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9 January 2019**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 9 January 2019

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Syria

1. **Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): What steps she is taking to provide humanitarian assistance to people in Syria. [908413]

14. **Royston Smith** (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): What steps she is taking to provide humanitarian assistance to people in Syria. [908426]

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): The United Kingdom is at the forefront of the humanitarian response and has been providing life-saving support to millions of people across Syria from the start of the conflict. To date, we have committed £2.71 billion, our largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis. This includes the provision of more than 27 million food rations and 10 million relief packages since 2012.

Simon Hoare: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Just before Christmas, I had the rather humbling honour of meeting two Syrian families who fled the horror of that country to find sanctuary in Shaftesbury in my constituency, where they are making their new home. The pictures that they showed me and the stories that they told were indeed horrible. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that, notwithstanding everything else that is going on, Her Majesty's Government has not forgotten Syria and the underlying and ever pressing need for peace?

Alistair Burt: I can assure my hon. Friend that no one in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office or the Department for International Development has forgotten Syria. We are all shocked and moved by the plight of those who have suffered so much, and I am familiar with some of the pictures that my hon. Friend describes. We are engaged diplomatically and in humanitarian terms every day in relation to Syria.

Royston Smith: Although Daesh is significantly weakened in Syria, a US departure could leave a vacuum that could cause more misery. Does the Minister expect the focus of humanitarian assistance in Syria to change as a result of the withdrawal of US troops?

Alistair Burt: The full details of the impact of the US withdrawal have yet to be worked through. Our focus on humanitarian aid will not be changed, and we continue to monitor the situation closely as it develops. Our focus on providing humanitarian assistance to millions of people displaced both externally and internally will remain.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): The possibility of a US withdrawal raises serious concerns about civilian protection. Will the Minister tell us what the Government are doing to work with agencies on the ground to ensure that, particularly in the Kurdish-controlled areas and in Idlib, as much as possible is done to protect civilians?

Alistair Burt: Yes indeed. To reassure the hon. Gentleman, who is the Chair of the Select Committee, we are very concerned about the potential implications, particularly on the Turkish-Syrian border. We are in constant contact with our partners in relation to this and with humanitarian agencies, which are fully abreast of the consequences of actions that have not yet happened. Everything is being done to try to encourage a peaceful resolution of the political conflicts there.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Are any plans in place to deal with what will be, I suspect, the increasing humanitarian needs of Syrian Kurds in particular, especially if they are attacked by the Turkish military?

Alistair Burt: As I indicated to the Chair of the Select Committee, we are all extremely concerned about the potential implications of US withdrawal and what it might mean on the Turkish border in relation to Kurdish areas. Humanitarian agencies are very alert to this, but politically we are doing what we can with partners to minimise any risk of confrontation there.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): What assessment is it possible to make of the number of lives that have been saved in Syria as a result of the historic financial contribution to the aid effort by the United Kingdom?

Alistair Burt: It is difficult to put full figures on this, to be honest. We believe, as I indicated earlier, that we have provided 27 million food rations, 40 million medical consultations, 10 million relief packages, and 10 million vaccines. If we look at all those whose lives have been protected—the 3.5 million in Turkey, the 1.5 million in Lebanon and the 1 million in Jordan—we can see that United Kingdom aid has played a significant part in that.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Last year the UK Government cut funding to aid programmes in rebel-held Syria, instead shifting focus to this valuable humanitarian work in the region. None-the-less, groups such as the Free Syrian police, whom we supported throughout the conflict, continue to face a number of threats from the regime as they continue their valuable work. Will the Secretary of State assure me that her Department has not simply abandoned these people and that their ongoing protection is still a matter of serious concern for the UK Government?

Alistair Burt: DFID's aid has always been focused on humanitarian need, regardless of who has been in control of territory. Provided we can be assured that aid and support are not diverted for terrorist or extremist purposes but get through to those who are in need, that is the guiding principle on which we work, and will continue to be the principle on which DFID will provide humanitarian aid.

Gender Equality

2. Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to improve gender equality for women throughout the world. [908414]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): Gender equality is considered in the design of all DFID's programmes, and is essential to achieving the sustainable development goals. Between 2015 and 2018, UK aid provided 16.9 million women and girls with modern methods of family planning, and helped 5.6 million girls to gain access to a decent education.

Nigel Huddleston: Action on Poverty, a charity based in my constituency, has done some tremendous work in Africa and Asia, including helping thousands of women to set up their own businesses. What more can the Department do to assist charities such as Action on Poverty?

Penny Mordaunt: I pay tribute to the work that Action on Poverty has done, and, indeed, to my hon. Friend's support for that organisation. We are currently helping it, through UK Aid Direct, to improve livelihoods and food security in Sierra Leone, but, more widely, we want to increase the number of small and medium-sized charities and other organisations with which we work to deliver the global goals.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Let me ask the Secretary of State a pertinent question about empowering women. Does she agree that all the research shows that allowing them to start their own businesses and have control over their own lives is one of the best ways of empowering them, and that that often means giving them the finance that will enable them to start a small business?

Penny Mordaunt: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman. Not only the future of womankind but the future of mankind depends on that happening.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my concern about the fact that in many parts of the world women and girls are still not being given the education that they deserve, or the same education as men and boys? What is her Department doing to help to alleviate that discrimination and highlight the need for equal opportunities?

Penny Mordaunt: Globally, 63 million girls between the ages of five and 15 are out of school. Under the auspices of the Minister of State, Department for International Development, my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), we are supporting the global education partnership and, within that, the education challenge. We have refreshed our own education

strategy to ensure that it is not just about girls in classrooms, but about the quality of education that they are receiving. Only through a concerted effort in that respect, and by asking other partners to step up, will we ensure that every woman and girl has a decent education.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's ambitious strategy on gender equality, which is a heartening step towards Labour's feminist approach to international development, but these commitments will remain just warm words if, as we learned last month, 20%—600—of DFID's staff are to be reassigned to other Departments to help to manage the Tories' Brexit shambles. Will the Secretary of State tell the House very specifically what impact she expects that huge cut to have on her gender equality strategy, and, indeed, on all her Department's work?

Penny Mordaunt: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new role and sincerely wish him well in it, but his assertion is incorrect. That is not the number of staff who have been redeployed. I think that, currently, the grand total of DFID staff who are helping other Departments is 25. However, if the hon. Gentleman is concerned about a no-deal situation, he knows what he needs to do: he needs to vote for the Prime Minister's deal.

Dan Carden: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for her warm words, but I note that she did not rule out the possibility of 600 staff leaving the Department.

Many Members will have been deeply concerned by reports in the media last week that DFID's independence may once again be up for debate in this summer's comprehensive spending review, although merging DFID with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office would fly in the face of the evidence of how our aid budget can make the greatest impact. Given that more UK aid money is already being spent by other Departments, given the brazen attempts to use aid to win trade deals, and given that 600 staff are on their way out, is the Secretary of State not overseeing the managed decline of the Department for International Development?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman quotes many statistics and figures at me, so I will help him by quoting some back. All of what he says is not true so, as he starts his new role, I encourage him to talk about the 17 global goals that I hope everyone on both sides of the House is looking to deliver. What he said is not correct.

HIV/AIDS

3. Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): What steps she is taking to help eradicate HIV/AIDS in developing countries. [908415]

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): The United Kingdom is a world leader in efforts to end the AIDS epidemic, including through our major investment in the Global Fund, which provided 17.5 million people with treatment in 2017. We are working to expand access to treatment while reducing new infections, particularly among adolescent girls, women and other groups who face stigma and discrimination.

Gillian Keegan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Along with medication, education has been transforming the spread of HIV in the UK, with infections falling by 28% since 2015. In sub-Saharan Africa, however, three in four new infections among 15 to 19-year-olds affect girls, and globally young women are twice as likely to be infected with HIV as men their age. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to curb HIV infections within the most vulnerable and susceptible groups?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. Women and young girls are indeed a vulnerable group in relation to AIDS. Ending AIDS as a public health threat by 2030 is a priority for the UK, which I was able to re-emphasise when speaking at the International AIDS Conference in Amsterdam earlier this year. Tackling AIDS is possible only if we target the most vulnerable populations, which we are doing by focusing on adolescents in the sexual and reproductive health programmes that we support.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): Analysis from the STOPAIDS coalition shows that, despite increased funding to multilaterals, overall DFID funding for HIV programmes has been falling, with bilateral funding for HIV programming falling from £221 million in 2009 to just £13 million in 2017. What steps is the Department taking to fill the funding gap created by that cut? If the Secretary of State is to shift spending to multilateral mechanisms, will the Minister confirm whether the Department will continue to invest in the Global Fund at the sixth replenishment conference in October 2019?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her questions. There is sometimes a difficulty with comparing spending when taking a snapshot, because programmes last for different lengths of time, but she is right to recognise our strong commitment to the Global Fund. We invested £1.2 billion in the current replenishment process, and we also provided extra assistance to the Robert Carr civil society Networks Fund during the course of this year. We will ensure that funding continues to go to programmes, and we do our best to track it when it goes into the wider programmes where the AIDS spending will actually happen. That remains a priority for us.

10. [908422] **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): The Uganda Virus Research Institute does a huge amount of work on HIV/AIDS and, of course, was jointly set up with the British Government back in 1988. What work is the institute doing? What can the Government do to strengthen both that work and the institute's Ebola research?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for mentioning that programme. In fact, my hon. Friend the Minister for Africa visited the programme recently and was able to see its valuable work on both AIDS and Ebola. That sort of ministerial commitment demonstrates our support on the ground, which will continue and intensify.

Afghanistan: Hazara Community

4. **Mr Adrian Bailey** (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): What steps her Department has taken to provide humanitarian support to civilians from the Hazara community displaced by the Taliban's recent offensive in central Afghanistan. [908416]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): UK aid provided 2 million people in Afghanistan with life-saving support last year, including members of the Hazara community. The provision of humanitarian assistance is based on need and is delivered across the country, and it includes food, shelter and clean water. Humanitarian partners have been assisting displaced people in central Afghanistan, but they have not requested new funding.

Mr Bailey: On 4 December, the Minister for Asia and the Pacific said that British embassy staff had met Afghan Government representatives from the affected area to discuss the situation. Can the Secretary of State update us on the progress made on the humanitarian front and on any developments since that meeting?

Penny Mordaunt: Obviously I do not know the precise meeting to which the hon. Gentleman refers, because of course we frequently meet regional representatives, as well as meeting representatives based in Kabul. We are assisting people, particularly in that region, because of the territorial changes and the new pressures. At the moment there has not been a further call on us to provide any further assistance in that respect, although in other areas of Afghanistan we have leaned in because of the drought.

SDG10: Reducing Inequality

5. **Danielle Rowley** (Midlothian) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to ensure that the UK meets sustainable development goal 10 on reducing inequality. [908417]

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): The Department for International Development's mission is to reduce inequality by ending extreme poverty.

Danielle Rowley: We often talk in this place, at least on this side of the House, about the importance of universal public services like the NHS and inclusive education in ensuring that everyone, regardless of income, has access to essential services, which will bring about more equal societies. What is the Department doing to ensure that UK aid better supports the development of universal free public services in the countries in which it works?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that that forms a core part of our work not only on ending extreme poverty but in providing access to essential, lifesaving services. Whether it is helping with infants and preventing maternal mortality or providing 12 years of quality education, the Department is working around the world on those opportunities.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): My hon. Friend will be aware that I am a member of the independent commission on sexual misconduct set up by Oxfam following the Haiti issues and that the commission is about to produce its interim report. Does she agree that the way in which staff are treated by non-governmental organisations, showing proper respect and reducing inequality, is an important step towards meeting this development goal?

Harriett Baldwin: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for the work he is doing on this important issue. Last year the Department took a leadership role on addressing such issues not only within the Department but within the providers we work with around the world.

11. [908423] **Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): What progress has the Department made in engaging with children and young people to achieve sustainable development goal 16.2 to end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against children?

Harriett Baldwin: Through our own work, through the International Citizen Service and through our work with many of our partner organisations, including UNICEF, we are working extensively on this issue. I am glad to be able to tell the hon. Gentleman that the UK is the largest donor to the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Does the Minister agree that it will be impossible to meet sustainable development goal 10 unless people with disabilities are included in all our humanitarian and development work?

Harriett Baldwin: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight this, which is why last year the UK held the disability summit and launched the disability strategy to make sure that those people are truly included in all our development work.

Topical Questions

T1. [908463] **Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): The current Ebola virus outbreak has claimed 377 lives in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to date, and more than 600 people have tested positive for the disease. The response effort has been good, but it has been hampered by terrible insecurity in the region, with many humanitarian workers under fire while trying to initiate vaccinations. More than 200 people have survived the virus and the rate of infection is slow. Yesterday, I spoke to Dr Tedros of the World Health Organisation, who has just returned from the country, about what more we can do to contain the outbreak over the next several months. The UK has stepped up its support in response to the situation in the DRC and its preparedness throughout the region. It is a critical time for other nations to do the same.

T3. [908465] **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): The good news is that once we leave the European Union we can get rid of tariffs on products from our friends in the African world. What discussion have the Government had with African countries about increasing trade and development after Brexit?

Mr Speaker: We have not heard from Mr Charalambous. We must hear from the feller!

Bambos Charalambous: The all-party group on vaccinations for all, of which I am a member, will release a report next week that highlights the fact that globally one in 10 children do not receive any of the 11 essential World Health Organisation-recommended vaccines. Does the Secretary of State agree that ensuring that all children are fully immunised should be a priority of this Government and vital organisations such as Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance?

Penny Mordaunt: I am extremely glad that the hon. Gentleman got to ask that question, because Gavi is our highest performing multilateral partner. It is absolutely right that we keep the programme strong. I shall visit Gavi's Bognor Regis facility next week. Between 2016 and 2020, UK Aid will have vaccinated 76 million children, saving 1.4 million lives.

Mr Speaker: I believe that my hon. Friend the Minister for Africa is ready to answer Topical Question 3 without its having to be repeated.

Mr Speaker: Indeed. Let us hear from the Minister for Africa.

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): May I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) that there will indeed be scope not only to copy across the existing favourable trade arrangements but to increase the favourability in terms of access to the UK market for many of the poorest countries in the world post Brexit.

T2. [908464] **Bridget Phillipson** (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): Pregnancy and childbirth are incredibly dangerous times for women throughout the developing world, where the vast majority of maternal deaths take place. What more will the Secretary of State be doing this year to ensure that pregnant women and those in childbirth receive the same basic level of healthcare support that many of us here are able to take for granted?

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): Our commitment to global health is designed to ensure that focus is placed on the most vulnerable, and our support for sustainable health systems ensures that the work that is going on to improve maternity and pregnancy services in so many parts of the world is supported and bolstered by the work that we do both in country and multilaterally.

T5. [908467] **Will Quince** (Colchester) (Con): Sadly, Ethiopia has one of the worst neonatal mortality records in the world. Will the Minister join me in thanking all those in Colchester, including the CHUFT Blanketeers, who have been busy knitting in support of my campaign to send thousands of knitted hats for newborn babies in Ethiopia?

Harriett Baldwin: Ethiopia is one of the countries in which the Department for International Development has extensive programmes. I am very pleased to hear that the good folk of Colchester are supplementing that work with this wonderful project to knit hats for babies.

T4. [908466] **Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Without realising it, many Members of this House will own an item of clothing made by a slave from an overseas country. What more will the Secretary of State do to make sure that her Department, along

with the Department for International Trade and its independent trade policy, tackles modern slavery not only at home but abroad?

Penny Mordaunt: Under the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, we have led the charge on tackling modern slavery globally, including at the United Nations General Assembly this year where we increased our financial contribution to £200 million to combat the issue. Critically, we have also held events with the private sector, because it is only with the private sector and by ensuring transparency, knowledge and security across all of its supply chains that we can eradicate this terrible practice from the world.

T7. [908469] **Trudy Harrison** (Copeland) (Con): Will the Minister explain to the House what steps she is taking to improve primary education in Pakistan?

Harriett Baldwin: As the House will know, we work worldwide, including extensively in Pakistan, to fund education. Literally millions of children are accessing 12 years of quality education thanks to the work of the Department for International Development.

T6. [908468] **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State tell the House how much of the international development budget has been diverted to the Ministry of Defence?

Penny Mordaunt: I have good news for the hon. Gentleman because, even with our immense skills, it is impossible to spend any of the 0.7% on anything that is not official development assistance-eligible. I encourage all Opposition Members, as they hopefully join us to deliver the global goals, to start working for a change with the private sector and the armed forces, without which we will not be able to deliver the humanitarian relief that we wish to deliver or achieve those goals.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The US decision to stop funding the United Nations Relief and Works Agency support to Palestine risks vital education and healthcare services there. I welcome DFID's decision to increase funding in the short term, but is that sustainable in the longer term?

Alistair Burt: We and other donors have moved very rapidly this year to seek to cover a shortfall in UNRWA funding. Work is going on to ensure that, in the long term, UNRWA is sustainable. Ultimately, though, the issue is not UNRWA, but the unresolved situation of refugees.

T8. [908470] **Jo Swinson** (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Does the Secretary of State see the huge contradiction between the vital work that DFID does helping countries to mitigate and adapt to climate change and UK Export Finance continuing to subsidise billions of fossil fuel projects?

Harriett Baldwin: I assure the hon. Lady that, on climate change, we continue to improve access to clean energy for millions of people worldwide. That is an important part of the work that we do within our UK aid budget.

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before we begin Prime Minister's questions, I hope that colleagues across the House will want to join me in welcoming to the House of Commons today the former Member of Parliament for Glasgow Central and now the Governor of the Punjab, our friend Mohammad Sarwar. Welcome Mohammad.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked— **Engagements**

Q1. [908398] **Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 9 January.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I am sure that the whole House would like to join me in paying tribute to Lord Paddy Ashdown who sadly died last month. From his service in the Royal Marines through to his time in this House and then as High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, he served his country with passion and distinction and he will be sorely missed.

In recent days, we have seen instances of threats of violence or intimidation against Members of this House, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), and members of the media. I know the whole House will join me in condemning those threats. Politicians and the media should be able to go about their work without harassment and intimidation.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Drew Hendry: I echo the Prime Minister's comments on Lord Paddy Ashdown and, of course, on the disgraceful behaviour and threats to politicians and journalists going about their business.

Like those in the rest of the UK, 235,000 EU nationals in Scotland were treated to a Christmas removal threat via social media from the UK Home Office telling them to register if they want to stay in the UK after December 2020. Friends, neighbours, colleagues—people vital to the Scottish economy—were shamefully told to pay to stay in their own homes. Will the Prime Minister confirm what will happen to those not registered by December 2020? Does she realise that, for those affected, this feels less like a hostile environment and more like a xenophobic one?

The Prime Minister: We recognise the huge contribution that EU citizens have made to our economy and our society, and we want them to stay. The EU settlement scheme will make it simple and straightforward for them to get the status that they need. EU citizens have until June 2021 to apply and the cost of applying is less than the cost of renewing a British passport, but if the hon. Gentleman is concerned about the interests of EU citizens, he can back the deal, which enshrines their rights.

Q3. [908400] **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): The Government's commitment to the armed forces covenant is commendable, as is their focus on reducing reoffending.

Care after Combat is doing remarkable work in this area, and its veterans have a reoffending rate of 8% compared to a national average of 45% on leaving prison, saving the Government £20 million. Will my right hon. Friend therefore convene a cross-Government effort not only to shore up Care after Combat's work, but to look to expand it nationally?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important issue. I pay tribute to those who have served in our armed forces for their courage and commitment. I also pay tribute to the vital work undertaken by Care after Combat; my hon. Friend is absolutely right about that. We have a range of measures in place to support those who have served in the armed forces who then find themselves in the criminal justice system, and prisons tailor rehabilitative work to individuals' needs, helping to reduce the risk of reoffending when they are released from prison. The point that my hon. Friend makes about the excellent record of Care after Combat is a good one, and I am sure that a Minister from the Ministry of Justice will be happy to meet him to discuss the matter further.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in paying tribute to Paddy Ashdown, who was elected to Parliament at the same time as me in 1983. He was a very assiduous constituency MP and a very effective Member of Parliament, and he and I spent a lot of evenings voting against what the Thatcher Tory Government were doing at that time.

I agree with the Prime Minister on the point that she made about the intimidation of Members of Parliament and representatives of the media outside this building, as happened a few days ago when the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) and Owen Jones of *The Guardian* were intimidated outside this building. I send my support and sympathy to both of them. We also have to be clear that intimidation is wrong outside this building as it is wrong in any other aspect of life in this country, and we have to create a safe space for political debate. [*Interruption.*] You see what I mean, Mr Speaker; I am calling for a safe space for political debate.

Mr Speaker: Order. We have a long way to go. The questions will be heard and the answers will be heard. No amount of heckling or noise will make any difference to that simple fact.

Jeremy Corbyn: I am sure that the whole House will join me in wishing a speedy recovery to the two British soldiers who were injured in Syria last week.

The Prime Minister scrapped the Brexit vote last month, and promised that legally binding assurances would be secured at the December EU summit; she failed. She pledged to get these changes over the recess; she failed. Is the Prime Minister not bringing back exactly the same deal that she admitted would be defeated four weeks ago?

The Prime Minister: First, I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman that there is no place for intimidation in any part of our society. Politicians do need a safe space in which to express their opinions, many of which are passionately held. I hope that he will now ask his shadow Chancellor to withdraw or apologise for the

remarks that he made about the former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Ms McVey).

Let me update the House on the matter of Brexit. The conclusions of the December European Council went further than before in seeking to address the concerns of this House, and they have legal status. I have been in contact with European leaders since then about MPs' concerns. These discussions have shown that further clarification on the backstop is possible, and those talks will continue over the next few days, but we are also looking at what more we can do domestically to safeguard the interests of the people and businesses of Northern Ireland. That is why this morning we published a package of commitments that give Northern Ireland a strong voice and role in any decision to bring the backstop into effect.

We have also been looking at how Parliament can take a greater role as we take these negotiations on to the next stage. So I can tell the House that, in the event that our future relationship or alternative arrangements are not ready by the end of 2020, Parliament will have a vote on whether to seek to extend the implementation period or to bring the backstop into effect. The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union will be saying more about this during his opening speech in the forthcoming debate.

Jeremy Corbyn: No amount of window-dressing is going to satisfy Members of this House. They want to see clear legal changes to the document that the Government presented to this House.

The Foreign Secretary said that the Prime Minister has not been asking for anything new in her discussions with the EU. Does not that tell us that the Prime Minister has been recklessly wasting time, holding the country to ransom with the threat of no deal in a desperate attempt to blackmail MPs to vote for her hopelessly unpopular deal?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman can say what he likes about no deal, but he opposes any deal that the Government have negotiated with the European Union. He opposes the deal—[*Interruption.*] He opposes the deal that the EU says is the only deal, and that leaves him with no deal. The only way to avoid no deal is to vote for the deal. If the right hon. Gentleman is uncertain about what I am saying, perhaps I can give him a tip—he might like to use a lipreader.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister says that it is the only deal available. If that is the case, why was it not put to a vote on 11 December in this House? Why has there been a delay of five weeks on this?

The Prime Minister said she hopes to get "written assurances" before the vote next week, so can I ask her this: will the changes she is looking for be made to the legally binding withdrawal agreement itself?

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier in my remarks and I have said previously, there are three elements that we are looking at. One is the undertakings and assurances that we are looking for from the European Union, and we intend that those will be available to the House before the House votes at the end of the debate. We are also looking at what more we can do domestically.

I have set out, and the Secretary of State will set out more clearly and in more detail, what we are going to do in relation to the powers for Northern Ireland and on the question of the role of Parliament for the future. We are also looking to ensure that we can provide the assurance and confidence that this House needs on the question of the backstop which has been at the forefront of Members' concerns. We put a good deal on the table, but yes, we are looking for those clarifications—clarifications which I am sure will ensure that Members of this House know that the backstop need never be used and that if it is used it will be only temporary.

Jeremy Corbyn: Well, in the midst of that very long answer I did not hear the words “legal changes to the document”. That was my question.

The Environment Secretary has said that no deal would damage the UK farming sector. The Foreign Secretary has said that no deal

“is not something any government”

would

“wish on its people”,

and £4.2 billion of public money is being wastefully allocated to no-deal planning. Will the Prime Minister listen to the clearly expressed will of the House last night, end this costly charade, and rule out no deal?

The Prime Minister: I have made it clear to the right hon. Gentleman that if he wants to avoid no deal, he has to back a deal, and back the deal. He stands there and complains about money being spent on no-deal preparations. Today, Wednesday, he is saying that we should not be spending money on no-deal preparations; on Monday, he said that no-deal preparations were “too little, too late.” He cannot have it both ways: either we are doing too much or we are doing too little. So perhaps he can break his usual habit and actually give us a decision—which is it?

Jeremy Corbyn: This is the first time since 1978 that a Prime Minister has been defeated on a Finance Bill in the House of Commons. Last night, the House made it clear, in supporting the amendment in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), that no deal should be ruled out. That is the position of this House.

The UK automotive industry wrote to the Prime Minister in December asking her to take the no-deal option

“off the table or risk destroying this vital UK industry.”

Given that this House has now rejected no deal, will the Prime Minister protect thousands of skilled jobs in the automotive industry and others and rule out no deal?

The Prime Minister: I recognise that the right hon. Gentleman welcomed the leadership given by the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford on that issue. I want to be clear that that amendment does not change the fact that the UK is leaving the European Union on 29 March, nor does it stop the Government collecting tax.

The right hon. Gentleman asks once again about the question of no deal and protecting jobs. We have negotiated a deal with the European Union that protects jobs. What is raising concerns, he says, is the prospect of

no deal. It is absolutely sensible for this Government to prepare for no deal, and those preparations are even more important given the position taken by the right hon. Gentleman. With an Opposition Front-Bench team who are opposed to any deal the Government negotiate with the European Union, it is even more important that we prepare for no deal. The deal protects jobs and security and delivers on the referendum, and he should back it.

Jeremy Corbyn: Instead of backing industries in this country and protecting thousands of jobs in manufacturing and service industries, the Transport Secretary is awarding millions of pounds of contracts to ferry companies with no ferries, to run on routes that do not exist and apparently will not even be ready by the beginning of April. That is the degree of incompetence of this Government in dealing with the whole question of relations with the EU.

The Prime Minister has spent the last week begging for warm words from EU leaders and achieved nothing. Not one single dot or comma has changed. She has already squandered millions of pounds of public money on last-minute, half-baked planning for no deal, which was rejected last night. If her deal is defeated next week, as I hope and expect it will be, will the Prime Minister do the right thing—let the people have a real say and call a general election?

The Prime Minister: No. We have put a good deal on the table that protects jobs and security. I noticed in all of that that we still do not know what Brexit plan the right hon. Gentleman has. I was rather hoping, as he went through, that he might turn over a page and find a Brexit plan. What do we know about the right hon. Gentleman? He has been for and against free movement. He has been for and against the customs union. He has been for and against an independent trade policy. He was a Eurosceptic. Now he is pro the EU. He wanted to trigger article 50 on day one; now he wants to delay it. He did not want money spent on no deal; now he says it is not enough. The one thing we know about the right hon. Gentleman is that his Brexit policies are the many, not the few.

Q4. [908401] Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): The NHS long-term plan is hugely welcome, particularly its recognition that GPs are the bedrock of the NHS. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is vital that we do all we can to support GPs in staying in general practice, and that the education and training budget be urgently prioritised, to enable a wide range of healthcare professionals to support GPs in their practices?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point about GPs. If he looks at the long-term plan for the NHS, which was launched on Monday and is being made possible by the £20.5 billion extra that we will be putting into the NHS by 2023-24, he will see that support for the workforce, including GPs, is a very important part of that plan. Indeed, a greater focus on primary care, which will help to keep people out of hospital—at any point in time, 20% to 30% of people in hospital do not need to be there—is an important part of the plan. GPs are an essential element of that, and I assure my hon. Friend that they will be part of that important workforce planning.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I concur with the Prime Minister in her remarks on Paddy Ashdown. I make the point that all of us collectively have a responsibility to make sure that there is no intimidation in our public life.

The Prime Minister delayed the doomed Brexit vote last year on the promise of written concessions from Brussels. Prime Minister, where are they?

The Prime Minister: I set out the position in my first response to the Leader of the Opposition. I suggest the right hon. Gentleman should have listened to it.

Ian Blackford: We are used to not getting an answer, and there we have it again. What the Prime Minister promised was that we would get written concessions, and that Parliament would have the opportunity to vote on them; nothing has materialised. A month has passed, and nothing has changed.

Last night, the Prime Minister suffered another humiliating defeat. When will the Prime Minister face the facts? There is little support for her deal or no deal in this House. The new year began without concessions; the Dublin talks failed without concessions; the debate on her deal restarts today without concessions. The Prime Minister is frozen in failure, asking MPs to write a blank cheque for her blindfold Brexit. MPs should not be debating without the full facts. Is it this, or will there be the concessions, not just clarifications? When will the Prime Minister guarantee that the House will see the full details before we start the debate this afternoon?

The Prime Minister: As I said in response to the right hon. Gentleman's first question, I set out the position earlier. I referenced, as he will know, the conclusions of the December European Council, which went further in relation to the issues that I have raised with the European Council than they had gone before, and those have legal status, but we are of course working further on those issues.

The right hon. Gentleman cannot get away from the fact that if he wants to avoid no deal, he has to be willing to agree a deal. The deal that is on the table, which the EU has made clear is the only deal, is the one that the United Kingdom Government have negotiated with the European Union. If he really wants, and is concerned about ensuring that we can look ahead to, a bright future across the whole of the United Kingdom, he should back that deal.

Employment: West Midlands

Q11. [908408] **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What discussions she has had with the Mayor of the west midlands on the creation of employment in that region; and if she will make a statement.

