU law, such as the working time directive and the agency workers' directive. Specifically within the withdrawal agreement, the UK is seeking a stringent and legally binding agreement with the EU not to roll back on employment standards. A joint committee would ensure that the UK was keeping to the agreement at a political level. There will be no roll-back of rights, including collective bargaining rights, when we leave the EU.

John Howell: I remind my hon. Friend of the European Social Charter, which we signed up to in 1961. Of the rights guaranteed by that charter, there are the

"the right to work, the right to organise"—

that is to be part of a trade union—

"the right to bargain collectively, the right to social security, the right to social and medical assistance, the right to the social, legal and economic protection of the family,"

and so on. Those are just some of the rights protected by this Council of Europe treaty that we signed up to in 1961 and it stands completely outside whatever is agreed in the withdrawal agreement.

Chris Skidmore: I thank my hon. Friend for putting that on the record. I listened to his speech on the Council of Europe and know he is a dedicated member of it. I pay tribute to his work, which often goes unheralded in this place. We know that there are many colleagues from across all parties who do a great deal of work on behalf of the United Kingdom at the Council of Europe, and it is right that that is recognised in this debate.

I hope the Government's commitment, in both the withdrawal agreement and statements that we have made, will give certainty and continuity to employees

and employers alike, creating stability in which the UK can grow and thrive. The political declaration on our future relationship makes it clear that we will build on this for the future deal with the EU. We want to ensure that the future economic partnership of the EU is underpinned by measures that ensure fair and open competition. Obviously, a rigorous approach to state aid is a critical component of that and provides a foundation for ensuring smooth trade and a partnership based on high market access. That is reflected in the political declaration, which establishes state aid as a crucial part of the level playing field commitments. The text makes clear that the precise nature of these commitments will depend on the scope and depth of the future relationship and the negotiations to take place.

There is no choice between taking the state aid rules or protecting workers' rights; the Government recognise the fundamental importance of both.

Stephanie Peacock: The Minister talked about state aid and workers' rights. Can he explain why the rules on state aid are both tougher and clearly more enforceable, in contrast to those on workers' rights?

Chris Skidmore: I am not going to pre-judge what is taking place as we move towards a clear, definable free trade agreement with the European Union and the discussions that will happen after the political declaration. We have made that commitment, but actually we want to make sure that the United Kingdom has the ability to ensure that UK rights are clear, definable and stronger. They are already stronger than those in many European countries. We will continue to ensure that we have the reputation I mentioned: being the second best country in the EU for workplace wellbeing, behind only Sweden. It is important for our global reputation that we maintain that.

On the point about the EU workers council, if the EU withdrawal agreement is not approved we will still unilaterally protect workers' rights in relation to European workers councils, as far as we can. However, to protect them fully, we require a deal with the EU, which sets the rules governing the establishment of a new European workers council. That is why I believe that the withdrawal agreement is so important to ensuring that we have no reduction in workers' rights.

We will go further than the minimum labour market standards guaranteed in a withdrawal agreement. The Government will protect workers' rights to ensure that they keep pace with changing labour markets. I hope the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich agrees that our approach on these vital issues will help secure the best possible deal for the UK as we leave the European Union.

3.55 pm

Laura Smith: Thank you to my hon. Friends the Members for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) and for Stroud (Dr Drew), to the hon. Members for Glasgow East (David Linden) and for Henley (John Howell), and to all other hon. Members who made interventions. I thank the SNP Front-Bench spokesperson, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), who is incredibly brave, battling through his cold—well done. I also thank the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend

[Laura Smith]

the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), and the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, the hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore), who stepped in at the last moment.

There have been some excellent contributions on the importance of workers' rights and the popularity of public ownership. I agree that it is UK Governments who are responsible for the privatisation of public services and the casualisation of labour.

On the points made by the hon. Member for Henley, my concern was precisely that the rights of workers in the charter in the European Court of Human Rights were not mentioned in the Court of Justice of the European Union ruling in the *Alemo-Herron* case. I was not criticising the ECHR or the Council of Europe—quite the opposite, in fact. I was pointing out that the workers' rights afforded by the ECHR, which appeared to have no bearing in the *Alemo-Herron* case, were trumped by the four freedoms.

On the point about Birmingham prison, I stand by my view that the evidence is mounting up rapidly. The obsession with outsourcing and privatisation is a failed project that is costing the taxpayer and the workers in those services an awful lot, while letting down those who rely on the services.

Finally, the current withdrawal agreement means dynamic alignment with EU state aid rules, so it is important that we gain a full understanding of them and the likely direction of travel. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud that the UK Government have made conscious decisions not to aid industry in the way that other EU countries have done. The point is that our national Parliament understands and is happy that the future state aid framework and regulations around public ownership allows for proper democratic debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered state aid, public ownership and workers rights after the UK leaves the EU.

Cat Welfare

3.57 pm

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered cat welfare.

I am grateful to you, Mr Hollobone, and I am grateful that the Minister is in his place. This debate about cat welfare is linked to a private Member's Bill that I presented to the House in July 2018, after speaking to a fantastic local charity in my constituency, Animals Lost and Found in Kent. To be frank, I was not aware of its great work until we were looking at the national volunteers charity day and my wonderful staff member Finlay, who is sitting in the Gallery behind me, said, "This is a list of charities in the constituency. Which one would you like to go and visit?" So I said, "Animals Lost and Found in Grange Road, Gillingham. Let's go and see the great work they do."

Meeting Natasha and Dee was inspirational. They are two individuals who do not have a lot of money, but they do have an amazing heart in wanting to do the right thing and ensuring that animals that have been abandoned, lost or injured get the support they need. I went to the back of their house and I saw a number of cats who had been neglected, injured or abandoned. I said to Natasha and Dee, "What can I do to help you?" They said that the legislation needed to be looked at.

There are 11.1 million cats in our country, who are part of our everyday families. They bring immense happiness to each and every one of us.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): I am delighted that my hon. Friend secured the debate. Is he aware that in 2016 the press reported 202 cats as having been shot in the United Kingdom, with 90% shot in either England or Wales, where we have more lax laws on air rifles? Does he agree that we should look at tightening up the law on the possession and ownership of airguns?

Rehman Chishti: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that important information from 2016. I was made aware of specific points about firearms, banning electric training aids and the control of airguns by the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals—the wonderful charity that does great work in this area—but I was not aware of his specific point. It is absolutely right that we do everything we can on the regulation of those firearms to prevent that kind of completely unacceptable behaviour and to ensure that the welfare of animals is protected at every level.

The amazing joy that these wonderful animals bring to our lives also means that we have a responsibility to do everything we possibly can to ensure that their welfare is protected.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech. I want to take this opportunity to congratulate Stapeley Grange Cattery in my constituency, which does an amazing job at looking after and re-homing cats. I also pay tribute to my own cat, Pudding, who is a remarkable addition to our family.

Rehman Chishti: I, too, pay tribute to the work of that cattery and congratulate the hon. Lady on the new member of her family. I am sure that her cat will be treated like a member of the family, as cats are throughout the country.

I could look at several cat welfare issues, including the public education campaign, cat breeding legislation, the control and regulation of airguns, which was raised earlier, and fireworks.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. As a cat lover, I am very lucky that Trixie the cat came to me as a stray, and that, growing up, we had Tippy the cat, who came from the Cats Protection League. The Cats Protection League's 2022 agenda encapsulates a lot of the issues that he has talked about, from microchipping to reducing violence against cats. It is really important that we get behind that campaign.

Rehman Chishti: I am so glad that I gave way, because the hon. Lady talked about Cats Protection, which I have met with and which has written to other Members and me. I was delighted to attend its Christmas parliamentary reception, along with other colleagues here. It does amazing work, and it is important that we work with it to ensure that we get the right kind of framework.

I was making the point that we could look at several cat welfare issues, but I will focus on two: the compulsory microchipping of all cats and reporting after an accident.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. When I got married some 32 years ago, my wife loved cats but I perhaps did not. However, as I continued to love my wife, I continued to love her cats as well. That is how life is. She is a volunteer and worker at the Assisi Animal Sanctuary, which does excellent work for cats and dogs. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that charities such as Assisi do a phenomenal job in caring for stray cats and in providing sterilisation and other deterrents that he referred to? No matter how good a job it does, we in the House must do ours, and to an equally high standard. Unfortunately, I believe that thus far we are not achieving that.

Rehman Chishti: I completely agree. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has done some brilliant work, but we have an immense amount more to do. I also agree on the first point. The hon. Gentleman has an agreeing wife, who made him become a cat lover and animal lover. I am not married yet, but if I get married, I will need somebody who likes cats, so that we can get a cat. Coming in and out of London, I do not have time to have a cat; we are talking about animal welfare, and cats must be given time. That is key. His point about supporting and doing the right thing as parliamentarians—not simply talking about something but pushing for the right framework to be put in place—is absolutely right.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Does my hon. Friend acknowledge the role that cats play in the social fabric of our society, particularly for the elderly or vulnerable? They play a vital role in providing the comfort and companionship that those people are looking for.

