

**Monday
7 January 2019**

**Volume 652
No. 228**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Monday 7 January 2019

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

MEMBERS OF THE CABINET

(FORMED BY THE RT HON. THERESA MAY, MP, JUNE 2017)

PRIME MINISTER, FIRST LORD OF THE TREASURY AND MINISTER FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE—The Rt Hon. Theresa May, MP
CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER AND MINISTER FOR THE CABINET OFFICE—The Rt Hon. David Lidington, MP
CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER—The Rt Hon. Philip Hammond, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE HOME DEPARTMENT—The Rt Hon. Sajid Javid, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS—The Rt. Hon Jeremy Hunt, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION—The Rt Hon. Stephen Barclay, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENCE—The Rt Hon. Gavin Williamson, MP
LORD CHANCELLOR AND SECRETARY OF STATE FOR JUSTICE—The Rt Hon. David Gauke, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE—The Rt Hon. Matt Hancock, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY—The Rt Hon. Greg Clark, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Liam Fox, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WORK AND PENSIONS—The Rt Hon. Amber Rudd, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EDUCATION—The Rt Hon. Damian Hinds, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS—The Rt Hon. Michael Gove, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT—The Rt Hon. James Brokenshire, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT—The Rt Hon. Chris Grayling, MP
LORD PRIVY SEAL AND LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS—The Rt Hon. Baroness Evans of Bowes Park
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR SCOTLAND—The Rt Hon. David Mundell, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WALES—The Rt Hon. Alun Cairns, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND—The Rt Hon. Karen Bradley, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND MINISTER FOR WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—The Rt Hon. Penny Mordaunt, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT—The Rt Hon. Jeremy Wright, QC, MP
MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO—The Rt Hon. Brandon Lewis, MP

DEPARTMENTS OF STATE AND MINISTERS

Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Greg Clark, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Rt Hon. Claire Perry, MP (Minister for Energy and Clean Growth)

Chris Skidmore, MP (Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Kelly Tolhurst, MP

Richard Harrington, MP

The Rt Hon. Lord Henley

Cabinet Office—

CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER AND MINISTER FOR THE CABINET OFFICE—The Rt Hon. David Lidington, MP

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARIES—

Oliver Dowden, MP

Chloe Smith, MP

Defence—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Gavin Williamson, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Earl Howe §

The Rt Hon. Mark Lancaster, MP (Minister for the Armed Forces)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Tobias Ellwood, MP

Stuart Andrew, MP

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Jeremy Wright, QC, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Margot James, MP (Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Lord Ashton of Hyde

Michael Ellis, MP

Mims Davies, MP

Education—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Damian Hinds, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Nick Gibb, MP (Minister for School Standards)

The Rt Hon. Anne Milton, MP (Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills)

Chris Skidmore, MP (Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Lord Agnew of Oulton

Nadhim Zahawi, MP

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Michael Gove, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—George Eustice, MP (Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Thérèse Coffey, MP

Lord Gardiner of Kimble

David Rutley, MP §

Exiting the European Union —

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Stephen Barclay, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Lord Callanan

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Robin Walker, MP

Chris Heaton-Harris, MP

Kwasi Kwarteng, MP

Foreign and Commonwealth Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Jeremy Hunt, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Sir Alan Duncan, MP (Minister for Europe and the Americas)

The Rt Hon. Alistair Burt, MP (Minister for the Middle East) §

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Minister for the Commonwealth and the UN)

The Rt Hon. Mark Field, MP (Minister for Asia and the Pacific)

Harriett Baldwin, MP (Minister for Africa) §

Health and Social Care—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Matt Hancock, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Stephen Hammond, MP (Minister for Health)

Caroline Dinenage, MP (Minister for Care)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Jackie Doyle-Price, MP

Steve Brine, MP

Lord O'Shaughnessy

Home Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Sajid Javid, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Caroline Nokes, MP (Minister for Immigration)

The Rt Hon. Ben Wallace, MP (Minister for Security and Economic Crime)

The Rt Hon. Nick Hurd, MP (Minister for Policing and the Fire Service and Minister for London)

Baroness Williams of Trafford (Minister for Countering Extremism and Minister for Equalities) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Victoria Atkins, MP §

Housing, Communities and Local Government—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. James Brokenshire, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Kit Malthouse, MP (Minister for Housing)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Jake Berry, MP

Heather Wheeler, MP

Rishi Sunak, MP

Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth §

International Development—

SECRETARY OF STATE AND MINISTER FOR WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—The Rt Hon. Penny Mordaunt, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Alistair Burt, MP §

Harriett Baldwin, MP §

The Rt Hon. Lord Bates

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Victoria Atkins, MP §

Baroness Williams of Trafford §

International Trade—

SECRETARY OF STATE AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Liam Fox, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

George Hollingbery, MP (Minister for Trade Policy)

Baroness Fairhead (Minister for Trade and Export Promotion)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Graham Stuart, MP

Justice—

LORD CHANCELLOR AND SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. David Gauke, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Rory Stewart, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Lucy Frazer, QC, MP

Edward Argar, MP

ADVOCATE GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND—The Rt Hon. Lord Keen of Elie, QC

Law Officers—

ATTORNEY GENERAL—The Rt. Hon. Geoffrey Cox, QC, MP

SOLICITOR GENERAL—Robert Buckland, QC, MP

ADVOCATE GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND—The Rt Hon. Lord Keen of Elie, QC

Leader of the House of Commons—

LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS AND LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL—The Rt Hon. Andrea Leadsom, MP

Northern Ireland Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Karen Bradley, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—John Penrose, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Lord Duncan of Springbank §

Scotland Office —

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. David Mundell, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Lord Duncan of Springbank §

Transport—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Chris Grayling, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Jesse Norman, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Andrew Jones, MP

Baroness Sugg, CBE §

Nusrat Ghani, MP §

Treasury—

PRIME MINISTER, FIRST LORD OF THE TREASURY AND MINISTER FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE—The Rt Hon. Theresa May, MP

CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER—The Rt Hon. Philip Hammond, MP

CHIEF SECRETARY—The Rt Hon. Elizabeth Truss, MP

FINANCIAL SECRETARY—The Rt Hon. Mel Stride, MP

EXCHEQUER SECRETARY—Robert Jenrick, MP

ECONOMIC SECRETARY—John Glen, MP

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY—The Rt Hon. Julian Smith, MP

LORDS COMMISSIONERS—

Mike Freer, MP

Paul Maynard, MP

Craig Whittaker, MP

Rebecca Harris, MP

David Rutley, MP §

Jeremy Quin, MP

ASSISTANT WHIPS—

Nusrat Ghani, MP §

Iain Stewart, MP

Jo Churchill, MP

Amanda Milling, MP

Michelle Donelan, MP

Gareth Johnson, MP

Wendy Morton, MP

Nigel Adams, MP §

UK Export Finance—

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Liam Fox, MP
 MINISTER FOR TRADE AND EXPORT PROMOTION—Baroness Fairhead

Wales Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Alun Cairns, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth §

Nigel Adams, MP §

Work and Pensions

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Amber Rudd, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Alok Sharma, MP (Minister for Employment)

Sarah Newton, MP (Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Guy Opperman, MP

Baroness Buscombe

Justin Tomlinson, MP

Office of the Leader of the House of Lords—

LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS AND LORD PRIVY SEAL—The Rt. Hon. Baroness Evans of Bowes Park

DEPUTY LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS—The Rt Hon. Earl Howe §

Her Majesty's Household—

LORD CHAMBERLAIN—The Rt Hon. Earl Peel GCVO, DL

LORD STEWARD—The Earl of Dalhousie

MASTER OF THE HORSE—Lord Vestey KCVO

TREASURER—Christopher Pincher, MP

COMPTROLLER—Mark Spencer, MP

VICE-CHAMBERLAIN—Andrew Stephenson, MP

CAPTAIN OF THE HONOURABLE CORPS OF GENTLEMEN-AT-ARMS—The Rt Hon. Lord Taylor of Holbeach CBE

CAPTAIN OF THE QUEEN'S BODYGUARD OF THE YEOMEN OF THE GUARD—Earl of Courtown

BARONESSSES IN WAITING—Baroness Vere of Norbiton, Baroness Sugg CBE §, Baroness Goldie DL, Baroness Stedman-Scott DL, Baroness Manzoor CBE

LORDS IN WAITING—Viscount Younger of Leckie, The Rt Hon. Lord Young of Cookham CH

§ *Members of the Government listed under more than one Department*

SECOND CHURCH ESTATES COMMISSIONER, REPRESENTING CHURCH COMMISSIONERS—The Rt. Hon. Dame Caroline Spelman, MP

REPRESENTING THE SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE ON THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION—Bridget Phillipson, MP

REPRESENTING THE SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE FOR THE INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY—Mr Charles Walker, MP

REPRESENTING THE HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION—The Rt Hon. Tom Brake, MP

CHAIRMAN OF THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION—Sir Edward Leigh, MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS

THE SPEAKER—The Rt Hon. John Bercow, MP

CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt Hon. Sir Lindsay Hoyle, MP

FIRST DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt Hon. Dame Eleanor Laing, MP

SECOND DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt Hon. Dame Rosie Winterton, MP

PANEL OF CHAIRS

Sir David Amess, Ian Austin, Mr Adrian Bailey, Sir Henry Bellingham, Mr Clive Betts, Mr Peter Bone, Sir Graham Brady, Ms Karen Buck, Sir Christopher Chope, Sir David Crausby, Geraint Davies, Philip Davies, Ms Nadine Dorries, Mr Nigel Evans, Sir Roger Gale, Mike Gapes, The Rt Hon. Dame Cheryl Gillan, James Gray, The Rt Hon. David Hanson, Mr Philip Hollobone, Stewart Hosie, The Rt Hon. Mr George Howarth, Sir Edward Leigh, Mrs Anne Main, Steve McCabe, Siobhain McDonagh, Mrs Madeleine Moon, Albert Owen, Ian Paisley, Mark Pritchard, Mr Laurence Robertson, Andrew Rosindell, The Rt Hon. Joan Ryan, Mr Virendra Sharma, Mr Gary Streeter, Graham Stringer, Mr Charles Walker, Phil Wilson

SECRETARY—Colin Lee

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The Rt Hon. The Speaker (Chairman), Ian Ailles (Director General of the House of Commons), Sir Paul Beresford, MP, The Rt Hon. Tom Brake, MP, Stewart Hosie, MP, The Rt Hon. Andrea Leadsom, MP (Leader of the House), Dr Rima Makarem (External Member), Jane McCall (External Member), Sir David Natzler KCB (Clerk of the House), Valerie Vaz, MP, The Rt Hon. Dame Rosie Winterton, MP.

SECRETARY OF THE COMMISSION—Marianne Cwynarski

ASSISTANT SECRETARY—Robert Cope

ADMINISTRATION ESTIMATE AUDIT AND RISK ASSURANCE COMMITTEE AND MEMBERS ESTIMATE AUDIT COMMITTEE

Dr Rima Makarem (Chair), Sir Paul Beresford, MP, Mr Clive Betts, MP, The Rt Hon. Tom Brake, MP, Jane McCall, Bob Scruton

SECRETARY—John-Paul Flaherty

COMMONS EXECUTIVE BOARD

Ian Ailles (Director General of the House of Commons), Carlos Bamford (Managing Director, In-House Services), Myfanwy Barrett (Managing Director, Corporate Services and Finance Director), John Benger (Clerk Assistant and Managing Director, Chamber and Committees), David Hemming (Managing Director, Strategic Estates), Eric Hepburn (Director of Security for Parliament), Tracey Jessup (Director of the Parliamentary Digital Service), Sir David Natzler KCB (Clerk of the House and Head of the House of Commons Service), Penny Young (Librarian and Managing Director, Research and Information, and Managing Director, Participation)

SECRETARY OF THE BOARD—Sarah Petit

OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

SPEAKER'S SECRETARY—Peter Barratt

ASSISTANT SECRETARY TO THE SPEAKER—Ian Davis MBE

TRAINBEARER—Jim Davey

DIARY SECRETARY—Nathan Albon (maternity cover)

SPEAKER'S CHAPLAIN—Rev. Rose Hudson-Wilkin

OFFICE OF SPEAKER'S COUNSEL

SPEAKER'S COUNSEL—Saira Salimi

DEPUTY SPEAKER'S COUNSEL—Helen Emes

COUNSEL—Daniel Greenberg (Domestic Legislation), Arnold Ridout (European Legislation), Eleanor Hourigan (Joint Committee on Human Rights)

DEPUTY COUNSEL—Peter Brooksbank, Philip Davies, Vanessa Macnair (Domestic Legislation), Emily Unwin (European Legislation), Samantha Godec (Joint Committee on Human Rights)

PRINCIPAL ASSISTANT COUNSEL—Helen Kinghorn (Commercial Law)

ASSISTANT COUNSEL—Joanne Dee (European Legislation), Edwina Acland (Commercial Law), Klara Banaszak (Domestic Legislation), Andrew Burrow

PARALEGAL & BUSINESS SUPPORT MANAGER—John Richardson (Personal injury claims)

PARLIAMENTARY COMMISSIONER FOR STANDARDS

PARLIAMENTARY COMMISSIONER FOR STANDARDS—Kathryn Stone

REGISTRAR OF MEMBERS' FINANCIAL INTERESTS—Heather Wood

PARLIAMENTARY SECURITY DEPARTMENT

DIRECTOR OF SECURITY FOR PARLIAMENT—Eric Hepburn

DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF SECURITY (OPERATIONS)—Fay Tennet

DEPUTY HEAD OF SECURITY—Emily Baldock

HEAD OF SECURITY PROJECTS—Ian Dougal

OFFICE OF THE CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS

SECRETARY TO THE CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—Clementine Brown

GOVERNANCE OFFICE

CLERK OF THE HOUSE—Sir David Natzler KCB

DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS—Ian Ailles

HEAD OF OFFICE AND SECRETARY TO THE COMMISSION—Marianne Cwynarski

SECRETARY TO THE COMMONS EXECUTIVE BOARD—Sarah Petit

PRIVATE SECRETARY TO THE DIRECTOR GENERAL—James Mirza Davies

PRIVATE SECRETARY TO THE CLERK—John-Paul Flaherty

CORPORATE RISK MANAGEMENT FACILITATOR—Rachel Harrison

HEAD OF PARLIAMENTARY SAFETY—Mal McDougall

HEAD OF INTERNAL AUDIT AND RISK MANAGEMENT—Richard Stammers

CLERK OF DOMESTIC COMMITTEES—Robert Cope

CHAMBER AND COMMITTEES

CLERK ASSISTANT AND MANAGING DIRECTOR—John Bengier

PERSONAL ASSISTANT—Charlotte Every

Overseas Office—

PRINCIPAL CLERK—Matthew Hamlyn

DELEGATION SECRETARY—Nick Wright

INWARD VISITS MANAGER—Dawn Amey

NATIONAL PARLIAMENT REPRESENTATIVE, BRUSSELS—Alison Groves

DEPUTY NATIONAL PARLIAMENT REPRESENTATIVE, BRUSSELS—Fraser McIntosh

Team Services—

DIRECTOR OF CUSTOMER AND TEAM SERVICES—Gosia McBride

COMMITTEES**Committee Office—**

CLERK OF COMMITTEES—Paul Evans

PRINCIPAL CLERKS OF SELECT COMMITTEES—Sarah Davies, Chris Stanton, Lynn Gardner

BUSINESS MANAGER (LIAISON)—Richard Dawson

OPERATIONS MANAGER—Francene Graham

BUSINESS MANAGER (COMG)—Jackie Jones

Departmental Select Committees—

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY: CLERKS—Chris Shaw, Ben Sneddon

DEFENCE: CLERKS—Mark Etherton, Adam Evans

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT: CLERKS—Chloe Challender, Mubeen Bhutta, Mems Ayinla

EDUCATION: CLERKS—Richard Ward, Katya Cassidy

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS: CLERKS—Sian Woodward, Philip Aylett, Ben Street

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION: CLERKS—James Rhys, Claire Cozens

FOREIGN AFFAIRS: CLERKS—Tom Goldsmith, Hannah Bryce

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE: CLERKS—Huw Yardley, Masrur Ahmed

HOME AFFAIRS: CLERKS—Elizabeth Hunt, Harriet Deane

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT: CLERKS—Ed Beale, Jenny Burch

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: CLERKS—Fergus Reid, Rob Page

INTERNATIONAL TRADE: CLERKS—Jo Welham, Sean Kinsey

JUSTICE: CLERKS—Rhiannon Hollis, Fiona Hoban

NORTHERN IRELAND AFFAIRS: CLERKS—Margaret McKinnon, Matthew Congreve

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY: CLERKS—Danielle Nash, Zoe Grunewald

SCOTTISH AFFAIRS: CLERKS—Ben Williams, Bradley Albrow

TRANSPORT: CLERKS—Gordon Clarke, Ed Faulkner
 TREASURY: CLERK—Sarah Rees, Peter Stam
 WELSH AFFAIRS: CLERKS—Kevin Maddison, Matthew Congreve
 WOMEN AND EQUALITIES: CLERKS—Jyoti Chandola, Luanne Middleton
 WORK AND PENSIONS: CLERK—Anne-Marie Griffiths

Other Committees—

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT: CLERKS—Lloyd Owen, Leoni Kurt
 JOINT COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RIGHTS: COMMONS CLERK—Eve Samson
 LIAISON: CLERK—Lucinda Maer
 JOINT COMMITTEE ON NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY: COMMONS CLERK—Simon Fiander
 PUBLIC ACCOUNTS: CLERKS—Richard Cooke, Laura-Jane Tiley, Samir Amar Setti
 PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: CLERKS—Libby Kurien, Sarah Thatcher, Ian Bradshaw
 REGULATORY REFORM: CLERKS—Chris Shaw, Ben Sneddon
 EUROPEAN SCRUTINY COMMITTEE: CLERKS—Jessica Mulley, Jeanne Delebarre
 EUROPEAN STATUTORY INSTRUMENTS COMMITTEE: CLERKS—Mike Winter, Yohanna Sallberg
 CLERK ADVISERS—Leigh Gibson, Joanna Dee, Francoise Spencer, Alistair Dillon, Kilian Bourke, Foeke Noppert, Sibel Taner
 JOINT COMMITTEE ON STATUTORY INSTRUMENTS: COMMONS CLERK—Jeanne Delebarre

Scrutiny Unit—

HEADS OF UNIT—David Lloyd, Elizabeth Flood
 DEPUTY HEAD OF UNIT (FINANCE)—Larry Honeysett
Head of Web and Publications Unit—Miranda Olivier-Wright

CHAMBER BUSINESS

Public and Private Bill Office—

CLERK OF LEGISLATION—Liam Laurence Smyth
 CLERK OF BILLS, EXAMINER OF PETITIONS FOR PRIVATE BILLS AND TAXING OFFICER—Colin Lee
 CLERK OF PRIVATE MEMBERS' BILLS—Adam Mellows-Facer
 CLERKS: Joanna Dodd, Mike Everett, Gail Poulton, Anwen Rees
 BILLS SUPPORT OFFICER—Julie Evans

Committees—

COURT OF REFEREES: CLERK—Colin Lee
 SELECTION: CLERK—Gail Poulton
 STANDING ORDERS, UNOPPOSED BILLS: CLERK—Clementine Brown

Journal Office—

CLERK OF THE JOURNALS—Mark Hutton
 CLERKS: Martyn Atkins, Medha Basin, Jack Dent, Mike Hennessy, Sara Howe, Sarah Heath, Dr Robin James, Dr Stephen McGinness, Crispin Poyser, Dominic Stockbridge, Charlotte Swift, Helen Wood
 PROCEDURAL HUB CHANGE MANAGER—Julie Evans

Committees—

PETITIONS: CLERKS—David Slater, Lauren Boyer
 PRIVILEGES: CLERKS—Dr Robin James, Medha Basin
 PROCEDURE: CLERKS—Martyn Atkins, Dominic Stockbridge
 STANDARDS: CLERKS—Dr Robin James, Medha Basin

Statutory Committees—

SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE FOR IPSA: SECRETARIES—Dr Robin James, Dr Mike Everett
 SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE ON THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION: SECRETARIES—Dr Robin James, Dr Mike Everett

Table Office—

PRINCIPAL CLERK—Philippa Helme
 CLERKS: James Davies, Amelia Aspden, Nick Beech, Anna Dickson, Gini Griffin, Stephen Habberley, Sarah Hartwell-Naguib, Phil Jones, Catherine Meredith, Jonathan Whiffing
 SENIOR EXECUTIVE OFFICER—Anita Fuki
 BACKBENCH BUSINESS: CLERKS—Sarah Hartwell-Naguib, Gini Griffin/Catherine Meredith

Vote Office—

DELIVERER OF THE VOTE—Catherine Fogarty
 HEAD OF PROCEDURAL PUBLISHING—Tom McVeagh
 PROCEDURAL PUBLISHING OPERATIONS MANAGER—Stuart Miller
 HEAD OF DISTRIBUTION SERVICES—Barry Underwood

OFFICIAL REPORT

EDITOR—Alex Newton

DEPUTY EDITOR—Jack Homer

PERSONAL ASSISTANT—Caroline Rowlands

DIRECTOR OF PARLIAMENTARY AUDIO/VIDEO—John Angeli

DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF PARLIAMENTARY AUDIO/VIDEO—Sally Freestone

MANAGING EDITORS (COMMITTEES)—Jonathan Hoare, Adele Dodd

MANAGING EDITORS (HOUSE)—Deborah Jones, Ann Street, Vivien Wilson, Emma Kirby, Jez Oates, David Hampton, Tony Minichiello, Ian Oakhill §

SUB-EDITORS—Kate Myers, Juliet Levy, Ken Gall, Victoria Hart, Paul Kirby, Portia Dadley, Joanna Lipkowska, Richard Purnell, Bran Jones, Tricia Hill, Ian Oakhill §, Saul Minaee, Will Holdaway, Keith Brown, Cara Clark, Tom Martin, Owain Wilkins, Richard Hallas, Helen Lowe

HOUSE REPORTERS—Emily Morris, Jude Whewy, Felicity Reardon, Angus Andrews, Jim Barr, Paul Owen, Lydia Davis, Eugene Wolstenholme, Stephen Farrell, Vivienne Kenny, James Mayne, Charlie Browne, Matthew Johnson, Richard Eaton, Andrew Taylor, Kath Burns

HEAD OF ADMINISTRATION—Stephen O’Riordan

SENIOR HANSARD ADMINISTRATORS—John Brake, Brian Harrison

ANNUNCIATOR SUPERINTENDENT—John LeHunte

COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE

DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS—Lee Bridges

DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS—Holly Greenland

CORPORATE SERVICES

MANAGING DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE SERVICES—Myfanwy Barrett

DEPUTY HEAD OF CORPORATE SERVICES—Martin Trott

DIRECTOR OF PEOPLE—Alix Langley

HEAD OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION—Jennifer Crook

DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE FINANCE AND PERFORMANCE—Philip Collins

HEAD OF ENTERPRISE PORTFOLIO MANAGEMENT OFFICE (EPMO)—Charlotte Simmonds

HEAD OF MEMBERS’ HUB—Lucy Tindal

HEAD OF HR ADVICE AND POLICY—Joanne Regan

HEAD OF HR SHARED SERVICES—Deborah Macaly

HEAD OF EMPLOYEE RELATIONS AND REWARD—Reg Perry

HEAD OF CORPORATE SERVICES PROJECTS—Andy Vallins

HEAD OF ORGANISATIONAL DESIGN, DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING—Carl Akintola-Davies

STRATEGY, PLANNING AND PERFORMANCE MANAGER—Jane Hough

HEAD OF TEAM SERVICES—Tara Cullen

FINANCE BUSINESS PARTNER—Caroline Young

HEAD OF HR ADVICE—Karen Bovaird

BUSINESS PARTNERS—Johan van den Broek, Harun Musho’d, Sally Jackson, Daniel Farruggio, Elizabeth Rousou, Tim Elgar

Health and Wellbeing—

HEAD OF PARLIAMENTARY HEALTH AND WELLBEING—Anne Mossop

CONSULTANT OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH PHYSICIANS—Dr Paul Grimes, Dr Ira Madan

OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH ADVISORS—Margaret Mainland, Jane Rose

CLINICAL NURSE ADVISER—Sarah Dow

PRACTICE NURSES—Karen St Cyr, Sally Nightingale

PARTICIPATION

HOUSE OF COMMONS LIBRARIAN AND MANAGING DIRECTOR—Penny Young

PRIVATE SECRETARY—Rachel Aves

PERSONAL ASSISTANT—Brigitte Onyskiw

DIRECTOR OF STRATEGY—Dr Edge Watchorn

HEAD OF PEOPLE CAPABILITY—Amy Baxter

STRATEGY DELIVERY MANAGER—John Thursfield

FINANCE & PERFORMANCE BUSINESS MANAGER—Karen Guthrie

COMMUNICATIONS AND AUDIENCES

HEAD OF COMMUNICATIONS AND AUDIENCES—Matt Ringer

PUBLIC ENQUIRIES MANAGER—Fiona Green

DIGITAL OUTREACH MANAGER—Laura Bristow

SENIOR MARKETING MANAGER – Emma Terry

EDUCATION AND ENGAGEMENT

HEAD OF EDUCATION AND ENGAGEMENT—David Clark
 DEPUTY HEAD OF EDUCATION AND ENGAGEMENT—Elaine Thain
 BUSINESS SUPPORT MANAGER—Heather Pike
 OUTREACH MANAGER—Daniel Gallacher
 EDUCATION CENTRE OPERATIONS MANAGER—Phillip Johnson
 CAMPAIGNS MANAGER—Michelle Budge
 OUTREACH MANAGER—Alasdair Mackenzie
 RESOURCES AND CONTENT DEVELOPMENT MANAGER—Philippa Brown
 SELECT COMMITTEE ENGAGEMENT MANAGER—Naomi Jurczak

VISITOR AND RETAIL SERVICES

DIRECTOR OF VISITOR AND RETAIL SERVICES—Amy Pitts
 BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT MANAGER—Matthew Morgan
 VISITOR OPERATIONS MANAGERS—Simon Featherstone, Amy Treble
 HEAD OF RETAIL OPERATIONS—Diana Christou
 SENIOR RETAIL OPERATIONS MANAGER—Tamsin Swain

IN-HOUSE SERVICES

MANAGING DIRECTOR OF IN-HOUSE SERVICES—Carlos C. Bamford, MBE
 DIRECTOR OF BUSINESS MANAGEMENT—Della Herd
 HEAD OF FINANCE—Ebenezer Oduwole

TRANSFORMATION

HEAD OF TRANSFORMATION—Sean House

RESILIENCE & EMERGENCY PLANNING

RESILIENCE & EMERGENCY PLANNING MANAGER—Georgina Gray

PARLIAMENTARY MAINTENANCE SERVICES

HEAD OF PARLIAMENTARY MAINTENANCE SERVICES—Mike McCann
 BUSINESS COMPLIANCE MANAGER—Martin Wittekind
 OPERATIONS MANAGER—Phil Sturgeon
 REACTIVE AND CEREMONIAL MAINTENANCE MANAGER—Steve Jaggs
 SMALL WORKS MAINTENANCE MANAGER—Len Thorogood
 CONTRACTS MANAGER—John Taylor

CATERING SERVICES

DIRECTOR OF CATERING SERVICES—Richard Tapner-Evans
 EXECUTIVE CHEF—Mark Hill
 OPERATIONS MANAGER—Robert Gibbs
 CATERING MANAGER (TERRACE CAFETERIA, MEMBERS' TEA ROOM AND JUBILEE CAFÉ)—Denise Durkin
 PRIVATE DINING AND EVENTS MANAGER—Lee Holt
 PRIVATE DINING AND EVENTS OFFICE MANAGER—Jason Bonello
 PRIVATE DINING AND EVENTS SALES MANAGER—Kay West
 CATERING SERVICES MANAGER, NORTHERN ESTATE (PORTCULLIS HOUSE, 1 PARLIAMENT STREET, 7 MILLBANK, RICHMOND HOUSE, MONCRIEFF'S AND TOTHILL STREET)—Katie Elliott
 CATERING MANAGER (PORTCULLIS HOUSE, 7 MILLBANK, 1 PARLIAMENT STREET, MONCRIEFF'S AND TOTHILL STREET)—James Ellis
 PURCHASING AND STORES MANAGER—Antony Avella
 MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER—Tanith Banks

SERVICE DELIVERY

DIRECTOR OF SERVICE DELIVERY—Fiona Channon
 PARLIAMENTARY LOGISTICS MANAGER—Wesley Auvache
 HEAD OF CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP TEAM—Caroline Nicholls
 CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGER (HOUSE SERVICE)—Peter Cox
 ASSISTANT ACCOMMODATION MANAGER (DIVERSITY & INCLUSION LEAD)—Stephen Furber
 HEAD OF SERVICE DELIVERY—Simon Mansfield
 SERVICE DELIVERY MANAGERS—Doreen Irving, Claire Dore, David O'Nions
 HERITAGE CLEANING MANAGER—Eliza Steffens
 POSTMASTER—Mark Morrish
 HEAD OF ACCESS & SERVICES—Emily Cathcart
 FIRE SAFETY MANAGER—John Bradbury

SERJEANT AT ARMS

SERJEANT AT ARMS—Kamal El-Hajji BEM

OPERATIONS MANAGER—Chris Rust

PRINCIPAL DOORKEEPER—Phil Howse

CURATOR'S OFFICE & HISTORIC COLLECTIONS TEAM

CURATOR (ACTING) —Melanie Unwin

DEPUTY CURATOR AND HEAD OF INTERPRETATION—Emma Gormley

ASSISTANT CURATOR—Dr James Ford

ASSISTANT CURATOR—Sileas Wood

COLLECTIONS CARE MANAGER—Caroline Babington

COLLECTIONS INFORMATION MANAGER—Natasha Walsh

COLLECTIONS REGISTRAR & ASSISTANT CURATOR—Emily Green

KEEPER OF HISTORIC COLLECTIONS—Mary-Jane Tsang

COLLECTIONS MANAGER, HISTORIC COLLECTIONS—Emma Traherne

CONSERVATION MANAGER, HISTORIC COLLECTIONS—Patrick Walsh

RESEARCH AND INFORMATION

HOUSE OF COMMONS LIBRARIAN AND MANAGING DIRECTOR—Penny Young

PRIVATE SECRETARY—Rachel Aves

PERSONAL ASSISTANT—Brigitte Onyskiw

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT DIRECTORATE

DIRECTOR OF INFORMATION MANAGEMENT—Steve Wise

HEAD OF INDEXING AND DATA MANAGEMENT—Anya Somerville

HEAD OF LIBRARY RESOURCES—Susannah Foulis, Katharine Marke

SPIRE BENEFITS REALISATION MANAGER—Anne Thompson

INFORMATION RIGHTS AND INFORMATION SECURITY SERVICE (IRIS)

HEAD OF IRIS—Victoria Payne

INFORMATION RIGHTS—Abigail Richmond

INFORMATION SECURITY—Lauren Wilday

PROJECT AND COMMUNICATIONS—Olivia Salmon

PARLIAMENTARY OFFICE OF SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY (POST)

HEAD OF POST—Dr Grant Hill-Cawthorne

ADVISERS—Dr Rowena Birmingham, Dr Peter Border, Dr Sarah Bunn, Dr Lorna Christie, Dr Lydia Harriss, Dr Abbi Hobbs, Jack Miller, Dr Jonathan Wentworth

KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE MANAGERS – Dr Sarah Foxen, Naomi Saint

RESEARCH & INFORMATION DIRECTORATE

DIRECTOR OF RESEARCH—Edward Wood

Business and Transport

HEAD OF SECTION—Oliver Bennett

LIBRARY CLERKS—Daniel Ferguson, Andrew Haylen, Frederico Mor, Antony Seely, Djuna Thurley

Economic Policy and Statistics

HEAD OF SECTION—Lorna Booth

LIBRARY CLERKS—Philip Brien, Daniel Harari, Ilze Jozepa, Matthew Keep, Feargal McGuinness, Andrew Powell, Chris Rhodes, Dominic Webb

Home Affairs

HEAD OF SECTION—Douglas Pyper

LIBRARY CLERKS—Jacqueline Beard, Jenny Brown, Lorraine Conway, Joanna Dawson, Catherine Fairbairn, Sally Lipscombe, Terry McGuinness, Hannah Wilkins, John Woodhouse

International Affairs and Defence

HEAD OF SECTION—Vaughne Miller

LIBRARY CLERKS—Louisa Brooke-Holland, John Curtis, Sylvia de Mars, Stefano Fella, Arabella Lang, Dr Jon Lunn, Claire Mills, Ben Smith

Parliament and Constitution Centre

HEAD OF SECTION—Pat Strickland

LIBRARY CLERKS—Graeme Cowie, Previn Desai, Neil Johnston, Richard Kelly, Dr Mark Sandford, Dr David Torrance

Science and Environment

HEAD OF SECTION—Edward Potton

LIBRARY CLERKS—Dr Elena Ares, Dr Sarah Barber, Sarah Coe, Emma Downing, Gabrielle Garton Grimwood, Suzanna Hinson, Georgina Hutton, Sara Priestley, Louise Smith

Social and General Statistics

HEAD OF SECTION—Richard Cracknell

LIBRARY CLERKS—Grahame Allen, Dr Carl Baker, Cassie Barton, Paul Bolton, Shadi Danechi, Noel Dempsey, Dr Rachael Harker, Oliver Hawkins, Richard Keen, Georgina Sturge, Dr Elise Uberoi

Social Policy

HEAD OF SECTION—Wendy Wilson

LIBRARY CLERKS—Hannah Cromarty, David Foster, Manjit Gheera, Susan Hubble, Tim Jarrett, Steven Kennedy, Robert Long, Andrew Mackley, Nerys Roberts

RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT DIRECTORATE

DIRECTOR OF RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT—Bryn Morgan

PERFORMANCE & BUSINESS MANAGER—Alison Penman

HEAD OF EVALUATION AND INSIGHT—Clare Bamberger

HEAD OF OPERATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT, HOUSE OF COMMONS LIBRARY—Hannah Russell

FRONT OF HOUSE MANAGER, HOUSE OF COMMONS LIBRARY—Amina Gual

HEAD OF CUSTOMER SERVICE, HOUSE OF COMMONS LIBRARY—Hannah Roberts

HEAD OF RESEARCH COMMUNICATIONS—Grace Rowley

HEAD OF RESEARCH INFORMATION SERVICE—David Beales

DATA SCIENCE LEAD—Oliver Hawkins

SELF-SUFFICIENCY PROGRAMME LEAD—Richard Keen

STRATEGIC ESTATES

ACTING MANAGING DIRECTOR—David Hemming

OPERATIONS DIRECTOR—Patsy Richards

DIRECTOR PROPERTY, PLANNING & DESIGN—Donald Grant CEng

PORTFOLIO MANAGEMENT OFFICE LEAD—Mike Brough

DIRECTOR CAPITAL INVESTMENT—Duncan Whiting

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT DIRECTOR—Jane O'Mahoney

RESTORATION AND RENEWAL PROGRAMME DELIVERY DIRECTOR—Ben Wheeldon

NORTHERN ESTATE PROGRAMME DIRECTOR—John Cryer

HEAD OF FINANCE—Abiola Babalola

HEAD OF INFORMATION—Richard Hill

HEAD OF TRANSFORMATION—Charissa Fiander

HEAD OF COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT (INTERIM)—Catherine O'Sullivan

HEAD OF PROGRAMME & PLANNING—Andrew Geehan MSc, BSc, BD

HEAD OF ARCHITECTURE AND HERITAGE—Adam Watrobski BA (Hons), DiplArch, DiplConsAA, RIBA

HEAD OF PROPERTY PORTFOLIO AND INTERIM HEAD OF WORK SPACE—Laurence Eaton

ESTATES ARCHIVIST AND HISTORIAN—Mark Collins BA, PhD

LEAD ELECTRICAL ENGINEER (BUILDING SERVICES)—Ugbana Oyet BEng (Hons), CEng, MIET

LEAD CONTROLS/COMMUNICATIONS ENGINEER—Allan Trendell

LEAD MECHANICAL ENGINEER—Andy Greaves

PARLIAMENTARY DIGITAL SERVICE

CHIEF INFORMATION OFFICER AND MANAGING DIRECTOR—Tracey Jessup

DEPUTY DIRECTOR—David Smith

CHIEF TECHNOLOGY & SECURITY OFFICER—Mark Harbord

DIRECTOR OF SERVICE DESIGN—Rebecca Elton

DIGITAL PORTFOLIO DIRECTOR—Dan Cook

DIRECTOR OF THE CYBER SECURITY PROGRAMME—Steven Mark

DIRECTOR OF RESOURCES—Tim Youngs

DIRECTOR OF SOFTWARE ENGINEERING—Matt Stutely

DIRECTOR OF LIVE SERVICES—Rob Sanders

HEAD OF MEMBER SERVICES—Graham Peek

OTHER PRINCIPAL OFFICERS

CLERK OF THE CROWN IN CHANCERY—Richard Heaton

COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL—Sir Amyas Morse KCB

PARLIAMENTARY AND HEALTH SERVICE OMBUDSMAN—Rob Behrens

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SEVENTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 13 JUNE 2017]

SIXTY-SEVENTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 652

TWENTY-SEVENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2017-2019

House of Commons

Monday 7 January 2019

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WORK AND PENSIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Universal Credit: Transition

1. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to support households transitioning from legacy benefits to universal credit.
[908363]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): The purpose of universal credit is to replace an outdated benefits system, ensuring that people are better off in work and that support is targeted to the most vulnerable. We recognise the challenge that this cultural shift represents. We currently provide advance payments and a transitional housing payment to claimants coming on to universal credit. Furthermore, we will spend over £3 billion on transitional protections for 1.1 million households as part of our managed migration regulations.

Christine Jardine: I thank the Secretary of State for her answer. I welcome reports that she is considering scaling back the roll-out of the migration to universal

credit for those on legacy benefits while problems with the system are identified and resolved. However, we have seen from the WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality—scandal that a letter from the Department is often not enough to stop even those who are not vulnerable from falling through the cracks. Why has the Secretary of State rejected the recommendation from her own social security advisory committee that legacy benefits claimants should be transferred to universal credit automatically? As a minimum, will she guarantee that nobody has their legacy benefits stopped without an application?

Mr Speaker: We are extremely grateful to the hon. Lady.

Amber Rudd: There was a lot in that question. I would like to reassure the hon. Lady that ensuring that the transfer from legacy benefits to universal credit is effective, fair and compassionate is absolutely central to the work the Department will be doing. The pilot announced some time ago, involving 10,000 people, will be taking place later this year. It will be absolutely central to ensuring that that is effective. I look forward to further discussions about that.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to her place. Her announcement is absolutely right. She knows the whole point of universal credit was the test and learn process, unlike, and learning lessons from, the mess of tax credits. Under tax credits, nearly 1 million people lost all their money. That will not happen under universal credit. I hope she will absolutely see the programme through.

Amber Rudd: I thank my right hon. Friend for his support and pay tribute to the incredible work he did to set up universal credit, particularly focusing on ensuring that universal credit helps people into work. We must remember that under previous legacy rates that took place under Labour, to which he rightly draws attention, there were marginal rates of tax of 90%. No wonder people were discouraged from going into work.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): I am so confused. Might I ask the Secretary of State whether the best news we have heard since the benefit was introduced is in fact correct? Is she postponing the mass migration? Is she limiting it to the 10,000? Is she then going to see how those 10,000 are looked after in the transfer? If that is so, may I thank her and congratulate her, and say that it is a real pleasure that she has introduced so quickly a key recommendation of the Select Committee?

Amber Rudd: I am afraid the right hon. Gentleman is a little ahead in his fulsome praise for me, which I always appreciate. As I said to him in the Select Committee before Christmas, I will want to consider carefully when I bring to the House the vote for the 3 million managed migration, which is scheduled for 2020. I am still considering when to do that. I can reassure him that there will be a vote on that before it takes place. The 10,000-person pilot, which was announced some time ago, will, as always, inform us how we do that.

21. [908384] **Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): In Thirsk and Malton, some of my constituents get paid on four-weekly cycles. That means they can get paid twice in a month and can appear to be earning more than they actually do. What more can we do to ensure universal credit responds to such situations, so that people receive the right level of support at the right time?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He has raised this issue with us before. He is right that we need to ensure that universal credit delivers on what it intends to do, which is to give real time financial support based on an actual month's assessment. We have recently updated the guidance for universal credit so that work coaches can adjust to ensure that where the situation he describes occurs, appropriate adjustments are made.

22. [908385] **Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): On 12 December, Neil Wright from Plymouth, who is disabled, received 1p in universal credit to live on. He is not able to claim another payment until 14 January. He said he had just 77p to live on at Christmas. Can the Secretary of State understand the utter hopelessness and anger that situations such as Mr Wright's cause? Will she agree to review his case, and, no matter the good intentions behind universal credit, will she admit that the system still causes misery and poverty for far too many people?

Amber Rudd: I am sorry to hear of the particular situation the hon. Gentleman raises. He must write to me, and of course I will take a careful look at it. However, I would just say also that I visited a number of jobcentres last Friday and was shown the work that a particular work coach had done to get three different people advances on the day of their universal credit application—the Friday before Christmas. We must not underestimate the good work that so many work coaches do to help claimants, which is in their interest and in ours.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The Labour party often talks about benefit cuts, but can my right hon. Friend confirm that when universal credit is fully rolled out,

there will be £2 billion more going into the benefits system than there would have been under legacy benefits, thanks to the changes in the last Budget?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for giving me the opportunity to clarify that. It is such an important point that by 2020 the total system will cost approximately £62 billion, which is £2 billion more than the £60 billion that would have been anticipated under the previous benefits, so we are investing in our benefits.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Just before I call the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), may I say to her—I think I do so with the support of the House—how sorry I was to see that her predecessor, an illustrious representative of the Bishop Auckland constituency, Mr Derek Foster, later Lord Foster, had passed away? He was well respected in this place and gave great service to it, and our sympathies go to his widow and the family.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Mr Speaker, thank you. I am sure all the people who live in Bishop Auckland will very much appreciate those sentiments.

The Secretary of State may know that five years ago 30,000 people were fined for wrongly claiming free prescriptions, but last year that figure was 1 million. That is because when people get their awards, they are not told whether they are entitled to free prescriptions. It is a simple piece of admin—will she sort it?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Lady for drawing that to my attention. I am aware of the changes that need to be made and some of the things that have already been addressed, but I will write to her further to set out how we are addressing exactly what she raises.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): The roll-out of universal credit is going well in my constituency. Work coaches have told me—[*Interruption.*] Jobcentre work coaches have told me how they value being able to give extra help to my constituents to help them into work. Will my right hon. Friend advise me what work she is doing to ensure that housing benefit payments reach the landlords of some of my most vulnerable constituents?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. I know she shares my concern that we must ensure that universal credit addresses the needs of the most vulnerable and that, where it needs to be paid directly to landlords, it can be. It is right that we have tried to limit that, but it is also right that we do not have one system that does not take into account the particular needs of the most vulnerable in our society. As we have had the opportunity to discuss, I will be looking further at what else can be done.

16. [908378] **Ruth George** (High Peak) (Lab): It is good to get clarification from the Secretary of State about managed migration, but in the meantime, more people will move on to universal credit by natural migration than by managed migration, with no protection whatsoever from the huge drop in income. The Department has published no conclusive list of all the reasons for people having a change of circumstances

and being moved on to universal credit. Will she commit to doing that at the earliest opportunity so that people are not transferred wrongly?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady is right that we now have 1.4 million people on universal credit and we expect another 1.6 million to move on to it during the next 12 months as part of natural migration. I am of course collecting information as we go to ensure that that is done fairly, accurately and efficiently, as I want it to be, but I will take her suggestion on board. I am very keen to ensure that everything we do is evidence-based.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Rugby jobcentre has quite a lot of experience with universal credit, having been a pilot centre since 2013 and on full service since May 2016. The staff there have had a hand in making the transition easier based on the test and learn approach. Will the Secretary of State acknowledge the hard work of staff at jobcentres such as Rugby's in making improvements to the universal credit system?

Amber Rudd: May I particularly thank the people in the Rugby jobcentre? I have had an opportunity to visit many different jobcentres since being appointed, and I find universally that the people who work in them are enthusiastic about universal credit and passionate, caring and compassionate about the claimants they work for. I urge Opposition Members not to underestimate the good work being done by work coaches in their constituencies to help the people most in need.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Happy new year, Mr Speaker.

Most people will have thought that the weekend's announcement was perhaps the start of a major shift by the Government with regards to universal credit, but unless it is followed up with meaningful interventions, changes and investment, such as to the benefits freeze, the two-child cap or the sanctions regime, it will be meaningless. Can the Secretary of State confirm if it is her plan to use the delay to the managed migration vote to introduce any changes to universal credit before the summer?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the whole principle of universal credit is test and learn, and so we are always looking to make changes and improvements. This is a tremendously ambitious project, bringing huge benefits to claimants and helping them into work and to stay in work, and we are always ready to learn from new developments as we proceed with the roll-out.

Neil Gray: By delaying the vote and bringing forward 10,000 guinea pigs to test the transfer from the legacy system to universal credit, the Secretary of State accepted that there might at least be some problems with universal credit, and yet she cannot come forward with any ideas or bring forward any changes. Does she accept that, unless she brings forward the changes being called for by Members across the House, the United Nations and expert charities and community groups, this exercise will be little more than kicking the can down the road?

Amber Rudd: I think that the hon. Gentleman misunderstands me. I am completely committed to the benefits of universal credit and to ensuring that it remains a force for good, helps people into work and does not repeat the terrible mistakes of the past under Labour and the legacy benefits. The new system will work much better for people, and, with the help of all Members of Parliament, people will find that their jobcentres are enthusiastic about it.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): If reports over the weekend are true, it seems that the Government are finally waking up to the potentially devastating impact of their managed migration plans on claimants, over one third of whom will be sick or disabled. Therefore, will the Secretary of State now clarify the situation and what action she will take to address the central flaw in these regulations, which places all the onus on claimants to make a new claim for universal credit or risk losing support if they do not make an application on time?

Amber Rudd: I am grateful for a second opportunity to clarify the situation. As we announced last year, there will be a 10,000-person pilot this summer that will help us to learn how to be most effective in the managed migration. We have 1.4 million already on universal credit through natural migration and 1.6 million are expected to come on during the next 12 months. Making sure that the managed migration is effective, efficient and compassionate is absolutely central to the success of universal credit, and that will be coming forward in 2020.

Margaret Greenwood: Only about one third of households due to be claiming universal credit by the time it is fully rolled out were ever scheduled to transfer under managed migration and so receive transitional protection. Universal credit is being used as a vehicle for cuts to social security and is pushing many people into poverty, rent arrears and food banks. Will the Secretary of State now stop the roll-out?

Amber Rudd: I would ask the hon. Lady to think again about her approach to universal credit. It is doing a good job. I urge all Members who have not had the opportunity to visit their jobcentres and experience it for themselves—talk to the claimants and work coaches—and above all to compare it to the legacy benefits. If they do, they will see the confusion and complication that was there. Now, with our one simple system, it will be much more straightforward for individual claimants.

Universal Credit: Childcare Costs

2. **Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op):** What support is available for childcare costs through universal credit. [908364]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Justin Tomlinson): Universal credit supports working parents with childcare costs, regardless of the number of hours they work. This provides an important financial incentive to those taking their first steps into paid employment. People can recover up to 85% of their eligible childcare costs on universal credit, compared to 70% on the legacy system.

Lucy Powell: As the Minister will know, one of the big challenges with universal credit is that families have to pay their childcare costs upfront. Save the Children and the Centre for Social Justice have recently warned that this is leaving families in £1,000 of debt when they start work. Under the review that the Department now seems to be conducting, can it look again at this, and can it also look at their other recommendation of making it not 85% but 100% of childcare costs, because this would really benefit those on low pay?

Justin Tomlinson: I know that the hon. Lady has worked tirelessly on this issue. The Government recognise its importance, which is why we have increased our financial support by nearly 50% since 2010. We are making improvements specifically in relation to payment in arrears, improving communication and ensuring that the Flexible Support Fund is better known and better used to help those who would otherwise face a financial barrier.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Can the Minister confirm that parents with disabled children will continue to receive additional support under universal credit?

Justin Tomlinson: Yes.

18. [908380] **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Will the Minister ensure that no one else ever suffers the same indignity as Paulette Reid of Acton, a working mum with three kids who, over Christmas, found herself with £10 to her name for the entire holiday season? When she rang the DWP asking for the payment that we are told everyone receives in advance, she was told to go to a food bank. The people at the Department obviously do not understand that that involves a referral process. How can this be happening now in the fifth richest country on earth? It seems that "I, Daniel Blake" is becoming reality in Ealing, queen of the suburbs.

Justin Tomlinson: I am very sorry to hear about that case. The hon. Lady's constituent should have had access to an advance payment, and if she was down to her last £10, it should have been made on that day. If the hon. Lady will write to me with all the details, we will look at that specific case to see what went wrong.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement about examining the impact of universal credit on women, which, through women, often affects children. Will she look again at the single household payment, and consider separate payments to protect women from financial coercion, control and abuse?

Justin Tomlinson: This matter relates mostly to domestic abuse. I have been doing a huge amount of work with Women's Aid, Refuge and ManKind to increase awareness that split payments are available in those circumstances, and to ensure that more work is done to identify, refer and support such claimants.

Employment Trends

4. **Royston Smith** (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): What assessment the Government have made of trends in the level of employment since 2010. [908366]

11. **Leo Docherty** (Aldershot) (Con): What assessment the Government have made of trends in the level of employment since 2010. [908373]

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): Let me first wish you a very happy new year, Mr Speaker.

The UK's employment rate is at a joint record high of 75.7%, and more people are in employment than ever before. Thanks to the policies of this Conservative Government, 3.4 million more people are in work than in 2010, and wages are growing faster than inflation.

Royston Smith: Many of my constituents have been able to find work, but much of it involves low-paid service-sector roles and few career prospects. What is my hon. Friend doing to help those who are already in work to move towards higher-paid, more rewarding occupations?

Alok Sharma: About 75% of the jobs that have been created since 2010 are full-time, permanent, high-skill occupations attracting high wages, but my hon. Friend is right to say that we need to help people with low earnings to progress. That is why, under universal credit, work coaches offer one-to-one support, and we are undertaking trials to determine what further support we can provide to help people to move into better-paid work.

Leo Docherty: Since 2010, unemployment in my constituency has fallen by two thirds. Can the Minister tell us how many employment records the Government have broken?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend has highlighted an important point, which, of course, the Opposition never want to talk about. Under this Conservative Government, 18 new employment records have been set since 2015, underlining the confidence that employers have in our policies. That confidence would evaporate if that lot got anywhere near government.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Getting people into work is a good thing, but there is no point in trapping them in in-work poverty. About two thirds of children in poverty are growing up in working households. What is the Minister doing to address that?

Alok Sharma: The hon. Lady has raised an important point, but I should point out that there has been no particular increase in in-work poverty. Indeed, 1 million fewer people, and 300,000 fewer children, are living in absolute poverty. Ultimately, however, this is about helping people into work, and, as we have said, we are doing an enormous amount through universal credit to ensure that that happens.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the question asked by the hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith), will the Minister not acknowledge that there is a big challenge for many of my constituents who work in more than one job on low wages, who do not have the time or the money to progress to further training, and whose employers are not willing to invest? How will he help those people to move to better, long-term, secure jobs?

Alok Sharma: As I said in answer to an earlier question, 75% of the jobs created since 2010 are indeed in high-level occupations which attract higher wages, but of course we need to do more and that is why the Government are investing in apprenticeships for both young and more mature workers. We are also investing in a national retraining scheme and technical skills. That is what is going to create support for individuals looking for jobs in the market right now.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): How do our low unemployment levels compare with those of France and other countries unfortunate enough to be trapped in the eurozone?

Alok Sharma: That is a typically forthright question from my right hon. Friend. To compare rates, in France the unemployment rate is over 9% I believe, but of course the other incredibly important progress we have made is in youth unemployment. That has been almost halved since 2010, thanks to the work we have been doing in government.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Local authorities in Scotland—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are now moving on to question 5, but I say to the hon. Lady that it is the first day back and we should celebrate her enthusiasm.

Universal Credit Roll-out

5. **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What progress her Department has made on the roll-out of universal credit. [908367]

9. **Ronnie Cowan** (Inverclyde) (SNP): What progress her Department has made on the roll-out of universal credit. [908371]

17. **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): What progress her Department has made on the roll-out of universal credit. [908379]

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): The roll-out of universal credit is now complete and is available in every jobcentre across the United Kingdom. By 2023, all existing legacy claimants will have been moved to universal credit which, as set out in our business case, will result in £8 billion in economic benefits a year to the British economy.

Patricia Gibson: Local authorities in Scotland have spent over £20 million on mitigating the harmful effects of UC, thus diverting money from key local services. Does the Secretary of State think this is acceptable, and was it envisaged when universal credit was conceived? Is it not more evidence that this system needs to be stopped and fixed to make it fit for purpose?

Alok Sharma: We do of course have the policy of new burdens funding, and in 2017-18 the Government paid out £30 million to local authorities across the country. If the hon. Lady has specific issues in relation to local councils on her patch, she should come forward as I will be very happy to have a discussion with her outside this oral session.

Ronnie Cowan: I would like to highlight one particular universal credit case that my office is dealing with. My constituent has incurable skin cancer which requires using a cream treatment. He has to use the cream at home and it needs to be applied for several hours every day. He has been told that as his treatment for cancer is not radiotherapy or chemotherapy he should be able to attend work. My constituent has daily and lengthy treatment for an incurable condition. Can the Secretary of State or the Minister tell me what my constituent should be applying for?

Alok Sharma: I am very sorry to hear about the distress the hon. Gentleman's constituent is undergoing, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for his regular engagement with the jobcentre in his constituency. I would be very happy to discuss this case with him in detail and see what more we can do to support his constituent.

David Linden: Last night on Twitter Steven McAvoyn contacted me about the issue of disabled students being unable to access universal credit unless they have already passed their work capability assessment by the time they become a student. This is an incredibly difficult issue for some of the most vulnerable people in our constituencies, so will the Minister look into this again?

Alok Sharma: I would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss the matter.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Can the Minister reassure my constituents who have heard claims that some housing associations are refusing to accept tenants in receipt of universal credit by giving an assurance that the Government will make sure this is never the case?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend has huge experience of the housing sector of course, and I thank him for the work he does in his constituency; I have been to visit him. The landlord portal has now been rolled out across almost 70% of the social housing sector, but I will be happy to discuss with him any specific cases he wants to raise.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I very much look forward to welcoming the Secretary of State to Stirling shortly. When she comes will she take time to visit the Jobcentre Plus at Randolph Field, where she can talk to work coaches who will give a far more positive story about the impact—the positive, life-changing impact—of universal credit than the critics on the other side of the House have given?