The Prime Minister: I was pleased to meet the Mayor of the west midlands last October, when my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and I visited the Kings Norton headquarters of adi Group and saw at first hand the opportunities that apprenticeships can afford. That is why we are seeing annual investment in apprenticeships double to nearly £2.5 billion by 2020. It was also an excellent opportunity to see a successful west midlands company doing its bit to give young people a career. I am pleased to say that the latest statistics show employment in the west midlands has risen by 276,000 since 2010.

Michael Fabricant: That is fantastic news, but I think the Prime Minister will agree with me that transport is also key to employment. I want to raise the question of the rail line that lies between Lichfield and Burton, which is currently used only for freight. It passes the National Memorial Arboretum, which gets about half a million visitors a year, but at the moment they all have to come by road, along the busy and congested A38. May I ask the Prime Minister that this rail line be upgraded to a passenger service, providing a valuable east-west connection from Birmingham? Would she also allow me to take her personally around the National Memorial Arboretum?

The Prime Minister: I of course recognise the important role that transport links play in relation to prosperity and economic growth. Our rail strategy, "Connecting people", which we have published, actually does look at how we can restore lost capacity where that unlocks housing growth, eases crowded routes, meets demand and offers good value for money, of course. It is for local authorities and local enterprise partnerships to determine whether a new station or train service is the best way to meet local transport needs, but we work closely with local authorities and local enterprise partnerships to take forward the schemes that they are interested in progressing.

In relation to the arboretum, I will of course consider a visit in the future, and I think my hon. Friend has probably given me an invitation it is very difficult to refuse.

Engagements

Q2. [908399] **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): UK officials at Dover process 10,000 lorries every day from the EU, bringing in food, medicines and other goods. Has the UK Government's experiment on Monday with 89 lorries in a Kent car park given the Prime Minister confidence in her Government's ability to handle a no-deal Brexit?

The Prime Minister: The Government are doing exactly what it is necessary and sensible for a Government to do, which is to make preparations for no deal and ensure that we test those preparations. I come back to the point that if the hon. Gentleman is worried about the consequences of no deal, he should back the deal.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): It seems plain to anyone who has listened to most of the debates in this House that there is no majority for any proposition on our future relationship with the European Union in this House of Commons, except the majority that is clearly against leaving with no deal. I propose to vote for the Prime Minister's withdrawal agreement, but I doubt it will pass. If it is passed and we get into a transition, there is no majority or consensus on what the Government are supposed to negotiate for in the years that follow to settle our future political and economic relationships with Europe. The Prime Minister has to be flexible on some things, so if she loses the debate next Tuesday, will she consider moving to the obvious step in the national interest of delaying or revoking article 50, so that we have time to consider what the British actually want?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and learned Friend referenced the withdrawal agreement and said that there was no position on what the future relationship should be. Of course, the framework for that future relationship, which is in greater detail than many had expected, is set out in the political declaration, which gives the instructions to the negotiators for the future. In that circumstance, it is right that we consider the role that Parliament will play as the negotiations go forward to ensure that we get the future relationship right. I believe it is possible to have a future relationship with the European Union that is deep and close, but that gives us the freedom to do what we want to do, which is to have an independent trade policy and to develop trade agreements and trade arrangements with the rest of the world.

Q5. [908402] **John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): I welcome the crackdown on cold-calling to fleece pensioners out of their hard-earned pension pots, but is that not just dealing with the symptoms, rather than the underlying cause, which is the ill-judged free-for-all pension changes introduced by the Prime Minister's friend, the previous Chancellor George Osborne, which gave the green light to the shysters and the spivs? What is she going to do about that?

The Prime Minister: The changes introduced by the previous Chancellor of the Exchequer gave pensioners more flexibility and freedom in relation to how to use their own money.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Every Member of this House knows that drivers and commuters want greater investment to repair our roads and upgrade our railway services, yet we are wasting money on a deeply unpopular project, where the management has failed and the costs are out of control. It will end up costing the taxpayer more than £100 billion—that is about £300 million per mile of track. Why can we not face up to reality, Prime Minister, cancel HS2 and spend the money on the people's priorities for transport, rather than on this overpriced project that will never deliver value for money for the taxpayer?

The Prime Minister: First of all, we recognise the concerns that people have about roads, particularly issues such as potholes in their roads, which is precisely why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has made more money available to address those issues.

On the question of HS2, it is not just about a high-speed railway; it is about ensuring that we have the capacity that is needed on this particular route, because we are already reaching capacity on the west coast main line. We are already seeing HS2 spreading prosperity. It is encouraging investment and rebalancing our economy, and that is 10 years before the railway even opens. We have seen 7,000 jobs created across the UK, and 2,000 businesses across the UK are delivering HS2. It will bring tens of billions of pounds' worth of benefits to passengers, suppliers and local communities up and down the route.

Q6. [908403] **Sir Edward Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I thank the Prime Minister for her words about Lord Ashdown, our friend Paddy. Paddy was loved on these Benches, and I believe he was respected across the House and across the country. We will miss him deeply.

An unusual thing happened last night: Conservative MPs and Opposition MPs united, and leavers and remainers united. They united to back my proposal for a review of retrospection in a law called the loan charge, which offends against the rule of law and has caused misery to tens of thousands of people. In her role as First Lord of the Treasury, will the Prime Minister agree to meet me and a cross-party delegation of MPs to discuss the new review of the loan charge?

The Prime Minister: First of all, the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct: the late Lord Ashdown was deeply respected across this House, across Parliament as a whole and widely across the country. On the question he puts about the review of the loan charge—[*Interruption.*] I get the point he was trying to make, but may I just make this point? He talked about Opposition and Government MPs uniting. Actually, the Government accepted his review into the loan charge. I think the first stage might be for the Chancellor of the Exchequer to sit down with him and a group of cross-party MPs to look at how that review is being taken forward.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Mr Speaker, I am not going to ask about Brexit. You may be pleased about that. [*Interruption.*] And happy new year to all of you as well.

I recently had the immense privilege of shadowing Dr Imran Zia at our accident and emergency department at Whipps Cross University Hospital. It was a humbling experience to witness the dedication and fantastic skill of our doctors and nurses. However, they work in buildings that are now well over 100 years old and they know they need better facilities. I have to say to my right hon. Friend that while the NHS set the development of Whipps as the top north-east London priority, in December it announced programmes for investment across London, and yet again north-east London was not included. Will my right hon. Friend please visit Whipps Cross Hospital to see how important and vital it is to the area? Will she work with our excellent Health Secretary, on the basis of a fantastic announcement on Monday, to invest in those buildings and facilities?

The Prime Minister: I will certainly look at the possibility of taking my right hon. Friend up on that invitation. He makes an important point about the announcement we made on Monday. Our right hon. Friend the Health Secretary has heard what he says about the particular requirements at Whipps Cross Hospital, and will be happy to sit down and talk with him in more detail about that. I will certainly look at my diary and look at his invitation.

Q7. [908404] **Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I would like to add mention of my own sadness at the passing of Paddy. In his final weeks, he was very concerned about the way that Brexit would play into Britain's place in the world.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): From the grave.

Hon. Members: Shame!

Layla Moran: Brexit, for example, is clearly in Russia's geopolitical interest. It was chilling to hear Vladimir Putin parroting exactly the words of the Prime Minister on why we should not hold a referendum but instead "fulfil the will of the people".

Meanwhile, poll after poll shows there is a majority for a referendum, because people can see that the Prime Minister's flailing deal is not in our national interest. So whose side is this Prime Minister on: Putin's or the people's?

The Prime Minister: I am on the side of the people, to whom this Parliament gave a vote on the decision as to whether to stay in the European Union. We will be delivering on and respecting the result of that referendum, and delivering on Brexit.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I am delighted that we have been able to deliver on our manifesto commitment to introduce an energy price cap. Will my right hon. Friend outline how that price cap will benefit my constituents across Erewash?

The Prime Minister: The fact that the energy price cap has now come in is a very important step that this Government have taken. Something like 11 million households will benefit from the price cap. Households will save money as a result of what this Government have done. We recognise the concern people had about energy prices. It is this Government who have acted to deliver, and my hon. Friend's constituents in Erewash will see a benefit as a result.

Q8. [908405] **Gill Furniss** (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): Many of my constituents are employed in the Sheffield steel sector—a beacon of innovation and manufacturing. UK Steel, the body representing steel companies, has been clear that a no deal would be nothing short of a disaster for the sector. Will the Prime Minister confirm that she will not be so irresponsible as to consider the option of a no deal, and reassure my constituents, who are worried about their jobs and their future?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely respect and recognise the role that the steel industry plays in the United Kingdom. Over recent years, the Government have taken steps to support the steel industry. The hon. Lady talks about the issue of whether we should leave the European Union without a deal. I have been working to ensure that we have a good deal when we leave the European Union. That is the deal that is on the table, and anybody who does not want no deal has to accept that the way to ensure that there is not no deal is to accept and vote for the deal.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): On Tuesday I shall vote for the Prime Minister's withdrawal agreement, but may I ask the Prime Minister to consider one particular aspect, for which I must declare a rather rash—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The question from the hon. Gentleman must be heard. As I scarcely heard what he said, I think he should start again—[*Interruption.*] Yes, he should start again and deliver it in full.

Huw Merriman: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am wearing my Arsenal tie, and unfortunately those on the terraces here are not quite as well behaved as those at the Emirates.

As I was saying, on Tuesday I will vote for the Prime Minister's deal. I would like her to look at one particular aspect, for which I have to declare a rather rash

financial interest. It relates to page 33 of the withdrawal agreement. Citizens' residency can be provided either for free by the UK Government or for an amount commensurate with existing costs. At a Brexit meeting in Bexhill, I was so confident that the Government would provide it for free that, rather foolishly, I offered to pay the charge for one particular European citizen who was not quite as confident. Given that this was a decision by the UK public, surely we should welcome our friends, neighbours and essential workforce from the EU, and offer citizens' residency free of charge, so that they can stay in this country at our cost.

The Prime Minister: Obviously, I recognise the concern raised by my hon. Friend. The £65 fee to apply for status under the scheme is in line with the current cost of obtaining permanent residence documentation, and it will, of course, contribute to the overall costs of the system, but applications will be free of charge for those who hold valid permanent residence documentation or valid indefinite leave to enter or remain, and for children being looked after by a local authority. Where an application is granted pre-settled status under the scheme, there will, from April 2019, be no fee for applying for settled status. As I said in an earlier response to another Member, the EU settlement scheme will make it simple and straightforward for people to get the status that they need.

Q9. [908406] **Stephen Kinnock** (Aberavon) (Lab): This week, our cross-party Norway Plus group published "Common Market 2.0", a clear plan that respects the 52:48 mandate, addresses concerns about free movement, protects jobs in my Aberavon constituency, and helps to reunite our deeply divided country. If the Prime Minister's deal is rejected on Tuesday, will she give the House the opportunity to vote on a range of options, including "Common Market 2.0", and will she give Members on her Benches a free vote on those options?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I am working to ensure that the deal that has been negotiated by the UK Government with the European Union is voted on positively by this Parliament. It is a good deal. It does what he wants: it protects jobs and security. It also delivers in full on the referendum result, which is a key issue. We owe it to people to deliver what they wanted, which was control of money, borders and laws, and that is what the deal does.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for ensuring that our manifesto commitment to scrap tolls on the Severn bridge crossings has been met. That will put £1,400 a year into the pockets of thousands of motorists, many of whom are my constituents. Does she agree that will help transform the economies of the south-west and south Wales?

The Prime Minister: This is an important step that the Government have taken. It was advocated by individual Members and the Secretary of State for Wales, and I believe it will indeed have a very positive economic effect on Wales, on the south-west and on constituencies such as my hon. Friend's.

Q10. [908407] **Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Local Government Association has produced figures showing that councils of all political persuasions overspent

their children's services budgets by £800 million last year. The figure for Sheffield was £12 million. That is totally due to the fact that the number of children in care has risen to a 10-year high. In the light of that pressure, does the Prime Minister accept that the £84 million over five years offered by the Chancellor in the Budget is totally inadequate? Without extra funding, either these vulnerable children will not get the care they need, or other important services, such as parks and libraries, will get further cuts at a time the Prime Minister has told us that austerity has come to an end.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman quoted £84 million. That was actually for a pilot, which is about keeping more children at home with their families safely. We announced an extra £410 million overall at the Budget for social care, which includes children, and spending on the most vulnerable children has increased by more than £1.5 billion since 2010. We are also taking a number of other steps, such as the work we are doing to increase the number of children's social workers, the appointment of a chief social worker for children, introducing Frontline and Step Up, and getting quality candidates into social care careers. Those are important steps. The hon. Gentleman talks about money; actually, it is about ensuring that the service that is provided is the right one. That is why we do it across the board, and that is why we are looking at those issues around social workers.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Ever since former President Gayoom introduced democracy to the Maldives, its legitimacy has been challenged. Just like we have seen with the prophets of doom around Brexit, the recent elections went ahead with no violence and President Solih was elected with a great majority. Will my right hon. Friend redouble her efforts to increase trade, education and cultural links?

The Prime Minister: I can tell my hon. Friend what I hope is news that he will welcome, which is that a new embassy is being opened in the Maldives. As we look around the world in relation to trade, we will of course see what we can do to improve our trade with a number of countries.

Q12. [908409] **Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Parliamentary defeats are now a regular feature of the Prime Minister's Government. She has lost a quarter of her Cabinet, and 117 of her Back Benchers want her gone. Her deal is as dead as the dearest dodo. How many more indignities can this Prime Minister endure before she realises that she is the biggest part of the problem? For goodness' sake, just go!

The Prime Minister: The UK Government have negotiated a deal with the European Union that delivers on the referendum result. I know the hon. Gentleman does not want to deliver on the referendum result. He wants to ensure that the UK stays inside the European Union, at the same time—talking about the economy—as he supports taking Scotland out of the Union of the United Kingdom, which is much more important economically for the people of Scotland. The people of Scotland know that remaining in the United Kingdom is their best future.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Volunteering services are enormously important, and none more so than the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, who put their lives at risk and often rescue people who make perilous crossings to try to get into this country. Is it not time that we looked at the RNLI's funding? Many people think it is funded by the Government, and it is time we gave some money towards it.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the vital role that the RNLI plays. As she says, many people do not realise that it is funded entirely by voluntary contributions. I pay tribute to all those across the country who raise funds for the RNLI, including, if she will allow me, the Sonning branch in my constituency.

Q13. [908410] **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): York has been in shock as we have learned that 11 homeless people in our city died last year. While we know that this is an issue across the nation, we also know that substance misuse services have been cut, that social housing has not been built in our city, and that mental health services are desperately underfunded and understaffed.

Prime Minister, I do not want to hear what you have done, because it has clearly failed. I want to know what you are going to do differently, so that no homeless person dies this year.

The Prime Minister: Every death of someone while homeless or sleeping rough on our streets is one death too many, which is why we have made a commitment to end rough sleeping by 2027 and halve it by 2022. The hon. Lady says that she does not want to know what we have done, but we have committed more than £1.2 billion to tackling homelessness and rough sleeping. She mentioned mental health services, and asked what we would do in the future. What we will be doing in the future is putting an extra £2.3 billion into mental health services, to ensure that we provide them for the people who, sadly, are not currently able to access them.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): More Londoners voted to leave the EU than voted for the current Mayor of London, who is swanning around Europe talking about Brexit rather than his responsibilities, such as crime, housing and transport. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if he insists on being a Brexit diva, he should concentrate on telling his side to vote for this deal—*[Interruption.]*

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree. What the Mayor of London should be doing is looking at what delivers on the overall vote of the people of London—the vote to which my hon. Friend referred—and at what delivers in a way that protects the best interests of Londoners, and that is to vote for this deal.

Q14. [908411] **Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister has had 20 dancing rebels, has promised five golden trade agreements and has had one big defeat, and yet she still cannot find her withdrawal agreement. Has she checked her pear tree?

The Prime Minister: It was a good attempt, but Christmas happened a couple of weeks ago.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): According to that invaluable website TheyWorkForYou, the Prime Minister has assured the House on no fewer than 74 previous occasions that we will be leaving the EU on 29 March. Will she categorically confirm today that there is absolutely no question at all of delaying that date?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to repeat what I have said previously—that we will be leaving the European Union on 29 March. I want us to leave the European Union on 29 March with the good deal that is on the table.

Q15. [908412] **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): My constituents Sarah and Chris Cookson lost their little boy Charlie in 2013. Since then, they have devoted their lives to helping other families and children with life-limiting conditions via their charity, the Charlie Cookson Foundation. On Boxing Day, Sarah gave birth to Carter John Cookson. He had three cardiac arrests in one day. After an unsuccessful operation, he is now fighting for his life, in need of a heart transplant. Carter has been given only a matter of

weeks to live. Will the Prime Minister join me today in raising awareness to help us to find a heart for little baby Carter?

The Prime Minister: Let me first join the hon. Lady in commending the work that the Cooksons have done with the Charlie Cookson Foundation in raising funds for children and babies with life-threatening conditions. I am sure that the sympathies of the whole House are with the family at this very, very difficult time. The hon. Lady has outlined some of the specifics of the case, but I will ensure that the relevant Minister at the Department of Health and Social Care meets her to discuss the issue further.

We do want to change the culture on organ donation in order to save more lives. That is why we are planning to introduce a new opt-out system in England in 2020. The new law will be known as Max and Keira's law, in honour of Max Johnson, who received a heart from Keira Ball, and Keira, who sadly lost her life in a car accident. However, the hon. Lady has outlined a tragic case, and I will ensure that a Minister from the Department speaks with her about it.

Points of Order

12.49 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As you are aware, at the beginning of Prime Minister's questions when I was expressing my deep sadness at the loss of Lord Ashdown and his concern for the state of where we are now, the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) loudly shouted from a sedentary position, "From the grave." I find such a comment disgraceful, and I ask for guidance on how the hon. Gentleman might, for example, retract such a statement and on whether it was becoming of the sort of conduct that we should expect from Members of this House.

Mr Speaker: I did hear those words. I did not hear a particular Member, and I did not see a Member mouth those words, but I did hear those words. I think it was most unfortunate that that was said. People sometimes say things instinctively and rashly, but it was most unfortunate. The hon. Lady was perfectly properly paying tribute to an extremely distinguished former Member of this House and someone that many would regard as an international statesperson. What was said should not have been said. If the person who said it wishes to take the opportunity to apologise, it is open to that person to do so.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I will apologise for my remarks if any offence was caused to any Member of the House.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman's words stand, and I thank him for what he has said.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As you know, I have always regarded you as an exceptional Speaker and a defender of Parliament, which I continue to do. However, I also regard the Clerks of the House in exactly the same light. I went to the Table Office late last night to look at the Business of the House (Section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018) (No. 2) (Motion) to see what shenanigans the Government were up to. It had been published, and I thought of proposing an amendment, but I was told that that would be totally out of order and that no other amendments had been tabled. However, there is an amendment to that motion on the Order Paper today, which puts me in something of an unfortunate position, so could you rule on what action might be taken?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. First, let me thank him for his kind remarks that prefaced his inquiry. This is the first that I have learned of the matter, and that makes it difficult for me to give immediate advice. It is a matter upon which I may need to reflect before giving him what I would call substantive advice.

Obviously, I was not aware of the hon. Gentleman's visit to the Table Office, of which he has now informed me. I understand that he is telling me that he was advised that the motion was unamendable, and I do not know whether he went into the Table Office before the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield

(Mr Grieve) or after. All I know is that in my understanding the motion is amendable—I am clear in my mind about that—so insofar as the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) is disappointed that he was unable to table an amendment, I understand that. Whether there is an opportunity for him to do so now seems doubtful. I would have had no objection to him seeking to table an amendment, but I was unaware that he was attempting to do so. That is my honest answer to him. I absolutely accept that he is a person of complete integrity and will always try to do the right thing, and the same goes for me. I am trying to do the right thing and to make the right judgments. That is what I have tried to do and will go on doing.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I hope you will bear with me because, as a relatively new Member who has never raised a point of order before, there may be some inaccuracy in the process. Given the comments that you have just made, I wonder whether you could point me towards the precedent that would allow for what seems to be an unamendable motion to be amended.

Mr Speaker: I am immensely grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I am not in the business of invoking precedent, nor am I under any obligation to do so. I think the hon. Gentleman will know that it is the long-established practice of this House that the Speaker in the Chair makes judgments upon the selection of amendments and that those judgments are not questioned by Members of the House. I am clear in my mind that I have taken the right course of action.

By way of explanation to the hon. Gentleman and to the House, the motion in the Prime Minister's name is indeed a variation of the order agreed by the House on 4 December. Under paragraph (9) of that order, the question on any motion to vary the order "shall be put forthwith." I interpret that to mean that there can be no debate, but I must advise the House that the terms of the order do not say that no amendment can be selected or moved. I cannot allow debate, but I have selected the amendment in the name of the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield. At the appropriate point, I will invite him to move it once the motion has been moved. That is the position.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. For the convenience of the House, I have brought with me a copy of the original business motion, which was passed by this House on 4 December 2018, and paragraph (9) states:

"No motion to vary or supplement the provisions of this Order shall be made except by a Minister of the Crown; and the question on any such motion shall be put forthwith."

That was a motion of the House.

Now, I have not been in this House as long as you have, Mr Speaker, but I have been here for 18 years and I have never known any Speaker to overrule a motion of the House of Commons. You have said again and again that you are a servant of this House, and we take you at your word. When people have challenged you in points of order, I have heard you say many times, "I cannot do x or y because I am bound by a motion of the House." You have done that multiple times in my experience, so why are you overriding a motion of the House today?

Mr Speaker: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for his characteristic courtesy. The answer is simple. The right hon. Gentleman referred to a motion and said that no motion in this context, for the purposes of precis, may be moved other than by a Minister of the Crown. 'Tis so. We are not treating here of a motion but of an amendment to a motion.

Mr Francois: That's ridiculous.

Mr Speaker: I am sorry, but there is a distinction between a motion and an amendment. What the right hon. Gentleman says about a motion I accept, but it does not relate to an amendment. That is the answer.

Mr Francois: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: No, there is no further.

Mr Francois: I am sorry, but that is utter sophistry.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In recent years—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The Father of the House is on his feet; let us hear the right hon. and learned Gentleman.

Mr Clarke: In my opinion, in recent years this House has seen a considerable diminution of its powers and has often seemed rather indifferent to the eroding of some of the powers we used to have to hold Governments to account. You, Mr Speaker, have been assiduous in maximising the opportunities for the House to hold what happens to be the Government of the day to account and in giving the opportunity for debate and for voting. I find it unbelievable that people are putting such effort into trying to exclude the possibility of the House expressing its opinion on how it wishes to handle this matter, and I suggest to some of my hon. Friends—the ones who are getting somewhat overexcited—that perhaps they should don a yellow jacket and go outside.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Of course I will come back to other colleagues. I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for his point of order, which I think requires no response from me; it stands on its own.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You are in an invidious position: you have an extremely difficult job to do, but can you confirm in relation to your rulings—whichever way they go; sometimes we will agree, and sometimes we will disagree—that it would not be in order for you simply to respond to the loudest voice at a particular point of time, or in any way to be pushed by a minority view because some are acting in a co-ordinated way to attempt to overrule your rulings?

Mr Speaker: I note what the hon. Gentleman says, and he will not be surprised to know that I share his judgment in the matter. For the avoidance of doubt and the understanding of people who are not Members of the House but are attending to our proceedings, and are possibly even present in the Palace of Westminster today, let me say this so that it is crystal clear from the

vantage point of the Chair: what the Chair is proposing to do is select an amendment because in my honest judgment it is a legitimate selection. It is for the House to vote upon—[*Interruption.*] Order. It is for the House to vote upon that amendment, and indeed to vote upon the motion. The Chair is simply seeking to discharge the responsibility of the holder of the office to the best of his ability. That is what I have always done, and no matter what people say or how forcefully they say it, or how many times they say it or by what manner of co-ordination it is said, I will continue to do what I believe to be right.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you confirm that no amendment to the European withdrawal motion can have any legislative effect and therefore cannot override the express repeal of the European Communities Act 1972 in any shape or form, which was passed under section 1 of the withdrawal Act by this House and by Parliament on 26 June this year?

Mr Speaker: The short answer is yes, the hon. Gentleman is right. [*Interruption.*] The hon. Gentleman is right: only statute can overrule statute. As usual the hon. Gentleman's exegesis of the situation is entirely correct. [*Interruption.*] Somebody chuntered from a sedentary position, "Not as usual"; well, that was my evaluative comment on the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) based on long experience of him, and on this particular point I absolutely accept that he is right.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You have often drawn our attention not just to what goes on within the House but the view the public might take of the priorities we hold, so may I ask you to confirm what I believe you just said: if people do not like the amendment you have selected, the simple answer is to vote against it?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Yes. A point of order now from Sir Bernard Jenkin.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I ask you to rule on a different matter, regarding Standing Order No. 118 on how delegated legislation is dealt with in this House, which states at paragraph (6):

"The Speaker shall put forthwith the question thereon"

after orders have been debated upstairs and brought to the Floor of the House? That has always been thought and understood to mean that these motions are unamendable: "forthwith" means unamendable. Why have you changed your interpretation of that word in this case?

Mr Speaker: My understanding is that the motion today, and the amendment, are undebatable: there is to be no debate on them. I have not made, as the hon. Gentleman suggests, a change of judgment specifically for today. I understand what the hon. Gentleman tells me in respect of the traditional treatment of delegated legislation, upon which he may himself be a considerable authority. I think it reasonable to say by way of response

that I cannot be expected to make a comprehensive judgment on that related question now, but I stand by the view I have expressed to the House. I completely respect the fact that the hon. Gentleman takes a view that differs from my own, but that is in the nature of debate and argument.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Government have a track record on this: they have a track record of trying to prevent this House from having its say over all aspects of the Brexit process, and what the public cannot see is the Chief Whip sitting there at the end of the Treasury Bench feverishly briefing journalists and texting Members in a co-ordinated attempt to undermine your judgment, Mr Speaker. The hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone)—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) is raising a point of order and he is entitled to be heard, and he will be heard.

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Member for Wellingborough made a reasonable point about going into the Table Office and being able to table an amendment. Is there not a problem here, Mr Speaker, as the fact is that the Government have had four weeks to get this right, but did not table the Business of the House motion until well gone 6 o'clock last night? Indeed, Members of this House were sitting in a meeting with the Prime Minister and Chief Whip and there was complete confusion about whether the Business of the House motion had gone down; there was a deliberate attempt to prevent amendments from being tabled and the House knowing what was going on. Do you agree that that is not acceptable, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: My understanding is that the Business of the House motion was tabled yesterday afternoon by the Government; I confess I do not know at precisely what time, but my recollection and understanding are that it was tabled yesterday afternoon. It is for Members to judge in the light of the chronology of events of recent weeks whether that was altogether helpful. Clearly the Government Chief Whip will do what he judges to be right on behalf of his Prime Minister and his Government; I acknowledge that. Whether Members elsewhere in the House found it particularly helpful is perhaps an essay question which I leave to others.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have to tell you that I am absolutely hopping mad. When I became an MP three years ago I was determined that I would not become part of the establishment. Do people in this House have any idea how out of touch the general public think we are most days? We are talking about 79 days to potentially crashing out of Europe without a deal; our focus should not be on the detail of, and arguments about, the process in this place; it should be about getting on with a plan B if Parliament decides next week that the Government's plan is not the one for the people. When are we going to start acting like public servants and doing the right thing and having the debate and getting on with it?

Mr Speaker: I have the highest respect for the hon. Lady, as she knows. I take on board what she says and I do not dissent from it. Equally, however, if Members raise points of order it is my responsibility to deal with them as fairly and effectively as I can. Clearly there will, I think, be a desire at some stage to proceed to the substance of the matters with which we are supposed to be dealing, but if there are further points of order, of course I will hear them and do my best to respond.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In my previous job in the European Parliament I often found that I was being asked to vote on amendments that had not been debated, and one of the things I really like about this House is that, before we vote on amendments, we get a chance to debate them. Can you confirm that, if this amendment is put to a vote today, we will have had a chance to debate it?

Mr Speaker: No, for the very simple reason that the terms for today, specified by the Government Chief Whip, specify no debate. If the hon. Lady asks me whether there will be a debate, the honest answer is no, but that is not my fault.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will appreciate that there are Members around the House who have concerns about your decision today. I think it would be very helpful to the House if you could confirm that your decision was taken with the full advice and agreement of the Clerk of the House of Commons and, perhaps to help the House, you might agree to publish that advice so that the House can understand the reasons for your decision. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Forgive me, colleagues, but I want to hear the right hon. Lady's point of order. I heard the start of it, but I did not hear its continuation, so please let us hear it.

Andrea Leadsom: Thank you, Mr Speaker. As you will have heard today, there are some concerns about the decision you have taken in the context of the Business of the House motion. Could you therefore please confirm that your decision was taken with full advice from the Clerk of the House of Commons and other senior parliamentary advisers and whether, under these circumstances, you might consider publishing that advice?

Hon. Members: Publish it.

Mr Speaker: Order. I thank the Leader of the House for her point of order, and what I say to her is twofold. First, of course I consult the Clerk of the House and other senior Clerks, and I hear their advice. That advice is tendered to me privately, and that is absolutely proper, but it is also true that I had a written note from the Clerk of the House, from which I quoted in responding to an earlier point of order.

If the right hon. Lady is inquiring whether there is what she might consider to be, in governmental terms, full written advice, a paper or a written brief, or whatever, there is none such. I have just told her what the situation is, I quoted from what was provided to me by the Clerk of the House and I have given my ruling. That is the situation.