Rehman Chishti: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He will have seen the PDSA's PAW report, which talked about cats' five welfare needs, one of which is

companionship. We talk about loneliness and the Government doing the right thing and people having the required environment to be happy, and what cats and animals do is absolutely amazing, so he makes a valid point.

My first point is about the compulsory microchipping of cats. I spoke to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on 25 October. He said that the proposals in my presentation Bill on the compulsory microchipping of cats and ensuring that car accidents involving cats are reported, as they are when dogs are involved, were very reasonable, and that he would ask his civil servants to look into the matter. I take the Secretary of State at his word, and if he says that the proposals are very reasonable, it therefore means that to do the opposite would be very unreasonable.

In the light of the Secretary of State's commitment and his saying that the proposals are very reasonable, I ask the Minister: are cats less important than dogs? A statutory instrument requiring dogs to be compulsorily microchipped was introduced in 2015, so there does not need to be primary legislation; such a change could be done through a statutory instrument. At the time it was said that such a change would be done with dogs first to see how the process worked, and that extending it further would then be looked at. That was in 2015. I know that the Government and Parliament work slowly, but three years to see how a system works is long enough.

I know the Minister. He and I have been here for the same amount of time—eight years. He is a wonderful man who cares passionately about animal welfare and doing the right thing, and he listens to what people have to say. A petition on change.org, "Help me to change the law for Cats involved in RTAs", received 377,000 signatures. A parliamentary petition about microchipping had 33,413 signatures. A petition to introduce compulsory microchip scanning for vets, rescues and authorities had 70,800 signatures. That demonstrates that people out there want Parliament to do the right thing, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) says is our duty. Ministers can see the public interest in this area through the petitions put forward and the contributions of Members today and in previous debates.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): My hon. Friend mentioned microchip legislation. It is also true that the Road Traffic Act 1988 could be amended. Section 170 requires motorists to stop and report accidents involving animals, including horses, cattle, mules, sheep, pigs and dogs, but not cats. Does he agree that it is time to amend that legislation?

Rehman Chishti: My hon. Friend knows a lot about this because she chairs the all-party parliamentary group on cats and has done amazing work on this issue. She is absolutely right. We were told that legislation does not cover cats is because they are free-roaming. I say to everyone, "Let's get away from technicality. Let's do the right thing and let's look at what counterparts around the world do on this issue."

I am grateful to Mandy at CatsMatter. She gave me a copy of a piece of legislation, which I have with me today. It is article 26 of the agriculture and markets law from the State of New York Department of Agriculture and Markets. Rather than using the RTA, we could

[Rehman Chishti]

have a specific section in animal welfare provision. Section 601 in that document is entitled “Leaving scene of injury to certain animals without reporting”. It states:

“Any person operating a motor vehicle which shall strike and injure any horse, dog, cat or animal classified as cattle shall stop and endeavor to locate the owner or custodian of such animal”.

If the free-roaming issue is the reason why we cannot amend the legislation here—the RTA—I point out that cats are also free roaming in the United States, but there the issue has been addressed through separate animal welfare legislation.

I was going to come later to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), but I shall come to it now. It is absolutely at the heart of this. If an individual is going along at night and knowingly hits a cat, is there a moral obligation on them? Many people would already act, but I make to the Minister the same point that I made earlier: are cats less important than dogs? We have legislation, but we argue over a technicality. I have read *Hansard* for when the matter was debated previously in the other place: “Well, the issue is free roaming and we would define ‘free roaming’ this way.” Let us avoid the RTA and go with animal welfare legislation and do that because it is the right thing to do.

If someone knowingly strikes a cat, they should do the same thing as they would if they struck a dog. They would try to find the owner. If they could not find the owner, they would report the accident. This point was made to me when I asked people to clarify the matter. They said, “Should one then report it to the police? That might be onerous for the police in terms of resources.” I say, “Well, we do it for dogs, but if you don’t have to report the accident to the police, you could report it to a vet or to the local authority. You could do a number of different things.” Technicality can be avoided. This is about doing the right thing in the first place. I completely agree with my hon. Friend. That was the second part of my speech; I am grateful that it has now become the first part.

Let me quote from the wonderful charity Animals Lost and Found in Kent on the issue of compulsory microchipping:

“Our main job at Animals Lost and Found in Kent Ltd is to reunite animals, our job is extremely hard as 5 cats out of 10 are chipped, the other 5 we can’t get home and end up going through the rescue centres, that isn’t fair or the best for the cat’s welfare as the cat gets confused, upset, stressed and can shut down. Stress in cats can be very dangerous for them and can lead to big problems like a blocked bladder, urinary tract infections and urine crystals which can lead to death if not treated. Stress also brings out more sinister problems in cats like the flu. But if the cat was chipped, we could get the cat home where they belong.”

That quote is from the points given to me by Animals Lost and Found in Kent.

The hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) talked about Cats Protection. I am grateful for the comments and notes given to me by Cats Protection on this matter. It says:

“In England a survey conducted for Cats Protection showed that 27% of owned cats are not microchipped. Compulsory microchipping of dogs is already in force across the whole of the UK...In the last 12 months 62% of the cats taken in by Cats

Protection’s UK Adoption Centres were not microchipped. Unlike collars, microchips don’t come off, or put cats at risk of collar-related injuries.”

I say to the Minister that it would not be difficult to introduce the legislation that we are calling for. That could be done. Why is it so important? Cats Protection says:

“Failure to microchip a cat can result in the following problems:

Difficulty reuniting a cat that goes missing with its owner

Cats are needlessly rehomed because they are believed to be strays

Worry about a pet cat in the event of an accident

Vets are unable to contact cat owners in any case of emergency

Ownership disputes are difficult to resolve

Detection of cat theft may be difficult”.

Are those not good enough reasons to say that we have to act swiftly?

I have had representations from CatsMatter, Cats Protection, the PDSA and Blue Cross, which I will refer to shortly. If I send the Minister those representations, will he be kind enough to respond to all the points that they have made? In addition, will the Minister be kind enough to meet me and representatives of all the charities that I have mentioned, which have been supporting and making this case, along with my wonderful hon. Friend the Member for Lewes, who chairs the APPG?

I am looking at the time and will mention just two other points. First, the Blue Cross animal hospitals do amazing work. I am grateful to Blue Cross for allowing me to visit one of its centres and see its great work. On microchipping, it says that in 2017, 24% of cats admitted to Blue Cross were considered to be strays, but it is not uncommon for owned animals to be presented as strays because they are not microchipped or do not have updated details on their chip. I agree with those who say, “There’s no point in microchipping if you don’t ensure that the details are correct.” That has to be addressed. The other point is, where will the money come from? Charities such as Blue Cross already do the work voluntarily. The cost is not significant; it can be done. If the issue is cost, I say to the Minister: it is not that expensive; it can be done. Ways and avenues can be found, because it is the right thing to do. Blue Cross says that out of a total of 5,057 cats admitted to Blue Cross for rehoming in 2017, a staggering 80% were not microchipped. If the legislation were amended and compulsory microchipping rules brought into play, that would address a number of those points.

My second point, which my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes has already brought to the fore, is about reporting after an accident. I say this to the Minister: if a jurisdiction in the United States addresses the issue of free roaming by covering it under animal welfare provisions, I think we should move away from amending the Road Traffic Act. That is why the presentation Bill that I put forward is called the Cats Bill. It does not talk specifically about the Road Traffic Act, because the matter can be addressed the other way round.

What I am calling for is the right thing to do. It ties in with what the Government are already trying to do. They have done a brilliant job on animal welfare, but a lot more needs to be done. I have seen the joy that cats bring. In October, for my 40th, I was in Little Rock, Arkansas, with my good friend French Hill. He is a Congressman down there and he has cats called JJ and

Timber. I was not there long, but in the short time I was there, I became attached to them—I would see them when I came back after a day out. Cats are amazing creatures. They bring a lot of happiness, and I just think that if they bring us happiness, we have a moral obligation to support them—to make sure that they get the right support.

I therefore say to the Minister, who is a good man, from the bottom of my heart: can we please not just say today, “We will look to address this at some point in the future”? Short term, medium term, long term—what is the timescale now for getting this provision on to the statute book and putting it into practice?

4.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti) on securing the debate. I do need to correct him on one thing, having been raised in the county town of East Sussex—Lewes. It is pronounced “Lewis”, not “Looze”, otherwise, a certain Member here will be quite angry—but we have set that straight.

I am very keen to confirm to my hon. Friend and other hon. Members who have turned up for the debate—I am pleased to see so many—that of course I will be more than willing to meet him and the various welfare groups that he has talked about to respond to their concerns expressed in writing, and to see how we can best move this matter further forward. There are also other things that I want to do on the back of my hon. Friend’s very well argued speech. That may not satisfy all his demands, but we will move forward on this agenda. Of course, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) will be more than welcome at that meeting as well.