Alok Sharma: The Secretary of State has already outlined the visits that she has made, and I know that she is going to make many more. What my hon. Friend describes is something that I also consistently find when I visit job centres—namely, the huge enthusiasm and the real desire to help individuals. For the first time, jobcentre workers and work coaches are able to do precisely that, through the one-to-one support that was not possible under the legacy system.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): If true, the reported U-turn on managed migration in response to considerable pressure from the voluntary sector and those on the Labour Benches, is welcome, but any

attempt to avoid scrutiny is not. Can the Minister assure the House that those regulations will still be debated in full in this Chamber, and if so, when?

Alok Sharma: The Secretary of State has set out the position very clearly. Of course we will be bringing forward any potential new regulations. The hon. Gentleman and his colleagues talk a lot about supporting vulnerable people, but they voted against the £1.5 billion of support last year and against the £4.5 billion of support introduced in the Budget. He should be supporting those policies, not talking them down.

Universal Credit: Helping People into Work

6. **Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): What assessment the Government have made of the effectiveness of universal credit in helping people into work. [908368]

10. **Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): What assessment the Government have made of the effectiveness of universal credit in helping people into work. [908372]

12. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What assessment the Government have made of the effectiveness of universal credit in helping people into work. [908374]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): There are many good reasons why universal credit is effective at helping people into work. The most important is that the legacy system disincentivised people from taking up work, often by applying a tax rate of 90% and above, while the taper rate under universal credit is more likely to be 63%, which enables people genuinely to get into work.

Robert Courts: Will my right hon. Friend join me in commending the hard work of the Witney jobcentre? Will she also explain how jobcentres such as the one in Witney are using new technology to help people into work in the digital age?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for drawing this to my attention. I thank the Witney jobcentre for the work that it does in helping people into work, and I also thank him for his work on this as a Member of Parliament. Of course it is essential that we make advanced digital equipment available to our work coaches to ensure that the service they deliver really is first class, and we will always ensure that they do.

Mike Wood: At the Stourbridge jobcentre, the work coaches are evangelical about how the flexibility of universal credit allows them to better support the most vulnerable and the hardest-to-help claimants. Will the Secretary of State ensure that this best practice is shared around the country so that more people can find sustainable work for the first time?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for drawing my attention to the good work being done by the Stourbridge jobcentre and its work coaches. He really highlights the other true benefit of universal credit, which is the personalised approach. It is no longer about signing on; it is about individuals going to the jobcentres and being

offered real, tailored support to help them to deal with their challenges and to get into work. This is a revolutionary system.

Peter Aldous: Given that the planned objective of universal credit is to move people closer to and into the workplace, can the Secretary of State confirm that empirical, rather than anecdotal, evidence is being compiled on a national basis, and that it will be made available for public scrutiny so that the necessary adaptations can be made to ensure that universal credit ultimately achieves its goal?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is right. Important though anecdotal evidence is—that is what MPs collect when they visit their job centres—it will also be absolutely critical to have full empirical evidence as well. In June last year, we published the universal credit full business case, which showed that universal credit will move more people into work. Once we have completed the managed migration pilot, we will also publish an impact assessment on the first phase.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Figures from the Trussell Trust show that food bank use increased significantly in the 12 months after the full-service roll-out of universal credit in Crewe and Nantwich. Universal credit was intended to lift people out of poverty. What has gone wrong?

Amber Rudd: I hope that the hon. Lady has seen an improvement since the roll-out started in Crewe and Nantwich—

Laura Smith indicated dissent.

Amber Rudd: I suspect that if she speaks to the jobcentre there, she will be reassured that the number of people being paid on time has vastly risen—

Laura Smith indicated dissent.

Amber Rudd: I would ask the hon. Lady to come back to me, if she will, and to have a conversation about this. It is absolutely true that when universal credit initially started, the payments were not getting out in time and advance payments were not available. That is now being changed, and claimants are universally noticing a distinct difference.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): If the Secretary of State wants some empirical evidence, let me give her some: 55,410 people are on universal credit in Birmingham and food bank demand has increased by two thirds. Birmingham MPs, drawing upon our surgery experiences, have highlighted 13 different problems with the process. The *Birmingham Mail* has highlighted benefit delays of months on end. Unemployment in the inner city is not going down; it is actually going up. Rather than consider any further roll-out of managed migration, let us stop and fix the problems first before more families are plunged into poverty, homelessness and hunger.

Amber Rudd: I was in Birmingham last Friday, when I went to the Yardley jobcentre and saw for myself the remarkable work being done and some projects that are

reaching people who had never been reached before. Under the legacy benefits, the second named person in a household who was not earning was basically ignored for years and was not invited to participate. We now have a system whereby the people who were ignored for years under the right hon. Gentleman's Government's system are being obliged to engage. I am facing the facts, so perhaps he should face them as well. He can have his own views, but he cannot have his own facts.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): An interim report commissioned by Centrepont shows that the Government's youth obligation programme is failing young people on numerous counts. Almost half of participants dropped out without finding a job or training, young people on the programme were more likely to be sanctioned, many did not understand what the programme was for, and there is no central recording of job destinations beyond the programme. At what stage is the Secretary of State going to get a grip on that situation?

Amber Rudd: I am not as despondent about the programme as the hon. Gentleman is. I visited Centrepont between Christmas and new year to find out for myself about the good work it is doing and about the relationship that it has with the universal credit service provider. It has a particular named person who helps with young people to ensure that they get additional personal help when they apply. Ensuring that personal help is available is exactly what universal credit is about, and Centrepont confirmed to me that that is exactly what young people are getting.

Employment: Ex-offenders

7. **Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support ex-offenders into employment. [908369]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): We know that employment is the best way to avoid repeat offending. I should declare that I wrote a book on prisoner rehabilitation called "Doing Time" so I am particularly passionate about the work being done at both the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Work and Pensions with the "See Potential" campaign, which contains guidance to encourage the recruitment of ex-offenders.

Huw Merriman: Happy new year, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman's politeness and the fact that he was born and brought up in my constituency are not altogether unrelated.

Huw Merriman: We share much in common, Mr Speaker.

A constituent of mine was convicted of an offence abroad 18 years ago when she was 20 years old. Since then, she has rebuilt her life and trained to become a social worker. She got a job, but she was told at the end of her probationary period that she could not keep it for reputational reasons. Will the Minister consider giving guidance to public sector employers to ensure that they will take a risk with people and do not continue to punish them long after their sentence has been spent?

Guy Opperman: I represented hundreds of people as a criminal legal aid barrister, and the vast majority of my clients deserved rehabilitation and a fresh start, so I wish my hon. Friend's constituent well. I can confirm that the Government will issue clearer guidance for the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 on that precise point.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that the Ministry of Justice recently introduced the female offender strategy, so will he set out what work the DWP is doing to support women ex-offenders back into work, which is one of the biggest causes of social breakdown and why they cannot integrate back into the community?

Guy Opperman: The reality is that the Ministry of Justice's education and employment strategy allows each prisoner to be set on a path to employment when they arrive in prison, and the Ministry is working hand in hand with the more than 100 job coaches working inside our prisons.

Universal Credit: Self-employment

8. **Hugh Gaffney** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the effect of universal credit on self-employed people. [908370]

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): Universal credit supports self-employed people to develop and grow their businesses where doing so is the best route for them to become financially self-sufficient. We recently announced changes to the grace period for the minimum income floor and the extension of the new enterprise allowance scheme, all of which provide additional support to self-employed claimants.

Hugh Gaffney: Citizens Advice estimated in October that self-employed workers could lose up to £630 a year because of the way universal credit payments are calculated. It also stated that 400,000 claimants could suffer losses because of the minimum income floor, which the Minister mentioned. Those claimants are people who are trying to make a living for their families and themselves. Will the Secretary of State commit to reviewing the effects of the minimum income floor on self-employed workers who are claiming universal credit?

Alok Sharma: As I highlighted in my earlier answer, we have made a change to the minimum income floor. The grace period will be extended to one year for all people coming in who are gainfully self-employed running a business. Ultimately, different businesses take different lengths of time to reach profitability, so, in the period before the minimum income floor is applied, we are giving people a chance to develop their business. That is also why we provide support through the new enterprise allowance.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Mention was made earlier of the fantastic fall in youth unemployment since 2010—around 50%, I believe. What action can the Minister take, or is the Minister taking, to ensure that that trend continues evenly across the United Kingdom so that our young people get the best start to their working lives?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend highlights a very important point. Youth unemployment has almost halved since 2010, and we have the youth employment support programme to thank for that—the work we do through jobcentres in schools to make sure that people do not end up not in education, employment or training. Ultimately, however, this is about supporting people through the process, and that is what we are doing in universal credit.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I hope it does turn out to be the case, as reported, that the Secretary of State is going to pause the roll-out of universal credit in order to fix it. I hope she has noticed that the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) congratulated her because he thought that that was what she had decided. Can the Minister assure the House that those who are being transferred to universal credit from other benefits will not have to wait five weeks before they are entitled to support? That is what is forcing them into debt.

Alok Sharma: I know the right hon. Gentleman cares very deeply about these issues, and we have had many discussions about this. It is precisely to help people with their cash flows that we have made advances available up front—up to 100%, if that is what they require—as well as two weeks of housing benefit run-on.

Pensions Dashboard

13. **Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): What steps the Government have taken to deliver the pensions dashboard. [908375]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): We published the pensions dashboard feasibility report in December, and the consultation closes on 28 January. We will shortly thereafter draft legislation, which will unquestionably benefit the 16,000 men and women in my hon. Friend's constituency who have an auto-enrolled pension at present.

Rachel Maclean: I thank the Minister for that answer, and I am delighted to hear of my constituents who are benefiting. What more can the Department do to encourage more women to save for their financial futures?

Guy Opperman: We believe that the dashboard will be a crucial part of that, but my hon. Friend will be aware that female participation in a workplace pension has increased by 3 million since 2012, thanks to auto-enrolment. In the private sector, female participation in a workplace pension has jumped from 40% to 80% in the last five years.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): In Hartlepool, one in five claimants lose their disability benefit, and we have an estimated nine food banks. We were one of the pilot areas for universal credit. Will the Secretary of State, as part of her investigations, please come to Hartlepool to see for herself the effects of universal credit on my constituents?

Guy Opperman: I am not sure that that has much to do with the pensions dashboard, but I can certainly say that universal credit is something that the Government support wholeheartedly, and that the individual matters will be looked into.

Universal Credit: Household Incomes

14. **Mary Creagh** (Wakefield) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the effect of the roll-out of universal credit on household incomes. [908376]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Justin Tomlinson): Universal credit spends £2 billion more than the system it replaces. It simplifies the old system and makes work pay. It is already transforming lives across the country.

Mary Creagh: Happy new year, Mr Speaker.

What an extraordinary answer. Some 10% of children in the UK live in severely food-insecure households. That is the highest number in the European Union. However and whenever the roll-out of universal credit starts, begins or enters into its full flood, will the Minister work with the Office for National Statistics to measure the extent of childhood food poverty before and after the introduction of universal credit?

Justin Tomlinson: I think we all recognise that we need better-quality statistics. Various groups are working on alternatives, and the Government will take those seriously. As has been mentioned, there are 300,000 fewer children in absolute poverty. On the specific issue of food insecurity, in the past five years alone it has almost halved to 5.4%, which is 2.5% lower than the EU average.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: It is very good to welcome the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) back to the House.

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): Happy new year, Mr Speaker.

I note the delays to the roll-out of universal credit announced over the weekend, but will the Minister please tell us what justification there can possibly be for people who have had to claim universal credit so far not receiving any protections? Will the Secretary of State agree to halt natural migration, compensate every single person who has lost out, and investigate the circumstances that have led people on to universal credit when there has been no change in their circumstance?

Justin Tomlinson: If the hon. Lady looked at the feedback we have had from stakeholders following this week's announcement, she would see that they make it absolutely clear that they support universal credit over the legacy system. We know that 700,000 people—some of the most vulnerable people in our society—are missing out on £2.4 billion of support because the legacy system is too complicated. Universal credit gives personalised, tailored support and makes sure that people get the support that they need.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: From one returning young mum to another—I call Jo Swinson.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I hope that the delay to the full roll-out of universal credit is a sign that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is open to making the many changes to universal credit that are needed. I urge Minister to look in particular at the harsh repayment timescales for loans, which led my constituent to say:

“I should never have taken that 3 month job. It made me worse off”.

Surely that is the very opposite of what the Government are trying to achieve with universal credit.

Justin Tomlinson: I, too, welcome the hon. Lady back.

This issue is a real priority for the Secretary of State. We have already made changes: initially, the repayment period was six months, then 12 months, and it is now 16 months, and we have moved the maximum deduction rate down from 40% to 30%. We will continue to review the situation.

Disability: Medical Assessments

15. **Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): What recent steps her Department has taken to improve the accuracy of medical assessments of disability for the purpose of claiming benefit. [908377]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): Ensuring the quality and accuracy of the assessments undertaken by qualified healthcare assessment providers is a top priority. The Department is implementing a wide range of improvements, as communicated to the Work and Pensions Committee and many stakeholders. All our assessment providers' claimant satisfaction reviews continue to exceed the minimum satisfaction level of 90%. Accuracy is improving year on year for both personal independence payment and work capability assessments, and the Department closely monitors performance, including through the independent audit of assessment reports.

Kevin Brennan: Some years ago, my constituent Robert Shafer was denied benefits after a Department for Work and Pensions medical assessment was deemed fit for purpose, despite its being contradicted by all other medical evidence and the medical examiner being sent for retraining. Robert Shafer's case has never been resolved. When will Ministers accept that the whole medical assessment process is in itself not fit for purpose?

Sarah Newton: I am very sorry to hear about that individual case. I would of course be more than happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to see what more we can do to help. The work capability assessment and PIP assessment process has been subject to a series of independent reviews, which we welcome, and we work vigorously to make sure that we make continuous improvements. For the vast majority of people, the processes work well.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Just before Christmas, the Minister announced yet another review of disabled people being wrong denied vital social security, after 4,600 disabled people had their disability living allowance wrongly stopped and were deprived of PIP. It is the seventh review of its kind in the past year and provides yet another example of the devastating impact of the chaotic shambles at the heart of the DWP.

Does the Minister agree that this latest review is the result of institutional indifference to the suffering of disabled people? Or is it simply the result of a Department in utter chaos?

Sarah Newton: Well, happy new year to the shadow Minister.

I utterly refute the idea that the Department for Work and Pensions and its staff, who work so hard, day in, day out—well, I will not even dignify those comments by repeating the allegations. The Department is there to make sure that people in our society get the benefits that they—[*Interruption.*] I am very happy to answer the question if the hon. Lady will refrain from chuntering so distractingly from sedentary position. We are utterly determined to make sure we have a benefits system that is compassionate, fair and fit for purpose. We are proceeding at pace to review the PIP claimant cases to make sure that people get all the benefits to which they are entitled.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I have a 31-year-old constituent who has the deteriorating condition cystic fibrosis. With lung function of less than 30%, he is now being assessed for a lung transplant. After a recent medical assessment, his PIP payments were stopped and he now has a 47-week wait for a tribunal date to appeal that medical assessment decision. Will the Minister meet me to discuss my constituent's case?

Sarah Newton: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing up this case, and I will be very happy to meet her. It is really worth reflecting on the fact that, for the vast majority of people, PIP works well. Many more people are benefiting from PIP than they were under the legacy system, but one mistake is one too many and I will of course work with her.

Mr Speaker: We are short of time, but I want to hear the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone).

Leaving the EU: Departmental Spending

19. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): How much her Department has spent on preparations for the UK leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement. [908381]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): We have prepared for all eventualities that might take place after March this year, including no deal. Preparations have been undertaken by staff as part of their regular duties, and we are therefore unable to apportion costs to that. However, the Department has been allocated £15 million for 2019-20 for EU exit preparation.

Mr Hollobone: Will the Department for Work and Pensions be 100% ready in the event of a no-deal Brexit?

Amber Rudd: We are 100% ready for any eventuality.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): When will the Government publish the report that was leaked to *The Times* just before Christmas, which revealed the different scenarios for Brexit and

their impact on unemployment, homelessness, poverty and much more? Will it be before next week's meaningful vote?

Amber Rudd: The Department regularly conducts internal inquiries to reassure ourselves that we are prepared for all eventualities, and I can reassure the hon. Lady that we are prepared.

Mr Speaker: Let us hear the voice of Amber Valley.

Motability

20. **Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con): What assessment she has made of the implications for her policies of the findings in the December 2018 NAO report on the level of profit made by Motability from leasing cars to personal independence payment claimants. [908383]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): Asking the National Audit Office to investigate was an important step towards ensuring that disabled people are provided with an excellent, value for money service. It is troubling that excessive amounts have been paid out in bonuses and are sitting in reserves. We accept all the NAO recommendations and will be meeting the chairman of Motability this week to discuss how the organisation plans to implement them.

Nigel Mills: Does the Minister agree that the great work done by that charity is being undermined by the amount of salary and bonuses that it is paying out? Will she work with it as soon as she possibly can to make sure that that money is used for the benefit of vulnerable people, not the directors of the business?

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. The Motability scheme is very much valued by disabled people and I want to make sure that all disabled people with mobility concerns can benefit from it, so we will be asking the organisation to use up its reserves and to make sure that it reaches more disabled people to help them play a full part in society.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister is always most courteous in engaging with the person asking the question, but the rest of the House also wants to hear her, so it would be appreciated if she could look in our direction.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): While Motability has created millions of pounds of profits, I have a constituent, 51 years of age and a former NHS nurse, who sustained a serious injury for which she has required more than 20 operations. After six months on sick pay, she was granted the highest PIP mobility rate as well as employment and support allowance at £73.10 a week. Her PIP was subsequently reduced to the lowest rate of £22 a week, and she lost ESA payment of £37 a week and has been deemed fit to work. She is struggling to buy food and to pay her bills. Her mobile phone was restricted by her provider due to two phone calls to the DWP costing her £47, so she has lost all her money. What will the Minister do to sort out this scandalous situation?

Mr Speaker: The question was an extraordinarily interesting one, and very comprehensive, but it was a classic example of what I call shoehorning. The hon. Gentleman was seeking to shoehorn his issue into a

question to which it did not really belong, but the Minister's dexterity is boundless and I feel sure that she will reply pithily.

Sarah Newton: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Of course, I will meet the hon. Gentleman to go through that case. It is well worth remembering that there are 600,000 people on the mobility scheme, which is many more than there were in 2010 before we had PIP. In fact, 144,000 people have been given enhanced mobility rates, and transitional protection is also available. I will be working with Motability to make sure that more people can benefit from that scheme, but of course we can meet and go through the details of that case.

Care Leavers: Employment

24. **Mr Robert Goodwill** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): What steps she is taking to support care leavers into work. [908387]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Justin Tomlinson): The Government are committed to supporting care leavers. We have introduced a £1,000 bursary for those starting an apprenticeship and a £2,000 bursary for those going into higher education, extended paid internship opportunities across Government and launched the care leaver covenant. We are also working closely with Barnardo's on an innovative work experience pilot.

Mr Goodwill: Care leavers are some of the most difficult people to get into employment. Social workers are helping with that transition through projects such as Staying Close and Staying Put, but what particular outreach support can the Department deliver to improve the statistics, which do not look good?

Justin Tomlinson: I know that my right hon. Friend worked tirelessly on this when he was a Minister in the Department for Education. We have 900 single points of contact who are supporting care leavers across the country. We are also working with a lot of businesses so that they can realise the huge potential that care leavers offer. I had two fantastic visits, to the Big House in London and PGL, which I saw at first hand were benefiting from giving care leavers work opportunities.

Topical Questions

T1. [908388] **Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): Universal credit is a vital reform that overhauls a legacy system that trapped people out of work; with six different benefits and three different places, it was utterly confusing. All new claimants now receive universal credit. In the future, we will move claimants who have not changed circumstances from legacy benefits to universal credit in an approach known as managed migration. It is right that the Government eventually operate one system. The Department has long planned to support 10,000 people through this process before increasing the number of people migrated. That will provide an opportunity to learn how to provide the best support, while keeping Parliament fully informed of our approach.

Giles Watling: The local jobcentre staff in Clacton do some excellent work and should be commended. However, the Secretary of State will know—I raised this case with her a little while ago—that for various reasons one constituent was unable to access some services at the jobcentre. In the end we were able to help this man, but what more can the Department do to ensure that outreach is available so that these vital services can reach even claimants who cannot make it to the jobcentre or who, like me, have difficulty dealing with IT stuff?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for drawing this case to my attention and for all the work he does with the jobcentre to ensure that his constituents have the right access to universal credit. Work coaches are trained to give additional support where it is needed, whether that is with IT or for people who require a home visit. We estimate that there have been nearly 300,000 home visits in the past year to ensure that people get the tailored support they need.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Nearly half a million senior citizens living abroad, who have paid in all their life, currently enjoy the guarantee that their state pension will be uprated annually. The same is true for pension entitlement built up working in another European Union state. With 81 days to go until Brexit, does the Minister recognise that the Government's total mishandling of Brexit means that we might crash out with a no-deal Brexit, and that in those circumstances it would be not just our jobs and economy that would be put at risk but the security and dignity of a whole generation of pensioners?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): The Government have a cross-departmental strategy on Brexit. The reality is that the policy for overseas pensioners has continued since the second world war, was endorsed by the previous Labour Government and is continued by this Government.

T2. [908389] **Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I have seen at first hand the benefits that universal credit can bring by giving people a job and helping them to turn their lives around, and I have also heard the frustrations of work coaches that there are still many people on legacy benefits who do not get that same good service. May I therefore welcome the latest test and learn approach, but ask the Secretary of State to ensure that we still move towards change and deliver?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for the good work that he has done as a champion of universal credit, recognising, as we all do on the Government Benches—and as I hope all Opposition Members will do—the good work that universal credit does at the hands of really caring, personalised work coaches, who ensure that the claimants we all seek to serve get the tailored support they need. I hope that my hon. Friend will take that as a resounding yes.

T3. [908391] **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): Why have not the Government published a recent equalities impact assessment of the plans for managed migration to universal credit? What have they got to hide?

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): We have previously published an equalities assessment and, as we have noted, we will do the same ahead of the full roll-out of managed migration.

T4. [908392] **Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): As universal credit is rolled out in Havant, I welcome the use of new technology to help applicants. What support is available to those applicants to ensure that they make the best use of the new systems?

Alok Sharma: As my hon. Friend will know, we now have a new partnership with Citizens Advice to deliver universal credit support, and his constituency is part of the early mobilisation of that programme. However, it is important that for those who are not able to use such technology, we still make a freephone helpline available, and that, as the Secretary of State has outlined, home visits can be arranged.

T6. [908394] **Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Church of England figures suggest that 5,500 children in my constituency alone may be affected by the roll-out of the two-child limit, which will restrict all new claims for universal credit to the first two children in a family. By the time this policy rolls out, it will affect 3 million children, pushing them into poverty. Will the Secretary of State meet me and campaigners from different organisations, from the Church of England to Rape Crisis and women's organisations, to discuss the impact that this policy will have? Will she pause the policy and stop it rolling out from 1 February this year?

Amber Rudd: We think this is the right thing to do. It is fair to taxpayers, some of whom are on very low incomes, to ensure that the support that we provide under universal credit is for two children so that people who are on benefits have the same choices to make as people on low incomes in thinking about whether to have a third child. On the other point that the hon. Lady raised, I am carefully considering what action needs to be taken.

T5. [908393] **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): I am pleased that employment levels in Crawley are above the national average, but what further support can be provided to get more people into work so that they can realise their full potential and that of our economy?

Alok Sharma: I thank my hon. Friend for the enormous amount of work that he does in supporting employers so that they can create jobs. He is right. We need to make sure that the jobs market is very strong, and that is why we make support available through universal credit, with one-to-one interaction.

T7. [908395] **Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Does the Minister think that a 47-week average wait for a PIP appeal hearing at the Coventry centre is acceptable, particularly considering that the person appealing will not receive any money during that time and that 80% of decisions are overturned at tribunal?

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): No, I do not think that that time is at all acceptable. That is why we have been working so closely with our colleagues in the Ministry of Justice to

make sure that people can have their appeals heard much more swiftly. The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that more than 200 new judges have been recruited to the tribunal, and that through the use of automation we are beginning to see waiting times for appeals reducing greatly. But let us look at this overall: PIP works for the vast majority of people, and of the decisions that have been made, only 9% have been taken to appeal and 5% overturned. We are constantly looking to make sure that we make the right decision the first time, but the situation is improving.

T8. [908396] **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): How are the Government supporting my young constituents to get into gainful employment?

Guy Opperman: It was a pleasure to visit my hon. Friend's constituency last summer and see the fantastic work and the jobs revolution that is taking place in Basildon. It was also a pleasure to meet dBD Communications, one of his top companies, which has done a fantastic job in creating new employment and getting new training work done, and has an expanded order book that is enhancing job opportunities in Basildon.

T9. [908397] **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): On 19 December, I received the observations of the Secretary of State in response to a public petition that I had submitted on behalf of my constituents calling for a halt of universal credit and for the problems to be fixed. Her response concluded that "we can see no reason to halt the rollout of Universal Credit". So what, if anything, has changed in the past three weeks?

Amber Rudd: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that there has been no change. We are continuing with the plan to have a pilot of 10,000 people, which we will use to ensure that the managed migration in 2020 happens in the most effective, efficient and compassionate way.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): While some employers do fantastic work to help ex-offenders into work, do Ministers agree that we now need some disclosure, to show up employers that blatantly discriminate against ex-offenders for no good reason to stop them getting jobs?

Guy Opperman: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I applaud his campaign to "ban the box". More companies should be like Timpson, which has been an outstanding

employer and has conclusively proved that employing ex-offenders is good policy and that they make great employees.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): We have been told time and again that people will not be worse off under universal credit, but my constituent is £463 a month worse off after transferring from tax credits in work to universal credit. Is that something the Government are proud of?

Alok Sharma: I am happy to look at the individual case that the hon. Lady raises, but I would point out that £2.4 billion was unclaimed under the legacy benefit system, and that is changing under universal credit.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I would like to put on the record my thanks to the Secretary of State for listening and changing her approach to managed migration. I think we will see a step change in how vulnerable claimants feel about their security under universal credit. I have given her a list of other areas of UC that need improving. I urge her to look at one area that will completely revolutionise how people feel about the system—the five-week wait has got to go. If we make the advance payment the first payment rather than a loan, we will see food bank usage and the whole system transformed immeasurably.

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend. There are many contributions on how we can improve universal credit. Some of them carry quite a big price tag, and some have had more success with the Treasury than others. I look forward to further conversations with the Chancellor in due course.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Under tax credits, under-25 lone parents got paid the higher over-25 rate. Under universal credit, they do not. What is the Secretary of State going to do about that? I ask her on behalf of the group of young parents from Newport who are worse off under this system and in hardship.

Alok Sharma: I am always happy to meet the hon. Lady to talk about these issues. As she will know, the changes we introduced in the Budget mean that work allowances are going up by £1,000 precisely to support those who need it—individuals with children and, of course, the disabled.

EU Withdrawal Agreement: Legal Changes

3.37 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Prime Minister if she will make a statement on progress made in achieving legal changes to the EU withdrawal agreement and the timetable in this House for the meaningful vote.

I would like to wish you, Mr Speaker, and all the House a happy new year.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): In a tone that I am sure will reflect the year ahead, may I join the Leader of the Opposition in wishing you, Mr Speaker, and colleagues across the House a happy new year?

As the House will be aware, the Prime Minister today launched a new 10-year plan for the NHS, allocating an extra £20.5 billion a year in funding. I am therefore responding to this question on her behalf. I am sure colleagues across the House recognise the importance of the NHS plan.

As confirmed by the Leader of the House in her business statement before the Christmas recess, this Wednesday the House will debate a business motion relating to section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. That will be followed by the main debate on section 13(1)(b), which will continue on Thursday 10 January and, subject to the will of the House, Friday 11 January. Discussions are taking place through the usual channels as to the proposed length of that debate and the date of the vote, but ultimately it will be a decision for this House, through the business motion, which will be voted on this Wednesday. Debate will also take place in the House of Lords on Wednesday 9, Thursday 10 and Monday 14 January.

The decision to postpone the debate last year was not taken lightly. Over the two years of negotiations, the Prime Minister won hard-fought battles—most importantly, to agree a bespoke deal, rather than the flawed off-the-shelf options initially offered. But it was clear from the three days of debate held in this House that it was not going to pass the deal and that further reassurances should be sought, particularly on the issue of the backstop.

Following December's European Council, a series of conclusions were published that went further than the EU had ever gone previously in trying to address the concerns of this House. Over Christmas, the Prime Minister was in contact with a number of her European counterparts on the further legal and political assurances that Parliament needs on the backstop. She has been in touch with the Taoiseach, and indeed British and Irish Government officials have been in contact over the past week. Securing the additional reassurance that Parliament needs remains our priority, and leaders remain in contact. Leaving the EU with the deal that has been agreed is in the interests of both sides.

When the debate begins on Wednesday, the Government will make clear for the House what has been achieved since the vote was deferred last year. As I said when I spoke in the debate on 4 December, the deal will enable

us to deliver a fair, skills-based immigration system and to have control over our fisheries policy and agricultural policies—

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Nonsense!

Stephen Barclay: Unlike the Scottish National party, which wants to retain the European approach. We will have our own trade policy for the first time in more than three decades, and there will be an end to sending vast sums of money to the EU. It is a good deal, it is the only deal, and I believe that it is the right deal, in offering certainty for this country.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. With less than three months until we reach the article 50 deadline, there can be no more hiding and no more running away. This issue will define Britain's future and should not be decided by the internal machinations of the Conservative party. This House and this country deserve much better.

A month ago, the Prime Minister shamefully pulled the meaningful vote, promising to do everything possible to secure assurances from the EU on the temporary nature of the backstop. Now the time has come for the Prime Minister to tell the House exactly what legal assurances she has been given by EU leaders. She achieved nothing at the December summit, but now surely she has plenty to update us on. Although I am delighted to see the Brexit Secretary here today, it is the Prime Minister who should be here to answer these questions. She suggested that a breakthrough had been secured last week. She is not here because she is busy promoting "Project Fear." It is all hot air.

There also seems to be confusion about exactly what the Prime Minister is demanding from EU leaders. The Leader of the House promised "legal reassurances", but yesterday the Prime Minister told the BBC:

"We're not asking for anything new".

Can the Secretary of State clear this up and tell the House exactly what is being requested, because this morning Ministers in his own Department did not seem to have a clue? When asked what the PM was demanding, the Brexit Minister had to concede that he did not know, but he reassured the whole world by saying that he was "an important person", so that is all right.

I fear that the reason so many members of the Cabinet are in the dark is that there is nothing to know. If that is the case, what guarantees do we have from the Secretary of State that, faced with yet another humiliating defeat, the Prime Minister will not just run away? Can he do what the Prime Minister should be doing here today by confirming the timetable for the meaningful vote and providing what we have not received so far: a cast-iron promise that it will not be reneged on yet again?

The Government are trying to run down the clock in an attempt to blackmail this House and the country into supporting a botched deal. The Prime Minister has refused to work with the majority over the past few months, in a desperate attempt to spark life into what is actually a Frankenstein's monster of a deal. Now we are told that, if we do not support the deal, the Government

[Jeremy Corbyn]

are prepared to push our whole economy off the cliff edge. To prove this, preparations for no deal are now under way.

The Transport Secretary, who has a PhD in incompetence in running Ministries, has awarded a shipping contract to a company that does not have any ships. Even today, we see the farce of lorries being lined up to stage a fake traffic jam in Kent to pretend to the EU that the Government are ready for a no deal—a stunt that the Road Haulage Association describes as “window dressing” and that one of the drivers describes as a “complete waste of time.” The Government are fooling nobody. These shambolic preparations are too little, too late.

The reality is that there is no majority in this House to support no deal. Why will the Government not face up to this truth and stop wasting our time and our money? The Prime Minister should be here updating MPs on what progress she has achieved, if any. Instead, she is continuing her approach, as before Christmas, of ducking scrutiny and dodging accountability. We will hold this Government to account for their incompetence.

Stephen Barclay: Based on the lack of content in that, it is good to know that the Leader of the Opposition had a good break over Christmas. He talks about colleagues not knowing. What they do not know is what Labour’s plan is. However, what they do know is that it is riddled with contradiction. Labour say they want to remain in a customs union, yet they also say that they intend to have an independent trade policy, even though the EU has made it clear that that is an area of EU competence. They say they want to be in the internal market but, at the same time, end free movement, even though the two are contradictory.

The shadow Business Secretary says that he does not want to rule out the option of a second referendum, yet the shadow Education Secretary says that that would be a betrayal of the democracy of the main referendum vote. Page 24 of Labour’s manifesto said that they would respect the referendum result; now they seem to have a policy to go back on that. So the confusion we have is as to what the Leader of the Opposition actually believes. He started out saying in interviews that we could not stop Brexit, yet his shadow Brexit Secretary says that they can.

I am pleased that the Leader of the Opposition started his remarks by seeming to upgrade me. Last time he said that my role is purely ceremonial. Now he seems to welcome me to my post. Yet he seems to suggest that the NHS 10-year plan, with an extra £20.5 billion of investment, is in some way “Project Fear.” Well, we are used to “Project Fear” on the NHS; it is “Project Fear” that we see from the Opposition on a regular basis.

The reality is that the right hon. Gentleman opposes the preparations for no deal, which any responsible Government need to make, while at the same time saying that he will vote against the deal. It is that internal machination in the Labour party that he needs to address, and nothing in his contribution to the House today sought to clarify that. It is now time he became clear. Does he maintain the position in the manifesto, that Labour will respect the referendum result, or does he agree with his shadow Brexit Secretary and want a second referendum?

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): We have only about 80 days left. The Government face a deadline which depend crucial decisions that will affect future generations and the whole basis of our political and economic relationships with the rest of the world. We are nowhere near consensus, either in this House or in the country, on what new arrangements with the European Union we are actually asking for, let alone on the arrangements that we are likely to achieve. Now we have a completely ridiculous urgent question from the Leader of the Opposition, who has no idea what he wants but who just feels that he has to say something about the crisis we are in.

As we are in this position and as 29 March is an entirely arbitrary date—it was accidentally set when the Prime Minister, for no particular reason, decided to invoke article 50 before she knew what she was going to ask for—may I ask my right hon. Friend: is not it obvious that the national interest requires that we now delay matters by putting off the implementation of article 50 in order to put ourselves in the position where we can negotiate with 27 serious Governments by showing that we know what we are asking for and can deliver from our side, and to protect the national interest and future generations?

Stephen Barclay: It is always good to hear from my right hon. and learned Friend, but I take issue with his question. First, he says this is an arbitrary date. The article 50 process set a two-year timeline and, indeed, this House voted for the date to be set in the Bill. Secondly—he touched on this in his interview on the “Today” programme, when he suggested that we revoke article 50 with a view to having a second referendum decision—the European Court of Justice was clear that revoking article 50 cannot be done as a tactical device in order then to go back on that decision; it has to be a confirmed intention at that time. If this is about extending that, an extension requires the agreement of all 27 member states, but if it is about revoking it, the Court was clear that revoking article 50 is not about buying more time; it is about making a clear decision that we do not intend at that point to proceed.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I wish you, Mr Speaker, and all Members and staff a happy new year?

It is with regret that we return after the Christmas break with no progress from the Government on the withdrawal agreement and—even more remarkable—that we return with no Prime Minister in Parliament. She cannot be bothered to be here. We are now just days away from the deadline to get a deal to protect our economy and the Prime Minister is not in Parliament to explain her lack of progress. Why is the Prime Minister not responding to this urgent question?

It is now clear beyond doubt that the Prime Minister’s tactic is to run down the clock and deprive Parliament of any alternative to her Brexit proposals, bringing the prospect of a no deal closer. The SNP we will work across this House to get support for an alternative that is about having another EU referendum and letting the people take back control from this Government. I say to the Leader of the Opposition: get off the fence and join us. Stop this Government’s chaotic Brexit plan.

Shamefully, we are in exactly the same situation as before Christmas, with the Tory Government again facing defeat but having wasted a month of precious time. The risks are real. The economic disaster facing our communities across these islands is real. It is suggested that the proposed letter between the UK and the EU regarding the backstop will not come before the debate and the meaningful vote. We cannot operate in the dark. This Government must show us the detail and tell us today how they believe these assurances will be enough to win support for their shambolic deal. Moreover, if, which is extremely unlikely, this Government manage to get their vote through, will they commit to extending article 50 immediately and remove the threat of the cliff edge?

The First Minister of Scotland was very clear today that the events of the last few years have made the case for Scotland being an independent country in charge of our own destiny even stronger. Scotland will not be dragged out of the European Union against its will. Our Parliament's powers are being eroded. The UK Government are treating the Scottish Government with contempt. Even when we seek compromise, our voice—Scotland's voice—is sidelined. This Government should wake up to the reality. Scotland knows who is leading in our interests, and it is not the Government in Westminster.

Stephen Barclay: I think that Members across the House will recognise that this Prime Minister has spent probably more time at this Dispatch Box answering questions from colleagues across the House than any of the previous incumbents. The right hon. Gentleman asked where she is. As I said in my opening remarks, she is launching the NHS 10-year plan because this party—Members on this side of the House—is committed to ensuring that we have an NHS fit for the future, which is what that announcement is about.

There seems to be, inherent in the right hon. Gentleman's questions today and in previous questions, a constant refrain from the SNP. On the one hand it calls for referendums, but on the other it cannot seem to cope with the results of the referendums in 2014 or 2016.

The right hon. Gentleman is right as to the concern about a no-deal outcome. That is why the best mitigation of a no deal is to vote for the Prime Minister's deal. It is the only deal on the table and it reflects over two years of hard-fought negotiation with the EU.

On the right hon. Gentleman's point about extending article 50, I touched on that in my reply to the Father of the House. The reality is that extending article 50 is not a unilateral decision: it would require the consent of the other 27 member states. It would also raise all sorts of practical issues, not least in relation to the timing of the European parliamentary elections at the end of May. It is the Government's firm intention not to extend article 50 and to leave the EU as the Prime Minister set out. The SNP should respect the largest vote in the United Kingdom's history.

Mr Speaker: In calling the right hon. Member for Wokingham, I warmly congratulate Sir John Redwood.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Do the Government understand that opposition to the withdrawal agreement goes way beyond the unacceptable Irish backstop and includes paying

huge sums of money with nothing nailed down over the future partnership? Worse still, it would plunge us into 21 to 45 more months of endless rows and disagreements, with all the uncertainty that would bring.

Stephen Barclay: May I join you, Mr Speaker, in congratulating my right hon. Friend on his well-deserved knighthood? As regards the interplay between the financial settlement and how a no-deal scenario would be managed, there is a contradiction in saying on the one hand that we can leave the EU with no financial contribution, and on the other that there would be sufficient good will on the EU side for them to move beyond anything more than contingency planning and offer some sort of managed deal, when, at the same time, we are not honouring the legal obligations we have.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): The Leader of the Opposition clarified, over the recess, that in the event that the Labour party obtains and wins a general election it will proceed with Brexit, so what are the Minister's civil service advisers telling it that is in any way different from what the Government are doing?

Stephen Barclay: It is not for me to speculate on what civil servants tell the Leader of the Opposition. I am not sure they would be having those discussions. The reality is that the Leader of the Opposition's party was the first to offer an in/out referendum. His party should therefore respect the decision, as its then leader said it would. It was the biggest vote in our country's history and that is why it is right that we avoid further divisiveness and ensure we leave as we said we would.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): First, may I endorse the comments by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) about the money side of things? It is not just that the backstop is not sufficient in itself. It is a vital issue, but it is not the whole story by any means. We have the European Court of Justice, the question of control over laws, the question of the extension of time under article 132, the issue of state aid and the incompatibility of the agreement with the repeal of the European Communities 1972 Act. So many aspects of the withdrawal agreement are, if I may say so to the Secretary of State, matters that go way beyond mere reassurances. Reassurances will get nowhere. They are certainly not going to convince anybody who is thinking hard about this when it comes to the vote next week.

Stephen Barclay: As my hon. Friend will know, the Prime Minister made clear that she has heard the concerns of the House in relation to the backstop and that is subject to the further discussions with European leaders. In terms of its scope, it is worth reminding the House that 80% of our economy is covered by services that would not be within the scope of the backstop. It is worth having some proportion with regard to that discussion. On the other issues, I was not sure whether he was saying he wants more freedom for state aid, which would be the Leader of the Opposition's position. That is not, characteristically, what I would expect my hon. Friend to be calling for. The reality is that any deal we enter into with the EU will require a backstop. That is the substance of it. Whether that is a Canada option,

[Stephen Barclay]

a Canada-plus, a Canada-plus-plus or a Canada-plus-plus-plus, the reality is that, whatever the deal, it will require a backstop.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Nearly a month has passed since the vote on the Prime Minister's deal was cancelled, and the EU shows no signs of being willing to offer her the legal assurances she says she is seeking about how long the Northern Ireland backstop might last. Unless the Secretary of State can reassure the House today that such assurances will be forthcoming, I urge the Government to take at least one decision in the national interest now and rule out the disaster that a no-deal Brexit would be for this country.

Stephen Barclay: I am very mindful of what the Chair of the Exiting the European Union Committee says, and of the letter on this issue signed by a significant number of Members. The core point about ruling out no deal is that the House has to be for something rather than simply to agree what it is against. It is clear that the signatories to the letter suggesting that no deal should be ruled out support a whole spectrum of issues. The House has to decide what it is for, not simply what it is against.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree with my constituent who runs a chemical business, who says a no deal would be a disaster for him? Can my right hon. Friend give a direct assurance that we will proceed to a vote on the deal next week?

Stephen Barclay: I think we need to move away from some of the more inflammatory language around the consequences of no deal, but I do agree with my hon. Friend that there will be significant issues arising from no deal. I do not support the view expressed by some Members, including the Democratic Unionist party spokesman, who is supremely relaxed about the consequences of no deal. I think the consequences of no deal will be material, but I do not think they will be of the inflammatory sort that we sometimes hear and read about in the press.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr iawn, Lefarydd, a blwyddyn newydd dda i'r Tŷ i gyd.

It is generally regretted that the British Government triggered article 50 in March 2017. They did so with the aid of the Labour party and without any semblance of a plan. The result, as people see, is a Parliament consumed by chaos and disorder. Delaying the meaningful vote a day longer only delays the inevitable. Will the Minister admit that the Government are now acting as a willing agent of crippling economic uncertainty, and immediately make good the harm they are choosing to do by bringing forward the vote to this week?

Stephen Barclay: I feel I must slightly correct the hon. Lady. It was the House that voted to trigger article 50—a clear majority of Members voted that we should send the article 50 letter. On her point about agents of uncertainty, the agents of uncertainty are those Members who are opposing the deal—the deal that will give us an

implementation period and give businesses and citizens the certainty they need—while at the same time not coming forward with a proposal that can command the confidence of the House. It is those opposing the Prime Minister's deal who are generating the uncertainty.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): The Secretary of State mentioned legally binding agreements. Will the Attorney General be coming to the House to be challenged on how legally binding some of the agreements will be? Those of us who are sceptical about having agreements rather than things written in law would like to have some of the legal advice we have already explored explained to us in the House.

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is a very experienced Member, and she will know that it is the House that governs its business. As happened with the previous statement, the business is shaped by business motions and what the House does. It is not normal practice—this has been an issue for successive Governments—for legal advice to be published. There are very good reasons for that, which the Attorney General set out, but ultimately the House controls its own business.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Has the Secretary of State been out and about talking to people during the Christmas break? Is he aware that people are saying, "Here we are in the greatest crisis this country has had in any of our lifetimes, at a time when we can have a 10-year plan for the national health service but no 10-year plan for the future of this country"? The people of this country feel let down by politicians on both sides. We have no plan. We have no purpose. We need leadership, and we need it now.

Stephen Barclay: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for acknowledging that we have a genuine plan for the NHS, and I pay tribute to the work of the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on that.

On what people say to me and other Members, I am always slightly wary of that, because it is somewhat subjective, and people have a tendency to select the conversations that suit their argument, but the majority of comments I have had from constituents demonstrate a desire for us to get on with it, back the deal, move forward and end this period of divisiveness. That said, I am sure the hon. Gentleman will have had different conversations with different constituents.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): My right hon. Friend has said that the withdrawal agreement, which we intend to recommence debating this week, represents the best deal and the only deal. Are we to infer from that that any legal assurances we may expect to receive from the European Union will stop short of a rewording of that agreement?

Stephen Barclay: My right hon. Friend, as an ex-Minister in this Department, will understand these issues extremely well. As I said in my opening remarks, we will update the House on the conversations the Prime Minister has had with European leaders in the debate starting later this week, and we will comment further on the nature of the assurances at that point.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that the British public understand this whole debate about the EU much better than they are sometimes given credit for here? Does he also agree that some of the wording and scare stories put about on the possibility of going over to WTO rules are outrageous? Will he as Secretary of State make sure that his Department does everything it can to ensure that the full truth of what WTO would mean gets across to the public, who I think are already aware that this is a way forward?

Stephen Barclay: I agree with the hon. Lady that it is in no one's interest to cause false alarm, but at the same time we should not give false comfort. There are material issues to be addressed in terms of a no deal, and we are working actively in government to mitigate them—I pay tribute to the work of many officials during the festive period who maintained their work in the preparation of those no-deal plans. Indeed, we are stepping up our communication—there will be a big communication campaign of radio and social media ads tomorrow and in the days ahead—but people cannot suggest that not honouring our legal obligations and not paying the financial settlement would allow us to enter some sort of managed no deal that allows us to cherry-pick the bits we want and avoid the bits we do not.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): Did my right hon. Friend see the interview in the *Augsburger Allgemeine* on 11 December given by Martin Selmayr, secretary-general of the European Commission, in which he said about the Commission:

“We have negotiated hard, and realised all our objectives”?

He says that the agreement

“shows that leaving the EU...doesn't work”.

Other Brussels officials have said that the UK is “locked in” and that

“losing Northern Ireland is the price Britain has to pay for Brexit”.

Is my right hon. Friend really as enthusiastic as Martin Selmayr and the Commission about this agreement?

Stephen Barclay: My right hon. Friend brings to the House his specialist interest, understanding and engagement in German politics, but the Prime Minister has been clear throughout—the political declaration itself makes this clear—about the sovereign position on Northern Ireland. Its constitutional status is unequivocally guaranteed and the integrity of the UK's internal market and Northern Ireland's place within it are preserved. She has made that extremely clear, and the political declaration also makes it clear, but of course politicians in Germany, like those in the UK, will make a range of statements.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): The public are sick and tired of Ministers spinning this out and prevaricating. It will have been noticed that the Secretary of State did not answer the question from the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), who asked for a simple guarantee. Will he guarantee that the meaningful vote will definitely take place next week?

Stephen Barclay: Yes.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The change required is one that will enable us to walk away from negotiations if the deal on offer proves unacceptable to us. As currently drafted, the agreement does not allow that possibility, does it?

Stephen Barclay: The scope to exit from the backstop—which is really at the heart of my right hon. Friend's question—was explored in the House at length on, I think, 3 or 4 December, when the Attorney General spoke about that specific issue in great detail. The crux of what he said was that it involved a balance of risk, and that, ultimately, these were political decisions in relation to the ability of a sovereign state to be bound in the future. I know that my right hon. Friend is an assiduous follower of the Attorney General and his legal advice, and I commend that earlier debate to him.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): There will have been a 35-day abyss between the date on which we expected to have the meaningful vote and next week, when we have been told that we will have it. There is no prospect of a different outcome from the one that we were told about before Christmas. I think it is unforgivable for our businesses, our public services and the country that we are having to contend with such uncertainty. The Secretary of State wanted to hear from the House what we wanted to rule out. I can tell him that I am in favour of ruling out uncertainty and a no-deal Brexit. Why is he not in favour of ruling out that uncertainty?

Stephen Barclay: The best way to avoid the uncertainty is to vote for this deal, but I do not accept the premise of the hon. Lady's question. She said that there had been no progress, but the European Council's conclusions in December showed progress in terms of its commitment—its “firm determination to work speedily on a subsequent agreement”.

It stated that it

“stands ready to embark on preparations immediately”,

and so forth. Moreover, as I said in my opening remarks, the Prime Minister has been having ongoing discussions with European leaders.

The reality that Members in all parts of the House must confront is that unless the House is for an option, no deal then becomes the alternative. It is not a unilateral decision of the UK Government to extend, and the Court, in announcing its position on revocation, made clear that that would require a breach of the manifesto commitment on which the hon. Lady stood, and on which the vast majority of Members stood.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): According to that excellent website TheyWorkForYou, the Prime Minister has assured the House on no fewer than 74 occasions that we will be leaving the EU on 29 March. Will the Secretary of State confirm that in no circumstances will that date be postponed?

Stephen Barclay: As my right hon. Friend says, the Prime Minister has made that commitment crystal clear—and how can one ever dispute what is said on TheyWorkForYou?

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Tapadh leat agus Bliadhna mhath ùr, Mr Speaker. Thank you, and a happy new year.

Even the most deluded have conceded that Brexit is not going terribly well. Can the Secretary of State tell us whether the Prime Minister regrets having made the United Kingdom an international laughing stock? When might the delusions that she shares with the Tory party and the Labour leadership come to an end? Might it be when we have the meaningful vote on Tuesday week? It has to happen some time.

Stephen Barclay: What is deluded is on the one hand to say, “We want more control in Scotland”, and on the other hand, when we reach a point at which the UK Government are gaining greater control over fisheries policy, to say, “Actually, no, we want to give it back to Brussels.” It is that sort of incoherent policy making by the Opposition that has created this constantly revolving door. They call for referendums, then lose them, and then say that they want another one.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): While it is of course right for us to debate the manner of our leaving the EU, and right for us to have those negotiations, does my right hon. Friend agree that the fact that we are leaving the EU was set beyond any doubt by the British people in the 2016 referendum?

Stephen Barclay: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. We were given a clear instruction to leave by the British people in the biggest vote in our democratic history. As the Prime Minister has said, now is the time for the country to come together after what has been a very divisive period in our public life, and to move forward from the referendum debate. That requires us to honour the referendum result, rather than replaying the division on a much more intense scale.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The Secretary of State continually says that there is no alternative plan, but in fact my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) and his colleague the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) have produced “Common Market 2.0”, which sets out how we can leave the EU and join the European Economic Area. It is a Brexit that deals with concerns about free movement and the backstop and has a real chance of reuniting our deeply divided country. Will the Secretary of State take the time to read this document and perhaps come back to us with his views?

Stephen Barclay: I know the hon. Gentleman looks at these issues in detail and very seriously and I very much respect that. I have looked at the report to which he refers and the work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) on this, but the reality is that there is an inherent contradiction in respecting the referendum result and suggesting that we can cherry pick from the four freedoms that the EU has always been clear cannot be divided. The reality is that the Norway option does not give us what is needed. There is Norway or Norway plus, but the reality is that Norway has a population of 5 million and much of what is done in terms of rule taking for Norway is not suitable for the UK in areas including financial services. There is also

an inherent contradiction in what was committed to in the manifestos of the hon. Gentleman’s party and my own, and delivering on the referendum result.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Mr Speaker, may I wish you and the House a constructive new year?

Given that neither the EU nor the UK wish to be in the backstop for any length of time, can my right hon. Friend explain to the House why it is so difficult to agree with our 27 EU partners a short protocol to the withdrawal agreement that would allow the UK to have a unilateral right to withdraw from the backstop in a relatively short period of time?

Stephen Barclay: As my hon. Friend knows, there has been some progress in this area, in terms of the commitments around best endeavours and the backstop being temporary. Indeed, article 50 requires that the backstop would be temporary. These issues have been raised across the House. The Prime Minister is discussing them with EU leaders and we will have more to say on this in the forthcoming days.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): This is pathetic. We should have had all of this dealt with by now; we should have voted before Christmas, and we should be moving on to a plan B. I ask the Secretary of State this quite seriously: we do not know when these legal reassurances from the Prime Minister are coming, so will he tell us if they are going to be given to us today, on Wednesday—when?

Stephen Barclay: I know the hon. Lady feels extremely strongly about this issue, but what is damaging to our public life is to stand on a manifesto that commits to respecting the result and then to spend time campaigning for a second referendum to undermine that result. We in this party are committed to honouring the referendum result and ensuring we deliver on it.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that this Government will never support the betrayal of democracy that would be a second referendum?

Stephen Barclay: The Prime Minister has set out the Government’s position on that, and I refer my hon. Friend to the many statements the Prime Minister has made on that point.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I wish you, Mr Speaker, and all Members of the House a happy new year.

One of our most distinguished ex-civil servants, Lord Macpherson, estimated this morning that the earliest time by which a comprehensive trade agreement with the EU could be reached would be 2025—that is, two years of transition and then five years of a backstop. If the Secretary of State does not agree with that estimate, why not?

Stephen Barclay: I do not think it will surprise the hon. Lady to learn that I do not agree with that estimate. That is because we start from a position of equivalence after 40-odd years of close co-operation, we are looking to put in place an agreement based on shared values, and we have a framework in the form of the political declaration that acts as an instruction for the next stage of the negotiation.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): As the Secretary of State will know, much of the debate in this House has focused on the Northern Ireland backstop and not on the principle of guaranteeing that there will be no return to the hard border of the past. Will he confirm that an essential part of the next week will involve the Government giving us a reassurance that the backstop will relate to keeping the border open and that the UK will not be held in that arrangement by extraneous matters such as fishing?

Stephen Barclay: I agree with my hon. Friend; there is a very good reason why the backstop is there. It is a reflection of two things. First, it is a reflection of our firm commitments under the Belfast agreement, reflecting the difficult history of Northern Ireland and the violence that the people of Northern Ireland have suffered. Also, Northern Ireland is the one part of the United Kingdom that has a shared geography with Ireland. That is why there are special circumstances and it is why the backstop is required. The reality is that whatever deal is put forward—including any put forward by Labour, if the Leader of the Opposition were to work one out—it would still require a backstop.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Mr Speaker, before I ask my question I should like to draw your attention some further serious events going on outside Parliament today. They include intimidation, threats and potentially unlawful actions targeting Members of this House, members of the press, members of the public and peaceful activists. May I urge you to use your offices to communicate with the Metropolitan police at the highest level to ensure that proper action is taken, as this issue has been repeatedly raised?

I would say to the Secretary of State that there has clearly been no progress in the negotiations or on the Government's position. There has, however, been progress on spending taxpayers' money. Will he tell us how much the delay has cost the taxpayer on a daily basis and in total since the Prime Minister decided to delay the meaningful vote?

Stephen Barclay: On the hon. Gentleman's first point, I have obviously not seen the incidents outside, but anyone who stands at this Dispatch Box is mindful of the plaque commemorating Jo Cox, which I know is so dear to many Members, not only on the Opposition Benches but across the House. I am sure that we would all unite in believing that, wherever we stand in the Brexit debate, all of us in this House should be able to air our views with respect and proportion.

On the hon. Gentleman's question on spending, the reality is that we do not want to spend money on no deal—[*Interruption.*] The amount of money for no deal has been set out by the Treasury—that is a matter of public record—but the fact is that those who criticise that spending, which any responsible Government need to allow for, need to explain why they are not backing the deal. It is the fact that people are not backing the deal that is requiring the Government to divert spending to no deal. The best way to avoid spending on no deal is to back the deal and give businesses and citizens the certainty that they need.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): As one of the signatories to the letter about the consequences of no deal, particularly around manufacturing and particularly in the west midlands

where my constituency is, I believe that the Secretary of State will appreciate my concerns. He has referred to the fact that 80% of our economy involves services. Will he please give us his assessment of the impact on services of no deal on 29 March?