Andrea Leadsom: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am grateful for your reply. My question really is, did the Clerk of the House of Commons propose that your solution is acceptable, or did the Clerk advise against it?

Mr Speaker: The answer is that I have discussed the matter with the Clerk of the House. [HON. MEMBERS: “Ah!”] Order. The Clerk offered me advice, and we talked about the situation that faces the House today. At the end of our discussion, when I had concluded as I did, he undertook to advise me further in the treatment of this matter—that seems to me to be entirely proper. That is the situation, and I think that is what colleagues would expect.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Just before I begin, I wish Michel Barnier a happy 68th birthday today. The contention in which this amendment is held is surely all the justification required for Members to vote on it and to decide one way or the other, and you are correct in what you are doing.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: On account of his seniority I will take a further point of order from the right hon. Gentleman, but I hope he will not push his luck.

Mr Duncan Smith: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. As you know, I respect the Chair and I would never push my luck with you. I do not challenge the decision by any means, and it is your right to make it from the Chair, but over the past 24 or 25 years I have on a number of occasions, particularly during the Maastricht debates, asked the Clerks whether we could amend a Business of the House motion. I was always told categorically that precedent says it is not possible and, therefore, there was no point seeking to do so—I say that only as a statement.

Because this has a big impact on the Government’s ability to get their business, regardless of Brexit, will the instruction go to the Clerks that, in future, a Back Bencher wishing to amend a “forthwith” motion will now have such an amendment allowed and accepted against any business in the House?

Mr Speaker: It seems entirely reasonable for me to say to the right hon. Gentleman that I would like to reflect on that matter. [HON. MEMBERS: “Ah!”] Order. Members cavil as though there is an assumption that there should be immediate and comprehensive knowledge of all circumstances that might subsequently unfold. It may be that there are Members who feel they possess such great wisdom and, if so, I congratulate them upon the fact. I do not claim that wisdom, so I am giving what I absolutely admit is a holding answer to the right hon. Gentleman. I will reflect on the point, but if he is asking whether I think it is unreasonable that people might seek to amend a Business of the House motion, I do not think it is unreasonable. If, in future, Back Benchers were to seek to do so, it would seem sensible to me to say, “Let us look at the merits of the case.”

Finally, in attempting to respond not only to the right hon. Gentleman but to some of the concerns that have been expressed, I understand the importance of precedent, but precedent does not completely bind, for one very simple reason. [*Interruption.*] I say this for the benefit of the Leader of the House, who is shaking her head. If we were guided only by precedent, manifestly nothing in our procedures would ever change. Things do change. I have made an honest judgment. If people want to vote against the amendment, they can; and if they want to vote for it, they can.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can I remind the House that, further to what you have just said, it was because of your courage in allowing an amendment to a Loyal Address, which enabled a referendum test to be applied in this House, that we had the referendum in due course and we are where we are? Let nobody suggest that you, by your actions, have been undermining Brexit. It would seem to me to be an absolute own goal for this House if we started undermining your position in the Chair. As an independently-minded Government Back Bencher, I strongly resent the fact that the Government pairing Whip, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), who is on the right-hand side of your Chair, has been trying to orchestrate objections to your decision.

Mr Speaker: Let me say this to the hon. Gentleman. So far as his last remark was concerned, I think I can cope with that. Government Whips going about their business in their own way is something to which the Chair is very well and long accustomed. The notion that a Government Whip might now and again do things that are unhelpful to the Chair is not entirely novel. I have broad shoulders and I am not going to lose any sleep over that—never have done, am not doing so and never will.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his characteristic courtesy and his sense of fairness. He recalls the record accurately: I did indeed select an additional amendment to the Humble Address, if memory serves me correctly, in 2013, and that was in the name of Mr John Baron. That amendment was on the subject of a referendum on British membership of the European Union, so what the hon. Gentleman says is true.

The fact is that there is a responsibility on the Chair to do their best to stand up for the rights of the House of Commons, including the views of dissenters on the Government Benches—that is to say, independent-minded souls who do not always go with the Whip—and to defend the rights of Opposition parties and very small parties, as well. I have always sought to do that, and on the Brexit issue, as on every issue, what the record shows, if I may say so—and I will—is that this Chair, on a very, very, very big scale, calls Members from across the House with a very large variety of opinions. Ordinarily, as colleagues will acknowledge, when statements are made to the House, my practice, almost invariably, is to call each and every Member, whether the Government like it or not. That is not because I am setting myself up against the Government, but because I am championing the rights of the House of Commons.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Do you agree that over the past few years we have seen a big evolution in the way the

Government treat motions in this House? That was partly brought about by the Wright reforms, but we have seen the widespread ignoring of motions passed in this House, and the beginning of a practice of not voting on motions—especially Opposition motions—that the Government feel are somehow awkward for them. Do you agree, Mr Speaker, that this has taken away from the importance of the decisions that this House of Commons makes? Do you therefore also agree that allowing this House of Commons to vote on more issues, in a context in which those votes have to be taken and put into effect, empowers this House of Commons and demonstrates that it is taking back control? As Speaker, you have an absolute duty to ensure that this House of Commons is taken seriously, which is why I commend you for the decision you have taken today.

Mr Speaker: Rather than deal in detail with what the hon. Lady has said, I will say that I agree with her assessment of recent events, and of course I thank her for agreeing with me.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The advice of the Clerks is entirely properly between you and the Clerks—that is an accepted principle—but if this place is to operate properly and effectively, it has to be on an established, rules-based system, as referred to by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith). May I ask you, Sir, to reflect on two things? First, if there is to be what one would consider to be a fairly seismic change in the definition of terms in this place, the role of the Procedure Committee in that should be taken into account. Secondly, I say this to you personally, Mr Speaker. We need to reflect in this place not on the personalities or the politics, but on the dignity of the office of Speaker and the dignity of the Chair. I think we are—I say this with sadness—in pretty choppy and dangerous waters at the time in our nation's affairs when, frankly, we can least afford it.

Mr Speaker: I am extraordinarily grateful for the point of order from the hon. Gentleman; I know he is deeply versed in the affairs of the House and takes his responsibilities to it very seriously indeed. I shall reflect most carefully on every word of what he has said to me today. I agree that there could well be a role for the Procedure Committee in relation to this matter, and thank him for what he has said.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I will come to other colleagues, if that is what colleagues wish.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Given the crisis that the country is facing over Brexit, the fact that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) has just said, the House of Commons is taking back control is to be welcomed, rather than feared. Mr Speaker, you have made your ruling; it is clear; the House should respect it. I wonder whether you could advise us on how we could now move on to the business of the day, to which I think the nation expects us to turn our attention.

Mr Speaker: The short answer to the right hon. Gentleman is that I am in the hands of colleagues, and I think he knows me well enough to know that I have

never ducked a challenge. That is not in my nature; it has been no part of my DNA, either since I have been in this House or in all my life before I came into Parliament. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) says from a sedentary position words to the effect of “Let’s get on.” I would like to move on, but I do wish to treat colleagues with courtesy. *[Interruption.]* Somebody said “You can,” but I will take a few remaining points of order if people wish to raise them. I say very gently to the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), who just raised his point of order and talked about the dignity of the Chair and the importance of our procedures, that if people are going to invoke that importance, it would be helpful if they did not undermine that self-same point by continuous and repetitive dispute.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have two points on which I would be grateful for clarity. First, section 9 of the order of the House that sets out the terms of the debate says that no motion may be made other than by a Minister of the Crown, and you have interpreted that to mean that an amendment can be made to the motion. The question on that motion, as amended, then has to be put, and that is the motion that, under the order, needs to be moved by a Minister of the Crown. Is it therefore the case that the question may not be put on the motion, if amended, unless the motion is adopted by a Minister of the Crown?

I then have a second point. *[Interruption.]* If I may come to the second point, which is the precedential—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I have heard the hon. Gentleman's first point and I would like to hear his second.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The second point relates to the interpretation of the word “forthwith” and, for the benefit of the Commons *Journal* tomorrow, how it is to be understood in future when such matters arise. Page 458 of “Erskine May”, which I am sure you have, Mr Speaker, says that such questions

“must be put forthwith without any possibility of amendment”.

That reads as a single set, rather than as though “forthwith” was simply being qualified. The question that then arises is on the other important Standing Orders that are affected by the “forthwith” question. I think particularly of Standing Order No. 44, relating to disorderly conduct, which states that the question must be put forthwith but makes no mention of amendment one way or another. It seems to me that it would be deeply troublesome if “forthwith” came to allow amendments under such circumstances, so I think that the precedential effect of your ruling needs to be clarified.

Mr Speaker: I am happy to reflect on the second point, which is not altogether dissimilar to that raised earlier by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith). It is a very serious question and it warrants a serious reply. I am not sure whether it is reasonable to expect a full reply today—I am not sure whether that is what the hon. Gentleman is seeking—but if the hon. Gentleman is saying to me in his typically courteous way that this is an important matter and that we need a judgment on it,

[Mr Speaker]

either from the Chair alone or from the Chair acting on the advice of, for example, the Procedure Committee, I agree with him.

On the hon. Gentleman's first point, the answer is that if the motion has been moved, the question on it must then be put. For the avoidance of doubt, I say that on the basis of specialist advice.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. My point is equally important constitutionally. Are there any means available to this House of communicating to the Conservative party that we are all now bored and tired of all these points of order? The nation is increasingly embarrassed by them. How do we therefore get on with today's debate?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has made his point, and I am grateful to him.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I must say that I never bore of the proceedings of this House and of doing my job, even if others do. A few moments ago, you said that only statute can overrule statute. The section of the Act to which this motion relates specified a period of 21 calendar days for the Government to come back. This motion specifies three sitting days. Which one has precedence and why did you select this amendment?

Mr Speaker: I have already explained the situation that appertains to the amendment. I do not wish to be unkind to the hon. Gentleman, but if, after all these exchanges, he is still not clear about my rationale for the selection of the amendment, I am not sure, frankly, whether I can greatly help him. I think I am right in saying that the reference to 21 days, as I have just been advised from a sedentary position by the Clerk of the House, is a 21-day maximum. When the hon. Gentleman enquires about supremacy—which of the two takes precedence—I simply make the point that that which is governed by statute is a matter of legal fact. Earlier in this series of exchanges, the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) asked me to confirm his legal understanding, and I did. That seems to me to treat of the point that concerns the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster).

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. There will be times in this House when we agree and times when we disagree, but I respect the ruling that you have made today. How can we put on the record that it is reprehensible that there are right hon. and hon. Members in this House who have often advocated our taking back control, but who are now doing the complete opposite in seeking to challenge your ruling? Let us not forget that this amendment seeks to decrease the uncertainty currently being experienced by millions of people across our country—our constituents, our public services and our businesses. How can we make it known to people outside the House who are watching our proceedings that the majority, I believe, of this House respect your ruling, and do not believe that what we are experiencing in this House is any way for us to conduct our affairs?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady. She, like many others, has made her position very clear, and that stands on the record for people to scrutinise. On the issues to be voted on today, I return to the point that I was making earlier: I hope that colleagues and those attending to our proceedings outwith the Chamber will understand me when I say that these issues are for the House to decide. I am simply making a selection and then inviting Members of the House of Commons to vote and reach their conclusions. I expect many people feel that it would be seemly and advantageous if we were to do so relatively soon; we have another piece of business first.

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You have said that you consulted the Clerks. For the sake of clarity, will you kindly inform the House whether the decision that you have arrived at is different from the initial advice provided to you by the Clerks?

Mr Speaker: I am not confirming or denying that. I am saying what I said earlier, which is that I had a discussion with the Clerk and with other Clerks. We discussed the situation, the various scenarios and the proffering of advice, and I stand by what I said. I have nothing to add to that. It is perfectly proper for the Speaker to consult and hear the views of the Clerks who serve at the Table, and sometimes other Clerks as well.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I really seek your guidance for myself and perhaps for others in this House. There is a difference between a motion and an amendment. If the Government had wished to prevent amendments, would not a better worded motion a few weeks ago have relieved them of the problem that they find themselves with today?

Mr Speaker: I am not sure whether I want to speculate on that, but the hon. Gentleman has obviously applied his beady eye to the material on the Order Paper, and he has reached that conclusion. Others may also do so.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You and your deputies have a well deserved reputation for being absolute sticklers for protocols, processes and conventions in this place, which occasionally I find quite frustrating, but which I utterly respect. To that end, would it be in order for you, in considering this important matter, to consult with your deputies as to the appropriateness of accepting this amendment?

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but the short answer is no, and I shall tell him why. The clue is in the title, "The Speaker in the Chair". The Speaker is elected to discharge his responsibilities to the House to the best of his ability. That is what I have done, diligently, conscientiously and without fail for the past nine and a half years. Mine is the responsibility. I do not seek to duck it.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Do you agree that in all our experiences in this House, it is extremely unwise to thrust civil servants and officials, who give their advice in confidence

and are neutral, into the public domain in this way? When it has happened in the past, it has often ended very badly indeed for those individuals. The House should stop that. It is extremely inappropriate for a Leader of the House to lead that charge.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman makes his own point in his own way with considerable force and alacrity. I respect him and I respect what he said. As to how others choose to go about their work, that is a matter for them. As far as I am concerned, I am a member of the legislature. I am the Speaker of the House of Commons, a very important part of Parliament. My job is not to be a cheerleader for the Executive branch; my job is to stand up for the rights of the House of Commons, and the Speaker will assuredly do so.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In your response to the point of order from my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), you said that this was an unprecedented thing. In response to the point of order from my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), you said that you did not necessarily intend this to set a future precedent. It is clear that it is important that you are, and that you are seen and believed to be, impartial. Clearly, there is a huge appetite to explore the implications of this decision. Might it not be wise not to implement this decision at such a contentious point in time, to reflect on both—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Had the hon. Gentleman completed his remarks?

James Cleverly *indicated dissent.*

Mr Speaker: Please finish.

James Cleverly: Would it not be appropriate to take time to reflect on the precedent that this decision might set, and instead to make a decision in slower time at a less contentious moment in the business of this House?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I respect his sincerity, but—I hope he will see this point even if he does not agree with it—the responsibility is mine, and it is not tomorrow, next week, next month, next year; it is now. The Chair has to make his best judgment there and then. That is what I have done, honourably and conscientiously in the firm and continuing conviction that I am right. So while I respect the hon. Gentleman and his sincerity in his point of order, the short answer to him is no.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Any of our constituents watching this now will be deeply worried about the future of our country and will not be impressed by this spectacle. A number of the points of order have articulated a series of finely detailed points, but they amount to the same thing: a tedious repetition. Is there anything in the rules of the House that prevents the abuse of the time made available to this House by making the same point over and over again?

Mr Speaker: Well, I do not think it is helpful when people just make the same point over and over and over again, but as I myself have often observed, it is not unprecedented. *[Interruption.]* The point has just been made elegantly and eloquently from a sedentary position by the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) that continued repetition is not entirely a novel phenomenon in the House of Commons, so I will deal with it. However, there is a ten-minute rule motion with which to deal, and the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) is waiting to present that ten-minute rule motion, and we do then have important business to dispatch. Unless people really feel that they have something new to raise by way of a point of order, I ask them in all courtesy to consider not doing so at this time.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. First, may I ask you to confirm that Members have an absolute right to raise points of order with you and to challenge you in the excellent job that you do as a servant of the House? This afternoon we have been told that we are reprehensible by some Members, and have been accused of wasting time and of being part of a co-ordination. I am part of no co-ordination in this place and never will be.

Secondly, with the greatest respect to you, Mr Speaker—I am agnostic on the decision that you have made and believe you have the absolute right to make it—we talk about the public out there, and there are a lot of people who believe that there is a conspiracy and a procedural stitch-up taking place by a House of Commons which, on the substantive issue of leaving or remaining in the European Union, is grossly out of touch with the referendum result. With that in mind, although I accept your decision and would indeed be more than happy to support you in it, may I again ask that any advice proffered on this matter should be put into the public domain so that the public can make their own decision about that?

Mr Speaker: The Clerk has just said to me that advice to the Speaker is private, but I do have two things to say to the hon. Gentleman. First, perhaps I can concur with him; I know him, and his whole political background and track record in this place prove that he is not part of co-ordinated efforts. He is very much his own person, and he knows that I have always respected him for that as well as for a number of his other qualities.

Secondly, the hon. Gentleman refers to a perception out there. To some degree, this brings us back to earlier points of order. I often have to explain this point to constituents and to people I meet around the country, so let me again say this and let me say it explicitly: it is not for the Chair either to try to push a policy through or to prevent a policy being pushed through. That is not the role of the Speaker of the House. The role of the Speaker of the House is to chair as effectively as he or she can in the Chamber and in the management of the day-to-day business, including the selection of amendments, new clauses and so on. What the House chooses to do is a matter for the House. If that applies across the piece, manifestly it applies to the subject of Brexit. What happens on this subject is not a matter for me; I am simply seeking to facilitate the House in deciding what it wants to decide. That has always been my attitude, it remains my attitude and it will continue to be my attitude. Let the House decide on the policy.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I was not intending to make a point of order, but it is important for me to place on record that in the eight and a half years I have been in this place, every time I have had an occasion to speak to any of the House officials—the Table Office, the Clerks, the Public Bill Office or the Private Bill Office—I have been given the most brilliant advice from everyone. It is really improper for Members here to be saying that advice given to you by the Clerks in the execution of their duty should be revealed publicly. That is most inappropriate and is putting the Clerks in an invidious political position.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for what she has said. I do not know whether there is any precedent for such advice having been issued, but my understanding is that it has not previously been issued. I said what I did in response to an earlier point of order on the basis, once more, of clerkly advice. I know that the Clerk would concur with that view, as I do.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This year will be 30 years since we first met in the final of the competition to be selected for Bristol South, and both of us have been on something of a journey since then. When you were elected as Speaker, you said you would serve for nine years. There has been the controversy of the recommendations of the Dame Laura Cox inquiry into the House of Commons, and you have been defended, particularly by two right hon. Opposition Members, on the importance of your being sustained in position beyond the nine years in order to oversee the discussions and denouement of the Brexit issue.

The uncomfortable conclusion, Mr Speaker, given the points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) and my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) and the implications of the precedent that you have set with this ruling today, is that many of us will now have an unshakeable conviction that the referee of our affairs, not least because you made public your opinion and your vote on the issue of Brexit, is no longer neutral. I just invite you to reflect on the conclusion that many of us inevitably will have come to.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of view. He is quite right that we met, I think, in the anteroom of the Bristol Conservative Association headquarters at 5 Westfield Park, Redland, Bristol in July 1989, so we have known each other for a long time and I take in a perfectly good spirit what the hon. Gentleman has said.

I have explained in response to previous points of order and adduced evidence in support of my argument, including that proffered by the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), that I have always done my conscientious best to champion the rights of Members wishing to push their particular point of view on a range of issues and, perhaps most strikingly, on this issue. That is what the record shows. I have always been scrupulously fair to Brexiteers and remainers alike, as I have always been to people of different opinions on a miscellany of other issues. That has been the case, it is the case and it will continue to be the case.

As for the other point that the hon. Gentleman made, he will know that I was re-elected unanimously by this House on, I think, 13 June 2017, for the Parliament. If I have a statement on that matter to make, I would of course make it to the House first. I think that most people would accept that that is entirely reasonable.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I never thought that I was going to be one of the people who would care about the procedures of this House. I scoffed at people who talked of procedure. When I arrived here, I realised that actually it is the procedures of this House, and protecting and developing them, that will make our democracy considerably better. I wonder if you agree with me, Mr Speaker—I have seen two occasions this week of what I am about to say—that people only care about the procedures, and protecting and conserving the procedures, when they do not like the outcome of the thing that is about to happen, and never when it is going in their favour.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady has made her own points with force and style. I think we all know—[*Interruption.*] Let me put it like this; I will not get into that. I think we all know from our own constituencies that people are inclined to complain about a process when they do not like a result. In this case, to be fair, the result will come only when we have votes on an amendment and a motion. If what the hon. Lady is implying is that people are complaining because they do not like the amendment that has been selected, well, she has made her own point, and that may very well be so. I certainly would not impugn for one moment the integrity of Members of this House who have challenged me today, as they are absolutely entitled to do, and made their own points. I hope that throughout these exchanges today it will be demonstrably obvious to everybody that no matter what point people have made, and how forcefully they have made it, I have heard it, I have heard it fully, I have heard it with courtesy, and I have responded to it with courtesy. That has been my approach and it will always be.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I join with many others in saying that I appreciate and respect the extent to which you listen to everyone and ensure that everyone is given a courteous, fair and proper hearing, and that the voices and votes of all people should be listened to? That includes, of course, the 17.4 million people who voted leave and will be watching these proceedings and worried about the direction of the House of Commons.

On the substantive question, may I ask for your advice and guidance on the amendment in the name of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve)? The reason I raise this is that I am wondering why you selected it, as it seems to me to be defective. It says that

“a minister of the crown shall table within three sitting days a motion under section 13”.

However, there is no sanction if a Minister of the Crown does not table such a motion; nor indeed does it say which Minister of the Crown it needs to be; and if a motion were to be tabled within three sitting days, there is nothing to force it actually to be taken, because it

could end up in the “Remaining orders and notices” section indefinitely. So why are we having this sort of amendment when actually, it seems to me, it does not have any effect?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he said at the start of his remarks and for his usual courtesy. What I would say to him on the substance of the issue is as follows. The judgment for the Chair is whether an amendment—in this context we are talking about an amendment—is orderly and selectable. It is not incumbent upon the Chair to seek to interpret the amendment. That is not my responsibility. If the hon. Gentleman is quizzical on that point—if he believes it to be, as he put it, I think, ineffective, or not effective—his inquiry on that matter should, if I may say so, be lobbed, gently or otherwise, in the direction of his right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), whose amendment it is. That—I am very clear intellectually on this point—is not a matter for me. It may well be very important to the hon. Gentleman, and perhaps to other people, but it is a matter to raise either personally with the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield or in an indirect way.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I will take remaining points of order from the Government Benches.

Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Further to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), we have all noticed in recent months a sticker in your car that makes derogatory comments about Brexit—[HON. MEMBERS: “Oh.”] No, this is a serious point about partiality. Have you driven that car with the sticker there?

Mr Speaker: Order. [*Interruption.*] I think the record will show—and I have the highest regard and affection for the hon. Gentleman—that I have listened to all the points of order. The only reason why I interrupt him at this point—I hope he will forgive my doing so—is that there was a factual error in his opening remarks. I am sure it was an inadvertent error, and I mean that most sincerely, but it was a factual error. He said that in recent months it had been noticed that there was a sticker in my car. That sticker on the subject of Brexit happens to be affixed to, or in the windscreen of, my wife’s car. [*Laughter.*] Yes, it is. I am sure the hon. Gentleman would not suggest for one moment that a wife is somehow the property or chattel of her husband. She is entitled to her views. That sticker is not mine, and that is the end of it.

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I think the House is now ready to move on. We have a long day ahead of us, and I beg to move that we proceed to the next business.

Mr Speaker: Well, that is not a motion that I can accept, but I would like to propose that we come now to the ten-minute rule motion. I call Mr Leo Docherty.

Armed Forces (Derogation from European Convention on Human Rights)

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

1.57 pm

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require Her Majesty’s Government to derogate from the European Convention on Human Rights in its application to the conduct of members of the armed forces participating in combat operations overseas; and for connected purposes.

I seek this Bill to ensure that our armed forces are protected from legal pursuit and that the resolve and capability of our armed forces to deliver hard fighting power when needed—[*Interruption.*]

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: We are on a ten-minute rule motion, so no.

Richard Benyon: I just wish that people would be quiet.

Mr Speaker: Order. We will start again. The right hon. Gentleman—

Richard Benyon: This is very important.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman is a person of unfailing courtesy in this House, and I think he also knows our procedures. There are no points of order during a ten-minute rule motion, but he is absolutely right that the speech should be heard, I hope, with courtesy and respect. I thank him for helping the Chair. Let us stop the clock and start again. I call Mr Leo Docherty.

Leo Docherty: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require Her Majesty’s Government to derogate from the European Convention on Human Rights in its application to the conduct of members of the armed forces participating in combat operations overseas; and for connected purposes.

I seek this Bill to ensure that our armed forces are protected from legal pursuit and that the resolve and capability of our armed forces to deliver hard fighting power when needed around the world is undiminished. The legal pursuit of our soldiers and veterans is a particularly painful chapter in our country’s history and must be urgently resolved.

I relate as illustration a conversation I had last year in my constituency, in the Aldershot garrison, with a senior soldier who had just left the Army after three decades of distinguished service in the most elite units, in the most brutal and demanding theatres of operation. His experience of sustained legal pursuit in relation to operations in Afghanistan left him with a deep sense of betrayal. Even though he was the son of a soldier and had himself served for 30 years, he told me, “My sons

[*Leo Docherty*]

will not serve.” That pained me, because soldiers do not wish to be above the law; they just want to be under the correct laws.

It has been the case for generations that the law of armed conflict and the Geneva conventions have governed warfare in the modern age carried out by our soldiers. That was the case up until 1998 and the unintended consequences of the Human Rights Act and the European convention on human rights, which has led to a catalogue of injustice involving hundreds of soldiers from all operational theatres. Those cases go on today. No other country has such a perverse situation in which soldiers who have done their duty and done no wrong face this kind of sustained legal pursuit. Indeed, 10 countries, including France and Spain, have in effect opted out of certain aspects of the European convention on human rights, so there is a way forward, and we must do the same.

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) for his terrific work on bringing this issue to the fore and getting it the attention it deserves since his election to this place in 2015. The excellent Policy Exchange report “Clearing the Fog of Law”, which he co-authored, makes clear the alarming manner in which the British military is today entangled in human rights law, to the extent that the European convention on human rights applies wherever and whenever a British soldier employs force. That means that foreign nationals, including enemy combatants, can sue the United Kingdom for a breach of the European convention on human rights in courts both here in London and in Strasbourg following military operations. To prevent that, we must, as other countries have done, derogate from the European convention on human rights.

I also pay tribute to my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), who has tackled headlong the outrageous scandal of the Iraq Historic Allegations Team. Since coming into this place, he has been instrumental, along with other members of the Defence Committee, in rightly urging my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) to close down IHAT.

The Defence Committee, led by our right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), continues to investigate the scandal of legal pursuit. We have heard recently from witnesses that the Army is “running scared of the law.”

That must end, and it must end not only because of legacy cases and the past, but because of our concern for the viability of future operations.

Getting the legal basis of military operations right underpins the central mission of our national defence at

this time, which is the rejuvenation of our armed forces to meet a complex new range of manifold threats. It is also part of the process of moving our armed forces from the era of counter-insurgency towards a more conventional posture, which we have lost by necessity through our long engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan. We must state with confidence that we need conventional fighting power. It is not a luxury.

Some commentators suggest that the era of military intervention overseas is over. Whatever the judgment of Members in this House about the wisdom of various past entanglements, the clear lesson of history is that, whether we like it or not, we will need in the future to deploy our soldiers abroad to fight on our behalf—and it will be to fight. We need to be honest with ourselves about that. Soldiers are extremely versatile and adaptable. They can be superb peacekeepers, first-class aid workers, accomplished policemen and effective diplomats. They can do all those roles very well, but they are first and foremost soldiers whose task is to deliver hard fighting power to kill and destroy our enemies. They must have the correct basis in law to do that, in situations where domestic human rights law is completely and utterly inapplicable.

To conclude, we must bring an end to the entanglement of our armed forces in human rights law. We should do that because it is the right thing to do, and we should do it because we have promised to do it; it is on page 41 of our manifesto. We should do it because we need to be honest with our constituents and our society about the role of our armed forces and the fact that they need to fight on our behalf. Our armed forces need to know that they can deploy and fight on our behalf while adhering to the Geneva conventions and the law of armed conflict. They need to know that they can deploy and fight on our behalf and will not then face spurious legal accusations years and decades after the event. Our armed forces need to know that they can deploy and fight on our behalf with the full confidence of our Government and our society, allowing them to serve in good faith and with pride for the safety of our people and the defence of our nation.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Leo Docherty, Sir Nicholas Soames, Sir Henry Bellingham, Dr Julian Lewis, Johnny Mercer, Tom Tugendhat, Mr Mark Francois, Sir Mike Penning, Richard Benyon, James Heappey, Jim Shannon and Gavin Robinson present the Bill.

Leo Docherty accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 8 March, and to be printed (Bill 312).

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (SECTION 13(1)(b) OF THE EUROPEAN UNION (WITHDRAWAL) ACT 2018) (NO. 2)

Motion made, and Question proposed forthwith (Order, 4 December),

That the Order of 4 December (Business of the House (Section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018)) be varied as follows:

1. Leave out paragraph (2) and insert:

“(2A) The House shall sit on Friday 11 January.

(2B) The allotted days shall be Tuesday 4 December, Wednesday 5 December, Thursday 6 December, Monday 10 December, Wednesday 9 January, Thursday 10 January, Friday 11 January, Monday 14 January and Tuesday 15 January.”

2. In paragraph (3):

- a. after “this day” insert “and the fifth allotted day”, and
- b. leave out “the Business of the House (Section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018) motion” and insert “a Business of the House (Section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018) motion”.

3. In paragraph (4) leave out “and fourth” and insert “fourth, sixth and eighth”.

4. In paragraph (6) leave out “up to six amendments” and insert “any number of amendments”.

5. Leave out paragraph (7) and insert:

“(7) On the final allotted day, the Speaker shall put the questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the European Union withdrawal motion at 7.00pm; and such questions shall include the questions on any amendments selected by the Speaker in accordance with the provisions of paragraph 6 of this Order which may then be moved.”