I do think it is time that my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham bought his own cat. He has made such a compelling case. He has shown how it can help people in their political affairs and to find their ideal partner. You never know: it might be the right thing for him to do in his own life.

Rehman Chishti: I should follow the example of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

David Rutley: Yes. It is great to see so many hon. Members with such deep personal experience with cats and involvement with welfare charities. Cats are cherished members of the family for many people. They bring great joy in homes across the country, and we need to recognise that. We also need to understand, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham pointed out in his excellent speech, the distress and concern it causes when a cat gets lost and people want to find out where it might be.

I join Members in their comments praising various groups. The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) is no longer in her place, but she mentioned Stapeley Grange. The hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) praised the excellent work of Cats Protection. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talks about his wife’s committed work in animal welfare in various debates, and I am pleased that that work also extends to cats.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): In Suffolk, we have a very dedicated individual in Kathleen Lusted. She is now approaching 100 and has given almost her whole life to looking after and protecting cats that have gone missing and providing them with new homes. She has almost single-handedly set up a Cats Protection League branch in Framlingham and Saxmundham. Will the Minister join me in thanking her and congratulating her on her life’s work protecting and looking after cats in east Suffolk?

David Rutley: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating his constituent on her work in Framlingham and thanking her for it. If he will provide details, I will not only put my thanks to her on the record, but I will write to her, too, given that it has been her life’s work. I appreciate the contribution that my hon. Friend has made in putting that before us.

There are so many good causes and good welfare groups that take the cause further forward, whether that is Cats Protection, the RSPCA, Battersea Dogs and Cats Home or Blue Cross. They are absolutely committed to the welfare of cats and various other animals. Through their dedicated volunteers, they ensure that in many cases cats that have been lost can be reunited with their owners. They also rehome cats.

Before I get on to the substantive point of the debate, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) raised an important point about air weapons. I know his interest in these matters and I recognise, along with many others, the widespread concern about the shooting of cats with air weapons. Anyone who does that is liable to prosecution for causing unnecessary suffering to an animal. The maximum sentence is currently six months in prison, but that could be extended with new legislation that we are looking to put to the House in due course. A review of air weapons regulation was announced in October 2017. We are now considering what needs to happen with the licensing system and will announce the outcome shortly. That will help address some of his concerns.

Sir Greg Knight: I am most grateful to the Minister for that response. While he is reflecting on the matter, will he look at what has happened in Northern Ireland, which has a system of licensing for airguns? The number of cats reported in the press as being shot has dropped.

David Rutley: I must confess that I was not aware of that. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising what goes on in Northern Ireland with me. I am sure that the hon. Member for Strangford is aware of that, too. I will follow up with officials and see what we can learn.

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give way?

David Rutley: On that point, yes, but then I had better move on to microchipping, otherwise I will be held to account.

Mr Reed: Last year, the RSPCA reported that it had reached a five-year high for the level of airgun attacks on pets. The vast majority of pets attacked were cats. Will the review that the Minister is engaged in also look at where airguns can be advertised and sold? We had an

[Mr Reed]

incident in Norbury recently in which a pawnbroker's shop turned itself into an airgun centre and had a big display of what looked like semi-automatic rifles, but were airguns, in the shop window on a high street right here in south London?

David Rutley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing that to our attention. I am not the Minister responsible for the matter, so I do not want to tread beyond where I should, but I have seen similar incidents and reports in my constituency. I will follow up on the very important point he raises and get back to him on how wide the review will go. I hope it will address such issues, but I will confirm that with him in due course.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham talked about his private Member's Bill, which takes forward a serious issue. He also highlighted how the subject has been raised in numerous petitions. The sheer number of people who have signed the petitions highlights that the Members in the Chamber are not alone; many people are very concerned about the issue. The Government recommend that any owner should microchip their cat to increase the chance of being reunited with it if it gets lost. In April this year, we updated the statutory cat welfare code with the welcome collaboration of Cats Protection and others. The code now more strongly emphasises the benefits of microchipping cats.

Microchipping technology has vastly improved the chances that lost pets will be reunited with their owners. For a relatively small, one-off cost of about £25, people can have greater confidence that their beloved cat can be identified. Why would someone not want to do that? As the head of cattery at Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, Lindsey Quinlan, has said, while the microchipping procedure is short and simple,

"the return on their value is immeasurable".

It is therefore good to see that the proportion of cats that are microchipped has grown in recent years.

My hon. Friend highlighted the good report by the PDSA showing that 68% of cats are microchipped. However, a recent survey by Cats Protection found that the majority of the cats taken to its adoption centres in the past 12 months were not microchipped. It is heartbreaking to think that some of those cats may not have been reunited with their families simply because of the lack of a microchip. That is why I strongly endorse Cats Protection's campaign to promote cat microchipping. The Government will work with Cats Protection and other animal welfare charities so that the proportion of cats that are microchipped continues to grow.

In England, compulsory microchipping of dogs was introduced through secondary legislation due to the public safety risk posed by stray dogs. That does not mean that cat welfare is any less important than dog welfare; it is just that there is not the same risk associated with cats from a safety perspective. For that reason, the microchipping of cats is not compulsory, but we strongly encourage owners and breeders to do it. That is why the Government's cat welfare code promotes microchipping on two grounds. First, as I have already mentioned, microchipping gives cats the best chance of being identified when lost. Secondly and just as importantly, a lost cat

that has a microchip is more likely to receive prompt veterinary treatment when needed. In that way, microchipping helps to protect more cats from pain, suffering, injury and disease, as required by the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

I am grateful to Cats Protection for its support in developing the cat welfare code. Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs officials remain engaged with the issue. I commit to meeting Cats Protection in January, whether as part of the roundtable or separately, to take forward this important agenda.

In the limited time available, it is important to highlight some other actions I would like to take in response to this important debate. As has been said, under the Road Traffic Act 1988, drivers are required to stop and report accidents involving certain working animals, including cattle, horses and dogs. That does not currently extend to cats. However, the Highway Code advises drivers to report accidents involving any animal to the police. That should lead to many owners being notified when their cats are killed on roads. I am pleased that it is established good practice for local authorities to scan any dog or cat found on the streets so that the owner can be informed.

Following today's debate, I will meet the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) to discuss how we can work together to further promote best practice. Highways England has clear guidelines for contractors to follow when they find a deceased dog. That process is designed with owners in mind, giving them the best chance of being informed of the incident that has occurred. The process laid out in the network management manual currently applies only to dogs. I would like to see what could be done to extend it to cats, and I hope other Members agree. The area is the responsibility of the Department for Transport. Following today's debate, I will work with the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) to explore what the Government can do in this area.

To conclude, I would like to say how important it has been to have this debate today. It has brought the issue very much to my attention as a relatively new Minister for Animal Welfare. I am extremely grateful for that. I would like to highlight how important animal welfare is to the Government and to DEFRA.

Rehman Chishti: The Minister has made a general point about looking to what further can be done. Rather than amending the 1988 Act, can we not put post-accident reporting for cats in animal welfare legislation, like in the United States? Will he go away and ensure we can look at compulsory microchipping, as well as the animal welfare perspective post-accident?

David Rutley: I thank my hon. Friend for his comment. Of course I will go away and look at his points. He has made a compelling case. I, and the Government, feel some sympathy with what he says. There are practical differences between dogs and cats in terms of public safety, but notwithstanding that, there is more we want to do to promote these issues. I will gladly meet him and take forward the actions and meetings I have talked about already.

Question put and agreed to.

NHS: Staffing Levels

4.30 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered staffing levels in the NHS.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. It is a pleasure to lead this debate and I thank hon. Members for being present. I know that many are eager to contribute, and the fact that they have taken the time to be here, during one of Parliament's more eventful weeks, emphasises the strength of feeling in the House about staffing levels in the NHS. I also thank the many organisations that have contacted me, offered support and shared their research.

It is clear that the issue of staffing in the NHS is a great and growing concern to many. Indeed, the case of my local NHS trust inspired me to apply for this debate. Most of my constituents rely on the Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust for a range of acute hospital-based and community services. The trust serves not just the people of Batley and Spen, but more than half a million people across Wakefield and North Kirklees.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for securing this important debate. My constituents also use the Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust. There are still several hundred nursing vacancies there, and that is having a significant impact on the delivery of patient care. Does she agree that the chaos of the current Brexit situation is not helping to recruit nurses, potentially from the European Union?

Tracy Brabin: I shall go on to discuss that in more detail, but my hon. Friend and neighbour is absolutely right. We have both been in meetings with the trust where that has proved to be of great concern to it.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): On a similar subject, is the hon. Lady aware that Oxford University Hospitals agreed today to fund the cost of obtaining settled status for EU nationals who work there?