Stephen Barclay: I very much recognise the point that my hon. Friend is making. I shall pick out one example from among many. It relates to data, which is extremely important within the service economy. Those who say that in the event of no deal we will go to WTO rules and that that will be completely benign have not, from what I have seen, addressed the question of what that would mean to service businesses in terms of data adequacy and how data would flow. There are many other examples, but that is one that would apply specifically to the service economy. I know from my discussions with my hon. Friend that he is well aware of what the impact would be on manufacturing in his own constituency as well.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I have to confess to the Secretary of State that I am sad to see that he is answering this urgent question rather than the Prime Minister, because it would have been helpful to understand how, in the light of the NHS 10-year plan, our becoming the largest purchaser of fridges in the world fits into those effective, value-for-money spending plans. He can redeem himself to the House today, however, by answering the question that was clearly put to him by my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) about the legal reassurances that we have been told will change all our minds on this deal. When will Parliament have an opportunity to read them? Will it be before the debate starts on Wednesday? Yes or no?

Stephen Barclay: I did try to address that in my opening remarks. I said that we would update the House as part of the upcoming debate, and we have set aside a significant number of parliamentary hours in which to do that. I know the hon. Lady well from our time on the Public Accounts Committee, and I am not sure that any legal assurances secured by the Prime Minister would be enough divert her from her desire for a second referendum. I have made it clear that we will update the House this week on the further discussions that the Prime Minister has had.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): The Secretary of State has already referred to the letter calling on the Government to rule out no deal. Does he agree that if we foolishly ruled out no deal, we would be left with one of two invidious choices: remaining in the European Union or accepting whatever deal the European Union saw fit to grant us? Were the Government to agree with the letter, that would fatally undermine our negotiating position, so they should categorically not do so.

Stephen Barclay: As my hon. Friend says, if the Government ruled out no deal, the only other option in the event of the Prime Minister's deal being rejected would be to revoke article 50, which would be contrary to the manifesto commitments of both main parties and hugely damaging to democracy.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): When a permanent secretary is not happy about being asked to spend money, they seek a written ministerial instruction

[Helen Goodman]

to make it proper. I have today had written confirmation from the Department for Transport that the permanent secretary sought such a direction. Does that not prove that no deal is a bluff?

Stephen Barclay: Given the hon. Lady's Treasury experience, she will be familiar with chapter 3 of "Managing Public Money" and the requirements on civil servants during their appearances at the Public Accounts Committee relating to value for money. She will also know that letters of direction are not new and have been sought under successive Governments, including during her time as a Minister. They form part of the checks and balances within Government and are a perfectly proper process.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): If we want to leave with a deal—the Leader of the Opposition is right that that is the majority view in the House—and if we want to end uncertainty for our farmers, businesses and citizens, is it not time to stop playing party politics and the ideological games, and vote for the deal? As national politicians, all of us should mean it when we say that we are here to act in the national interest.

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The business community and citizens are clear that they want the certainty that the deal offers. They want the implementation period to allow investment to be made and planning to proceed. Given the risk of uncertainty that will result from the uncharted waters we will enter if the deal does not go ahead, it is time for Members to look again at the deal and at the complex set of terms within the withdrawal agreement and not let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Once again, a representative of the Government has come here to make a nebulous statement that can be summed up in three words: nothing has changed. It is groundhog day again. We have heard nothing new, and the only difference is that there are now only 81 days before we risk crashing out of the EU. Will the Secretary of State stop playing chicken? Will he show a bit of leadership and hold the meaningful vote this week so that we can get on without delay?

Stephen Barclay: I am slightly perplexed at being accused of playing chicken when I am at the Dispatch Box answering the hon. Lady's question. As I touched on in reply to the Westminster leader of the Scottish National party, no one can suggest that the Prime Minister has not been incredibly diligent in her willingness to come to the House and to answer questions, which she done assiduously on many an occasion.

As for "nothing has changed", perhaps the hon. Lady prepared her question before hearing my previous answers because I have referred to that. The fact is that there have been discussions and the Council statement was made in December, and we will explore such points in much more detail in the coming days.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Whatever happens next, my right hon. Friend will agree that a second referendum would do nothing

to move the debate forward and would create further division and confusion. We have had a people's vote, so let us get on and prepare either to implement a heavily amended deal or no deal and to deliver Brexit on 29 March this year.

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is right that we have had a vote, and I think his constituents want that vote to be respected, just as mine do. That is what the Government are committed to doing, but we should do so in a way that gives businesses and citizens the certainty that they need. That is what the Prime Minister's deal offers, and I commend it to the House.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): The no-deal planning is clearly a total shambles. It has included giving a contract to run ferries to a firm that does not have any ferries. When the Government lose the vote on their deal next week, as they surely will, will the Secretary of State really contemplate risking leaving the EU without a deal—knowing all the chaos that that would create—rather than extending article 50 or, indeed, going back to the people and asking them whether they would rather remain in the EU or accept the half-baked deal that the Government have agreed?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Lady should be much more candid with the electorate about the fact that she is actually calling for revocation. Extending article 50 is not a unilateral decision for the UK Government; it requires the agreement of all 27 member states. She is, in essence, calling on us to revoke article 50. That goes against the commitment in the Labour party's manifesto, on which she stood, and goes against what people voted for. If that is her position, that is fine; she is entitled to it, but she should be clear with the electorate that that is what she is calling for. Members who voted to trigger article 50 also need to explain why they have changed their minds.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I am totally committed to delivering the Brexit that my constituents voted for, and I know that the Secretary of State is as well. In that context, does he agree that it is instructive to note that not a single one of the leave campaigns argued for a no-deal Brexit as their first choice? This deal is the way to avoid a no-deal Brexit.

Stephen Barclay: I agree with my hon. Friend. Part of the reason why I supported leaving the European Union is that I want us to be much more global in our approach. I want us to look to the growing economies in China, India and Brazil, develop the work of the economic and financial dialogues that the Treasury has had in place for a number of years, and look at how we can supercharge them and take a much more global approach. We recognise that the best way to trade with those growing economies is not on a WTO basis, but by putting in place more bespoke trading arrangements with them. I find it slightly illogical that we should have that global objective of closer trading relationships with the wider world, while saying that with our largest trading partner we can revert to something that we are trying to move away from elsewhere.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): A happy new year to all across the House. Will the Prime Minister bring further

clarifications and any legal assurances that she has to the House on Wednesday to allow MPs sufficient time to debate them before any meaningful vote?

Stephen Barclay: As I set out in my earlier remarks, there will be a business motion on Wednesday, when these issues will be discussed—as they are being discussed, prior to that, through the usual channels—and the House will have an opportunity to debate them in much more detail.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): The Secretary of State was kind enough to meet me before Christmas to discuss some of my concerns about the withdrawal agreement, and particularly about the fact that the role for the Northern Irish institutions set out in the December joint report was not carried across into the withdrawal agreement. Can he confirm that in the discussions that took place over the Christmas break, the role of the Northern Irish institutions and the question of future regulatory divergence were on the agenda?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend raises a very important point, and it is one that we have been looking at. I think it is part of a wider question: as we move into phase 2, how do we give a greater role to Parliament and the devolved Assemblies? We are actively looking at those issues, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's work in bringing them to the fore.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): It is a new year, but it does feel like a groundhog statement, with exactly the same strategy as before: trying to force Parliament to choose between a bad deal for the UK and no deal at all, while talking up the even worse consequences of no deal. Further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), will the Secretary of State set out today how much was spent on the farcical exercise of having 100 lorries drive around Kent? What does he think that that does to the UK's international reputation? Does he think that any other country is looking at that exercise and thinking that Brexit would be a great example to follow?

Stephen Barclay: The rest of the world will be looking at the fact that we have had a democratic vote and whether, as a Parliament, we respect and honour that vote. In respect of the deal, it is about not only what the UK Government say but what the EU has said. The EU Commission has been clear that this is the only deal. The idea that in the remaining days someone can go back to the Commission and negotiate a completely different deal is just not credible.

On the right hon. Gentleman's specific question about the precise cost of the contingency planning, he is an experienced Member and I am sure that a written parliamentary question, or another type, will be tabled in due course. I have answered many such questions from him and know that he is assiduous in posing them. I am sure that the Department for Transport will answer that question. The substance of the matter is that we do not want to be spending money on no-deal preparations, which is why we should support the deal and bring the certainty that it offers. Nevertheless, it is responsible for the Government to prepare for no deal if there is uncertainty about the vote.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): When the Government's deal is voted down in this place, there will be just 73 days until 29 March, so will the Secretary of State tell the House what discussions he, the Prime Minister or their officials have had with the EU about extending article 50?

Stephen Barclay: Let me unpick that question. There have been extensive discussions with EU leaders, but not on the issue of extending article 50. The extensive discussions have been about the concerns that the House has expressed about the backstop. The Prime Minister has had conversations with the German Chancellor Merkel, Prime Minister Rutte, Donald Tusk, President Jean-Claude Juncker, President Macron and of course, as I said in my statement, with the Taoiseach. There have been extensive discussions with European leaders, but they have been about getting assurances in line with the House's concerns.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): A broken economy is an opportunity for those with money and connections to exploit, to their own advantage. Will the Secretary of State tell us how many more furtive contracts, such as the one with Seaborne Freight, we should expect over the next 81 days?

Stephen Barclay: It is not a broken economy that is putting £20.5 billion a year extra into the NHS and investing in a long-term plan. It is not a broken economy that is seeing the lowest unemployment rate for more than 40 years. That is a sign of the Government's having taken the difficult decisions on the economy. We now have an industrial strategy that is ensuring that we start to drive the productivity that the economy needs.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Secretary of State has repeatedly asked the House to say what it wants. I think the House has said many times lots of different versions of what it wants, but I shall give him an example he can toy with: why will the Government not give us a vote on staying in the customs union?

Stephen Barclay: I am pleased that the hon. Lady is clear about what she wants, but the point I was making was about what would find consensus in the House. It is easy for the House to talk about and unite behind positions that it is against, but the point I was making was about the extent to which there are positions that the House will unite behind—

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): A customs union. It is Labour policy.

Stephen Barclay: It is always nice to know what the Labour policy is, because it keeps changing. One minute Labour cannot stop Brexit, and the next minute it can. *[Interruption.]* I was just answering the heckle from the Labour Front Bencher, but I shall come back to the hon. Lady's question—*[Interruption.]* If her colleagues will stop heckling, I will happily come back to her question. She asked about the customs union. The fact is that we want to have an international trade policy. We cannot have it both ways. We cannot say that we will be part of a customs union yet at the same time expect the EU Commission to give us unilateral control of our trade policy.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The Prime Minister changed her policy on whether we should leave the European Union. She changed her policy on no deal being better than a bad deal. She changed her policy on this being the best possible deal when she went off to try to get a better one. Is the Secretary of State here instead of the Prime Minister because the Prime Minister has finally realised what we all realised a long time ago, which is that she has lost the plot, that she is no longer in control of these negotiations and that she should be packing her bags and going?

Stephen Barclay: The reality is that the Prime Minister was committed to respecting the referendum result, and that is what she has done. She set out a manifesto commitment to honour the referendum result, and that is what she has done. She has been consistent in both.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): As a birthday present next week, I am looking forward to voting down this terrible deal, which will lead the country into a much worse position than it is in currently. Will the Minister confirm that it is not the case that, by default, this country will then drop out under a no-deal situation? It is in the gift of the Government to use their powers to withdraw article 50. Will he confirm that it will be at the Government's discretion to allow a no-deal Brexit to happen?

Stephen Barclay: Well, the hon. Gentleman cannot have it both ways. He cannot, on the one hand, say that he is voting against the deal and then, on the other, pray against the uncertainty that will result from voting against it. We have already covered this point on a number of occasions: the UK Government cannot unilaterally extend article 50. That requires the consent of the other 27 member states. Even if they wanted to grant such consent, there are practical issues to consider, as I have set out, such as the timing of the European parliamentary elections. Let me be very clear: it is not the Government's policy to extend or to revoke article 50. I thought, as I am sure many other Members did, that that was also Labour's policy—I am sure many Labour voters also thought so, based on its manifesto. He needs to be clear, if he is voting against the deal: is he, or is he not, going back on the manifesto on which he stood?

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Before Christmas, this House had a great deal of problems getting hold of a copy of the Attorney General's advice. If there is now to be any change to the deal itself, or to the agreed explanatory wording that sits alongside the deal, may I suggest to the Secretary of State that the Government would run the risk of once again being held in contempt if they withheld any changes in the Attorney General's advice? Will the Secretary of State avoid the Government once again being held in contempt by giving an assurance to the House here and now that, if there is any change to the advice, that change will be given to the House, or that confirmation will be given that the advice has not changed at all?

Stephen Barclay: It will not surprise the hon. Gentleman to hear that no Minister wants to be found in contempt of the House. Obviously, any possibility of our being

found in such contempt will be taken extremely seriously, and the Government would look at that and respond accordingly.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased that the Secretary of State has read the proposal that I and the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) put forward for a Common Market 2.0. Given that plan A is all but doomed now, and that the Secretary of State says he wants to know what the House is for, will he ensure that, after the vote next week, he and his team bring forward to the House a series of votes on plan B, including our proposal for a Common Market 2.0, so that he can have a very clear view of what the House is for?

Stephen Barclay: I respect the work that the hon. Lady has done and the seriousness with which she and my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) have looked at this issue and tried to engage with it in a material way. I have set out my concerns with the substance of their proposal, but that does not negate the work that has been done.

On whether there will be indicative votes, the reality is that, if the deal does not go ahead, we will be in uncharted water and we as a Government will need to look at that. None the less, it is our policy to win the vote. That is what the entire Government are focused on, and we will continue to make that case to colleagues from all parts of the House.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): A guid new year tae yin and a', and mony may ye see!

Will the Secretary of State confirm that the emergency services contract, and any other contracts to deal with a no-deal Brexit, will not be part of the EU procurement process or under EU procurement rules? What does he believe it means when the UK Government can produce worse procurement than the European Union?

Stephen Barclay: I am not sighted on emergency services contracts, but I am happy to have a discussion with the hon. Gentleman about any specific concern he has about procurement. As hon. Members know, I share the desire of many others for value for money and ensuring that we procure effectively.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State has repeatedly told us that the Government have been preparing for no deal, yet it was under legislation that allows for the awarding of contracts outside the normal rules that the Department for Transport spent nearly £14 million on a ferry company with no ferries. We have also seen the issues around Operation Brock in Kent. Given that his Department's job is to assure itself and Parliament that the Government are prepared for Brexit, what does he say about the Department for Transport? Is it really up to the job?

Stephen Barclay: I know that the hon. Lady looks at these issues in detail through her chairmanship of the Public Accounts Committee, and I suspect that she will be looking at those contracts in due course. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport has answered a series of questions on this matter over the festive break to address the concerns to which the hon.

Lady refers. The reality is that a responsible Government need to put in place contingency arrangements and ensure that we have additional capacity at our borders. That is the responsible thing to do. The individual mechanics are issues that I am sure the hon. Lady will explore through her Committee.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): It is nearly a month since the Government pulled the original meaningful vote, so can the Secretary of State tell the House and the country what percentage of the EU withdrawal agreement or the political declaration will have changed by the time we recommence that debate on Wednesday?

Stephen Barclay: With respect, it is a fairly specious argument to look at the percentage, because surely it is about the quality of the change, rather than counting words in the texts; it is not about going through the texts and asking what percentage has changed. The Prime Minister has been very clear that she is seeking further legal and political assurances. We have already covered the fact that we will explore these points in the coming days, and I look forward to having further debates with the hon. Gentleman on the matter.

Joanna Cherry: Today's written statement from the Transport Secretary on the Government's no-deal Brexit contract with the self-styled ferry operator Seaborne Freight says that the

"negotiated procurement procedure without prior publication was concluded as allowed for by Regulation 32 of The Public Contracts Regulations".

I have been studying those regulations fairly closely, and they seem to envisage an emergency situation brought about by events unforeseeable by the contracting authority. It seems to me that it has been foreseeable by the Government and everyone in this country for some time that there might be a no-deal situation, so will the Government publish the legal advice that enabled them to proceed under regulation 32? If so, when can we expect to see it?

Stephen Barclay: I respect the hon. and learned Lady's point, but the reality is that she is critical of the Government when we do not prepare for no deal and then she is critical of the Government when we do prepare for no deal. The responsible thing for a Government to do is to ensure that we have additional capacity. Given the short timescales, it was necessary to follow a specific procurement route, as the Transport Secretary has set out.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): The Secretary of State has alluded to various contingency arrangements that his Government are making in the event of no deal. Further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), will he tell us exactly why a ferry company that does not own any ships and that appears to have some very spurious terms and conditions on its website has been awarded a contract worth over £13 million? Can we assume that the same level of due diligence will be completed if any further contracts are issued?

Stephen Barclay: The reason is quite straightforward—that, against a finite deadline for when we leave the European Union, we need to put in place contingency plans. We were hoping to have secured the deal, which would have meant that we would not have needed the

no-deal contingency arrangements, but given the level of uncertainty those arrangements have been necessary. Preparing for all eventualities is the responsible thing for a Government to do.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My constituent Joanna Adams from Strathbungo emailed me yesterday deeply concerned about this whole situation, saying:

"I can't believe with only a couple of months to go we still don't know what's happening. To have the options of the PM's terrible deal or a no deal seems incomprehensible to me."

It is incomprehensible to most of us, including 880 people who emailed me from the "Exit Brexit" website. The reality is that there are 81 days before we have to get out of the EU—we are running out of time. Is it not the case that running out of time is inevitable and extending article 50 is essential?

Stephen Barclay: I respect the 800-odd people who emailed the hon. Lady on this, but the reality is that 17.4 million voted in the referendum, and it is on their mandate that this Government are acting. Unlike some Members of the House, I do not think that no deal is a no-risk option and I am not supremely relaxed about it—I think there are risks to no deal. We are planning and preparing to mitigate those risks. The reality is that the best way to avoid the uncertainty and mitigate the risks of no deal is to vote for the Prime Minister's deal.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): May I put it to the Secretary of State that for a company that has no idea how long the delays due to a no-deal Brexit will be to trucks vital for its export and import business, it is not a lot of comfort to be told that the Government have issued a multi-million-pound contract to a ferry company with no ships, or to be told that it will have an airport to park its trucks in when they cannot get where they are meant to go? Will he not recognise that the growing demand from business and from Members of this House is that a no-deal scenario is not possible—that it has to be not mitigated but avoided and rejected? There are different ways of doing that, some multilateral and some unilateral, but why will he not join that growing chorus and say that he rules out no deal because that is in the interests of this country?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman really goes to the heart of the issue, which is that I am seeking to rule out no deal by backing the Prime Minister's deal, but the difference is that he is not. He stands on a manifesto that says he will honour the referendum result, then says that he does not want to support the Prime Minister's deal, but then wants to complain about the consequences of no deal. I agree with him that there will be disruption from no deal; that is why he should be supporting the Prime Minister's deal.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Secretary of State will be aware that as things stand with the proposed withdrawal agreement, there is no legal guarantee that means that the common fisheries policy will end in December 2020. There is no legal separation of fishing negotiations from general trade negotiations, but if the backstop is invoked, tariffs will, by law, apply to Scottish exports but not Northern Ireland exports. Does he therefore agree that any Scottish Tory voting for this so-called deal does so in the knowledge that those are the facts that platitudes will not change?

Stephen Barclay: I think that we really have a misrepresentation of the reality of what the political declaration says. The political declaration is absolutely clear that we will be taking control of our coastal waters. We will be in a position to negotiate in the same way as other states such as Iceland. The real betrayal is the hon. Gentleman's party wanting to sell out Scottish fishermen by selling off the policy back into the EU.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Since article 50 was triggered two years ago, a full nine months after the EU referendum result, we have seen staggering incompetence from the Tory Government, and dangerous and deliberate constructive ambiguity from the main Opposition party, on the biggest issue facing the UK since the second world war. Regardless of how people voted in the EU referendum, does the Secretary of State think that this shambolic spectacle has enhanced or diminished faith in politics?

Stephen Barclay: I think that what we have seen is the Prime Minister working day and night in the national interest to fight for a deal for the entire United Kingdom, securing through a two-year negotiation a withdrawal agreement that allows us, after 40-odd years, to wind down our deeply ingrained relationship with the EU. The political declaration allows us to set a course for a future relationship that respects our trading relationship with our largest trading partner but also allows an independent trade policy with the rest of the world and gives us control of our immigration system and our fishing and agriculture. I think that corresponds to the work that the Prime Minister has put in.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It seems that very little has changed in the month since the meaningful vote was postponed in either the legal changes secured from the EU or the opinion of this House. Given that it seems inevitable that the Government will lose the meaningful vote next week, what is the Secretary of State's plan B?

Stephen Barclay: We have already covered that on a number of occasions. It is the Government's intention to win that vote, and that is what all Ministers are focused on.

Points of Order

4.55 pm

Nick Boles (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Exceptionally, I will take the hon. Gentleman's point of order now because it relates to Brexit protests, and therefore there seems an apposite quality about hearing what he has to say at this point.

Nick Boles: Thank you, Mr Speaker. If this place stands for anything, it is freedom of expression, and you are the greatest defender of that freedom, but that freedom must be accompanied by personal safety, in particular for right hon. and hon. Members. We have heard reports from the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) of the threatening behaviour of certain protesters towards my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry). Will you consult the Serjeant at Arms to see whether the Metropolitan police are doing everything they can to protect the public's right to protest but also to ensure that Members are able to go about their business in total safety?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, with which I entirely identify. I am happy to take other colleagues' points of order in due course, but there is nothing that the hon. Gentleman has said to which I object in any way. I share both the sentiment he has expressed and his strength of feeling on behalf of colleagues about this matter. Naturally, I am grateful to him for giving me advance notice of his point of order.

I have indeed been made aware of recent incidents involving aggressive and threatening behaviour towards Members and others by assorted protesters who have donned the yellow vests used in France. When I refer to "recent incidents", I am more specifically referring to reports I have had of incidents that have taken place today, in all likelihood when many of us, myself included, have been in this Chamber. The House authorities are not technically responsible for the safety of Members off the estate—that is and remains a matter for the Metropolitan police—but naturally, I take this issue very seriously and so, I am sure, do the police, who have been made well aware of our concerns.

Reflecting and reinforcing what the hon. Gentleman said about peaceful protest, let me say this. Peaceful protest is a vital democratic freedom, but so is the right of elected Members to go about their business without being threatened or abused, and that includes access to and from the media stands in Abingdon Green. I say no more than that I am concerned at this stage about what seems to be a pattern of protests targeted in particular—I do not say exclusively—at women. Female Members and, I am advised, in a number of cases, female journalists, have been subjected to aggressive protest and what many would regard as harassment.

I assure the House that I am keeping a close eye on events and will speak to those who advise me about these matters. I would like to thank the hon. Gentleman for doing a public service in raising the issue. I do not want to dwell on it for long, because we have other important business to which we must proceed, but if colleagues with relevant experiences want to come in at this point, they can.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to you for the statement that you have just made. I was at Abingdon Green earlier this afternoon and witnessed what happened. A completely unacceptable level of abuse was directed at the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) and at the Sky News journalist Kay Burley. I completely agree with the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) that peaceful protest in the vicinity of Parliament is a hugely important and valuable part of our democratic traditions, but intimidation and abuse are not peaceful protest. I therefore ask you to use your good offices to do everything possible to ensure that journalists and broadcasters can do their job and that Members of this House are free to speak their minds.

Mr Speaker: I happily give the right hon. Gentleman that undertaking.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. This is not the first such incident that has taken place. There was an incident shortly before Christmas, after which a number of us wrote to the Chairman of Ways and Means. As a result, police officers are now stationed outside the Abingdon Green area, but they are not necessarily on the way in and out, which I think is where the latest incident took place. People do have the right to protest freely, but they also have a responsibility to conduct themselves appropriately. What we have seen once again, most regrettably directed at the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), has been really vile and misogynistic thuggery, abuse and harassment.

We in this place remember that our friend Jo Cox was murdered by a far-right neo-Nazi in 2016, that people have gone to prison for plotting to murder another Labour MP, and that many people have been jailed for the abuse that they have directed at other colleagues. As you have said, Mr Speaker, this abuse seems to be directed specifically at women and has a strong streak of misogyny, and it is now being streamed on Facebook Live in order to raise revenue for these far-right people so that they can fund their trolling activities online and in the real world. I therefore also ask that you write to Twitter and Facebook so that these individual sites, wherever they pop up and under whoever's name they appear, can be shut down and these individuals do not profit from filming their abuse of MPs, who are rightly speaking out on the important national issues of the day. I offer all solidarity with the right hon. Member for Broxtowe.

Mr Speaker: The last point that the hon. Lady raised—on live streaming—is new to me; I have heard it from her now for the first time. I will carefully reflect on it. I am perfectly open to taking the course of action that she has recommended, but I hope that she will forgive me if I say that I will want to consult on the best way to proceed. But I have no hesitation in saying that I share 100% the concerns that have been expressed, and it is necessary to state very publicly the difference between peaceful protest on the one hand and aggressive, intimidatory and threatening protest on the other. The idea that one cannot make a distinction between the two is not right; it is not always straightforward, but it can be made, and it must be.

Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe

5.3 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe following punitive actions taken against her in Iran.

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): I thank the hon. Lady for raising her question.

The House will appreciate that, in dealing with Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe, a detained person in Iran, some matters are confidential, so I hope the House will appreciate that I may be sparing in some of my responses.

The treatment of all British-Iranians detained in Iran, including Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe, is a priority for the UK Government. We are committed to doing everything we can for each of them, and I have met Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe's family a number of times, as has the Foreign Secretary. We have repeatedly asked the Iranians to release Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe on humanitarian grounds, and I do so again today.

During his recent visit to Tehran, the Foreign Secretary raised Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe's case and those of our other dual nationals detained in Iran. The welfare of British nationals in detention is a priority for us, and we are also seeking clarification from the Iranian authorities about how they propose to deal with any reported hunger strike situation if it progresses. We have made it clear that Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe must be treated humanely and in line with international standards, and we are urgently seeking clarification of reports that her calls to her family in the UK are being restricted.

Tulip Siddiq: Most hon. Members will be aware of my constituent, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who has now been imprisoned in Iran for nearly three years, separated from her family, her husband and her daughter. She was on holiday in Tehran visiting her parents with her young daughter when she was imprisoned. The United Nations has declared her imprisonment to be illegal and arbitrary, yet her treatment in Iran has become considerably worse in the past two weeks.

In the past two weeks, Nazanin's ration of food has been slowly decreased. She has been told that the phone calls she is allowed to make to her family and husband in London are now restricted and will be further restricted. She has also been told that she will be denied medical access, even though she has discovered lumps on her breasts. In the light of this, Nazanin has said that she will go on hunger strike from next week. I would therefore like to ask the Minister a few questions.

First, do the Government believe the ill treatment and imprisonment of a British citizen to be worthy of more than just tough rhetoric? Namely, at what point will the treatment of Nazanin and other British nationals detained in Iran warrant a diplomatic summons for the Iranian ambassador?

Secondly, does the Minister believe that the Government have used all diplomatic means at their disposal to protect Nazanin's welfare? If so, have the Government formally requested a private meeting with Nazanin in prison?

[*Tulip Siddiq*]

Thirdly, in the wake of the specific recent abuses, will the Foreign Secretary finally make a decision on whether to grant Nazanin diplomatic protection, for which we have been asking for a long time?

Finally, the UN Security Council is mandated to safeguard international peace and security. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that Iran's practice of detaining British nationals has become sufficiently widespread that it now constitutes a crime worth discussing at the Security Council meeting in April? If so, will he sponsor a meeting and do just that?

I think the Minister and the Foreign Secretary are determined to solve this case, and I believe their resolve is genuine. From my conversations with them, I have found them to be very insistent on demanding that Nazanin is released, but the truth is that this is now a matter of life and death. Tough rhetoric will not do anything. What we need is decisive action from our Government to make sure that my constituent, Nazanin, comes home alive to West Hampstead. What action will the Minister take to save this woman's life?

Alistair Burt: Again, I am grateful to the hon. Lady for what she has said and the way in which she has said it. A number of things that she has raised on behalf of her constituent must remain hers, as she puts her case for her, and I am sure those words will have been heard very carefully not only in this House but in Tehran. Let me respond to some of the issues that she has raised.

The circumstances of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe's detention are well known. I have met the family a number of times, and I have met the little girl in Tehran. On humanitarian grounds, we have consistently pressed Iran to recognise that reuniting a mother with her child in these circumstances must be absolutely paramount.

In addition, we note that Iran does not of course recognise dual nationality. That is why it has not been possible to have this case treated as a normal consular case in which we would expect access. It is not treated in that way by Iran. We have noticed that if she is to be treated as an Iranian national, as those in Iran wish, she is now at a stage where she should be eligible for parole. We hope and believe that that might be the course of action taken—again, I stress on humanitarian grounds.

Without commenting on all the matters raised by the hon. Lady, we consider action in terms of what we think is in the best interests of any particular dual national. There are one or two others in Iran, and there are others around the world, and each individual action that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office takes is judged by us to be in their best interests. There is no standard template, because all circumstances are different.

There is constant communication between the FCO and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I think the House is aware of the number of times the Foreign Secretary has raised the matter. I have also raised it through personal contact in Tehran, and it is raised regularly through the embassy there as well. The request for diplomatic protection is still being considered in relation to whether it would add anything to the circumstances. As I say, the request for a meeting has been made, but it is not possible because of the attitude towards dual nationals.

As the Foreign Secretary has stated, we remain of the view that Iran is a state looking for recognition around the world—it is a state with a strong and proud history—and we feel that this case might be handled in a different way. I know that that view has been expressed many times in the House before, but we will continue to raise the case, and to do so in the way that we think is in Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe's best interests. I note everything the hon. Lady has to say. The matter is always—always—under consideration.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): The hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) is assiduous in bringing this case before the House, and Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe's husband continues to bring it before the public. I know the Secretary of State has worked very hard to do what he can, and he has certainly been raising it over the festive period. However, Nazanin is now in a much more dangerous situation, and I would like to know what more can be done beyond keeping this case in the public eye. What more practically can be done?

Alistair Burt: It is very good to see my hon. Friend in her place.

This is not simply a question of keeping the case in the public eye, which, understandably, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe's husband has sought to do, as have other colleagues. It is very much about the communication that goes on more on diplomatic channels, and that is constant. I can assure my hon. Friend that the case is raised on every possible occasion, as with other dual nationals, and we will continue to do so. Her access to medical care at present, bearing in mind her condition, is a matter of supreme importance to the United Kingdom. We would hope, on purely compassionate grounds, that medical access, which has been assured in the past, will continue.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) on securing it, and I thank her on behalf of the whole House for her tireless campaigning to bring Nazanin home.

I can only echo what my hon. Friend has said regarding the latest terrible turn of events: the denial of medical treatment to Nazanin and Narges Mohammadi, with their announcement of a planned hunger strike in protest; and the cruel, vengeful response of the Iranian authorities in stopping Nazanin's weekly phone calls with her husband, Richard, and in cutting food rations. This would be inhuman treatment of any prisoner, but to pile this torment on an innocent woman, whose mental and physical health is already suffering, is nothing but barbaric. I join my hon. Friend in calling on the Iranian authorities not just to restore Nazanin's basic rights, but to restore her freedom without any further delay.

We must remember that, as we know, the Iranians face a twin threat this year from crippling US sanctions, affecting their trade and investment prospects worldwide, and from dangerous military escalation, as the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia gear up for a more direct conflict. Those of us who look at those dual prospects with horror, and despair that the path of progress of progress and peace that the Iran nuclear deal opened up is growing increasingly narrow, know that Iran will need

us to fight on its behalf to preserve that deal, preserve trade and stop the descent into war. However, Tehran needs to hear this: every day that Nazanin's inhumane treatment continues and every time we see fresh human rights abuses in Iran, it makes it more and more difficult to summon the stomach for that fight.

Does the Minister of State agree with me that when the Foreign Office says Iran is holding Nazanin for diplomatic advantage, Tehran needs to realise that in fact the opposite is true? Every day it continues her unjust detention, it is simply digging its own diplomatic grave.

Alistair Burt: I am extremely grateful for the way in which the shadow Foreign Secretary puts the case. She is right to say that in Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe's situation, access to medical treatment as requested is absolutely essential. The United Kingdom will continue to make that point very clearly. Indeed, the work through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tehran to try to clarify the situation on calls is continuing with urgency.

On the wider issues that the right hon. Lady mentions, she makes a very fair point which we have stressed in our contact with Iran. We have sought to understand Iran's concerns about the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, an agreement which it signed and which we abide by. We do indeed seek to make a case to others about the importance of abiding by agreements and international norms. It is not easy in this context, but it is made that bit more difficult if we see a situation where there is an obvious humanitarian response, quite outside any other considerations. People would notice and no doubt approve if there was a swift return of Nazanin to her daughter. I can only hope that those remarks are well noted. The United Kingdom will continue to press along the same lines.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): This is an extremely important and sensitive issue that has been running on for far too long. I pay tribute to Ms Zaghari-Ratcliffe's representation in this House, which has been conducted with huge capability for many, many months—far too long, as the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) and I agree. I also pay tribute to the Minister for his work with his Iranian opposite numbers. May I urge him also to work with our European partners and others around the world? Over many years, we have seen Iran take hostages from many countries, not just the United Kingdom, and hold them for the extraction of influence or ransom. This is not a new action by the Iranian Government. Although this particular case is more egregious than most, it is not just us who suffer. Could the Minister perhaps organise, with United Nations partners, a debated motion through the Security Council, which would expose some of the evil done by this evil regime?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's comments and contributions as Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. I can only repeat that we will continue to do what we can in the best interests of any detained national. We recognise the wider issues he raises. We will continue to handle the matter on a humanitarian basis, but his wider point is not ignored.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): May I first of all, like the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, pay tribute to the hon. Member for Hampstead and

Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) for her continued efforts and for securing this urgent question today? I thank the officials who continue to work on this case and groups such as Amnesty International, which continue to work hard to keep it in the public eye. We also need to pay tribute to Nazanin's family for the courage they have shown, not least over the past few weeks.

We condemn, absolutely wholeheartedly, the actions of the Iranian regime not only in this case, but in the cases, as others have pointed out, of other nationals who have been taken. This will have a deep impact on how it is portrayed across the international community. More importantly, we all must remember the human impact of depriving Nazanin's family and small child of a wife and a mother. Nazanin has now spent more than 1,000 days in prison. Her freedom must be restored.

I know there were particular concerns about Nazanin's health. What discussions has the Minister had about medical assistance that might be brought to her? As others have asked, what further action can be taken, either at the Security Council or with our European Union partners, who have similar concerns about the actions of the Iranian regime?

Alistair Burt: Certainly, we very much echo the appreciation that the hon. Gentleman expresses for Nazanin's husband and family for the way they have tried to deal with these very difficult circumstances over a long period, and for the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn for the way she raises them.

With the understanding of the House, I will not go into detail about the medical treatment or assistance sought—I am not sure that would be appropriate—but, in the circumstances we have been made aware of, we are doing what is appropriate in that regard. We stress the humanitarian aspect of the case and the fact that if Nazanin, who is a dual national, were treated as an Iranian national, there would now be an appropriate opportunity under the Iranian legal system to take account of the circumstances and reunite this family, as is so desperately needed.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): The astounding inhumanity displayed by the Iranian regime continues to horrify many people around the world, including all Members of this House. In the light of how traumatic this case is for the family of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, will my right hon. Friend say what ongoing support is being provided to them at this incredibly difficult time?

Alistair Burt: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has been in contact with the family some 11 times since August, and I believe further contact is imminent. That support is offered here; I think Richard Ratcliffe is aware that he can have contact with the Department at any time. Our officials—I am grateful for Members' recognition of their work—are also in contact with the family. I will not go into too much detail in relation to Tehran, but the family there have also been seen and have contact. I have met them a couple of times. Their circumstances are quite remarkable, and they are doing everything they can to understand the system and to try to ensure that what they do is in the best interests of Nazanin.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) for the fight she has put up for her

[Ann Chwyd]

constituent. I, too, have met the family several times. I have had a good relationship with Iranian officials in the past. I chair a committee of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and the last time I met Iranian MPs, when I raised the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, they said to me, “We promise that if you come to Iran, you can visit her in prison.” Obviously, I have not rushed to do so, but that offer was made and I am willing to go if circumstances permit. However, our immediate concern must be her own safety and health. We are all very concerned about that.

I pay tribute also to the Foreign Office, latterly, for the efforts it has made on Nazanin’s behalf. However, the Secretary of State said on the “Today” programme:

“Nazanin isn’t the only person who is being detained, despite being totally innocent, as a pawn of diplomatic leverage.”

What did he mean by that? Are press reports that our Government owe the Iranian Government money true? If it is a matter of money, why do we not pay?

Alistair Burt: I thank the right hon. Lady. I know her work with the IPU and her compassion in this case. Let me disentangle a couple of things. I am grateful for what she has said about a potential meeting. I am not sure necessarily that the parliamentarians she met had the authority to make such an offer—it has not proved possible for us to see Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe up to now—but I appreciate the good faith in which it was made. Any such contact, through any contacts and friends she may have in the Iranian Parliament, has to be helpful, as I think many people see the circumstances in the same way. The issue of an outstanding financial payment is entirely separate—it goes back many years and is being handled through a completely different channel—and there is no linkage between the two that is accepted either by the UK Government or the Iranian Government. It is a matter that is well known to us.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): The Foreign and Commonwealth Office does an amazing job with about 20,000 foreign national consular cases every year—to put that into context, that is about 30 per Member of Parliament per year. Notwithstanding the complexity of this case and of dealing with Iran, this does highlight some fundamental issues around how we treat dual nationals. Is it not time to review the policy on dual nationals and the advice we give them when they are travelling to their other country?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who knows the situation extremely well from his own diligent work in the Department some years ago. Travel advice recognises the situation of dual nationals and gives appropriate advice when necessary. On Iran, there is specific advice about the situation of dual nationals, and, where they might be at particular risk, that is made very clear. On whether there is a case over time for considering this on a wider international basis, there may be a call for that. I understand the point he makes very clearly.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): The case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe is heartbreaking: the separation of a mother from her young child and now this dreadful escalation in the reduction of food rations and the denial of medical treatment. Sadly, Iran has form when

it comes to the cruel practice of preventing medical attention. In 2017, one political prisoner died and another lost part of his face because of untreated cancers. What discussions has the Minister had with his counterparts in other countries, including those with slightly warmer relations with Iran, about how we can present a united front in raising this case and others like it?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, who makes her own points very strongly. I have touched on this matter with one or two neighbours in the general context of perceptions of Iran, but each case is separate and individual. We do what we can in the best interests of all our dual nationals. Some are known and some are unknown to the general public. We always have to bear that in mind.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): In the light of the role played by British diplomats, and my right hon. Friend and his colleagues in the Foreign Office, in engaging with the Iranians successfully before Christmas to persuade them to persuade the Houthis to go to the Stockholm peace talks on Yemen, while not conflating that issue with this, may I ask whether there are any pointers from that recent diplomatic engagement with Iran that could help to bring some satisfaction in this case?

Alistair Burt: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the recent announcement and thank him for his question. Iran is a complex country. The way in which there was indeed help and assistance at a vital stage to ensure that the talks in Stockholm went ahead was an example of what Iran can do to move its position as far as many outside Iran are concerned. As one would expect, in all our dealings with Iran, while never being blind to issues that we consider to be very difficult, in terms of its conduct and what it might be doing, the UK constantly looks for opportunities to change the nature of relationships in a confrontational region. As the shadow Foreign Secretary said, in the region as a whole there is too much confrontation, too many opportunities for conflict and too many situations in which people feel threatened and act in a way that increases that threat rather than decreases it. One would expect the UK to play its part in trying to decrease that threat, and Iran is part of the process whereby those threats might be decreased. We will continue to work on that basis.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): There have been several questions in the House about this case, and the Minister and the Foreign Secretary have talked about it to the Foreign Affairs Committee on a number of occasions. If reports are true, it appears that the situation of this prisoner is deteriorating rather than improving, and that she requires additional support. What has made the situation deteriorate, and what can we do through our partners—either in the P5 at the United Nations, or in the UN General Assembly more broadly—to try to improve the situation, not just for Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe but for all prisoners throughout the world who are held illegally?

Alistair Burt: I do not think that it is really possible to answer the hon. Gentleman’s question. It is not always possible to gain access to those who are making the decisions relating to people who are held in detention in a variety of countries, and that is certainly true in this

particular case. I think that the best the United Kingdom can do is make very clear how we see the situation, keep up our constant contact and requests for assistance, and continue to raise the matter as it has been raised here, but we are not always aware of what may have triggered one development or what might trigger a release. All I can say is that, as the House would expect, constant efforts are made to bring about the latter.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Iranian regime has employed the taking and tormenting of hostages right from the outset. Surely, at some point, one reaches a stage at which one has to say that sweet reason and appeals to compassion are not working and severe sanctions must be considered. What sanctions are at our disposal, and what consideration has been given to imposing them?

Alistair Burt: Sanctions are in place in relation to a number of figures in Iran—the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in its entirety, and others—on human rights grounds. That course of action has already been taken by the United Kingdom.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) on bringing this matter to the House and giving us a chance to participate. I also thank the Minister for his endeavours on behalf of everyone involved, but Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe in particular.

Nazanin had threatened to go on hunger strike. She was then informed that her weekly phone calls to her child and her family would be withdrawn. That is undoubtedly the final straw, which demands that we do more to help her. Does the Minister not agree that it is the latest low blow against this British mother, and is completely unacceptable?

What more can be done to help Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe? Can the UN help, for instance, or could other countries with which we have contact use their influence?

Alistair Burt: No one understands compassion better than the hon. Gentleman, who articulates it so clearly in the House on so many occasions.

We still think it best to handle this issue in a bilateral way, which is how we deal with a number of dual nationality cases. We do have contact with the system in Iran, and we are continuing to pursue that. We are very disappointed by the present circumstances, and we are deeply concerned about the humanitarian aspects—both Nazanin's separation from her child and the current restrictions on medical care, which must be lifted as soon as possible. We will continue to press for that, using all our contacts bilaterally.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): My right hon. Friend has implied that we may not be speaking to the people who make the decisions on Nazanin. Is he suggesting that other power brokers, such as the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, may well be the decision makers, and have we any contacts with them?

Alistair Burt: The authority structure in Iran is complex, as any study of it will show. I am absolutely certain that the messages that the British Government send, and our work through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office

and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tehran, get through to people, but it is not always possible for us to have contact with every part of that complex power system.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Is Iran not a signatory to the international covenant on economic, social and cultural rights, and is it not in breach of that covenant by denying Nazanin access to medical treatment? Are states like Iran free to disregard treaties and covenants as they see fit, or should there be consequences?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman asks me a question to which I do not know the answer, but the point he makes is fair. The adherence to international agreements is very important, and they should stay in place. The Iranians point this out in relation to JCPOA—the joint comprehensive plan of action—of course on their own part. Whatever the signing of agreements may be, the circumstances of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe stand on their own account, and that is why we press for the humanitarian reunification of a mother with her child and the granting of freedom to this lady.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the actions he and his colleagues are taking on this terrible case, but will he elucidate the following issue? The case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe is very much in the public eye, and so it should be, but there are other British nationals or dual nationals imprisoned in Iran. Is she being treated any differently from those other individuals, and if those individuals are being discriminated against as well, what action is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that those cases are looked at so they can be freed too?

Alistair Burt: To answer my hon. Friend may I go back to something I said right at the beginning? The very nature of these cases means we are dealing with individuals, some known only to their own families, and the details and circumstances of those cases are rightly and appropriately confidential. Again, the best thing I can say to the House is that, as all colleagues will know from their own dealings with our consular offices—those staff who work both in London and at post—every effort is made to ensure all actions are handled in the best interests of the individual detained. That remains the case, and that is certainly the case for all dual nationals in Iran.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): May I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) for her work for her constituent? I am sure the Minister shares my concerns about dual nationals who find themselves in the situation where the basics of food and access to healthcare are being denied. Surely the Government need to look at this and see what more can be done to help people who find themselves in these situations.

Alistair Burt: Whether someone is a dual national or mono-national should make no difference: the humanitarian care of those who have been detained under a system through its own processes should be universal, and in these circumstances the situation of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe calls out for appropriate access to medical care and appropriate and humane treatment, and that is what the United Kingdom demands.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): May I congratulate the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) on tabling this urgent question, you, Mr Speaker, on granting it, and the Minister on his response to it? Will he share with the House his thinking as to why the Iranian regime seems to be willing to use up scarce diplomatic capital and to incur further reputational damage by not only the continued detention of this particular woman but her worsening circumstances?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. If I was to offer some thoughts on that they would take us the best part of the next half-hour, because again I go back to the point about the complexities in relation to Iran. This is a 40-year-old regime with different power structures and a concern about a world that it views rather differently from us in terms of the threat it feels is posed to it, and that plays into an equally complex situation in the region, where many see threats against them and take actions that only increase threats, rather than decrease them. It is not possible to offer a snap, cod view of thinking except to say Iran pays proper understanding, but equally, in doing so, there can be no turning away from those areas where we think the conduct of Iran has not been right and has not been correct, and we certainly make that case, as well as seeking, where we can, to understand the position it puts to us and the rest of the world.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The United Kingdom's primary interaction with the Iranian regime has been through its Prime Minister, but we know that the real powerbroker behind Nazanin's detention has been the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. What efforts have been made to reach direct interaction and influence with the real powerbroker behind this situation?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. As I indicated before, it is a complex authority structure. I am absolutely confident that our representations go through to the right quarters, even if indirectly. We will continue to seek to do that, but we will look for any new avenues that might be effective.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): These events have been very traumatic for Nazanin's family, and not least for her sister-in-law, who lives in my constituency. Can the Minister confirm that the ongoing inhuman treatment of Nazanin is doing great damage to Iran's reputation on the international stage, and that that point will be made directly to Iran's supreme leader and to the Iranian Prime Minister?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman makes his own point very well. Anyone looking at these situations objectively, regardless of the politics of the situation and the complexities of what is happening in the middle east, will see a mother and her child and wonder how on earth this can be going on, particularly in a situation where, under Iranian law and recognising Iran's role and its legal system, there is an opportunity to take a course of action that could change this perception of Iran. That is something that we hope might now strike Iran.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) for her diligence in bringing her constituent's case to the

House again. I would like to pass on the solidarity of my constituents who have been in touch with me to Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and her family; they often share their concerns. I know that the Minister will be aware of the situation in Iran, so may I ask him to speak to his colleagues in the Home Office? I have many Iranian constituents who are seeking some form of leave to be in the United Kingdom and they often find that it is very much delayed. Given the significance of the FCO's advice to people travelling to Iran, will he ensure that his colleagues in the Home Office are aware of this and take it into account in their decision making?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to the hon. Lady and her constituents, and indeed to the constituents of the many hon. Members who have written to their MPs and, through them, to me about the circumstances of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe to ensure that she is never forgotten by anyone. I will certainly bring the hon. Lady's points about the Home Office directly to my colleagues.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) on gaining this urgent question. I should also like to pass on to the Zaghari-Ratcliffe family my thanks and those of the family of my constituent Jagtar Singh Johal for the support that they have offered his family during his detention in the Republic of India.

The theocracy of Iran cites diplomatic support and consular services, but there is a litany of inconsistency, whether in relation to the Republic of India in relation to Jagtar Singh Johal or to the Islamic Republic of Iran in relation to the Zaghari-Ratcliffe case. In order to get over some of those inconsistencies, will a Minister from the Foreign Office agree to attend the all-party parliamentary group on deaths abroad and consular services and assistance, to listen to the lived experiences of families who are undergoing this situation here in the UK while their family members are being held abroad, whether in Iran or anywhere else? It is that lived experience that will inform best practice in the Ministry.

Alistair Burt: On and off, I have been dealing with consular cases in the middle east region since 2010. I have met a number of families in very difficult situations following a variety of crises, as well as those who have been held. In each particular case, we have tried to engage the consular service, which tries to look at each case individually and to apply its sense of what is in the best interests of each individual being held abroad. The contact has to be very good between them and the families, but I know that there is not always agreement about what might be in the person's best interest. My right hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan) is the Minister with responsibility for consular matters within the Department—*[Interruption.]* One of my ministerial colleagues has principal responsibility for all consular matters, and I will certainly ensure that the hon. Gentleman's request is passed on—*[Interruption.]* The Minister responsible is my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin). We have heard the hon. Gentleman's request, and I am sure that a colleague will attend that APPG meeting if a request comes through.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I wish to make a brief point of order about the progress of business, if possible.

Mr Speaker: Not in relation to the progress of business. We have statements next, and points of order come after statements.

Kevin Foster: It is just a brief point.

Mr Speaker: No, I have just told the hon. Gentleman what the position is. If he has a point of order, he can raise it after the statements.

NHS Long-term Plan

5.45 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): With permission, I would like to make a statement about the NHS long-term plan. The plan sets out how we will guarantee the NHS for the future. It describes how we will use the largest and longest funding settlement in the history of the NHS to strengthen it over the next decade, rising to the challenges of today and seizing the opportunities of the future.

It is worth taking a moment to reflect on the time when the NHS was first proposed from this Dispatch Box, under the Churchill Government in 1944. Even after the perils of war, infant mortality was nearly 10 times what it is now, two thirds of men smoked and life expectancy was just 66. It came 10 years before we knew the structure of DNA and four decades before the first MRI. The NHS has led the world throughout its history, but one constant has been the core principle set out by the Conservatives in that national Government: the NHS should be available to all and free at the point of use according to need, not ability to pay.

As last year's 70th anniversary celebrations proved, the NHS is one of our proudest achievements as a nation. We all have an emotional connection to it—our own family story—and we all owe an enormous debt of gratitude to the people who make the NHS what it is and work so hard, especially during the winter months when the pressures are greatest.

Because we value the NHS so much, the new £20.5 billion funding settlement announced by the Prime Minister in June provides the NHS with funding growth of 3.4% a year in real terms over the next five years. That means that the NHS's budget will increase in cash terms by £33.9 billion, rising from £115 billion this year to £121 billion next year, £127 billion in 2020-21, £133 billion in 2021-22, £140 billion in 2022-23 and then £148 billion in 2023-24.

That rise of £33.9 billion, which is actually over £1 billion more in cash terms than was proposed in June, delivers on our commitment to the NHS and will safeguard the NHS for the long term and help to address today's challenges. The NHS is facing unprecedented levels of demand. Every day, it treats over 1 million people. Compared with 2010, the NHS carried out 2 million more operations and saw 11.5 million more out-patients last year. Despite record demand, performance was better this December than last December. So we will address today's challenges, not least with the £6 billion extra coming on stream in under three months.

As well as addressing current challenges, the NHS long-term plan sets up the NHS to seize the opportunities of the future. At the heart of the plan is the principle that prevention is better than cure. In the future, the NHS will do much more to support people to stay healthy, rather than just treating them when they are ill, so the biggest increase to any part of the NHS—at least £4.5 billion—will go to primary and community care, because GPs are the bedrock of the NHS. That means that patients will have improved access to their GPs and greater flexibility about how they contact them, as well as better use of community pharmacists and better access to physiotherapists. Improving the availability of fast and appropriate care will help communities to keep people out of hospital altogether.

[*Matt Hancock*]

The next principle is that organisations across the NHS, local councils, innovators and the voluntary sector will all work more closely together so that they can focus on what patients need. There will also be a renewed clampdown on waste so that we can ensure that every penny of the extra money goes towards improving services and giving taxpayers the best possible return.

Ultimately, staff—the people who work in the NHS—are at the heart of the NHS. The long-term plan commits to major reforms to improve working conditions for NHS staff, because morale matters. Staff will receive better training and more help with career progression. They will have greater flexibility in their work, be supported by the latest technology that works for them and be helped more with their own mental health and wellbeing. That already happens in the best parts of the NHS, and there has been a huge amount of work to support the people who work in the NHS, but I want to see it happen everywhere. We will bring in better training, mentoring and support to develop better leadership in the NHS at all levels. We will build on the work that is already going on to recruit, train and retain more staff so that we can address critical staff shortages.

The plan published today is the next step in our mission to make the NHS a world-class employer and deliver the workforce it needs. To deliver on the workforce commitments, I have asked Baroness Dido Harding to chair a rapid programme of work, which will engage with staff, employers, professional organisations, trade unions, think-tanks and others to build a workforce implementation plan that puts NHS people at the heart of NHS policy and delivery. Baroness Harding will provide interim recommendations to me by the end of March on how the challenges of supply, culture and leadership can be met. She will make her final recommendations later in the year as part of the broader implementation plan that will be developed at all levels to make the NHS long-term plan a reality.

That is the approach that we will be taking to support the NHS over the next decade, but what does it mean for patients and the wider public? It means patients receiving high-quality care closer to home. It means supporting our growing elderly population to stay healthy and independent for longer. It means more personalised care and more social prescribing. It means empowering people to take greater control of, and responsibility for, their own health through prevention and personal health budgets. It means accessing new digital services to bring the NHS into the 21st century. It means more support for mothers by improving maternity services. It means providing more support for parents and carers in the early years of a child's life so that this country can be the best place in the world in which to be born, in every sense.

We will improve how the NHS cares for children and young people with learning disabilities and autism by ending inappropriate hospitalisation, reducing over-medicalisation and providing high-quality care in the community. The NHS will tackle unacceptable health inequalities by targeting support towards the most vulnerable in areas of high deprivation. To help to make a reality of the goal of parity between mental and physical health, we are going to increase mental health service budgets not by £2 billion, but by £2.3 billion

a year. For the first time ever, we will introduce waiting time targets for community mental health so people get the treatment they need when they need it. We will also expand services for young people to include those up to the age of 25—something that never happened under the previous Labour Government.

The long-term plan focuses on the most common causes of mortality, including cancer, heart disease, stroke and lung disease. The health service will take a more active role in helping people to cut their risk factors by stopping smoking, losing weight and reducing alcohol intake. The NHS will improve the quality and speed of diagnosis and improve treatment and recovery, so that we can help people to live well and manage their conditions. We will upgrade urgent care so people can get the right care more quickly.

All in all, the NHS long-term plan has been drawn up by the NHS—by more than 2,500 doctors, clinicians, staff and patients. It will continue to be shaped and refined by staff and patients as it is implemented, with events and activities across the country to help people to understand what it means for them and their local NHS services. The experts who wrote the plan say that it will lead to the prevention of 150,000 heart attacks, strokes and dementia cases, and to 55,000 more people surviving cancer each year—in all, half a million lives saved over the next 10 years. It is funded by taxpayers, designed by doctors and delivered by this Government.

This is an important moment in the history of the NHS. Our long-term plan will ensure that the NHS continues to be there, free at the point of use, based on clinical need, not ability to pay, but better resourced with more staff, newer technology and new priorities. It will be fit for the future, so that it is always there for us in our hour of need. I am proud to commend this statement to the House.

5.55 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the advance copy of the Secretary of State's statement, but may I quickly say at the outset that Churchill's Tory party voted against Labour's NHS 22 times?