6. After paragraph (9) insert:

“(9A) Notwithstanding the practice of this House, a Member may be called to speak twice to the Question on the European Union withdrawal motion without the leave of the House.”—*(Jeremy Quin.)*

Amendment proposed: (a), at end, add

“7. In the event of the motion under Section 13(1)(b) being negated or amended so as to be negated, a Minister of the Crown shall table within three sitting days a motion under Section 13, considering the process of exiting the European Union under Article 50.”—*(Mr Grieve.)*

Question put forthwith, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 308, Noes 297.

Division No. 291]

[2.7 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane	Boles, Nick
Abrahams, Debbie	Brabin, Tracy
Ali, Rushanara	Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Allen, Heidi	Brake, rh Tom
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Brennan, Kevin
Amesbury, Mike	Brock, Deidre
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Brown, Alan
Ashworth, Jonathan	Brown, Lyn
Austin, Ian	Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Bryant, Chris
Bardell, Hannah	Buck, Ms Karen
Beckett, rh Margaret	Burden, Richard
Benn, rh Hilary	Burgon, Richard
Berger, Luciana	Butler, Dawn
Betts, Mr Clive	Byrne, rh Liam
Black, Mhairi	Cable, rh Sir Vince
Blackford, rh Ian	Cadbury, Ruth
Blackman, Kirsty	Cameron, Dr Lisa
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta	Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Blomfield, Paul	Carden, Dan

Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Goodman, Helen
Champion, Sarah	Grady, Patrick
Chapman, Douglas	Grant, Peter
Chapman, Jenny	Gray, Neil
Charalambous, Bambos	Green, Kate
Cherry, Joanna	Greening, rh Justine
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth	Greenwood, Lilian
Clwyd, rh Ann	Greenwood, Margaret
Coaker, Vernon	Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Coffey, Ann	Griffith, Nia
Cooper, Julie	Grogan, John
Cooper, Rosie	Gwynne, Andrew
Cooper, rh Yvette	Gyimah, Mr Sam
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Haigh, Louise
Cowan, Ronnie	Hamilton, Fabian
Coyle, Neil	Hanson, rh David
Crausby, Sir David	Hardy, Emma
Crawley, Angela	Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Creagh, Mary	Harris, Carolyn
Creasy, Stella	Hayes, Helen
Cruddas, Jon	Hayman, Sue
Cryer, John	Healey, rh John
Cummins, Judith	Hendrick, Sir Mark
Cunningham, Alex	Hendry, Drew
Cunningham, Mr Jim	Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Daby, Janet	Hermon, Lady
Dakin, Nic	Hill, Mike
Davey, rh Sir Edward	Hillier, Meg
David, Wayne	Hobhouse, Wera
Davies, Geraint	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Day, Martyn	Hollern, Kate
De Cordova, Marsha	Hosie, Stewart
De Piero, Gloria	Howarth, rh Mr George
Debbonaire, Thangam	Huq, Dr Rupa
Dent Coad, Emma	Hussain, Imran
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Jardine, Christine
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan	Jarvis, Dan
Docherty-Hughes, Martin	Johnson, Diana
Dodds, Anneliese	Johnson, Joseph
Doughty, Stephen	Jones, Darren
Dowd, Peter	Jones, Gerald
Drew, Dr David	Jones, Graham P.
Dromey, Jack	Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Duffield, Rosie	Jones, Sarah
Eagle, Ms Angela	Jones, Susan Elan
Eagle, Maria	Kane, Mike
Edwards, Jonathan	Keeley, Barbara
Efford, Clive	Kendall, Liz
Elliott, Julie	Khan, Afzal
Ellman, Dame Louise	Killen, Ged
Elmore, Chris	Kinnock, Stephen
Esterson, Bill	Kyle, Peter
Evans, Chris	Laird, Lesley
Farrelly, Paul	Lake, Ben
Farron, Tim	Lamb, rh Norman
Fellows, Marion	Lammy, rh Mr David
Fitzpatrick, Jim	Lavery, Ian
Fletcher, Colleen	Law, Chris
Flint, rh Caroline	Lee, Karen
Fovargue, Yvonne	Lee, Dr Phillip
Foxcroft, Vicky	Leslie, Mr Chris
Frith, James	Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Furniss, Gill	Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Gaffney, Hugh	Lewis, Clive
Gapes, Mike	Linden, David
Gardiner, Barry	Lloyd, Stephen
George, Ruth	Lloyd, Tony
Gethins, Stephen	Long Bailey, Rebecca
Gibson, Patricia	Lucas, Caroline
Gill, Preet Kaur	Lucas, Ian C.
Glindon, Mary	MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Godsiff, Mr Roger	Madders, Justin

Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Mann, John
 Marsden, Gordon
 Martin, Sandy
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McInnes, Liz
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Nandy, Lisa
 Neill, Robert
 Newlands, Gavin
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Owen, Albert
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pidcock, Laura
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Lucy
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rashid, Faisal
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Emma
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Rowley, Danielle

Ruane, Chris
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Ryan, rh Joan
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Saville Roberts, Liz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Eleanor
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Laura
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeting, Wes
 Sweeney, Mr Paul
 Swinson, Jo
 Tami, rh Mark
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 Twist, Liz
 Umunna, Chuka
 Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
 Vaz, Valerie
 Walker, Thelma
 Watson, Tom
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitfield, Martin
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Williams, Hywel
 Williams, Dr Paul
 Williamson, Chris
 Wilson, Phil
 Wishart, Pete
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Alison McGovern and
 Guto Bebb**

NOES

Adams, Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy

Amess, Sir David
 Andrew, Stuart
 Argar, Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Mr Richard

Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Stephen
 Baron, Mr John
 Barron, rh Sir Kevin
 Bellingham, Sir Henry
 Benyon, rh Richard
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, Jake
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Braverman, Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buckland, Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, Conor
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cartledge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, Colin
 Clarke, Mr Simon
 Cleverly, James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Glyn
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Dineneage, Caroline
 Docherty, Leo
 Dodds, rh Nigel
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Duddridge, James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan, rh Sir Alan
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Dunne, rh Mr Philip
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Eustice, George
 Evans, Mr Nigel

Evennett, rh Sir David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, rh Sir Michael
 Field, rh Frank
 Field, rh Mark
 Ford, Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freer, Mike
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, rh Mr David
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, John
 Goldsmith, Zac
 Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Luke
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Bill
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Hair, Kirstene
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hammond, rh Mr Philip
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Henderson, Gordon
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Howell, John
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Hurd, rh Mr Nick
 Jack, Mr Alister
 James, Margot
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, rh Boris
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Keegan, Gillian

Kennedy, Seema
 Kerr, Stephen
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Lancaster, rh Mark
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Little Pengelly, Emma
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Maclean, Rachel
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Masterton, Paul
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Maynard, Paul
 McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
 McPartland, Stephen
 McVey, rh Ms Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Moore, Damien
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morton, Wendy
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Paisley, Ian
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen

Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Perry, rh Claire
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Mr Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, David
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Thomson, Ross
 Throup, Maggie

Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt

Watling, Giles
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Amanda Milling and
Rebecca Harris

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put forthwith and agreed to.

Ordered,

That the Order of 4 December (Business of the House (Section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018)) be varied as follows:

1. Leave out paragraph (2) and insert:

“(2A) The House shall sit on Friday 11 January.

(2B) The allotted days shall be Tuesday 4 December, Wednesday 5 December, Thursday 6 December, Monday 10 December, Wednesday 9 January, Thursday 10 January, Friday 11 January, Monday 14 January and Tuesday 15 January.”

2. In paragraph (3):

- a. after “this day” insert “and the fifth allotted day”, and
- b. leave out “the Business of the House (Section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018) motion” and insert “a Business of the House (Section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018) motion”.

3. In paragraph (4) leave out “and fourth” and insert “fourth, sixth and eighth”.

4. In paragraph (6) leave out “up to six amendments” and insert “any number of amendments”.

5. Leave out paragraph (7) and insert:

“(7) On the final allotted day, the Speaker shall put the questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the European Union withdrawal motion at 7.00pm; and such questions shall include the questions on any amendments selected by the Speaker in accordance with the provisions of paragraph 6 of this Order which may then be moved.”

6. After paragraph (9) insert:

“(9A) Notwithstanding the practice of this House, a Member may be called to speak twice to the Question on the European Union withdrawal motion without the leave of the House.”

7. In the event of the motion under Section 13(1)(b) being negatived or amended so as to be negatived, a Minister of the Crown shall table within three sitting days a motion under Section 13, considering the process of exiting the European Union under Article 50.

European Union (Withdrawal) Act

[5TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Debate resumed (Order, this day).

Question again proposed,

That this House approves for the purposes of section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, the negotiated withdrawal agreement laid before the House on Monday 26 November 2018 with the title ‘Agreement on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community’ and the framework for the future relationship laid before the House on Monday 26 November 2018 with the title ‘Political Declaration setting out the framework for the future relationship between the European Union and the United Kingdom’.

2.27 pm

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): Before Christmas, the Government presented to Parliament a comprehensive deal for the UK’s withdrawal from the EU. We continue to believe that this is the best deal to honour the referendum result and deliver certainty for our businesses, our citizens and our security. It was clear that there was much that Members agreed with, but we listened to the views of the House, which in particular expressed concerns in relation to the backstop. We therefore paused the debate to enable those concerns to be discussed with EU leaders.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): In the intervening month from when the meaningful vote was delayed to the debate restarting just now, not very much has changed. On Monday, I asked the Secretary of State whether he had brought forward any plan B contingency work, and he ignored that question. In the light of the motion and the amendment that have just been passed, it is rather more contingent on the Government to have a plan B—and rather urgently. Will he explain to us now what work has been going on?

Stephen Barclay: We have a very good early illustration in this debate of the attitude of Scottish National party Members, because even before I get into my statement setting out what measures have been taken since the pause in the debate, they have already decided that they have reached their judgment on those measures.

Neil Gray: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman has already had one go. Let me enlighten him on some of the developments that have happened since the pause in the debate.

Today, we have published a document entitled “UK Government commitments to Northern Ireland and its integral place in the United Kingdom”, which sets out the domestic reassurances we can provide. As the Prime Minister has said, these are one aspect of our strategy to reassure the House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Stephen Barclay: I will take interventions in a moment.

Another aspect of our strategy is our commitment to work in a more targeted way and more closely with Parliament in the next phase of negotiations. I will

return to that later. I reassure colleagues that, whatever the outcome of this debate, we will respond rapidly, recognising that we must provide Parliament with as much security as possible.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): Amendment (n) deals with what further information the Government might put before the House to ensure that, should we need to use the backstop, this House can decide alone to leave it, without Europe deciding it with us. I had a quick word with the Attorney General, because the amendment involves him. It states that he should report to the House should the Government say that they have new arrangements whereby sovereignty resides in this House in respect of whether we should leave the backstop. Might the Government accept that amendment, please?

Stephen Barclay: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important question: what will the role of this House be in the event that the backstop has to be triggered? As he knows, there are safeguards that will mitigate the need for the backstop. It is in neither side’s interest to have the backstop, not least because it breaks the four freedoms that the EU has always rigorously sought. I will come on in my speech to some of the safeguards that apply.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): The Secretary of State says that he was listening to the debate, which is why he paused it and came back with answers on the backstop. If he did listen to the debate, he will know that concerns relating to importing, manufacturing and security were mentioned as many times as, if not more than, the backstop. What reassurances and changes has he delivered on those things?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that there are concerns about issues such as security. That is the very essence of why we need the deal. It will provide confidence on issues such as security and it will secure the implementation period so that things such as security measures will remain in place.

It was clear in the debate before Christmas that there were many views in the House about what trade deal we should enter into with the EU. The possible trade deals included no deal, no deal plus, Norway, Norway plus, Canada, Canada plus, Norway for now and Norway forever. There is a whole spectrum of deals that different Members cling to, but the reality is that whatever deal is to be put in place, it requires the winding down of our 45-year relationship with the European Union. Therefore, whatever deal is put in place requires a withdrawal agreement, and that withdrawal agreement requires a backstop.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): The Secretary of State made a comment about working more closely with Parliament. I ask him to reflect on the fact that this place is grossly out of touch with the public on the fundamental issue of whether we are a member of the European Union. This House is not representative of the people. The Executive are a legitimate branch of government, so can we be assured that in whatever way they increasingly work with Parliament, the Executive will not give up their responsibility to implement the will of the people, which is a much greater body of sovereignty than this place?

Stephen Barclay: I think it is fair to say that there is a range of views in this House, and that those views are held sincerely by Members of Parliament. As I just alluded to, those views cover a vast range of different deals. I think the point of substance my hon. Friend is referring to is that the clear majority of the House voted to give the public the decision on whether we stayed in or left the European Union, and indeed the majority of the House voted to trigger article 50. It is therefore incumbent on Members of the House not simply to say what they are against, but to be clear what they are for.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Stephen Barclay: I will make a little more progress, then I will happily take further interventions.

The withdrawal agreement addresses many of the key issues that Members, including Opposition Members, have spoken about. For example, it protects citizens' rights: it protects the 3 million EU citizens in the UK and the 1 million UK citizens in the EU. It provides a financial settlement that honours our legal obligations. Not to do so, as Opposition Members have often pointed out, would undermine our international position. It guarantees an implementation period that means that businesses will have one change to make as we enter a new trade deal, as opposed to two. Most importantly—this is an issue on which the Opposition rightly have a proud record, because they played a key part in the peace process in Northern Ireland—the withdrawal agreement enables us to preserve that hard-won peace and ensure that the commitments that were made in the Belfast agreement are honoured.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State realise that the withdrawal agreement and especially the backstop arrangement, which would forcibly remove Northern Ireland from the rest of the United Kingdom because laws would be made in Brussels rather than in Westminster and the Northern Ireland economy would be cut off from trade deals that the United Kingdom entered into with the rest of the world, have put in jeopardy the fine balance in the Belfast agreement? That is not helped by the Secretary of State's reported comments to the Cabinet yesterday that a refusal to vote for the withdrawal agreement would be likely to lead to a referendum on a united Ireland.

Stephen Barclay: I recognise the genuine concerns the right hon. Gentleman has about the backstop. I will come on to address some of those concerns, although I readily concede that I do not expect to address all of them with the areas of movement I cover today.

This is about assessing the balance of risk. The backstop does not cover 80% of our economy, as the services economy is outside it. Many in the business community in Northern Ireland see huge benefits in the certainty that is offered through the withdrawal agreement. Indeed, it is not our intention to enter into the backstop, not least because many businesses in Northern Ireland will have access to both the EU and UK markets. That is one of the attractions, and it is actually one of the reasons why Labour's sister parties in the north of Ireland—the Social Democratic and Labour party—and

in the south actually support the withdrawal agreement, as well as because it will secure the commitments on peace, as I mentioned.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): The Scottish Government have for quite some time made known a number of concerns they have about the agreement. Since December, when the UK Government cancelled the debate to go away and listen, what has changed in the agreement to make the Scottish Government support it?

Stephen Barclay: Again, I will come on to that. As we move from dealing with the winding-down arrangements to the trade negotiation—that will be the second phase of the negotiations, because leaving the European Union is not a single event but a process—there will be a significant opportunity to recognise the fact that Scotland voted differently, as did other parts of the United Kingdom, and to engage with Parliament, as the Prime Minister referred to in her interview on “The Andrew Marr Show” at the weekend. We will be looking to work with Parliament in different ways, and particularly in a targeted way with the Select Committees, and to work more closely with the devolved Administrations, because there are different interests. The trade negotiation phase will allow us to explore that.

I think that “show not tell” is important in politics. My very first meeting in this role—I prioritised this—was with the lead Ministers in the Scottish and Welsh Governments to discuss their concerns, so that we could move from having regular meetings to making them more effective and more targeted.

We know that there is no future trade agreement and no implementation period without a withdrawal agreement, as that agreement contains the guarantee on citizens' rights, the financial settlement and the backstop, but let us just look at the Opposition's position. The Leader of the Opposition rejects that on the basis that he can first trigger a general election and then negotiate a new deal that secures things the EU has consistently ruled out, such as a third party having a say over its trade policy. He is then going to secure that new deal and pass the legislation to enact it, and he is going to do all of that before 29 March. So we are going to have a general election, a new trade agreement—even though the EU itself ruled that out and says this is the only deal on offer, he is going to uniquely secure a new deal—and he is going to pass the legislation to ratify that, all within the next 78 days. Yet Labour's sister parties actually support the withdrawal agreement, not least to recognise one of the proudest achievements of the Labour party, the peace process.

Joseph Johnson (Orpington) (Con): I obviously agree with the Minister's point about the fantasy policies of the Labour party, but I am afraid the Government themselves are indulging in fantasies. Is it not time that the Government set out a realistic basis for this debate? As the former permanent secretary to the Treasury, Sir Nick Macpherson, said the other day, there is no chance at all of us concluding a trade deal with the EU by 2020 and very little chance of doing so by 2022. A far more realistic prospect is that we might do so in the mid-2020s. Can we not conduct this debate on the basis of reality, rather than continued fantasy?

Stephen Barclay: I pay heed to my hon. Friend, because he is one of the most serious thinkers in our party and I know he engages very seriously on these issues. Of course, the former permanent secretary to the Treasury is also someone we all listen to intently. The point is that there are a number of things that are different in this instance. First, on trade deals, a significant amount of time is often taken up by the first phase of understanding the regulatory positions of both sides. Well, after 45 years of being part of the European Union that regulatory understanding is already there. Secondly, there is a difference because often there are six-week time lags in trade rounds. If people are flying back from Canada or the US, the physical geographical issues can constitute a delay. Clearly, our geographical relationship with Europe will allow us to inject much more pace into those trade rounds and accelerate them. Thirdly, the fact is that we have a political declaration that sets a framework for those trade discussions to take place.

Fourthly, there is also the issue of the incentives that the UK offers—I was going to come on to this point—including the position on security, which is obviously of interest to many member states in Europe, and the fact that the backstop is uncomfortable for the EU. On day one of the backstop fishing rights are lost, which is why President Macron may not be keen on entering into the backstop. There is also the fact that the backstop breaks the four freedoms, which have always been safely guarded by the European Union. The backstop is not a desirable place for the Europeans to enter, which is why there is an incentive for them to get momentum into the trade agreements.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con) *rose*—

Stephen Barclay: I will of course give way. May I also take this opportunity to congratulate my right hon. Friend on his recent honour?

John Redwood: I thank the Secretary of State. Will he now, as a matter of good contingency planning, urgently publish our schedule of tariffs for trading as an independent country? Can they please be lower tariffs than the EU schedule, and will there be zero tariffs for all imported manufactured components?

Stephen Barclay: My right hon. Friend will know, because he has often spoken in warm and glowing terms about trading on a no-deal WTO basis, that tariffs are just one aspect of our relationships, particularly given the UK economy's interest in services. Issues such as data adequacy are actually much more significant to our economy. The political debate often focuses on tariffs, but as a service economy issues such as data are much more serious to us. The WTO, which my right hon. Friend often advocates, actually does not address such issues. That is one reason why the WTO is not the land of milk and honey that some pretend.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): The problems with the withdrawal agreement extend far beyond the backstop. The Secretary of State talks about services. The fact is that the withdrawal agreement will substantially not help services in this country, which make up approximately 80% of our economy. He talks about certainty. At the end of the day, can he not agree that

this political declaration is a declaration of aspiration? We have absolutely no idea where we will be at the end of the trade negotiations, which EU officials will have told him will take at least three to four years.

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman has not been able to convince his own Front Benchers. Senior Opposition Front Benchers, such as the shadow Business Secretary, have spoken of the huge damage there would be to our democracy if we did what he advocates, which is to end the uncertainty by calling a second referendum. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] We hear the cheers from the Labour Benches. The policy in the manifesto on which Labour Members were elected was to honour the referendum, yet they cheer. It is on page 24 of the Labour manifesto on which the hon. Gentleman stood.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is a fundamental fallacy at the heart of the Opposition's position? On the one hand they say that there is zero appetite on behalf of the European Union to renegotiate the Government's deal, yet they claim there is somehow a huge appetite to negotiate another deal as yet unspecified. The reality is that unless they vote for this deal they will become the handmaiden of hard Brexit.

Stephen Barclay: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. He alludes to the 78-day plan being put forward by the Opposition, which the EU has made clear is not credible, their sister parties have made clear is not desirable, and which I suspect many on their own Back Benches recognise is not doable. Yet they persist with it.

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Stephen Barclay: I will make some progress and come back to my fellow Cambridge colleague very shortly.

The more material issue raised in the House on the backstop related to whether it damages the European Union or would be used in trade negotiations. It is for that reason that we have published the paper on Northern Ireland in respect of that. I recognise that that alone will not be sufficient for all the concerns colleagues may have, but I think it is a welcome step forward.

In the event that a subsequent agreement that meets the objectives of the backstop will not be ready by the end of 2020, we will face a choice of whether to seek to extend the implementation period or to bring the backstop into effect. We will provide in law for a mandatory process of consultation with the Northern Ireland Assembly in that scenario. Before any decision is taken on whether to seek to extend the implementation period, the Assembly would be given an opportunity, ahead of any parliamentary scrutiny, to express its view. Those views would then be brought before Parliament prior to a vote at Westminster. This procedure places a clear obligation on the UK Government, guaranteeing a strong voice for Northern Ireland. We will consult the parties in Northern Ireland on the details of those proposals and how best to provide for them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Stephen Barclay: I will just make progress on this section and then I will happily take further interventions.

Secondly, the protocol provides for alignment in Northern Ireland with a small fraction of EU single market rules. Where there is a proposal for a new EU law which is within the scope of the backstop but concerns a new area of regulation, that addition needs the consent of the United Kingdom. The EU cannot mandate the UK to accept that such a regulation must apply in Northern Ireland. We recognise that accepting new regulations for Northern Ireland under the backstop would be significant. Therefore, we plan to legislate in domestic law to ensure that a UK Minister will be required to seek the agreement of the Northern Ireland Assembly before reaching any agreement in the UK-EU joint committee to add additional rules to the scope of the protocol.

Mr Vara: With reference to the possibility of trading on WTO rules, does my right hon. Friend agree with what was said this morning on the “Today” programme by the president of the Port of Calais, Jean-Marc Puisseuseau:

“The trucks will be passing as they are doing today...there will not be a queue in Dover because there will not be control, so where is the problem?”

Does my right hon. Friend agree that rather than scaremongering from the comfort of these green Benches, we should take note of the person who is actually in charge of the Port of Calais and who knows what he is talking about?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Of course those representing a port will want to talk up the benefits of that port. The issue will be what legal obligations apply, not just what commercially they would want to do. I think he was talking more in terms of what flows into the UK than necessarily what is flowing back into France. In my remarks in response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), I referred to the fact that we have a political debate that tends to focus very heavily on goods, yet we have an economy that is predicated on services. On issues such as data and professional qualifications, there are many other issues that would not be addressed in a WTO scenario. That is the issue. Many Members are raising various different deals to which they feel most closely aligned, but the issue is that those deals would all require a withdrawal agreement and they would all need to address, as the EU has made clear, issues such as citizens, the financial settlement and a backstop, which is needed as a safeguard. It is not enough for the House to say what it is against; we have to say what is the deal, with a withdrawal agreement and a backstop, that we in this House can unite behind.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Clearly, the whole point of the backstop is to avoid a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland, so will the Secretary of State outline the Government’s timeframe for the invention, trial and deployment of the new technology needed for an invisible border with absolutely no infrastructure?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman will know that the political declaration reflected the Prime Minister’s negotiation success—this point has been raised by a number of my hon. Friends—in terms of using technology to mitigate the issue of a hard border. In the interim,

the issue is whether we can do that to the timescale required to avoid a backstop. The political declaration allows us to explore that, but this is about having insurance to protect the very peace that so many on the Opposition Benches worked for and quite rightly should take pride in.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I strongly support the Prime Minister’s Brexit deal, which also has considerable support in Northern Ireland among businesses, farmers’ organisations, community leaders and fishermen. I want the Secretary of State to take a few moments to explain to this House the very serious consequences that Northern Ireland could face in the event of the UK coming out of the EU on 29 March this year—it is a very short time away—without a deal. Sinn Féin’s seven MPs, who do not take their seats in this House, are sitting back thinking that all their Christmases have come at once. Will the Secretary of State confirm that they will use a hard border to agitate for a border poll, which could undermine the constitutional status of Northern Ireland? I think that is the issue he may have raised in Cabinet this morning. Will he elaborate on that?

Stephen Barclay: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady, first for her support for the Prime Minister’s deal, and secondly for the way in which she engages with such seriousness with issues of substance in Northern Ireland. I am conscious that there are genuine concerns among other Members in Northern Ireland, and we are seeking to address that. She is right to draw the House’s attention to the level of uncertainty that would flow from there not being a deal in place. The Prime Minister’s deal allows us to guarantee the hard-won progress of the peace process and, as the hon. Lady rightly says, many businesses and farming groups in Northern Ireland are very supportive of the deal.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab) *rose*—

Stephen Barclay: I will just make a little progress, and then I will give way to the hon. Gentleman.

On the backstop, some have asked whether the terms of the withdrawal agreement raise questions for the Union, but Members also need to consider the consequences to the Union of inaction. As the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) has said, if there is no deal, that in itself would pose a risk to the Union, and not just in Northern Ireland, but, as a number of my hon. Friends will know, in Scotland, because SNP Members will seek to exploit a no-deal situation in order to have a further independence referendum. Similarly, inaction that results in a second European referendum would carry risk for the Union, because SNP Members would say, “Well, if we can have a second European referendum so quickly after the first one, we can have a second referendum on independence.” I accept that Members across the House have concerns about the terms of the withdrawal agreement and the backstop—we are trying to mitigate those—but this is not a purity test. This is about balancing those risks with the risk to the Union of inaction and a second referendum being exploited by Opposition Members.

Chris Bryant: I hope that the Secretary of State understands that the issue for some Opposition Members is that there is no legal certainty in the next stage.

[Chris Bryant]

For instance, the Home Secretary has repeatedly said that we are going to have the best security arrangements that any third country has ever had with the European Union, but that does not mean anything. It does not mean that we will be in the European arrest warrant or that we will be able to secure proper extradition of paedophiles, murderers and terrorists from other countries to this country—or the other way around—to face justice. That is why some of us think that the Government are completely selling us a pup here. The evidence of the fact that nothing has changed since they pulled the debate is that we have exactly the same motion today and exactly the same deal—nothing has changed.

Stephen Barclay: I am in the process of setting out what has changed, and as I go through my speech, I hope I will have an opportunity to do so. The point is that this is a process, not a single event. The framework signals areas related to the trade negotiation, as I touched on in my remarks to my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson).

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Stephen Barclay: I will just make some progress, and then I will happily take further interventions.

On the backstop, let me address colleagues' concerns about being trapped, which was raised in a previous debate. The Government are not shying away from the fact that the backstop is an uncomfortable situation for the United Kingdom, but it is also an uncomfortable situation for the EU, in terms of the break in the four freedoms and the fact that we have a mutual interest in avoiding entering into it.

Indeed, since the previous debate, progress was made in the December Council on the confirmation of its commitment to use best endeavours to negotiate and conclude a subsequent agreement. Indeed, the EU27 gave me a new assurance in relation to the future partnership with the UK, by stating that the EU

“stands ready to embark on preparations immediately after signature of the Withdrawal Agreement to ensure that negotiations can start as soon as possible after the UK's withdrawal.”

The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) is busy checking his phone, but that relates to his point. Both sides intend to make early progress on the issues he raised.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman talked about the risks to the 96-year-old United Kingdom. I see this as an opportunity for independence, as underlined by the fact that this Government have shown more respect to, and have engaged more with, the Government of Ireland than they have to and with the Government of Scotland. That shows that independence gives you power, a voice and respect—something that the UK does not show the Scottish Government but that it does show in spades to the Government of Ireland, an independent country. The Celts who are independent are in a far better situation than the ones who are stuck with Westminster.

Stephen Barclay: There is a legitimate point as to how we engage with the House as a whole—with Members on both sides—as we move into the next phase. I have already touched on my desire, and the Prime Minister's

commitment, to look at how we do that with the devolved Administrations in a more targeted way. If we look at the first phase, we will see that a huge amount of hours have been spent on engagement. The Prime Minister has spent a huge number of hours at this Dispatch Box. There are opportunities for us to work in a much more targeted way, to listen to Members' concerns about issues such as citizens' rights and employment, and to look at how, through the Select Committees in particular, we can work in a much more targeted way. I think that the next phase lends itself to that approach. I gently say to the hon. Gentleman, however, that that also requires a dialogue both ways. If Members are going to jump in, before we have even responded, with a judgment on the withdrawal agreement or on measures that have been taken, that suggests a lack of engagement on their part to work in a collaborative way.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I had my first consultation with the Prime Minister last night—two years into the process. The Secretary of State is talking about the backstop, but the DUP, which has a confidence and supply agreement with the Government, is vehemently opposed to what he is laying out. How did the Government get themselves into this position? The answer is that they did not consult. If they had taken on the view of this House earlier in the process, they could have negotiated with Europe something that could have been acceptable to this House. The Government have put themselves in this position.

Stephen Barclay: First, as we move into the next phase, there is an opportunity to operate in a much more targeted way with the House. Secondly, on the pause—[*Interruption.*] I am trying genuinely to answer the hon. Gentleman's question. The pause was about listening to the House's concerns about the backstop. Look at the comments yesterday by the Taoiseach, who said:

“We don't want to trap the UK into anything—we want to get on to the talks about the future relationship right away.”

That is because the Prime Minister has been listening to the House and relaying that. As we move from a phase that was about implementing the result into a phase that is about trade negotiations and how they align with the sectoral interests of both the different nation state economies and the Select Committees, there is scope for a different dialogue, and I am very keen to signal that.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that by definition, if a backstop is to work, it has to be mutually uncomfortable, because there needs to be an incentive for both sides to get out of it? If not this backstop, then another backstop will be necessary. That, too, would have uncomfortable elements. We are not hearing any viable, practical alternatives.