Tracy Brabin: That is something that we have discussed with our trust. The cost should not necessarily fall on the shoulders of the people we want to employ, so that seems like a good thing.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): For Sherwood Forest Hospitals trust, which covers King's Mill Hospital in my constituency, the latest figures show 200 nursing vacancies and, since nursing bursaries were abolished, a 32% decline in those applying to do it. Is it not time to bring nursing bursaries back?

Tracy Brabin: I absolutely agree that training for this most lauded position should not be done at the cost of nurses themselves.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the hon. Lady agree that we must have fewer medical quangos and more medical professionals in their white doctors' coats seeing patients; less cleaning up of paper trails

and more cleaning up in wards and A&Es; and funding that is targeted at frontline staffing and reasonable rates of pay?

Tracy Brabin: Certainly, funding and support should be given to frontline staffing. I will go on to talk about how I see that playing out.

The Mid Yorkshire trust is a major employer of about 8,000 members of staff who operate across three hospital sites: Pinderfields Hospital, Pontefract Hospital and Dewsbury and District Hospital, which is in my constituency. Like many trusts across the country, the trust is feeling the pressure on recruitment. In the most up-to-date figures, which were given to me directly by the trust this week, there is a 10% vacancy rate. That includes 95 full-time-equivalent posts for medical staff, 209 vacancies for full-time registered nurses, and vacancies for all other posts covered by the trust. The trust tells me that its key workforce challenge remains recruiting registered nurses and junior doctors in training. Those staff shortages lead to expensive cover being required—a bill that is ultimately paid by the taxpayer.

I am pleased that the trust has taken steps to mitigate against staffing shortages, including an extensive recruitment programme where vacancies across the trust are advertised and marketed widely. It has introduced a new associate nurse role in partnership with a local university, and expanded and increased the number of apprenticeship opportunities to offer different routes into careers in the NHS. It has held open theatre days to promote particularly difficult roles to recruit for, such as operating department practitioners. Finally, it has increased the number of nurses and doctors on the local temporary staff bank, which reduces its reliance on, and the cost of, commercial agency staff. I am sure that all hon. Members agree that that is all great.

Despite that work, problems remain. I must put on record my concern that staffing shortages can lead to problems for patients. The ambulatory emergency care unit at Dewsbury and District Hospital opened in 2015 to care for patients who needed a quick diagnosis and treatment, and who could be treated without the need for admission to a hospital bed. Since July, it has been closed because of staff shortages and it will remain closed for the foreseeable future. It had also been closed from the end of December last year to early March. Patients now face the lengthy and expensive trip to Pinderfields Hospital.

In the most recent inspection at Mid Yorks, the results of which were announced last week, the safety of services was deemed to require improvement, which will cause deep concern to my constituents. We are now told that the harsh funding climate for our NHS, which has existed since 2010, is coming to an end—austerity is over.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): As the daughter of a nurse, I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. I know she is a proud member of the GMB, like me, so I declare an interest in highlighting its survey, which showed that 78% of NHS and ambulance workers are incredibly concerned about staffing levels. Does she agree with a nurse from Barnsley who said that we need more registered nurses and trained support staff, not untrained volunteers, who are sometimes being used?

Tracy Brabin: My sister is also a nurse. When someone has a nurse in the family, they understand how hard they work. My hon. Friend must be psychic, because I am about to go on to that point.

When it comes to the recruitment and retention of NHS staff, it could not be further from the truth that austerity is over. The Royal College of Nursing did not mince its words when it said:

“The UK is experiencing a nursing workforce crisis”, particularly in England. With one in three nurses due to retire within a decade, we are looking at a perfect storm of increasing vacancies across health and care.

Paula Sherriff: Does my hon. Friend share my concern that, as a direct result of staffing shortages at Dewsbury and District Hospital, the midwife-led birthing unit has had to be closed several times? September was a particularly bad month for closures. That has a traumatic effect on mums-to-be, who expect to give birth there but turn up and get sent elsewhere.

Tracy Brabin: Capacity, particularly in midwifery, is a massive issue, and midwife recruitment is also a problem. A mum who is about to have a baby wants to make sure that they are guaranteed a bed and a midwife who will be with them throughout the process, so of course that is a concern. There are almost 41,000 vacant nursing posts in the NHS and it is estimated that that number will grow to almost 48,000 by 2023—just five short years away.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The hon. Lady is being generous. Does she agree that the problem with the recruitment and retention of staff also stretches to our mental health services? In Cumbria, three years ago, the Government promised a specialist one-to-one eating disorder service for young people, which has yet to be delivered. Does she agree that it is not good enough for the Government to make promises that they cannot deliver because they cannot recruit the staff?

Tracy Brabin: We are seeing increasing problems around recruitment and retention in mental health services, which I will go on to. We know that nurses are heroes of our health service and that they will always voice their concerns.

A survey conducted by the RCN in 2017 had some deeply worrying results. More than half of the nurses said that care was compromised on the last shift and more than 40% said that no action was taken when they raised concerns about staffing. If there was any doubt about the commitment of nurses, nine in 10 were not paid for extra unplanned time worked in the NHS. Unpaid time worked by nurses in the NHS saves the NHS hundreds of millions of pounds a year.

I am not just talking about nurses and the worryingly low levels of recruitment. The Royal College of Physicians informs me that in Yorkshire and Humber 36% of physician consultant posts advertised were not filled. Across the UK, a total of 45% of advertised consultant posts went unfilled, due to the lack of suitable applicants. The RCP believes that we need to double the medical school places to 15,000 a year to alleviate this problem in the long term and it is seriously hard to disagree with that assessment.

The RCP is also calling for investment in public health initiatives, which I am sure is another thing that we all agree on. The desperate need for more mental health staff is well reported. The consultant psychiatrist vacancy rate in the northern and Yorkshire region, which Batley and Spen falls under, is 11.7%, which is higher than the average consultant psychiatry vacancy rate in England. One in 10 consultant psychiatrist posts are vacant. Doctors specialising in mental health are uniquely placed to look at a person's brain, body and psyche. Such specialists will only become more important, so I ask the Minister to update Members on his plans to meet the target of 570 junior doctors specialising in psychiatry by 2020-21 and to say what plans he has to ensure that all trainee doctors have experience of working in psychiatric settings?

The British Medical Association has provided information on the potential impact of Brexit on staffing levels in the NHS. Nearly 10% of doctors working in the UK are from the European economic area. Doctors, as well as many other professionals, make a massive contribution to our NHS. However, the BMA warns that many EEA doctors continue to feel unwelcome and uncertain about their future here. Given the uncertainty that we have seen in the past few days, I imagine that that feeling will not change any time soon. The results could be devastating, with more than a third of doctors from the EU considering moving away from our country. That is the last thing we need, as hospitals are already chronically understaffed, with more than one in four respondents to a BMA survey reporting that rota gaps are so serious and frequent that they cause significant problems for patient safety.

Alarmingly, some doctors feel bullied into taking on extra work. It is clear that something needs to change, particularly now we are in winter again. There are too few staff, who are too stretched, and trusts across the country are struggling to fill vacancies. However, in order to fix a problem, we need to know whose remit it is to provide a solution. Shockingly, there are no specific legal duties or responsibilities at UK Government level to ensure that health and social care providers have enough staff to provide safe and effective care to meet the needs of the population. Health Education England has some powers related to the higher education supply. In practice, however, those powers relate only to the funding for the 50% of their courses that nursing students spend on placements. Health Education England no longer commissions higher education university places, meaning that it is responsive to students signing up for nursing courses rather than proactively seeking them based on areas of need and workforce planning.

We know that the number of European workers in the NHS has fallen dramatically since the referendum. Mid Yorks recruited highly skilled workers from the Philippines, but delays to visa applications meant that 50% of them have now gone elsewhere and into other jobs. We need to do better than that.

The case is clear to me and to many others that we need a proactive and accountable power-holding body that makes robust assessments of population need, and uses that need to calculate the workforce requirements. No action has been taken to assess the level of population need for health and social care support now or in the future. Nobody has calculated how many nurses are needed to meet those needs safely and effectively. No

workforce strategy is in place to set up the mechanism through which new registered nurses can be generated through a supply line.

Workforce plans are not consistently available and when they are they are based on affordability and finance, rather than on the expertise and skills mix of staff required to care for patients. Plans are limited in their ability to make effective change. Providers may identify a need for more nursing posts but then find themselves unable to fill them. Vacant posts stay vacant and gaps on the frontline are filled by more expensive bank and agency staff, and—as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock)—by volunteers, or substituted lower-qualified staff. Patient care is left undone, with lengthening waiting lists.

That is the sad truth of where we are and when the Minister responds I would be grateful to know what plans are in place to enforce accountability for the NHS workforce. Simon Stevens has confirmed that the long-term plan for the NHS could not definitely deal with the NHS workforce and there are serious concerns that without investment a new plan will ultimately fail.