We welcome many of the ambitions outlined today by NHS England. We welcome the greater use of genomics in developing care pathways. We welcome the commitment to early cancer diagnosis; after all, it was a Labour policy announced at the general election. We welcome the commitment to new CT and MRI scanners; it is a Labour policy. We welcome the greater focus on child and maternal health, including the expansion of perinatal mental health services; again, it is a Labour policy. We welcome the roll-out of alcohol teams in hospitals, because, yes, it is another Labour policy.

The Secretary of State did not mention this, but we will study carefully the details of any new proposed legislation, because we welcome the recognition that the Health and Social Care Act 2012 has created a wasteful, fragmented mess, hindering the delivery of quality healthcare. Healthcare should never be left to market forces, which is why scrapping the competition regime and scrapping the Act's section 75 procurement regulations, as proposed today by NHS England, are long-standing Labour policies. The Government should be apologising for the Health and Social Care Act. But why stop

halfway? Why not commit to fully ending the purchaser-provider split? Why not commit to democratic accountability when planning care? Why not commit to consigning the whole Lansley Act to the dustbin of history?

What about the other holes in today's announcement? Waiting lists are at 4.3 million, with 540,000 waiting beyond 18 weeks for treatment. A&Es are in crisis, with 618,000 trolley waits and 2.5 million waiting beyond four hours in A&E. So why is there no credible road map today to restoring the statutory standards of care that patients are entitled to, as outlined in the NHS constitution? They were routinely delivered under a Labour Government. Is it not a damning indictment of nearly nine years of desperate underfunding, cuts and failure to recruit the staff we need that those constitutional standards will not be met as part of this 10-year plan?

The Secretary of State boasts of the new budget for the NHS. Will he confirm that once inflation is taken into account, once the pay rise is factored in and once the standard NHS England assumption about activity is applied, there is actually a £1 billion shortfall in the NHS England revenue budget for this coming financial year? When he answers, will he tell the House—I will be listening carefully to what he says—whether he has seen or is aware of any internal analysis from the Department, NHS England or NHS Improvement that confirms that £1 billion shortfall figure?

Can the Secretary of State also confirm that despite his rhetoric about prevention, the public health budget is set to be cut again in the next financial year as part of a wider £1 billion of cuts to broader health spending, and that when those cuts are taken into account, spending will rise not by 3.4%, as he says, but by 2.7%? That will mean deeper cuts again to smoking cessation services, deeper cuts again to drug and alcohol addiction services and deeper cuts again to sexual health services when infections such as gonorrhoea and syphilis are on the rise. By the way, why is HIV/AIDS not even mentioned in the long-term plan? What was the Secretary of State's answer when asked about public health cuts in his weekend interviews? Targeted Facebook advertising. Given that life expectancy is going backwards, health inequalities are widening and infant mortality is increasing, the public health cuts should have been reversed today, not endorsed.

The NHS long-term plan admits that

"the extra costs to the NHS of socioeconomic inequality have been calculated as £4.8 billion a year in greater hospitalisations alone."

Does that not confirm that, for all the rhetoric on prevention, the reality is that the Government's austerity and cuts are making people sicker and increasing the burden on the NHS? Nowhere have we seen greater austerity than in the deep cuts to social care, but where are the Government's proposals today? They still do not have any.

With respect to social care, surely the Secretary of State agrees that:

"It is not possible to have a plan for one sector without having a plan for the other."—[*Official Report*, 18 June 2018; Vol. 643, c. 53.]

Those are not my words, but the words of the Foreign Secretary when he stood at the Dispatch Box last June as the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. I agree with him; it is a shame that the current Secretary of State does not.

By the way, the Foreign Secretary also promised that:

"Alongside the 10-year plan, we will also publish a long-term workforce plan".—[*Official Report*, 18 June 2018; Vol. 643, c. 52.]

Where is it? The Secretary of State has not done it. We all want to know where the staff are coming from to deliver the ambitions that have been outlined today. We are short of 100,000 staff. We are short of 40,000 nurses. The Secretary of State talks of doing more for mental health services; we are down 5,000 nurses in mental health. He talks of doing more for primary and community care; GP numbers are down by 1,000 and district nursing numbers are down by 50%. Now, the Home Secretary wants to impose a £30,000 salary cap on those coming from abroad to work in our NHS, ruling out nurses, care assistants and paramedics. The Secretary of State should do his job and tell the Home Secretary to put the future sustainability of the NHS first, instead of his Tory leadership ambitions, and ditch that salary cap for the NHS.

There are certainly many welcome ambitions from NHS England today, but the reality is that those ambitions will be hindered by a Government who have no plan to recruit the staff we need, who have no plan for social care and who are pushing forward with deep cuts to public health services. Patients have been let down as the Government have run down the NHS for nearly nine years. We do not need 10 more years of the Tories. The NHS needs a Labour Government.

Matt Hancock: Well, I think we discovered from that that Labour has absolutely nothing to say about the future health of the nation. The hon. Gentleman did not even deign to thank the people who work in the NHS for their incredible work. Did we hear any acknowledgement of the million more people who are seen by the NHS, of the record levels of activity going on in the NHS and of the fact that we have more nurses and doctors in the NHS than we had in 2010? He had nothing to say. He talked about the workforce. Chapter 4 of the document is all about the workforce plan. He gives me the impression that, like his leader on Brexit, he has not even read the document he is talking about.

The hon. Gentleman asked about targets and legislation. On legislation, when clinicians make proposals on what legislation needs to change to improve the NHS, we listen. We do not then come forward with further ideological ideas. We listen. So we will listen to what they have said. The clinicians have come forward with legislative proposals and we will listen and study them closely.

On the money that the hon. Gentleman talked about, it was a bit like a broken record. He asked about a £1 billion shortfall in the NHS budget. I will tell him what we are doing with NHS budgets: we are putting them up by £20.5 billion. There is an error in the analysis by the Nuffield Trust, because it does not take into account an improvement in the efficiency of the NHS. Is it true that every year we can improve the way the NHS delivers value for taxpayers' money? Absolutely. We can and we must, because we on the Government Benches care about the NHS and about getting the right amount of money into the NHS, but we also care about making sure that that money is spent wisely. The hon. Gentleman would do well to heed the views of the NHS itself, which says that yes, the NHS is probably the most efficient health service in the world, but there is always more to do.

[Matt Hancock]

The hon. Gentleman argued about various budgets. The budgets in the NHS are going up because we care about the future of the NHS. The Labour party called for an increase of 2.2% a year; we are delivering an increase of 3.4% a year. Labour has nothing to say on health, as it has nothing to say on any other area of domestic business. We will make sure that we are the party of the NHS for the long term.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): First, I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his paying tribute to the work of the late Sir Henry Willink, who served in Churchill's Conservative Government. I met him once or twice when he became master of a Cambridge college. The Conservatives have shown respect for the NHS ever since, as he foreshadowed.

I also congratulate my right hon. Friend on the large increases in funding that are almost as big as some of the funding increases that I received when I was a Health Minister and then Secretary of State. Ever since it was founded, all Governments have increased spending on the NHS—they are bound to—and whichever party is in opposition we always have these knockabout exchanges about whether it is enough. As my right hon. Friend rightly says, what matters is how effectively the money is spent to produce the right patient outcomes. The plan appears to reflect that very well.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that the biggest pressure facing the health service is the extraordinary growth in demand, and the change in the nature of that demand, which is being caused by the ageing population, with chronic conditions playing such a large part? Does he also accept that his most urgent priority is to build further links between the hospital service, the GPs, the community services and local authority social services, so that we have people working no longer in silos, but together to produce the best package for the patient? We have achieved something, but not very much. I hope that when we produce our adult social care policy, which I hope is soon, my right hon. Friend will begin to think about some reforms to make sure that all elements of the service work together properly to produce the proper and most cost-effective personalised treatment for each individual patient.

Matt Hancock: I pay tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend, who of course did so much to set in train the modern health service that we know and whose reforms were kept and, indeed, enhanced during the period when Labour was in government. He is right about the need to run the NHS so that it can be the best that it possibly can be. Yes, we need the money, but we also need to run it well. It is no good just to argue about the money. On that he may have a surprising ally, because the shadow Secretary of State, who is currently looking at his mobile phone—well, he is not any more—said a couple of months ago:

“we need to augment the debate beyond the current mantra of ‘we can spend the most’”.

However, it appears that the Labour party only has a mantra of “We can spend the most.” We care about the money, but we care about the NHS being the best that it possibly can be, too.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I note that the Secretary of State referred to the Churchill Government in 1944, but had he looked at *Hansard* he might have seen that Churchill cited the Highlands and Islands Medical Service, which was the first national health service in 1913.

I welcome the long-term plan, but the integration to which it aspires is going to be frustrated if there is no reform of the internal market and the fragmentation continues. The Secretary of State cites the funding, which he describes as 3.4% per year. That is actually just back to what the NHS received prior to 2010. He talks about a million extra patients. With this enormous increased demand, does he not think that it would be more honest to describe funding per head, rather than just a total? Scotland spends £163 more per head. Perhaps he should aspire to spend the money on the patients and then perhaps the NHS would keep up.

Again, like the previous funding agreement, the funding is focused only on the NHS, with cuts to public health, no extra money for health education and still no Green Paper on social care. I totally agree that prevention is better than cure, so will the Secretary of State reverse the cuts to public health? In his own letter, which was circulated, he emphasised reducing cancer deaths, yet there was no mention of prevention at all. That is the best way to reduce cancer deaths. Public health is crucial, smoking cessation is crucial and tackling childhood obesity is crucial, so will he liaise with his colleagues in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and set a nine o'clock watershed on advertising rubbish foods?

I agree with the aim of improving screening. Last year, the Government agreed that they would reduce the bowel cancer screening age from 60 to 50. Can the Secretary of State tell us when that will actually happen? Does he recognise that it will mean a bigger need for endoscopists and radiologists? So will he fund Health Education England to provide them and to provide the other doctors, nurses and staff that the NHS will need to deliver this long-term plan?

Matt Hancock: My response is yes on the cancer screening—it is in paragraph 3.53. I want to return to the point that was made by the hon. Lady and by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) about the link to social care. Of course that is critical. The plan has a section on the link to social care and the social care Green Paper will then tie into the plan. Of course, the two come together and the Green Paper on social care will be provided soon.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I warmly welcome this ambitious and wide-ranging long-term plan for the NHS. I agree with the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) that so much is dependent on social care, on public health and on the workforce through Health Education England budgets, but may I add to that the situation for capital budgets within the forthcoming spending review? So much of the success of transforming services depends on the upfront funding to get things going and sometimes double running so that we can get a new service up and running before an existing service closes down. Will the Secretary of State go further in talking about the role and importance of capital budgets?

I also really welcome the triple integration—not only between health and social care, but between mental and physical health and between primary and hospital services. Could the Secretary of State confirm and support the proposal in the long-term plan that the legislative tweaks that will support that much needed integration will come from the NHS itself? I confirm that the Health and Social Care Committee remains committed to subjecting those proposals to pre-legislative scrutiny. Will he meet me to see how we can take that forward?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the legislative changes. These changes have been proposed by the NHS. The NHS wants the changes set out at a high level in the plan. Of course there is a lot of consequential work to do to turn them into a full legislative proposal. The NHS is working on that. If it does that alongside and working with the Select Committee, I would be very happy to meet with her to discuss how that might happen. This is very much the NHS's proposed legislation and I look forward to discussing it with her.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): I am glad that the Secretary of State says that he will listen to clinicians if they want to change primary legislation. I just think that many of those clinicians and many Labour Members wish that he and his colleagues had listened to us when we warned about the problems with the Lansley legislation six years ago. But let us put that to one side. The biggest challenge facing the NHS is indeed the increase in the number of older people with two, three or more long-term chronic conditions. They need more joined-up services in the community and at home. The local NHS has been asked to put forward its plans for these new services by April. It cannot do so without proper long-term funding for social care. So will we hear about that in the Green Paper before April—yes or no?

Matt Hancock: When I answered a previous question on the timing of the social care Green Paper, I said it would be provided “soon.” I certainly intend that to happen before April. My previous commitment was to do it before Christmas, so it is well advanced. But the hon. Lady is right on the legislative proposals. There is a broad consensus on the need for more integration, as my hon. Friend the Chair of the Select Committee said. The proposals that are made by the NHS in the paper are what it thinks is needed in order to deliver this integration, which I very strongly support.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): No doubt my right hon. Friend is gratified, as would be the Churchill-led National Government of 1944, by how truly remarkable and amazing the national health service, the baby of that Government, has turned out to be. Will he assure me that this money does not come without strings and that he will enforce a much better system of lessons learned and, in particular, of disseminating best practice more widely through the NHS? Finally, will he please kick the work of the sustainability and transformation partnerships into some form of prompt result?

Matt Hancock: When I referenced Churchill, I did not realise that it would be in front of his family. My right hon. Friend is quite right about the need for a just culture—a need for understanding the lessons that are

learned when things go wrong—in what is a high-risk business of providing medicine and medical care. Those lessons should be properly learned and there should be transparency and openness and a culture of constantly improving the way that things are done, whether that is medically, logistically or organisationally in hospitals. That is a critical part of the review that Baroness Dido Harding will take forward. It is something that she cares deeply about, making sure that we get the culture right within the workforce not only to tackle the high levels of bullying and harassment, which are completely unacceptable in the national health service, but to make sure that there is a spirit and a culture of continuous improvement and of learning from errors that everyone makes. All of us make errors, and we should learn from them and that culture should be inculcated right across the NHS.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): The Secretary of State was absolutely right to commit in his statement to ending the inappropriate hospitalisation of people with learning disability and autism, but the long-term plan itself postpones for five years the ambition of reducing by 50% the number of people who are in institutions. Mencap has described that as disgraceful. It amounts to abandoning the current plan to reduce the number by 50% by this March and it effectively tells the system to take its foot off the brake and will result in people continuing to be treated as second-class citizens, and continuing to have their human rights abused. I urge him to rethink this outrageous long postponement of an absolute imperative to get people out of institutions and to give them a better life.

Matt Hancock: I have a lot of sympathy with the right hon. Gentleman's argument. The target for this March, which I inherited, was for a reduction of a third to a half. We are at a reduction of over 20%. The challenge has been that, while the number of people who are being moved into community settings has proceeded as per the plan, more people have been put into secure settings. This is an area that I care deeply about getting right, and I very much take on board the response of Mencap and the right hon. Gentleman to the proposals.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on his plan. As a former Minister of public health, let me say how delighted I am and how much I agree with him that prevention is better than cure. As Governments of all shades have said for a long time, the reality is that people must take more responsibility for their own health—notably to keep their weight down and to take more exercise. This is all good messaging, but the problem is that obesity and being over-weight is an increasing problem, especially among the young. What new messages—what new approach—will we have to public health if he is really going to make the sort of progress that we need to make?

Matt Hancock: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Throughout this statement, Opposition Members have been murmuring from a sedentary position about the public health budget. Let me address that directly. The public health budget, which was devolved five years ago with widespread acclamation across the House, has been set and will be set in the spending review. We are putting an extra £20 billion into the NHS—the scale far

[*Matt Hancock*]

dwarfs individual budgets—and the whole long-term plan is about prevention being better than cure. The public health budget is important, and it is being delivered well because it is being delivered by councils in concert and tied to other subjects. The truth is that we are having the whole NHS focus on the prevention strategy, not just one individual budget; those who concentrate on just one budget are missing the point.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: A very large number of right hon. and hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye. The Secretary of State is attending to the questions put to him in his usual courteous fashion, and I think that is respected. However, I gently point out to the House that this is the first of three ministerial statements today and that there is then further substantive business with which we want to make progress, so I gently encourage colleagues to be economical.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I am heartened that Baroness Harding is looking at the staffing side of things, but she does have a mountain to climb. Let me remind the Secretary of State that the last time the NHS went out to recruit GPs, it ended up with fewer GPs at the end of the year than it had had before. That is not to mention the pension cap put in place by his former mentor—or maybe his current mentor—the former Chancellor, which now means that there is a problem with the retention of senior clinical staff. We can add to that list the immigration rules and pay ceiling. Is the Secretary of State lobbying the Home Office and the Treasury, particularly to deal with the £30,000 cap and the pension cap?

Matt Hancock: I welcome much of the tone of the hon. Lady's remarks. The truth is that it is critical to ensure that we have the workforce and the people to deliver the plan. There is a whole section of this plan, as well as ongoing work, to deliver that. I want to clear up this point: in the immigration White Paper published by the Home Secretary before Christmas, as now, there is no cap on recruitment numbers for nurses and doctors. The proposal is that the cap will not necessarily apply within a shortage occupation. We will be recruiting people from around the world to work in our NHS.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I very much congratulate my right hon. Friend on the 10-year plan and on his announcement of the Harding review. Will Baroness Harding look particularly at the way in which pay and pensions are structured for general practitioners and pinch-point specialists within the NHS, since they are retiring or going part time at the moment—a full 10 years before the time they had anticipated when they went to medical school?

Matt Hancock: We are already looking at that subject. It is very complicated because of the nature of assets owned by GPs—their value having risen sharply over the last generation. However, we have record numbers of GPs in training. Although we need to ensure that we retain more GPs and encourage as many as possible to be full time, we have successfully breached our target; we are training more GPs than we had planned to, and that is a good thing.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I welcome the focus in the long-term plan on the most common causes of mortality—cancer, heart disease, stroke and lung disease—and on cutting the risk factors. However, will the Secretary of State just explain to me how cuts to public health budgets and the fact that the comprehensive spending review is much later in determining the money that will be made available for public health can be part of a joined-up plan to start dealing with some of these diseases?

Matt Hancock: There is £16 billion ring-fenced for public health in this spending review. Crucially, we want the whole NHS to be focused on keeping people healthy as well as curing them when they are ill. Yes, of course it is a matter for that one budget in the spending review process, but it is also a matter of the whole £148 billion a year that will be going into the NHS.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's plan. He will be aware that our constituents value receiving treatment as locally as possible. Will he give an assurance that he will do all he can to ensure that district general hospitals are there to provide most of these crucial services?

Matt Hancock: Yes. I am a strong supporter of district general hospitals and community hospitals. So often, local matters because it matters to patients and their families. If someone is having a highly complicated procedure, they will want to be in the very best place in the country—or, indeed, in the world—but often they will want to be close to home as well. That matters for small hospitals and district general hospitals such as the one on which my hon. Friend's constituents rely so much.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The Secretary of State has waxed lyrical today about the NHS becoming a learning organisation, being transparent and admitting its mistakes. Will he therefore set the trend and lead by getting up at the Dispatch Box and apologising to this House for the fragmentation and chaos caused by the Lansley Act?

Matt Hancock: We will listen to and learn from what clinicians say about what legislative changes are needed now. This document is all about concentrating on what is the right thing for the future, rather than the blame culture that we are trying to get rid of in the NHS.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): I very much welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and the fact that he has been able to announce future spending so that hopefully the planning for how those resources are spent can be done properly. Will he also bear in mind that, during the period of the national health service, some 60% of the time there has been a Conservative Secretary of State, which shows very much the support and commitment of the Conservative party to the health service? Regarding the money that he is talking about, what will he do to ensure that people see and understand what is being spent locally?

Matt Hancock: As my right hon. Friend says, from its inception and the first White Paper throughout most of its history, the NHS has been supported and nurtured by a Conservative Secretary of State, and long may that continue.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I want to concentrate on cancer services. I have tried to be very positive and to engage with Ministers through the all-party parliamentary group on cancer, but I must express my disappointment at chapter 3. The Secretary of State referred to paragraph 3.51 on cancer, particularly in relation to some of the new investments. Practicalities and resources must be linked to the ambition to improve outcomes, so we need early diagnosis and cost-effective treatment. For example, this country has the second worst survival rate in Europe for lung cancer; only Bulgaria is any worse. The “Manifesto for Radiography” by professionals, oncologists and so on set out some specific asks, including a one-off investment of £250 million in advanced radiotherapy and an additional £100 million a year to support that investment with trained staff. I am afraid that the Government’s plans set out in the 10-year plan fall far short of that, so I do hope that the Secretary of State will look at that again.

Matt Hancock: We very much agree with the thrust and purpose of the hon. Gentleman’s remarks. In fact, paragraph 3.56 sets out how we are learning from what has happened in Liverpool and elsewhere in the country to make sure that we get early diagnosis right because, as he says, early diagnosis is absolutely critical. I will take away his specific points, but the whole thrust of the plan with regards to cancer is about increasing early diagnosis.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): In a local community survey that I am doing right now, mental health is particularly flagged up by people as a priority for them, as well, so I very much welcome the Secretary of State’s continued focus on that in this 10-year plan. I also very much welcome the fact that as part of the work with the Department for Education, the trailblazer area in south-west London will enable us to really see some of the more joined-up working that he talked about. Will he set out what the additional services available for young people up to the age of 25 will mean practically? I represent a very young constituency, and that will be a key change that could benefit us.

Matt Hancock: At the moment, as somebody transitions from children’s mental health services to adult mental health services, there is often a gap in provision as they register for the adult services. The purpose of having the new care plans up to the age of 25—similar to those, for instance, for care leavers that we have brought in in other legislation—is to make sure that there is a seamless transition from children’s mental health services to adult mental health services and not a gap that many, many people fall through.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Let me bring the Secretary of State back to the issue of public health. He seems to be saying that this is only a small grant and therefore not really very important compared with spending on the NHS as a whole. May I draw his attention to the wording in the long-term plan where it says that action by the NHS

“is a complement to, but cannot be a substitute for, the important role of local government”?

That role has been undermined by £700 million of cuts to public health grants in the past five years. Will he now recognise that if we are going to get a proper

joined-up approach to ill-health prevention, he needs to give a commitment that in future the public health grant will increase, in real terms, at least by the same amount as NHS funding as a whole?

Matt Hancock: I certainly did not say that the public health grant was small—I said that it was £16 billion over the last spending review period. But NHS spending as a whole, by the end of this five-year funding settlement, will be £148 billion every year. Therefore, turning the firepower of the whole NHS to keeping people healthy in the first place will play a huge role in this. Of course, the public health grant has to be settled as part of the spending review, but the idea that that is the whole of everything with regard to preventing ill-health is missing the point.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): In the week before Christmas, when we mere mortals were just looking forward to a holiday, the Secretary of State did an all-night shift in Milton Keynes University Hospital and then travelled to Chelmsford, where he visited my brand new medical school and did a “Dragons’ Den” with medical entrepreneurs who are finding new ways to use technology to treat their patients. May I thank him for his super-energy, and does he agree that supporting staff and embracing innovation is also key to our NHS?

Matt Hancock: Yes, it was a joy to make that visit. We found ourselves in a new medical school in a room where the students were enjoying a dissection—my goodness, after a night without sleep it was quite a thing. It was a joy to go there with my hon. Friend and I agree with both the points she made.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I, too, congratulate the Secretary of State on the NHS 10-year long-term plan. There are between 6,000 and 8,000 rare diseases. One in 17 people, or 6% of the population, will be affected by a rare disease in their lifetime—that is 3.5 million people in the United Kingdom. Will he confirm a commitment to assisting those with rare diseases, and can the NICE process for new life-saving drugs be urgently speeded up so that more lives can be lightened and saved?

Matt Hancock: I strongly agree with the hon. Gentleman. For those who have rare diseases, diagnosis takes seven years, on average, and genomics can bring that down to a matter of seven days, in the best cases. We are the world leaders in genomics and we are going to stay that way. We have reached the 100,000 genome sequence and we are going to take it to 1 million, with 500,000 from the NHS and 500,000 from the UK Biobank. He is absolutely right. This is one of the bright shining stars of the future of healthcare, and Britain is going to lead the way.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): As a former Health Minister, I congratulate the Secretary of State and the Government on this statement. I particularly pay tribute to his work on mental health—I am proud that under this Government it looks as though we are finally beginning to close the gap and stop mental health being the Cinderella service—and on early diagnosis of cancer. I also welcome his espousal of the work on genomics, which I, as a former Minister for life sciences

[George Freeman]

and health technology, and others were involved in setting up. Does he agree that if we are really going to drive the revolution of accountability, productivity and local engagement, the accountable care pilots offer us the chance to really measure and drive digital communities of healthcare where we reward communities that promote health and wellbeing?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I do. I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend did in putting together the areas of the NHS where this is already working. We want to spread that success more broadly across the NHS to make sure that we seize these very exciting opportunities as well as deal with the important day-to-day challenges that the NHS faces.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): On 29 December, two young people, one of them aged only 24, committed suicide by jumping from the Humber bridge in my constituency. Since I first commented on this, I have been inundated with comments from local residents detailing the inadequate mental health support that they have. Unfortunately, the Humber bridge is becoming a place that people choose to visit when they are feeling desperate and as though there are no other options. Partly for this reason, can I ask the Secretary of State to commit—not in 10 years, or even in one year or six months, but right now—to providing more money for the Humber NHS Foundation Trust so that we can help to support people when they are feeling so very desperate?

Matt Hancock: I will absolutely look into the request that the hon. Lady makes. The example that she gives locally in Hull is actually reflected across the country in terms of the need for greater access. For the first time, we are going to have access targets for community mental health, because it is critical to make sure that we have accountability and understand what is happening in mental health trusts in terms of access so that we can then drive policy to meet it. But I appreciate that that is a medium-term goal: in the short term, she has made a specific request for a specific organisation, and I will absolutely look into it and write to her.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): Mental health issues are often part of the very complex causes of rough sleeping. They are also a barrier to getting rough sleepers off the streets. Will my right hon. Friend say more about how his plan fits in with the Government's plan to eradicate rough sleeping?

Matt Hancock: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right about this. I pay tribute to the work that he did as a Minister in this area. We have put forward £30 million to support mental health services for rough sleepers. It is about so much more than just the money, though—it is about co-ordinating care and co-ordinating different agencies. There is a lot of work going on on this inside Government that he was very much involved with.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): My clinical commissioning group has to make more than £40 million of cuts in the next 15 months and is proposing to cut GP and urgent care centre opening hours. It also has an

£11 million risk thanks to the predatory private “GP at hand” scheme, of which the Secretary of State is a member. We have had GP practices suspended, palliative care beds closed, and our major hospital under threat of demolition for seven years. Will he accept that the self-regarding statement he has just made will be unrecognisable to people who work in and use the NHS, which is reeling from the crisis that his Government have caused?

Matt Hancock: I will take advice and consideration from many people, but not from the hon. Gentleman, who for seven years has run a frankly outrageous campaign based on scare stories about hospital closures that are totally unreasonable, unrealistic and wrong. He will never be somebody I listen to, because I care about improving the future, not political point-scoring.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Last Friday, it was a pleasure to meet the chief executive and chair of my local hospital trust to discuss the new A&E department and the new mental health ward that will be built on the site of Torbay Hospital over the next year. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is also vital that we have the local services around mental health, in particular, because in the past we have seen far too many people from Devon being sent elsewhere, across the country, and that this investment will now bring that to an end?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely. My hon. Friend is a brilliant advocate for Torbay and for the English Riviera, and has made the case so strongly for his local hospital. I was delighted that we could recently find the funding to support the case that he and local clinicians have made, and I look forward to working with him to make it a reality.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Before coming to this place, I was a senior manager in Bristol's primary care trust and then the CCG. I want to pay tribute to the NHS managers who have kept the ship afloat since the Lansley reforms. Today's plan is clear in its commitment to triple integration and seeking to free commissioners from the barriers to integration in the 2012 procurement rules, but tomorrow the CCG in Bristol will embark on a huge re-procurement process for some community services for the next 10 years based on those old rules. In the light of his plan, will the Secretary of State intervene locally and support my call to pause that divisive community services re-procurement?

Matt Hancock: I will raise the hon. Lady's point with NHS Improvement, which considers these things. Local provision of services should, rightly, be decided by local clinical priorities, but she makes a cogent point that I will raise with NHSI, and I will ask its chief executive, Ian Dalton, to write to her.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I declare an interest, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on blood cancer and the APPG on heart and circulatory diseases. I very much welcome this plan's focus on those areas. In tribute to my caseworker, Susan Lester, who sadly passed away last week from pancreatic cancer, can I have an assurance from the Secretary of State that he will continue to work with voluntary sector organisations such as Bloodwise, the British Heart Foundation and Pancreatic Cancer UK?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course. I am sure the whole House will join me in passing on our condolences to the family, friends and colleagues of my hon. Friend's caseworker. He is doing right by her in raising that issue in the House. Of course we will keep working with those organisations, which do brilliant work. In fact, there is an event in the Commons tomorrow with Bloodwise, which the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), will attend.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Before Christmas, I attended the inaugural event of the Addie Brady Foundation, in memory of 16-year-old Addie, who died a year ago from a brain tumour—her second primary cancer. She was affected by a rare genetic condition called Li-Fraumeni syndrome, a feature of which is a high risk of cancer and repeat cancers. Her family, other families and an international panel of experts have been campaigning for a national screening programme for people suffering from Li-Fraumeni syndrome. Can the Secretary of State confirm whether his announcement today includes much needed Li-Fraumeni syndrome screening on the NHS, particularly for children, which would extend and save lives?

Matt Hancock: I will certainly take up the hon. Lady's suggestion with Mike Richards, who is running a review of our screening programmes to ensure that they are all fit for purpose, run as effectively as possible and targeted at the right people.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I am delighted to hear my right hon. Friend talk at length about prevention. In that vein, what role does he see for initiatives such as the daily mile in schools, which allows young people to get into the thrust of getting involved in sporting activity and sets them up for life?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Things like the daily mile, which I have participated in, are an incredibly important part of this. Prevention is about public health and the whole NHS, but it is also about more than that. We talk a lot in the House about the rights that the NHS gives us—the right to care that is free at the point of use, according to need—but we also need to talk about the responsibilities that we have, including the responsibility to use the service wisely and the responsibility to ourselves and our communities to keep ourselves healthy. That part of the debate needs to continue and be strengthened, at the same time as ensuring that the NHS is always there for us.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Under the Government's public health proposals, County Durham will lose 38% of its budget—or £19 million. The Secretary of State said that we should be listening to clinicians. Clinicians in County Durham are clear that they want that budget protected. Can he tell me what those clinicians are missing? Is it not a fact that this Government are quite clearly going to remove money from deprived areas such as County Durham, while more leafy areas, including Surrey, have an increase in their budgets?

Matt Hancock: That is obviously not right. Indeed, there is a whole section of the plan on reducing health inequalities, which is extremely important.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I very much welcome this plan, its ambitions and the Government's commitment to it. Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the biggest obstacles to a fully functioning health service is the fact that information cannot be easily shared between many centres? There are myriad systems, which means that data cannot be accessed from one centre to another. When it comes to care, the professionals are brilliant and must be praised, but this situation is causing distress, and it slows diagnosis and wastes patients' time. I speak from a great deal of personal experience, unfortunately, having spent too long in the NHS with family members. Can he give an assurance that that will be addressed by the plan?

Matt Hancock: Yes. I feel strongly about this. Chapter 5 of the plan is all about digitally enabled care. The interoperability of data between systems in different parts of the NHS is mission-critical. Over Christmas we published proposals for the interoperability of primary care systems, and we will roll that out in the hospital sector as well, so that people can access their own patient record and the clinicians who need to see it can access the whole record. Instead of having to phone each other up to find out what is going on with a patient they once had, they should be able to look at the record.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's recognition that the staff are at the heart of the NHS and join him in thanking them for their excellent work, but there are 40,000 nursing vacancies today. How many nursing vacancies will there be at the end of 2019, and how many will there be at the end of 2020?

Matt Hancock: I know that the hon. Gentleman takes a close interest in that, as chair of the all-party group. Obviously we need more nurses. The vacancies are, in many cases, filled by temporary staff, but that is not the best way to manage things. We need more nurses and more doctors. I am glad that we have a record number of GPs in training. In the plan, we have made provision for a 50% increase in the number of clinical placements. We have a whole programme, including the Harding review, to take this forward and ensure that it happens, because the NHS is, at its heart, delivered by its people.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement and in particular the continued commitment to increase funding for mental health and build on the work already done through the five year forward view. Does he agree that one of the challenges in implementing those changes is ensuring that funding gets to the frontline through commissioning decisions? That has been one of the obstacles to generating real change on the ground and achieving the goal of parity of esteem between mental and physical health.

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need not only more funding for mental health, which is in the plan, but more joined-up delivery of mental health services. Since the birth of the NHS, mental health services have been separate from physical health services, but treatment needs to be for the whole person—their physical, mental and social health. We need

[*Matt Hancock*]

not only the money but the join-up, and my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), the Mental Health, Inequalities and Suicide Prevention Minister, is working closely on that.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): I agree with the shadow Secretary of State completely. I do not feel satisfied that the Secretary of State recognises the urgent need to reverse cuts to social care budgets alongside this plan. Does he see that savings made by reducing avoidable admissions and delayed transfers of care could go towards delivering a more ambitious 10-year plan for our NHS?

Matt Hancock: As I have said, after I became Secretary of State, we put £240 million extra into social care, and there will be £650 million next year.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on this announcement and particularly on the increase in spending, which is more than the Labour party promised at the last general election. The vital point of today's announcement is the publication of the plan, which has been decided by clinicians, so that they can tell politicians what is right for the NHS. Will he thank the clinicians for that work? We want to take party politics out of the NHS.

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is quite right: we must focus on the substance of what is needed to deliver an NHS that will be there for us all in our hour of greatest need. That is what we should be concentrating on. I have heard some Members say, "Whatever the Government promise, we will just promise more." That is no way to have a discussion about the future of the country and our most valued institution. Instead, we should back the NHS's plan, deliver on it and keep the economy strong so that we can keep putting in the money that the NHS needs.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Paragraph 4.17 of the plan states:

"Mature students are more likely to have family and other commitments that make it harder to retrain without financial support."

Will the Secretary of State therefore now admit that his Government made a huge mistake when they abolished bursaries for nurses and allied health professionals?

Matt Hancock: No; we are proposing to have more targeted support for those who need it, to ensure that we get support to the areas of nursing with the most acute shortages, such as community nursing and mental health services. That is where support is best targeted.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): My constituency is one of the 25 trailblazer areas that will have new mental health support teams working in and around schools. Will the Secretary of State give further details on what this plan will do to deliver improved mental health services on the ground, particularly for young people in schools?

Matt Hancock: Supporting children with mental ill health is an incredibly important part of the plan, from early intervention on anxiety and depression through to support for those with more serious mental health

conditions. It means that there will be dedicated support that can link with schools' mental health services and help signpost in what is often a complicated system. The Mental Health Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock, has already agreed to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this further. It is an important and welcome intervention.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): When our local sustainability and transformation plan was submitted in October 2017, it projected an annual deficit in health and social care in Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent of £542 million by 2020-21, which is more than double the £250 million projected at the time of the 2015 general election. That shows the scale of the problem, because there are more than 40 STPs across England. Will the Secretary of State write to me with some numbers to show how this long-term plan will help our local STP with the extra revenue and investment needed to transform services so that we do not face a litany of unsustainable cuts, notwithstanding those in the years immediately to come?

Matt Hancock: Of course we are putting more money in, and in the coming days we will announce the local provision increases for the first year—there is a £6 billion cash uplift in year 1. We will be working with local areas in the months ahead on the plans for years 2 to 5.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): In the past few weeks I have visited Witney Community Hospital, the Windrush surgery, the Nuffield health centre and the associated nearby pharmacies, and I have seen not only their brilliant winter preparedness but how they form a hub for care close to home. Does my right hon. Friend agree that ensuring that people are treated in the community and improving public health is the way to ensure that we have free, high-quality care for everybody?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The community hubs being developed in many different parts of the country are critical in bringing together support and enabling early intervention. The adage that a stitch in time saves nine is almost as old as "prevention is better than cure," but both are equal in their wisdom.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Money might not be everything, but transforming a service against a background of real-terms cuts is almost impossible. The Central London clinical commissioning group is in the middle of a 13% real-terms cut, the West London clinical commissioning group is having an 8% real-terms cut, real-terms cuts are being made in mental health services, and Westminster City Council has cut 31% of its funding for social care. Can the Secretary of State indicate whether inner-London residents will see any benefit as a result of this plan?

Matt Hancock: As I said a moment ago, local allocations will be published in the coming days.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): One of the most effective ways of reducing avoidable deaths is to stop people smoking in the first place, and to encourage those who do smoke to give up as fast as possible. How will this plan encourage pregnant mothers, 11% of whom still smoke, to give up smoking and get their partners to give up, and how will it encourage young people not to start in the first place?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. When people are in hospital, there will now be much more aggressive provision of counselling and support to stop them smoking. It is also about targeting support, rather than treating everyone the same and giving them the same messages. It is absolutely right to include micro-targeting and to use social media to communicate with people. There are luddites who say that we should not use these modern approaches, but we on the Government Benches believe in the future.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I am pleased that the Secretary of State is keen to improve public health and reduce health inequalities, and I assume that he will therefore support my new clause 5 to the Finance (No. 3) Bill, which is specifically about ensuring that the Government's economic policies reduce health inequalities. On social care, is he aware that in 2017 alone 50,000 people with dementia had an emergency hospital admission because there was not adequate social care? What will he do to ensure that his plan, which we are still waiting for, will avoid such emergency admissions in 2019? Please do not say that more has been given in the Budget, because that is a sticking plaster compared with all the cuts that the Government have made in social care.

Matt Hancock: Page 32 of the document sets out details on the integration with social care that the hon. Lady rightly calls for. Clearly, ensuring better integration in cases of dementia is absolutely vital. Some parts of the country are doing that brilliantly with integrated commissioning, but we need to ensure that is spread across the whole country.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I welcome this plan and the Secretary of State's energy. When he visited Pilgrim Hospital in my constituency, he saw that this is not solely about money, because a huge chunk of the challenge that the NHS faces is about the workforce. Within the workforce plans in this 10-year plan, will he pay particular attention to under-doctored areas such as Lincolnshire, where it is a huge challenge to produce the same outcomes that we see in other parts of the country?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is dead right. It was a real pleasure to visit Pilgrim Hospital in Boston, where my grandmother worked as a nurse for 30 years, and to meet the staff. He is absolutely right about the recruitment challenges that they face, which is why a whole chapter of the report, and ongoing work, is dedicated to improving recruitment. When we put £20 billion into a public service, of course we will need more people to deliver it.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): At this very moment, Derriford Hospital in Plymouth is on OPEL 4 alert—the new name for black alert. The real shame is that that is now so commonplace that it no longer always makes the news. Will the Secretary of State, who I know visited the hospital recently, explain whether the new NHS plan will address the structural inequalities in funding for the regions, especially the far south-west? Those inequalities often contribute to the underfunding of services, which is why our hospital is on OPEL 4.

Matt Hancock: I enjoyed my visit to Derriford Hospital's night shift and learned an awful lot from it. One of the consequences of seeing what is happening on the ground is that we are providing it with a new A&E facility. We are putting tens of millions of pounds into the hospital, so it would be a bit better if the hon. Gentleman mentioned that as well as rightly raising concerns about performance. That funding was the result of the campaigning of the hon. Member for Plymouth, Devonport, who is an absolutely brilliant campaigner for his local community—[*Interruption.*] Yes, the Members for Devonport and for Moor View. I am a big supporter of Derriford Hospital and think it does a brilliant job, and in challenging conditions, but it is going to get a better A&E because we have provided the funding to allow it to do that.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I welcome the commitment to mental health in the NHS long-term plan, particularly the badly needed new care model for young adults, the commitment to more care for people with severe mental illnesses and the further expansion of mental health liaison services in A&E. I also welcome the commitment to more performance standards for adults with mental illnesses. Will my right hon. Friend make sure that those mental health standards are introduced sooner rather than later, so that we do not have to wait too long for the waiting time standards? Transparency is so important for the parity of esteem between mental health and physical health.

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Those standards are being trialled at the moment. Of course we want to get them right, but we will look at the results of those trials as soon as we can.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): The Bedfordshire mental health trust told me today that the need for in-patient beds for men has increased. Will the Secretary of State urgently reinstate the in-patient mental health facilities in Bedford, which his Government removed, so that my constituents no longer have to travel at least 20 miles to access care?

Matt Hancock: Of course the provision of services locally is a matter for local clinicians, and it must be led by local clinicians. I am always happy to look at individual cases and, as with the other example, I will ask the NHS to write back to the hon. Gentleman with an explanation.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Upgrading the NHS's technology is key to its productivity and its future, and it should include rolling out a new NHS app; phasing out outdated technologies such as fax machines; and adopting new fourth industrial revolution technologies. What progress has the Department made in those areas?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is dead right. There is a whole chapter in the plan on using new technologies not only to improve care but to make care more convenient. He has been a doughty campaigner for the use of technology in health services. His trip to my local hospital to understand these issues went down incredibly well locally, and I hope he keeps pushing us to do the best we can.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): How can it possibly make sense that, when the Health Secretary is targeting much needed support towards areas of

[Lilian Greenwood]

high deprivation, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government is cutting funding for social care and public health, and cutting deepest in cities such as Nottingham with high levels of poverty? Is that not actively undermining the Health Secretary's stated ambition to improve health and reduce inequality?

Matt Hancock: In debates on the future of our nation's healthcare, we should always start with the facts, and the fact is that social care funding is going up. It went up by £240 million this year, and it is going up next year, too.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Adult social care is not working properly in Northamptonshire, with far too many delayed transfers of care for elderly people. With the root-and-branch reform of local government in Northamptonshire, there is a wonderful, unique opportunity to create successful integrated health and social care pilots. Will the Secretary of State seize this opportunity and get the 10-year NHS long-term plan off to a wonderful start in Northamptonshire?

Matt Hancock: Yes. I have discussed the proposals made by my hon. Friend and his Northamptonshire colleagues with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government. We are both enthusiastic to see what can be done, and I invite my hon. Friend into the Department to speak to my officials about how this could be done. His proposals are, by design, entirely consistent with the proposals in paragraph 1.58 of the long-term plan, and I very much look forward to working with him and his Northamptonshire colleagues on making it happen.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Health visitors are vital to delivering early intervention and prevention, yet their numbers are in freefall—falling by 23.5%, or 2,425 health visitors, since October 2015. Health visitors are now working with dangerous caseloads, so when will the Secretary of State ensure that we have safe delivery of health visiting services?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady is dead right. Of course, health visitor numbers went up very sharply between 2010 and 2015. In fact there is a proposal in the plan, and the NHS will be discussing with Government the best way to commission health visitors. Health visitors are clearly a health service but, at the moment, they are commissioned by local authorities. We look forward to working with the NHS and with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government on how best we can commission health visitors in future, because they are a critical part of maternity services.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Over the holiday period, another young woman tragically died of cervical cancer, which she contracted before the age of 25; therefore, she was not able to have a smear test. Will the Secretary of State, as part of this review, remove that ridiculous and utterly arbitrary age limit so that, where a GP believes a female patient needs a cervical smear, they can have one irrespective of their age?

Matt Hancock: I entirely understand the hon. Gentleman's argument. He is a reasonable man who makes reasonable arguments, and I will take it up with Mike Richards, who is running the screening review. I will ask Mike to write to him specifically on that point and to take it into account.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on infant feeding and inequalities, I am glad that the long-term plan has a commitment to improving maternity services in England. The announcement on 30 December said that the UK Government are

"asking all maternity services to deliver an accredited, evidence-based infant feeding programme in 2019 to 2020, such as the UNICEF Baby Friendly initiative".

What does the Secretary of State mean by "such as"? UNICEF Baby Friendly is the gold standard, as recognised by Scotland and Northern Ireland, which have 100% accreditation, but England has only 60% accreditation. Does he also acknowledge the need for community-based infant feeding support, such as peer supporters and health visitors, because it cannot just stop at the hospital door?

Matt Hancock: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady's work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on infant feeding and inequalities. She makes a strong and passionate case for breast feeding. I do not want to let the best be the enemy of the good. The proposal she cites is a proposal from the NHS. Of course, if other such services come forward, why should we be against it? I want to be clinically led in this area, but I very much support the thrust of her argument.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): The people of Hartlepool lost their A&E several years ago, and there is a powerful argument for the return of those services. On the subject of urgent care, what measures does the Secretary of State intend to take to help our overstretched ambulance services?

Matt Hancock: There is extra support for ambulance services in the plan, which is incredibly important. The targets and accountability measures for ambulances were reviewed this time last year, and we now need to make sure that the whole ambulance service gets the support it needs.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State update the House on the review of the tariff process in relation to his statement? Specifically, what will be the impact on NHS trusts in London of changes to the market forces factor? I am concerned that those changes will mean that London loses out when it comes to the funding to be allocated in his plan.

Matt Hancock: Of course we want to make sure that the funding is allocated fairly, and we want to make sure that all the different factors that count towards and cause different costs in different parts of the country are properly taken into account, whether it is rurality or the market forces factor, so called because of the differences in relative costs. I will write to the hon. Gentleman with the full details in the coming days, but what matters here is to make sure that we are clearly led by the evidence.

Migrant Crossings

7.8 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I will make a statement on the number of migrants trying to cross the English channel in small boats and what the Government are doing in response.

Before that, I know the whole House will want to join me in sending our thoughts and prayers to those injured in the attack at Manchester Victoria station on new year's eve and to all those affected by that cruel and senseless act. I also thank the emergency services for their courageous response. Thankfully there were no fatalities, and I am pleased to say that all three victims have now been discharged from hospital.

Let me turn to the issue of the English channel migrant crossings. Over recent weeks, we saw a sharp increase in the number of migrants attempting to cross the channel to the UK in small boats. Over 500 migrants, mostly Iranian, attempted to travel to the UK on small vessels in 2018; 80% of them attempted this in the last three months of the year. About 40% of those involved in these attempts were either disrupted by French law enforcement or returned to France via French agencies. Since 1 January, a further 25 have attempted to cross the channel, but they were disrupted. In addition, just this morning, a dinghy was discovered along the Kent coast. A number of individuals are now going through UK immigration procedures and one person has been arrested.

I am sure the House will want to join me in thanking all the law enforcement agencies and all those involved in the response for their tireless efforts over Christmas and the new year. This includes those from the Border Force, immigration enforcement, the coastguard, the National Crime Agency and the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, many of whom I met in Dover last week. I would also like to thank our French law enforcement partners for their efforts to date, which have been collaborative, swift and thorough.

The English channel contains some of the busiest shipping lanes in the world, the weather conditions are often treacherous and the inflatable boats being used are woefully ill-equipped to make such dangerous journeys. The migrants who choose to make the trip are putting their lives in grave danger, and they can at times also create dangerous situations for our rescue services.

The reasons behind the increased crossings are diverse, and in many cases are outside our control. First, instability in regions such as the middle east and north Africa is driving people out of their homes in search of better lives in Europe. Secondly, organised crime groups are preying on and profiting from these vulnerable and often desperate people. They are falsely promising them safe crossings to the UK, even though the journey is one of the most hazardous and most dangerous possible. Thirdly, strengthened security at the French-UK border has meant that it has become increasingly difficult for stowaways illegally to enter the UK in trucks and cars, leading to more reckless attempts by boat.

I have been very clear that robust action is needed to protect people and our borders and to deter illegal migration. Over the festive period, I took the decision

to declare the situation a major incident. I appointed a dedicated gold command, and I stepped up the UK's response.

As part of joint action agreed with the French, I have ordered two UK Border Force boats to be redeployed from overseas to patrol the channel. That is in addition to the two already undertaking enhanced patrols in these waters. That will mean four Border Force cutters in total. That is in addition to the two coastal patrol vessels currently operating and the aerial surveillance of the area. Last week, I also requested additional help from the Ministry of Defence while we await the return of the two boats currently overseas. I am grateful that the Royal Navy has kindly offered the use of HMS Mersey, which started patrols on Friday.

I am continuing to discuss with the French what more they can do to stop people from attempting to make these crossings from France in the first place. I welcome the action plan that the French outlined just this Friday, which includes a commitment to increase surveillance and security in maritime areas, prevention campaigns in French coastal areas to stop people from setting off in a boat in the first place and a reinforced fight against smuggling gangs. I am pleased to say that the National Crime Agency has also redoubled its efforts. Just last week, two men were arrested on suspicion of the illegal movement of migrants.

In addition, we are doing important work in the home countries of would be migrants to reduce the factors that compel them to make these dangerous journeys in the first place. For example, we are helping to create jobs and build infrastructure, tackling modern slavery, providing education and delivering life-saving humanitarian assistance in response to conflicts and natural disasters. We are also doing important work to undermine organised crime groups, and we have committed £2.7 billion to the humanitarian response in Syria, making us the second biggest bilateral donor to the region. We are on track to resettle 20,000 refugees fleeing the conflict in Syria by 2020, as well as up to 3,000 of the most vulnerable people from the middle east and north Africa, including children at risk of exploitation and abuse. In 2017, the UK resettled more refugees under national resettlement schemes than any other EU state.

Let me reassure the House that I am continuing to monitor the issue of channel crossings daily. Right hon. and hon. Members will know that these crossings have provoked a debate, but I am not afraid to say that I think that some legitimate questions need to be asked. Why, for instance, are so many people choosing to cross the channel from France to the UK when France itself is a safe country? The widely accepted international principle is that those seeking asylum should claim it in the first safe country that they reach, be that France or elsewhere. Indeed, many asylum seekers do just that. Domestic legislation from 2004 clearly states that, if an individual travels through a safe third country and fails to claim asylum, it will be taken into account in assessing the credibility of their claim. Following these recent events, I have instructed my officials to look at how we can tighten this still further and ensure that these provisions are working effectively.

Britain has a proud tradition of welcoming and protecting asylum seekers and we have a long history of accepting economic migrants too—people like my very

[Sajid Javid]

own parents—but all these routes need to be safe and they need to be controlled, which getting in a rubber dinghy is not. That is why I will not accept these channel crossings as just a fact of life. Safeguarding lives and protecting the UK border are crucial Home Office priorities. While we have obligations to genuine asylum seekers, and we will uphold them, we will not stand by and allow reckless criminals to take advantage of vulnerable people. Encouraging people to cross the channel dangerously to come here is not an act of compassion, so I will continue to do all I can to stop these dangerous crossings. I commend this statement to the House.

7.16 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for prior sight of his statement. Opposition Members join him in sending our thoughts and prayers to those injured in the attack at Manchester Victoria station, and we thank the emergency services for their courage.

Does the Home Secretary share my concern that we should be careful not to heighten a potentially toxic atmosphere on migration as the Brexit debate reaches its climax? However, the whole House agrees that the public deserve the assurance that our borders are secure. Nobody in this House believes that these crossings should be just a fact of life, not least because these desperate people are putting their lives in terrible danger. However, is he aware that his predecessor—the then Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May)—took the decision in 2012 to scrap an aerial surveillance programme of the entire coastline, presumably because of the dictates of austerity? Does he accept that this decision, in the words of the then Security Minister, Dame Pauline Neville-Jones, left us “more naked than we would otherwise have been”, and that we are now scrambling to catch up by using the armed forces?

The Home Secretary knows that a little over 200 people arrived here crossing the channel in the entire final three months of last year. One migrant making that dangerous crossing is one too many, but does he appreciate that some people might think that describing this as a major incident is an overstatement, when we consider that, at the height of the Mediterranean crisis, Greece was seeing hundreds of people a day landing on its beaches?

The Home Secretary is correct to make the point about the risk to human life. We know that ruthless people smugglers put desperate people in unseaworthy craft, with no one on board who is any type of seaman, and they distribute fake lifejackets—and all this in the busiest shipping lanes in the world. These people smugglers are putting people's lives at risk for mere financial gain. However, does the Home Secretary accept that there can be no question of turning back asylum seekers who have reached British waters? That would be to put this country outside international law.

May I also remind the Home Secretary that in this country we operate under the rule of law? In this case, we are bound by the 1951 convention relating to the status of refugees. Does he accept that under the convention, to which we are a signatory, refugees have a right to seek asylum here? Taking the failure to claim in the first safe

country into account is one thing; claiming that it entirely nullifies the asylum claim is quite wrong. Refugees may have cultural, family or language reasons to claim in this country. Does he understand that it is not for him as Home Secretary, or anyone else, to claim that someone is not a genuine refugee without examining their case?

I welcome the increased co-operation with the French and the French action plan outlined on Friday. The important thing is not bellicose statements, but to stop people making dangerous crossings in the first place.

On the deployment of the Royal Navy, it seems to some that the Home Secretary was in some type of competition with the Defence Secretary as to who can appear more bellicose towards groups of Iranian refugees in their rubber dinghies. Serious questions arise, however. What will be the total cost to the Home Office of this deployment and how will it be funded? What will be the cost per person rescued? How many of the people smugglers have been prevented and detained? What of the operations that were taking place in the Mediterranean which have apparently now been suspended? Can the Home Secretary explain what contingency measures will be put in place, so as not to leave a gaping hole in existing co-ordinated rescue and interdiction efforts? I ask the Home Secretary please to tell the House that all of those issues have been considered and addressed or are in hand, otherwise unkind people might be forced to conclude that this major incident had little to do with a national crisis but more to do with positioning for the forthcoming Tory leadership battle.

Sajid Javid: I thank the right hon. Lady for her comments. Let me take this opportunity to wish her and her team a happy new year. She raised a number of points. Let me try to tackle them in order.

This has nothing to do with the Brexit debate or the legitimate debate taking place around Brexit on future immigration and related issues. This is all about protecting our borders and protecting human life: dealing with a situation here and now. That is all it should be about.

The right hon. Lady mentioned the previous Home Secretary, now the Prime Minister. In fact, when she was Home Secretary she did a great deal to deal with illegal migration, especially from France. For example, the work on the Sandhurst agreement was initiated by her as Home Secretary and then continued by her as Prime Minister. As I mentioned in my statement, there is some evidence that as it has become harder on some other routes for people to enter the UK by clandestine means—by ferry, train or car—they are turning to more dangerous routes. We need to address them as well.

The right hon. Lady questioned whether this should have been designated a major incident. Let me make two brief points. First, there has been a significant increase in the number of crossings using small boats across the English channel. As I said, there were 543 attempts in 2018. Not all were successful, with roughly 40% being disrupted. Some 80% took place in the past three months, particularly in December. There is a definite increasing trend. It needs to be dealt with as quickly as possible, so that it does not get completely out of control.

The right hon. Lady may think—maybe it is suggested through her question—that 543 attempted crossings is not very much relative to the total number of asylum

claims every year. The problem—this is the real issue—is that this is a very dangerous way to try to enter the UK. It is incredibly dangerous. This is one of the busiest sea lanes in the world. Often these people will travel at night with no lights and no lifejackets. They are taking an incredibly dangerous journey that puts at risk not just their lives but the lives of those who rescue them, such as the RNLI and others. It is the danger that that represents which requires us to take more action. It is one of the reasons, alongside protecting the border, why this is a major incident. I do not think anyone in this House would want to be in a position knowing that the Government have not done everything they reasonably can to protect human life as well as our borders.

I gently ask the right hon. Lady—I know she means well and that she values human life as much as anyone else in this House—please not to use this issue as some kind of political football. This is about protecting human life and protecting our borders.