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This comes back to the point that businesses and our citizens want the certainty of a deal and want one set of changes in the implementation period. It is clear that that requires, after 45 years, a winding down of our relationship, and that involves a backstop, regardless of which deal—it is almost like cinema pick 'n' mix—is

on offer. It is almost like there is a deal with “plus” attached for every variant, but he is absolutely right that they all require a backstop.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Is it not a fact that the Republic of Ireland Government, this Government and the European Union have spent years rejecting all and any suggested alternatives to the backstop? What confidence should we have that the European Union, the Republic of Ireland or this Government will, two years after the commencement of this process, start seriously to consider alternatives? The reality is that the backstop will be the European Union’s and the Republic of Ireland’s Northern Ireland solution in a substantive deal.

Stephen Barclay: The answer is that we have already seen a signal of that in the political declaration—on the technology that a number of Members have highlighted, for example. There is a shared desire to avoid going into the backstop, for reasons I have already alluded to, such as the breaking of the four freedoms and the fact that under article 50, there is no legal underpinning for any permanence in the backstop.

Members also need to address the reality of this. Some say, “Well, we’ll pay for an implementation period.” That is another of the myriad deals that people suggest. The reality is that the legal underpinning of the implementation period is article 50, which requires it to be temporary, not permanent. We sought that clarification, and there was a reflection of that in the December Council. Of course I recognise that there are ongoing concerns, and I am very keen to work with colleagues on those.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for the way he is taking us through the developments that have taken place. One of the things that a lot of us cannot understand is why, if everybody is so reluctant to go into the backstop—we are told the UK and the European Union are reluctant, and the DUP certainly is—it is not possible to get a legal undertaking about when it will end.

Stephen Barclay: My right hon. Friend brings me on perfectly to the next phase of my speech, which is about the role of Parliament, how we look at the decision on extending the implementation period, and how we avoid that. We will continue to work closely with Stormont, Holyrood and the Welsh Assembly, especially on the future frameworks, which will strengthen decision-making abilities and allow for decisions previously made at EU level to be made locally. Indeed, as I said, we want to learn from this and engage with Parliament in a much more targeted way. As the Prime Minister has made clear, the Government’s intention is to ensure a greater and more formal role for Parliament in the next stage of negotiations.

The withdrawal agreement provides that if the future relationship or alternative arrangements to supersede the backstop were not going to be ready by the end of 2020, either the Northern Ireland protocol would apply or the United Kingdom could seek to extend the implementation period for up to one or two years from the start of 2021, with any extension needing to be agreed by 1 July 2020. Should that situation arise, the

view of Parliament would be crucial. I am pleased to say that we will accept the amendment tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire), which will cement Parliament’s role in that process by requiring a vote on whether to seek to extend the implementation period or bring the backstop into effect. On the point that my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) makes, by accepting that amendment, we give Parliament much more of a say on this issue of concern about the triggering of the backstop.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con) *rose—*

Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con) *rose—*

Stephen Barclay: I will happily take interventions from two former Ministers, both of whom served with distinction in the Department for Exiting the European Union.

Mr David Jones: Does my right hon. Friend not accept that extending the transitional period would merely amount to kicking the can down the road, and that to solve the problem of the Irish backstop, which it is generally agreed across the House is the most repugnant element of this withdrawal agreement, what is needed is a rewording of the withdrawal agreement? Has he agreed a rewording of that agreement?

Stephen Barclay: No, because, as I have said on a number of occasions, whichever deal we have will need the elements we have talked about in respect of the withdrawal agreement, including a backstop. Let us not forget what that is about. It is about asking, because of the unique circumstances of Northern Ireland—because it is the only part of the United Kingdom with a land border, and because of its history in terms of the peace process—how we provide a guarantee. It is like insurance; one does not want to have to call on it, but how do we ensure that there is a guarantee to address the concerns that the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) set out?

Suella Braverman: I applaud the Secretary of State and his excellent ministerial team in the Department for Exiting the European Union for all their efforts at this challenging time for the Government. In December, the Attorney General published his legal advice, which contains a statement on the backstop. He wrote that

“despite statements in the Protocol that it is not intended to be permanent...in international law the Protocol would endure indefinitely until a superseding agreement took its place, in whole or in part”.

Is it the Secretary of State’s position that that legal position is unchanged, notwithstanding the reassurances that have been garnered to date, and does he agree that that means that in international law, we still risk being trapped indefinitely in the backstop?

Stephen Barclay: With characteristic aplomb, my hon. Friend alludes to one of the key issues in this debate: how one assesses the balance of risk. The Attorney General said in his statement to the House on 3 December, when these issues were explored in great detail, that how one assesses that balance ultimately is a political decision. In a way, the same point can be made about the concerns

[Stephen Barclay]

Members have expressed about the Union. There is a balance of risk in terms of concerns about the backstop, including the issue of that small section in the backstop where EU competence will continue. What is the risk of that? I have alluded to the safeguards. How does that risk elide with other risks, such as the risk of inaction?

The same is true of the assessment of my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), whom I hold in the highest regard. The difference there is an issue not of understanding—he understands these issues in great depth—but of how one assesses the balance of risk. The Attorney General dealt with that in some detail in his comments to the House.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I support the backstop. What concerns me is our future trade relations. We are essentially renegotiating access to our biggest market as a third-party country. Does that not leave the British state in an extremely vulnerable position?

Stephen Barclay: It is a statement of the legal position to say that to enter into a permanent arrangement, we need to be a third party. That reality is part of the difficulty of this situation. That is why we need an implementation period. We have in the political declaration a framework and in the business statements of the December Council a commitment. In “best endeavours”, we have something that gives legal force to ensuring momentum. It is a shared endeavour, too, because it is in neither side’s interests to trigger the backstop. There is, then, a mechanism, a framework and a process for addressing these concerns. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, however, that there is further significant work to be done, and that will be the job of this House.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is somewhat inconsistent for Scottish National party and Plaid Cymru MPs to suggest that Britain would not be in a position to draw up a trade treaty with the rest of the EU as a third-party country, when both believe that an independent Wales and Scotland would be in a position to draw up trade agreements with the rest of the United Kingdom if, God forbid, they ever got independence?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is quite right to draw the House’s attention to the inconsistency that many of us are familiar with in the SNP’s position, particularly given that Scotland’s biggest market is the United Kingdom. It seems strange that it wants to sever itself from its largest market in that way—and strange also that it appears to want to remain within the remit of the European common fisheries policy.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): We are spending a lot of time talking about the risks of the backstop, but my constituents are concerned about the risks to their jobs, if they work in sectors not covered by the World Trade Organisation; to citizens’ rights, if they are married to an EU citizen; and to security. All these issues are covered by the implementation period and the breathing space of the withdrawal agreement. Does the Secretary

of State agree that it is important to focus on the benefits of the agreement in front of us, as well as the risks?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend, as a former Member of the European Parliament, always speaks with great authority on these issues, and she is absolutely right. After 45 years, we are winding down a complex relationship with the EU, and certain things are incumbent on us in that process, including safeguarding citizens’ rights and honouring our legal obligations. As a Brexiteer who supported leaving on the basis that we should be trading with the rest of the world, I find it a strange idea that our first measure on leaving would be to walk away from our legal obligations. I do not think that other countries around the globe would find that persuasive.

I know that my hon. Friend is a huge champion of business in her constituency; it is important that we respond to the fact that businesses do not want a series of changes; they want one set of changes, and they want transitional arrangements in place to give them certainty as they go through that process. This is the challenge for the House. It is not enough for it simply to say what it is against, or to suggest that under WTO rules these risks could be mitigated.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Is not the reality that the so-called implementation period will essentially keep us in the EU—in the single market and the customs union—so that we do not harm our economy and have more time to sort out what on earth we are going to do, and that the so-called backstop is about aligning Northern Ireland with the EU, so that there does not have to be a hard border and we do not threaten peace in Northern Ireland? The Secretary of State talks about the House having to make up its mind. Why is he not more honest? Why does he not admit that this is essentially about keeping us in until we can make up our minds what on earth we are going to do? If that is the case, what is the point?

Stephen Barclay: No, I do not accept that, not least because 80% of the economy is outside the backstop. The political declaration is quite clear that the country will get control of its trade policy. That is one of the inconsistencies in the position of the Leader of the Opposition, who seeks both to be in a customs union and to have an independent trade policy. The shadow Business Secretary is on record as saying that is not a tenable position—[*Interruption.*] Sorry, the shadow International Trade Secretary.

The point is—this goes to the heart of the hon. Lady’s question—that we need to honour the result of the referendum, which was the biggest democratic vote in our history, in a way that gives us control over immigration through a skills-based system, and over agriculture and fishing, and in a way that allows us to put an end to sending vast sums of money to the EU. These were the key issues on which the British people voted. I recognise that some, in particular the Father of the House, did not vote for a referendum, but the vast majority of the House did, and the vast majority voted to trigger article 50. We need to honour that, but accept that we leave either with a deal or—by default, if the House does not support the deal—with no deal. We cannot run away from that reality.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): As the Secretary of State will be aware, there are reports in the newspapers that Jaguar Land Rover will imminently implement a transformation plan. What that says to me is very simple. Parts for an average Land Rover cross between the UK and the EU 37 times, so it says to me that we need the withdrawal agreement to maintain that just-in-time movement of parts in a way that protects jobs in my constituency and the wider supply chain. This is a matter of urgency. Hon. Members need to think about that when deciding how to vote on the withdrawal agreement.

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is absolutely right both to draw the House's attention to the urgency of this issue—we have 78 days before we leave the EU—and in his sectoral understanding of the flow of goods and how that impacts the key industries in his constituency. That is why so many business groups support the deal. They want that certainty.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the question from the right hon. and learned Gentleman, the Father of the House, to the Prime Minister earlier, and in the context of the House having voted against the Government twice over its concerns about the possibility of no deal, does the Secretary of State accept that it would be the Government's responsibility, if they were defeated next Tuesday, to bring forward legislation to suspend article 50?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point that many hon. Members have raised, but it does not address the legal position. The position of the courts is that we cannot unilaterally extend article 50. That requires the consent of the other 27 member states, and we do not know what conditionality would be attached, if it were sought. In particular, the courts were clear that the only way would be to revoke on the basis of a permanent decision. Given that more than 80% of the electorate voted for one of the two main parties, and that both parties' manifestos backed the decision to leave—that commitment is on page 24 of the Labour manifesto—I feel it would be divisive for our country to proceed in that way.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): As somebody who did not vote to trigger article 50, I would ask the Secretary of State to consider this very carefully: if he genuinely does not want a no deal, as many Cabinet members do not, when the Government are defeated next week, should they not come forward with a specific proposal—he has made clear the difficulties of extending the process—either for a people's vote, so that the public can choose between staying in the EU and the Government's proposals, or for revoking article 50, so that we can have a national consultation, as they did in Ireland on abortion, and get this right?

Stephen Barclay: I respect the principled position that the hon. Gentleman took in his vote on article 50, but if one recognises the majority opinion of the House, which is what he says we should do next week, it would be only consistent to recognise also that the majority decision of the House was to trigger article 50, and that set a timetable. For the sake of consistency, he needs to accept that. The consequence of triggering article 50 is

that we either leave with a deal—the EU has made it clear that the Prime Minister's deal is the only deal, so it is not logical for Labour to say it could negotiate another deal in the time remaining—

Mike Gapes *indicated assent.*

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman nods. I think many other Labour Members would agree. Members have to accept the risk of a no deal, therefore, and as a Government, we have to be responsible. We certainly do not want a no deal; I join him in not wanting that. Some Members are very relaxed about a no deal; I do not agree that we should be relaxed about it, because of issues such as data and qualifications, which I think they need to address.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab) *rose—*

Stephen Barclay: I will take one more intervention, and then I will wind up my speech.

Rushanara Ali: Yesterday, outside the House, the Secretary of State said that he was beginning to get used to being a punch bag in the House, so I shall try not to metaphorically punch him.

The Secretary of State has said that no deal would be irresponsible. In the light of the recent votes, I hope that he can rule it out, because it would be catastrophic. The Bank of England's analysis shows that, in a worst-case scenario, the economy would be 8% worse off and unemployment would be 6.5% higher, and the current deal—the Government's deal—would make our economy nearly 4% worse off. Neither of those are good prospects for our country. Can the Secretary of State at least keep an open mind about a public vote if all else fails?

Stephen Barclay: I respect the concern that the hon. Lady feels, but it is not in the power of an individual Minister to say that that will not happen, because the House has to decide what it is for; it is very good at saying what it is against. The reality is that having triggered article 50, we either leave with a deal or we do not. I do not think it is credible to say that we can negotiate another deal in 78 days, as Opposition Front Benchers have suggested. I think that the alternative would pose a risk to the peace process, which is a fine achievement that should be cherished, but it cannot be ruled out. That is why the deal on the table is the right deal, and one that we should support.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Stephen Barclay: I must draw my speech to a close.

With just 78 days before we leave the European Union, the House should now give citizens and businesses the certainty that they seek, and the way in which to do so is to back the deal that, after two years of hard-fought negotiation, the Prime Minister has secured. It is for that reason that I commend the deal to the House, and I hope that all Members, mindful of the risks of uncertainty that will otherwise flow, will respond by backing it.

3.21 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): It is a pleasure finally to be able to resume this debate.

[*Keir Starmer*]

Thirty days ago, on 10 December, the Prime Minister told the House that the meaningful vote would be deferred. She did, of course, do so without consulting the House on the issue. The ground that she laid out on 10 December was that if the Government “went ahead and held the vote”,

which was due to take place the next day,

“the deal would be rejected by a significant margin.” —[*Official Report*, 10 December 2018; Vol. 651, c. 23.]

That was her judgment call. She said that she would do everything possible “to secure further assurances”, particularly over the issue of the Northern Ireland backstop.

The Leader of the House went further, saying:

“going back to the EU and seeking reassurances, in the form of legally binding reassurances”

was

“absolutely doing the right thing”.

The implication was that this was a pause to allow further assurances—legally binding reassurances, according to the Leader of the House. The International Trade Secretary, with his usual foresight, said:

“It is very difficult to support the deal if we don’t get changes to the backstop.

I am not even sure the Cabinet will agree for it to be put to the House of Commons.”

That was his assessment.

Those were senior members of the Cabinet, indicating to Parliament and to the country that the deal, the proposition before the House, needed to be changed if it were to be voted on and not defeated by a substantial majority. They were, of course, challenged. They were challenged on the basis that this was just a way of delaying and avoiding a humiliating defeat, and they were running down the clock. Now, 30 days on, those rebuttals ring hollow.

The Prime Minister is often mocked for saying that nothing has changed, but this time nothing has changed. The proposition before the House today is the same proposition as the one that the Prime Minister put before the House on 5 December, when she opened the initial debate. I have my own copies of these two documents, but the two copies that I have here were laid on the Table at the beginning of the debate. They are the proposition that is before the House, and, as everyone in the House knows, they are precisely the same two documents that were put before the House on 5 December. When we go through the Lobby next Tuesday, we will be voting for or against these two unchanged documents.

Lady Hermon: Given that the right hon. and learned Gentleman has just picked up the withdrawal deal, I am sure that, being the learned gentleman he is, he has read, on page 307, the guarantee and the protection for the Good Friday agreement—the Belfast agreement—and the consent principle. Twenty years ago, his party, the Labour party, was the architect—thank the Lord—of that agreement, which put an end to the appalling violence of more than 30 years in Northern Ireland, when 302 police officers lost their lives and thousands of innocent people lost theirs in the terrorist campaign. Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman explain to the House, and to the Irish diaspora in Labour constituencies, how it is that the Labour party is voting down a deal that guarantees the agreement?

Keir Starmer: Let me take that point head on, because it is very important. Our party—both parties—played an important part in the peace process, and I genuinely think that there is a consensus, or a near-consensus, across the House on the importance of that agreement. We have been very proud of upholding it. Even in the course of these debates over the last two years, every time it has come up there has been a reiteration of the principles. I myself worked in Northern Ireland for five years, with the Policing Board, implementing some of the recommendations of the Good Friday agreement, and I therefore have first-hand knowledge of how both communities see it, what the impact was before change, and what it is now. However, I do not think it fair to characterise anyone who says that these two documents are not the right deal for our country as undermining the Good Friday agreement. That simply means that there can be no criticism, no issue, no challenge to the Government, which cannot be right.

In addition, I have stood at this Dispatch Box and moved amendment after amendment whose objective was a customs union and a single market deal, which I genuinely believe constitute the only way of securing no hard border in Northern Ireland. On every occasion, the Government voted those amendments down. To say at this stage that we have tried to do nothing to protect the position is simply not right. [*Interruption.*] I will come to the issue of the need for a backstop—I will tackle that issue—but I wanted to deal with the intervention.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I do not think that the right hon. and learned Gentleman has answered the key question asked by the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon). I cannot understand why the Labour party is joining in the criticisms of the Irish backstop. The right hon. and learned Gentleman has repeated his commitment to a permanently open border. He has also repeated—and I agree with him about this—that there can only be a permanently open border if there is a customs union and regulatory alignment. If they are to be permanent, that must be kept permanently.

What the critics on this side of the House are saying about the backstop agreement is “We are not allowed to cancel it unilaterally.” If they are given that power, it is no longer a permanently open border. With the greatest respect, it does smack of opportunism that the Labour party is joining opponents of the backstop with whom it has no agreement whatever politically. The answer is to have the same open border for the whole United Kingdom and for the United Kingdom to be in a single market and regulatory alignment, and that is not inconsistent with the referendum.

Keir Starmer: That suggests that the customs arrangements under the backstop are the same as customs arrangements that we have currently, but they are not. I have read the document in detail several times, and I know what the customs union that we are in looks like and I know that the one under the backstop is fundamentally different. It is fundamentally different from the amendments that we have been faithfully tabling for 12 or 18 months. It is therefore unfair to say that because it is called a “customs arrangement” or a “customs union” that it is all the same; it obviously is not. The arrangements for Northern Ireland are different from those for England, Wales and Scotland, and even the arrangements for England, Wales and Scotland are not the same as the customs union that we are in now.

Among the deficiencies is that we would not have any say over future trade agreements during any period in the backstop, which has not been built in because the Government are pretending that any period would not last long. I will address the point about having a say, but we would not be able to strike our own agreements and would take no advantages from trade agreements struck by the EU. That is a fundamental deficiency of being in the backstop. It is not right or fair to pretend that such issues do not exist, that we cannot seriously engage with them, or that the importance that the Labour party puts in the Good Friday agreement is somehow undermined. That just removes the ability to challenge. The withdrawal agreement is a serious document, and it is what the Government have put before us to analyse and vote on, so we are entitled to say that it is not good enough. However, that does not mean in the next breath that we do not stick by the commitments in the Good Friday agreement.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I will make some progress and then take further interventions.

The withdrawal agreement is the same document that was before the House when the Prime Minister announced that she was postponing the vote. It is the proposition that she said she thought would be defeated by a significant margin. No changes have been made either to the 585-page, legally binding withdrawal agreement or to the incredibly vague political declaration. There is no new text for this House to consider.

Some of us expected the Prime Minister to make a statement on Monday to tell the House what had happened while we were in recess, to update us on any meetings or discussions that she may have had—we read about them in the press—and to say whether anything had changed. She did not come to make a statement. The Brexit Secretary handled an urgent question, the central thrust of which was about what progress had been made and what changes there had been. The Brexit Secretary defended his position with a smile, attacking the Opposition, as he always does, by asking, “What’s your proposition?” while ignoring the fact that we are voting on the withdrawal agreement, not on what anyone else is saying. He smiled, attacked the Opposition and swerved challenges, but he did not answer the question, and the reason why is that there has been no meaningful change.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Keir Starmer: I will just make this point and then give way.

I was here for Prime Minister’s questions today, and I carefully noted what the Prime Minister said in answer to the first question from my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition. First, she said that the changes that she is now relying on are the results of the December European Council summit, at which the EU agreed that it would use “its best endeavours” to secure the future relationship as quickly as possible. What else could it say? Of course, we would hope that it would do that.

However, the EU also said at the same summit that the withdrawal agreement cannot be renegotiated, so that does not take us very far.

Secondly, the Prime Minister said that further clarifications might be “possible” by Tuesday, so we are in exactly the same position as we were on 10 December, with a hope for possible assurances—there may be something coming.

Thirdly, the Prime Minister referred to the paper on Northern Ireland published this morning, and the Brexit Secretary referred to it, too. Members may not have had the chance to read this 13-page document, but I have read it. I do not dismiss anything that marks a step towards ensuring that the concerns in Northern Ireland and across the whole United Kingdom are addressed, whatever they are, so I am not dismissing this document. However, on my reading—if I am wrong, I will correct this or be corrected—I think I am right in saying that the document does not contain any new commitments. It brings together the unilateral commitments made in other places at other times into one document. I have been going through the document as I have been in the Chamber, so if I am wrong, I will be challenged but, as far as I can see, it just builds on the unilateral commitments in paragraph 50 of the phase 1 joint report document from December 2017 and adds the commitments that the Prime Minister has made in Belfast and other places. I am not saying that those commitments are not important or are without significance. I do not dismiss them, but we need to see the document for what it is, which is a bringing together of existing commitments. The position has not changed between 10 December and today.

The fourth thing that has been relied upon as a change that the House needs to take into account is that it is now said that Parliament will have a role in July 2020 when we must choose whether to apply for an extension of the transition or to go on to the backstop. There are several points about that, one of which is that it does not change the options, and I will develop why I think that those options will have to be exercised. Arguably, it is the logic of the article 50 case in the Supreme Court, certainly if we go on to the backstop, because the whole argument in the Supreme Court was that if we change the rights of individuals in this country as a matter of international law then we have to have a vote in this House, so I am not sure that this is much of a gift or concession from the Government.

The other point is the practical reality, which we have seen today and yesterday: the idea that the Prime Minister or anybody else was going to get away with freezing Parliament out of that decision in July 2020 is misconceived. We were always going to have a say on that, because it is such an important position. So the proposition on the table is not altered. The Brexit Secretary did not answer substantively on Monday because the December summit does not really take us anywhere: further clarifications may be possible but they are still long awaited, the Northern Ireland paper is a bringing together of existing commitments that does not change anything, and Parliament was always going to find a way of having a say in July 2020 as to which option we take.

Stephen Doughty *rose*—

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con) *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I promised earlier to take an intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), so I will give way to him first.

Stephen Doughty: I concur with my right hon. and learned Friend that nothing has changed. Does he therefore agree that the Prime Minister's decision to delay was not only wrong, but irresponsible, because on every single day that has gone by during that time we have seen the Treasury spending more and more taxpayers' money to prepare for a no deal that it says it does not want, businesses cancelling investment plans, and jobs being put at risk? All of that is deeply irresponsible, particularly when nothing has changed.

Keir Starmer: I agree with that, because if the Prime Minister's own judgment is right that this deal as it was on 10 December is likely to go down by a significant margin, that brings into sharp focus the role of this House in debating and deciding what happens next, and the more time we have for that, the better. We have just been deprived of 30 days of that because we will not now get on to it, probably, until next week.

Sir Oliver Letwin: The right hon. and learned Gentleman has listed a series of things that have not changed. One thing that I note has not changed are the terms of his and the Leader of the Opposition's amendment in calling for

"a permanent UK-EU customs union",

a perfectly clear phrase that we all understand completely, and a "strong single market deal". I am one of those in this House who would like in some way or another at some point or another in the not too distant days to arrive at some cross-party agreement about something we could actually go forward with, and therefore I ask the right hon. and learned Gentleman to explain to the House what kind of "strong single market deal" would need to be delivered in order to get an agreement.

Keir Starmer: I can deal with that because, as Members know, I have been talking to the EU and the EU27 for quite a long time now, not to undermine the Government's position—it was actually facilitated by the first Brexit Secretary of State in some respects—but to explore what other options are possible. At present the customs union operates on the basis that the Council sets the mandate for the Commission, the Commission does the negotiating, and Parliament then has a role. So if we want a customs union that replicates the benefits of the current customs union and we want the UK to have a say in that we must find something that is similar to that, but obviously not the same as it, and the central question I have been addressing is whether the EU would be interested in a discussion about what that sort of working customs union would look like. *[Interruption.]* I actually had the discussion. *[Interruption.]* It is very easy for Members on the Treasury Bench to chunter, but I have been responsible and actually gone and had the conversation asking whether there is a basis for a discussion about a customs union that would work in that way. I have been very clear that if it ended up as something akin to the Turkey customs union—which works for Turkey—that really would not be good enough.

As for a single market deal, my own view is that there are advantages in what we call the Norway model but that there are also disadvantages in that, and therefore it must be possible—again, I have had discussions—to explore a close economic relationship that keeps alignment, with, of course, oversight and enforcement mechanisms to go with it, but which is not simply the EEA.

I say all that in some detail in order to reassure the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) that when we talk about a close economic relationship, a customs union with a say, and a close single market deal, we are talking about concepts that I have surfaced only after I have had discussions with EU27 countries and the EU about their possibility. I am not going to stand here and pretend that that will be easy; rather, I am standing here saying that we have been pressing for at least 12 or 18 months to have that. One of the major problems—this is at the heart of the debate and the fractiousness about it—is that the Prime Minister and the Government have pushed Parliament away. They had a choice—

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington) *rose—*

Keir Starmer: I will give way in a moment, but I want to make this point because it is very important.

I campaigned to remain; I wanted to remain.

I agonised over whether we should trigger article 50, but I worked out that, having accepted the result of the referendum, it was not open to me to stop the Prime Minister starting the negotiations. What I wanted is for this House to have a proper role—by consensus, or at least by majority, if possible—in finding a way forward.

It was obvious that the sorts of arguments that are happening in the House, particularly among Conservative Members, if I may say so—I do not think that is controversial—would break out. It was obvious because for 30 years there has been a discussion, for want of a better word, in the Conservative party about not just the relationship with Europe but the vision for our country. That argument was always going to break out, and it was always going to divide Conservative Members. That is obvious, and it is not just an Opposition point. In those circumstances, a different Prime Minister might have said, "I can see what is going to happen down the line, and I need to bring Parliament into this." That has been refused at every twist and turn.

Let us be honest that we are having a vote on Tuesday only because we fought to have it. I coined the phrase "meaningful vote", and, working across parties, we got the amendment, which was resisted by the Government. They went through the Lobby to say no. We said, "You have to publish a plan," and the only reason we got a plan was that we won an Opposition day motion—the Government were going to oppose that motion. We said that we wanted to know what the impact would be, and the Government said, "You can't." We had to get it via a Humble Address. We have seen the Supreme Court and the idea of even voting on article 50 in the first place, and then the Attorney General's advice. The Government have persistently voted down every motion. The one thing I remember the first Brexit Secretary saying to me, over and again, on the article 50 Bill was that he wanted

a clean Bill: “I want a clean Bill, and I will make sure that every amendment is voted down.” That was his avowed aim.

Mr Lidington: I completely accept the right hon. and learned Gentleman’s central point, which is that there is space for completely honourable debate within and between political parties in this House about the outcome of the negotiations on the future permanent relationship between this country and the EU27, and the various options, from Norway to Canada and every variation in between, have their champions in this place. But from his conversations with the EU institutions and with members of the 27 Governments, surely he will have accepted that the essential and unavoidable gateway to any such destination of a final agreement has to be the withdrawal agreement, which covers citizens’ rights, the Irish border and the financial settlement, which is the key document that we are being asked to endorse and ratify. What is his objection to that document?

Keir Starmer: I accept that there has to be a withdrawal agreement, and I accept that it has to cover citizens’ rights and that there are payments. I have on more than one occasion stood here and said that the progress on citizens’ rights under the withdrawal agreement is a step in the right direction, although it does not go far enough—we have quibbled about that, but there will always be an argument about whether we have gone far enough.

I have also stood here and said that we will have to fulfil our financial obligations, for the very reason the Brexit Secretary said, which is that we will not get very far in trying to reach trade agreements, or any agreements, with anybody else on the international plane if, at the same time, we are walking away from the international agreements or obligations that we have.

That does not mean I do not have concerns about the withdrawal agreement, and about the backstop in particular. The backstop has become the central issue for two reasons: first, the lack of progress on the future relationship, and I will develop that point in just a moment; and, secondly, the avowed aim of some Conservative Members to diverge as far as possible from EU alignment. It is that fear that has driven the debate on the backstop, and it could have been avoided months ago.

Sir Oliver Letwin: I am doubly grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way again. It is helpful to address this point after the intervention of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office.

Can the right hon. and learned Gentleman take this one stage further? If there were a cross-party agreement on the terms of an EU-UK customs union of the kind he describes, and if there were some variant of a “strong single market deal”—whether Norwegian or otherwise—is he saying it is the position of the Labour party that it would then co-operate with Her Majesty’s Government to arrive at an agreement about how to reshape the political declaration in such a way as to enable the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration to go forward so that we can exit on 29 March?

Keir Starmer: There is the customs union point and the single market deal point, and there are other issues relating to rights and protections, whether they are workplace rights or environmental rights and so on.

Obviously, at some stage, if we are to leave other than without a deal, there has to be a consensus in this House for something. That is why the wasting of the past 30 days has been so regrettable, because that is where we need to get to. At no point have the Government reached out across the House at all, even after the snap election. I actually personally thought that at some stage somebody might give me a ring and ask what would be the main features that we could at least begin to discuss, or whether it was worth even having a discussion about them.

The second point gives meat to this. Time and again we have tabled amendments along the lines I have been talking about, and time and again the Government have just blindly whipped against them, without any regard to whether they were good, bad or indifferent; they were just Opposition amendments, so they were going down.