Six years on from the Health and Social Care Act 2012, it is still unclear which organisation is accountable for workforce strategy. Too often, no one is taking responsibility. Health Education England has been consulted, but it has failed to deliver a workforce strategy. Now is the time for leadership and action, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate can last until 5.30 pm. I have to call the Front Benchers no later than 5.7 pm. Four Members are seeking to catch my eye. The guideline limits for the Front Benchers' speeches are five minutes for the Scottish National party, five minutes for Her Majesty's Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister, and then Tracy Brabin will have two or three minutes at the end of the debate to sum it up. There are 20 minutes of Back-Bench time before I call the Front Benchers, so there will have to be a five-minute time limit on Back Benchers' contributions.

4.47 pm

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on securing this debate and on highlighting the biggest challenge facing the NHS: the creeping workforce crisis that has been evolving for some time now. We are now seeing that crisis beginning, in real terms, to affect patient care.

The hon. Lady was right to highlight the fact that a lack of staff in some parts of the country means that operations are being cancelled and beds are being closed. She was also right to point out the challenges that Brexit poses to the recruitment and retention of frontline NHS staff; in the past decade, we have been increasingly reliant on European Union staff coming to work in the UK—before that, it was staff from outside the EU who provided most of the overseas workforce in the NHS. I am sure that all of us would like to put on the record our support for the excellent work that NHS staff from the UK and from all over the world do in caring for patients.

I will also do what I should have done at the beginning of my speech and draw attention to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as I am a practising NHS hospital doctor working in mental health services.

Paula Sherriff: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Dr Poulter: I will not, because of the time limit and because I want to let other people speak; I am sure that we can talk about this issue in detail after the debate.

Very briefly, Mr Hollobone, the Government have made a number of promises about NHS staffing and yet, unfortunately, those promises are failing to come to fruition. In 2015, there was a promise of 5,000 more GPs. Recently, I submitted a written parliamentary question about how much progress had been made in realising that target but I did not get an adequate answer. I would be grateful if the Minister updated us in his concluding remarks by saying how close we are to realising that target of 5,000 additional full-time GPs.

I would also like to highlight some of the challenges in community and mental health services. Very often in this Chamber, we talk about hospitals, and very often the NHS is seen through the prism of that acute sector, but the key challenge to keeping people out of hospital is doing more in the community, building up community mental and physical health services—and they are the very services that are seeing reductions in frontline staff.

I want to touch briefly on mental health. We know that the number of full-time-equivalent mental health nurses fell by 6,000 between 2010 and March 2018, including a reduction of more than 1,800 in learning disability nurses alone. The number of child and adolescent mental health service and learning disability consultant psychiatrists has also slightly declined over the past decade, and many parts of the country, particularly outside London, are struggling to fill higher registrar training posts in those services.

Perhaps more concerning is that the number of junior doctors in specialist psychiatry training—core and higher psychiatric trainees who will become the consultant psychiatrists of tomorrow—has also fallen, by 490 full-time equivalent doctors, from 3,187 in 2009 to 2,697 in March 2018. [*Interruption.*] The civil servants are rapidly checking my figures; they are from answers to parliamentary questions, so they are absolutely correct.

That is a woeful record of decline in the psychiatric and mental health workforce, and it must be corrected. If the Government are serious about their rhetoric on mental health, about improving the quality of provision for people with poor mental health, they need to recognise that the workforce has already declined. Even if there is the promised increase in numbers, it will be from a lower baseline than that of about a decade ago.

The only way to deliver the expansion in services that patients deserve—for example, specialist eating disorder services in Cumbria or East Anglia—is by having a much more serious approach to the recruitment and retention of mental health staff and by paying premiums to attract both doctors to work in CAMHS and people to work in parts of the country where there is a shortage of mental health staff. I look forward to the Minister's response.

4.52 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on calling this vital debate.

I remember the challenging years of the mid-1990s, when I was working as a physio in the NHS. During that crisis time, I never knew when I would get home. Today's scenario reminds me of the dying years of a Tory Government—the parallels are so strong.

In York, I read the Care Quality Commission reports in detail, and although the care given by our NHS staff is excellent, the real challenge that I pull out of the results of CQC reports is the staffing crisis. My local hospital currently has 59 doctor vacancies, and there are 580 nursing vacancies in bands 4 to 7, 312 of which are in bands 5 to 7. The trust has done everything it can to recruit. It went to Spain and recruited 40 Spanish nurses, 37 of whom left after a very short period. The reality is that NHS staffing is in crisis and that affects patient care.

Last year, the trust had to spend £8.5 million on agency staff. That pushed a trust that is already struggling because the funding formula does not work for York into further deficit, which has an impact on its control and on the resources it can get for the winter crisis—York had some of the highest levels of influenza last year. The Minister, therefore, must ensure that the money works, as well as addressing staffing.

I want briefly to look at primary care because, as we have heard, we need early intervention across all ages to keep people out of hospital. Rightly, the Government looked to increase the number of health visitors, and by 2015 the figure was up to 10,309, but since then we have seen a 23.8% fall, down to 7,852, meaning that young people are not getting the input they need. School nursing figures have also fallen by 25% since 2010. So we have a real crisis in our primary care workforce, and also in mental health, as the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) said. Certainly we feel that in York, whether in the community or the hospital environment.

Paula Sherriff: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Rachael Maskell: I am going to continue.

The trust is doing everything it can to recruit, but it is impossible to recruit because the national pool of mental health staff is far too small. Therefore, it is vital that we consider the solution, which comes down, as has been said, to workforce planning. We need a partnership approach to planning the workforce. We need to understand the changing demographics and the increasing mental health challenges in order to put the right planning in place, but trusts will not be able to recruit unless the staffing framework is right. The removal of the bursary scheme has been seriously detrimental, particularly to the recruitment of mature students into nursing. People are giving up a job, but their staying in the profession for longer will pay dividends. Students have to pay to travel to placements, and I remember what that was like, so it is really important that they have bursaries.

Secondly on workforce planning, we need to look at how we educate healthcare professionals across the board. I remember discussions at a national level with the trade unions on that very issue, about needing to

find a different way. In some countries they bring a real foundation into NHS training so that everyone works together in the first 18 months or two years of their training and has a breadth of understanding of medicine before going off to specialise. We, instead, train in traditional old silos of jobs that have clearly blended over the years, and we must look once again at how we structure that.

Thirdly, we need to look at the “Agenda for Change” package. There is no doubt that it is hard to recruit because people are poorly paid in the NHS and can be better paid elsewhere. Given the stress levels and the antisocial hours that people work, we need to look once again at the remuneration of our NHS workforce. Finally, the knowledge and skills framework has consistently been underutilised by the Government and NHS employers, and it is vital that we go back to that framework of professional development in the NHS.

4.57 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I declare my interest as a nurse who is still on the Nursing and Midwifery Council, or NMC, register. I speak, therefore, with first-hand experience about having to deal with staffing shortages during more than 20 years of working in the NHS. Staffing problems have always been there, but I welcome the debate that the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) has secured because we must recognise the issues that many hospital trusts and community services are experiencing.

I welcome last month's NMC figures, which show an increase of more than 4,000 nurses joining the register in the past 12 months, a significant percentage of whom were UK-trained nurses. There was also an increase of 3,000 UK nurses compared with this time last year. I welcome those figures, but that is not to say that there is not a staffing problem across the NHS.

I want to focus on some of the solutions from my experience that would make a real difference out there in the workforce. I understand the sentiments of the hon. Members for Batley and Spen and for York Central (Rachael Maskell) about the bursary scheme, but I trained on that scheme myself and it is far from the panacea that has been portrayed in recent years. We were paid a pittance—£400 a month—for the three years of our training. Yes, it paid for travel and expenses, but not for much else.

Someone training as a nurse has to do the minimum hours to get on to the register, so it is very difficult for them to have an additional job, as other students would. Often times they are mature students and have other commitments, such as children and family responsibilities, and an additional part-time job is almost impossible to hold down. Life on a bursary was tough, and it often explained the high drop-out rate during the three years.

The system I would prefer, and have always advocated, is the degree apprenticeship route. During my time in this place, I have been doing bank shifts at my old hospital with student nurses who are now on the degree apprenticeship route: it is a far better system, and we need to upscale it as a matter of course. Not only are student nurses earning while they are learning; they are part of the workforce, which is a point that the bursary scheme missed completely. Student nurses were university students, but not necessarily part of the

working environment, and often found it tough to move into that environment, because they were not seen as key members of the workforce.

The degree apprenticeship route also means that when students work for hospitals or community trusts during their degree apprenticeship, they are often being paid by those trusts, which are then able to accurately predict the number of students coming through the system. That was different under the bursary system: trusts just had to wait and see which newly qualified nurses applied for their vacant posts. For long-term workforce planning, having those student nurses as part of the team means that trusts have an idea of who is likely to come forward when they qualify. There are a number of positives, and I push for the Government to roll out that degree apprenticeship system—maybe not just in nursing, but in other healthcare professional specialities.