Let me turn to the other questions the right hon. Lady raised. On the first safe country principle, she mentioned the 1951 refugee convention. The first safe country principle is well established and widely accepted in international law. The Prime Minister herself referred to it in her speech at the UN General Assembly last year. It is a principle indirectly supported through the new global compact for migration and the global compact for refugees. It is a principle legally accepted by the UNHCR when it explicitly recognised the concept in its paper that set out the legal precedent on the agreement between the EU and Turkey. Very importantly, it is a principle at the heart of the EU's own common European asylum system. In the 2005 procedures directive, it is explicitly stated that an asylum seeker should claim asylum in their first safe country, otherwise it can be declared inadmissible if it is claimed in another country. That is repeated in the 2004 qualification directive. It is also a principle that underpins the Dublin regulation. The whole point of the Dublin regulation is that if someone has passed through another EU safe country, it is expected that they claim asylum first there. It is a principle that I hope she would support, notwithstanding that it was also embedded in domestic legislation passed in 2004 by a Labour Government. I understand that she did not vote against that Act.

Lastly, the right hon. Lady asked me about the other activities in which the boats that I have asked to come back to the UK are involved. Those activities are very important. We will still be involved in international activities and humanitarian support. I believe we can balance both requirements domestically and internationally in the way we have set our plans. The Royal Navy is supporting while we fill the gap until those boats return.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): This is a very important statement, but can we please show some brevity? It was an important question and we wanted a very full answer, but it was much longer than I would have expected. So please, can we have brevity in both questions and answers?

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to stress the safety and security of the people who try this most dangerous crossing. Given that, he is also

right to say that people should claim asylum in the first safe country they come to—France is clearly that country—and for one very good reason: if they do not do so they will live in squalor while they seek to get across the channel, putting their own lives at risk. Has the Home Secretary checked how long the people trying to cross the channel have spent in France without declaring themselves as asylum seekers?

Sajid Javid: I agree very much with my right hon. Friend. It is not always possible to get a definitive answer. Many people are using France as a transit country: in many cases, they have entered through another EU country. The principle is very important. Those who encourage people not to claim asylum in the first safe country are encouraging them to take this dangerous journey and they should reflect on that.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of the statement. I concur wholeheartedly with what both he and the shadow Home Secretary said in relation to the attack at Manchester's Victoria station.

Some 500 individuals have been so desperate as to risk an incredibly dangerous journey across the channel last year in what is probably better described as a human tragedy than a major incident. In response to the statement, let me say first that we must of course stop the organised crime gangs that encourage these perilous journeys. The Home Secretary mentioned two arrests, but how many people does he estimate are involved in facilitating these crossings, and does he anticipate further arrests and charges in the days ahead?

Secondly, we must above all protect lives. Will the Home Secretary confirm that that is the clear and unambiguous duty of all the ships being deployed to the channel? I share the shadow Home Secretary's concerns about the implications of withdrawing two ships from operations in the Mediterranean. Will the Home Secretary say a little more about what that means for what we are able to achieve there?

Thirdly, we must properly, fairly and independently consider each asylum claim made on arrival and treat everyone with dignity and respect. It is here, unfortunately, that the Home Secretary has caused most concern in recent days. Despite the more moderate language in his statement, he reportedly said that "real, genuine" asylum seekers would not make such crossings and spoke of a need

"to send a very strong message that you won't succeed"

in making it to UK shores. That approach is factually, legally and morally wrong. It is actually pretty insulting to the many refugees who have contributed to this country who, for a whole host of legitimate reasons, made their way here through other safe countries. As he knows, the success rate of asylum applications from Iranians is particularly high.

Will the Home Secretary retract those remarks and confirm that all asylum applications will be considered solely on the basis of the refugee convention and of whether the applicant is a refugee, without any thought of sending messages? Will he take a humane and compassionate approach to possible third-country removals instead of tightening laws? If he does not, he will simply prolong the misery.

Sajid Javid: Like the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), the hon. Gentleman challenges me to explain why this is a major incident. Declaring something a major incident allows us to bring more focus, more control and more resources. It is a well-established procedure in government, and I hope the whole House can support it. Bringing in more resources allows us to protect more human life as well as to protect our borders. I am sure he agrees that if one life were lost in this situation, that would be one life too many.

Of course, if the vessels that are currently there, which have been joined by the Royal Navy vessel and are to be joined by other vessels, come across any situation in which any life is in danger in any way, their first duty is to protect life. However, that is not their sole duty; they also have a duty to protect the border. In this case, they are working with the technology and equipment they have, with the support of aerial surveillance and the co-operation of the French navy and French vessels, to protect the border. That includes returning people, in many cases to the French coast, with the help of the French authorities.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned my comments last week about genuine asylum seekers. I absolutely stand by those comments. Our job is to protect and help genuine asylum seekers. It should not be a shock to him that, sometimes, people who claim asylum are not genuine asylum seekers. If we are to do more to protect those who really deserve it, we should absolutely focus our resources on them. Those who could claim asylum in another safe country and have every opportunity to do so should be encouraged to do so.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the calm and assured way in which he has dealt with this difficult matter. Is he satisfied that, throughout the camps and assembly areas they use in France, these poor people are made aware that if they come here by making this terrible crossing and they are not entitled to be here, they will be returned? That is very important.

My right hon. Friend has prised an offshore patrol vessel from the Royal Navy. The Navy has a lot of very underused assets called URNUs—university royal naval units—which have grossly underused Archer-class patrol vessels. May I suggest that if he needed more boats, he could easily have those vessels equipped with regular naval staff and used to great effect?

Sajid Javid: I thank my right hon. Friend for his suggestions. We are working closely with the Ministry of Defence. On his first point, we are sending, including via this statement, a very clear message: “If you have passed through a safe country”—that of course includes France—“we will seek to make your claim inadmissible, and you should think twice about taking that journey. Do not give your money to these people smugglers—these vile criminals—and do not take this dangerous journey. If you are seeking protection, seek protection in the first safe country that you can.”

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I would like the Home Secretary to clarify what he just said. Is he seriously saying that he wants to make all first claims of asylum in this country inadmissible if people travelled through another country first? He will

know that people often travel because they have family in this country and existing family reunion provisions do not work effectively, and that we are bound by international law. Is he seriously saying he wants to rip up our obligations under the refugee convention and international law? Does he realise the shame that his doing so would bring on our country?

Sajid Javid: Let me be clear with the right hon. Lady. I am not saying that at all. What I am saying is—[*Interruption.*] I am not saying that, and I will clarify. Every claim of course will be assessed on its own merits, but the point I am making is about the first safe country principle, which is well established. I mentioned in response to the shadow Home Secretary a number of international agreements. The concept has now been accepted by the UNHCR, and it is even in European rules, which apply to us through the common European asylum system. The principle is well established in the qualification directive and the asylum procedures directive, which are backed up by the Dublin regulation.

For example, articles 25 and 26 of the 2005 asylum procedures directive cover the principles of first safe country and inadmissibility of claims where people have travelled through safe countries. Indeed, the Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants, etc.) Act 2004, which is domestic legislation, clearly sets out that failure “to take advantage of a reasonable opportunity”

to claim asylum in a safe country shall be taken into account in assessing an individual’s credibility. That is an Act that the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) voted for.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The heart-rending plight of those caught out in the channel, often having placed themselves in the hands of the modern-day equivalent of the slave trader, rightly worries us all, but surely the Home Secretary is right that, inevitably, nearly all of them will not be correctly classified as asylum seekers under the Dublin convention. Is it not clear that the closest possible co-operation with the French is required to ensure that these poor people do not end up on the high seas?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend makes a number of good points, particularly on co-operation with the French. Thankfully, during the course of the last year in particular, we have had very good co-operation with the French, much of which was codified in the Sandhurst treaty. We are seeing good co-operation on this situation, including the announcement the French made on Friday. However, he is absolutely right that the more we can work with the French to stop these crossings in the first place, the better protection these people will have from the dangerous journey.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Taking something into account is not the same as seeking to make it inadmissible. Will the Home Secretary confirm which he means?

Sajid Javid: The two are consistent. They do not cancel each other out. One can take something into account because one seeks to make it inadmissible.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): The Home Secretary knows that I raised the issue of illegal migrants coming to Kent in November, when he

came before the Select Committee on Home Affairs. Then, there were around 100 individuals and 13 boats; in December, there were more than 95 individuals. He said there was a joint co-ordination centre with France that would resolve issues to a certain extent. Is he saying that joint co-ordination centre did not work, or were additional resources required?

I very much welcome the two additional cutters, which are coming from Gibraltar and Greece. When will they arrive and do what they need to do? Will their place be taken by our international counterparts? They, too, have a responsibility to ensure that those who would come in from north Africa and the Gulf are deterred from doing so in the first place.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend mentions the UK-France joint co-ordination centre now opened in Calais. It is not that it does not work—it makes an important contribution—but it is not enough on its own, and its work needed to be supplemented, which is why we have taken further action in recent weeks, including working much more closely with the French on disruptions. As I mentioned earlier, of all the crossings we know about, the French have successfully disrupted just over 40%. We need to step up law enforcement co-ordination—the French have recently made several arrests—and ensure better co-ordination of maritime patrols and shared intelligence, and that is exactly what we are doing.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Home Secretary tell the House how many convictions of people traffickers there have been in the past 12 months and, given that intelligence-led policing is key to those convictions, what use the authorities have made of SIS II, Europol and—ultimately for bringing people to justice—Eurojust and the European arrest warrant?

Sajid Javid: Law enforcement work is an important part of this operation. Since April 2018, UK law enforcement authorities have disrupted 46 organised criminal gangs involved in people smuggling. In November 2018, two men were jailed for eight years each; in September 2018, seven members of an OCG were jailed with sentences totalling 48 years; and last February, two men were jailed for over nine years.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The Home Secretary was previously cautious about increasing the number of patrols because perversely it might have led to an increase in the number of attempts. Why has he changed his mind?

Sajid Javid: That is a very good question. It is important to keep this under constant review. Border Force has a limited number of vessels and a great deal of work to do, not just in the UK but as part of international operations. I asked for advice on redeployment, and once I had received it and was comfortable that it could meet both its international obligations and prioritise the UK border, I made a decision, and that is what was implemented.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Rather than denigrating refugees fleeing the despicable Iranian regime for not claiming asylum elsewhere, will the Home Secretary tell the House how many asylum seekers we have been able to return to other EU countries

under the EU Dublin regulation in the last three years? Is he concerned that in the Brexit deal before the House there is no guarantee that the UK will retain that power?

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Gentleman should stop treating this as a political game; we are talking about people's lives. This Government, as much as any other before them, care about those people's lives. I have mentioned the aid we are providing in region, including the more than £2.7 billion—more than any other country—to help Syrian refugees, and our refugee resettlement programmes, which I know he supports. Under those, we resettled more refugees in 2017 than any other EU state. Rather than trying to score cheap political points, he should join us in trying to help these people.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I welcome the Home Secretary's statement and agree, as does the whole House, that our priority should be preventing these crossings in the first place. I welcome what he has said about the increase in surveillance, by air, on sea and on land in France. Nevertheless, this morning a vessel left France and landed in Dungeness, in my constituency, which, as he knows, is often a particularly treacherous part of the coast. What more needs to be done to prevent boats from slipping through the net? In this case, the vessel was detected by a local fishing craft, which alerted the authorities, and was not first spotted by the authorities themselves.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend refers to the events this morning in his constituency, and while I cannot say too much about that—it is an ongoing operation—he might know that an arrest has been made. He is absolutely right about doing more on detection, and that involves work with Border Force and the coastguard—now with the help of the Royal Navy—but also, very importantly, with the French authorities. Despite the news he has shared with us, we have seen a significant fall in the overall number of crossings in the last seven days. We cannot take too much from that, but we hope that the law enforcement and detection work being done is contributing to a reduction in the overall number of crossings.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I want to be clear that I agree about the need for clear border security, but what was lacking in the Secretary of State's statement was actual figures. He talked about attempts, but how many people have actually arrived here and claimed asylum in the three-month period? If he does not have those figures to hand, will he put them in the Library of the House, along with the numbers of people who came by other routes in the same period?

Sajid Javid: I am happy to share some figures with the right hon. Gentleman. In 2018, 543 people made the attempt to cross the channel, and 42% of them—227 people—were intercepted, meaning that 316 arrived in the UK, most of them in the last three months of the year.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Most of my constituents would welcome a clampdown on illegal asylum seeking and would regard it as outrageous that somebody can come to this country and claim asylum having travelled through one, two, three or many more

[Mr Philip Hollobone]

safe countries on the way. I for one, speaking on behalf of my constituents, would welcome the Government getting tough on this. Let us enforce the Dublin conventions and conduct joint maritime patrols with the French so that, when these people are caught mid-channel, they can be returned to French ports.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I think most of our constituents across the country would agree with him. He mentioned joint patrols. We are working with the French—that work has been stepped up in recent weeks—to see what more we can do together, and the new co-ordination centre is certainly helping.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Over Christmas, my colleague Assembly Member Leanne Wood was contacted by Robin Jenkins, a Welsh RNLI lifeboatman and a crew member on Sea Watch 3, which rescued 32 people, including women, children and a baby, off the coast of Malta on 22 December. The 15-metre vessel has now been in limbo at sea for 17 days, denied safe harbour throughout Mediterranean Europe. The British Government have so far refused direct support, despite requests and even though these people cannot claim asylum in any country because they are not allowed to land. Will the Home Secretary outline what he is doing to encourage EU member states, and of course UK territories and resources in the Mediterranean, to show common humanity to these people?

Sajid Javid: First, may I take this opportunity to thank all the members of the RNLI for their work, especially in recent weeks, in response to the increase in the number of crossings? As we all know, they are incredibly courageous volunteers who put their lives at risk, and I want to put on the record our gratitude for all their work.

The hon. Lady has raised a specific case. From what she has said, I am not sure whether it is a Home Office or Foreign Office case, but we are happy to take a further look.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I welcome the Home Secretary's announcement, but will he explain what co-operation the UK is giving to our European partners, not just in France, but in Italy, Greece, Spain and Malta, which have borne a heavy responsibility for rescuing and providing safe haven to refugees? Can we hear more about that, please?

Sajid Javid: I am happy to share further details with my hon. Friend. We are helping our European friends in several ways with the huge increase in the number of refugees and asylum seekers since 2015. As part of Operation Poseidon in the Aegean, our Border Force vessels and crew have been called out on more than 700 missions and saved more than 15,000 lives. We are also working closely with our friends in Greece, having provided personnel, advice and funding, and we will continue to work with our friends in Europe to see what more we can do.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I want to say that the most terrible thing about the Home Secretary's English channel photoshoot is his wilful misreading of decades of asylum legislation—legislation we were proud

of in this country—but actually the most terrible thing is that nothing he has said today will stop the traffickers, which is what we all want. There are 1,500 people sleeping rough tonight around Dunkirk and Calais, 250 of them children and unaccompanied minors. Between them, they speak 28 different languages. They are not just from Iran, but fleeing persecution in Yemen, Ethiopia and other countries around the world. There have been 972 human rights abuses reported in Calais, 244 of them involving police violence. The Home Secretary says that he is there with the French police when they take disruptive measures, but they are pouring bleach into the tents of the refugees. If the Home Secretary cares about these people, as he says he does, he will spend less time on Twitter talking to the alt-right and more time in Calais, working out how we can deal with this humanitarian crisis now.

Sajid Javid: I am afraid I do not accept the picture of France that the hon. Lady has painted. France is a good partner and it is a perfectly safe country, as are many other European countries. The hon. Lady should think very carefully about the fact that she is indirectly encouraging people to get into small boats and cross the channel, which will put more lives at risk. She should think very carefully about what she is saying and what she is encouraging.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): My right hon. Friend rightly described how dangerous the crossing is. What more is he doing to work with the authorities, not just in France but in other appropriate nations, to tackle the root cause of the problem so that these vulnerable people do not have to attempt the crossing in the first place?

Sajid Javid: I can tell my hon. Friend that much cross-governmental action is being taken, especially by the Department for International Development, to tackle some of the root causes of the increase in migration that we have been seeing across Europe. Central to that is the help for Syria and, more broadly, the middle east and parts of north Africa. As I have said, the United Kingdom has provided nearly £3 billion of humanitarian funding, which makes it the largest single donor to the region. We are helping with infrastructure and education, and providing other types of humanitarian support to try to prevent people from undertaking these dangerous journeys and working with people smugglers in the first place.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker. A happy new year to you.

The Home Secretary has not been shy in trying to make their mark over the Christmas recess. Before the announcement of this migration emergency, they made headlines by commenting on the Government's intention of protecting the rights of persecuted Christians abroad. Many of those who are now taking to the boats and are in peril on the sea appear to be Christians from Iran. Does the Home Secretary see no contradiction between a commitment to protect those persecuted Christians abroad and telling them that there is no room at the inn in the UK?

Sajid Javid: I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman has been listening to what I have said about the Government's policy. We will continue to assess each

application, but it is a widely accepted principle that those who are fleeing persecution should claim asylum in the first safe country in which they arrive.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Such is the desperation and commitment of some refugees that they are even crossing the North sea and landing in small boats in Lincolnshire, in both East Lindsey and Boston. I pay tribute to the work of Lincolnshire police and the Border Force in dealing with that difficult and largely unpopulated coast, but does the Home Secretary agree that we should look not only at the real hotspots that have arisen very recently, but at the east coast of England?

Sajid Javid: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. As he will know—no doubt this is one of the reasons why he has rightly raised the issue—there was a landing on the coast of Lincolnshire in, I believe, December. That is being looked into closely, but he is right to say that we should look more widely than just the south-east coast.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): This is a time of unprecedented global refugee crisis, and the vast majority of refugees end up in countries adjacent to their country of origin. Only a small minority come to this country. I agree with the Home Secretary that we want to protect and save lives, but will he please tell us how many border officers he has sent to Calais to process people who have a claim to family reunion, what he is doing to increase the number taken under the schemes for family resettlement—a safe and legal route that allows people to leave an overburdened country next to a country at war and come to this country—and what else he is doing to enable us to take our fair share of the world's responsibility for this global refugee crisis?

Sajid Javid: As I am sure the hon. Lady will know, we do a great deal. This Government, and successive previous Governments, have done much to help refugees across the world. We have the vulnerable children's and the vulnerable persons resettlement schemes, and we will work actively with our European partners to reunite families, particularly children. One of my first acts as Home Secretary last summer was to ensure that a new right to stay would be established for unaccompanied refugee children brought into the UK from Calais, to make it easier for them to do that. We will continue to meet our obligations on family reunion under the Dublin regulation.

Just a couple of months ago, alongside Canada and unlike many other countries, we were the first to help the former White Helmets who were facing certain death under Assad in Syria. We took more than 25 of them, along with their families—nearly 100 people—and gave them our protection, because that is in accordance with our values and the kind of country that we are.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I welcome the Home Secretary's decisive action. Under the European Union's Dublin regulation, asylum seekers should claim asylum in the first safe country that they reach. I think Members on both sides of the House agree that we want to deter people from making this dangerous journey. Is not the best way of doing that to ensure that people who are intercepted in the English channel return to the

French shoreline where they embarked? That would remove the incentive to attempt the crossing in the first place.

Sajid Javid: We are working closely with our French friends in disrupting more of the boats to prevent them from setting out in the first place. When they are detected in French waters, they are returned to France. We are also working with France—using our own detection systems, which reach out into French waters—to establish whether we can return more. However, the safest option is not just to return boats but to concentrate on the criminal gangs that are feeding on these vulnerable people, and to ensure that no one sets out on this journey in the first place.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Home Secretary aware of the United Kingdom's obligations under the 1951 United Nations convention relating to the status of refugees? Is he aware that there is no legal obligation for asylum seekers to seek asylum in the first safe country in which they arrive? That does not exist in the body of international law.

Would it not be a much better use of the Government's resources to be engaged on the French mainland, looking after some of the terribly abandoned unaccompanied minors? We promised to take in 3,000. What resources are being devoted to disrupting the incentive to cross the channel in an unsafe way by processing those people on the French coast and understanding their needs?

Sajid Javid: We remain absolutely committed to the 1951 convention, and that will not change. The principle that I have set out today, which is widely established and accepted, is the “first safe country” principle. It is in the interests of those asylum seekers not to continue what might be a dangerous journey, and to seek asylum in the first safe country.

The hon. Gentleman asked me whether I was aware of the convention. I wonder whether he is aware of the UK's own domestic laws and regulations of 2004, which represent the will of the House and which clearly underline the importance of claiming asylum in the first safe country.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): My constituents would certainly want me to say that anyone coming to the UK illegally from a safe country such as France should be returned. Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the most compelling purposes of the “first safe country” principle is precisely to prevent people from being incentivised to undertake these dangerous crossings?

Sajid Javid: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. That goes to the heart of the issue, which is about protecting lives and protecting vulnerable people. If such people feel, for whatever reason—perhaps because they have been sold a false prospectus by people smugglers—that they cannot claim asylum in a safe country that they are in, they are ultimately the ones who will be hurt, and we must all do what we can to prevent that.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Does the Home Secretary not understand that it is precisely because these people are so desperate that they will take these risks and undertake these dangers to travel in

[Alison Thewliss]

boats to come to the UK? They are doing that precisely because the safe routes they ought to have failed. Safety is relative, and I certainly feel safest when with my family; how many of the people picked up in these boats have family in the UK, and how quickly will the Home Secretary be able to process their applications?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady suggests that these people are not able to seek asylum in other safe countries. France, for example, is a perfectly safe country, and if these people are fleeing persecution it is to their advantage that they claim asylum in the first safe country they are in and are not encouraged to take dangerous journeys.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): My right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) made an important point that the Home Secretary has so far ignored. When will he admit the telling impact of the Government's austerity policies on this serious problem, and when will he report to the House on what further resources are being allocated to help?

Sajid Javid: If the hon. Gentleman is suggesting that these boat crossings are taking place because of UK Government spending, that is plainly ridiculous.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): How successful did the Home Secretary find exploiting the acts of desperate and vulnerable refugees, misrepresenting conventions and stirring up hatred in pursuit of his own personal ambition to become the next leader of the Conservative party?

Sajid Javid: Only serious questions deserve an answer.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I have been to Calais and spoken to unaccompanied child refugees, and I have spoken to child refugees in Plymouth. They all want a better life, but this major

incident has left many of them in fear. When refugee stories like this appear in the media, there is a real fear that will rise, and indeed hate does rise and violence towards refugees in our country rises. So will the Home Secretary make it absolutely clear that nobody, especially those on the right—the far right in particular—should use this incident to stir up hate and division in our communities and to seek to give even more fear and a tougher time to people who have suffered so much already?

Sajid Javid: Of course there is no room for hate in this country, whether of refugees or migrants or for any other reason. That is why it is even more important that we have the protection we offer. That is a very precious thing, and we must make the system as fair as possible and do all we can to discourage people, in this case, from taking these dangerous journeys and working with people smugglers. That is the whole intention of the policy the Government have set in place, and I hope the hon. Gentleman can support it.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Lang may yer lum reek, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The Home Secretary pointed out earlier that there are diverse reasons why people might be attempting this treacherous journey across the channel, yet he refuses to acknowledge that some of them might be trying to be reunited with their families. What progress has been made in supporting the family reunion Bill brought forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil)?

Sajid Javid: The Dublin regulation takes account of family reunion and the need for it to be considered in successful and pending asylum applications in European member states. We take part in that actively because we can see that need. That is another reason why someone in France who wants to come to the UK for family connections need not take that treacherous journey; there is a system within the Dublin regulation for family reunion.

Drones: Consultation Response

8.4 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):

I should like to make a statement about the action the Government are taking on our future policy on drones.

The disruption caused by drones to flights at Gatwick airport last month was deliberate, irresponsible and calculated, as well as illegal. It meant days of chaos and uncertainty for over 100,000 passengers at Christmas, one of the busiest times of the year. Carefully planned holidays were disrupted, long-expected reunions between friends and relatives missed. Families were forced to spend hours at an airport, not knowing if or when they would reach their destinations—completely unacceptable and utterly illegal. I pay tribute to all at Gatwick and other airports who worked very hard to make sure people did get away, albeit belatedly, for their Christmas breaks, and I thank all those in the defence world and the police who worked hard to get the airport back together again, and of course Sussex police are now leading the investigation into this criminal activity.

I am clear that, when caught, those responsible should face the maximum possible custodial sentence for this hugely irresponsible criminal act, and I want to assure the House that my Department is working extremely closely with airports, the Home Office, the Ministry of Defence, the Civil Aviation Authority and the police to make sure our national airports are fully prepared to manage any repeat of what was an unprecedented incident. I spoke personally to the heads of the major UK airports before Christmas, and later this week the aviation Minister, Baroness Sugg, will meet them again for an update on progress. In the meantime the Ministry of Defence remains on standby to deal with any further problems at Gatwick or any other airport if required.

This incident was a stark example of why we must continue to ensure drones are used safely and securely in the UK. Today I am publishing the outcome of our recent consultation, “Taking flight: the future of drones in the UK.” We received over 5,000 responses to that consultation reflecting a broad range of views. Those responses underlined the importance of balancing the UK’s world-leading position in aviation safety and security with supporting the development of this emerging industry. The Government are taking action to ensure that passengers can have confidence that their journeys will not be disrupted in future, aircraft can safely use our key transport hubs, and criminals misusing drones can be brought to justice.

The UK is where technology companies want to build their businesses, invest in innovation and use science and engineering to bring immense benefits to this country. Drones are at the forefront of these technological advances and are already being used in the UK to great effect. Our emergency search and rescue services use drones on a regular basis. Drones can also reduce risks for workers in hazardous sectors such as the oil and gas industries, and this technology is also driving more efficient ways of working in many other sectors, from delivering medicines to assisting with building work.

However, the Gatwick incident has reinforced the fact that it is crucial that our regulatory and enforcement regime keeps pace with rapid technological change.

We have already taken some big steps towards building a regulatory system for this new sector. It is already an offence to endanger aircraft. Drones must not be flown near people or property and have to be kept within visual line of sight. Commercial users are able to operate drones outside of these rules, but only when granted CAA permission after meeting strict safety conditions.

Education is also vital to ensure everyone understands the rules about drone use. That is why the CAA has been running its long-standing Dronesafe campaign and Dronecode guide—work that is helping to highlight these rules to the public. And on 30 July last year we introduced new measures that barred drones from flying above 400 feet and within 1 km of protected airport boundaries. In addition, we have introduced and passed legislation that will mean that from November all drone operators must register and all drone pilots complete a competency test.

However, we now intend to go further. Today’s measures set out the next steps needed to ensure that drones are used in a safe and secure way and that the industry is accountable. At the same time these steps will ensure that we harness the benefits that drones can bring to the UK economy.

A common theme in those 5,000 consultation responses was the importance of the enforcement of safety regulations. The Government share that view. The majority of drone users fly safely and responsibly, but we must ensure that the police have the right powers to deal with illegal use. We will therefore shortly be introducing new police powers. These include allowing the police to request evidence from drone users where there is reasonable suspicion of an offence being committed, as well as enabling the police to issue fixed penalty notices for minor drone offences. Those new powers will help to ensure effective enforcement of the rules. They will provide an immediate deterrent to those who might misuse drones or attempt to break the law.

My Department has been working closely with the Home Office on the legislative clauses that will deliver these changes. It is of course crucial that our national infrastructure, including airports and other sites such as prisons and energy plants, are also adequately protected to prevent incidents such as that at Gatwick. We must also ensure that the most up-to-date technology is available to detect, track and potentially disrupt drones that are being used illegally, so we have also consulted on the further use of counter-drone technology. Those consultation responses will now be used by the Home Office to develop an appropriate means of using that technology in the UK.

Of course, aviation and passenger safety is at the heart of everything we do. While airlines and airports welcomed our recent airport drone restriction measures, they also asked for the current airport rules to be amended in order to better protect the landing and take-off paths of aircraft. We have listened to those concerns, and we have been working with the CAA and NATS to develop the optimum exclusion zone that will help to meet those requirements. It is important to stress that any restriction zone would not have prevented a deliberate incident such as that at Gatwick. However, it is right that proportionate measures should be in place at airports to protect aircraft and to avoid potential conflict with legitimate drone activity. We will therefore introduce additional protections around airports, with

[Chris Grayling]

a particular focus on protected exclusion zones from runway ends, alongside increasing the current aerodrome traffic zone restrictions around airports. Drone pilots wishing to fly within these zones must do so only with permission from the aerodrome air traffic control. We will amend the Air Navigation Order 2016 to implement these changes.

I want to address some of the rather ill-judged comments that have been made by Labour Members. Let me remind them of three things. First, the event at Gatwick airport was a deliberate criminal act that can carry a sentence of life imprisonment. We can pass new laws until the cows come home, but that does not stop people breaking them, and the law is as tough as is necessary to punish the perpetrators of an attack such as this. Secondly, this was an entirely new type of challenge. It is noteworthy that, since the events at Gatwick, we have been approached by airports around the world for our advice on how to handle something similar. Thirdly, the issue was solved only by the smart and innovative use of new technology. For security reasons, I am not going to give the House details of how this was achieved, but I want to extend my thanks to the Ministry of Defence for moving rapidly to put a new kind of response into the field.

There is no question but that lessons have to be learned from what happened at Gatwick. Passengers have to be able to travel without fear of their trips being disrupted by malicious drone use. Airports must be prepared to deal with incidents of this type, and the police need the proper powers to deal with drone offences. We must also be ready to harness the opportunities and benefits that the safe use of drones can bring. The measures I have announced today in response to the consultation will take us forward on that front, and I commend this statement to the House.

8.12 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I should like to thank the Secretary of State for giving me advance sight of half of his statement—that is a new trick, just giving me some of the pages—but I have to say to him: is that it? Announcing the end of a consultation exercise does not constitute action; nor does it go any way towards restoring confidence in his capabilities; nor does it go any way towards addressing the justified anger of the hundreds of thousands of passengers who had their travel plans thrown into chaos ahead of the festive season after the malicious and sustained drone attack at Gatwick airport. In fact, his statement serves only to highlight the damage that his dithering and delaying have caused.

It is not only Labour Members who are critical. Colonel Richard Kemp, a former intelligence chairman of the Cabinet's emergency Cobra committee, said:

“It is amazing that this kit”—

the kit to defeat drones—

“was not in place and that we have had to wait two days for it to be installed. This drone incident is hardly a surprise. They've been known about for years.”

And Lord Dannatt, the former head of the Army, said:

“By any analysis, the fiasco at Gatwick over the last few days has been a national embarrassment of near-biblical proportions. With most of Europe already sniggering at the United Kingdom over our Government's inept handling of Brexit, we did not need to add more lines to the pantomime script.”

Of course, right hon. and hon. Members will vividly recall the Secretary of State describing the ennoblement of General Dannatt as a “political gimmick” by the Labour party, only for him then to realise that the former Army chief was in fact ennobled by—you've guessed it—the Conservative party.

It is good to learn that the Government might finally listen to the advice of industry on extending drone exclusion zones around airports to some 5 km, but it is unfortunate that this advice was not considered sooner. It is also unfortunate that the drone incursion at Gatwick airport in July 2017 did not serve as a warning to the Secretary of State. He clearly learned no lessons from that incident, and he was totally negligent in failing to bring forward measures to better protect national infrastructure. The Government's approach to drones has been chaotic, and the industry clearly has no faith in his ability to deal with serious incidents. It was no surprise to learn from the media that, during the Gatwick incident, the Secretary of State was stripped of his command by the security services due to his inaction. An effective Transport Secretary would have taken decisive action once the threat was known and understood. Earlier and clearer direction from him would have given airports the confidence to invest in anti-drone technology. His prevarication has delayed investment in detection and prevention measures. Why did he not ensure that proposals were brought forward to universally license such technology for use at airports?

Labour has repeatedly warned Department for Transport Ministers over the last several years that they needed to take action on drones, yet nowhere near enough has been done. The drone consultation closed five months ago, yet the Gatwick fiasco still happened, and it is abundantly clear that the Department is totally distracted by having to deal with this Government's chaotic Brexit, including extending the duties of departmental staff to handing out blankets, sandwiches and hot drinks to lorry drivers who find themselves trapped on the M20. Following the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill, which fell before the last election, the Government have found the time to legislate on space flight and air travel organisers licences, as well as vehicle technology and lasers during this Parliament, but their failure to bring forward detailed plans on drones has had disastrous consequences.

It is frankly astonishing that there were no plans in place across the Government Departments to deal with a drone attack. Why was there no urgent, clear and effective response? The drones Bill will seemingly include powers for the police to enforce any new laws or regulations relating to drones. Greater police powers are welcome, but they are meaningless without more resources. What arrangements does the Secretary of State intend to set out to enable airports to act urgently in the event of a hostile drone incursion? What steps will he take to give confidence to airports that their actions will be permitted and lawful? Drone licensing and registration are not due to come in until November 2019. Should not the Secretary of State accelerate the introduction of such provisions in all circumstances? Developing drone technology presents huge public policy challenges that demand a sweeping, cross-departmental response across Government. My fear is that the rhetoric we have heard from the Government today is many miles away from reality, and is it not stark-staringly obvious that this Secretary of State is not up to the job?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the rhetoric we have heard today is many miles away from reality: his rhetoric! Let me restate the point that this was a crime. It was an illegal act, and it had nothing to do with the laws that are in place. Somebody deliberately decided to disrupt Gatwick airport. It was a crime that will carry a sentence of up to life imprisonment when that person is caught, and I put it to the House that that maximum penalty is, in my view, appropriate to the crime. This is not a question of the laws not being in place; it is a question of catching the person who did this, and Sussex police, amply supported by the Met and our security agencies, are working very hard to achieve that.

The hon. Gentleman's second point was about technology. Let me gently explain that the technology that was deployed with the help of the Ministry of Defence, for which we are grateful, to tackle the problem is new and unavailable elsewhere in the world. This country is at the forefront of developing systems that can combat this kind of issue, and a huge amount of work is ongoing to find out what is on the market and to assemble new kinds of systems, but there simply is not an off-the-shelf solution available to airports that they could buy tomorrow to provide protection against such attacks. A huge amount of work will now take place to ensure that that can happen, but he is simply ill-informed if he believes that there is some magic solution that was not put in place.

The third point is that other airports are now placing a huge amount of focus on ensuring that such things cannot happen again. Above all, however, we have put in place a mechanism to redeploy the MOD capability should such an event occur again. I hope that it does not, but we know how to deal with it if it happens again, and other airports around the world are coming to us asking, "What do we need to do?" That is the reality of what is happening, not the nonsense we have just heard from the Opposition spokesman.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): As the Member of Parliament for Gatwick airport, I extend my thanks to everybody who worked so hard on 19 and 20 December to mitigate the deliberate criminal act that the Secretary of State correctly identified. One of my concerns is that the Ministry of Defence was not brought in until some 18 hours after the incident started on the Wednesday evening, so will the Secretary of State assure me that the deployment of the military technology will be more rapid if further such attacks are forthcoming?

Chris Grayling: I am grateful for the opportunity to reiterate my thanks to all those in and around Gatwick who worked so hard at an extremely difficult time for the airport. As for the deployment of the technology, the first thing to say is that it was not immediately apparent that we were dealing with anything more than irresponsible drone usage close to an airport, which has happened many times over the past few years. By the time it became clear that this was a malicious attack, the Government machine and the Ministry of Defence moved as quickly as possible to deploy a new kind of response to deal with the issue. Clear protocols are now in place that would enable the system to be deployed quickly, but I hope that that will not have to happen again.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for sharing the parts of the statement he felt like sharing in advance. He was previously warned about the need for tougher legislation by my predecessor as Scottish National party spokesman, my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), the shadow Minister, by myself and by the British Airline Pilots' Association, so why did he ignore those warnings and delay legislating in this area? What new evidence has actually emerged from the consultation confirming the need for additional enforcement powers, other than the blatant reaction to the Gatwick incident? How many of the 5,000 responses to the consultation related to enforcement?

How much was spent on overtime over the holiday period to get the consultation response document ready for the first day back so that the Secretary of State could pretend that he is suddenly in charge? How did the Government come up with a 400 feet-high and 1 km-wide exclusion zone? Using two different methods of measurement is a complete recipe for confusion. What consultation was undertaken at that time? What was BALPA's view? What was the view of the Civil Aviation Authority and NATS when the previous exclusion zone was proposed? How has the Secretary of State now suddenly arrived at a 5 km exclusion zone? Why did the Government not meet the stated target of a draft Bill by summer 2018? What updates on that lack of progress did they ever give to Parliament?

Given that legislation regarding the use and deployment of drones is reserved to Westminster, what support will the UK Government offer to Scottish airports to allow them to comply with any changes? Will that include financial support? The Secretary of State mentioned that the Home Office is legislating for and developing the appropriate means of using the new technology, so which is the lead Department? Will all the legislation come in one new Bill? How do we know that the planned timetable will be met?

Under this Secretary of State's watch, we have had the east coast mainline bail-out, the Northern rail fiasco, the Thameslink rail fiasco, delays to High Speed 2, contracts awarded to Carillion, and a ferry contract awarded to a company with no ferries. Today, his Department could only muster 89 lorries out of a planned 150 for a pretend no-deal scenario planning exercise. When we factor in the drone legislation fiasco, when is he going to move aside?

Chris Grayling: Well, it is difficult to tell whether we got more nonsense today from the SNP or from Labour. The hon. Gentleman appears not to have noticed that we legislated last summer to tighten up the rules around drones. He asked whether we had been working overtime over the Christmas period. I have to say that the consultation response was finished before Christmas, work on draft clauses for the drones Bill is substantially completed, and we have now brought forward this, which was well prepared over many months, so that question was nonsense as well.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the approach to the exclusion zone around airports. We judge that it is necessary to provide as much protection as possible to the flight path into and out of an airport, which is why we end up with something that looks more like the Transport for London sign, with bits sticking out either

[Chris Grayling]

side to provide extra protection for the approach and landing areas, than a pure circle around the airport. As for Scottish airports, they have been a part of the discussions that I had over the Christmas period and will be a part of the discussions that Baroness Sugg will be having later this week.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I fully accept what the Secretary of State says about the adequacy of the laws and the deterrent effect of potential sentences. However, it is possible for anybody to go on the internet and buy a simple but substantial device that they could use not to try and close an airport, as in this case, but to fly into the engine intakes of a plane that was landing or taking off. What can he tell us about not only registration but, more importantly, the capability to prevent such an attack maliciously being mounted by someone who might well belong to a jihadist organisation and who will not be deterred by death, let alone by long prison sentences?

Chris Grayling: That is a serious point that we and the security services have been working on. We have been in conversation with airports about it for some considerable time, and two things are happening on that front. First, this country has moved to introduce a drone registration scheme, which will start later this year. Secondly, and more significantly, the European Aviation Safety Agency is moving towards a requirement, which I expect to be introduced within two to three years, for all drones to contain technology that allows them to be tracked and potentially to be stopped in critical areas.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement, but I wonder whether it closes the gate after the horse has bolted. BALPA has been warning about the rise in irresponsible use of drones close to aircraft and airports for years. An incident of this sort was surely foreseeable, and I am unsure whether the Secretary of State was saying that he was satisfied that the airport had proper and adequate plans to respond to such a risk. However, changes to regulations will mean nothing if we are unable to stop, catch and prosecute offenders. If such a crime is perpetrated in the future, what assurances can he give the House that it could not lead to further such disruption to services?

Chris Grayling: On the hon. Lady's point about BALPA, we legislated last summer to make certain activities around airports illegal. That included the height at which a drone can be flown and the restricted area around an airport within which a drone could not be flown. She asked what would happen in a future incident. Right now, we have protocols in place to allow us to deploy the same equipment as was used at Gatwick if there were to be a repeat attack. The airline industry and the airport industry are working intensively to try to assemble mechanisms that could prevent such an attack from happening again. The reality is that there is not, and has not been, an off-the-shelf solution. That is now being worked on—the technology is being assembled and systems are being integrated—but there is no simple, off-the-peg solution available right now, beyond the capability that we have in place to protect UK airports.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): In my constituency, which is under the Heathrow flight path, there are significant concerns about aircraft safety. I have written to the Secretary of State in the past, prior to the incident, about my concerns over drones. Does he recognise that far less attention is paid to mitigating risk outside airports than inside them? Does he agree that it is sheer folly to get on with expanding Heathrow and increasing the threat to communities such as mine, which will have more flights going over them, while this clear risk continues? Should we not seriously consider whether that is a sensible approach to take over such a densely populated area, when, as he says, the technology to provide greater safety simply does not exist at scale?

Chris Grayling: I know how strongly my right hon. Friend feels about the matter. Of course, the same issue would arise whether expansion took place at Gatwick, Stansted or Heathrow. The reality is that Heathrow has been ahead of most other airports in providing protection against drones, but even Heathrow has not had the perfect solution. That is why the systems that we now have in place could be deployed at Heathrow at short notice to provide protection for the airport.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I think it was Peel who said that the absence of crime, not the apprehension of criminals, was the test of a good force. What the hundreds of thousands of travellers wanted was for the disruption to be stopped. May I ask some very specific questions? Were there contingency plans already agreed with the MOD and the Home Office to protect our airports from drone incidents and others? If not, why not? If there were such plans, why did they not work? Were they not activated in time because of dithering, and was that the fault of the Secretary of State's Department, the Ministry of Defence or the Home Office—or, indeed, the Cabinet Office and the Cabinet Secretary in No. 10? Which is it?

Chris Grayling: As we are hearing from around the world, protections against such a deliberate and disruptive attack are few and far between. The reality is that the Government and different Departments, including the MOD, moved very quickly to assemble a response of a different kind from any previous one, and they did so in a way that is now being looked at very carefully around the world.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that what we saw at Gatwick was criminal activity, and I welcome the actions that he has taken. My constituents are surrounded by airports at Southampton, Farnborough, Lasham and the Odiham RAF base. What discussions has my right hon. Friend had with these smaller airports, which have real challenges when it comes to taking measures to protect themselves from such malicious attacks? As my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) has said, such attacks threaten not only safety in the air, but residents on the ground.

Chris Grayling: That is why the measures we introduced last summer—to make it illegal to fly a drone close to an airport and to put restrictions on the height above which one can fly a drone—were applicable to the situation in most of the drone incidents that have occurred, namely irresponsible usage close to an airport. There were 97 such incidents last year. We will be sharing the

experience of Gatwick, and indeed the technological developments, with airports such as Southampton. Such airports may want to take steps similar to those taken by bigger airports to protect themselves. As I say, this is an emerging technology.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): What happened at Gatwick was, as the House knows, pretty damned scary. Wherever we travel in the world, passengers have an equal right to confidence and safe travel. Let us hope that we in the UK get the legislative framework right and work out how to take down such drones if they are hostile. I suggest that it would be in the best interests of travellers all over the world for us to share our knowledge, and perhaps to work towards some sort of international treaty governing the use, administration and stamping out of drones when they are in bad use.

Chris Grayling: I absolutely agree with that. We are already seeking to share our knowledge and experience, and I expect it is something that the International Civil Aviation Organisation will also want to pick up on. *[Interruption.]* Once again, the shadow Minister is rabbiting on from a sedentary position about EASA. It is Government policy to remain part of EASA, if we can, because in areas such as international aviation safety, we believe it is sensible to work internationally across borders.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The oldest commercial airport in the country is in Shoreham, in my constituency. This problem affects not just the large commercial airports, but the smaller ones too. Sussex police were greatly stretched when the incident happened, and I know that they greatly welcomed the offers of help from around the country, but there was concern about confusion over the lead Department. Was it Transport or the Home Office? Of course, later the Ministry of Defence was brought in as well. What assurances can the Secretary of State give that in future there will be a much better immediate, co-ordinated response?

The Secretary of State has spoken about the need to legislate, and about registering drones. The trouble is that most of them come in from China and, increasingly, a lot of them can be DIY built. The people who do that do not register, and they have no regard for regulations. Those drones will certainly not carry devices that make it possible to disable them, to ensure that they are not harmful near airports. What is he doing about that?

Chris Grayling: That is precisely why the technology becomes so important: for all the requirements that one puts into law, including around the technology that goes into drones, ultimately if people choose to act in a deliberate, disruptive and illegal way, the technology needs to be there to stop them. In respect of responsibility, the gold command was Sussex police, supported by the Metropolitan police and the security services. In Government, my Department took the lead.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The document to which the Secretary of State referred is called "Taking Flight", but is it not true that his Government have taken flight over this issue? This is not a new issue that has suddenly arrived: BALPA has been arguing for greater protection for years.

Indeed, almost three years ago I raised this issue with the then Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill), when I said, "we have the current issue of drones near aircraft, which needs to be addressed in an air strategy. I hope that the Minister will do something about that before there is a critical problem."—*[Official Report, 20 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 357WH.]*

The Minister of State said in that debate that he was "wise enough not to stray into"—*[Official Report, 20 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 361WH.]* those issues. Is it still wise not to have not done anything for more than three years?

Chris Grayling: It might be if we had not, but of course we legislated last year.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Just prior to Christmas, I held a rural crime summit in Lavenham in my constituency. A key issue raised was hare coursing. I was pleased to learn that Suffolk constabulary had purchased a drone, which will be used to gather intelligence and will greatly enable us to fight back against this real menace in rural areas. Does the Secretary of State agree that although the incident with drones that we are discussing was criminal, the technology offers great potential for fighting back against criminality, and in particular those crimes with which we have historically struggled to deal?

Chris Grayling: I quite agree, which is why the strategy is about not only meeting the challenge of the careless, illegal or inappropriate use of drones but setting a direction to ensure that we allow the kind of usage that my hon. Friend talks about. As well as the inspection of infrastructure and policing, there are a whole variety of other ways in which drones can be a positive for our society.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The Secretary of State is right that what we are discussing was a crime, but it was an entirely foreseeable crime. I, too, asked the previous aviation Minister about this issue two and a half years ago. Is the truth not that these matters really should be the responsibility of the Ministry of Defence, because the consequences of bringing down a civil airliner of this kind are so huge? It may or may not have been the Secretary of State's fault, but it was beyond the competence of his Department. It is far too serious to be dealt with by the Department for Transport.

Chris Grayling: I do not think it is a question of one Department or another: we have to work as a team. The truth is that the Ministry of Defence has and did have a really important role. The Home Office has a really important role in enforcement and licensing. The Department for Transport manages the use of airspace. It is a policy area in which the Government need to work as a team. My view is that the response, which brought three Departments together, was the right approach.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): In my 30 years in the fire service, I attended two major aircraft incidents, one of which resulted in multiple fatalities. The whole House and the nation can be grateful for the actions taken at Gatwick airport, where there was no loss of life and no loss of aircraft. Despite the chaos for the travelling public, in the circumstances it has to be

[Bill Grant]

measured as good that there was no loss of aircraft and no loss of life. In the light of the events at Gatwick, what discussions has my right hon. Friend had with airport operators throughout the United Kingdom about mitigating or preventing the malicious incursion of drones into operational airspace? We must bear in mind that those intent on bringing chaos and death to the air-travelling public will not respect exclusion zones, so on their own exclusion zones will not stop the drones.

Chris Grayling: That is the central point: we could have done everything imaginable in legal terms, but if somebody is determined to cause an attack of this kind, they will do so. It is now very much about understanding what technology can make a difference. In technological terms, this was very much a learning exercise, because there simply was not an off-the-shelf system available to deal with it. It took a lot of effort to work out what competencies were there and to assemble them in a way that could work. It was the first time that had been done anywhere in the world. We now understand more clearly how to deal with an attack such as this one, and others will have learned from it so that the kind of terrible events that my hon. Friend mentioned can never happen in such a situation.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I declare an interest: my boyfriend was one of those people who were supposed to land at Gatwick. Although he landed a few days later, he did so safely, and that was appreciated.

It is right that technological solutions must keep pace with the threats that we face. What consideration has the Secretary of State given to live-update geofencing to make sure that if people are accidentally flying a drone near a restricted airspace—around not only airports but defence installations—that drone will not be able to access that airspace and that it can be live-updated by the authorities to make sure that drones do not enter any restricted airspace?

Chris Grayling: This is one of the areas that is currently being worked on at a European level. We are working with EASA on this and we expect regulations to come forward during the implementation period that we would want to be part of in any case, because these technologies are made not just in one country. The point about geofencing is an important one, as is the ability to include technology that enables us to track a drone and to know which drone it is. My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) made the very real point that a number of these machines are assembled by amateurs on a fair scale, which is why we need the technology to take them down as well.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Who is responsible for inspecting airfields and airports for their security in matters such as this? Can we have a report in a few weeks' time—I appreciate that not everything can be disclosed—that says that all major airports in the country have been inspected and have put in place the right measures to prevent or deter an incident such as that at Gatwick?

Chris Grayling: Most immediately, the security at the airport is the responsibility of the owners themselves, supported by my Department and by the national security agencies. Those discussions are already happening—they were happening within a matter of hours of the incident at Gatwick. I can assure the House that every airport is now taking active steps to look at what measures it can put in place, but the reality is that these are experimental systems and are not universally available yet. It will take a bit of time for other airports to get them in place. In the meantime, the Ministry of Defence capability is there if necessary.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I urge the Secretary of State to look at the reports by the BBC's Quentin Somerville who shows how drone attacks, using commercially available drones, have been using chemicals and explosive devices on the battlefields of Mosul. In many respects, we were fortunate—darn lucky—in that we had a wake-up call at Gatwick. May I suggest that the Secretary of State talks not only to the MOD but to NATO, where there is huge expertise about the use on the battlefield of drones, which can be bought commercially and used here by terrorists who want to attack us?

Chris Grayling: I can assure the hon. Lady that we are very well aware of that and, indeed, the security services have been providing advice to airports about this for some considerable time. They have provided advice specifically based on some of those experiences in the middle east, and this is something on which we work with them continuously.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): There was some speculation in the press at the time that there may not have been any drones involved in this incident. Will the Secretary of State confirm how many malicious drones brought all this destruction to Gatwick, and can he tell us, in the light of this experience, what he is doing to make sure that his Department supports airports around the country in getting their contingency plans updated?

Chris Grayling: The report of there being no drone was a misspeak by a police officer. I have spoken to the chief constable since and to the airport chief executive—we talk regularly—and there is no question but that there was a drone or a small number of drones. Nobody is quite sure whether it was one, two or three, but it certainly was not a large number—probably only one. It made a return on a regular basis on many occasions just as the airport was about to reopen. On contingency work, I spoke to the operators of all the major airports on the day after this happened. Within a short period of time, after we understood what the issue was, police around the country were carrying out additional patrols around those airports. We have had regular discussions since. Baroness Sugg is holding a further meeting with them in a few days' time to get an update on their plans. All of them have been briefed that we can provide the kind of support that the MOD provided at Gatwick if something happens there.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I was one of those tens of thousands of people whose journey was disrupted that day. After the initial relief that it had been rearranged in such an orderly way for me to get home to Edinburgh, which also had to cope with the knock-on effect, I was aghast that one of our major

airports could be so vulnerable and that it took so long to get it back in play. That is an issue which, with respect, the Secretary of State will have to pay attention to and address. He said a few minutes ago that these incidents are few and far between, but, with respect, it would take only one to create a catastrophe and there has been an undermining of public confidence in the safety at our airports. Will he bring forward some report, some work to reassure the public, and, without in any way undermining security, detail how our passengers will be protected in our airports?

Chris Grayling: I am happy to do that to some degree, but the reality is that the response by the Ministry of Defence included some highly sensitive, confidential, secure equipment. That equipment is there to be deployed at other airports at short notice, should the need arise. I give the hon. Lady an undertaking that we are talking to all those airports about what additional measures they can put in place and are already putting in place to ensure that this cannot happen again. Until now, all the experience of drone incidents around the world has been of irresponsible drone usage. This is the first time that a drone has been deliberately used in a very clever way over a sustained period of time to disrupt an airport. Airports now need to ensure that they are ready to make sure that that cannot happen again.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I hope that it comes as no surprise to the Secretary of State that I am now the fourth member of the Defence Committee to rise. It comes as no surprise to the four members of that Select Committee present in this Chamber that this situation has arisen and that nothing was planned to deal with the consequences other than calling the Ministry of Defence, whose Ministers, I am disappointed to say, are not also on the Front Bench.

As a constituency MP, like many others here with airports within distance of their constituencies, I wonder whether the Secretary of State can give some assurances to my constituents, specifically in Whitecrock in the burgh of Clydebank. Does the Secretary of State recognise that disruptive technology is not new?

With all due respect to my hon. Friends and colleagues who were disrupted during the travel episode, this is also not just about the traveller. It is about the person living on the ground, if a tragic event should bring down a liner on top of a community represented by any of us. Fundamentally, this is not just about airports or aeroplanes. What should happen, as the Chair of the Select Committee himself asked, if someone should use a drone to attack a piece of infrastructure, whether it be an oil refinery or rig, or a large drone hits the front of a high-speed intercity train? The Secretary of State must recognise the consequences of this situation and the impact on people's lives if nothing is done about it.

Chris Grayling: Of course. Many people around the world are trying to find the perfect anti-drone solutions but, as Gatwick airport discovered, the reality is that those technologies are still embryonic. We now have in place an assembly of systems that will enable us to deal with an incident such as this again, but there is a lot of work to be done and a lot of work is being done.

Leaving the EU: Tobacco Products and Public Health

8.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): Happy new year, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I beg to move,

That the draft Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 1 November, be approved.

Smoking causes 78,000 deaths a year in England, accounting for 16% of all deaths annually. The United Kingdom is a global leader in tobacco control and the Government are committed to ensuring that we remain so after we leave the European Union. As hon. Members know, the Government have negotiated a deal with the EU and are in the process of taking it through Parliament. As has been much discussed, the deal is designed to secure a smooth and orderly exit from the EU. At the same time, it is of course the job of a responsible Government—I am pleased to say that the shadow Leader of the House is listening intently—to prepare for all possible scenarios. We are committed to ensuring that our legislation and policy function effectively in the event of no deal. It is for this scenario that these regulations have been laid. If the UK reaches a deal with the EU, the Department will revoke or amend this instrument to reflect that agreement.

This instrument will ensure that the UK domestic legislation that implements the two main pieces of EU tobacco legislation—the tobacco products directive and the tobacco advertising directive—continue to function effectively after exit day at the end of March. The instrument also amends and revokes some EU tertiary legislation that will no longer apply to the UK after our withdrawal. The amendments and revocations are being made under the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 and are necessary in order to correct deficiencies in the UK and EU legislation in the event of no deal. The primary purpose of this instrument is to ensure that tobacco control legislation continues to function effectively after exit day. These proposed amendments are critical to ensure that there is minimal disruption to tobacco control if we do not reach a deal with the European Union.

This instrument introduces three main changes. First, in the event of no deal, the UK will need to develop its own domestic notification systems for companies that wish to sell tobacco products and e-cigarettes on the UK market. The notification process is essential for ensuring that companies are complying with legislation on product standards. Public Health England and the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency have already commenced work to ensure that domestic notification systems are in place and functional by exit day.

Secondly, in the event of no deal, the UK will not hold copyright to the EU library of picture warnings for tobacco products. Requiring the industry to continue to use these pictures would breach copyright law. Picture warnings are a key part of tobacco control, and it is therefore extremely important that we continue to require the inclusion of graphic picture warnings on tobacco products. The UK has therefore recently signed an

[Steve Brine]

agreement with the Australian Government to obtain their picture warnings free of cost—who knew, Madam Deputy Speaker? This agreement covers all copyright issues. I am very grateful to the Australian Government for their assistance in this matter. Action on Smoking and Health supports the proposals on notification systems and on the picture warnings as

“pragmatic and practical, minimising the amount of additional work involved if there were to be a no deal Brexit.”