Clive Efford: We know from the author of article 50 that it was drafted with the intention that it should never be used, so 29 March is an arbitrary date. It is only now that the Government have started to reach out and indicate that they might be willing to discuss Brexit with other parties in this House in order to get consensus, but we have run out of time. Surely the Government now have to listen and consider the fact that we may have to suspend article 50, or even to seek its revocation.

Keir Starmer: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I do accuse the Government of running down the clock, and it is a serious allegation. The article 50 window is two years—it is very short. The Government started the two years by having a snap general election, and lost two or three months. They then went through to the end of the phase 1 agreement, but it was not until June last year that we even had a Chequers plan, so the two-year window has in effect been run down. There is a question of the extension of article 50, which may well be inevitable now, given the position that we are in, but of course we can only seek it, because the other 27 have to agree.

The other serious question with which I have been engaging is about the appetite of the EU, after the negotiations have gone the way they have, to start again and to fundamentally change what is on the table. I have to say, with regret, that I genuinely think that the way the Government have gone about the negotiations, particularly in respect of the red lines that the Prime Minister laid down in the first place, has undermined a lot of the good will that would otherwise have been there.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I will give way once more and then I really am going to get on, because I have been giving way for around half an hour.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: This is my last intervention. To go back to the intervention by my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin), which was pertinent to the situation we are all in, he asked whether the right hon. and learned Gentleman was saying on behalf of the Labour party that, if there were a cross-party agreement on a form of customs union, sufficient regulatory alignment and so on, his party would join in that

[Mr Kenneth Clarke]

positively, with a view to reaching a solution and moving on to the serious negotiations. The right hon. and learned Gentleman has turned that question into an attack on the Government, and I agree with him. I share his criticism that the Government should have made serious overtures to the Opposition long, long ago; but as we are now so short of time and we are all in danger of going towards a no-deal exit, which only a small minority in the House positively wants, is it not time for him to answer the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset? Is the Labour party available for discussions with a positive view to reaching a conclusion on a customs union and sufficient regulatory alignment to keep open borders?

Keir Starmer: I have been available for discussions for the whole time I have been in this post. I have spoken to Members on all Benches about amendments, some of which have had cross-party support. We are going to have to have a discussion—I think starting after Tuesday—about where we go next. We will all have to enter that in the right spirit, because I genuinely think that leaving with no deal would be catastrophic. I also genuinely think that we cannot do it on 29 March this year; it is simply not viable for so many practical reasons. We are going to have to look at what available options are realistically still on the table and what now are the merits of each of them. There are different options; we are just discussing one of them. There are other options that I know members in my own party feel very strongly about, such as a public vote. But we are going to have to sit down and consider credibly what are the options and how Parliament takes control of what happens next. We will enter that in the right spirit, but we will all have to acknowledge, I am afraid, that some of the options that may have been there a year or two ago are not there in the same shape and form as they would have been at the time of the manifestos.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Keir Starmer: No, I really am going to make some progress now because I have been giving in—hopefully, I have been giving way, though I may have been giving in as well!

I have made the point about this being the same proposition on the table, but let me just go to the heart of the problem of why we are so stuck on this question of the backstop on which I have been challenged. At the heart of the problem is the future relationship document. The truth is that there has been barely any progress on the future relationship. It is a flimsy 26-page document. In truth, it is an options paper—a 26-page options paper—which could and should have been written two years ago. Paragraph 28—I know that everyone has marked it up, but it is worth having another look at—covers the implications for checks and controls. This is the future relationship. It says:

“The Parties envisage that the extent of the United Kingdom’s commitments on customs and regulatory cooperation, including with regard to alignment of rules, would be taken into account in the application of related checks and controls, considering this as a factor in reducing risk.”

It then goes on to say that there is a “spectrum of different outcomes”. What it is saying is that we do not

know yet what the commitments on customs and co-operation will be. We do not know what the alignment will be. If it is close it might lead to one result; if it is not close it might lead to another result—a spectrum of different outcomes.

The document has 26 pages, at the heart of which is a “spectrum of different outcomes”. We keep calling it a deal, but this is not a deal; it is an options paper. It is an options paper that has been written by others. We have all mocked up an options paper, as have various academics. Let me contrast this with what the previous Brexit Secretary, the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), said. We were challenging him over the summer about the future relationship and trying to get an assurance from him that we would have a precise and detailed document that we could vote on so we know where we are going. He said this:

“What is important is that it is clear and specific enough”—
the future relationship document—

“that we are not talking about options for negotiations”—
that is what it would not be—

“but we are clear on the choice of model”—

so it is a clear model that he said we would have—

“and therefore that it reads as a direction for the UK and the EU to get on with it—that we are really implementing heads of terms for an agreement.”

This is miles away from that. This is not a deal, and that is the cause of the problem.

The cause of the problem is this: whatever the Secretary of State says, nobody but nobody who is serious about this thinks for one moment that this document will turn into the future relationship and come into force on 1 January 2021. Nobody credible thinks that. It is a complete myth. It is precisely the same as the myth that this would all have been negotiated by now, which is why there is such anxiety about the backstop. The backstop should never have been the driving force—the focus. We should have been so far advanced in this part of the negotiation that the backstop would have been a bit of a non-issue.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I just want to make this point. We need to understand why this document is so flimsy. It is not just an accident. It is not just that people were not working hard. It is not just that the civil servants, who have worked really hard in all this, were not doing their job. It is for two primary reasons.

The first was that the Prime Minister laid down her red lines in autumn 2016 without consulting the House and, I think, without consulting the Cabinet. She said that those red lines were: outside the customs union, outside the single market and no role for the European Court of Justice. She added the suggestion that

“if you believe you’re a citizen of the world, you’re a citizen of nowhere.”

That was an interpretation of the referendum—we can argue whether it was a good or bad one—by a small team of, I think, three or four people. That was not even the interpretation of the Cabinet, and certainly not of this House. We only have 26 pages on the future relationship, because that got us off to the worst possible start to the negotiations. Those were political

choices, not necessities. They were the Prime Minister's choices, which set her on a path, and this is where it ended.

Add to that the fact that we only got the Chequers proposal in June last year. Anybody who visited Brussels between the triggering of article 50 and June 2018 will have heard the same complaint that I heard: "We don't know what the UK is actually asking for, and therefore we can't really advance the negotiations." When we first got the Chequers proposal in June last year, those in Brussels acknowledged that at least there was now a plan on the table. Of course, Chequers did not unlock the problem, because it was a plan that led immediately to Cabinet resignations, that MPs were quick to say they opposed and would not agree to in any circumstances, and that the EU rejected. That is why there are only 26 pages, which expose the thinness of the proposals.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Keir Starmer: I will just crack on.

What we see from this document is that the envisaged future relationship will not deliver frictionless trade; it does not aspire to any more. There is no plan for a permanent customs union and no certainty for financial services. In fact, there is almost nothing for financial services. On workplace rights and environmental protections, there is nothing to ensure that standards do not fall behind over time. No wonder the general secretary of the TUC said:

"This is a bad deal for working people: bad for jobs and bad for rights."

It also places us outside a whole raft of common EU programmes and agencies. Again, much of that flows directly from the Prime Minister's insistence that there should be no role whatever for the European Court. She put that red line down, and once she had done so, any meaningful participation in those bodies became very difficult.

For five years, I was the representative of the UK in Eurojust, which, as the House will know, plays an important part in the investigation and prosecution of very serious offences across Europe, as do other agencies. In order to have the full participation that makes sense, we have to accept the oversight and enforcement mechanisms that go with it, but the red line made it impossible and led to such a thin document as this.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): I have heard colleagues ask the right hon. and learned Gentleman repeatedly about the Labour party's proposals and whether it would work on a cross-party basis. He indicated at the Dispatch Box that he would enter into cross-party discussions. Is he speaking for the Labour party or as an individual, and what proposals does he have?

Keir Starmer: I have to say that I love this. We are voting on the Government's deal, but Members are attacking the Labour party's plan. Well, that makes a lot of sense. Whatever else we are going to do next Tuesday, we are not going to vote on our plan. Let us be serious.

Alberto Costa: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer: The hon. Gentleman asked me a question and I am answering him. Whether we like it or not, the Government's deal is what we are voting on. We are not

voting on what any one of us may think, say or do. Having not made any attempt to engage seriously with the Opposition on amendments and proposals, it is a bit rich for Government Members to now say that it is somehow the Opposition's fault that the Government are in a mess and cannot get their deal through. I gently say that there is huge interest in what the Opposition think. Why? Because, in an ordinary set of proceedings and absent the snap general election, there would be a majority on the Government Benches for the Government's own proposition. This challenge needs to be put in its proper context: it is because Conservative Members know full well that they are not all going into the same Lobby.

Vicky Ford *rose—*

Julian Knight *rose—*

Keir Starmer: If anyone wants to intervene on me and say that the Conservatives are all going into the same Lobby, they can, but I do not think that is the case. The point is that the Government are so divided that they cannot get their own deal through. That is the truth of the matter.

Vicky Ford *rose—*

Keir Starmer: I am going to make some progress.

Vicky Ford *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. I am well aware that the hon. Lady is a former chair of the Internal Market Committee of the European Parliament. In case there are people present who were not aware of that, among the litany of achievements that she can proclaim, I have done a public service in advertising that important fact. However, it does not give her an automatic right to intervene. The right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) will decide whether he wishes to give way to the hon. Lady, and at the moment he is not giving way.

Keir Starmer: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Vicky Ford *rose—*

Keir Starmer: I am not going to give way.

It is no good us pretending about this. I have said in recent weeks and months that the future relationship document is 26 pages long and that it is thin and flimsy, and the answer that now comes back occasionally is, "It was always going to be that way. What did you expect? It's a future relationship." Well, I will tell Members what the Prime Minister expected. I see nods from Conservative Members, but the Prime Minister was very clear about what she expected, and she set it out in her Lancaster House speech on 17 January 2017:

"I want us to have reached an agreement about our future partnership by the time the two-year Article Fifty process has concluded."

I repeat:

"I want us to have reached an agreement."

She continued:

"From that point onwards, we believe a phased process of implementation, in which both Britain and the EU institutions and member states prepare for the new arrangements".

[*Keir Starmer*]

At the time, I was proposing that that was a transition period, and the Prime Minister and various Secretaries of State for Brexit kept insisting it was not a transition period, because that would imply that we were negotiating in it; instead it was an implementation period, because—[*Interruption.*] No, this is what they argued. They said that the agreement would have been reached and all we would need to do was implement it—to phase it in—during the two-year period. So the idea that this is as it was always going to be—that a blind Brexit was inevitable or an inherent part of the process—is completely contradicted by the Prime Minister’s own words when she said what was going to be achieved.

There are very serious consequences to having such a flimsy document on the future relationship. First, it invites this House to vote on a blind Brexit. I and other Labour Members have very strong views on what the future relationship should look like. Given a document that does not set out whether it might end up as a distant Canada-style model of some sort, or a closed Norway-style model, how can one expect any responsible Member of this House to say, “I don’t know where this is going to end, I don’t know what it’s going to look like, it could actually turn out to be an agreement I fundamentally disagree with, but I shall vote for it”? That just cannot be right. That is the problem—it is a blind Brexit. Secondly, as I have said, because the document is so thin, nobody serious, either here or in Brussels, is suggesting for one moment that the agreement is actually going to be ready by January 2021.

That means that we are going on to either an extended transition or the backstop. That is going to happen. If anybody is intending to vote next week on the pretence or understanding that we are not going to be here arguing about this in July 2020, I genuinely think they are labouring under a misconception—they are wrong. We will either be going on to the transition or going on to the backstop if the deal goes through in this form. We cannot escape that and simply pretend it is not going to happen.

I have said a few words about the backstop. As the Secretary of State rightly said, it provides for citizens’ rights and financial obligations. I do not shy away from the commitments made under the Good Friday agreement. I certainly have no truck with those who play down the importance of the Good Friday agreement—it is not the Secretary of State, the Government or the Prime Minister—or even say that their version of hard Brexit somehow overrides it. Those commitments are serious, and they have to be kept.

I also accept that, given the lack of progress in the 26-page document that we have, at this stage, sadly, some sort of backstop is inevitable. Having got to this stage of the article 50 exercise, it is now inevitable that we cannot finish the exercise within the transition period. There are risks under the backstop, and the Attorney General’s advice, which we fought to uncover last year, set them out pretty starkly. There is the fraught question of whether the backstop would, in truth, be indefinite or temporary. We can have views on that, but we cannot avoid the fact that it is a live dispute, and the Attorney General gave his view on that.

It is also indisputable that once we are in the backstop, if that is what happens in January 2021, it will introduce barriers to trade between England, Wales and Scotland

and the EU. That is spelled out in the document. We are putting up barriers to trade in January 2021 if we go into the backstop. I have already touched on the inadequacy of the proposed customs arrangements.

Jonathan Edwards: I am sure the right hon. and learned Gentleman will have seen the article written over the weekend by Peter Hain and Paul Murphy—both former distinguished Members of this House and Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland who played an important part in the peace process—in which they made the case that the backstop is an important element that we must honour. Has he had an opportunity to reflect on that?

Keir Starmer: I have read the article, and I reflect on it. I used my words carefully; I said that there are risks in the backstop, which the Attorney General’s advice set out, and they are real risks.

There is a risk that we should not be blind to. The Attorney General spelled out in his advice that the backstop, as a matter of international law, may well be indefinite—he said that it is arguable either way—and that we therefore cannot get out of it unilaterally. We know that, and we have had a discussion about it. However, he went on to say that we cannot get out of it even if the negotiations completely break down and an allegation of bad faith is found. That is not just—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker) *indicated dissent.*

Keir Starmer: He did say that. I flushed that advice out, and I have read it over and over again. It is absolutely clear. The Attorney General says that if an allegation of bad faith is found, the only remedy is to ask the parties to act in good faith. That is spelled out in the advice. I know that the Minister is an honourable man and will concede that. I am not suggesting for a moment that there is bad faith—of course I am not. I do not think that the negotiations have been or will be negotiated in bad faith, but a country ought to pause before it simply says that an international agreement with those sorts of arrangements is to be waved through because we have used so much time up that we cannot do anything else.

Mr Robin Walker: The point I was making—I apologise for making it from a sedentary position—is that the Attorney General said that, on the balance of probabilities, the backstop would not be entered into. He also pointed out that it could be challenged legally under European law were it ever to be entered into.

Keir Starmer: I understand the argument that article 50 can only be a vehicle for a temporary arrangement and not a permanent one. The Attorney General addressed that, and it is obvious to anybody who has read and understood article 50 rightly. However, the point the Attorney General was addressing was the circumstances in which we could bring the backstop to an end once we were in it, as a matter of international law. Whether article 50 permits it or not, or what the Court would do if it were challenged, is an open question.

The Attorney General said that the backstop may be indefinite—he did not say it was indefinite—but he called into question the argument that it will be temporary.

I have noticed that the Prime Minister is very careful in the way she puts it: she always says that the backstop is intended to be temporary. I do not think she has ever used any other phrase, presumably because she is bearing in mind what the Attorney General has advised. I am not saying that there does not need to be a backstop or arrangements to protect the Northern Ireland situation, but we cannot simply and casually say that these are matters to which we should not have too much regard. I honestly cannot think of another treaty that the UK has ever entered into that it could not exit in such circumstances. We might say that that is a good thing or a bad thing, but it is a very unusual thing to be doing.

I want to address the notion that rejecting the deal somehow leads to no deal. I have never accepted that, and it is deeply irresponsible of the Government to pretend that this is a binary choice. No Prime Minister has the right to plunge the country into the chaos of no deal simply because the deal has been rejected, or to run down the negotiations. I believe that that view is shared across the House. There is no majority for no deal. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) and others for the amendment to the Finance Bill that the House passed yesterday. It will not formally prevent no deal, but it will give consequences to a non-endorsed deal.

The amendment is also symbolic, in that it shows that the House will not simply sit by and allow a no-deal exit. I do not think that the Prime Minister would attempt that, because I think she understands that a no-deal exit in March this year is not practically viable. I have been to Dover several times to look at the customs arrangements, and it would be impossible to get from the arrangements as they are today to those that would need to be in place on 29 March in the time available. Whatever anyone else says, it would be impossible to do that. There are plenty of other examples. However, if the Prime Minister attempts a no-deal Brexit, we will fight her tooth and nail every inch of the way.

Every Member of this House has a solemn duty to consider the deal before us—not the deal that the Prime Minister pretends to have negotiated or the deal that she promises to change between now and when we go through the Lobby, but the text before us. Labour is clear that the deal is not in the national interest. It does not come anywhere near to meeting our tests, it will make the country poorer and more divided and it will not protect jobs and the economy. I say that with sadness, because I have shadowed three different Brexit Secretaries, and the fact that we now have a deal that is so demonstrably not uniting the country and not able to command the support of this House is a tragic waste of the two years that have been available for negotiations and a miserable end to this part of the process. We will have to vote on the deal next Tuesday. After that, it will be time for this House to decide what happens next.

Mr Speaker: Order. The House is now embarking on the resumption of the debate started on 4 December and interrupted. A lot of Members put in to speak on 9 and 10 December, and the order just agreed allows those who have already spoken the possibility of a second speech. I must tell hon. and right hon. Members that if they wish to speak on any of the next four days

of debate, they should put their names in to my office, and that they cannot rely on notification that was given a month ago. Apart from anything else, the days have changed and my team cannot be expected to anticipate the thought processes of hon. and right hon. Members, so if people would notify my office, that would be greatly appreciated.

4.13 pm

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. We have just heard two heavyweight and extremely important speeches from the two Front Benches. I congratulate the new—he is not really new anymore—Brexit Secretary on his grip on the extraordinary complexity of detail that he so evidently demonstrated at the Dispatch Box. I have only rarely troubled the House with my views on Brexit—I think this is only the second time I have done so—and I have approached the whole process on the basis that as Government Back Benchers, it is our job to try to assist the Government in reaching a satisfactory deal. Our job is to support and assist.

We have some special issues in the west midlands. My hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) has made it clear that the issue of just-in-time supply is important to us there, but this is not just about cars. It is also about food. Much of the food in this country is not stored in a warehouse, but is on a motorway, so just-in-time supply is a very important matter for us.

I also think the comments made by my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) and the Father of the House, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), and indeed the response from the shadow Brexit Secretary, are a very important start to this resumed debate and need to inform our discussions.

It has always been quite clear that it is the Government's job to propose and Parliament's job to dispose. Let me be clear: I have great sympathy for the Prime Minister. I served with her in Cabinet and shadow Cabinet for seven and a half years, and I believe that she has a steadfast determination and integrity. No Prime Minister could have given so much time to the House at the Dispatch Box on this issue. However, I have to say that I have been astonished that she would bring back to the House of Commons a deal that she knows she has absolutely no chance whatsoever of getting through, and apparently with no plan B. I think this is a matter of very great concern.

The Government are accountable to Parliament. We have had the beginnings of a new constitutional strategy: that it should be the other way around, and somehow the House of Commons should be accountable to the Government. That is not the way we do things. While I was unable to support the amendment last night, because I thought it fettered the Government's ability for Executive action too much, I did support the amendment to the Business of the House motion this afternoon, because I think the House of Commons now has to be very clear that if the deal does not go through next week, this House of Commons has got to reach some conclusions and, if I may coin a phrase, take back control. It seems to be that it should do so on the basis of what my right

[Mr Andrew Mitchell]

hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset and my right hon. and learned Friend the Father of the House were saying.

As of today, I cannot understand what the Government's strategy is or has been. It has all the appearances of drawing on the strategy pursued by Lord Cardigan at the charge of the Light Brigade in Crimea. Indeed, it does not seem to be a strategy at all. As Sun Tzu, the famous Chinese general, said:

"Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat."

The danger with the tactics being pursued was set out very eloquently by the first Brexit Secretary, and they of course relate to the issue of the backstop and of sequencing.

In summary, with the greatest of regret, I am unable to support the Prime Minister in the Lobby next week. Briefly, that is for three reasons. The first is to do with the backstop. The backstop issues have been very well rehearsed. In the royal town of Sutton Coldfield, we had the pleasure of welcoming Arlene Foster to speak, and it was very clear to me that her reservations about the treatment of Northern Ireland on the backstop were extremely difficult.

I would make this point in addition to what has been said already about the position of Northern Ireland. Having now been in this House for nearly 30 years, on and off, I have sat through heartbreaking statements about the situation there, with the violence that so dreadfully afflicted Northern Ireland for so very long and, indeed, that went wider than Northern Ireland. The fact is that there was a hard-won, hard-fought treaty—lodged at the United Nations—which says there shall be no border in Northern Ireland. For me, that is the beginning and the end of the matter.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I do not want to question the sincerity of the comments that the right hon. Gentleman has just made. There are very few references to the border at all in the Belfast agreement, but where there are references, they do not in any way suggest that this decision cannot take place. There is no commitment to open the hard border. There is a commitment to co-operation among our nations—between Northern Ireland and the Republic. There is a commitment to relationships on a north-south basis.

One of the things that is in the Belfast agreement, which is completely absent from this discussion, is that it says in paragraph 12 of strand 2 that any future relationship—or impediment—or regulation or rule can be implemented only when it is agreed by the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Oireachtas in the south. That is completely absent from the considerations on or indeed the text of the withdrawal agreement.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, but the point I am making is that the absolute importance of an open border in Northern Ireland—indeed, it is enshrined in an internationally lodged treaty—seems to me to be completely unexceptional.

The second reason I cannot support the deal is that, far from settling matters, it enshrines or embeds the conflicts and divisions that have so convulsed our country. It perpetuates, not heals, the deep divisions that have engulfed our country. It leaves us as a rule taker, which

will antagonise and inflame both sides. Those who voted remain will campaign to become rule makers once again, and those who voted to leave will feel that we have not done so and that the result of the referendum has not been fully respected.

The Government present the deal as the compromise that should bind us together; it is, in my view, the worst possible common denominator. It perpetuates the toxic, radioactive afterlife of the referendum. We need look no further than what is said about the deal by the leading proponents and opponents of Brexit on the Government Benches. Consider the eloquent arguments put by my hon. Friends the Members for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah) and for Orpington (Joseph Johnson) and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), and the equally eloquent and passionate arguments put by my right hon. Friends the Members for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) and for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) and my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg). Listening to their eloquent, well-argued points against the deal before us, one can see that it will perpetuate the deep divisions.

Thirdly, all of those points are before we start on the political declaration, about which we have heard some astute comments today. We will be out, we will have paid the £39 billion and we will be saddled with the backstop. We can already see how difficult it will be to negotiate and agree the trade and commercial deals with our 27 European neighbours in the European Union. We have heard what the French have said about fisheries. We have heard what the Spanish have said about Gibraltar. We have heard what Greece and Cyprus have said about any precedents set in respect of Turkey. Alas, I cannot support the deal.

So what is to be done? It seems to me that we almost certainly need more time, although the amendment that we passed today makes it clear that the House of Commons expects the Government to address these matters with great urgency. The former Brexit Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden, makes the good point that deals in the European Union are normally done up against the clock. I recognise the validity of that point. The much bigger role for Parliament to take, which was set out by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe and my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset, is clearly extremely important.

The Government, as the servant of Parliament—not the other way round—need to go back to Brussels, Paris and Berlin and spell out clearly to our friends in the European Union why the deal is unacceptable, in particular the backstop. They should explain that if the Commission persists in this vein, it will sour relations between the European Union and the UK for generations, to our huge mutual disadvantage.

The Government have rightly stepped up planning for no deal, but given the will of the House on this matter, even talk of cliff edges and no deals seems unduly alarmist. It will clearly be in everyone's interests for a series of deals and preparations to be put in place, however temporary. We must use any extra time to look again at the available options. The shadow Brexit Secretary talked about this. What are the pluses of Norway and Canada—both deals that the EU offered us earlier? Clearly, no money that is not legally, contractually due should be handed over at this point.

If the Prime Minister's deal is rejected, it will be for Parliament to reach a conclusion on how to proceed. I profoundly hope that we can, because if we are unable to do so and this House cannot reach a resolution on these matters, the possibility of a further referendum will undoubtedly arise—something I believe profoundly to be most undesirable. A large cohort of our constituents will feel that a second referendum tramples on their democratic rights and is an attempt by a complacent establishment to make off with the referendum result. As a matter of fact, I do not think the result would be likely to change in the event of a second referendum.

Parliament must now seek to reach an agreement on how best to proceed. Only if we find ourselves incapable of reaching any agreement should we consider the option of going back to our constituents to seek their further guidance.

4.24 pm

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): Mr Speaker, it feels like déjà vu all over again. We seem to be back to where we started just before Christmas. As the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) rightly pointed out, it seems that nothing has changed, but we hope that we will have a vote, and that it will be meaningful, so that we can get on with finding solutions to the problems with which Parliament is faced.

I think the point was made earlier that part of the problem for MPs, businesses and others is that it is becoming increasingly difficult to believe anything the Government tell us will definitely happen. We have to feel for those who have had to negotiate their way through this, and for the officials who have had to negotiate on behalf of the UK Parliament. I sincerely hope that Monsieur Barnier is enjoying his birthday today; he deserves to, after two and a half years of “nebulous” arguments, as some might put it. Indeed, the Prime Minister got off very, very lightly when Jean-Claude Juncker referred to her proposals in that way. I think he was just trying to be helpful to the Government.

Those of us on the Scottish National party Benches cannot vote for a deal that will make us poorer, less secure and more isolated, and which will deliver worse public services and a worse future for young people, depriving them of the rights and opportunities that we have enjoyed and taken advantage of. It is timeous that during the biggest crisis in modern times, with a weak and unstable Government in place who are clearly the most incompetent in living memory, “The Scream” is to come soon to the United Kingdom.

We have a Government who are spending money on food and medicine shortages in peacetime, because they have lost control of the situation in this place and beyond. With every day that passes, they show us just what a disaster this is. This disaster is entirely of the Government's making. This Brexit mess was left to them by the grossly irresponsible Brexiteers, who have had a political lifetime to prepare for this moment, but when the moment came, we found out just how ill-prepared they were. In many ways, those who proposed this in the first place do an utter disservice to cowboys and snake oil salesmen.

This situation will make us poorer. What kind of Government proactively pursue a policy that they know—because their economic analysis tells us—will make us poorer? A hard Brexit will cost £1,600 for every person in Scotland. We know that because the Scottish Government had the decency to produce independent analysis, something the UK Government have pointedly refused to do—and we know why: because they are deeply embarrassed by the situation, as they should be.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): There is a tendency among those who favour Brexit to think that maybe it would be good for us to tighten our belts, and that a little reduction in income is something we can get over. However, I represent the furthest away part of mainland Britain. I have businesses that will go bust if we have a hard, no-deal Brexit. Their owners will lose their livelihood, as will all the people who work in those businesses. To take forward the hon. Gentleman's point, surely the ultimate role of Government is to protect those people and protect those businesses? Without enterprise—the little acorns from which mighty oaks grow—this country is going nowhere.

Stephen Gethins: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point. He represents a rural area with many similarities to my constituency. He will be aware that the Bank of England warned that crashing out would be worse than the 2008 crisis. We know how devastating years of austerity have been for our public services and household incomes. The University of St Andrews found that small businesses will be particularly hard hit, so he is right to make that point. Even the Chancellor recognises that remaining in the European Union is better. We are all paying the penalty for the Tories' folly and, frankly, extremism in this regard. The EU single market is the world's largest economic bloc, with half a billion consumers. It is eight times bigger than the United Kingdom, and 40% of Scottish exports go there. It has become very expensive indeed to leave the EU, and the question has to be asked: is it now unaffordable to remain in the United Kingdom?

Other industries will be badly hit as well. The UK, and Scotland in particular, does well out of education and research. Since 2014—we have had no answers about what will come next—Scottish universities and other research institutions have drawn down about £500 million of EU funding, and the UK has done particularly well competitively. I represent some universities; research conducted by those such as St Andrews, Dundee and Abertay through EU funding—I see this daily, as do colleagues elsewhere in the House—will benefit each and every one of us for years to come, and that is before we even start on the financial benefits of membership.

What have the UK Government said in response to the biggest employer in my constituency? Absolutely nothing. That is an abrogation of their responsibility to people who own small businesses, and who work in research, which makes our lives better and improves our healthcare. The same goes for other industries. The Secretary of State mentioned the food and drink sector and talked about having a no-deal Brexit if the agreement was rejected. Extraordinarily, some of his colleagues have actively said that they would like a no-deal Brexit, but the National Farmers Union of Scotland has said:

“It would be nothing short of catastrophic and could have a devastating impact”.

[Stephen Gethins]

On access to markets and much-needed labour, it said:

“It is becoming clear to NFU Scotland that there is misleading and damaging rhetoric coming from the UK Government...on where the gaps in skills and labour are.”

I hope that the Secretary of State will not mind me saying—I am sure that others will not—that the NFU is not renowned for coming out with strong words. It does so sparingly, not often, so I certainly hope that he will heed those words.

On fishing, which the Secretary of State mentioned, we have consistently argued for being taken out of the common fisheries policy. For years, Conservatives have consistently voted against that proposal in this place: they voted against the Fisheries Jurisdiction Bill, and against our proposed amendments to previous treaties. Now that we are being taken out of the EU, however, with the impact that will have on the markets to which we need access, all of a sudden they are all in favour of a hard Brexit.

Alan Brown: If the backstop is enacted, tariffs will be applied to Scottish fishing exports, but Northern Ireland will be protected by tariff-free access to both the EU and the UK. The Scottish Secretary said that he would resign if special provisions were given to Northern Ireland. Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the Scottish Secretary is not only still in the job, but urging his colleagues to back a deal that disadvantages Scotland?