I will briefly touch on flexible working. We are under the misapprehension that internal rotation and a shift-based system means there is flexible working for staff in the NHS, which there absolutely is not. In most areas, people are forced to do internal rotation, whether in the community or in the hospital-based system, and that is increasing as we move towards a seven-day-a-week service. If young parents with children are all of a sudden put on a week of nights with a week's notice, and have no childcare provision, that makes it almost impossible for them to hold down their job.

In the good old days when I first started, people were able to do a permanent nights system, to do permanent weekends, or to choose to work evening shifts. That is all gone now: they are forced to do internal rotation. I say to the Minister that the NHS needs to look at a flexible working system for its staff, because if it does, it is more likely to hold on to the excellent staff who keep the NHS going.

5.1 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on having secured this important debate. I have a little bit of a family connection to the NHS, as I am the daughter of a GP, but it is an honour to follow colleagues of all parties who have direct experience of working in the NHS. I welcome their having shared that experience with us.

Staffing levels in the NHS are an important issue, which affects my local NHS trust in Worcestershire as well. I am in close contact with that trust and with staff at the Alexandra hospital in Redditch, and I very much hear that concern; I hear it from my constituents all the time. I agree that it is essential that we increase the NHS workforce at all levels, from nurses to consultants and, particularly, GPs. We are now in a situation in which demand is rising fast: the population is growing, it is ageing, and people are living longer. That is partly due to the success of our fantastic NHS, and the doctors and nurses who work within it, but it does create one of the biggest problems that the NHS faces.

I must have met every Minister in the Department of Health and Social Care over the past few months, and I am looking forward to meeting the Secretary of State later today, when I will be pressing for more details about a welcome capital investment in breast cancer

services at the Alexandra hospital and across Worcestershire. There has also been more investment in my local hospital, to keep the frailty unit open and open a new urgent care centre. However, all those services have to be staffed, and we need the stability and security of knowing they will continue to be there, serving my constituents. I welcome those changes, but in previous meetings, I have consistently pressed the issue of staffing levels. I am encouraged that the Government are focused on meeting these challenges and providing the NHS with the workforce we need it to have.

At the moment, one of the biggest recruitment drives in the NHS's history is taking place. It is intended to increase the number of doctors and nurses trained in the NHS by 25%—an increase of 1,500 places a year. Steps such as those will play a crucial role in supporting the future NHS workforce, but as Members have highlighted, the immediate pressures are still here and must be addressed now. Nowhere is this issue more acute than in general practice, and I often write to constituents who have complained about the waiting times for seeing their GP. Since becoming the MP for Redditch in 2017, I have pushed for change; I am pleased that the Government are listening and now intend to hire 5,000 more GPs and 5,000 additional GP staff by 2020.

I also welcome the fact that the Home Office has exempted doctors and nurses from the tier 2 visa quota system for non-EEA skilled migrant workers. That will enable the NHS to recruit more quickly and widely, especially considering that NHS recruitment demands account for 40% of tier 2 places. I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care have said time and again that we must get the message out that we want EU nationals to stay in this country, and we need them in our NHS. That has been unilaterally guaranteed by this country, with or without a deal, so please let us get that message out to our wonderful NHS staff.

There are positive steps, and the progress that has already been made should be welcomed. In my county of Worcestershire, the total number of staff employed rose by almost 7% between August 2013 and August of this year, to over 5,000. [*Interruption.*]

5.5 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

5.20 pm

On resuming—

Rachel Maclean: I believe I was noting the positive progress in Worcestershire. The total number of staff employed rose by 7% to more than 5,000 between August 2013 and August this year, and the number of doctors has increased by 5%. The number of nurses has gone up by nearly 8%. There are now nearly 1,400 nurses working in Worcestershire acute hospitals. I have been to the wards, and spoken to the nurses at the Alex who tell me about the positive recruitment days that they have held at the University of Worcestershire. I very much welcome that work, and I hope that it will continue to bear fruit.

It is vital to maintain the morale of our staff, and I welcome what my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) said regarding flexible working. It is

[Rachel Maclean]

important that we look at the issues in the round. As a former employer myself, I know how important it is to get every aspect of the employment offer right. I welcome the new contract deals that will result in a 6.5% pay rise for more than 1 million NHS workers this year. That means that those on the lowest salaries in the NHS will see some of the largest proportionate pay rises. Many nurses and healthcare assistants will enjoy pay increases of at least 25%. We must get the pay offer right to ensure that we encourage our NHS staff both to enter the profession and to stay.

I thank the Minister for attending the debate. I want to hear more about the strategy. I welcome the progress that has been made, and I implore him to continue, steadfast, in that pursuit.

5.21 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I, too, declare an interest as a longstanding NHS worker of more than 30 years.

Healthcare is not delivered by machines or buildings; it is delivered by people. People are the core of the NHS. The problem relates to workforce, and it is hitting all four nations. Although Scotland has the highest ratio of every group of healthcare staff per head of population, we too face challenges. We have a 4.8% nurse vacancy rate in Scotland, but in England it is more than 11.5%. The Royal College of Nursing says that there are 41,000 nurse vacancies at the moment, and if action is not taken, that will rise to 48,000.

As other Members mentioned, since the introduction of the bursary in 2015, there has been a one third drop in applications. Acceptances in England have gone down by almost 4%, whereas in Scotland they have gone up by almost 14.5% over the same period. The bursary is having a huge impact, particularly on mature students, who might already have a degree and have therefore also been hit by the removal of the post graduate bursary that allows a nurse to be trained in just two years.

There has been a 15% drop in mature students, which is hitting those with mental health issues and learning disabilities in particular, as those specialities tend to attract the more mature nurse student. There has been a 13% drop in mental health nursing staff and a 40% drop in nurses looking after those with learning disabilities. That makes those services unsustainable.

Brexit is affecting the workforce, as it is every other aspect of life. There has been a 90% drop in European nurses registering to come and work in the UK, and a trebling of EU nurses who are leaving the UK register. That does not help to solve the problem, and those nurses cannot be totally replaced by UK staff in enough time. It does not matter that the Government come out with warm words if the Home Office's actions make people feel insecure. Friends of ours who have been GPs for more than 20 years in Scotland applied for citizenship for their children. The eldest and youngest children were granted it; the middle child was refused. What are they now talking about? "Maybe we should go back to Germany where we'd be safe."

From every angle, the Government are taking actions that are making staffing levels worse. The former Secretary of State for Health, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), used to go on about the lack of junior doctors and consultants as a cause of excess deaths among those admitted at weekends. Actually, the only staffing impact proven through research is on the ratio of registered nurses to patients—not healthcare assistants or others.

Dr Poulter: I am sure that most of us had great concerns about the previous Secretary of State's use of statistics, but a mental health study was carried out and the highest morbidity rates were in the middle of the week, not at weekends, which rather disproved the assertions that he was making.

Dr Whitford: We pointed that out repeatedly at the time. It has been shown time and again that quality, well-trained, experienced nurses—not so much agency nurses or healthcare assistants—who know a ward are the bedrock of every single service in healthcare.

Brexit is having an impact. Even though in Scotland our Government have promised to pay settled status fees for all those working in public services, we have already lost, according to the British Medical Association survey, 14% of our doctors. England has lost almost 20%. We cannot reach a point where England has 50,000 nurse vacancies. That would be unsafe. The Government need to take action and, like the Scottish Government, put the bursary back, get rid of tuition fees, and make it sustainable for people to train to become nurses. If they do not do that, the sustainability and safety of the NHS in England will deteriorate further.

5.26 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on securing this extremely important debate, and on the tour de force that she presented. She touched on many important issues. Time restrains me, so I will not be able to pick up on all the points that she made, nor on all the impressive contributions made by other Members, particularly those who have had frontline experience, and had practical examples that we need to look into further.

My hon. Friend talked about her local trust being a big employer in her constituency and beyond. Indeed, it employs some 8,000 people, but has a 10% vacancy rate—sadly, very much in line with the national average. She was right that covering the gaps in the rota is an expensive business. I was pleased to hear that so many initiatives were being undertaken by the trust, but the fact that there is still a 10% vacancy rate shows that something is broken with the system.

My hon. Friend highlighted the impact on patients that staff shortages can have regarding closures, and she was right to highlight the nursing workforce crisis and the whole range of specialisms that are at risk. She was also right to raise the uncertainty that Brexit brings to staff, and to highlight the lack of legal powers to require safe staffing levels, and the overall strategy that we need to get the correct staffing levels.

I was also delighted, as always, to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell). She was right that agency spend sucks away vital resources and that recruitment challenges will never be solved unless we get the right framework. That is why we deeply regret the abolition of the nurse bursary, to which I will return.