Thirdly, this instrument proposes a transfer of powers. Currently, the Commission holds a range of powers under the tobacco products directive that enable it to respond to emerging threats, changing safety and quality standards, and technological advances. This instrument transfers these powers from the Commission to the Secretary of State. It should be noted that all powers in this category relate to technical, scientific and administrative adjustments that may be necessary to respond to changing circumstances in this space.

This instrument will have some impact on the tobacco and e-cigarette industry—there is no getting away from that. My Department ran a short technical consultation in October to seek feedback on the practical issues that will affect the industry in a no-deal situation. It focused on picture warnings and the notification process that I have outlined. We received 32 responses and have welcomed practical feedback on the issues highlighted in the consultation. Tobacco control stakeholders expressed support for the continued use of picture warnings as an effective way of stopping people smoking. They also showed support for the proposals to amend the notification system for e-cigarette and tobacco products as a means of harm reduction. The tobacco industry raised concerns around the timing of implementation and cost, primarily in relation to the changes to picture warnings. The Department has consulted with external experts who confirmed that the timescale for industry to implement these changes would be difficult but certainly manageable. To support industry with these changes, the Department intends to publish detailed guidance later this month.

Let me say a word on the devolved Administrations. It is important to note that the DAs have provided their consent for the elements of the instrument that are considered to be devolved. Furthermore, we have engaged positively with them throughout the development of this instrument. This ongoing engagement has been warmly welcomed. I want to place that on the record for our friends in the devolved Administrations.

In conclusion—

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister give way?

Steve Brine: In conclusion, Madam Deputy Speaker, taking my lead from your look—Members will have a chance to contribute—this instrument constitutes a necessary measure to ensure that our tobacco control regulations continue to work effectively after exit day. I should, however, emphasise that, due to the instrument being made under the withdrawal Act, the scope of the amendments in the instrument is limited to achieving that objective. Therefore, at an appropriate point in the future, the Department will review where the UK’s exit

from the EU offers us opportunities to reappraise current regulation to ensure that we continue to protect the nation’s health. That is timely on this day of all days, when we have published our long-term plan.

I urge Members to support the instrument, to ensure the continuation of effective tobacco control and harm reduction. I commend the regulations to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I apologise to the Minister for my moment of inattention a minute ago. It was not inattention to what he was saying; it was that I had happened to look at the statutory instrument before us, which for the first time in parliamentary history is illustrated. The illustrations are shocking. Having listened carefully to what the Minister said, I was making a mental note to ensure that every teenager I know sees these illustrations. It is not for me to make any value judgment on whether one should smoke, vape or otherwise. The Minister has done that very well.

8.56 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be here on the first day back to discuss these interesting and colourfully illustrated amendment regulations on tobacco products and nicotine inhaling products, not tucked away in a Committee Room but on the Floor of the House.

As I have said previously on EU exit secondary legislation, I still strongly hope that we leave with a deal and that all these SIs will have been for naught. I understand that, as a matter of contingency planning, it is only right that we discuss these changes as a just-in-case measure. However, I have to say again that if a no-deal scenario was ruled out once and for all, none of this would be necessary, saving vital taxpayers’ money that could have been better spent elsewhere. As I understand it, these no-deal SIs run to around 900, so that be a substantial sum of money. But here we are. The Minister has already set out what these regulations mean, so I will not repeat any of that.

Smoking rates have declined. However, it is estimated that around 6.1 million adults in the UK still smoke. I hope that they were listening to your comments, Madam Deputy Speaker, and that we all show those awful images to as many people—young and old—as possible, because it is never too late to quit. Hospital admissions attributable to smoking increased by 2% in 2016-17 compared with the previous year, and last year we also saw a small increase in the number of women smoking during pregnancy.

Those figures are not surprising when coupled with the fact that £96 million has been cut from the public health budget this financial year alone, adding up to £800 million by 2021. That means cuts to vital public health services, which both the Minister and I are passionate about, including smoking cessation services. The Government must reverse these public health budget cuts if they are serious about reducing smoking rates. It is a shame that today the Secretary of State missed yet another opportunity to do that, in his statement on the NHS 10-year plan. There was no reversal or any new money that I could see for smoking cessation services or public health services. He did, however, maintain that prevention was at the forefront of the Department’s forward view, which was welcome. If that is the case, the

high standards for the safety and quality of tobacco and nicotine products must be maintained or even improved if the UK leaves the EU without a deal.

With that in mind, I have a few questions about the regulations. Will they have any impact on the current advice on e-cigarettes? Will the Government be undertaking a review of e-cigarette regulations to ensure that they are fit for purpose and encourage their use by smokers to quit smoking, while also discouraging uptake by young people? More generally, will the amendments allow for regular reviews and updates of the health warnings?

That brings me to the picture warnings on cigarette packets—anyone who wants to see the new ones can find them at the back of the draft regulations. They replace a number of unappealing photographs that we currently use with new photographs, which are under copyright by either the Commonwealth of Australia or Professor Laurence J. Walsh of the University of Queensland. I am sure that this is a short-term fix, but could the Minister please elaborate, and provide some clarity, on what agreement has been reached with the Australian Government, or indeed with Professor Walsh, on using the photographs? In what form was the agreement made, what does it cover, and how and to what extent does it affect the rights of the copyright owners? What payment, if any, will the Australian Government or Professor Walsh be entitled to as a result? What conditions and constraints will there be on UK businesses using these photographs? What about current packaging that uses the old images? I hope that some contingency has been made for those to continue to be sold.

I am under the impression that these photographs are still being evaluated by the Australian Government. If they are found not to be fit for purpose in Australia, will the Minister take that to mean that they are not fit for purpose in the UK either? I know that the Government will be publishing detailed guidance on the picture warnings and the notification process this month, but it may be beneficial to businesses if the Minister could please give a better idea of when they can expect to receive the guidance?

Finally, do the Government have any plans to use UK-sourced or commissioned photographs? Surely we have some comparable images of our own, taken by doctors or researchers, that we could use? If not, are plans in place to acquire some? The legislation also introduces a fee-making power for characterising flavours and emissions on nicotine and tobacco products. Will the Government be using that power immediately, and what impact will it have on businesses?

Unfortunately, smoking is still prevalent in our country, which is why we must ensure that tobacco and nicotine products meet the highest safety and quality standards. If the worst happens and we do leave the EU without a deal, we must ensure that these standards are upheld, so the Opposition will support the regulations today, in the hope that they will not be needed.

9.2 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson). It is fair to say that all the changes to tobacco regulations that have been made in this House have come from the Back Benches, with

pressure being put on the Government, whichever party has been in power, to make the necessary changes. It is therefore a great pleasure to see my hon. Friend the Minister and the Opposition spokesperson, who are both tremendously supportive of making the necessary changes and implementing tough regulations on tobacco products.

This is clearly one of those statutory instruments that will be required if there is no deal. In any case, once we leave the European Union we will be responsible for our own measures on tobacco enforcement. It is therefore timely that we are having this debate now, before we leave the European Union. Clearly the measures are pragmatic and will minimise the amount of work required once we leave the European Union. However, I have one or two concerns that I hope the Minister can respond to when he sums up.

The current system for notification of e-cigarettes and novel tobacco products is reasonable and minimises additional work, but products that are notified to the UK prior to leaving the EU will not require re-notification. My concern is whether such novel products will come to the fore between now and our departure date, and what the effect of having a deal would be, and therefore whether there we be another period of time in which those products could be introduced. Would we then need to review how those products are dealt with under this statutory instrument?

Secondly, on the picture warnings that we obtained from Australia, which the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West mentioned, one of the key issues is that people who smoke get used to cigarette packets showing messages. We need to rotate those messages and pictures so that they shock people. We want to shock people, particularly young people, to stop them smoking. The concept of rotating pictures and identifying the best images to achieve that shock factor is key. I trust that my hon. Friend the Minister will consider that and keep it under review so that we can introduce it, if needed.

There clearly needs to be a longer-term review, so my third point is that we need to see a report by 20 May 2021, which would give us an opportunity to review all the regulations that apply not only to tobacco products but to e-cigarettes and other heated tobacco products. The Australian Government will clearly evaluate their various different initiatives, and it is fair to say that we have been at the forefront, both in Europe and across the world, in leading on tobacco control. It is therefore important that we encourage smokers to quit and prevent young people from starting to smoke.

Will my hon. Friend undertake to review the regulations regularly so that we can encourage young people and others to give up smoking and, equally, ensure that measures are in place so that people who want to give up are given help and support to do so? More importantly, we should ensure that doctors, when reviewing people's cases, are directing those who smoke to the help and support they need in order to give up and to have better personal health.

I warmly welcome this statutory instrument, but I hope the Minister can give me some reassurance on those three points.

9.7 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Again we are rushing through a statutory instrument because of the threat of a no deal. I would be interested to know what the Minister might be doing differently if we were not having to rush this through.

Smoking is obviously a critical cause of cancer, and although smoking rates have dropped over the past 20 years, there are still far too many people smoking. I welcome the commitment in the explanatory memorandum and the regulations to minimal change in tobacco control. It is important we recognise that smoking also causes non-cancerous diseases such as heart and lung disease and strokes, and is probably the biggest single cause of morbidity in our country.

The regulations mention that we are revoking the common European notification system for both e-cigarettes and tobacco—this is not just about tobacco—and that it will be replaced by a UK system. The Minister talked about the MHRA taking on that work. Will it be ready by the end of March? As the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) asked, will the guidance to industry definitely appear before the end of this month? That is very close, yet the Government are asking industry to change the pictures it is using, and may be asking it to change how some of the warnings are constructed.

Under proposed new regulation 53A of the Tobacco and Related Products Regulations 2016, the Secretary of State will be able to collect fees to fund this work. Will the fees be collected on a continuing basis, with industry having to register with such a body and pay ongoing fees, or will it be only on the registration of a new product? What we might see is the same as we are likely to see on drugs: if a company has to register a product in Europe and then go through a separate process here, it might not register the product here. Although I am obviously not a big fan of tobacco producers, it is important that we do not undermine those producing e-cigarettes and vapes that have helped people come off cigarettes.

The new pictures have been mentioned. The hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) talked about the need to rotate them. Unfortunately, it does not matter what image we are talking about, but if people see it all the time they become inured to it. It is important that any regulations in the UK shadow what we have been doing with our EU colleagues as much as possible.

The Minister talked about the consultation in October, and the explanatory memorandum referred to industry and stakeholders. Will he perhaps clarify for us whether any anti-smoking charities or any health bodies were represented?

Proposed new regulation 16A(2) gives the Secretary of State the ability to allow change in e-cigarette and vape formulations and standards. What concerns me is that paragraph 6.4 of the explanatory memorandum mentions the discussion about the standards being “too onerous”—not for the user, but for the industry—and too restrictive. It is absolutely critical that we do not lower these standards, because if this decision just slips through without our being able to interrogate it, we may regret it further on.

The regulations will revoke section 2(4) of the Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Act 2002, which means that no EU member state is allowed to advertise tobacco in

another member state. The explanation is that EU member states could advertise tobacco in the UK, and we should therefore revoke our obligation not to do that to them. Unfortunately, this is exactly the tit-for-tat race to the bottom that the EU regulations were intended to avoid. Does the Minister really think that allowing UK companies to advertise in Ireland, Holland or France is going to benefit people here?

It is of concern that proposed new regulation 53A, which is on setting fees, says that such statutory instruments must be carried through using the affirmative process, yet all other changes to regulations will be allowed to be carried through under the negative procedure.

It is critical that the standards of tobacco products, e-cigarettes or vaping mixtures are maintained at as high a quality as possible. There is evidence that young people are beginning to use vaping *de novo*. Initially, there has been great benefit in getting cigarette smokers off tobacco and vaping using or e-cigarettes. However, it must be remembered that the pulmonary membrane in our lungs is the most sensitive membrane in the body, and we cannot allow the addition of harmful chemicals that may cause destruction or fibrosis and leave people crippled in the future. We do not yet have long-term experience of these vaping fluids, and it is critical that the Government keep them under observation and maintain as high a standard as possible.

9.12 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I want to follow the remarks of the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) about the impact of these regulations on vaping products. The vaping industry welcomes the Government's sensible planning, but has a particular concern about products that are already registered with the EU. The industry producing such products is looking for some clarification from the Minister and some assurance about whether products that are already registered will need to be re-registered under the new UK-based system.

The Minister has spoken about the opportunity to reappraise our legislation. Of course, e-cigarettes are controlled by the tobacco products regulations, despite there not being any tobacco at all in such products. There are three issues that are of concern to users in particular. The first is the cap on nicotine strength in vaping liquids. In many cases, it is too low to encourage heavy smokers to switch to e-cigarettes, which we know are far better for their health and which we want to encourage. There are restrictions on both the size of bottle in which vaping liquids can be sold and the tank size of vaping devices, both of which appear to be completely arbitrary, with no basis to them.

Both users of e-cigarettes and the manufacturing sector are hoping that this may be an opportunity for the Minister to rectify the regulations, which, frankly, are nonsensical. I look forward to the Minister's response on those points.

9.14 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I will be succinct, Madam Deputy Speaker. I just have a couple of quick questions for the Minister, but first let me say that I welcome the regulations.

Before recess, I asked the Minister a number of questions that came from the tobacco sector itself. Has he had any contact with the sector to seek its opinion on proposed legislation to ensure that what is put forward reflects its point of view?

The Minister referred to the devolved Administrations. I am ever mindful of the current situation in Northern Ireland, which I hope will change. We have a non-functioning Assembly, which means that the responsibility for the administration of legislation falls on the permanent secretary and civil servants. Will that be done through a statutory instrument, so that the permanent secretary can make a decision? Legislation passed in this place last year on the Northern Ireland Assembly gives the permanent secretary the authority to make a legislative change. I just want to be sure about how that will work in Northern Ireland.

Madam Deputy Speaker, those are my succinct comments.

9.16 pm

Steve Brine: I will briefly address some of the points that have been raised. The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) says she hopes that no-deal contingency will not be needed. Fortunately, I have a cunning plan to ensure that it is not needed, which is to vote for the deal next Tuesday. I look forward to her support.

A number of Members talked about e-cigarettes. The best thing a smoker can do for their health—I have always said this—is to quit smoking. E-cigarettes are not harmless: the nicotine is toxic and addictive, and there are unanswered questions on the long-term effects of their use. There is, however, evidence that e-cigarettes are significantly less harmful to health than smoking tobacco. The control plan that I published last year commits to monitoring the safety, uptake, impact and effectiveness of e-cigarettes and novel tobacco products. We will review all the regulations as part of our post-implementation plan by May 2021. A number of Members referred to that, for which I am grateful.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West and the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) talked about the rotation of warning images and the deal with the Australian Government. The deal is indeed to use their picture warnings free of charge. That is very kind of our friends down under. The rotation of picture warnings so that people do not become desensitised to them is very important. We are aware of the benefits of rotating the warnings. In the medium to long term we will consider our options, and they may well include the option of developing new domestic picture libraries. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East said that there are plenty of images. I am sure we can access them domestically, and I will be looking at that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East talked about products that have already been notified. A new notification system, which will be in place on exit day in a no-deal scenario, has been developed. If there are novel products, they will be notified through the new system. Products notified between now and exit day will continue to be notified through the EU system. I have to say that I am not aware of any novel products that

are due to be notified by the current or new notification processes, but they will be able to deal equally effectively with any novel products that appear on the market.

This is an important statutory instrument. The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire said that we must not in any way water down or lose our ambition on tobacco control. I think she knows me well enough to know that I certainly do not lack ambition in this space. One of the first things I did in this job was to publish the tobacco control plan. Tobacco is still our biggest preventable killer. She is absolutely right to say that, and it is why such a central part of the long-term plan is prevention. One of the simpler things we can do to prevent ill health and the cost it brings to our health service in England, as well as in Scotland, is to stop people smoking.

The hon. Lady asked whether the notification system will be ready. I think I said in my opening remarks that the feedback we have had from the industry is that that will be challenging, but the advice we get from experts is that it will be ready. She also asked about fees being charged on an ongoing basis. I will have to write to her on that point, but I will endeavour to do so this week so that she gets the answers she wants. I have already answered the question about lowering standards, which we most certainly do not want to do.

We are absolutely committed to the tobacco control measures I set out in the plan. I want to ensure that we maintain discipline and our focus on preventing ill health by driving down smoking rates, and we will review all our tobacco control legislation by 2021. Of course, if the House supports the deal next Tuesday, the draft regulations will not be necessary, but in the event that they are, we will be ready.

Question put and agreed to.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. We are about to debate a matter of huge constitutional significance. Hitherto, the sole criterion for voting in Committees of this House has been election. If this measure passes, we will change that to allow people who have not been elected to vote in Committees of this House. That would be a huge change, which we are about to rush through in 40 minutes, without proper scrutiny. The Government have already withdrawn one motion from today's proceedings. Is there any way that, through your offices, you can ask the Government whether they would be prepared to withdraw this motion so that we can debate it fully and properly at an appropriate time?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I fully understand and have some sympathy with the point the right hon. Gentleman makes. It is indeed the case that we have a very short amount of time for this important debate. Of course, as he knows, I have no power from the Chair to do anything about the timetabling of matters in the Chamber. As I look at the Leader of the House, I see that she has a determination to get on with this debate now. I can well understand that. It is in the power of the Government to change the business, but as the right hon. Gentleman knows, the House is very busy. All I would say is that I hope people will speak succinctly and briefly, and that it is unfortunate that the earlier business took so long, with so many people saying the same thing over and over again but insisting on having their voices heard, which has curtailed the debate on this very important piece of business.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) rightly says that this is a very important constitutional issue. At 10 o'clock, will the motion immediately go to a vote, or will it require a closure motion?

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. If the debate is still continuing, there will be no vote. However, I say once again that this matter is in the hands of Members. If Members who prolonged the urgent questions and statements earlier are listening or paying any attention—there is a very good chance that they have given up and gone home—they know that it was their actions earlier in the day that curtailed this debate. Let us not curtail it any further.

Committee on Standards: Cox Report

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I inform the House that Mr Speaker has selected a manuscript amendment in the name of John Stevenson, copies of which are in the Vote Office and which is also available online.

9.24 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): I beg to move,

That this House approves the Fifth Report of the Committee on Standards, Implications of the Dame Laura Cox report for the House's standards system: Initial proposals, HC 1726, and agrees the following changes to Standing Orders and to the Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members as approved by the House on 17 March 2015:

Standing Order No. 149 (Committee on Standards)

(i) in paragraph (5), line 3, leave out from “witnesses,” to end and add “may move motions and amendments to motions or draft reports, and may vote.”.

(ii) leave out paragraph (5A).

Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members

Chapter 4: Procedure for inquiries

(i) Leave out paragraph 6(b) and insert –

“b) be in writing or by email, and provide the complainant's name and full postal address; and”.

(ii) Leave out paragraph 11.

The motion stands in my name and that of the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green). I welcome the opportunity to take part in this important debate on behalf of the Government. The motion, if agreed by the House, serves to strengthen the independence of the Committee on Standards and modernise its practices. I will touch more on the content of the motion, and I am sure that the hon. Lady, the Chair of the Committee, will also provide the House with a detailed account of the proposed changes.

It is important that we put these changes in their wider context. Now, more than ever, we must not lose sight of our drive to improve the culture of our Parliament. How has this motion come about? In November 2017, shocking stories of harassment and bullying in Westminster came to light. I have been clear, as has the Prime Minister, that there is absolutely no place for this unacceptable behaviour in Parliament, or anywhere else for that matter. We should be setting an example for others to follow, and my ambition is that our Parliament become a role model for other Parliaments around the world.

In response to the allegations, the Prime Minister convened party leaders and set up a cross-party working group to develop an independent complaints and grievance procedure for Parliament. A programme team, overseen by a cross-party steering group made up of Members of both Houses and staff representatives, then worked on the implementation of the new policy, known as the ICGS, which was agreed by the House and launched in July last year. Throughout our work, there was a clear recognition from the cross-party group that establishing the ICGS was the beginning, not the end, of a bigger movement to challenge and change the culture in Parliament. As part of this, we agreed that there must be a review of the scheme at six and 18 months, as it beds in. This gives us the chance to improve as we go and to constantly ask ourselves what more we can do.

I am currently working with colleagues in the House to establish the first of these reviews and that work will begin later this month. The purpose of each review will be, first, to scrutinise how the new complaints procedure is working in practice; secondly, to address outstanding areas, such as how to incorporate into the scheme visitors to constituency offices and how to manage third-party reporting; and thirdly, to incorporate the findings of the Cox report, following the recommendations of the House of Commons Commission and the other independent inquiries set up as part of the ICGS.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Can I ask the Leader of the House about an area of which I was not aware? What does she mean by “visitors to constituency offices” in this context?

Andrea Leadsom: It means how visitors to constituency offices might potentially in future be able to submit complaints about the behaviour that they have received in constituency offices.

John Spellar *rose*—

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry, but I will not give way. Dame Laura Cox QC’s inquiry—

John Spellar *rose*—

Andrea Leadsom: I will not give way.

John Spellar *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Lady is not giving way. We have not got much time.

Andrea Leadsom: Dame Laura Cox QC’s inquiry looked into the bullying and harassment of House of Commons staff. Naomi Ellenbogen QC is conducting a similar inquiry on the House of Lords side, and Gemma White QC is currently conducting a broader inquiry into employees on the Commons side. All of the many different employment situations in the House will be covered by a one-off review of historic complaints.

Dame Laura Cox published her report into the bullying and harassment of House of Commons staff in October last year. There were three key recommendations in that report, which the House of Commons Commission agreed and committed to taking forward.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I am particularly anxious that the second of the recommendations in the Cox report be moved forward as quickly as possible. Can the Leader of the House give us a timetable for that?

Andrea Leadsom: The House of Commons Commission is looking at each of these issues. If the hon. Gentleman will bear with me, I will answer his question in a moment.

Dame Laura Cox also raised serious concerns about the senior management of this place and, as an ex officio member of the Commission, I am keen that these issues be explored further. Her concerns cannot be brushed aside. It will be very important that the Commission does not ease up on the pace of dealing with what are most urgent issues facing the governance

of Parliament. The changes to be made in the light of the Cox report are a matter for the Commission and the House itself.

That brings us to the motion on the Order Paper. I pay tribute to the Committee on Standards for its work, which was done not only quickly, in recognition of the gravity of the situation, but thoughtfully. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston for the constructive way in which she has engaged with the process since the beginning of her chairmanship. It is not an easy task when Committees themselves must assess their fitness for purpose and adapt to calls for change. The Committee on Standards has adopted a clear openness and willingness to do so, while also recognising the need for a further and separate review of the standards system.

The motion relates to the third and key recommendation of the Cox report, on the independence of the process for determining complaints of bullying, harassment or sexual harassment brought by staff against Members of Parliament. The House of Commons Commission agreed in December to establish a small, informal working group to examine and report on that recommendation. The Government are fully committed to ensuring that MPs are accountable for their actions, but also agree with the Commission that it is necessary to consider carefully the potential constitutional implications of wholesale changes in the standards system. In the interim, while recognising that need for further review, the motion seeks to make some important changes in the current system to enhance its independence and ways of working.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I want to put it on the record that, as one who has spoken to people who have been raped, groped and abused in this building, I want the motion to be passed. I wonder whether the right hon. Lady realises, as I do, that we will struggle to get it through because of the lack of time, and will join me in saying that we can see the people who are trying to stop it. Does she agree that that would be a disaster and a shame on this House?

Andrea Leadsom: I entirely agree with the hon. Lady that it is important for us to demonstrate that we, as a House, are absolutely committed to ensuring that the dignity and respect that we want everyone to feel in this place is adhered to, and that we do everything we can to make that happen.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): May I raise an issue relating to dignity and respect, especially for women Members? As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on women in Parliament, I have written to the Speaker asking him, as a matter of urgency, to consider the issue of proxy voting for women during maternity leave. Please will the Leader of the House also exert some pressure? The issue is becoming very urgent.

Andrea Leadsom: I can absolutely assure my hon. Friend that I am committed to changes that will accommodate the need for parents to spend time with their new babies.

The changes sought in the motion will first confer full voting rights on lay members of the Committee on Standards. That means, in practice, that lay members will have equal status on the Committee and will hold a

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

majority in any vote, with the Chair holding a casting vote only in the event of a tie, and it goes some way towards meeting Laura Cox's challenge.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): As my right hon. Friend knows, I tabled an amendment relating to that issue. What I seek from her is an assurance that, when the Gemma White inquiry reports, we shall have an opportunity to revisit the issue and ensure that her analysis can be taken into consideration.

Andrea Leadsom: I spoke to my hon. Friend earlier today, and assured him that the six-month review of the independent complaints and grievance scheme would indeed take into account the issues raised by each of the independent inquiries, and that all issues relating to the way in which the process for managing complaints works would be in scope for that.

John Spellar: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Andrea Leadsom: I will not give way to the right hon. Gentleman. I have already given way to him.

Secondly, the motion will modernise practices so that referrals can be made by email or in writing. Thirdly, it will abolish the current requirement for the independent Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards to consult the Committee on Standards on whether a case that is more than seven years old, or one involving a former Member, can be investigated by her. That will ensure that she can act independently. Many of us have raised grave concerns about appalling allegations that have gone without investigation as a result of the current arrangements. So ensuring that the PCS can operate independently of the Committee on Standards is vital and will better enable justice for those seeking recourse.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): On the issue of the Committee's willingness to remove any obligation on the standards commissioner to consult the Committee before going to the police, I welcome the Committee's willingness to look at that proposal, but can the Leader of the House reassure us that it will still be a victim-centred approach? She will know from our discussions in the steering group that it is vital that a victim's or a survivor's wish not to have a motion go to the police should be overridden only if there are overwhelming cases of safeguarding. Can she reassure us that there will be some kind of protocol on that?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will appreciate that this motion has been put forward as a result of the Standards Committee's own recommendations—not something that I am in control of—but I absolutely reassure her that I remain as committed, as do all members of the original working group on the complaints procedure, to putting the complainant at the centre of this process and to ensuring confidentiality about their identity. That is vital to the success of our complaints procedure.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): As I understand it, the Standards Committee is appointed by the usual channels and, if it were to appoint people like the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) and people with a great commitment to ensuring

that things are done properly—people of the highest standards and probity—why would we have this problem? Why do we lack confidence in people within this House to do the job for which they are elected and for which they have a mandate from the people? Why do we think we are going to get better people from outside?

Andrea Leadsom: That is a lengthy question. I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to debate it further, but the evidence that was taken over a lengthy period and that was unanimously agreed by the working group and has been supported by the Standards Committee suggested that a greater element of independence was required, and that having seven lay members and seven parliamentary Members on the Standards Committee and the voting as proposed by the Committee's Chairman provides the right balance—having the memory and the corporate understanding of being in this place, while at the same time ensuring that we can benefit from the experience and knowledge of independent lay members.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Clearly, the objection is to the idea of lay members being part of this, yet this Parliament put that as a construct into the General Medical Council, so we have members of the public who rule on the behaviour of doctors—not their clinical work, but their behaviour. It is important that we have that independent voice here because we work for them—for the public.

Andrea Leadsom: I agree with the hon. Lady.

The changes proposed today are a strong and positive step forward for the better. The Government are fully supportive of the work of the Standards Committee and the House of Commons Commission to make sure that the standards system is more independent, transparent and effective. To return to where I began my remarks, today's motion is a separate matter from the new complaints system, known as the ICGS, in so far as it is for the House to make changes to its system of standards, but it is vital that we as a House look at this issue carefully in order that the complaints system in the round can command the confidence of the people who work with or for Parliament and the wider public. Today's motion demonstrates that the House is listening on what more we can do to improve the culture of Parliament and, importantly, demonstrates that we are also taking action. The Government support this change and will support further changes to provide proper recourse for victims and to ensure the proper functioning of our parliamentary democracy.

The recent Christmas message by the Queen had a particular resonance for me when she said:

“Even with the most deeply held differences, treating the other person with respect and as a fellow human being is always a good first step towards greater understanding.”

I would like to take this opportunity to stress that, while we may be divided on a few matters in this place, this is something we can all be united on: our shared ambition to make our Parliament a world leader in its respectful treatment of others. It is in that spirit that I commend this motion to the House.

9.39 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for moving the motion. I should also like to thank the Committee on Standards for its work on

producing the report. I want to speak to the motion, and also to touch on the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson). This is a short report, but at its heart lies a constitutional issue that warrants consideration. I note from the inside cover of the report that the Law Officers are entitled to attend the Committee although they are not entitled to vote. I want to place on record my thanks to the shadow Solicitor General, my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), for his helpful discussions.

Before I move on to the specific proposals and questions, I also want to thank Dame Laura Cox for the time that she has given to this inquiry and for producing a wide-ranging report in the given timeframe. I also want to reiterate part of the statement from the House of Commons Commission, which is set out in paragraph 4 of the report:

“The scale of the problem and depth of hurt caused is beyond dispute.”

The Commission went on to state:

“The staff of the House of Commons are essential to the functioning of democracy. We deeply regret that their diligence has at times been so poorly repaid, and that it has taken so long for us to recognise what must be done.”

The Committee’s report then states:

“We, like the Commission...commit ourselves to contributing to putting things right.”

I want to add that the House staff and other people working in this great place need to know that they are valued, and I hope that they do.

Paragraph 5 of the report states:

“The functions of the Committee on Standards and of the House of Commons Commission are different, but with some degree of overlap.”

I agree that the functions are different, but I am unclear as to how they overlap. They have completely separate roles. The House of Commons Commission has elected representatives from different parties, and I am definitely not aware of any overlap. I would not want to give the impression that there was any interference in the work of the Commissioner or of the Committee. Nor does the Commission have any say over the work of the Committee. In paragraph 6, the Committee states that it chose to speak to only one elected representative, the Leader of the House. Was she aware of any discussions taking place with anyone else? Were any other experts consulted?

I want to deal with two other issues before I come on to the question of voting. First, if the Commissioner feels that she should refer matters to the police in a criminal matter, she is bound to do that. She should not have to ask anyone’s permission to do so. Secondly, receiving complaints by email will bring the process up to date, and I am sure everyone would agree that as long as we maintain the principle that any statement or complaint must be signed, it can be sent off by email.

The main proposal concerns voting rights for lay members, which Dame Laura Cox suggested in her report. This has been considered for some time but, as the Committee said, the matter now needs decisive and immediate action. A Committee of the House is covered by privilege, which is defined in article 9 of the Bill of Rights Act 1689 as relating to Members only. However,

giving lay members a vote would change the nature of the Select Committee. As Dame Laura Cox has pointed out in paragraph 380,

“all the difficulties inherent in the process would not be alleviated by the giving of full votes to lay members, which will in any event require primary legislation”.

It is arguable that privilege would extend to lay members. Lord Nicholls, giving written evidence to the Procedure Committee in 2011, said that if all members of a Committee were undertaking the work of that Committee, he would expect privilege to extend to all members. Unless they are covered by privilege, this could leave lay members exposed to challenge, and however slight the risk, that cannot be right. There are two different views on this, and the only way to make this clear is through legislation, as Dame Laura Cox and the Committee’s report have said. It is not clear when the Government will bring forward the legislation to protect the lay members, so will the Leader of the House tell us when they will do so? Will she also confirm that advice has been taken on the risk to lay members of judicial review, and will she publish it? Lay members have to be protected.

In paragraph 44 of the report, the Committee states:

“The advice we have received is that, procedurally speaking, the House has the power, if it chooses, to confer voting rights on lay members”.

May I ask who that advice was sought from? Was it given on procedural rules or on a constitutional point? Has parliamentary counsel been consulted? Members and lay members need to be reassured. Once they receive that protection, lay members should, as recommended by the Committee, be allowed to move motions and amendments and vote. Their indicative votes are recorded now, so that would be a logical next step.

Everyone who works in Parliament will be concerned by the recent case in the House of Lords. The task was delegated to a Committee, which looked at the case under a fair procedure. The House of Lords, which is of course different, is however looking at including lay members on its sub-committee, albeit in a minority.

This proposal deals with the process at the end, but we must also ensure that Members and staff are reassured that the process is fair from start to finish and does not leave any person feeling that they have not had a fair hearing or that an injustice has been done, and that the recommendations of the Cox report are progressed without delay. I know that the Commons executive team is dealing with that. However, it does raise a constitutional question as to how to preserve the independence of the process while balancing it against the doctrine of exclusive cognisance. Some Members may want to hear the Leader of the House’s view before they vote, so will she reassure us on that point?

Finally, I thank the Committee on Standards again for its work. We must all play our part in ensuring that our new procedures are robust, fair and effective to protect everyone working and visiting Parliament.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. It is obvious that a great many people wish to speak, but there is hardly any time, so I am imposing a time limit of three minutes on Back-Bench speeches.

Mr Rees-Mogg: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is not customary to impose a time limit when the debate would cease if a closure is not put on the motion.

Madam Deputy Speaker: It is customary to impose a time limit when the person in the Chair can easily see that the demand for time is far greater than the supply. I am therefore imposing a time limit. I call John Stevenson.

9.46 pm

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. My comments will be short. I tabled the amendment, but the Leader of the House has reassured me, so I do not intend to press it. I will make a couple of general comments before talking about the motion before us and the changes to the Standing Orders.

The Cox report highlights concerns about behaviour that should trouble us all. Such unacceptable conduct should not and cannot be tolerated and must be stamped out. It is therefore important we introduce the correct procedures and rules to ensure that behaviour improves and that the culture and environment of Parliament is as it should be for the staff. I agree with the Cox report that Parliament has in the past been reactive in making changes and must get on the front foot and become proactive.

The lay members make a valuable contribution to the Committee on Standards, and their wisdom and knowledge from outside the parliamentary estate is valued, so I support the idea that they should have a vote.

John Spellar: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John Stevenson: There is only a short amount of time for each speaker, so I will not take any interventions.

The only thing that I want to bring to the House's attention is the fact that we must make this change with our eyes open. There are constitutional issues, so we must ensure that we do this with the full knowledge of the consequences. We must consider the individuals who will become lay members of the Committee, the criteria for their appointment, the appointment committee that will select them, the length of service and how members can be removed, and how they must conduct themselves. Political views must also be taken into account, because the Committee is politically balanced at present, so we must consider whether lay members should have to give some indication of their political background if they have one to declare. Finally, we must be aware of the democratic legitimacy and accountability of the Committee on Standards. It is an important function of this House, and we must get things right. I recognise that many professional bodies have lay members that make valuable contributions, but from our perspective it is important that we get the balance right.

My final observation is that this Parliament is part of our democratic process, so democratic accountability and legitimacy are vital to it. Change is required, but it must be managed and properly thought through. Change must not be reactive to the personalities of today; it must be for the long term and look to Parliaments of which Members here will not be a part. We must ensure that we leave a legacy that works.

9.49 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I shall try to be as brief as possible. I welcome this report and congratulate the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) on its timely contribution. I had the privilege of serving on the independent complaints and grievance scheme working group, and I know how many committees and bodies across this House have devoted great amounts of time and effort to trying to address some of the serious issues and difficulties that were identified last year, as the Leader of the House said. I think that we are getting there with some of the things that we have looked at, and I am grateful that we are starting to make some sort of progress in dealing with them.

A couple of things have concerned me about the situation over the past few months. The shadow Leader of the House referred to one of them, namely what happened in the House of Lords. It was totally unacceptable, and my worry and fear is that the same process could happen here in this House. We have to be very wary of that.

I am also concerned about the restoration of the Whip for two Members of the governing party, who had been suspended because of very serious allegations, so that they could participate in a vote of confidence in the Prime Minister. I have no interest at all in the veracity of the allegations and claims that were made against them; my only concern is how the public observed what happened. The view of the public would have been that the House was more interested in internal contests in political parties than in ensuring that serious allegations were properly investigated. I know the Leader of the House, and I know that she is embarrassed about what happened with those two Members.

Progress is being made, however. We are looking at some issues that have, as the hon. Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson) described, constitutional significance and an impact on our work. He is right to raise those issues. I am looking around at other members of the working group, and I think the most important thing is that independence is brought into the system as a predominant feature and guides all our undertakings in this House. There can be no question whatsoever of Members of Parliament marking their own homework when it comes to assessing claims made by individual Members of Parliament. I think it is worth disregarding the potential constitutional risks when we are looking at the independence of the process.

I welcome the fact that the standards commissioner can look at historical cases without reference to the Committee on Standards. The standards commissioner must be given the maximum amount of operational freedom to investigate such cases. In the working group, we raked over the whole idea of historical cases. I was disappointed, as I am sure other Members were, to be informed by legal opinion that we could not do anything about historical cases, but Dame Laura Cox is more than sure that that is going to happen.

The Cox report was a massive wake-up call to the House about the scale of some of the difficulties that we have to confront. Dame Laura has ensured that we will never return to a situation in which such things are overlooked, and that we will do everything possible, as robustly as possible, to tackle some of the issues that exist in the House. I know that the three main recommendations from her report have been accepted

by the House of Commons Commission. As we have seen from the work of the Standards Committee, all efforts are being made to ensure that her report is obeyed in full.

We have a particular role in our community and society. Parliament is our premier institution of democracy, and whatever we do must set an example to the rest of our community and society. We must do everything possible to ensure that those who work in this House do so in a safe environment, with respect and dignity afforded to them. If we use that as a guiding principle, I am sure that we will achieve success and tackle these issues, as we want to do.

I strongly support the report. I hope that other hon. Members do not try to talk this out when they get to their feet this evening, although I am pretty certain that that is exactly what they will attempt to do. I hope that we will return to the matter, and that we will make sure that we have an opportunity to get the motion through this evening.

9.54 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Dame Laura Cox rightly said that the bullying and abuse of staff in this place is

“an institutional failure...which has undermined the...authority of the House of Commons”,

and she is right. Anybody who attempts to block these changes at this very late stage, after previous debates, including on the role of lay members, risks not only embedding that perception but further undermining trust in this place. I urge them to consider that.

I fully support the Leader of the House, the changes to the Standing Orders that she has introduced today and her tenacity in doing so. I also fully support the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), in bringing forward the recommendations so swiftly. In debating the report, we have to acknowledge how the House of Commons has ended up in this situation. I believe it is because we are a dysfunctional and unaccountable organisation in terms of the system of management in this place. Who is actually fundamentally responsible for not having ensured that our staff can work in a safe environment? We still do not really know the answer to that question—or do we? I think that Laura Cox was pretty clear that it is the Speaker of the House of Commons, the House of Commons Commission and the chief Clerk of the House of Commons who are responsible, yet we still see very little change in those areas.

To go alongside today's changes, we need a fuller picture of how the modest changes that we are debating—and they are modest—fit into the fuller picture of reform that Laura Cox called for. We need to see not only the changes that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House has been so good in bringing forward to make sure that we have training and a grievance procedure, but that we have a clear plan for modernisation; that we have a democratic, transparent and accountable governance structure in the House of Commons; that we fundamentally review the role of the Speaker, which is clearly not currently working as it should; and that we end this piecemeal approach to reform in this place.

An example of that approach, raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) earlier, is the incredibly long-winded way we have had to bring

forward changes for something such as baby leave, which is a fundamental right for every person we represent in our constituencies. If they work, they have the ability to take time off when they are pregnant or have young children. Members in this place are not able to do that. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House has worked tirelessly to bring the changes forward, but there needs to be clearer and better management structures through which to make such changes in future, and to make sure that this is a modern place of work.

9.56 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): This is a matter of the utmost importance for the reputation and standing of this House. We cannot afford to be inward-looking tonight; we have to be outward-looking. The Cox report was an absolute wake-up call to this Parliament to act. I very much welcome the steps that the Leader of the House took leading up to the introduction of the independent complaints and grievance process this summer, but Cox requires us to go further and to have a system that not only is independent, fair and transparent, but that is seen to be so. The proposals in the Committee on Standards report that we are debating are a step on that journey. The Committee and I do not pretend that they are a full response to Cox, but they are a first step, and they are an indication of earnest intent that this House understands that we can no longer allow the public to believe and perceive that we are marking our own homework and that our decisions and adjudications on our colleagues cannot be trusted.

Mrs Miller: Does the hon. Lady agree with the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) that the role of lay members has become inherent in so many different professional organisations? Are we saying that we are not a professional organisation that would welcome such input?

Kate Green: I very much agree, and I also very much endorse the comments of my friend the hon. Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson), who rightly pointed to the standing of the lay members who currently belong to the Committee and, indeed, to the full Nolan process we put people through to recruit them to membership of the Committee. I remind the House that the Committee reports to this House. Ultimately, decisions will be taken by this House. We may vote in the Committee on a matter that comes before us—although it is very rare for us to do so—but ultimately the output of our deliberations will be a report to this House, so the elected membership of this House will have a final say.

It is important that the Committee take action now to ensure that the public see we are serious about independence and fairness in the system. That is particularly imperative because under the independent complaints and grievance system that now pertains, the Committee may very well find itself dealing with appeals very shortly. We need to be able to show the public that those appeals will be dealt with appropriately and in a way in which they can have confidence.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I do hope that the House will support the report tonight and give the motion of the Leader of the House the support that it deserves.

Sir Desmond Swaine (New Forest West) (Con) *rose—*

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The Question is as on the Order Paper—*[Interruption.]*

Sir Desmond Swayne: I was not aware that this was a time-limited debate.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I beg your pardon? Is this a point of order?

Sir Desmond Swayne: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. My understanding was that the debate proceeds until there is a closure motion.

Madam Deputy Speaker: No, I have taken the decision that, as there was only 10 seconds before 10 pm, I would, as usual, put the Question. *[Interruption.]* I will take the right hon. Gentleman's point of order after I have put the Question. The Question is as on the Order Paper. As many as of that opinion say aye.

Hon. Members: Aye.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Of the contrary, no.

Hon. Members: No! No!

Madam Deputy Speaker: Division. Clear the Lobby.

Sir Desmond Swayne: There do not appear to be any tellers, Madam Deputy Speaker, but there is a point of order.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The Question is as on the Order Paper. As many as of that opinion say aye.

Hon. Members: Aye.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Of the contrary, no. The ayes have it.

Question put and agreed to.

Sir Desmond Swayne: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Correct me if I am wrong, but my understanding is that if there is no order of the House that a debate must end at a particular time, and if Members are standing at the moment of interruption, then that debate should continue at another time, when time becomes available, and not be put to a vote when Members are still standing, waiting to speak in the debate.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman is, of course, absolutely right in his description—*[Interruption.]* Order! Order! Close the doors!

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, of course, in his description of the way in which matters are dealt with at the point of interruption. I took the decision this evening that, as there were 10 seconds left before 10 pm, that was the point at which I should put the Question. The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), who was on her feet at 9.59 and 51 seconds—I was watching very carefully—had the courtesy to sit down just before 10 o'clock in order that I might put the Question. I took the decision that the Question ought to be put to the House, as it was the moment for the Question to be put. If the right hon. Gentleman is saying that it was not right for the hon. Lady to sit down with nine seconds to spare, I think he is really splitting hairs. I understand very well the point that he is making, but I took the decision that nine or 10 seconds

meant that we were at the point of interruption and that no one else could have made a meaningful speech in those nine seconds. Of course, I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman's point, which was also made by the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) in a point of order earlier in the evening, that it is possible for a Member to speak through the point of interruption, and that then there could be no vote and no decision.

My decision and my ruling from the Chair this evening has been that my reading of this Chamber was that the vast majority of Members in this Chamber wanted to have a decision on this matter this evening. I agreed with the right hon. Gentleman earlier that it is a great pity that today we had urgent questions lasting for some two hours and eight minutes that were somewhat repetitive, and that we then had statements lasting for three hours and two minutes that were also rather repetitive. As I said to the right hon. Gentleman in answer to his point of order earlier this evening, these matters are in the hands of Members. If Members insist on having their voice heard again and again, making the same point on the same matter, we will be in a position whereby an important debate such as the one that has just concluded has not had nearly enough time, but these matters are in the hands of Members.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I will of course allow the right hon. Gentleman to make a further point of order if he so wishes.

Sir Desmond Swayne: It is verging on impertinence, Madam Deputy Speaker, but could you share with us the rationale for your decision, rather than allowing the debate to proceed, which it would otherwise have done had you not terminated it at the moment of interruption? We could then have explored all those constitutional issues that were raised ever so briefly during the short time that we had.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I will answer the right hon. Gentleman's further point of order by saying this: it has become the practice in this House that everybody who stands up to speak thinks that they have an automatic right to do so in that debate at the point when they stand up to speak. But as the right hon. Gentleman will recall, when he and I were new young Members of this House—some decades ago—it was perfectly normal for us to sit there, hour after hour, and not be called. It was perfectly normal for 100 people to rise at the beginning of an urgent question or a statement, but for only 30 to be called. It was perfectly normal for people to write to the Speaker and say that they would like to speak in a particular debate, but for only half of them to get to do so. I am terribly sorry that the right hon. Gentleman has been disappointed this evening because, of course, his seniority means that it is normal that he is called in a debate, near the beginning of the debate, but many Members really ought to get used to the fact that it is not an automatic right to speak for as long as they wish, whenever they wish, because there are 650 Members of this place and it is important to balance the rights of one as against the rights of all the others.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I propose to take motions 4 to 12 together, but having become accustomed to being challenged this last half hour or so, I wait to see if there is a challenge. There is no challenge, so we will take motions 4 to 12 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (SOCIAL SECURITY)

That the draft Social Security (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 31 October 2018, be approved.

That the draft Social Security (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 31 October, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES)

That the draft Payment Accounts (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 6 November, be approved.

WILDLIFE

That the draft Humane Trapping Standards Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 14 November, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (HUMAN FERTILISATION AND EMBRYOLOGY)

That the draft Human Fertilisation and Embryology (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 19 November, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (HUMAN TISSUE)

That the draft Quality and Safety of Organs Intended for Transplantation (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 19 November, be approved.

That the draft Human Tissue (Quality and Safety for Human Application) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 19 November, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (HEALTH AND SAFETY)

That the draft Blood Safety and Quality (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 19 November, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (CIVIL AVIATION)

That the draft Aviation Safety (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 26 November, be approved.—(*Iain Stewart.*)

Question agreed to.

UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights

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

10.11 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): I thank the House for allowing me to hold this debate this evening on the statement by the United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Professor Philip Alston, following his visit late last year to the United Kingdom, which, along with a plethora of other reports, has ensured that the grinding and increasing poverty of daily life for so many in the UK has been brought into the spotlight.

Unlike the Government, who have treated Professor Alston's well-evidenced and thorough statement with complete and utter disdain, I want to personally thank him for his conviction in passionately highlighting the absolute shame, degradation and harm that this Government are inflicting on those they govern, which has led to 14 million people living in poverty.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): In addition to the disdain that this Government showed for the UN rapporteur's report, the United States Government showed the same disdain when he produced a report on poverty in the United States. I know that we have a special relationship with the United States, but I think it shames us all that we share that disdain. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: My hon. Friend points to a worrying analogy, and I do of course agree.

Professor Alston's statement confirms what many Labour Members have known for a very long time—that when it comes to welfare reform and this Government's policy agenda overall,

“the evidence points to the conclusion that the driving force has not been economic but rather a commitment to achieving radical social re-engineering.”

It has long been embedded in Tory DNA that “there is no such thing as society”, and social experiments in rolling back the state always begin with those who need the state the most. That is why the legacy of every Tory Government is one of deep inequality.

Professor Alston rightly notes that nowhere can this social re-engineering be seen more clearly than in the roll-out of “universal discredit”, as he calls it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing this matter to the House for consideration. The report highlighted the alarming rise in food bank use. In my constituency, the Trussell Trust food bank had a 20% increase in take-up over the Christmas period because of debts due to delays in first universal credit payments, leading to people being forced to choose between paying rent and feeding their children. Does the hon. Lady not agree that the Minister—I am being respectful to him—must take steps to address the issues highlighted in the report? It cannot be ignored.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I will come to those points later in my speech, but he is right; this cannot be ignored any longer.

[Mrs Lewell-Buck]

In principle, universal credit seemed to make some sense. Consolidation of six benefits into one should have achieved the key tenets of simplifying payments and incentivising people into work. Crucially, however, it was never designed to get support to those who needed it in a timely and efficient manner. In reality, like all welfare reform measures from this Government, it was about creating a hostile environment and demonising and dehumanising benefit claimants. As Professor Alston notes, the Department

“is more concerned with making economic savings and sending messages about lifestyles”

than with responding to genuine needs.

The result has been an unrelenting onslaught of abject harm inflicted on more than 3 million people. The late-in-the-day news that the next phase of roll-out is being scaled back gives no comfort to the millions already suffering. Trussell Trust food bank figures show that in areas where universal credit has been implemented, food bank usage has increased by 52%. The fact that the Work and Pensions Secretary states that she “regrets” the growth in food banks will offer no comfort to the estimated 8.4 million people in the UK suffering from food insecurity, or to the volunteers and faith groups filling the gap left by the state and manning the nearly 2,000 food banks that we shamefully now have operating as a permanent part of the welfare state.

Nor will the Secretary of State’s regret give comfort to my constituents, such as one 18-year-old girl starting out in life who unexpectedly lost her job and who, despite statements made by the Government to the contrary, has not been eligible for housing cost assistance through universal credit. She narrowly escaped homelessness thanks to the intervention of our irreplaceable South Tyneside citizens advice bureau. The Secretary of State’s regret will also not help my constituent who suffers from mental health difficulties and was left with only £1.25 per day to live on after the Department made an error with her payments.

The five-week delay embedded in the system, which often turns out to be longer, was never going to achieve anything other than hardship, because one day going hungry and not being able to pay the bills is one day too many.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): In my constituency, there are nearly 6,000 children living in poverty, and in one ward 40% of children are living in poverty. Does my hon. Friend agree that in one of the richest countries in the world, unnecessary suffering brought about by Government policies is unacceptable?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, and I agree.

The 35-day delay leads to destitution and despair. There is no acceptable rationale for making people wait that long other than, to use Professor Alston’s words, “to make clear that being on benefits should involve hardship.”

That hardship is exemplified clearly in the draconian application of sanctions. It is estimated that across the benefits system, more than 350,000 people were denied access to benefit payments between 2017 and 2018 for the most trivial and minor of reasons—for example,

missing appointments because a relative has died unexpectedly or because claimants themselves have been admitted to hospital, or attending interviews instead of jobcentre appointments. The list is endless.

Professor Alston’s statement pays attention to the 2017 Government transformation strategy, under which all Government services will be “digital by default”. Universal credit claimants have been used as guinea pigs, as this is the first major service to be digital by default. It was either a deliberate act or total incompetence that led the Government to the conclusion that the most vulnerable and those with limited digital literacy and limited access to computers should be the first to test that. Even worse, it has been done against a backdrop of closures of libraries and jobcentres—the very places that those struggling would have gone to for assistance.

This Government have created a disability culture void of medical evidence and based on ignorance, fabrications and downright cruelty. The work capability and personal independence payment assessments—the most damning policies of our time—have seen companies such as Maximus, Atos and Capita being handed multimillion-pound contracts to hit targets based on how many people with disabilities they can push into destitution, and people with Down’s syndrome being asked by assessors how they “caught” it.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very good speech. Does she agree that it is shameful that in 2017 the UN, which we associate with development work in third-world countries, found that 14 million people in Great Britain were living in poverty as a result of the Government’s failed welfare reforms? Does she agree that the Government should be ashamed of the findings of the UN report, which demonstrates that the only increases we have seen in this country are in child poverty, food bank usage and homelessness, as a direct result of Government policies? Does she agree that it is unacceptable for the Government to ignore the UN’s findings on poverty and the treatment of disabled people in this country?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: The Government should be ashamed. They should also be ashamed that a wheelchair user with multiple sclerosis was asked how long it would be before she could walk again, and that a young woman with a cancer-related bone marrow disease was denied personal independence payments because she had a degree, because working to gain a qualification is apparently a sign that someone is “not really disabled”. On top of that, people with disabilities are losing their severe disability premiums and enhanced disability premiums under universal credit, leaving them £80 a week worse off.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate on this important issue, which I feel has been shamefully neglected by the Government up to this point. Does she agree that the use of informal observations in benefit assessments, which have no criteria and are open to subjective opinion and interpretation on the part of assessors, often results in inaccurate and ill-informed assessments? That has certainly caused some of my most vulnerable constituents considerable distress. Does she therefore agree that the Government should undertake a review of the use of such observations?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I agree that that would be a welcome way forward.

Those stories I have mentioned are not the exception but the norm, so it is little wonder that in 2017 the UN concluded that the UK Government were guilty of “grave or systematic violations of the rights of persons with disabilities”.

The UK benefits system now locks people into a Kafkaesque nightmare, and for some the only escape, tragically, has been to take their own lives. This state-inflicted damage cannot and must not continue.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I too congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate and on her powerful speech. Does she agree that the welfare state system we now have, in which people are left utterly powerless and often without the support they need to appeal decisions, is contributing not only to rising debt but to rising levels of mental health problems, as people suffer from depression and despair because they are unable to get on and be treated fairly?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: My hon. Friend is right. I used to be proud to live in a country where people, when in need through no fault of their own, were able to receive help from the welfare state in their darkest hours, but since 2010 that safety net has been eroded and ripped away so that work is no longer a route out of poverty. Punitive welfare reform, benefit cuts, inaction on low-paid and insecure work and the widening gulf between the cost of living and income have led to 4 million people being in work and in poverty, and over 4 million children living in poverty. Stories of children coming to school with a grey pallor and undernourished, rummaging through bins for food and wearing threadbare clothes are commonplace.

What comes through very clearly in Professor Alston’s report is that this Government do not have a vision for this country that works for everyone. His statement and the full report, which will follow in the spring, should be treated as a factual commentary and a warning for future general elections of how Tory Governments rip the very fabric of our country apart and cause irrevocable harm. Eight years of regressive policies have led to the hollowing out and decimation of local government and many other key public services, meaning that costly crisis management, rather than prevention, is now the norm.

We now see the human cost borne out on our streets, where homeless people are dying; where people suffering from terminal illnesses, disabilities and mental health difficulties are being wrongly declared fit for work, which means some attempt to take their own lives, and some are successful; where children and adults are being admitted to hospital for malnutrition; where food banks are having to turn desperate people away because they cannot cope with demand; where families are living in squalid temporary accommodation, with only the clothes on their backs and no end in sight; where vulnerable adults and children are being left with no social care provision at all; and where a whole generation of women have been plunged into poverty after their pensions were stolen from them by this Government.

This short debate in no way does justice to Professor Alston’s report, and I hope we will be able to revisit it in future, because as we debate it here tonight there will be

mums and dads returning home after a hard day’s work with rumbling stomachs, looking through empty cupboards wondering how they will feed their children. There will be elderly people sat alone, the silence of their loneliness piercing as they wonder if they should eat or put their heating on. There will be thousands who have torn open that brown envelope this morning only for the words and decisions within it to tear their world apart. Their pain lies at this Government’s door. Their suffering should be the shame of this Government, but it is not.

Professor Alston noted the

“striking...disconnect between what I heard from the government and what I consistently heard from...people...across the country.”