Stephen Gethins: My hon. Friend is right. It is truly remarkable that the Secretary of State for Scotland is still in a job. He is pursuing a policy that he knows will not only make us poorer, but put Scotland at a competitive disadvantage. I say to our friends from Northern Ireland that we want them to thrive. This has nothing to do with the state of Northern Ireland; it is simply about having a level playing field across these islands. Having a level playing field means that under the agreement, we have access to the markets that Northern Ireland has access to, and it means having EU vessels—

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con) *rose*—

Stephen Gethins: If the hon. Gentleman can answer the point about why the Secretary of State for Scotland is still in post, or can say whether we will cede waters to EU vessels and place barriers on trade for customers, I would love to hear from him.

Stephen Kerr: The hon. Gentleman has mentioned a number of sectors; it is only right to put on the record that NFU Scotland, the Scotch Whisky Association and every other trade body in Scotland is imploring this House to support the Prime Minister's agreement with the European Union. That is what our constituents and the businesses that employ them expect of all Scottish MPs.

Stephen Gethins: It is good to hear the hon. Gentleman's point, which he makes well and honestly, but it is extraordinary, and a shame, that many of his colleagues—some of whom are in the Chamber—were not listening to him. If he cannot even win over his colleagues, what

hope does he have of winning over everybody else? There is almost nobody on his entire half of the Government Benches—extraordinary stuff—but I have the greatest respect for the courage and indefatigability he demonstrates.

This Government's disrespect agenda has turned the constitutional settlement of the United Kingdom upside down. The UK Government have imposed legislation on the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly against overwhelming opposition from across the parties—from not just the Labour party but the Scottish National party, the Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru. The Scottish Parliament rejected the deal by 92 votes to 29, leaving the Conservative party in utter isolation in Scotland, as it has been for decades.

As the Government turn the constitutional settlement upside down, without reference to this place and ignoring the Scotland Act 1998, let me paraphrase the great Winnie Ewing—Madame Ecosse—who said that it was claimed once upon a time that Britannia ruled the waves; now, Britannia simply waives the rules. We heard howls of protest in this place today when Parliament took back control, but Parliament did the Government a favour. The Government have wasted all this time, but now they will be forced to come back within three days, not because of something they did, but because Parliament reasserted itself, and you, Mr Speaker, did the right thing today in allowing the vote. That is incredibly important as we reach this crunch time. One cannot do this kind of thing in the European Union.

I have found utterly baffling and really quite depressing the lack of knowledge about the European institutions in this place. The EU is made up of independent and sovereign states, which reach agreement and compromise in what is truly a partnership of equals. There is democratic oversight from the European Parliament—Ministers here have attempted to stifle democratic oversight—and there is a Court, not to impose anything on anybody but to resolve disagreements, which will arise in any democracy with 28 independent and sovereign member states.

I am not entirely sure what future arbitration mechanism the Government propose. I see from their agreement that they propose a role for the European Court of Justice. I welcome that, but it is a bit too little, too late, and it has been met by a wall of opposition from their own Members, who do not seem to understand what the Government are arguing for.

As I set out what the European Union is all about, it strikes me that despite all those who try to compare it with the United Kingdom and ask whether, if Scotland becomes independent, we want to be in the EU, no one can tell me in what way they are similar. Can anybody compare the EU with the UK? Silence. It is not possible to compare them. To do so would be to disregard every treaty, and the fact that the EU is a club for independent and sovereign states. I am astonished, since Government Members persistently make that argument, that nobody can tell me what the difference is. That argument is almost as dead and defunct as the Prime Minister's deal.

Let me move on to a human element. The way EU nationals have been treated is a disgrace. No Member should be complicit in what is being done in our name. That is nowhere clearer than in the appalling treatment of our friends and neighbours who happen to hold

passports from a different European country. They contribute so much to our homes and our NHS, and they contribute financially so much more than they take away.

On a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry)—as well as, to be fair, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) during Prime Minister's questions today—does the Minister agree that it is deeply offensive to be asking those who already pay their taxes and so much in contributions to pay £65 each to remain in their homes? Would anybody on the Government Benches like to defend that? Anybody? I didn't think so. Would anyone want to defend the disgrace of charging people £65 to remain in their homes?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald *rose—*

Stephen Gethins: Since the Government cannot stand up to defend themselves, I will give way to my hon. Friend instead.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Does it not offend natural justice that people are being made to pay that fee to maintain rights that they already have and enjoy, yet they were excluded from the vote itself and have played no part in the democratic mechanisms that have brought us to this point? The Government have done everything to isolate them and are doing everything to isolate them further. Would it not show an element of good will, at least, if they cancelled the £65 fee?

Stephen Gethins: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. It is the very least the Government could do.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech. Is the situation not even worse, because these people—our friends and neighbours, our colleagues, people we depend on in our communities and throughout Scotland, have been asked—even when they have been here for decades, to apply to pay to stay in their own homes?

Stephen Gethins: As usual, my hon. Friend makes a powerful point about EU citizens on behalf of his constituents. Truly there is shame on this Government for the way they treat our neighbours and fellow citizens. They are whipping up a frenzy over immigration and those seen as outsiders. The Government have disgraced themselves, and, following the vote of no confidence, are no longer fit for office.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con) *rose—*

Stephen Gethins: If the hon. Member can defend the Government's position, which they themselves seem incapable of defending, I will give way to him, although he could not do so when I challenged him earlier.

Douglas Ross: Can the hon. Gentleman defend the SNP's policy? In July 2014, in the run-up to the Scottish independence referendum, Nicola Sturgeon spoke about her "common sense position" on this issue. She said:

"There are 160,000 EU nationals...living in Scotland... If Scotland was outside Europe, they would lose the right to stay here."

Does he defend that?

Stephen Gethins: It is extraordinary that the hon. Member cannot engage with any of the arguments or defend his own Government. Indeed, he cannot even vote for his own Government. The way the First Minister came out the day after the referendum to give that reassurance to EU nationals and the way the Scottish Government have said they will waive the fees of public sector workers which as yet the UK Government have not had the decency to do—I hope they will change their mind—should put each and every Government Member to shame. In the independence referendum, as in Scottish Parliament and local authority elections, those EU citizens—our friends and neighbours—have the franchise, they have the vote, and they are treated with decency, which is a lot more than can be said here.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Everyone will know by now that my husband is German and that we have many friends who are EU citizens. With many EU citizens who have been here for decades being refused permanent right to remain and they or their children being refused citizenship, does my hon. Friend agree that it is not just about the money? There should not be an application. Even a registration would suggest something different. An application implies that someone can be refused.

Stephen Gethins: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. She frequently makes very good points on that very matter. This goes to the heart of what kind of society we want to build and how we treat our friends and neighbours. Do we want that isolationism, or do we have the decency to treat our friends and neighbours appropriately?

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech touching on the human elements and our responsibility to our friends and neighbours, but there is also the fundamental point about our rights as EU citizens. Could anyone defend the current position? He worked in Europe for many years. We today have the opportunity to work in 28 member states. How is it right that if the Government get their way UK citizens will have the right to work in only one state and will be excluded from the opportunity to work in Europe which he, I and many others had? It is a disgrace that that right is being taken away from our young people.

Stephen Gethins: That is an excellent point. I spent years benefiting from freedom of movement on the Erasmus programme. I know that many other Members who are present did as well, and that it has benefited our friends, our relatives and many of our constituents. Who are we to deprive the next generations of the benefits that we have had—the rights and opportunities that we have had? It is utterly shameful to be depriving our young people of freedom of movement, from which many of us across the House have benefited, and which benefits everyone without fear or favour. That is yet another failure.

Then there is security, which is a basic priority of the UK Government and of any Government anywhere in the world. This is a Government who are, proactively and consciously, making us less safe, isolating us from key partners elsewhere in Europe and drawing away from key planks such as the European arrest warrant. According to the Royal United Services Institute,

[Stephen Gethins]

“the full benefits of membership—combining both shared decision-making and operational effectiveness—cannot be replicated”

by the deal that we are seeing today.

Nowhere has the disregard for security—and for the peace process—been seen more clearly than in Northern Ireland. There has been an utter disregard for it throughout the debate, although that is not the Government’s fault, and it is not the fault of one or two Ministers who argued for remain. The disregard shown during the EU referendum and subsequently was appalling as well, especially given that the European Union has been a key partner for peace in Northern Ireland for decades.

Let me now, briefly and finally, say a little something about the Labour party. We have the weakest and the least stable Government in living memory. They cannot even defend their own record. They cannot even defend the basics. They are actively making us poorer and less secure—proactively—and at great cost as well. All that the Government have going for them—and I say this with great respect to the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras, who was very good today and always is, as are many other Labour Members—is an exceptionally weak Opposition Front Bench.

I want to work with the Opposition Front Bench, and we work together very well. The right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras has been a champion for his cause. However, the Leader of the Opposition appears to have washed his hands of any kind of leadership when it comes to this issue—the biggest issue to have faced his party. There is no such thing as a “jobs first” Brexit, but there is such a thing as a jobs-destroying Brexit.

We want to work with Labour, and the House should not just take my word for it. Last night, as I was preparing for today’s debate, I was contacted by a member of the Labour party who lives in Crail, in my constituency. She sent me a letter which she has sent today to the Labour party’s international policy committee. I know that all Labour Members will have read it, but I will read some of it out for the benefit of the House. She wrote that

“if there is a general election, or a second referendum, the Labour Party should make it clear that being in the EU is in the UK’s best interests, and that it is Parliament’s duty to ensure that we stay.”

That did not come from the Scottish National party, or from my friends among the local Liberal Democrats, or even from the Conservatives or the Green party, but from my own local Labour party. I always like to say that there is a great deal of sense in North East Fife, but apparently there is even a great deal of sense in the North East Fife Labour party, and I hope that its members are listening.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: What my hon. Friend may not know is that a Labour spokesperson said after Prime Minister’s Question Time that in theory Labour could change its mind and be against Brexit in any future snap election. Does he agree that a Schrödinger’s Brexit is not exactly a step forward for the official Opposition?

Stephen Gethins: As usual, my hon. Friend has made an excellent point.

I appeal to the Labour party. We have a weak Government, and an absolute crisis is facing us. I have worked with many Labour Members, and I know that many of them are pained by the position that has been taken by the Leader of the Opposition in particular. They behave honestly and decently, and they make a fine contribution, as has been evident today. I appeal to them to join with the SNP in the short time that we have left, because there are alternatives, and other Members and Ministers have made that point. As the shadow Secretary of State and others made clear, we must revoke article 50 or seek an extension. That is the only sensible course of action left to us, because the current situation will not play out sensibly. Although helpful, no amount of motions requiring a response within three days can help us beyond that point. It will be embarrassing for the Prime Minister, but it is a small price to pay.

Over two years ago, the Scottish Government set out a compromise that they devised with members of other parties, with experts—we still like to listen to experts—and others, but that compromise was rejected by the UK Government without them considering it or coming back on anything. This Government have comprehensively failed on the biggest issue to face a post-war Government, so this Parliament must take back control of the situation. It also means that we are now in a place, after almost three years, whereby when we get some kind of final solution such is the huge impact that we must put it back to the people in another referendum to let them sign it off. I know that that certainly has support across the SNP Benches and, increasingly, among those on the Government Benches as well. Given the time that the Government have wasted since 2016, that is our only reasonable option. No deal must be ruled out. Billions of pounds have been totally unnecessarily wasted. We have not struggled for metaphors for the Government’s failures over the recent past, but a ferry company without any boats is up there with the best of them.

Brexit has no redeeming features—none. We are almost three years on from the referendum, and I believe now even more than I did then—I was strong for remain—that Brexit is the wrong thing to do and that nothing good whatsoever will come out of it. I want everyone across these islands to thrive, but what underlines the current set-up is that the UK is broken and that we probably need to move on to a new relationship. Every one of Scotland’s neighbours—similar-sized countries—is more successful, fairer and has a more equal and respectful relationship with the UK Government than Scotland does. Our close neighbours in Scandinavia have a healthy and respectful economic and political relationship, even though not all those independent states are members of the EU. That is a healthier and better state to be in. I note that none of the 50 states that have gained independence from the UK since the second world war has made as much of a mess as the UK Government have made of this situation, because they had a much more straightforward way through.

Right now, however, we must focus on sorting out the almighty mess that the Tories have left us in. The Government have had their chance, but they have blown it over the past two and a half years. All that they have achieved is to drive up support for the EU across the other member states. Support for the EU in Ireland is at 92%, meaning that those of our near neighbours who

believe in leaving the EU are giving the flat-earthers a wee run for their money, and they are even giving those who believe that the Prime Minister still runs a strong and stable Government a bit of a run for their money. We have been sold this nonsense for far too long. We are stuck on a sinking ship, and this Parliament must take back control. We need a common-sense solution, and this deal is not it.

4.53 pm

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): In May last year, when I was a Parliamentary Private Secretary, I believe that I was the first person on the payroll to resign to fight for Brexit. I had deep concerns about how Brexit was being handled, and I felt compelled to resign for the Brexit that I believed in and the Brexit that my constituents and our country voted for. I was the first to step down, but I was not the last. We have seen talented, committed and hard-working colleagues on both sides of the Brexit debate resign because of numerous concerns.

Our reasons for standing down may vary, but one thing that we all have in common is our belief that this deal is a bad deal for our country. Be they remain or leave, I respect all those colleagues who bravely stood by their convictions and made the principled decision to fight for what they believe in, but the fight is not yet over. The Prime Minister speaks of a deal that will unite our country, a goal that no doubt we all desire, but the division we have seen is of the Prime Minister's own making. Her desire to get a deal at any cost, prolonging "Project Fear", and her decision to postpone last month's withdrawal agreement vote were mistakes—and that decision has only led to more division at a time when our country should be uniting behind the democratic decision to leave the EU.

On 23 June 2016 the question was clear: should the UK remain a member of the EU or leave the EU? The British people spoke and decided overwhelmingly to leave.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Not overwhelmingly.

Andrea Jenkyns: Well, I think 1 million more people is quite a big clue, actually.

It was never supposed to be this way. At the referendum there was no third option: the choice was either leave or remain. The referendum did not mention a half in, half out or worst of both worlds choice for our country's future. The referendum question said nothing about giving the EU £39 billion of taxpayers' money and getting nothing in return, the referendum question said nothing about a continued role for the European Court of Justice after 2019, and the referendum question said nothing about an Irish backstop and restricting our ability to sign new trade deals. This deal is a sell-out of those who voted to leave. It is therefore impossible for the House to unite around this deal, and it is impossible for our country to unite around a bad deal.

At the referendum two years ago the British people spoke and our objective was clear: as elected Members of Parliament we were tasked with delivering Brexit. Some Members thought the British people would deliver a different result and would vote remain in the referendum,

but they did not, and this is the problem: some Members do not accept the result of the referendum and are using every opportunity to thwart the will of the British people.

It is a sad period in our great Parliament's history when MPs try to overturn the democratic mandate; that is completely unacceptable. After all, it was Parliament that gave the British people the opportunity to have the referendum in the first place. Our great British parliamentary model has been a beacon that has been used as a template in parliamentary democracies across the globe for centuries. Let us not insult our greatest institution, or forget that we were elected by the British electorate. We are all democrats, so let us respect the result: our British people have spoken and it is time for us now to deliver. Our people decided to take back control and said we should leave. *[Interruption.]* They are still British citizens.

This was a vote dictated not by fear, but by hope: hope of a different tomorrow and a new path; hope of a new system not restricted by the EU's institutions; and hope that once again our people will feel that they have a true stake in our country's future. The chance of a global Britain was promised, but that promise has now been broken.

We must leave, and we need a clean Brexit and to trade under WTO rules if necessary. The US and China sell billions of pounds' worth of exports each year to the EU using WTO rules; the UK can do the same if necessary. As the EU's largest trading partner and with a deficit of £95 billion in trade in goods, we should have been negotiating from a position of strength, but the Prime Minister's determination to get a deal at any cost gave the EU the upper hand. The Prime Minister showed her hand too soon, and now the EU has called her bluff.

I say that it is time we put the ball firmly in our court and take the upper hand in these negotiations. The EU fears our leaving on WTO terms as it will give Britain the competitive advantage if we do, so let us fully embrace a clean Brexit; I have no doubt that the EU will come running back to us at the eleventh hour. But besides being a good negotiating tool, leaving on WTO terms is not something we should fear.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): My hon. Friend talks about the potential advantages of our leaving on WTO rules. Can she explain why, if WTO rules are just fine for trading with our largest trading partner, it is so necessary that we are able to do trade deals on our own terms with other, much smaller economies?

Andrea Jenkyns: I believe in a global Britain, as the Prime Minister said in her statement several times, and it is important that, in trading with both smaller nations and larger nations, Britain is free to chart its own path in the world and to forge new trade deals with whoever.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): My hon. Friend will not be aware of it, but, in evidence to the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs today, Ryan Scatterty of Thistle Seafoods in the north-east of Scotland, representing seafood processors, said that the growing market for his industry is in places like Australia. The industry currently trades on WTO rules, as he confirmed to the Committee. If the industry can do that with Australia, surely it can do it with the EU.

Andrea Jenkyns: I was in Kenya with some of our colleagues back in July. Kenya sells us lots of flowers, which have a short shelf-life, and it currently trades with us on WTO rules. We have no problems there, so I agree with my hon. Friend.

Stephen Kerr: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Andrea Jenkyns: I will give way to my hon. Friend, and then I will continue.

Stephen Kerr: Does my hon. Friend agree that we would desire a free trade agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union?

Andrea Jenkyns: As I said earlier, we have seen how the EU negotiates—look at how it negotiated with Greece—and it usually comes back at the eleventh hour. It would be great to have a deal with the EU, but I do not agree with having a bad deal. The Prime Minister's mantra is that no deal is better than a bad deal, and in that case I would rather leave on WTO rules.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Andrea Jenkyns: No. I need to make some progress.

It is time that we put the ball firmly in our court and take the upper hand in these negotiations. The EU fears our leaving on WTO terms, as it would give Britain a competitive advantage, so let us fully embrace a clean Brexit. Leaving on WTO terms is not something we should fear.

There has been some concern about engineering firms being disproportionately affected by a clean WTO Brexit. However, the heads of firms such as Dyson, JCB and Northern Ireland's Wrightbus support Brexit. Car companies can withstand a 10% tariff on sales into the EU and a 4.5% tariff on components from the EU because they have benefited from a 15% depreciation in sterling. Border checks on components from the EU will be unnecessary, counterproductive for EU exporters and illegal under WTO rules, which prohibit unnecessary checks.

A better deal was available and is still available. The Brexit deal was never only a choice between the Prime Minister's deal and reverting to WTO rules, but if that is the choice, let us go on WTO rules.

This place is often divided by its very nature, but one thing that unites us is our belief that the British people are remarkable and can succeed, no matter the obstacle. Our great history shows that we can overcome any hurdle and that we always triumph. This deal is a submission, and the British people should never accept a bad deal. This deal is remain masquerading as leave, and it is time that entrenched leave Members started believing in Britain and respected the result of the referendum.

Instead of fear, we need to see forward planning and a vision for the future—a future away from the EU—that the whole country can get behind. I am hugely optimistic about our country's future. There may be difficult times ahead, so we need a leader who can take this great country out into the world and start trading freely around the globe, and this deal simply does not allow us to do that.

In her Lancaster House speech, the Prime Minister said:

"A Global Britain must be free to strike trade agreements with countries from outside the European Union too... the great prize for this country—the opportunity ahead—is to use this moment to build a truly Global Britain. A country that reaches out to old friends and new allies alike. A great, global, trading nation. And one of the firmest advocates for free trade anywhere in the world."

That was a vision for Brexit that many of us had, but the Prime Minister's deal will not allow it to happen. I therefore urge colleagues on both sides of the House to reject her deal. Let us stand up for democracy, let us restore faith among our electorate and let us now deliver on our promises to our great British public.

5.4 pm

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): It is nearly two months since the 585 pages of the withdrawal agreement were published, and it is already gathering a little bit of dust. As we have already heard, despite deferring the vote and pretending otherwise over Christmas, and ringing up Mr Barnier or Mr Juncker on Christmas eve or new year's eve saying "Please can we have a negotiation?", the Prime Minister has found that, in that famous phrase, nothing has changed. So here we are yet again facing a Government who are determined to prevaricate and kick the can further down the road.

Earlier today, having seen the Government defer this issue previously, Members realised that once the Prime Minister's plan was defeated there would potentially be 21 days, and then perhaps another seven days, before the Commons would be allowed to determine what happens next. We had the ridiculous spectacle of the Government objecting to that and saying, "No, Members must not be allowed to vote on moving things forward." That prevarication is extremely dangerous. It is dangerous to put political calculations above the country's best interests when we could crash out with no deal on 29 March.

I am glad, Mr Speaker, that you withstood the attempts by a loud and vociferous minority in this place to thwart Members and prevent them from having a say. You have in the past made decisions and rulings with which I have disagreed, but on this occasion allowing parliamentarians to express their views was the right thing to do. Indeed, that proved to be the case, because a majority of MPs said, "No, we don't wish to wait 21 or 28 days, till the middle of February; we want to get on with things." The time has now come to decide. The House has instructed Ministers, if the Prime Minister's deal is rejected on Tuesday, to come forward with a motion three sitting days later, which would be Monday 21 January. We could then make some decisions.

By the way, I do not address my remarks on prevarication only to Ministers. I gently say to those on the Labour Front Bench that they, too, should stop prevaricating on the question of Brexit. The time has come for the Labour party to make some decisions and stop this notion of constructive ambiguity. I know that this complex sequenceology has been constructed to try to avoid having to confront these issues, but the politics should come second to the national interest. We cannot afford to gamble at this stage, given how close we are to 29 March.

The withdrawal agreement is wrong for the country, as is the political declaration that accompanies it. The withdrawal agreement ignores 80% of our economy, the service sector. It might not necessarily provide good pictures for the television cameras, unlike queuing ferries at Dover and so forth, but the service sector is very much where the UK excels, whether in legal, professional, media, creative or financial services. Not only do many of our constituents work in those services, but they provide the engine for the revenues needed for our public services—for our NHS, schools, local authorities and social care. If we ignore the risk of diminished prospects for those sectors in our economy, we will be facilitating a further decade of austerity to come. That is why I say to all Members, across all parties, that we cannot just kick the can down the road and pretend that this will not matter.

The problem with the withdrawal agreement is that it is full of warm promises about what might be agreed, but it does not actually agree many, many things. It contains no agreement on data or energy policy. It says that we will establish a process on transport policy, and that we will talk about the Erasmus programme to allow students to study throughout Europe. It does not resolve the security situation or the question of Euratom. It fudges the question of the Northern Ireland border still further. The withdrawal agreement does not actually settle many of these things.

What is worse is that the political declaration is non-binding on the parties involved, which means that it amounts to little more than warm words. The Government got themselves into this ridiculous situation by embarking on the article 50 process without a commitment that, by the end of it, we would have not just the divorce arrangement settled, but, in particular, a settled plan for an EU-UK trade deal. That should have been part of the negotiation framework.

For us now to be asked to leave on 29 March without having settled our future relationship with Europe is highly irresponsible. Ministers may say, “Well, we intend to do it this way”. European officials may also say that they intend to do it that way, but, of course, they are here today and gone tomorrow, and commitments that are made by those particular individuals will not necessarily bind us on what happens to the UK. Therefore, we will not have the EU-UK arrangement settled down by the time that we are asked to leave, and anything could happen in that process.

There are many difficulties with that, because of course if we do not have the EU-UK trade deal buttoned down, our prospects of doing deals with the rest of the world will have to wait. Other countries, such as Japan, Singapore, Canada, America and others, will say, “We may be interested in doing a trade deal with you, but we would like to see what your relationship is with the EU first. Will you be allowed to reduce tariffs or not?” That arrangement could take two, three, four or five years—an ever unknown amount of time. The Canada trade deal with the EU took seven years.

The idea that the poor old Secretary of State for International Trade is raring to go with all these new deals across the world is, of course, fantasy. That is the delusion of Brexit that so many people are operating under, but the real world is beginning to bite. Businesses know it, and increasingly our constituents see it, and they want the right to determine their own future.

The withdrawal agreement and this settlement would end the free movement of people across Europe. I regard that as a great tragedy. It is a shame that we have not stood up and spoken out for the benefits of free movement. We should remember that free movement is reciprocal, so just as we restrict European movement into the UK, we will potentially be sacrificing UK citizens’ right of movement to the rest of Europe. Let us think of the future generations, their work opportunities, their study opportunities, the freedom we enjoy, the 2 million British people who already reside across the rest of Europe, and the uncertainties that this will create—and for what? What is this great harm? It is a ridiculous proposition, and that alone would be a reason to reject the withdrawal agreement.

There is also the notion that the agreement will allow us to control taxpayers’ money, but we know that we will lose a great deal of money because of the effect on the economy. Members do not need to take my word for that; the Treasury, the Government and the Prime Minister herself have articulated how we will be worse off by going down this pathway. We will be controlling a diminished amount of money. We will be paying out £39 billion, and possibly even more during the transition arrangement, in exchange for what? There is no commitment on a trade with the EU deal going forward, which I regard as a fundamental failure.

The Prime Minister has made a number of strategic errors all the way along this process, such as setting down red lines and interpreting the outcome of the referendum in her own way—for instance, on whether it was to do with the single market or the customs union, when, of course, none of that was on the ballot paper. She has also failed to take the temperature of Parliament. She did not exactly read the runes of the House of Commons from the beginning, and now she faces this situation. Under this arrangement the UK could be left in limbo in this situation for the next four years, and we would not even have a seat around the table to shape the rules to which we would be subject—it is a nonsense. Britain has had a fantastic ability to shape the rule-making arrangements of an entire continent—the whole European Union—for many years, and many of the rules and regulations that we have chosen to adopt have been generated by the United Kingdom. Some of the best ideas that we have had have shaped EU policies, and it is a great shame that we will be moving away from that.

Whether it is because of the failures of the withdrawal agreement or the wishlist presented in the form of the political declaration, which is an almost meaningless document, this House has to reject the Prime Minister’s proposal when it comes to the vote next Tuesday. The House must quickly realise that we have to extend article 50 at the very least, if not suspend or revoke the article 50 process, while we put this question back to the British public so that they can decide, in the full knowledge of the facts and the economic and social impact.

A people’s vote is a solution whose time has come, and increasing numbers of Members on both sides of this House are realising that it is the way ahead. I strongly hope that the Labour Front Benchers will also realise that the people’s vote has the support and is the preference of the vast majority not just of Labour party members, but of Labour supporters and voters. Now is the time to decide. We cannot afford to prevaricate any longer.

5.16 pm

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): If the referendum were rerun today, everything that I have seen over the last two years—not least as a member of the Brexit Select Committee—would still lead me to vote to stay within the European Union. Having said that, I do respect the result of the referendum as a valid expression of the will of the people, but to me this means leaving the EU in a way that secures the best economic deal available with the EU and that maximises the potential for retaining the close cultural, educational, justice and security relationships that we have developed with our closest partners and allies. The referendum was “in or out”, but it did not, as some wrongly insist, dictate the terms of our leaving, nor the terms of our future relationship with the EU once out. Both of those questions were left for Parliament to resolve, and that is what MPs must now do. It is for this primary reason that I would oppose a second referendum, which would be indeterminate, complicated to implement and very divisive.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman will probably be aware that the Prime Minister spoke to 200 MPs in one of the rooms in Portcullis House last night. Again, she ruled out a second referendum, but she said that if the deal does not get through, there are two options left: a no-deal Brexit or no Brexit at all with the revocation of article 50. Businesses up and down the country are going to have to start thinking about how they react once the deal is voted down. Will the hon. Gentleman venture his view on what he would do in that scenario?

Mr Djanogly: I was at that meeting, which I thought was a good expression of joint interests from all parties to the Prime Minister. I hope that we saw within that meeting the start of what could become a consensus, moving forward after what might be a defeat next week. Having said that, I do not discount a second referendum, as the Prime Minister did not. I am simply saying that I think it would be a very poor second best and a sign that this place had failed, but I do not dismiss the possibility.

As for the Prime Minister’s deal, on balance I find it to be a fair one and practical in the overall circumstances of the hand that we had to play; it has my support. To criticise the deal as not being as good as what we have with the EU now is a facile argument, if only because the EU was never, ever going to allow us to leave on the same or better terms than apply to the remaining 27 countries, no matter how many German cars we bought. The deal was always going to have to represent a compromise of views within the Conservative party, within Parliament and certainly with the EU. The deal reached does not represent my optimum position, but no one was ever going to get everything they wanted.

That is not to say that I do not share some of the criticisms of the deal, including many that can be found in the Brexit Committee’s report on the deal. For instance, despite assurances from two Secretaries of State, the financial settlement has not been included in the withdrawal agreement as being wholly or even partially conditional on securing a binding future relationship. To my mind, this has been a failure of negotiation that will undoubtedly reduce our leverage in future relationship negotiations due to start in March 2019 if we have a deal. Furthermore,

the lack of detail in the future relationship political declaration means that there will still be another cliff edge as we reach July 2020, when we will need to decide either to head towards the backstop or to extend the implementation period, and there will still be a level of uncertainty for business as to the final form of the deal, although much less so than if we crash out with no deal.

So, on balance, we should take the deal on offer. The mess and upset that would be caused by a hard Brexit is unacceptable. Yes, the legalities can be brought to the fore on things like the backstop, but the legal cart should not be leading the commercial horse.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I suspect that the hon. Gentleman might agree with me that the deal is very different from what people were promised during the referendum by those leading the Brexit campaign. If he does agree, is there not a case for thinking that it is undemocratic not to allow the people to have a say now, given that what is on offer is so different from what they were promised?