We know that the NHS workforce is extraordinary. The NHS is one of the biggest employers in the world, and we must pay tribute, as we do every time, to the staff who work so tirelessly, day in and day out. We also have to recognise that there are simply not enough of them. Last month, the King's Fund, the Nuffield Trust and the Health Foundation joined forces and warned that the staffing crisis in the NHS is deepening so fast that the service could be short of up to 350,000 staff by 2030. That warning is stark. Clearly there is an existential threat to the NHS if action is not taken to address the staffing crisis that we are now being told about.

According to official figures, there were more than 102,000 vacancies across the NHS at the end of September. That means that one in 11 posts in the NHS is currently vacant. The chair of NHS Improvement, Baroness Harding, recently acknowledged that

“the single biggest problem in the NHS at the moment is that we don't have enough people wanting to work in it.”

However, the issues that we face run far deeper than merely how attractive the profession looks to applicants.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen said, we face a perfect storm of a retention crisis caused by factors including pay and conditions, ongoing uncertainty about Brexit, demographic challenges in many sectors of the workforce and the ongoing impact of the catastrophic decision to scrap bursaries for nurses, midwives and allied health professionals. Although many of those issues are clear and long-standing, there is no credible overarching strategy to address any of them. As the House of Lords Select Committee on the Long-term Sustainability of the NHS found, the lack of such a strategy

“represents the biggest internal threat to the sustainability of the NHS.”

We all eagerly await the publication of the NHS long-term plan, but I would welcome the Minister's confirmation of precisely when that will happen. I was deeply concerned to hear Simon Stevens's comments about how the plan will not definitively address staffing problems. Will the Minister confirm whether that is the case? If so, when will we see the comprehensive strategy for the NHS workforce that we so desperately need?

As many hon. Members have said, the workforce crisis has been compounded by the abolition of undergraduate nurse bursaries. When it was announced that bursaries would be abolished, we were told that our many concerns were misguided and that the changes would lead to an additional 10,000 training places being provided. However, just as everyone but the Government predicted, the exact opposite has happened. As of September 2018, almost 1,800 fewer people are due to start university nursing courses in England, while the number of mature students has plummeted by 15%.

In our debate on nursing higher education on 21 November, the Minister said:

“We expect NHS England to clearly set out its commitment to the nursing workforce in the long-term plan, and ensure that there is a clear way for that plan to be implemented... The Government

will be consulting on the detailed proposals on future funding for higher education that the RCN has put forward”.—[*Official Report*, 21 November 2018; Vol. 649, c. 372WH.]

Will he provide greater detail on that point and say when that consultation will take place?

The issues that hon. Members have discussed today are acute, systemic and entrenched, but they have been exacerbated by the Government's short-term and flawed approach. Any long-term strategy for the NHS will fail if it does not address them. Staff and patients deserve more than a health service in a constant state of crisis. They deserve better than this Government.

5.31 pm

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) for securing this debate. As she and hon. Members who have contributed to other such debates will know, the issues she raises are very similar to those that we discussed on 21 November in the debate that the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) has just referred to. However, it is welcome to have the opportunity to discuss them again, because such debates reflect the importance that we all place on the NHS workforce. The one thing that the hon. Gentleman and I agree on is that it is right to begin by reiterating our thanks to the NHS professional staff for their work treating patients day in, day out.

I also thank other hon. Members for their contributions. I note in particular the comment rightly made by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) that we need to upscale nurse degree apprenticeship routes. I will speak about that in more detail if I have time. My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) spoke about the capital announcement made last week, which I was pleased to see come through. My hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) made some points about mental health—may I offer him a meeting at the Department to discuss those matters directly, because today I want to concentrate on other matters? The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) made a contribution based on her valuable experience.

I should say right at the outset, as I did in our debate two weeks ago, that the Government greatly value the staff who contribute to and support the NHS. We understand its importance and are committed to ensuring that it is supported and funded appropriately, which is clearly reflected in the extra £20.5 billion a year that the NHS will get by 2023-24.

As the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston quoted me saying in our last debate, we expect NHS England to set out clearly its commitment to the workforce in the long-term plan. The plan will address how to open up the profession to more people from all backgrounds and ensure that they get the right support throughout their training. To answer his question: yes, when the long-term plan is published, he will see the workforce embedded in it and in our strategy. We also expect NHS England to deliver a clear implementation plan to guarantee the future of the workforce. The NHS employs a record number of staff—more than 1.2 million in 2018, which is more than at any other time in its 70-year history—with significant growth in newly qualified staff since 2010.

[Stephen Hammond]

Let me repeat what I said two weeks ago:

“the Government, and I as the new Minister for Health, should never be complacent”.—[*Official Report*, 21 November 2018; Vol. 649, c. 372WH.]

We are not. We are absolutely committed to ensuring that nursing remains an attractive career so that the NHS can build on the record numbers of nurses on our wards. Actions already taken to boost the supply of nurses range from training more nurses and offering new routes into the profession to enhancing rewards and pay packages, and there are now 11,000 more nurses on our wards than in May 2010.

NHS England, NHS Improvement and Health Education England are working with trusts on a range of recruitment, retention and return to practice programmes to ensure that the required workforce is in place to deliver safe and effective services. We should note that NHS Improvement has had some real success with its retention programme. Retention seems to me one of the key issues for the Government to focus on, and that will be reflected in the long-term plan. NHS Improvement's programme continues its direct work with trusts to support improvements in retention, with a focus on the nursing workforce and the mental health clinical workforce. So far, 35 trusts have been involved and the initial evidence is positive and encouraging, with more flexible working programmes and greater support for older workers. It is therefore right that that programme be expanded further to all remaining NHS trusts in England.

Maria Caulfield: Revalidation is a new system for nurses to retain their registration, but it is a very difficult and stressful process for nurses who may be part-time or part of a hospital bank. I was lucky because my NHS trust, the Royal Marsden, is extremely supportive to its bank workers, but will the Minister ensure that bank nurses are supported through the revalidation process to keep them registered?

Stephen Hammond: I am listening carefully to my hon. Friend, and I will ensure that that work is undertaken.

As I have said today and on previous occasions, the priority is to get more nurses on our wards. There are currently 52,000 nurses in training, and we have announced a policy change that will result in additional clinical placement funding to make 5,000 more training places available each year. My hon. Friend made the point that nursing bursaries were not always the panacea that everyone suggests; students on the loans system are at least 25% better off than under the previous system. However, we recognise that students incur additional costs as a result of attending clinical placements, so we have introduced a learning support fund with a child dependants allowance, reimbursement of travel costs and an exceptional hardship fund. When I spoke to nurses at Barts last week, I listened carefully to the points they made about the need for help with travel in particular, and I am looking carefully at that issue.

The hon. Member for Batley and Spen raised the RCN proposal. Yesterday, as I had promised I would, I responded to the RCN in a formal letter to Dame Donna, and I look forward to meeting her to discuss her proposals in the near future—hopefully the very near future.

We are increasing the number of midwifery training places by more than 3,000 over the next four years. There continues to be strong demand for nursing places, with more applicants than places, but I am under no illusions, nor am I complacent. We need more people applying and we need to increase that route. A number of routes are open. HEE's programme covers all fields of nursing; its RePAIR—reducing pre-registration attrition and improving retention—programme explores effective interventions to ensure that people are supported through their whole student journey from pre-enrolment to post-qualification.

The hon. Member for Batley and Spen was right to mention the number of new routes into nursing. In particular, she will have noted the report published last week by the Select Committee on Education on the nurse degree apprenticeship. We are working with the Department for Education to carefully consider the Committee's recommendations and I will respond in due course.

I want to turn to the story of doctors. In the NHS today, it is true that there are 18,200 more doctors in trusts and CCGs than there were in 2010. My hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich raised the matter of the additional 5,000 doctors. This year, we have recruited 3,473 GP trainees, against the target of 3,250. That is an increase on last year, but we are determined to meet the commitment of 5,000. To ensure that that is possible, we have rolled out an extra 1,500 medical school places. By 2020, as he knows, five new medical schools will be open to deliver that expansion.

In the whole of this discussion, it is only right that I recognise that the Government value the professionals. It is key that we ensure that NHS staff are well remunerated. It is absolutely right that we have given NHS staff a well-deserved pay rise. All staff will receive a 3% pay rise by the end of 2018-19.

There is a lot more I might have said. The hon. Member for Batley and Spen raised a number of local issues, including ambulatory care. If she cares to write to me or to catch me, I would be happy to have a longer discussion with her. I thank her and all hon. Members for the points they have made in the debate. I also stress, as I have done today to staff at North Middlesex, and last week, that making sure that we have an NHS long-term plan that sets out a strategy for the NHS and ensures a sustainable supply of clinical workforce—doctors, workers and others—is key, and it is key to delivering our ambitions for the NHS. I thank the staff for all that they do.

5.41 pm

Tracy Brabin: I thank colleagues from both sides of the House for their contributions, particularly those with frontline experience, and I thank the Minister for his measured response.