He added:

“The Government has remained determinedly in a state of denial...poverty is a political choice. Austerity could easily have spared the poor, if the political will had existed to do so.”

In his response I hope the Minister will answer one pertinent question, the answer to which millions of people currently suffering need to know: does that political will exist yet?

10.26 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Justin Tomlinson): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck), who has done a huge amount of work in this area over a number of years. She brings a huge amount of experience to many of the points she has raised.

This report covers not only the Department for Work and Pensions but the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Treasury and the Department for Exiting the European Union, but I will be speaking predominantly from the perspective of the DWP. At this stage it is only an interim report, and we are committed to considering Professor Alston’s views and opinions very carefully.

I recognise that hon. Members would now expect me to disagree with the majority of the report as it stands, and there are certainly things with which we do not agree, but I support the important role of the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights. The former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Ms McVey), other departmental Ministers, our respective teams and I were fully engaged with the process. We met Professor Alston, we supported the visits and the engagement throughout the process and, as I said, we will give very serious consideration to his views and opinions.

As a Minister, I am not precious. Government should be challenged and held to account, whether by the UN special rapporteur, by stakeholders or by the fantastic work of the various Select Committees. All Governments of all political persuasions, since the dawn of time, have had challenging reports, and it is rare we get a report that says, “Fantastic. You are single-handedly doing everything perfectly right.” Such reports are an important part of our democratic process, and even the most challenging and most critical reports ultimately shape future decisions.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Will the Minister give way?

Justin Tomlinson: I will give way. I will not take too many interventions because I have a lot to cover.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank the Minister for giving way. I am a little confused, because the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions have both dismissed the findings and do not agree with the report. Has there been a change of thinking since they made those comments?

Justin Tomlinson: What I am saying is that we will consider the report seriously. We obviously do not agree with all the points, but Professor Alston has highlighted some important views and opinions to which we should rightly be looking to respond.

One challenge I make to Professor Alston ahead of his final report is that, at two of the visits, the visits to Newcastle and Clacton, he had the opportunity to meet frontline staff and volunteers. At the recent Women and Equalities questions, my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) expressed a huge amount of disappointment from those frontline staff and volunteers, who felt that their fantastic work was not recognised—it had just one line. It is right that the report holds the Government's feet and Ministers' feet to the coals, but we would all recognise that there are people doing a fantastic job, both the paid formal staff and the volunteers, and I hope Professor Alston will reflect on that.

As we consider Professor Alston's views and findings, we must remember that this is a snapshot. On many of the issues raised, we are rightly already taking action, acknowledging that there were issues and that they needed to be dealt with. That is either through the additional money secured in recent Budgets, or through our ongoing and crucial work with stakeholders, with their particular expertise. As I have said, while this covers many Departments, I will focus on where the DWP has the lion's share of the involvement.

Understandably, UC formed a significant part of both the report and the speech we have just heard. To be absolutely clear, this was never a financial thing. We are looking to spend an additional £2 billion compared with the legacy benefits, and rightly so. UC offers the opportunity for personalised, tailored support dealing with housing, training and childcare, and giving claimants who are in a position to seek work an additional 50% more time to find work.

Although there are still challenges and there is much more work to do, if Members visit jobcentres, they will find that the frontline staff do recognise that UC is significantly better than the complex legacy benefits. They were six benefits across three agencies—HMRC, the DWP and local authorities—and, frankly, people had to be nuclear physicists to navigate them. We all know from our own constituency casework how complex it was to unravel the situation.

Jim Shannon: My constituency office is about 100 yards from the social security office—it is as close as that—and I have had numerous distressed people come from the social security office to my office looking for advice. I have written perhaps not to the Minister directly but to his Department to outline some of the changes that we feel should be made. In the light of those things, perhaps more needs to be done in the social security office to address the issues early on.

Justin Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I am coming on to those. UC dealt with the fact that, for some, there was in effect a 90% tax rate.

The well-documented 16, 24 and 30-hour cliff edges were significant barriers for people. It was so confusing and complex that £2.4 billion-worth, we believe, of claims went untaken each year across 700,000 claimants, who were some of the most vulnerable people. My role in the DWP is to represent vulnerable people going through the benefits system and it was often those people who were missing out on money because they were simply unaware that they were entitled to the support that we rightly wanted them to have.

Ruth George: Will the Minister give way?

Justin Tomlinson: Let me make a bit of progress and I will give way if I have time. The hon. Member for South Shields has raised some important questions and I want to try to cover as many as I can in the limited time. If I can, I will come back to the hon. Lady.

There have already been much needed improvements, partly through the additional £4.5 billion cash boost that has been secured in recent Budgets. There are the changes to advance payments, particularly to make that a part of the discussion in the initial conversation. We have changed repayments from six months to 12 months to 16 months and the rate at which they are done. That is something that we will continue to review. There is the additional, non-repayable two weeks' housing benefit, worth up to £237, and the recent announcement of an additional two weeks of ESA, JSA or income support, worth up to £200. We have scrapped the seven days' waiting. There are the alternative payments—direct to landlords—on housing, and more frequent payments where we feel that will help. There is the additional £1,000 work allowance, worth £630, which alone came to £1.7 billion. There is the 12-month exemption from the minimum income floor for the self-employed, and there is the increase in the severe disability premium from £158 to £326.

However, there are areas where we still need to do further work. The hon. Member for South Shields talked about digital by default. I think we do need to look at that. We have alternatives in place, but we also need to be more proactive in recognising those who would need that support. We have to identify vulnerable claimants and a major step was to put in place a formal arrangement—I championed this—with Citizens Advice. It will remain independent of us, it is widely respected and it is best placed to give support, particularly to vulnerable claimants, not just on the digital side, if that is needed, but general support as people navigate the benefits to which they should be entitled.

Building on that, we have to make sure that stakeholders are absolutely key and at the heart of everything we do in training our frontline staff and providing support for claimants. For example, a month before Christmas, I was working very closely with Women's Aid, Refuge and ManKind, meeting three or four times, so that they could do a root and branch review of the training we do to help to identify potential victims of domestic abuse, update our training manuals and guidance, feed in the feedback they receive from their supporters, and look at the best ways to identify potential victims, refer them to the maximum number of local and national support organisations, and work on the level of support we can offer. That is a principle I would like to see formalised, so that it does not just happen because it is a topical issue; it is a given going forward and we look to do that in many areas.

A lot was said about measures of poverty and what the reality is out there. What we do know is that there are 1 million fewer people in absolute poverty—a record low—including 300,000 children. On the different measures of relative and absolute poverty before and after housing, all are no higher than in 2010 and three are now lower. The average income of the poorest fifth in society under our Government has increased by £400 in real terms.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Does the Minister agree with Professor Alston's assessment that, because the Government use four different measures of poverty, they can essentially say what they want about the figures? The reality is that there are 14 million people living in poverty in the UK.

Justin Tomlinson: The hon. Lady has just used one of the statistics. There is cross-party work on looking at alternatives. We are very interested to see if there is a way we can find statistics that we can all agree on. I think that is one area on which we do all agree.

The richest fifth are £800 less well-off under this Government. We are rightly targeting support at those who are most in need. Household incomes have never been higher and income inequality has fallen, having risen under the last Labour Government.

Many Members referred to food banks. Food affordability, the ability to afford a meal, has almost halved in the last five years. It is down to 5.4%. That is 2.5% lower than the EU average. There is still more to do in that area, which is why I am committed to working a lot more closely with the food bank network in this country. For a variety of reasons, some people may be going to food banks who should be receiving formal support. I want to make it as easy as possible to identify, to refer them and to get them back in to the system, so they can receive the full support.

Liz McInnes indicated dissent.

Justin Tomlinson: The hon. Lady is shaking her head. I do not understand why anybody would not want to do everything within their power to identify vulnerable people in society and give them the support we want to give to them. The very heart of the question raised by the hon. Member for South Shields is: is there a will from the Government? There absolutely is—from me and right through the Government.

We are going to keep on working with all stakeholders and partnership organisations to ensure that those in most need in society receive the support that they should. We are also looking at homelessness. Rightly, we have put in an additional £1.2 billion, building on the principles of the duty to refer. We have some exciting pilots: the Newcastle trailblazer; partnership working led by Crisis, which has had some really positive findings; and the Housing First initiatives in Manchester, Liverpool

and the west midlands. Again, they are on the principles of identifying, referring and supporting. There are exciting developments from those pilots and they will go to the heart of future roll-out support.

The key for me, with my individual role in the Department, is sharpening up the tailored support, whether for care leavers, ex-offenders or the parental conflict programme, and ensuring that those who need the extra support that many of us in our lives have been able to take for granted are given it to unlock everybody's potential. Some of the areas I felt were missing from the report related to education attainment to unlock people's potential. I went to a school that was at the bottom of the league tables and two of my best friends went to prison. It is absolutely key that we ensure that, regardless of people's background, they are given the maximum opportunity to succeed. I wholeheartedly support the significant improvements we are making in education.

Thelma Walker: As a former headteacher, I talk to a lot of my former colleagues. Many of them, of a morning, are washing children's clothes and giving them breakfast. They are having to give children extra lunch because they are starving. Does the Minister agree that that is totally unnecessary and inappropriate? We should be caring for the most vulnerable in our society.

Justin Tomlinson: That is why it is absolutely right that we have targeted support at the poorest in society, so the poorest fifth are now £400 better off in real terms than they were under the Labour Government. We will continue to do that work.

By prioritising sound financial management and a strong, growing economy, we have been able to deliver record employment in every region of the country. Wages are rising the fastest in a decade. We introduced the national living wage, income tax threshold changes and universal credit childcare up to 85% of costs, which is worth up to £15,000 to parents with two or more children, and we doubled free childcare. Those are all priorities for this Government, because we recognise that everybody should be supported, regardless of their background. By treating people as individuals in a simplified system that can give tailored, personalised support, we can unlock their potential, regardless of their unique challenges and opportunities.

As I said, we have to take many of the findings and opinions seriously. We are doing a huge amount of work, and we will continue to do so. I thank the hon. Member for South Shields for raising this very important issue.

Question put and agreed to.

10.40 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 7 January 2019

[MR VIRENDRA SHARMA *in the Chair*]

Televised Election Debates

4.30 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 228572 relating to an independent commission on televised election debates.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I start by thanking the petitioner, Jonathan Levy from Sky News, who began this petition as part of the Sky News “Make Debates Happen” campaign, and also the more than 130,000 members of the public who have signed the petition since September 2018, which has led to this debate today. The e-petition states:

“Genuine leaders’ debates took place in 2010, but in the next two elections didn’t happen.”

It calls for the electoral laws to be amended to make it mandatory for party leaders to take part in televised debates, and also proposes establishing an independent debates commission to set the rules and format of such debates, which the petition states

“would take decision making out of the politicians and broadcasters’ hands and ensure TV debates become a regular fixture of UK elections.”

It is worth noting that the Sky News “Make Debates Happen” campaign has received a fair amount of cross-party support from some prominent Members of the House, and I want to acknowledge the work that my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) has been carrying out on his private Member’s Bill, which will be shortly coming before the House, to make general election leaders’ debates take place. I am sure we all look forward to hearing his contribution to this debate in due course.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese (Slough) (Lab): I wholeheartedly commend Sky News and others for their initiative for an independent commission on televised election debates. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there should be an independent commission rather than this being left to the Prime Minister of the day’s political whims as to what is in their best interest, and that maybe we should also have deputy leaders’ debates within that framework?

Steve Double: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point, which I will develop later. If we are to have regular leaders’ debates and formalise that process, it is absolutely right that that be managed by an independent commission—as he rightly says—to take it out of the hands of politicians and ensure that it is carried out in an orderly and fair manner. On extending this to deputy leaders, I am not sure I would go that far, but I believe that the deputy leader of the hon. Gentleman’s party is indeed keen for such a debate to take place.

We are here today to debate having debates, and I believe that this petition is very timely in its coming to the House, because there is no doubt that the nature of politics in this country has changed considerably in recent times. The growth of the 24-hour news cycle and

the development of social media mean that what the public have come to expect of their political leaders has changed. We now generally expect our leaders to be much more visible and accessible than they were in previous generations. I believe that it is in this context that the matter of holding leaders’ debates must find its place.

Only last month we saw what can happen, when a debate was proposed between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition on the EU withdrawal vote. After various to-ings and fro-ings, it proved very difficult to find agreement on that debate and it ended up not happening. I am not sure that what we saw take place last month reflected very well on our democratic process.

It is also interesting and worth noting that the petition had at that time reached around 60,000 signatures, and the number of signatures it was attracting had really slowed up. After that debate was proposed and then failed to take place, there was a sudden surge of signatures that pushed the petition well over the 100,000 mark very quickly. That shows the interest among the public in televised leaders’ debates, but also perhaps demonstrates the frustration that many people felt—the to-ing and fro-ing and horse-trading that went on at that time did not materialise into a debate taking place. There is clear evidence of an appetite among a large part of the public to see our political leaders debate on TV.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I apologise for missing the start of the hon. Gentleman’s speech. I agree that what happened last month did not reflect particularly well on politics in the British state, but one of the big problems with that episode was that it was seen as a debate between just the Labour party and the Conservative party. Does he agree that if we are to have these formalised television debates—they are vital for democracy—every single party contesting those elections should have a part to play?

Steve Double: I am not at all surprised at the point the hon. Gentleman makes, for obvious reasons, and that is one of the big challenges and questions that would need to be addressed. It is right that it be addressed by an independent commission, because clearly there is a tension and a balance that has to be struck on leaders’ debates when it comes to who is included, how many debates there are and so forth.

We need to ensure that we strike the right balance between all political parties in that process, and also meet the expectation of a large part of the public—they want to see a debate between people who have a realistic chance of being the future Prime Minister. That is one of the big tensions that leaders’ debates create, and it would need to be addressed by the independent commission, but I absolutely take on board the hon. Gentleman’s point.

The fact is that fewer and fewer of our constituents vote for us, our political parties or indeed our leaders based simply on what they read in the leaflets we put through their doors or in newspapers. There have been significant changes to the way we interact with one another and to how we gain the information we need through the media, as well as through social media, to inform ourselves before we decide how to vote. There is a clear expectation among the public that politicians, and particularly leaders of political parties, be much more visible and accessible than they were previously.

[Steve Double]

I believe the public want greater opportunities to see the political leaders in action and interacting with each other to build up a more complete picture of who they are and what they stand for. Party leaders have been at the forefront of some of the changes that have taken place and the election campaigns of all main parties now focus much more on the leader than was previously the case. Often, their style of leadership is scrutinised carefully. Televised debates are a great opportunity for our political leaders to present their case and communicate directly with voters through the TV screen, into their living rooms and on their smartphones. They are also a way for leaders to showcase the rigorous debates on important national matters that we see week after week here in Parliament while putting them into a format that is much more accessible for the public.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman mentioned TV channels. Is not the problem which TV channel would get the debate? They are all looking for that prize.

Steve Double: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point that the independent commission would need to decide on. I believe it is important that we have a commission that is independent of politicians and broadcasters to manage the process and decide who would be involved in the debates and who would broadcast them. I think the debates should be accessible and shared across as many broadcasters as possible, but the independent commission would have to manage that.

It is probably inevitable that debates will become a regular feature of our elections in the future. Although not everyone will welcome that, that is clearly the direction of travel. Debates took place in 2010 and were generally well received by the public. I believe that the public now expect debates to happen regularly, so it would be better to embrace that expectation and put a proper process in place for debates, rather than go through the dance we have seen at every recent election.

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): Can my hon. Friend point to any evidence that supports that comment? That is quite a sweeping statement and it would be interesting if he backed it up with some evidence or proof.

Steve Double: Which statement is my hon. Friend asking me to clarify?

Simon Hart: My hon. Friend's claim that the televised debates were well received by the public. The extent to which the public viewed them would be an interesting add-on to his comments.

Steve Double: If I remember the figures correctly, I think that about 10 million watched the leaders' debates in 2010. I base that comment on what I perceived from the voting public—I was out campaigning in that election for someone else, and I saw on the doorstep that the debates sparked a great deal of interest—and on the fact that many people were disappointed that debates did not happen recently. I take my hon. Friend's point that views on debates are mixed—they are not universal—but I believe that the public have a growing appetite for them.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on introducing the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. To back up what he is saying, this is what the Hansard Society found in its 2018 "Audit of Political Engagement":

"Among different sources of news and information respondents used to inform their decision-making at the 2017 general election, party leaders' debates and political interviews were the most important".

Although the process was imperfect in 2017, voters nevertheless said that debates were among the most important sources informing their decision making.

Steve Double: I agree. There is a growing appetite and many more voters today use leaders' appearances on television, whether in head-to-head debates or in other formats, to get the information they need to make an informed decision.

I feel that the current situation, with horse-trading between the parties and a sense that no one really knows whether debates will happen or not—people set out their criteria, and we cannot be sure how serious anyone is about wanting the debates to take place—is not helpful and does not reflect well on our democratic process. I therefore believe that it is time to embrace debates and formalise the process so everyone is clear about the expectations. They should be taken out of the political sphere and put into the hands of an independent body that can hopefully manage the process much better.

Sky News laid out some proposals for the independent commission that is proposed to manage this process. It said that the commission should be established by parliamentary statute and funded solely by agreed contributions by UK broadcasters—I am sure we would all agree that the taxpayer should not fund the commission or the debates; they must be paid for by the broadcasters. It said that the commission should be made up of former judges, civil servants, broadcasters and other public figures who have experience in the media and politics, and overseen by a Cross-Bench peer with relevant experience, and that it should ensure that the general public have the opportunity to see the leaders of the political parties that could form a Government debate each other by including at least one televised debate between electorally realistic candidates for Prime Minister before every general election. I believe that those sensible proposals would put in place a framework that would ensure that the process is managed well and happens in an orderly and fair manner.

Simon Hart: I am not being awkward for the sake of it. A televised debate is just one means that a party or leader has of communicating with voters in the run-up to an election. What is so special about that form of media? Why should the independent commission not have any say over any of the other methods through which we communicate with our potential voters? It seems strange to isolate television as the preferred means by which to impose this new regime and to disregard social media, for example, which probably reaches as many people—I do not know the exact figures—just as effectively. Why would we stick with just one?

Steve Double: Leaders' debates on television are unique because the leaders of political parties go head to head with each other. On social media, political parties primarily

promote their own leader or policies. Head-to-head debates, which clearly need to be managed and adjudicated fairly and transparently, are quite different from parties' campaigning on other media platforms. Party political broadcasts on TV are already regulated, and this proposal is an extension of that. The head-to-head nature of TV debates means that they are a slightly different animal from regular campaigning.

I think we should embrace debates. As has been mentioned, we must balance any decision to formalise regular leaders' debates with people's legitimate concerns. We have to acknowledge that not everyone believes that this is a positive step or the right way forward. In the run-up to this debate, the House of Commons social media team carried out a very quick, unscientific survey on its Facebook page. It asked:

"Should party leaders have to take part in a TV debate before a general election?"

The response was mixed. More commenters were opposed to televised leaders' debates than were in favour. Many felt that TV debates are largely about performance and that they facilitate judgments based on personality, appearance and media-savviness, rather than on a leader's capacity to be Prime Minister. Some referred to the Americanisation of British politics and suggested that debates could result in a more presidential style of politics, which runs contrary to our parliamentary institutions and tradition. Others pointed to the perceived gap between politicians and voters, and said that canvassing constituents and other forms of direct engagement would be far more useful. It is right to acknowledge that not everyone is entirely enthusiastic about this proposal and we must balance those views. It is important that we weigh up the genuine concerns and reflect on them before any decision to press ahead is made. I have personally considered the pros and cons of regular debates. Although I believe that we will inevitably reach that point and that it is probably better to embrace and shape the idea rather than resist it, a number of important points need to be considered.

It is important that we do not allow leaders' debates to dominate political campaigning in general elections. Debates should not replace other forms of campaigning and should complement the election campaign, rather than replace or dominate it, so there must be careful consideration of how many debates are scheduled. We had in three in 2010, which was probably too many. I think it would more naturally sit at one or two.

It is also important that we think carefully about the timing of debates. During the 2010 campaign and the debates that took place then, I was very much aware of the role of postal votes. Today, increasing numbers of voters choose to vote by post, and we need to recognise that for many millions of people across the country, polling day is not election day. It happens several days before election day, when their postal votes land on their doorsteps. We need to take that into account. It was wrong that in 2010 some of the debates happened after the postal votes had landed, and some people had already voted before all the debates took place. Certainly, if I had any role in this, I would strongly recommend that all leaders' debates took place on television before postal votes were dispatched, to ensure that every voter had a chance to see the televised debates before they had the opportunity to vote.

Another benefit is that that would free up the last couple of weeks of the campaign. Those final two weeks of the campaign would not be dominated by televised leaders' debates but by the other, more traditional forms of campaigning. I think that would be the right thing to do. I am sure that many of us remember David Cameron's comments when reflecting on the 2010 debates. He said that

"they took all the life out of the...campaign"

in those final weeks because they sucked in so much energy and attention. Avoiding that would be very welcome.

Sound and informed debates are one of the fundamental pillars of our parliamentary democracy, and it makes sense that the voting public can see our political leaders in debate during general election campaigns. We need to accept that our politics continue to change, and to adapt to changes in how people communicate and inform themselves. We should embrace that change in our election campaigning. Leaders' debates are a good format for making politicians more accessible to voters and, should we decide to formalise regular leaders' debates, it is absolutely right that responsibility for managing the process is taken out of the hands of politicians and broadcasters and put into the hands of an independent commission. It should be completely funded by broadcasters, and the bill should not in any way come to rest on the taxpayer.

I trust that the debate will prove a useful opportunity to consider the matter. Once again, I thank Sky News for initiating the petition, as well as the 130,000 people who signed it. I look forward to the contributions of other hon. Members and to hearing the Minister's response.

4.54 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) on introducing the petition in a particularly objective way, even though he supports it. He covered many of the issues. I had not originally intended to engage in the debate and wanted to make only one point, but now that I have been given the opportunity to speak I will wrap that point into a wider speech.

From my perspective, the 2010 debate let the genie out of the bottle and, quite simply, it cannot be put back in. In both 2015 and 2017, when there was at least a precedent, it was bizarre that the Prime Minister of the day decided that debates were not appropriate for those particular elections—that is dangerous. I think that we give Prime Ministers far too much power and that there is a need for an independent voice on this issue. Responsibility should not rest with the Government of the day, let alone the Prime Minister.

My main point, which is the one I had intended to make, is that the broadcasting of politics is in serious need of investigation. I do not know if I am right—the Minister will no doubt put me in my place if I am wrong—but since my return to Parliament, I have been alarmed at the lack of regional coverage, certainly by ITV, which I do not think is meeting its obligations. The required amount of coverage is in statute.

That issue may differ somewhat from the question of whether we should have prime ministerial debates, but it is interesting that the petition was initiated by Sky, which is not subject to the same rigours as both the

[Dr David Drew]

BBC and ITV, and it is disappointing that our mainstream media do not want to get as much as they should from the political scene. I do not believe that broadcasters should show debates at the peak time of 7 o'clock—there are reasons why that would go down badly with the wider electorate—but to my mind, the rules and regulations on how much politics should be shown at both national and regional levels are not being adhered to, which is why this debate is particularly apposite.

We should be able to remove the matter from party politics, implement an independent scrutiny arrangement and make sure that politics is properly covered in the media—certainly in the broadcast media, which have more control than print media. I hope that the matter does not end with the next prime ministerial debate and that we consider more wholeheartedly the way in which broadcasting is currently handled and ensure that sufficient time is given to politics. I do not expect the Minister to count every minute with a stopwatch—although perhaps she has time for that—but I think we are being short-changed, and we ought to pay attention to that.

The hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) may be on to something. He may come at the issue from a different angle from me, and he probably does not share my view—I am not sure he is convinced that this is how we should conduct our politics—but he certainly made the point that debates should be subject to some form of wider scrutiny, and I share that view. I think it is important to put that on record.

The debates have to be held in the fairest and most impartial way possible, which is why responsibility needs to be taken away from the Prime Minister. It cannot in any way be fair or impartial for one person to decide whether to go on television to defend their party's policies—during debates, it is a party standing for election, not the Government—so that decision should be taken away from them.

Whether we like it or not, we all watch the US presidential debates, which always seem to be the centrepiece of the whole presidential campaign. I do not know whether votes are won or lost by those debates; Richard Nixon certainly lost some, but whether they are won is another matter. The fact is that that approach is built into the American constitution, because Americans have a President. I must make it very clear, however, that our Prime Minister is not a President, and we should constrain the role of the Prime Minister. Nevertheless, television debates are a way in which the public can find at least some comfort that the person who will lead the Government is able to answer questions in a format that they can access, so that they may make up their own minds.

The debate should be held earlier, as the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay has said, recognising that so many people vote by post nowadays. Given that we have the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 and we know when the next election should take place, I do not understand why we do not yet know how many days that election campaign will be held over. It would be good to regulate that as well, so that we know when during the campaign the debate will take place. That should all be laid down so that candidates can prepare for the debate and the public can be made aware of the timing. The question whether we should have two, three

or only one television debate needs to be investigated properly and to be the subject of debate in the House. That is why we are in this Chamber today.

My last point reinforces what the hon. Gentleman said: the debate on a so-called debate on the meaningful vote degenerated into a farce—including whether it would be on the BBC or ITV, what format it would take, who would be interviewing, and whether members of the public would form part of the panel—and that did not help us in this place. It looked like our self-interest always comes to the fore. If we genuinely want to reach out to people, we have to accept impartial rules for how a debate is conducted.

I hope, therefore, that any commission would have a wider range of responsibilities than those relating to a prime ministerial debate. Any crucial issue should be subject to rules regarding who will be interviewed, how they will be interviewed, and at what time. All that should be laid down in advance, rather than be subject to a Dutch auction between the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister that makes it look like it is about which one of them blinks first. That does none of us any good in the long run.

This has been a useful debate. I think that most of us would support revisiting the issue and it being dealt with properly by Parliament and the Government of the day. Anything that adds to people's interest in politics has to be a good thing. Of course, it has to be managed properly and we have to strike a balance with regard to the participating parties. That will be difficult, given that so many parties are represented in this House, not to mention those outside it. There must, therefore, be a *de minimis* level, based on the previous general election, to decide who is entitled to take part; otherwise, people would invent themselves as party leaders just to get a free hit on the television.

All those things need to be looked at, and the only way in which we can do so is to have an independent commission with the powers and duty to ensure that it is done properly and in a way that enhances, rather than belittles, our democracy.

5.3 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It is great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew)—I agree with virtually everything he said—and my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), who introduced the motion in a very reasoned way. I also thank the Petitions Committee for the debate—one of the advantages to come out of the expenses scandal is that the public can have things they are interested in debated in this House.

I am delighted that we have such an excellent Minister present to respond to the debate and to agree with everything I say. I am very interested to hear what she has to say, as I will be to hear the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), and the spokesperson for the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard)—two excellent parliamentarians.

I am particularly interested in what the shadow Minister will say, because at some time in the future his party might be in government. I hope that what he says today

will apply when Labour is in government. It is a problem that people are quite keen on TV debates when in opposition, but not when in power.

Kevin Brennan: I should point out that when I was in Government, the Prime Minister at the time did agree to a television debate—in 2010.

Mr Bone: I will come to that specific point, because it is a very good example.

I am very grateful to Sky News, because it has done something really useful: it has got the wider public thinking about these debates. We cannot arrange them two or three months before a general election; we have to have an independent commission, because the problem is that the party with the advantage does not want to have a TV debate. The only time we get a debate is, for example, if the Prime Minister thinks that the Government are behind and the Leader of the Opposition wants publicity. That is exactly what happened with Gordon Brown. I would suggest that he thought it right to have a debate because he was behind.

I thought that the debate between Gordon Brown, David Cameron and Nick Clegg was very good. When we go out campaigning during a general election, we have a campaign session in the morning and in the afternoon, and between 5 pm and 7 pm in the evening. I remember getting back one evening after campaigning, going to the gym, putting on a headset and listening to the debates. The only thing that I remember really is the phrase, “I agree with Nick”, but the debates were very useful in helping electors to make up their minds on how to vote.

Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con): My hon. Friend mentioned Nick Clegg’s participation in that debate, but that was part of the problem raised by both the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) and my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double). Should not the debate be for those with a credible possibility of becoming Prime Minister? What we ended up with then was Cleggmania and a disastrous coalition Government.

Mr Bone: My hon. Friend might say that, but I couldn’t possibly do so. However, I certainly agree with the first bit. When I promote my private Member’s Bill, I will explain why the debate should be between only the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition: in a leaders’ debate, we look at who is going to be Prime Minister.

Those of us in this Chamber get some spin-off advantages from leaders’ debates. For us constituency candidates, there is nothing worse than to be told that we are to get a visit from the leader of our party, because we know that we will lose days of campaigning as a result. First, we will be asked to find a suitable venue that ties into everything the leader wants to promote. Desperately, we find somewhere, talk to people and they agree, but then the party officials say, “No, we don’t want that”, and ask for something else. Eventually, they decide on somewhere else and they send down an advance team of young people who boss us around and tell us how to run things in our own constituency—that is another day lost. In time, the leader turns up and we get a PR event—they used to be called “Cameron Direct”—where people ask difficult questions of the Prime Minister or the Leader of the Opposition.

But that was not the case: all those questions were planted. There was no real debate at all and we lost three or four days of campaigning. If we had leaders’ debates, that would at least give us a few days on which they would not be able to visit us in our constituencies.

Where I disagree slightly is with the idea that leaders’ debates dominate the decision making of the British public. I do not think that that is the case, nor that there is a national swing any more. Voters are much more savvy now, voting on what is in their interests. The last general election had all sorts of strange results, but if votes had been determined purely by the party leaders and what they said, the results would have been much more uniform. The debates do not make that sort of difference, but they are an important part of the democratic process.

Those who argue against televised debates say they are all about performance, not substance. Is that not what people used say before the Houses of Parliament were televised? There were exactly the same arguments, and we now know that they were completely wrong.

I really wanted to talk about my private Member’s Bill on the televised leaders’ debates commission, which was given its First Reading in 2017 and is scheduled to be debated on 15 March. It is the second Bill on that day, the first being the Prime Minister (Accountability to House of Commons) Bill, which also stands in my name. I assure the House that if that Bill is not moved, the first Bill will be on the leaders’ debate. We have an opportunity in March to move the whole process forward. The Government have little legislative time because of Brexit, but this is a private Member’s Bill. On 15 March, if nobody objects, we can move forward and make the Bill an Act of Parliament. I hope that the Opposition and the Government will allow the House to make its own decision on this matter and not try to block the Bill with some parliamentary procedure.

Much of what Sky News says is already proposed in my Bill: to set up an independent commission responsible for holding a number of leaders’ debates during the regulated period. My Bill calls for three debates: one with the leaders of all the parties represented in the House of Commons at the time of the general election, and the second and third between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. As my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway) mentioned, we want a debate between people who are likely to be Prime Minister, although I do not want to leave out the smaller parties.

There is a problem that I accept: by having a debate between the leaders of the parties in the House of Commons, not every party will be included. But would we really want a communist party or the British National party in the debate? I think not. There was a serious problem with the UK Independence party, when at the height of its power it had no MPs but clearly had very large support. I would leave it to the commission to decide whether to bring any other party leaders into the debate, but the leader of any party represented in the House would have to attend. By the way, attendance would not be optional; the Prime Minister or the Leader of the Opposition could not offload it to someone. No; they would have to attend.

People say the debates would take up lots of the party leaders’ time, but if they had to prep for weeks on end they could not be much good as a leader. They should know what they think, and be able to go out and debate.

[Mr Bone]

Under my Bill, there would be proper debates. The moderator would ask a question, but the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition could debate with each other, back and forth. There would be an actual debate, not rehearsed lines delivered before they moved on.

We can argue that we do not have a presidential system, but we have moved a very long way towards a presidential system since Tony Blair. I remember in the last election, Conservative MPs were all there, standing with Theresa. That was the message—it went down well—because the leader is so associated with local politics.

Jonathan Edwards: The notion that we are moving to a presidential system worries me greatly, and perhaps is one of the concerns about formalising a TV debate schedule. I have served in three Parliaments, two of which were hung Parliaments—one with a small minority Government. Does that not mean there should be a requirement for every single political party that could form a part of the Government to have a full role in the TV debates?

Mr Bone: Under my Bill, there would have to be a minimum of three debates—two head to head between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition and one with all party leaders. That is the minimum, but if the commission thought it was right to have more debates, it could have them. I want a minimum number of compulsory, not optional, debates—the leaders would have to turn up.

The make-up of the commission is where I move slightly away from Sky News's suggestion. One commission member should be nominated by the Prime Minister and one by the Leader of the Opposition, two by broadcasters and three by the Speaker of the House of Commons, one of whom would be the chairman. The commission would serve for the whole Parliament, and a new commission would be set up depending on the election results. That is slightly different, but it would be funded entirely by the broadcasters. The object would be to have as much coverage as possible, and it would help to inform the debate.

We have a very good Minister and I know she will take our remarks on board. This is an opportunity for the Government to do something now that will benefit democracy when the general election comes around. The Prime Minister has said that she will not lead the Conservative party into the next general election. It is a great opportunity, as part of her legacy, to do this. I hope it will not be dismissed out of hand.

One of the great advantages of this debate is that on Second Reading in March, even if we have only limited time, I can point to this debate and say, "This is what Members said." One reason I have not published the Bill yet is because I wanted to hear what Members said today, so that that could be incorporated into the Bill. I entirely take on the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay about the two polling dates—the postal vote deadline and polling day. It is absolutely right that the leaders' debate between all party leaders should be before the postal vote date, and at least one of the head-to-heads should be before the postal voting date. I will incorporate that into my draft Bill.

I hope Members here will find the time to serve on the Bill Committee when we move forward, so that all the details can be worked out. I hope this Minister will be on the Bill Committee, so we can get an Act of Parliament. Some people say I am being hopeful, but in this Parliament I have already managed to make one of my private Member's Bills an Act of Parliament. As it happens, I have another on drone regulation, which seems to have some relevance. Through private Members' Bills we can get what the electorate want.

Mr Dhesi: I agree that the proposal is entirely sensible and inevitable, but surely the fear is that the Government may kick the petition and the campaign into the long grass. Electoral laws are widely accepted as outdated, and in February 2016 the Law Commission published an interim report calling for current laws governing elections to be rationalised into a single consistent legislative framework governing all elections. Three years later, the Government have yet to respond, so what chance does the hon. Gentleman's Bill have of seeing the light of day?

Mr Bone: I will park other electoral reform, but the public want this particular reform; the broadcasters want it, I argue most MPs want it and it is an opportunity for the Government to do the right thing. We need a bit of good will at the moment, so it would be a nice thing to do.

I thank Members who will come to support my Bill and those who will oppose it.

Adam Holloway: Will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the extraordinary and supremely able editor of Sky News, my friend from ITN John Ryley? He has been the driving force behind this.

Mr Bone: I was supposed to say that earlier. I mentioned Sky News, but it is John Ryley and he has done really well. I also thank Adam Boulton for what he has been doing at Sky News. He is always fair and balanced when it comes to Brexit.

Thank you for listening to me, Mr Sharma. I am interested to hear what other Members have to say; hopefully, I can incorporate some of their comments into the Bill.

5.20 pm

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), I originally turned up to listen to the debate and possibly to make an intervention, but I will follow the excellent speech by the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone). I start with two disappointments. One is that there are not more right hon. and hon. Members present. This is an important issue; I can guarantee that every Member of Parliament has a view about how debates on television and in the media should be conducted during a general election. It is a disappointment that more people have not turned up. It is disrespectful to the 130,000 people who petitioned for the debate and it does not do justice to the importance of the issue.

My second disappointment is that the three hon. Members who spoke before me all came to the conclusion that we need a quango to regulate debates. Reluctantly, I agree with them. As we do not have a written constitution, it has the merit of being flexible; when the world

changes, the processes within this place and electorally change. If people were acting with democratic spirit and good will, and as television and the media have developed, one would have expected politicians and political parties to have responded to that by enabling people to benefit from having the debate broadcast on television in their front rooms. That has not happened for the reasons stated explicitly by the hon. Member for Wellingborough. When Leaders of the Opposition are massively ahead in the opinion polls, they do not want a debate. Why would they risk hitting a banana skin? When Prime Ministers are in No. 10 and ahead in the opinion polls, they want to avoid exactly the same banana skin. Therefore, I think we need a regulatory body.

My heart sank when the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) went through the list of the great and the good who would have to serve on a quango to regulate television debates—judges and other people. Sadly, we have developed a population of quangocrats who serve on many quangos, scratch each other's backs and move from one quango to another. That means that sometimes we do not get the breadth and the quality in those organisations that we should. I make a partisan point here, from the position I have taken on the Brexit debate. It is extraordinary that the total membership of the Electoral Commission are remainers. The difficult problem in setting up any quango is not going to the pool of people who have made themselves available to serve—often public spiritedly; I do not want to be too mean—as it is a closed group. Reluctantly, I think we have to have a body that will consider the complicated issues involved, but I hope it is not the list that was given by the able motivator of the motion, the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay.

It is important that we have televised debates or discussions set up, in whatever form, because sometimes we do not state the blindingly obvious: that debate is at the core of democracy and our society. We need to have that debate in as many forums as we can. When the BBC was the monopoly broadcaster in the 1950s, it might have been sensible to just have the debate on the BBC, but now we have a range of social media and different television broadcasters, including access to television stations from around the world, as well as traditional print media. We need to ensure that there is regulation on television, which is where most people look for discussion during a general election. The viewing figures for the debates in 2010 were immense. However much Cleggmania we had in that election—and I got worried looking at the figures because it seemed that the Lib Dems were going to get a huge number of votes in my constituency, but I went out every day and I suppose I must have knocked on a Lib Dem door, but nobody admitted to it through the whole campaign—those debates were important, as the people and leaders challenged each other, but I do not think they changed very much.

That has been the case in many elections. I remember the opinion polls ticking over on the bottom of the Sky television screen in the 1997 election, barely shifting half a point during the whole election. We live in a time where the world is changing and politics are more fluid than they have ever been. We need a response to that. It would be the difficult job of a regulatory body to balance up the major parties and who would be invited. It is said, rather glibly, that only the leaders of the

parties that are likely to provide the Prime Minister should be there. If we looked at the experience in Canada, the people who were going to be Prime Minister before the election eight or nine years ago were not elected. One of the major parties got 2%. There have been major changes in European Union countries. Parties that were permanently in the ascendancy, such as the Social Democrats in Sweden, are now minor parties. Sometimes these changes happen very quickly. There has never been a more intense time for debate.

It is going to be a difficult job for any regulatory body that is set up, but I think it is vital. It is not just that there are a lot of different outlets for information nowadays. We have coined the phrase “fake news” for a lot of the information that has been used in elections and referendums, because of the internet. One of the great things about a debate is the ability to challenge lies. In the old cliché, if you keep on telling lies I will keep on telling the truth. That is the purpose of debate.

People have complained about the referendum—about whether certain facts were facts—but it is the purpose of debate to expose such things. What better place than on television, with a huge audience, to get those issues out? I do not think that the 2010 election was affected by the television debates, but I believe that the 2017 election was massively affected by the debates, quite simply because the Prime Minister did not have the courage to debate. She would not put the case for the Conservative party, which went from having a large lead in the opinion polls to not being able to form a majority Government. If anyone doubts the power of the debate, I think the television companies were right to empty-seat the Prime Minister and go ahead without her. It was a bit strange, and it looked a bit strange, but it exposed the fact that the leader of one of our major parties was unprepared to get up and defend its position.

I have another example of the positive side of television debate and discussion, although not in a formal leaders' debate. It certainly affected me when I saw how important it was. Hon. Members will remember the rise of the British National party. It did not rise to a significant extent, but it looked as if it was making progress when it was led by the bottom-feeder Nick Griffin. On the evening when he went on “Question Time” I was in someone's front room talking about pavements and street lighting. At the end of the meeting they said to me, “Are you going to go and buy a bottle of wine?” I thought, “What do these people know about my drinking habits? That's a bit strange,” but every single one of those people, living in terraced houses in north Manchester, was going back to watch Nick Griffin and Jack Straw, and the other party people on “Question Time”. Griffin was destroyed and the BNP fell apart. That is the power of debate, and however complicated it is to deal with parties that have significant support with no representation, and those such as the Scottish National party and Plaid Cymru whose primary objective is to get out of this place, and who do not want their leader to be Prime Minister but who clearly have a significant democratic impact in the whole United Kingdom, we should do what we can to facilitate those positions.

I could go on speaking about this issue, which is an important one, on which we should be giving support. Having heard what the hon. Member for Wellingborough said, I wish him well with his Bill. It may need some tweaks. However, the whole of the House of Commons

[Graham Stringer]

and House of Lords should get together, because when we are away from elections we all believe in debate. It is only vested interest, when we think we can grab an election without debating, that stops it happening. I did not intend to speak, but the debate is a good one, and it is a shame more people are not here. Sky is to be congratulated, as are the people who signed the petition, on stimulating the discussion.

5.33 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I commend the organisers of the petition, the Petitions Committee for allowing time for the debate and my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), who introduced the motion so effectively.

I agree with the former Deputy Prime Minister Lord Whitelaw, who said in the House of Lords in 1990 that Sky News had “a very high reputation”, adding:

“I admire it as do many other people.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 9 October 1990; Vol. 522, c. 195.]

Those comments are relevant today. Sky News is an award-winning broadcaster, picking up awards from the British Academy of Film and Television Arts and the Royal Television Society; it has won the RTS news channel of the year award. It therefore has a strong reputation for news coverage. That strength comes from the quality of its journalists, including Beth Rigby, Ed Conway, Mark Stone and Mark White. It undoubtedly has a team of top-notch journalists and is one of the main sources of news in my household. I cannot understand why the channel has threatened an enviable reputation by devoting so much coverage and air time to its own campaign and petition for the leaders’ debates commission.

I am now going to shatter what has so far been the consensus in the debate. In this day and age, when we are all concerned about fake news and the reliability of what we read, watch and interact with, I question the editorial decision by Sky News to report constantly on its own campaign, as if it were actual news rather than simply an attempt to gather more signatures.

The campaign and petition on the Parliament website started in early September 2018, ahead of the party conference season. Since then, Sky News has been reporting on its progress almost every half hour and certainly every hour. Latterly, there has been a running total of the number of signatures in the top left-hand corner of the Sky News screen together with its campaign hashtag. During critical moments of the Brexit debate in this place, and at moments of crisis, either for the Government here or elsewhere in the world when wildfires were sweeping California or conflict was raging in Yemen, Sky News still found time to insert and promote its campaign for election debates.

If the petition was gathering huge support it might be argued that that should be reported by Sky News. However, if one looks at the other petitions on the Parliament petitions website that argument falls flat. A petition calling for a ban on the sale of fireworks has 297,000 signatures, which is twice the support that the Sky News petition has. A petition asking for the UK to leave the EU without a deal has the support of almost

300,000 people. Another petition, set up by a young cancer sufferer and calling for the lowering of the age for smear tests from 25 to 18, so as to prevent cancer, has 93,000 signatures.

My point is that but for the fact that Sky News was the promoter of the debate campaign, it would not have been gathering the air time and signatures it has. I have struggled to find any coverage of any of the other petitions, which have either attracted more support or are arguably more worthy, on any Sky News outlet. One hundred and sixty-five of my 74,000 constituents signed the petition and, despite the best efforts of Sky News, only one asked me to attend today’s debate. I felt so strongly about the misuse of Sky News’s position in the broadcast media to promote its own campaign and petition that I had to come and speak.

As to my views on leaders’ debates and the idea of setting up a commission, general elections in the United Kingdom are not about electing a president. Voters elect 650 individual MPs, and from them a Government is formed. My experience of previous elections—to this place and to the Scottish Parliament—is that leaders’ debates suck the oxygen away from local campaigns. The focus on the doorsteps, instead of being on the merits of each candidate and on local issues, is on what will happen or has just happened in the debates. The media reporting is all about how well each leader performed. Who looked good? Who answered the questions best? How did the broadcasters or newsreaders appear? It is not about the substantive issues of the election campaign.

For a period, journalists are not reporting on the critical issues of the election. They become more like commentators at a boxing match. In 2010, as several hon. Members have mentioned, it was perceived that Nick Clegg had performed well in the debate. That resulted in hours of coverage of the so-called Liberal Democrat bounce. However, the actual result showed little or no change in Liberal Democrat support, so how much influence do the debates have? In my view, the drive for leaders’ debates is simply about the media machine and journalists trying to insert themselves into an election campaign rather than doing their job of reporting on the key election issues of the day. They provide little new information to voters.

In the United Kingdom, we have the added complication of four nations with differing political perspectives. If a leaders’ debate is about assessing how potential Prime Ministers perform, how does that model accommodate smaller parties, such as the Scottish National party, the Democratic Unionist party and Plaid Cymru? Other Members have already commented on that issue.

Those parties might have significant support in their own parts of the country, but there is no prospect of their leaders occupying Downing Street. The Sky News proposal does not accommodate what is essentially a way to scrutinise presidential candidates. I note that my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) proposed an alternative, but I do not think that accurately reflects the huge regional variations in how we vote as between the different parts of the United Kingdom. Why, for example, should voters in Cornwall have to listen to the leader of the Scottish National party, when none of the voters in Cornwall has any prospect of voting for the leader of the Scottish National party, whether or not they have any desire to do so?

In the letter that we all received from John Ryley, the head of Sky News, before this debate, we were told that an

“independent commission would remove the ability of political leaders to block debates because of narrow political interest.”

My question is this: if it is the politicians who are blocking this, where are the BBC and ITV in all this? They have been pretty quiet ahead of this debate, which I think is telling. I have had private discussions with the BBC and ITV, and I think a number of hon. Members will have done likewise.

Steve Double: As a matter of accuracy and balance, my hon. Friend might be interested to know that I was interviewed this morning by BBC Scotland about this debate, and there was a great deal of interest in this from the BBC in Scotland.

John Lamont: I am grateful for that comment, but from my constituents’ perspective there has not been much interest. My point was more about the management within ITV, the BBC and BBC Scotland, who are not as supportive as the editorial team behind Sky News appears to have been in pushing this campaign; certainly they do not have equivalent petitions running and have not added their support to the petition being run by Sky News.

I look forward to hearing the rest of the debate and the Minister’s response. I could have said more, only I thought that more colleagues would have wanted to contribute to this debate, given that it is headline news—but it would seem that it is headline news for Sky News and very few other people.

5.41 pm

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I join other hon. Members across the Chamber in congratulating my fellow south-west MP, my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), on the way he introduced this debate and the Petitions Committee on bringing it forward. I also join other colleagues in congratulating Sky News on initiating the petition; it is to be congratulated, certainly, on achieving 130,000 signatures—as my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) said, not for want of trying, given the fairly widespread coverage that Sky News was able to give it.

I suppose I should start with an informal declaration of interest: before I reached this place, I was a broadcast journalist for 20 years. For much of the time I worked, not for Sky News at all, but for the BBC—this is starting to sound less like a declaration of an interest and more like an admission of guilt, is it not?

I suspect people will be unsurprised to hear that, because of that background, I take a close interest in the interaction between the broadcast media and democracy. I have seen it from both sides—poacher turned gamekeeper, if you like—and while I cannot claim ever to have reached the exalted heights of editorial management at the BBC in which I would have been responsible for anything so important as a televised national election debate, I was involved on a regional level in organising debates between candidates in individual constituencies, and many of the arguments run across the piece.

I will admit to having been slightly torn when I heard about this petition, because fundamentally, now as a democratically elected politician and before that as a broadcaster, I want us to do everything possible to engage more people in the democratic process. That is vital. My problem lies in the fact that I remain to be convinced that televised leaders’ election debates are the way to achieve it. I will go on to give a few reasons why I do not believe that to be the case.

I was also torn about the precise merits of this petition as it is written, until I looked at it in detail. The coverage that Sky News has been giving it, as my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk made clear, has made one think that it is simply about who should be organising a debate—an independent electoral commission, in other words—but when one actually looks at the wording, one sees that it seeks to go far further, which is where I have the problem.

The petition says:

“Amend election law to make party leaders take part in a televised debate.”

That, I am afraid, is where the petition lost me, for a number of reasons. First, it is not a matter for legislation to make party leaders take part in an election debate. The second problem I have is this: without wishing to be facetious, supposing that in a parallel universe a Parliament were to pass this law and make it mandatory for party leaders to take part in an election debate, how would they be forced so to do? As I say, I do not wish to be facetious, but if a party leader, the Prime Minister or the Leader of the Opposition declined to take part in such a debate, what would happen on the night of the debate? Would an independent commission send beefeaters with spears to force them into a carriage and take them to Television Centre to take part? It just does not seem plausible to me that such legislation could possibly work.

Mr Bone: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech, but if it were the law of the land that the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister attend these debates, they would do so. To do otherwise would be outrageous.

Peter Heaton-Jones: I do not see that that would be enforceable, although I take my hon. Friend’s point that it would probably be outrageous not to take part so far as electoral ambition was concerned. The point was made eloquently earlier that there is some sign that not taking part in a debate probably does not do a leader any good, but I still stick to the point that I am not clear how one would force a party leader to take part in such an event. I am not convinced that the petition is calling for something that could be delivered in reality.

Generally speaking, although I have said clearly that I welcome any moves to make the democratic process more accessible to our constituents, I am not convinced that TV debates are the way to do that. They have not historically been part of our democratic process. Other hon. Members have said this, so I will not develop the point at length unnecessarily, but only in 2010 did the first leaders’ election debates occur.

We spoke earlier about the figures and, using the wonders of new technology, I have the figures for the 2010 debates here. They are substantial viewing figures, it is true. For the first debate, hosted by ITV, 9.9 million viewers watched. The second debate, hosted by Sky

[*Peter Heaton-Jones*]

News, had 4.2 million viewers and the third, hosted by my former employer the BBC, had 8.6 million. Those numbers are not insubstantial, but nor are they massive. For comparison's sake, about two weeks ago on Christmas day, "Call the Midwife" was watched by 8.7 million people.

The broadcasters shot themselves in the foot somewhat after 2010 by trying to make the point that if we added up those three figures, a total of 22.7 million people watched the debates. That is a bit like saying that, because I am speaking in this debate in this Chamber and I also hope to speak later in a debate in the main Chamber, somehow, miraculously, there are two of me. That is not what those viewing figures show at all, and the organisation Full Fact, whose website I have just accessed, makes that point as well. It is debatable how popular the debates are and how much they are relied on by members of the public to make their decisions.

We do not have a presidential system, as has been described. People may think we have moved towards one whether we like it or not, but constitutionally the voting public do not vote for a Prime Minister.

Graham Stringer: National elections, certainly for the parties that fight seats across the United Kingdom, are fought on the basis of manifestos. Would the hon. Gentleman like to compare the number of people who read our manifestos with the number of people who watched the television debates? He is absolutely right that these are not presidential debates, but the leaders put forward their manifestos.

Peter Heaton-Jones: It is true that manifestos, in my experience, will never make it to the top of the bestseller lists. However, although the hon. Gentleman makes a perfectly reasonable point, there are other ways than a televised leaders' debate in which parties and party leaders can get their messages across and sell their manifestos, which I will come on to.

My main concern about party leaders' debates is that they have a tendency to suck the oxygen out of the rest of the campaign, as was ably mentioned earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk. I take a rather old-fashioned view about this, and perhaps I am aiming for some sunlit uplands that have long since dissipated—if they ever existed in the first place—but I would quite like election campaigns to be about ideas and policies and ideologies. I do not want them to be about whether the Prime Minister was wearing kitten heels, whether the Leader of the Opposition was on the right or the left podium, what colour tie the leader of a third party might have been wearing or whether the TV host of that particular event did a good job, but that is what we will get if we have a campaign that is bookended by two election debates, perhaps a fortnight apart. The first week will be looking forward to debate No. 1, the second week will be looking back at debate No. 1, the third week will be looking forward to debate No. 2 and the fourth week will be looking back at debate No. 2. Where is the time within that actually to debate policies and ideas? The difficulty is that that is what we will end up with.

I speak with a little experience, having worked in politics not only in this country but in Australia, where I worked on election campaigns. There is a longer

history there of leaders' debates on television. I have to say that they are not hugely watched, but they happen, and the public expect them to happen. However, the entire election campaign tends to be about the debate and the process of the debate, rather than the ideas that might be discussed during it. My concern is that that is what we will end up with if we rely on debates as the means to get people interested in the democratic process.

I will move on briefly to the substance of the petition—setting up an independent debates commission. I have a great deal of sympathy with this idea. If there are to be leaders' election debates, we absolutely have to end the current chaotic system of rival broadcasters jockeying for position, putting forward opposing ideas for formats, arguing about how high the podium will be and whether people will enter from stage left or stage right—and that before individual parties start to have their say.

One side will think that a particular format put forward by one broadcaster favours their man or woman, but the other party will say it prefers another format, so we will end up with either no debate or a month of ridiculous discussions about something that only a few nerds in politics and broadcasting are interested in, and once again we will get absolutely no further forward on discussing ideas and policies. I am not convinced that an independent debates commission would change any of that.

I am also not convinced that, even if a commission was set up with a great deal of legislative power behind it, it would be immune from the sort of pressure that is currently brought to bear on the broadcasters by the different party leaders, who each jockey for a different format. I am also not convinced that it would be immune from potential legal action.

The point was well made earlier about how to define a party leader. Someone could suddenly set themselves up as a party leader. Where would that leave us? Should we then say that only potential Prime Ministers may be allowed to take part? This is a very difficult circle to square, and I am not convinced that an independent debates commission would have any success in doing so. However, my overall view is that we are barking up the wrong tree.

I absolutely want more people to be involved in the democratic process—that is vital—and I could understand if we were having this discussion 20 or 30 years ago, but I think the boat has sailed on TV election debates and on expecting people to sit down at 9 o'clock on a random Tuesday evening to watch something on linear television, even though it will be repeated and watched on iPlayer, or the Sky version thereof.

TV debates feel like they are a bit old hat in 2019. There are many more ways through which we can and should encourage people to access the democratic process, as they are already doing. There are any number of social media platforms where, in my experience from the last general election, the real policy debates seem to happen. I am not sure that, in 2019, mandating a TV election debate in prime time is really looking forward at all; it is probably looking backwards.

I was much taken by the point made by the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) about the need for our regional broadcasters to get more involved in the democratic process. That is absolutely crucial. I speak as someone who spent most of his career in regional broadcasting. In my area, BBC Spotlight and ITV News West Country

do a very good job with their coverage of local politics, but maybe we ought to think about such outlets taking a greater role in ensuring that some of the issues are debated on a level more relevant to people in their constituencies.

I will not detain colleagues any longer. I understand the principle behind the petition, and I applaud Sky News for initiating it. I am not opposed to leaders' debates per se, but I remain unconvinced that they are the way forward and I am utterly unconvinced that it is possible or desirable to make it mandatory that they happen. If there is an agreement that they should take place in the future, I absolutely see the argument in favour of a debates commission independently—that is the key word—to decide on their format and timing, taking those decisions out of the hands of the broadcasters and party leaders.

Overall, I do not believe that making debates mandatory is the way forward; I remain very uncomfortable with that. I applaud the Government's response to the petition, which I assume the Minister is about to repeat, which is that they should not change the law in this direction.

5.58 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma, even though you are about to leave.

[*PHILIP DAVIES in the Chair*]

On a Monday morning I usually spend time traveling down from Scotland to take part in the afternoon's business, but today was a little different. Already being here, I had the great privilege and honour of being interviewed live on Sky News from its platform on College Green. It was a very interesting experience, because today there was a cornucopia of dissenters heckling and providing a narrative to the entire episode, including some members of the English Defence League and an evangelical gentleman who all the way through the interview encouraged me to repent my sins.

In the middle of that experience, the redoubtable Adam Boulton asked me whether I would have faith in an independent commission to organise these TV debates. I had to think about that a little, because I would not want to write anyone a blank cheque—particularly not a new quango, were one to be set up—but my response was that I would have more faith in an independent commission to organise TV debates than I have in the way that is done at present, which is a chaotic and anarchic amalgam of political fixers getting together to try to do what is best for them and the broadcasters trying to do what is best for them. I am attracted, therefore, to the idea of putting this on a statutory footing and having in writing the rights and the responsibilities to which the commission would have to adhere in organising the debates.

Three immediate benefits would arise from having an independent commission. The first is that that would take the matter out of party politics, out of the hands of the political fixers, and provide a level playing field and a set of fair rules that everyone would have to abide by. I am sure that from time to time they might prove inconvenient or troublesome to one or other of the parties, but it would none the less be a situation in which everyone had to play by the same set of rules.

The second reason why I would welcome an independent commission is that it would give us the opportunity to ensure that not just third party but fourth, fifth, sixth and other minority voices were represented in the debate. The third reason why I think that having an independent commission would be useful is that that would allow some discussion to take place, and some control, over the format of the debates. We have not spent much time this afternoon talking about format, but I would understand why a lot of people might be sceptical about the idea of television debates if they resembled the circus that we have every Wednesday afternoon at Prime Minister's questions. That is an exercise in how the Executive are not accountable to the legislature, with prearranged and, quite often, pre-rehearsed questions and answers being traded for the benefit of the TV cameras. It is not really an exercise in scrutiny or debate. Allowing a more inquisitive format, whereby people are allowed truly to challenge each other and perhaps are also subject to third-party questioning in moderation would be, it seems to me, extremely beneficial.

Until the last two colleagues spoke, I was worried that this debate would be a bit one-sided; there was consensus among all those who spoke previously. But in the last 20 minutes or so, some arguments have been advanced against the principle of having television debates at all, never mind whether they should be run by an independent commission. I think it is important, as we consider how this argument develops, that we consider the arguments against and see whether they have validity or can themselves be countered. I want to spend a couple of minutes on some of them.

The first is the suggestion—this has been hinted at—that having televised debates would somehow trivialise serious political discourse, that it would be taking politics and important decisions and putting them on television in the name of entertainment. It seems to me that having an independent commission would be the best way to guard against the trivialisation of politics and its being presented as entertainment, because we could build into the process clear rules to prevent that from happening. I also think that when party organisers, media or broadcast officers, or whoever is responsible, express such concerns, they are being a little disingenuous, because those are the very same people who spend an awful lot of time and money looking at the very latest social media platforms and trying to ensure that they are using them as effectively as possible—often by trivialising or, certainly, condensing the political message so that it is easily understood on those very limited platforms.

The other argument against is, "Well, how would you define what a leader is?" I want to discuss at this point the role of the SNP, in particular, in such debates because the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) suggested that someone watching in Cornwall might not care very much about what the leader of the Scottish National party would have to say, were she to take part in a debate. Perhaps that is because he assumes that the leader of the Scottish National party would talk about matters only in relation to Scotland, which is of course the principal brief of the SNP, but it seems to me that televised debates also provide an opportunity for everyone in the place where the election is taking place, which for now would be the United Kingdom, to ask, "What type of Government do we wish to get out of this electoral process?"

[Tommy Sheppard]

As the hon. Gentleman knows, his side was successful and mine unsuccessful back in 2014, in the Scottish independence referendum, so for now, Scotland remains part of the United Kingdom, which means that its representatives in this Parliament have every bit as much right as anyone else to determine and to influence the character of the Government of the United Kingdom. I think that people in Cornwall and everywhere else in the United Kingdom would be extremely interested to know what criteria the SNP would adopt in this Parliament, were it successful in the election, in terms of determining who should form the next Government of the United Kingdom.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con) *rose—*

John Lamont *rose—*

Tommy Sheppard: Let us see whether the hon. Gentlemen make the same point. I will take the intervention from the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk first.

John Lamont: Just to clarify the point that I was making, it was not that the people of Cornwall would not care about what the leader of the SNP would want to say, but that neither she nor the party are on the ballot paper in Cornwall, so the people of Cornwall would not have the opportunity to vote SNP even if they wanted to. If we extend the argument, or the argument that the hon. Gentleman is making, which other parties do we include in the debate if they are also not on the ballot paper?

Tommy Sheppard: Let me just take the intervention from the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham), which I presume is relevant to the same point.

Luke Graham: It is, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He makes a point about having the right people in the right debate, and he is quite right. When the SNP has MPs at Westminster, it is quite right that it should take part in Westminster debates. Should it not be Westminster leaders who take part in Westminster debates and Members of the Scottish Parliament who take part in their own leadership debates? The hon. Gentleman would not want the Prime Minister to take part in a debate for our devolved Parliament, and it should be his Westminster leader, not Nicola Sturgeon, who takes part in a debate for Westminster.

Tommy Sheppard: Members have said in this debate that of course the British system is not a presidential system, so it is not just a matter of who will become the Prime Minister; indeed, we do not elect Prime Ministers in the election, which is constitutionally absolutely correct. For me, the purpose of TV debates is not just to say, “Who is going to be the next Prime Minister?” and to have some gladiatorial contest between the potential challengers for that position. It is a matter of saying, “What do we want the Government of the country to be? What are the serious issues they should adopt? What are their priorities? What is their general direction?”

That is where TV debates can prove extremely useful, in educating the public and raising awareness of those very important issues, and having an independent commission would give us or it the opportunity to ensure that matters were conducted in a way that allowed that to happen, rather than this being seen as some sort of presidential contest.

There has also been a suggestion that somehow it is not quite right that Parliament should seek to make regulations for broadcasters and that it is up to them to cover politics in whatever way they see fit. The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk was critical of Sky, in particular, and the editorial judgments that it makes to cover its own campaign. There is already much regulation about the conduct and coverage of elections in this country. We have a very highly regulated electoral system, and quite right too, so that people are able to make a challenge if something is seen to go wrong. Therefore, the idea of Parliament seeking to regulate the broadcast coverage of an election campaign or any other political campaign seems to me to be entirely consistent with the fair and democratic process that we have of trying to ensure that all these matters are fairly regulated.

There was also a suggestion that somehow a national TV debate would undermine local campaigning. I am sorry, but I just do not buy that. In my experience, and as colleagues have mentioned, people do tune in to the TV debate, perhaps because of how it is presented as a television programme. But the effect of doing that is to engage them with the political process more generally. Having had their appetite whetted a little—perhaps “having been hooked” is the wrong phrase—they move on to take more interest in the local campaigns and to ask questions. Perhaps they even get involved; perhaps they turn up to hustings for local candidates as well. The two things can be perfectly symbiotic: one can encourage the other. Anything that we can do to stimulate political awareness and engagement will be for the long-term benefit of our democracy.

Returning to the question of the role of minority voices, it is important to stress—I say this to the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone)—that this is no longer a two-party political system, if it ever was; there are third, fourth and fifth parties, and they have a right to be represented as well.

Mr Bone: The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech. The whole point of my Bill is to include a debate between the leaders of the smaller parties as well. I hope that the SNP will support the Bill, because it does include that provision.

Tommy Sheppard: That is welcome and important. In the country that I represent in this Chamber, the two major political parties—Labour and Tory—are lucky if they can command half of the electorate’s support between them. Almost half of the entire electorate places its allegiance with parties other than the two main parties in the United Kingdom. That needs to be understood and built into the process.

Before Christmas, when we had the shenanigans about the debate on what to do about Brexit—it was not meant to be an election debate—we had a situation whereby the SNP, the third largest party in this House and the second largest political party in the United

Kingdom in terms of its membership, was likely to be excluded from a debate between the leaders of the Conservative and Labour parties, although it did not take place in the end. The situation was all the more bizarre—the shadow Minister might want to respond to this—given that the leader of the Labour party, as I understand it, has said that if there were to be a general election in the coming months, Labour would commit in its manifesto to implementing Brexit. It might do it differently, but it would none the less commit to implementing Brexit. Therefore, we were going to have a debate between a Conservative way of doing Brexit and a Labour way of doing Brexit, ignoring other voices, which do not want Brexit to happen at all, and conveniently ignoring the fact that opinion polls consistently show that a majority of people across the United Kingdom do not want Brexit to happen at all.

Mr Bone: Rubbish! The hon. Gentleman is making outrageous claims about how the British people would vote. Let's face it: there was one referendum, the decision was made and your side lost. Stop moaning about it.

Tommy Sheppard: I am a democrat and I believe that in a democracy people have the right to change their mind, and it is quite clear that a very large number of people who voted for Brexit three years ago have changed their mind, now that they understand what it actually means. Leaving that to one side, my point is that before Christmas we were in danger of witnessing a debate between the leaders of the two main political parties in the United Kingdom where the alternative to Brexit was not going to be represented, so it was just as well that it did not go ahead.

A number of people will be concerned about the practicalities of how this can work, and how the uniqueness and idiosyncrasies of the British system can be respected. It should not be beyond our ability and wit to make this happen. In Scotland, five parties are represented in the Scottish Parliament and regularly there are five-way debates on broadcast television and other forums, which do not seem to present any great difficulty at all. Many other countries throughout the world have multi-party and proportional electoral systems, where it is usual for Governments to be formed on the basis of coalitions between a number of different parties. They have no difficulty in representing all the party views in televised debates. If they can do it, we should be able to do so as well.

I know that the Minister keeps getting sent out to this type of debate and that she has to say that this was not in the Government's manifesto—I am sure it was not—so they are not minded to do anything about it. However, I ask her to accept that this should be an ongoing and open debate. I ask her to consider playing a role in stimulating that debate, and not to close her mind or her ears to the voices that say that we need to consider much better regulation, which has in fact become part of our institutionalised way of doing politics in this country. We might as well accept that and make it the best that it can be.

6.14 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): This has been a very interesting debate so far and I would like to say at the outset that, contrary to what has been said by some

colleagues, I think that Sky News has performed a valuable public service in trying to take the party politics out of the process of election debates and allow us as politicians to concentrate on how best to present our policies, which, after all, is what really matters. I think that the Government should stop digging their heels in and back election debates as an integral and important part of our democracy. There is no need to wait; let's just agree to debate.

We have had some very good speeches. First of all, the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) presented the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee extremely ably. He referred to the recent to-ing and fro-ing about the possibility of a Brexit TV debate, as did other hon. Members. I will come back to that point later in my remarks. He was intervened on by the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards), who pointed out the necessity of involving other parties in the debate process. We have had further discussion of that in the course of the debate and I will come back to it in a moment. The hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), speaking on behalf of the SNP, also raised this issue. It raises interesting and complicated questions when people participating in the debate, which is about electing this House of Commons, are not even candidates in that election to the House of Commons, and the hon. Gentleman made a very interesting argument as to why that broader perspective should be taken into account.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Kevin Brennan: I will not give way to the hon. Lady, because she was not here for the debate and I am old school in that regard, I am afraid. I am happy to give way otherwise. It is not personal, but that is how I prefer to operate.

The hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr made a valid point, but I think it raises interesting issues about which parties should be involved in these debates. They certainly must have a role and somehow be incorporated into this process, whether through the means suggested by the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) or others.

The hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay also said that leaders are much more visible and accessible these days than they used to be. I am not sure that is entirely true. When Clement Attlee was campaigning to be Prime Minister in 1945 and 1950, he drove around the country with his wife, Violet, in a Hillman Minx, to engage with the electorate. It is certainly true that times have changed. Attlee also said that being Prime Minister was the job that took up the least amount of his time of any job he had ever had.

The hon. Gentleman gave an interesting response to the questions from Parliament's social media. Some of the points being made about the potential Americanisation of politics are important. However, I think the real challenges are not about the Americanisation of politics through TV debates, but about the involvement of large and shadowy amounts of money in British politics—the activities of organisations such as Cambridge Analytica and so on. Those are more worrying issues with the Americanisation of politics, rather than our having television debates.

[Kevin Brennan]

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) quite rightly said that the decision about whether we should have debates should not just rest in the hands of the Prime Minister. He also quite rightly pointed out the lack of television coverage of regional politics these days. He wanted to take the issue of debates out of party politics. He referred to the Nixon-Kennedy debates, saying that the thing he knows is that Nixon lost. Interestingly, of course, a lot of the polls showed that Nixon had won, particularly for people who had followed the debates on the radio rather than on television. That makes a valid point about the role of image in people's political perspectives. Whether or not the TV debate was responsible for John Kennedy's narrow victory is highly debatable, not least because when his father, Joseph Kennedy, was asked why the victory had been so narrow, he said that he could not afford a landslide. Again, money was perhaps more compelling and important in American politics than the debates.

In response to the hon. Member for Wellingborough, who also mentioned the 2010 debates, I am tempted to say—unusually—"I agree with Peter," because I did agree with much of what he said. We look forward to seeing the details of his private Member's Bill. He is the sort of Member who would never commit to supporting a Bill without having read every clause and word, and without having carefully performed an exegesis of every part, so I will not make any commitments about his Bill until we have seen what it says, but it certainly sounds like it contains some interesting ideas. We look forward to it surfacing on the Ides of March, as he suggested, and hopefully it will have a less portentous fate than that date might otherwise suggest.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the inclusion of the minor parties in one of the debates proposed by his Bill. It is an interesting area, because it is true that some parties that have a lower share of the vote and that do not stand in all parts of the United Kingdom were represented in previous debates—for example, in 2015, when David Cameron insisted on having a diluted debate because he did not want to have a head-to-head debate with my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) and preferred to have a large number of voices, possibly to defuse the impact of the event overall. Nevertheless, despite the fact that it is the "Conservative and Unionist" party, at no point was it suggested that the Democratic Unionist party should participate in the debate. Unlike Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National party, it was not invited, even though it also stands in only one of the constituent countries of the United Kingdom. Nor was the Social Democratic and Labour party, which had hon. Members elected to this House at that time; the Ulster Unionist party, which has had hon. Members elected to this House in recent times; or indeed—whether it would have turned up or not—Sinn Féin, which stands in the general election and has elected MPs, although they do not take the oath or take their seats in this place.

There is an asymmetry to the way that such debates have been organised. Northern Ireland has largely been excluded from that process, even though it is an integral part of the United Kingdom. It is interesting that we now frequently debate the issue of the British border in Ireland, as I call it, because of the backstop and Brexit,

but that in those general election debates, Northern Ireland was treated as a sideshow and almost as a separate election from the United Kingdom general election in terms of inviting people to participate. We look forward to the Bill tabled by the hon. Member for Wellingborough.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) reluctantly accepted that there would have to be a quango to administer election debates, but quite rightly pointed out that any such body should have a greater diversity than bodies such as the Electoral Commission. I agree that different political views should be represented, and it would also be important for any such body to have representation from the nations and regions of the United Kingdom, and from different social classes. Many of our bodies tend to be made up of the same kind of people with similar views. His suggestions on that were refreshing and interesting.

My hon. Friend also discussed the 2010 leadership debates and the so-called Cleggmania that allegedly resulted. Interestingly, of course, despite that spike in the polls, the Liberal Democrats won fewer seats in the 2010 election than they had held before, but because it was a hung Parliament, they ended up in government for the next five years.

The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) was extremely critical of Sky News for having campaigned on the issue. I have thought carefully about what he said and whether it is appropriate for a broadcaster to campaign in that way. It would be wholly inappropriate for a broadcaster to campaign on a political policy issue, but I do not think it is inappropriate—it is not outwith Ofcom's rules—for a broadcaster to campaign in such a way for such debates. It is possibly more difficult for the BBC and ITV, which are also party to Ofcom's rules, because special considerations are involved for public service broadcasters. I do not agree, however, that it was inappropriate for Sky News to campaign on the issue and in fact, in doing so, I think it has provided a valuable public service and has helped to bring about this interesting debate.

John Lamont: Given that other petitions on Parliament's petition website are arguably more worthy and, in some cases, have more support, why has Sky News not given them any coverage or reported on them, but has given almost hourly coverage to its own campaign?

Kevin Brennan: I suggest, probably, because it is its own campaign. It is a valid point that a lot of the issues that the hon. Gentleman mentioned are worthy of more news coverage. Hopefully his remarks will have brought those campaigns to broadcasters' attention and they will receive more coverage in future.

The hon. Gentleman said that he thought debates provide little additional information for voters, and again I disagree. As I said in an intervention on the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay, the Hansard Society report indicates that the general public say that they find debates a valuable way—indeed, among the most important ways—of gaining information to help them to decide how to vote. He went on to talk about the SNP leader's role in the debates and whether a voter in Cornwall would be interested in what the leader of the SNP had to say. He said that such a voter could not vote for the leader of the SNP, but, of course, nobody in

Scotland could vote for the leader of the SNP, because the leader of the SNP was not a candidate in the general election. That raises interesting points as to who should participate in debates and whether those who do should be the leaders of political parties or the leaders of groups that are hoping to gain election to the House of Commons. It is a moot point, but a valid one. Even though the leader of the SNP is extremely important to Scottish voters, it is true that Scottish voters would not have an opportunity to vote for her in a general election.

The hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones), who always speaks with a great deal of expertise on broadcasting matters because of his previous career with the BBC, asked how leaders could be compelled to attend if we were to pass a Bill, such as the one envisaged by the hon. Member for Wellingborough, that said that political party leaders had to participate in such debates.

As other hon. Members have pointed out, it is not unreasonable for us to expect the leaders of political parties, who have ambitions to become the Prime Minister, to comply with the law. I am not suggesting that we should have draconian penalties for anyone refusing to comply, but it would be extraordinary if the leader of a political party, a potential candidate to be the Prime Minister of this country, sought not to comply with a perfectly reasonable law to get them to participate in an essential element of the democratic process as judged by this Parliament. That is a bit of a red herring; they would turn up by virtue of the fact that it would be the law that they should participate. Nor is it unreasonable that such a law should be considered and potentially reach the statute book.

The hon. Member for North Devon made an interesting and valid point about how relevant TV debates are in this age of social media, whether they are old fashioned and whether, in a sense, we are asking a question that is no longer particularly pertinent and might have been more relevant 30 or 40 years ago. However, although I bow to his expertise about television, I think that where linear television still hits home is in the big live event type of television, whether that is “The X-Factor”, a sporting event, or the participation of political leaders at the time of a general election, when the nation’s attention turns to the question of who will govern the country for the next five years. At such times, a live television linear-type event is still highly relevant and of interest to the public, and would be supplemented massively by activity on social media; I think that is true. Obviously, social media has a huge role to play in modern elections and we need to look at the whole issue of social media, including Facebook and other types of platforms, in more detail, as it now has a major influence on our politics.

We support, in broad terms, the campaign that there should be some sort of independent means to ensure that TV debates take place between party leaders at general elections. The reason we are doing so is that the Minister, as a Minister, has the opportunity to try to make some sense of the complicated electoral law that we have. It is voluminous, it is fragmented, and it poses problems for electoral administrators, campaigners, voters and policy makers. There are 40 Acts of Parliament and more than 170 statutory instruments relating to our electoral legal framework and some of those provisions go back into the 19th century.

It is widely accepted by those involved in administering or competing in elections, such as the Electoral Commission and the Association of Electoral Administrators, that fundamental reform of electoral law is needed, but the Government have not really listened to that argument. In February 2016—nearly three years ago—the Law Commission published its interim report, calling for the laws governing elections to be rationalised into a single consistent legislative framework governing all elections, but the Government are yet to respond to that, even though, as I say, it has been nearly three years. I encourage the Government to look again at that report and respond to it.

I have mentioned this previously, but I also urge the Government to look at the 2018 audit of political engagement by the Hansard Society, which found that among the different sources of news and information that respondents used to inform their decision making at the 2017 general election, party leaders’ debates and political interviews were deemed to be the most important ways in which they were able to make up their minds. Furthermore, 74% of those who used those things in that way said the party leaders’ debates and political interviews were at least “fairly important” in their decision making. There is a need for a wider reform of electoral law and the issue of TV debates should be included within that.

My own party leader has said in response to this campaign:

“I welcome any move that will guarantee general election debates so that voters can hear directly from those putting themselves forward to lead the country.”

That was a welcome statement, but unfortunately the Prime Minister has not matched it, which is a shame. Speaking to Sky, she said:

“The next general election isn’t until 2022. There’s plenty of time to think about those issues at that time.”

In fact, that is exactly the time when there will not be plenty of time to think about these issues. Now is the time to think about them. We may not be immediately able to solve them, but now is the time to think across parties about the best way to handle the issue, because if we get to 2022 and start thinking about it, we will have the same old to-ing and fro-ing, and shenanigans, and jiggery-pokery that we have seen recently in relation to the discussions about the possibility of leaders’ debates on Brexit.

Whatever we think about the merits of such debates, and the question is different from that of whether party leaders should debate at a general election, the truth is that the way in which such arguments come about, and this has happened over the course of a number of Governments, going back some considerable time, is something like this—in fact, I know exactly how the suggestion of a Brexit debate came about. No. 10 went to Tom Newton Dunn at *The Sun* and said, “We need a page lead for the Prime Minister on Brexit. The Prime Minister is in trouble on Brexit. We need a page lead.” If someone needs a page lead in *The Sun*, they don’t get it for nothing. So *The Sun* said in return, “Well, what can you give us as an exclusive, or a scoop in old-fashioned terms, for giving you a front-page lead in *The Sun*?” Of course, the answer was, “Well, we’ll say that the Prime Minister is in favour of challenging the Leader of the Opposition to a debate on Brexit”, in the full knowledge that that would never happen unless some groundwork

[Kevin Brennan]

had been done, unless there had been some discussion between parties, and unless the other parties that have an interest in this matter—as the hon. Member for Edinburgh East, the spokesman for the Scottish National party, rightly pointed out—had an opportunity to have an input as well. A debate on Brexit was not going to happen on those terms, but that is how these things come about, which is a pretty shabby process. If we had a properly independent process, then we could get rid of all the jiggery-pokery around election debates and actually get down to concentrating on trying to present our policies effectively to the electorate.

Finally, I challenge the Minister to go a little further than the Government have so far and at least entertain the possibility of supporting the kind of measure that is being proposed by Sky News and her hon. Friend, the hon. Member for Wellingborough, which the Opposition and other parties support, whereby a consensus on a way forward can be found to ensure that such debates can happen, rather than waiting until 2022, when it will be far too late.

6.36 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and that of Mr Sharma earlier.

First, I thank the petitioners for creating this petition and my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) for bringing it here today and articulating the arguments for it for the purposes of the debate. My hon. Friend put the original arguments in a capable way and I am glad that he did so for us. I thank the Petitions Committee, which he represents, and of course those members of the public who signed this petition.

I will say at the outset that I very much agree that TV debates are that useful democratic exercise that many Members here today have said that they are and can be. They allow the electorate to reflect on the choices that they wish to make at an election. There is plenty of academic literature, as well as surveys, confirming that members of the public do indeed find TV election debates informative and engaging.

In addition—this is very important to me in my work as Minister with responsibility for elections—such debates can also serve as one of those important tools that engage people who perhaps do not normally engage in politics, so that every so often they can have a think about an election and the big choice that is represented by that election. I really value that, as I know many hon. Members who are here today in Westminster Hall do, too, so I do not think there is any dispute between us that TV debates are an important matter. However, what we are here to talk about is the best way to go about having those debates. That is what I will focus my remarks upon. I am not persuaded that mandating television election debates is the way to achieve that very important goal.

I thank all hon. and right hon. Members who have contributed today. In summary, we heard the case against TV election debates put by my hon. Friends the Members for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) and for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones), and the case for put by the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew),

my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), and—reluctantly, I think—the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer), as well as the two other Front Benchers here today: the hon. Members for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), who spoke for the Scottish National party, and for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), who spoke for the Labour party.

Of course, I note the private Member's Bill tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough and look forward to—no doubt—continuing this discussion with him when the Bill comes before the House. I reassure him and other Members that I do not stand here in any way to dismiss these arguments; I stand here to engage with them. However, the question I face is whether such measures are the best way to get more people to engage with our democracy.

I will make five key points around the idea of legislating to mandate TV election debates; my points will be about not the virtue of TV elections in their own right, but legislating to mandate them, which is what the petition we are considering asks for.

I begin with the point that TV election debates have already happened—under their own steam—in the last three general elections, without having to be mandated by election law. The hon. Member for Edinburgh East made that point. He rightly said that debates happen all the time, and in five ways, in Scotland. Indeed, they have happened in many ways throughout our elections in recent history. I draw on the words of the hon. Member for Stroud, who said that the genie has been out of the bottle since 2010. Yes, it has, and without needing to be legislated for.

My first point, therefore, is this: the current arrangements between political parties and broadcasters work. They already give rise to election debates, bolstered by the regulatory framework set by the independent regulator, Ofcom. I will come on to those points in more detail.

Secondly, I want to develop the argument that attendance at TV debates is a matter for political parties rather than for the law. I will also bring into the debate how many other campaign mediums are used by parties to convey their messages, and by voters to choose how they get their information, and how we should not prioritise one over others. We need to consider some implementation matters, and I will come on to those, and I also want briefly, in closing, to refer to some of the other evidence on the matter that we have seen here in Parliament, for example from Select Committees.

I start with the point that debates are already happening. Indeed they are, and Members have capably covered how they have been happening since 2010. Under the current arrangements, they have happened by agreement between political parties and broadcasters, and broadcasters collaborate with each other on key factors. TV election debates have been successfully delivered; decisions about format, location and participation have all been settled; and, crucially, the public have benefited from, and no doubt enjoyed, the results. Experienced broadcasters—Sky, but others as well—are well placed to continue to make such decisions, and it would not be right to take that from them and put it into law. It is helpful that different broadcasters are able to choose bring their own distinctiveness to election debates. In what we are discussing, we come close to matters of editorial independence, which we should of course leave with broadcasters, as well as the ability to organise and deliver TV election

debates, especially given that we are talking about the costs residing with them. One might argue that the costs and the delivery should stay in the same place.

I will move on to another argument. I said earlier that the debates are a matter of choice for political parties. I do not say that lightly; I say it in full consideration of the fact that it is then for the electorate to choose a political party that has capably communicated to them something they liked to hear. That is what elections are about; it is the fundamental nature of a choice at an election. Voters reward political parties that are aligned with their own priorities and communicate that successfully. Failing effectively to communicate priorities to a voter is unlikely to lead to electoral success—I do not think I need to break that to any colleagues here. That is the whole point of elections, so I say again that there is no need for legislative intervention when voters' interests, and indeed those of parties, are closely aligned in a way that has already worked.

I want to bring in some points about Ofcom and the broadcasting code. In discussing the current framework, it is important to consider the framework that TV election debates would have to adhere to. Ofcom, as the independent communications regulator, already sets the standards for TV and radio programmes, and its code contains rules that apply to all those broadcasters it licenses, ensuring that news, in whatever form, is reported with due impartiality, accuracy and fair prominence of views and opinions. Crucially, it also includes specific rules on impartiality that apply during election periods, including the requirement for due weight to be given to the coverage of parties and independent candidates.

We can continue to have confidence in that regulatory framework, in that it supports the editorial independence of broadcasters and has already demonstrated an ability to deliver fair and politically neutral television election debates. An independent broadcasting system is in itself a democratic function that we enjoy, and are lucky to have, in this society, and I say again that Government intervention risks undermining that independence, of both the broadcasters and Ofcom. I note that the argument has been put that the same could be achieved through an independent debates commission, and I will come back to that point in a second.

First, however, I will deal with whether we should privilege one campaigning medium over another: should we privilege telly over other ways of communicating with each other? I am not convinced. Political parties use many mediums to convey their message to members of the public before a general election, and at every other time of year, and the public demand that. As I said earlier, this is absolutely a two-way matter between how the public choose to get their information, and ask to have it, and how parties can respond to that. It is very much a two-way process between parties and the public.

I, for one, am quite a fan of the good old-fashioned political canvassing method. I was out there in the very chilly Norwich weather on Saturday morning, knocking on doors—back to work in the new year, as I hope every Member in this room was. That is another way to get in touch with voters, and who am I to say that television is any better or worse? I do not attempt to make that judgment call, and I am sceptical of the call today suggesting that any one medium is better than another.

Graham Stringer: Does the Minister not accept that we already discriminate in legislation—possibly in favour, possibly against, depending on one's point of view—against electronic media? We demand that they provide a platform for party political broadcasts and that they balance the different views during a general election campaign, but we do not apply that to any other form of media. There is already that separation and it would not, therefore, be changing the legislative framework very much to say that a platform for debates should be provided.

Chloe Smith: I agree, and I disagree. I respect how the hon. Gentleman has tried to bring the point to bear, but the point of detail he has chosen is about how, when any one medium is used, impartiality within it is ensured. That is admirable, and that is where I agree with him, but where I disagree is regarding further entrenching the choice of any one medium over another.

I will put this in a generational sense for the hon. Gentleman: television broadcasters are quite simply losing favour with the younger generation as their source of news. Why should we legislate at this point for a medium that will not necessarily remain favoured among those who are, and those who will become, the voters in elections to come? I am happy to substantiate that.

On how news consumption is going in the UK, a report by Ofcom stated that in 2018 alone 52% of 16 to 24-year-olds used Facebook as their news source while only 39% used BBC1. The report found that people in that age group were more likely to get their news from social media posts than directly from news organisations. In the face of that technological shift, I remain unconvinced that the case is made for privileging a form that one might almost argue had its heyday with Richard Nixon in the last century. Why should we privilege that form? I say Nixon; as has already been covered, it was thought that Kennedy won the debate, but that is the very point. It is a matter of history, and if we legislate at all we ought to look to the future rather than the past.

I will incorporate at this point the parliamentary example that I think was provided by my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay. Here we stand today having a debate in Parliament—in itself a form of political debate, a form of debate on political policy—and we do not expect it to be covered only on the TV, although it will capably be, and I am glad for that.

I certainly support the use of TV in Parliament and the accountability that we can provide by being on camera as we do our work. However, we also expect social media to carry part of that weight, and we also might well expect that some people would prefer to read about our proceedings via the written word. All of those are valid ways for people to get their information, and we should not privilege one over another.

Fourthly, I wanted to bring together some points about implementation and refer to a few that have been made in the debate. First, the proposal would require primary legislation. The point has already been made that if we anticipate a general election as far away as 2022, which of course is the case, we have time to look at the issue and get it right. However, even with that timescale, there are other pressing priorities that the public ask us to address through legislation, and I suspect that they would prioritise them over this issue.

Mr Bone: I understand that the Minister is making a strong Government speech—very little of which I agree with, I have to say—but I am here to help her.

Dr Drew: As always.

Mr Bone: As always. The proposal does require primary legislation, but not Government legislation. That is why I have taken the private Member's Bill route, and all I ask the Minister is whether she would allow that debate to get a fair hearing, with no objecting, no filibustering, and no putting up people to stop it. Let us have the debate and a vote. Would she be open minded to that?

Chloe Smith: I hope that my hon. Friend's flattery of me extends to knowing that I am a friend of Parliament, and I look forward to Parliament having the opportunity to have that debate when the time comes. I will make no further comment on what should be the passage, or otherwise, of that Bill. Today, what I am trying to do—which I hope is welcome—is go into some of the arguments that reasonably pertain to the proposal in front of us. The least courtesy we should give to any petition is to give it a proper going over, debating the arguments that we think relate to it.

I call the House's attention to the fact that the proposal would require primary legislation, which is not two a penny. What we choose to do through primary legislation requires some prioritisation, and that is the part of the electoral law framework that would have to be looked at if we wanted to do this. The hon. Member for Cardiff West has already made the point that election law is complex. It is thought by many to be fragmented and unwieldy, and it absolutely the case that it is aged. He is right to say that parts of election law relate to the 19th century. As I have said, I am not convinced that we should add another piece that relates, arguably, to the 20th century, not to mention the 21st. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that election law is a complicated matter, but I do not yet see the argument for adding this proposal to it through primary legislation.

Another aspect of what it means to put something into law has already been referred to, particularly by my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon. I share his concern that forcing somebody to attend a debate—effectively, making somebody a criminal for not taking part in a debate—is unlikely to be a priority for law enforcement. The hon. Member for Cardiff West suggests that he does not want to add any penalties to the proposal, but he still wants to see it in law. I do not think that is a very strong position: if we do not wish to criminalise somebody for something, we do not put it into law. If a proposal stands on its own because it is reasonable and virtuous, that is fine, but in this case debates happen already and need not be made mandatory. We put something in law if we want the hon. Gentleman's chief constable, and my chief constable, to have to spend their time thinking about it. I am not convinced that turning members of political parties into criminals for not participating in a television debate, or indeed in any other campaigning activity, is the right thing to do.

We also ought to think about the electorate. If participation in the debate is compulsory, is watching it going to be compulsory as well?

Kevin Brennan *indicated dissent.*

Chloe Smith: The hon. Gentleman laughs at that point, but I say in all seriousness that if we privilege one campaign medium in law, the question follows whether we think it is important that people are compelled to take part in that activity. That is what we do when we put something into law.

Moving on to the suggested use of a quango to achieve the proposed objective, my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon was not convinced that an independent debates commission would improve the current system. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton for also giving that issue some thought, although in the end he came down on the other side of the argument. I do not think that having a quango and simply calling it independent is the answer to every policy question. It raises many questions that are as yet unresolved. Who would appoint the members of such a body? How would it function? What would happen if political parties, or any figure involved with that body, disagreed with the suggested format? Those are all questions that would have to be bottomed out if we went for an independent debates commission format.

Other reports and research exist. Setting up an independent body is not a new proposal: it has been addressed in multiple reports, including a report by the House of Lords Select Committee on Communications, which in 2014 published its findings on the broadcasting of general election debates. That Committee found no substantial evidence that an independent debates commission should be set up to oversee election debates. The report instead focused on recommendations for broadcasters that oversee election debates, such as making more use of the opportunity to inform voters and encouraging members of the public to be more interested in the electoral process.

Another interesting piece of work was published in 2015 by Professor Charlie Beckett of the London School of Economics. His findings highlighted the fact that a formal regulatory or legislative framework for TV debates is largely viewed as unrealistic and undesirable. He also raised questions about such a framework, including who would have the final say and how it might be adaptable to evolution in the political landscape.

I thank hon. Members for giving me the time to go through the arguments at some length. I also thank the petitioners, first and foremost, and my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay for introducing the debate and allowing us to examine the arguments. We have heard a number of very good arguments on this topic, although to my ear they mainly focused on the way in which TV debates are good and helpful in themselves, rather than on the ins and outs of whether legislating for them is the way forward. Were we to consider a change to electoral law, those arguments would need to improve before making debates mandatory and making additions to an area of law that is already complex and precious.

Participating in TV election debates should continue to be a matter for political parties, and we should continue to view that as a two-way relationship, with the encouragement of voters. The delivery of such debates should remain in the hands of broadcasters, other publishers and, indeed, the public themselves, through social media and the other media of the future. I am a passionate promoter of people's involvement in democracy, and I am honoured to be a steward of our

electoral system. That is what leads me to conclude that we should let people decide for themselves what the formats of the future ought to be, rather than privileging one format at this point in time. In conclusion, I entirely trust the British people to be able to find the information that suits them to make their choices in elections and at election times. That is what I hope to see in elections of the future.

6.59 pm

Steve Double: I thank all Members who have participated in this debate. It has been a good debate with a good number of thoughtful and well-presented contributions. I again thank Sky for its role in bringing forward the petition, which has enabled us to have this debate. It is right that we have had the debate; the issue needs careful consideration, and I hope the debate has made a useful contribution. I thank the Minister for her response laying out the Government's position. Although many of us will be disappointed that we have not managed to persuade her to our way of thinking, I appreciate the way in which she presented the Government's position.

The matter needs to be dealt with through consensus in Parliament. It goes wider than the Government's decisions on general elections and our democratic process, so I very much welcome the private Member's Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), which will give Parliament another opportunity

in the relatively near future to consider the matter again. I hope that will enable Parliament to express its view. If that view is that we should formalise leaders' debates, the Bill will give us the opportunity to do so.

In winding up, I simply make the point that it is important that we embrace all methods of engaging the public in politics, particularly at the time of elections. I was thankful that the Minister made clear that she welcomes TV debates. It is not that anyone is against TV debates; the issue is how we facilitate them. I continue to be of the view that the current system does not really work. The horse-trading and the to-ing and fro-ing reflect badly on this place and the political parties. Formalising things and taking them out of the hands of politicians would be a positive way forward. I hope today has been a useful contribution to the debate, which I am sure will continue in the coming months and years. We look forward to discussing the issue again in the very near future. I once again thank everyone for their contributions.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 228572 relating to an independent commission on televised election debates.

7.2 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 7 January 2019

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Winter Preparedness

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): This Government recognise that winter, with demand placed on services with colder weather and seasonal flu, is a challenging time for the NHS as it is for health services around the world. DHSC Ministers meet weekly with our systems leaders in the NHS to ensure that our services are equipped for winter to support those who need them.

We have been busier than ever, but our NHS has been rising to the challenge over the festive period.

The latest data to November shows that compared to last year, we have seen 3.6% more attendances per day at A&E, and that over 1,600 more patients per day were seen within four hours so far this year. Despite that, the published NHS winter operational updates show that in December there have been fewer ambulance handover delays and diverts to other A&Es compared to last year. This means ambulances spend less time at hospitals and more time on the roads reaching patients.

Ahead of winter

We started the run up to the winter period with over 2,200 more doctors and 1,600 more nurses on our wards than just a year ago, bringing the total increase since 2010 to 16,500 more doctors and 13,400 more ward nurses

We also increased NHS funding by £1.6 billion at the start of this year, to support and improve A&E and elective care performance.

On top of this, in advance of winter, more than £420 million has been provided to help the NHS this winter:

£240 million for adult social care—allowing councils to plan to provide care for 40,000 more people.

£145 million capital funding to hospitals for winter improvements—to upgrade wards and redevelop A&Es—the benefits of which the NHS expects will bring the equivalent of an additional 900 beds.

£36.3 million has been invested into the ambulance services for new vehicles and ‘make-ready hubs’. This will pay for more than 250 new ambulances, with 100 delivered by Christmas Eve.

The NHS has continued to work to improve services in advance of winter, to help people avoid a hospital visit or admission, and get them home quickly if they do have to stay. This has included:

Increased access to GP appointments at the evening and weekends. The latest figures (August 2018) show that full extended access was available for 40 million people, which is an increase of over 4 million from March 2018.

Fully embedded clinical streaming in A&Es following our investment ahead of last winter of £100 million, which means patients are directed to the most appropriate service.

Improved NHS 111. Half of calls to NHS111 now receive clinical input and ahead of this winter we have rolled out 111 online across the country so that the public can access care advice and services through digital channels and reduce additional pressures on A&E. 91% of the population have access to NHS Digital’s 111 online service.

Work to standardise services provided by urgent treatment centres and increasing public awareness of this as an alternative to A&E for minor illness and minor injury.

Increased implementation of ‘hear and treat’ and ‘see and treat’ by ambulances—reducing unnecessary conveyance to hospitals.

Joint working between hospitals, councils and other local partners to reduce long lengths of stays in hospital and helping improve transfers to community and social care. The published NHS winter operational updates show that the number of beds occupied by patients staying more than 21 days in hospital on average per day is down by more than 2,000 (12.5%) this winter so far, when compared to the equivalent period last year.

Extending the flu vaccination programme—already the most comprehensive in Europe—even further. Vaccination remains the best line of defence against flu and this year, we have more effective vaccines available than ever before.

This winter we have also encouraged all healthcare workers to be vaccinated, are funding the vaccination again for frontline social care workers, and have extended the offer to staff giving direct care in the voluntary managed hospice sector. Free vaccine eligibility has also been extended to include children up to nine years old (Year 5) so that all two to nine year olds are now offered the vaccine.

Performance over the next few weeks

The NHS continues to make some progress in rising to the seasonal challenges, but we also know that there is no room for complacency at this early stage of winter.

There are clearly a number of hospital trusts where the situation has been challenging. The most recent statistics showed that 75% of all 12-hour trolley waits occurred in just 10 trusts.

In addition, NHS England and NHS Improvement continue to monitor NHS performance daily. They are supporting hospitals nationally and, working with regional teams, will maintain a close grip and oversight during winter of their performance.

The Care Quality Commission will be continuing to monitor hospital services over the winter months with over 30 visits to hospital emergency departments planned. The CQC is able to undertake further visits in response to any emerging risks identified.

And we will go further to support this through our long-term plan to guarantee the future of the health service—backed by an extra £20.5 billion a year in real terms by 2023-24.

[HCWS1232]

TRANSPORT

Ferries

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): The Government have entered into three contracts with ferry operators to provide additional ferry capacity and services into the UK as part of no-deal EU exit contingency planning.

While the ambition of Government is to ensure an orderly exit from the EU, the Department for Transport has been undertaking a wide range of work to mitigate the impact on the transport system of a no-deal EU exit.

Significant work has taken place to understand the effect that this would have on the UK border and the impact on flows of goods between the UK and EU. While the Government have made clear they are committed to ensuring frictionless movement across the UK border, the scale of the potential disruption to the Dover Straits, if additional customs checks were introduced in Calais, Coquelles and Dunkirk, where freight services disembark, could be very significant. Given the importance of these routes, contingency work is being undertaken to mitigate potential impacts and ensure that goods can continue to flow into and out of the UK as freely as possible.

A priority for Government is to ensure that the Port of Dover and the Eurotunnel can continue to operate at the maximum possible capacity. The Government are therefore working with both organisations and our French counterparts in Calais, Coquelles and Dunkirk so that any disruption or drop in throughput is managed effectively and mitigated.

There is a clear willingness to reach agreements which secure the continued operation of these vital trade routes in all scenarios and the Government remain confident that there will not be major disruption to the flow of goods across the border. Nevertheless, the potential for a decline in throughput remains possible in a worst-case scenario and the Government are therefore planning for all eventualities.

As one of several contingency measures being undertaken, the Department for Transport has completed a procurement process to secure additional ferry capacity between the UK and the EU which can be used for critical goods such as medical supplies in the event of disruption to cross-Channel crossings. A negotiated procurement procedure without prior publication was concluded as allowed for by regulation 32 of The Public Contracts Regulations 2015. An accelerated competitive process was carried out in order to ensure that capacity can be in place in time for a no-deal exit while at the same time securing value for money for the taxpayer. The Department approached a number of shipping providers capable of providing additional freight capacity in order to ensure fairness for the market and also engaged external expertise to ensure value for money for the taxpayer.

Bids were evaluated on the basis that they met our strategic aims of providing additional freight capacity for a no-deal Brexit scenario. Bids were reviewed against a number of criteria, including journey time, quality of delivery plans, and the pricing submitted by bidders.

The bids we received to provide capacity were subject to technical, financial and commercial assurance as part of standard due diligence procedures and consistent with that undertaken on all Government contracts. This included a price benchmarking exercise to ensure that the taxpayer was getting good value for money, and assurance on the delivery plans of our bidders.

The Department commissioned external advice from three respected professional advisers to support this work. Three contracts were agreed with operators totalling c.£103 million.

Two contracts went to established operators, Brittany Ferries (£46.6 million) and DFDS (c.£42.6 million). These contracts provide for additional capacity between the UK and EU on existing routes, via the provision of additional services and additional vessels. The contracts agreed with them include early termination provisions and other typical contractual provisions to ensure Government have the right protections in place, such as in the event of an operator becoming insolvent.

The routes agreed with Brittany and DFDS are away from the Dover Straits, and will run from the Ports of Immingham and Felixstowe (DFDS) and Poole, Plymouth and Portsmouth (Brittany) to destinations in Germany (Cuxhaven), the Netherlands (Vlaardingen) and France (Caen, Cherbourg, Le Havre, and Roscoff).

The third contract was awarded to Seaborne Freight (£13.8 million), a new operator to provide a new service between Ramsgate and Ostend. Seaborne Freight has been preparing for some time to operate services on this route. The management team of Seaborne has extensive experience in the shipping and maritime sector, including the operation of ferry services on cross-channel routes, freight brokerage, port management and vessel chartering.

While the broad contract structure is the same for all three contracts, including the provision that payment will only be made in arrears and on the successful provision of services, the Seaborne contract is also subject to the achievement of a range of key milestones including in relation to finalising funding and vessel chartering agreements.

As with many operators in the sector, it is not uncommon that they do not own their own vessels and will be chartering them through third parties. The Department has reviewed their plans for sourcing vessels with the support of external advisers. A number of large institutional investors are backing this service and the Government's contract represents a small part of the overall investment required by Seaborne to open this route. These lenders undertake their own rigorous due diligence before making financial commitments, providing a further level of assurance to Government. Seaborne and my Department are also working closely with Thanet Council to ensure that Ramsgate Port is ready to take new services. A programme of work to prepare the infrastructure is under way.

In total the additional freight capacity delivered by these three contracts will be equivalent to around 8% of normal flows across the Dover Straits. While this will not be sufficient to mitigate the full level of disruption possible in a worst-case scenario, it will enable the Government to provide essential capacity for the highest priority goods including medical supplies.

In terms of next steps, the Department for Transport will provide support to and oversight of all operators to ensure that these services are delivered to meet the terms of the contracts agreed.

I will provide further updates to Parliament at the appropriate points.

[HCWS1233]

Petitions

Monday 7 January 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Green Deal Scheme

The petition of residents of Kilmarnock and Loudoun,

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.—[Presented by Alan Brown, *Official Report*, 23 October 2018; Vol. 648, c.246.]

[P002271]

The petition of the residents of North Ayrshire and Arran,

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.—[Presented by Patricia Gibson, *Official Report*, 23 October 2018; Vol. 648, c. 245.]

[P002272]

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.—[Presented by Martyn Day, *Official Report*, 11 December 2018; Vol. 651, c. 253.]

[P002304]

Observations from the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry):

Consumers can obtain appropriate redress where they have suffered detriment under the Green Deal. A process for handling complaints was established under the Green Deal Framework (Disclosure, Acknowledgment, Redress etc.) Regulations 2012. The consumer makes a complaint to their Green Deal Provider, the company responsible for the work undertaken. Where this is not resolved satisfactorily, the consumer may approach the Green Deal Ombudsman or the Financial Ombudsman Service, depending on the nature of the complaint. Their decision is binding on the Green Deal Provider.

Where the consumer remains unsatisfied with the redress offered through those channels, or if the Provider is in liquidation, they may refer their complaint to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy for consideration. Where the Secretary of State is satisfied there has been a breach of the regulations, he may impose the sanction of reduction or cancellation of the Green Deal loan. This is the full extent of the Secretary of State's powers to provide redress to consumers in relation to the Green Deal.

For one particular Green Deal Provider, that has dissolved, additional arrangements have been made whereby complainants can approach the Green Deal Finance Company who are able to make offers of loan cancellation or reduction where the complaint is accepted and there is evidence of substantive loss.

The Government are undertaking a fundamental review of the Green Deal. We published a Call for Evidence in October last year and a summary of responses this summer. We are now considering the next steps to develop policy proposals and will continue considering what changes could be made to the Framework.

Review the regulations and control of fireworks

The petition of residents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk,

Declares that the petitioners believe that the use of fireworks is increasing in terms of frequency and that the resultant nuisance of noise and perceived danger from explosions are growing with the ever increasing size and power of fireworks available within the UK; further that fireworks can cause severe distress to people suffering from PTSD or other mental health issues and to animals.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to review the existing legislation for the regulation and control of fireworks; further that consideration be given to legislating for a ban on private use and limited fireworks to licensed displays; and further that considerations be given to promoting the use of silent fireworks as an alternative

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Martyn Day, *Official Report*, 20 November 2018; Vol. 649, c. 834.]

[P002288]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst):

The Government take the issue of public safety very seriously. The Government have recognised the strong feelings and concerns that many people have regarding fireworks. We want to reassure the petitioners that there is a comprehensive set of legislation in place to closely regulate the supply, storage, possession, use and misuse of fireworks to ensure public safety.

Together, the restrictions set out in the 2003 Fireworks Act, the Fireworks Regulations 2004 and the Pyrotechnic Articles (Safety) Regulations 2015, provide a regulatory framework that allows for the safe enjoyment of fireworks by the public while minimising the risk of fireworks harming individuals, property or animals. In addition, the availability of fireworks to the public is restricted by a licensing scheme for retailers which only allows for their sale without a licence during the traditional firework periods around 5 November, New Year's Eve, Diwali and the Chinese New Year.

Local Authority Trading Standards have powers to take action against those who sell fireworks illegally, including those selling fireworks without an appropriate licence, or outside the normal selling period, or to underage people. This also includes the sale of illegally imported fireworks and internet sales.

We recognise that the noise from fireworks can be distressing to some, and so there is in place a noise level limit of 120 decibels on the fireworks that are available for consumer use, which has not been increased in recent years. Consumers can now also choose to buy from a wide range of low noise fireworks.

While noting that legislation is in place, the Government have listened to the concerns around the potential for distress to be caused by fireworks to individuals, as well as to livestock, pets and wildlife. The Office for Product Safety and Standards is working with industry, retailers and others to promote the safe and responsible use of fireworks through guidance and public education and to ensure that appropriate action is taken against those that break the rules. The Office's recent campaign on firework safety reached over a million consumers.

Fireworks have played a part in the UK's history, and have been used for celebrations by many of our cultures for many years. We recognise the enjoyment they bring to many people and the important role that they play in bringing communities together in celebration or remembrance. The Office of Product Safety and Standards has been asked to develop our evidence base on firework safety to ensure we have a thorough understanding of all the issues, but there are no plans for further regulation in this area at present.

Ministerial Corrections

Monday 7 January 2019

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Mental Capacity (Amendment) Bill [Lords]

The following is an extract from the speech by the Minister for Care, responding to the comments of the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), in the debate on Second Reading of the Mental Capacity (Amendment) Bill [Lords] on 18 December 2018.

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage):... The right hon. Gentleman also mentioned 16 and 17-year-olds. We have given very careful thought to how to include 16 and 17-year-olds and to how the Bill will interact with other legislation including the Children Act 1989, and we are very comfortable that it works alongside existing legislation. It is also a Law Commission recommendation to bring the provisions in line with the Mental Health Act, as he will be aware.

[Official Report, 18 December 2018, Vol. 651, c. 757.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage):

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones).

The correct response should have been:

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage):... The right hon. Gentleman also mentioned 16 and 17-year-olds. We have given very careful thought to how to include 16 and 17-year-olds and to how the Bill will interact with other legislation including the Children Act 1989, and we are very comfortable that it works alongside existing legislation. It is also a Law Commission recommendation to bring the provisions in line with the **Mental Capacity Act**, as he will be aware.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Traidcraft and Fair Trade

The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on Traidcraft and Fair Trade on 18 December 2018.

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): The hon. Member for Strangford asked about modern slavery, and I shall say a little more about that. At last year's UN General Assembly the Prime Minister launched the "Call to Action" to end forced labour, modern slavery

and human trafficking, in which specific commitments are set out, to address modern slavery at the national and international level. It has been endorsed by 43 countries so far. On the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development announced a £40 million package of new funding, forming part of the overall £150 million spend that the Prime Minister committed the Government to at the UN. That package of support will help more than 500,000 vulnerable men, women and children, and includes £13 million for the second phase of the work in freedom programme, the UK's £20 million contribution to the global fund to end modern slavery, and the £7 million of DFID support to Nigeria.

That is all in addition to existing DFID programmes such as the £8 million regional women and girls protection programme operating in Greece and the Balkans, protecting girl and women refugees by providing shelters and strengthening national counter-trafficking mechanisms, and the £22 million responsible business programme, which is spreading responsible business approaches.

[Official Report, 18 December 2018, Vol. 651, c. 227WH.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for the Middle East:

Errors have been identified in the speech I gave in the debate on Traidcraft and Fair Trade.

The correct responses should have been:

Alistair Burt: The hon. Member for Strangford asked about modern slavery, and I shall say a little more about that. At last year's UN General Assembly the Prime Minister launched the "Call to Action" to end forced labour, modern slavery and human trafficking, in which specific commitments are set out, to address modern slavery at the national and international level. It has been endorsed by **84** countries so far. On the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development announced a £40 million package of new funding, forming part of the overall £150 million spend that the Prime Minister committed the Government to at the UN. That package of support will help more than 500,000 vulnerable men, women and children, and includes £13 million for the second phase of the work in freedom programme, the UK's £20 million contribution to the global fund to end modern slavery, and the £7 million of DFID support to Nigeria.

That is all in addition to existing DFID programmes such as the £8 million regional women and girls protection programme operating in Greece and the Balkans, protecting girl and women refugees by providing shelters and strengthening national counter-trafficking mechanisms, and the **£30 million** responsible business programme, which is spreading responsible business approaches.

ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 7 January 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
WORK AND PENSIONS	1	WORK AND PENSIONS—continued	
Care Leavers: Employment	20	Topical Questions	20
Disability: Medical Assessments	17	Universal Credit: Childcare Costs	6
Employment: Ex-offenders	13	Universal Credit: Helping People into Work	11
Employment Trends	7	Universal Credit: Household Incomes	16
Leaving the EU: Departmental Spending.....	18	Universal Credit Roll-out.....	9
Motability	19	Universal Credit: Self-employment	14
Pensions Dashboard	15	Universal Credit: Transition.....	1

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Monday 7 January 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	1WS	TRANSPORT	2WS
Winter Preparedness	1WS	Ferries.....	2WS

PETITIONS

Monday 7 January 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY	1P	BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY—continued	
Green Deal Scheme	1P	Review the regulations and control of fireworks	2P

MINISTERIAL CORRECTIONS

Monday 7 January 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE	1MC	HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	1MC
Traidcraft and Fair Trade.....	1MC	Mental Capacity (Amendment) Bill [<i>Lords</i>]	1MC

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
Monday 14 January 2019**

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

Monday 7 January 2019

List of Government and Principal Officers and Officials of the House

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Work and Pensions

EU Withdrawal Agreement: Legal Changes [Col. 25]
Answer to urgent question—(Stephen Barclay)

Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe [Col. 50]
Answer to urgent question—(Alistair Burt)

NHS Long-term Plan [Col. 62]
Statement—(Matt Hancock)

Migrant Crossings [Col. 85]
Statement—(Sajid Javid)

Drones: Consultation Response [Col. 101]
Statement—(Chris Grayling)

Leaving the EU: Tobacco Products and Public Health [Col. 114]
Motion—(Steve Brine)—agreed to

Committee on Standards: Cox Report [Col. 124]
Motion—(Andrea Leadsom)—agreed to

UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights [Col. 138]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Televised Election Debates [Col. 1WH]
E-petition Debate

Written Statements [Col. 1WS]

Petitions [Col. 1P]
Observations

Ministerial Corrections [Col. 1MC]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