I have a couple of points. First, I am sure the Minister can feel the sense of urgency in this debate. Although I appreciate that long-term discussions are needed, we still do not have a date for when the long-term plan will be published or for the consultation on the Royal College of Nursing proposals. The Minister said it would be soon, but when will we have that?

Stephen Hammond: There is a commitment from the Government to produce the long-term plan before the end of the year, as the hon. Lady knows, and I have written to Dame Donna to request a meeting to discuss the RCN's proposals.

Tracy Brabin: That is very reassuring.

We hear from across the House that mental health is receiving such little support. People are hanging by a thread. Nurses are saying to their organisations and their MPs, “I am worried for the health and safety of my patients. I’m doing too many shifts. I’m absolutely shattered. I can’t guarantee that I am going to be doing my job properly. They’re bringing in volunteers to support me on the ward.” It is an absolute crisis. While I understand that the wheels of government work very slowly, I hope that the Minister takes from this debate that Brexit has been a universal issue. We are losing staff members. I welcome the commitment to an extra 5,000 doctors and so on, but that is just plugging the gap of the staff who are draining away from our hospitals and frontline services.

Stephen Hammond: I absolutely recognise that Brexit is a pressure on the system, but we should also recognise that there are 4,367 more professionals working in the NHS from the EU than there were at the date of the referendum. It is important to put that on the record.

Dr Whitford: Will the Minister give way?

Stephen Hammond: I would give way, but I cannot—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I call Tracy Brabin.

Tracy Brabin: If that is the case, the statistics are welcome, but in my constituency we are losing European members of staff. We cannot get away from the overall numbers—there are staffing shortages of 10%. In my constituency and in my trust they cannot recruit, because of various issues. I am grateful that the Government listened when I raised the question of tier 2 visas with the Prime Minister, when we wanted to bring over a paediatrician but could not because the visa took so long that he got another job. I welcome that when it comes to nurses, too, but we have to accept that there are things such as the bursary—

5.45 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Tuesday 11 December 2018

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Clinical Waste: Healthcare Environmental Services

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): I am today taking the opportunity to update the House about a company which provides clinical waste services to NHS Trusts.

This company—Healthcare Environmental Services (HES)—was subject to previous discussions in Parliament. On 9 October, the then Minister of State for Health, set out concerns that a number of waste storage and treatment sites were well over the permitted levels. This included waste collected from hospitals and other public services. Although the waste was stored securely, the Environment Agency was sufficiently concerned at the activities of this company that they took regulatory action, including launching a criminal investigation.

At the start of October, a number of trusts served by HES' Normanton site, terminated their contracts, and arranged for Mitie to provide waste collection and incineration services instead.

Until last week, a number of other NHS trusts continued to receive services from HES. Those organisations, supported by NHSI and the Department of Health and Social Care, have been monitoring the situation.

However, HES has now failed to collect waste from 24 further trusts. NHSI has sought assurance from HES that it has not ceased trading and is capable of, and will continue to provide services. Such assurance has not been forthcoming. Contingency arrangements are in place for each of the affected trusts. An optional extension in the Mitie contract has been exercised, which will allow all affected trusts to access a replacement clinical waste collection service. This has been communicated to all Trusts and NHSI is working with affected trusts to mobilise and implement contingency plans.

These robust contingency measures mean there is no gap in service provision and no health risk to the public.

[HCWS1168]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Joint Inspection Team: Contingent Liability

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): I am today laying a departmental minute to advise that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) has received approval from Her Majesty's Treasury for a contingent liability associated with the joint inspection team (JIT) advisory role to local authorities.

The departmental minute describes the contingent liability that MHCLG will hold as a result of the JIT providing advice to the local authority. The local authority is still responsible for making decisions on enforcement.

The unquantifiable contingent liability will remain for the duration of the JIT operations, likely to be a period of 12 months, plus six years.

If the liability is called against JIT, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal Supply procedure.

[HCWS1169]

TRANSPORT

EU Transport Council

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I attended the only formal Transport Council under the Austrian presidency (the presidency) in Brussels on Monday 3 December.

The Council reached general approaches on the social and market pillars of the first tranche of the 'Mobility Package'. The 'social pillar' is intended to establish a specific regulatory regime for the posting of workers in the road transport sector, and the 'market pillar' is intended to introduce new regulatory requirements for the operation of light commercial vehicles (vans); and to modify the 'cabotage' rules for vehicles operating in countries other than their country of establishment.

I welcomed the work that the presidency had done to achieve compromises on these challenging proposals, give the range of view from member states. During the discussion, I pressed for a further reduction in the proposed cabotage 'cooling-off period' (a period of time between cabotage operations) and for extending the period after which a vehicle should return to base to 10 weeks. After a lengthy debate a compromise was reached which included the reduction of the 'cabotage' cooling-off period to five days; clarifying when the posting of workers rules would apply to different haulage operations; removing altogether the requirement for the return of the vehicle; and retaining the original proposal to ban drivers from taking weekly rest in the cabin of their vehicles.

Following this, the Council reached a general approach on a proposal from the second tranche of the 'Mobility package', to amend the current directive on combined transport. The existing directive liberalises cabotage operations when part of a freight journey that comprises a rail or sea leg. The general approach included an amendment to these cabotage provisions in line with the earlier compromise on cabotage rules.

The Council reached a general approach on the proposed directive on road infrastructure safety management (RISM), from the third tranche of the 'Mobility Package'.

The lunchtime debate consisted of Ministers discussing how to address airspace capacity constraints and was followed by presentations from Eurocontrol Director General, Eamonn Brennan and Transport Commissioner, Violeta Bulc.

Later, the Council reached two general approaches on the proposed directive on minimum level of training for seafarers and the proposed regulation establishing a European maritime single window. In addition, the Council adopted conclusions on inland waterway transport.

The Council reached a partial general approach on the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), endorsing the text presented by the presidency. The outstanding elements are those subject to horizontal negotiations on the multi-annual financial framework beyond 2020.

The Council noted the presidency's progress reports on discontinuing seasonal changes of time, rail passenger rights, streamlining the trans-European transport network, clean and energy efficient vehicles and electronic freight transport information.

Finally, there were several information points from member states, the presidency and Commissioner Bulc under any other business. The presidency updated Council on the provisional agreements reached with the European Parliament on electronic road tolling and exchange of information, safeguarding competition in air transport and aviation wet-leasing. Commissioner Bulc noted good

progress in on-going EU-ASEAN aviation negotiations that she hoped would conclude this year. In reply to a joint declaration from Luxembourg, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany and the Netherlands on the social agenda in aviation, Commissioner Bulc noted that she would present a progress report on the social agenda identifying actions for potential completion. Ireland intervened to defend the value of new business models in aviation. Commissioner Bulc also drew attention to the 17 December conference on sustainable transport infrastructure charging and internalisation of transport externalities to be held in Brussels. The presidency provided an update on the EU's space programme and the outcome of the informal meeting of Transport and Environment Ministers held in Graz on the 29-30 October 2018. Finally, Romania presented transport plans for its incoming presidency of the Council of the European Union.

[HCWS1167]

ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 11 December 2018

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
TREASURY	127	TREASURY—continued	
Air Passenger Duty: Domestic Flights	140	Major Infrastructure Projects: Funding	132
Children's Services	131	Sale of Public Assets: Value for Money	134
Children's Services	143	Sporting Infrastructure: Cornwall	127
EU Withdrawal Agreement: Manufacturing		Support for Businesses and Entrepreneurs	142
Sector	141	Support for the High Street	128
Further Education Funding	132	Topical Questions	143
Income Tax	136	Youth Unemployment	134
Leaving the Customs Union and Single Market:			
Scotland	138		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Tuesday 11 December 2018

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	9WS	TRANSPORT	10WS
Clinical Waste: Healthcare Environmental		EU Transport Council	10WS
Services	9WS		
HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL			
GOVERNMENT	9WS		
Joint Inspection Team: Contingent Liability	9WS		

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Tuesday 18 December 2018**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Tuesday 11 December 2018

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 127] [see index inside back page]
Chancellor of the Exchequer

European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018: Statutory Obligations on Ministers [Col. 151]
Answer to urgent question—(Mr Robin Walker)

Cannabis (Legalisation and Regulation) [Col. 168]
Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Normal Lamb)—on a Division, negatived

Exiting the European Union: Meaningful Vote [Col. 174]
Emergency debate under Standing Order No. 24

Ivory Bill [Col. 226]
*Programme motion (No. 3)—(Dr Thérèse Coffey)—agreed to
Lords amendments considered*

Fuel Poverty [Col. 236]
General debate

Petition [Col. 252]

Private Parking: Ports and Trading Estates [Col. 254]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
House of Commons Financial Plan and Draft Estimates [Col. 11WH]
NHS: Hysteroscopies [Col. 35WH]
Leaving the EU: State Aid, Public Ownership and Workers' Rights [Col. 43WH]
Cat Welfare [Col. 66WH]
NHS: Staffing Levels [Col. 75WH]
General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 9WS]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