Mr Djanogly: I would not argue with the right hon. Gentleman about promises being made during the referendum campaign that could now be disputed, but the same could be said for a lot of general elections that we have had in the past. To say that elections or referendums are discounted because of what people maintained during the course of them would not, I am afraid, be a line that I would take.

Furthermore, if the deal is rejected by this House, from my point of view I will do everything I can to ensure that we do not leave the EU without a deal, and, to my mind, the next best thing after the Prime Minister’s option would be the Norway-plus alternative. If the Government’s deal fails to pass this House, and assuming that the Opposition’s no-confidence motion fails, I hope that we shall then start to find a new tone of cross-party working. We shall need a degree more honesty in how we describe Brexit issues, where in reality no one is going to win—not us and not the EU. We have the Labour Front Bench changing its position; we have the Brexiteers shouting, “Sell-out”, at every initiative while offering nothing as an alternative; and we have a Government who have frequently made soothing hard Brexit noises to Brexiteers while lining up a deal that clearly has a trajectory of close regulatory alignment to the single market and some form of customs arrangement. I do hope that the Government get their deal, but if not, it will surely be because they have unsuccessfully attempted to be all things to all men.

Gareth Thomas: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that if the deal does not pass this House next Tuesday, agreement to extend article 50 will be an urgent priority for the Government to bring forward a measure on?

Mr Djanogly: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. If the deal is rejected and we start looking at other possibilities—on a more consensual cross-party basis, I hope—then clearly whatever route we take leads to the deadline, and an answer to that may well have to be to extend the article 50 period. I am very pleased, looking back over a year ago now, that some of us in this place decided to ensure that the Government were not able to restrict the timing of the article 50 period, and so that will be a possibility.

Rather than add to the fudge, let me explain why and how, if this deal fails, Members of all parties should coalesce around a Norway-plus option, and why the “plus” element—being in a customs union with the EU—is a good thing. First, most business wants a customs union because it allows free movement of almost half our exports between Union members without tariffs and checks and paperwork. Opponents say that this would stop the UK forging its own trade agreements, but, to my mind, the benefits of the EU customs union are far greater. We must keep in mind that the EU has some 250 FTAs with some 70 countries, and the UK plan is to “roll over” those deals, meaning that, at best, we would have the same—not better—terms as the EU with one third of the world’s countries. There would be no advantage of being outside the EU. That is, of course, assuming that we are able to make those deals happen, which we know is proving somewhat elusive, as the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) explained.

Secondly, the chances of negotiating better FTAs as a country of 50 million, rather than a bloc of 500 million, is realistically and simply not how it normally works. Thirdly, there will be significant costs of going it alone on FTAs, from being forced to take US genetically modified crops to issuing visas to countries, as currently requested by Australia and India. Fourthly, FTAs take a long time to negotiate—an average of seven years.

Fifthly, the claim that Commonwealth countries will prioritise us over the EU is unrealistic, not least considering that the Czech Republic currently has four times the trade with New Zealand than we do and that the Swiss do much more trade with India than we do. Sixthly, “most favoured nation” clauses in our rolled-over EU agreements and the integrated nature of world trade will significantly reduce our ability to get commercial advantage. Finally, high levels of foreign input into our manufactured goods will create huge problems under the so-called rules of origin.

In conclusion, my view is that we shall be better off with a customs union arrangement with the EU, and the deal on offer presents the best opportunity of securing future prosperity for our companies and employment for our people. We should support it.

5.26 pm

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): One problem of having extended debate and resumption of debate is that we are getting a lot of repetition and recycling of arguments that we have heard many times before. For that reason, I want to focus on one specific issue, which is the idea of World Trade Organisation rules and exactly what they mean. The term “WTO rules” is used casually in every pub, and in every radio interview I encounter, but I suspect that many of the people who use it are not at all clear what it means.

Before getting into the detail of that, I will make one general point about no deal, which was brought out rather brilliantly by the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), who got to the heart of this very well. He exposed the fact that no deal is actually a choice. It is not just something that happens; it is the conscious choice of a Government who could choose to revoke article 50, as the Father of the House keeps reminding us. That may be a difficult

decision and a very unpopular one, but article 50 could be revoked, and by choosing not to revoke it, the Government will be choosing to have no deal, with all its catastrophic—or so they tell us—consequences.

Let me narrow down to the specific issue of what the WTO rules would be if we found ourselves in a no-deal world. The basis on which I speak is that many years ago, long before I came into the House, I was part of a small community of international trade specialists and got involved in negotiating the so-called Uruguay round and then the Doha round as part of the World Trade Organisation—or, as it was then called, the general agreement on tariffs and trade. I saw at first hand the way in which the WTO system operates. I realise that there is no longer just a small community of anoraks, which is what we were. A large number of people now consider themselves experts on trade policy, but the glibness with which the term “WTO rules” is applied leads me to believe that there are probably not too many anoraks, because there are some very real difficulties in applying WTO rules.

The World Trade Organisation is to trade what the United Nations is to peace. It has some admirable principles, but I think most Members, and certainly those on the Government Benches, would consider it seriously negligent of us to make our national defence dependent solely on the rules of the United Nations. Rules have to be enforced, and they have to be effective.

We need to look back on what the World Trade Organisation is and what it is trying to achieve. In the post-war world, it has established one central principle, and actually it is not free trade; it is something called the most favoured nation—MFN—rule. It is about non-discrimination. It has one big waiver, which is to allow common markets and customs unions such as the European Union to function on the basis of total free trade within themselves, but its whole objective is to stop the proliferation of bilateral agreements.

Such agreements were common in the inter-war period, and they are becoming fashionable again. Many people who are in favour of Brexit say that they are the whole purpose of trade policy. Those people want deals with numerous countries, but the whole purpose of the WTO was to stop this happening. It was supposed to be a multilateral organisation. In that capacity, the WTO achieved a great deal. It cut tariffs to single digits on most manufactures except agriculture, and it got rid of quantitative restrictions, except for the quotas that still exist for agriculture and textiles. It also began to establish a set of rules around intellectual property and various other intangible non-tariff barriers regarding, for example, government procurement.

The problem is that the WTO reached the zenith of its authority about 10 years ago, when the Doha negotiations collapsed and multilateral trade negotiations ceased to make any progress. This was largely due to the obstruction of India, Brazil and, to some extent, the United States. The European Union was actually the main liberalising force, but anyway, the negotiations collapsed and the WTO’s authority is now much less strong. Where does that leave us in terms of what the WTO rules now mean? If they mean anything, it is the application of the rule of law. In the WTO, the rule of law operates through dispute panels, which in theory have the same force as the European Court of Justice in settling disputes. It baffles me that Conservative Members

[Sir Vince Cable]

are so affronted by the intrusiveness of the European Court of Justice, because it was designed to achieve precisely what the dispute panels of the WTO were designed to do.

However, like the United Nations, the WTO is not a desperately effective body, and many of its rulings are not carried through. Because it is a weak organisation, it is possible for big countries to bully weak ones. A celebrated case some years ago involved a trade dispute between the United States and Costa Rica—over men's underpants, as it happens—and Costa Rica won the dispute. The United States felt deeply humiliated and refused to comply. A face-saving compromise was eventually reached, but that dispute sowed the ill feeling that in due course led to President Trump, who has made it absolutely clear that he does not believe in the World Trade Organisation. He does not want it to work, and he is doing everything he possibly can to stop it working, including not sending judges to sit on the dispute panels. It is now a very weak organisation. If we were to crash out of the EU under WTO rules and found ourselves in a dispute with the United States—or, indeed, with the European Union, which we had left—we would not be able to rely on the WTO dispute panels to settle the dispute in an orderly manner.

That is one of the WTO's central weaknesses. Another is that, throughout its history, it has been overwhelmingly concerned with getting rid of tariffs. The main problem in international trade these days is the divergence of standards, which is of course why we originally entered the single market under Lord Cockfield and Mrs Thatcher. That was perfectly logical. If we are trying to liberalise trade, we attack the non-tariff practices that obstruct trade, hence the harmonisation of rules on mutual recognition. However, the WTO does not do that. It has very weak rules covering government procurement and all the barriers that are dealt with in the European Union through the rules on state aid, competition and the like. That, in turn, means that there is very little in the WTO that covers the services sector, which, as we have been reminded, accounts for 80% of our economy. We have a fair degree of liberalisation in the services trade in the European Union, which benefits our high-tech industries, financial services and so on. No such arrangement exists in the WTO. Those sectors are completely unprotected.

Finally, and not least, the fact is that some tariffs remain, and they are on agriculture. We have the problem that if we leave the European Union with no deal, on WTO terms, the European Union's tariffs on dairy products, lamb and various other items, which are quite high, immediately kick in. The problem with that, as we discovered when we had the foot and mouth epidemic, is that if we cannot export, prices crash. The only logical response from the farming industry, in order to maintain the value of the stock, is to slaughter large herds. This will happen. We know there is a paper at the moment in the agriculture Department—the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—setting out a plan for slaughtering a third of all British sheep in order to maintain the integrity of the market. That is an inevitable consequence of a high tariff obstructing British exports.

That is not all; I had only 30 seconds in the House yesterday, but I mentioned the particular problem associated with exports through the port of Portsmouth. It is actually the lifeline to the Channel Islands; that is the main route. The Channel Islands are not otherwise affected by Brexit of course, but they will be in this case. If trade is obstructed at the port because of the need to comply with veterinary requirements, phytosanitary requirements and things of that kind, lorries will be obstructed and fresh produce will not be able to get through. Quite apart from the disruption to traffic, the whole system of agricultural trade and the supply of food to the Channel Islands will simply dry up. We have an enormous practical problem resulting from this.

Mr Leslie: The right hon. Gentleman is giving an excellent speech, which is very helpful indeed. Did he see that the *Financial Times* reported yesterday that the Department for Transport commissioned research that says that just a 70-second delay in authorising a vehicle at the border could mean a six-day queue to get on a ferry?

Sir Vince Cable: Yes. Indeed, if I have made a contribution to this argument, it is in pointing out that this is not just a problem in Dover; this problem exists in all the ports around the country. There is going to be serious disruption of supply chains—of the supply of fresh food and many other items. Those people who trivialise the issue by simply saying, “WTO rules—nothing to worry about”, are completely disregarding these consequences.

The conclusion I come to—I think many Conservative Members share it, publicly or privately—is that no deal is just not a viable, acceptable option under any circumstances. We will therefore, within the next few weeks, be brought to the point at which the Government will have to revoke article 50. That would be a major step; it would be overturning the result of the referendum. I feel uncomfortable about Parliament, through Government, doing that. That is why I and other people who are not enthusiasts for referendums believe that the only way of dealing with this properly and of reasserting democratic legitimacy is to go back to the public and seek their approval for doing just that.

5.38 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I rise briefly to explain why I feel I have to vote against the draft withdrawal agreement that we are debating over the next few days.

Before doing that, however, I want to welcome warmly the statement made very clearly by the Prime Minister after the Salzburg summit that, whatever the outcome of the negotiations, the rights of EU citizens living in the United Kingdom would be protected. I think that was a hugely important promise to give. I urge the Government to make sure that their settled status scheme operates smoothly so that we ensure that those rights are fully and properly protected, because it is vital that we do so. EU citizens are our friends, our colleagues and our neighbours. We want them to stay, and we want to ensure that their rights are appropriately protected.

Turning to the draft withdrawal agreement, I regret that I have to diverge from the Government on this crucial question but I cannot support an agreement that I do not think is in the national interest and that I do

not believe respects the result of the referendum in 2016. Of course, I fully recognise the need for compromise as we settle a new relationship with our European neighbours. I strongly believe that we need to listen to the views of people on all sides, whichever way they voted in the referendum, but right across the spectrum of views on Brexit there are many who believe that this draft agreement is not the right one for our country.

A legal obligation to pay £38 billion to the EU, without any certainty on our future trading relationship, would significantly undermine our negotiating position. We would be giving up a key advantage in the negotiations for little in return.

The so-called backstop would do even greater harm. It is not acceptable for the United Kingdom to become a regulatory satellite of the EU, locked permanently into its regulatory and customs orbit, without a vote, a voice or even an exit door. Northern Ireland would have an even greater proportion of its laws determined by institutions in which it has no say than the rest of the United Kingdom under the terms of the deal. Even listing the titles of those regulations takes up more than 60 pages in the draft agreement. As the Attorney General's legal advice confirmed, Northern Ireland would be required to treat Great Britain as a third country in relation to goods crossing the Irish sea.

According to Martin Howe, QC, the backstop arguably contradicts the articles of the Acts of Union of 1800, one of the fundamental founding statutes of this Parliament. The articles state that

"in all treaties...with any foreign power, his Majesty's subjects of Ireland shall have the same privileges and be on the same footing as his Majesty's subjects of Great Britain."

The articles also stipulate that all prohibitions on the export of products from Great Britain to Ireland, or vice versa, should cease from 1 January 1801.

Even if the backstop were removed, I am afraid there would still be unacceptable flaws in the draft agreement. In particular, the significant continuing role for the European Court of Justice would prevent us from restoring democratic control over the making of our laws. Of similar concern is the statement in the political declaration that the backstop and the withdrawal treaty will be the starting point for the negotiations on the future relationship.

I want to emphasise that none of the amendments that have been tabled to the motion can fix the defects that I have referred to in the withdrawal agreement. If we ratify the treaty, it will be legally binding and it will apply regardless of encouraging statements and amendments about parliamentary locks or other warm words.

There is a better option: we should table a draft in the EU negotiations that sets out a wide-ranging free trade agreement based on the Canada plus model. That is in line with proposals that Donald Tusk put forward in March. It should include a protocol in which all parties commit that no new physical infrastructure will be installed on the Northern Ireland border. Instead, we should use existing flexibilities in the EU's customs code to ensure that customs formalities and checks take place away from the border, as was set out in the paper produced by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) in September last year.

More people voted leave in June 2016 than have ever voted for anything else in the long history of British democracy. That was a legitimate expression of the

natural desire to be an independent self-governing democracy—the basis on which most countries around the world operate their systems of government. EU membership means vesting supreme law-making power in people we do not elect and cannot remove—people who in this negotiation process have shown clearly that they do not have our best interests at heart and that they are prepared to inflict punishment on us for the democratic choices we have made.

Brexit is an issue that has divided my constituency and the whole country. I will continue to work to bridge the divisions that the referendum has painfully exposed, but I do not believe that the draft withdrawal agreement is the right way forward either for my constituents or for the nation as a whole, and I urge the House to vote against it next week.

5.44 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Britain in the European Union has been at the heart of building peace, security and prosperity. We have played a critical role in promoting the ideals of democracy, human rights, equality and freedom. We have worked with our European partners to fight extremism and terrorism, to protect the environment, to improve labour standards for our citizens and to contribute to tackling global poverty, conflict and inequality.

Since the referendum, the Government have failed to build coalitions and consensus. They have failed to prioritise economic reality over fanciful ideology. They have failed to put aside party interest in favour of the national interest. That failure is reflected in the dreadful deal secured, after two years, by the Prime Minister. It leaves us as rule takers at the mercy of the EU, when we were once equal partners setting the agenda and making the rules. It leaves us fundamentally worse off, costing billions of pounds that could have been spent on tackling the appalling social problems caused by the programme of austerity implemented by the Government: crime, child poverty, inadequate social care, rising homelessness and the housing crisis. There have been cuts to education, early years funding and much else.

The deal leaves businesses facing years of uncertainty and without clarity on our future trading relationship with the European Union. It gives little clarity on what protections there will be for workers' rights and the environment after the implementation period. It leaves us in a much weaker position to negotiate trade deals with non-EU countries, whenever it is that we might be free to do so. We have heard from many knowledgeable Members about how long that might be. It is not likely to be done in two years; it is more likely to be in five, six or seven years. The EU has been successful in negotiating over 50 trade agreements with third countries. Britain is stronger negotiating as part of an EU bloc with big emerging economic powers. It leaves us worse off, and the golden promises made by the leave campaign have so far failed to materialise. They were totally unrealistic. They were incredibly misleading and untruthful. They were unfair on the British people, because they were so untrue and misleading.

Since 2016, the uncertainty due to the result of the referendum has already cost the UK more than 2% of GDP. Households are £900 a year worse off and investment has gone down dramatically. The Prime Minister has said that the impact of leaving the EU does not show

[*Rushanara Ali*]

that we will be poorer, but that is exactly what the Government's own analysis of leaving the EU shows. Under the Government's deal, the economy will be 3.9% smaller. That is the equivalent of over £100 billion a year. The average person will be over £1,000 worse off and real wages will be 2.7% lower. Trade barriers would be 10% of the value of the services trade. The Government are also asking us to spend £39 billion to make people poorer.

How can I vote for a deal that makes us even more worse off, when thousands of people in my constituency rely on jobs in financial services, the tech industry and other companies that trade with the European Union? They desperately need access to the single market and the customs union. Even before we leave the EU, half of all children in my constituency live in poverty thanks to the appalling policies of this heartless Government. The Government's austerity programme has led to schools facing millions of pounds of cuts, homelessness doubling, and crime, including violent crime and knife crime, soaring because 200 police officers have been laid off—nationally, the figure is 21,000. I cannot understand how the Government can claim that this is the best they can do, when Britain stands to lose so much. The provisions and the cost of Brexit will result in less money for investment in our public services because of the tens of billions of pounds we will have to spend under the Prime Minister's deal or no deal, which is the choice she is threatening us with.

In the future trading relationship—the political declaration, which many colleagues have already mentioned—the Government no longer promise frictionless trade, only the possibility of co-operation. A future customs arrangement could consist of technology solutions that do not even yet exist and are likely to cost tens of billions of pounds. Financial services—which contribute 6.5% of total economic output, more than £27 billion of tax annually, and employ more than 2 million people around our country—get just three paragraphs.

I refer to financial services because my constituency sits between the City of London and Canary Wharf, which power our economy. Too often this Government fail to prioritise or think about the long-term impact of our leaving the single market and customs union on those sectors that provide so much tax revenue and so many jobs in our country. As many hon. Members have mentioned, the services sector accounts for 80% of the economy, yet the future trading relationship lacks clarity on the kind of access we will have to the single market. The relationship for UK firms in the sector will be based on equivalence, which is much worse and more limited than what we have now. That means the loss of passporting rights and 16 million people facing uncertainty about their insurance policies. There also remains no clarity about how about £28 trillion-worth of derivatives—the infrastructure that allows banks and their clients to manage risk, cash flow and capital positions—could be affected.

When the Prime Minister decided, hastily and irresponsibly, to start the clock by triggering article 50—which some of us voted against—she had no strategy. She did not have a plan and put our country in a terrible position and at the mercy of EU negotiators, who had

the upper hand. In 2017, the UK's former ambassador to the EU, Sir Ivan Rogers, told the Treasury Select Committee:

"If you wanted to avoid being screwed in the negotiations...say: 'I will invoke Article 50, but only under circumstances where I know exactly how it's going to operate'."

That is not what happened. The Prime Minister did not heed that advice and the country is paying the price for her mistake.

The Prime Minister has failed to listen to concerns relayed to her by Members from across the House, including at a meeting she held yesterday, rather belatedly—nearly two years after triggering article 50—with Members of different parties. She missed the opportunity to bring the House together from the beginning, as others have pointed out. She has been beholden to managing divisions in her party, which has been ripping itself apart, making a mockery of our country in the rest of the world. Let us not forget that the rest of the world, which historically has seen us as an important ally, is looking at us in dismay. When Conservative Members talk about global Britain, they should remember how their behaviour in tearing themselves apart, and how their divisions tearing the country apart, look across the world. They are far from presenting an image of the inclusive, mature, global Britain required in the face of the huge challenge we have to address.

By giving us a false choice between her deal and no deal, the Prime Minister is holding a metaphorical gun to our heads. That is utterly irresponsible and she and her Ministers need to stop doing that. We will not accept that false choice. The no-deal scenario is utterly catastrophic. The Bank of England's worst-case scenario points out that no deal could shrink our economy by 8%, and unemployment could increase dramatically, with inflation spiralling out of control. Many constituencies will suffer job losses in a no-deal situation, but mine will be among the worst off—according to the UK Trade Policy Observatory at the University of Sussex, thousands of residents in Bethnal Green and Bow will lose their jobs.

Yesterday's amendment to the Finance Bill demonstrates that there is no majority for crashing out of the EU with no deal. I believe there is a majority for seeking to secure permanent customs union and single market access, and the Government should do so. As they are running down the clock, article 50 must be revoked. But of course the best deal on offer is membership of the EU. The Government promised the exact same benefits, but they now offer something that will damage our economy.

I cannot support this deal, because I believe it will make our country and my constituents worse off. The Government's own analysis points to that. We should allow the public a final say, with a choice between the Government's deal and remaining in the European Union. I and many of my constituents joined more than 700,000 people to march in the streets of London for a people's vote. I believe that is the only way to settle this matter, and I hope the Government will consider that option when this deal is voted down, as I believe it will be; otherwise, they will destroy livelihoods, cause job losses, damage our economy and diminish our place in the world. Nobody wants to see that happen to our country.

5.56 pm

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): My constituency voted to leave the European Union, and I promised my constituents before, during and after the referendum that I would respect the result. I also told them that I believe in a smooth and orderly Brexit. Although the Prime Minister's deal is imperfect, I believe it will provide that smooth and orderly Brexit.

The Prime Minister has worked very hard on the deal, and my constituents have given me the message loud and clear, whatever their view on the European Union, that she has been sincere about respecting the referendum result. She has been extremely hard-working and is absolutely determined to see this through. I think all of us in the House, and most of our constituents, recognise that the Prime Minister is trying to do what is in the best interests of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

I would like to touch on a couple of aspects of the deal that I think will help Members come to the same conclusion I came to and support this compromise. I have received many emails from constituents telling me to vote against the deal or for the deal. Even those who asked me to vote against it did so for different reasons. Some did so because they want no deal, and others because they want a second referendum or another outcome—perhaps no Brexit at all. Those who email to ask me to support the deal do so in a calm, rational and logical manner, whether they voted leave or remain. They explain that this deal, imperfect though it is, is a compromise that will allow the country to have a smooth and orderly exit.

Mr Speaker, you will know that for the last two and a half years I have been championing the rights of EU nationals living in the UK and British citizens living in the EU27. I think I am one of the MPs most personally affected by the decision to leave the EU and its impact on citizens' rights, because my mother, father and sister are EU nationals. I think everyone in the House believes that we should protect the rights of EU nationals living in Britain and British citizens living in the EU, and the only way of doing that in a smooth and orderly manner is with the Prime Minister's proposed deal. It is the only deal that offers an absolute guarantee to my parents, to the more than 3 million EU nationals in Britain and to the more than 1 million British nationals in the EU.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman support the £65 fee that these EU nationals have to pay?

Alberto Costa: I would say two things about that. In 2014 the SNP—[*Interruption.*] I promise to answer directly. In 2014 the SNP argued that Scotland should leave the EU and then reapply for admission as a third party. That was, in effect, what was on the ballot paper for Scottish independence, so it is a bit rich today for the SNP to talk about citizens' rights. It put them in danger back in 2014.

I said that I would answer the hon. Lady's question, and my answer is this: as a member of the Government—as a Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Secretary of State for Scotland—I support the Government, but I am uneasy about the fees for settled status. My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) asked the Prime Minister about the fees earlier today,

and I can say this to the hon. Lady: it is a matter that I am pursuing and will continue to pursue to ensure absolute fairness for innocent EU nationals in this country, who did not have the right to vote in the referendum, who in many instances have lived in this country for decades, and who might be asked to pay a sum of money—albeit a modest sum of money—to remain in the country. I personally think we have to look at that very carefully. I promised her an answer, and I hope she is satisfied with that one.

The deal on citizens' rights gives certainty not just to citizens but to businesses that rely on EU nationals for their workforce. If a further reason is required, that is a second and connected reason to support the deal. It would allow businesses to continue to employ EU nationals, not just those resident in this country today but those who come to the UK during the implementation period. The implementation period would give certainty to EU nationals who in the future might wish to live and work here—and exercise their withdrawal agreement rights, if that agreement is passed—and to businesses in South Leicestershire that have been lobbying me and asking me what the situation will be for the people they employ.

The implementation period would also give certainty to British businesses that do business in the EU27 and need UK nationals not only to work in member states but to have the ability to move between member states. The deal that the Prime Minister has negotiated allows for that, and I say this to Opposition Members, particularly Labour Members and the shadow Brexit spokesman: if they are sincere, as I hope they are, I urge them to see that as an overriding reason to support the Prime Minister's deal, given that they have not come up with any plan of their own that would give EU and UK nationals the rights that her deal would give them.

I come now to the second issue, which is the so-called backstop. Let me declare an interest and refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am dually qualified as a Scottish and an English solicitor, and I still practise as an English solicitor. We have heard a lot of talk from people who have, let us say, new-found Unionism in their blood, and I welcome that greatly. I felt that I was a lonely voice in the 2015 Parliament when I intervened to oppose nationalists' comments about the United Kingdom. [*Interruption.*] If the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) has an intervention to make, she should feel free to make it.

Carol Monaghan: I think that all we would argue about is where the lines are drawn. The hon. Gentleman obviously feels that he is British, and we feel that we are Scottish. Both of us are happy to show pride in our nations, as we see them.

Alberto Costa: I am proud to say that I am Scottish, British and with Italian heritage, and there is absolutely nothing wrong with that. We are the wonderful, fantastic United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I urge the hon. Lady to start reflecting on her own party's policies, which are divisive. I am not a nationalist; I am a British patriot. There is a difference between the narrow-mindedness of nationalism and being a good patriot.

I was talking about the issue of the so-called backstop. Let me make a simple analogy. There is one area about which, as a dually qualified solicitor, I am able to speak

[*Alberto Costa*]

with some knowledge, and that is legal services. There is a lot of talk about creating a border down the Irish sea, but there is already a border down the Irish sea when it comes to legal services regulation.

In fact, the United Kingdom is blessed with three legal systems: distinct, proud, global and fair systems. We have the English and Welsh system, the Scottish system and the Northern Irish system. As fellow lawyers will know, each of those systems regards the others as foreign legal systems. England and Wales regards Northern Ireland's system as a foreign legal system, and Scotland regards England and Wales's system as a foreign legal system. A qualified Scottish solicitor does not have automatic regulatory rights to practise in Northern Ireland, because there is already a border down the Irish sea in respect of legal services regulation. Each jurisdiction has its own regulatory body when it comes to the profession of lawyers.

Gavin Robinson: As a member of the Northern Irish Bar, and as someone who had the opportunity to study English or Scottish law, I know that there are two substantive forms of law in this land. We have devolution, and there are respected regulatory bodies in every field and every facet in this country. In this place, however, we have one sovereign Parliament. The withdrawal agreement would allow rules and regulations to be set for Northern Ireland in another sovereign Parliament.

Alberto Costa: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point, but my point is simply this. He does not have an automatic right to practise as a barrister in England and Wales unless the regulatory body in England and Wales permits a Northern Irish barrister to do so, because there is a border down the Irish sea. Under European Union law as it stands, the Law Society of Northern Ireland is, at least for solicitors, the regulatory body that is recognised as a competent authority. I speak as a Unionist—I have the scars on my back from fighting for the integrity of the United Kingdom when I stood against the SNP candidate in Angus—but there are already instances of different regulatory practices between the different constituent parts of the United Kingdom.

Gavin Robinson *rose*—

Alberto Costa: I am afraid that I am going to wind up my speech now. Others want to speak.

There is nothing unique in the principle of having slightly different regulatory regimes when it comes to services or goods. I do not want to see the backstop, and I believe that the Prime Minister is right: it is an insurance policy, and I hope that she will bring something back from the EU in the next few days. However, I do not think that that alone should negate a Member's duty to vote for this deal in the interests of the United Kingdom.

In conclusion, if the deal does not go through next week, the people out there are watching us. We are the sovereign Parliament—sovereignty is in our hands—and we must make a decision that calms the febrile atmosphere that still exists out there, and one that allows us to respect the referendum result in a smooth and orderly manner. I believe that the Prime Minister's deal, compromise though it is, allows us to do that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. There is no formal time limit on Back-Bench speeches at present, but it would be helpful for colleagues to know that speeches of approximately 10 minutes each, and preferably no more, will happily enable everyone who wishes to contribute to do so.

6.10 pm

Sir David Crausby (Bolton North East) (Lab): I was actively involved in the "Get Britain Out" campaign in the referendum in 1975. I was on the wrong side of that referendum when I voted to leave, and I was on the wrong side of the next one, 41 years later, when I voted to remain. In the meantime, the British people changed their minds in one direction, and I changed my mind in the other. At the same time, mainstream politics, and much of the media, changed its mind as well as the common market evolved into the European Union. In the 1970s, many Conservatives who supported the common market, which many in Labour saw as a big businessman's club, started to get nervous when the European Union started properly to deliver workers' rights. At the same time, the Labour movement and the trade unions came round to the view that there were advantages in cross-European standards on equal pay, decent working conditions and, most importantly, good standards of health and safety.

The referendums of 1975 and 2016 have much in common. Ted Heath, the then Prime Minister, had taken us into the common market in 1972 without a people's vote, so Harold Wilson promised a referendum after he delivered renegotiated terms. The British people went for it, and he won the 1974 election and the result in the consequential referendum. Fast forward to 2015, David Cameron, who was becoming terrified of the threat posed by Nigel Farage and UKIP, must have looked back in history and thought it would be a good idea to imitate Harold Wilson by promising a referendum in the forthcoming election. To be fair, David Cameron was successful in that his policy secured a Conservative majority for the first time since 1992. The first part of Mr Cameron's cunning plan worked, but the difference was that it all went wrong for Mr Cameron because he was no Harold Wilson and was completely unable to persuade the British people to do what was in Britain's best interest.

When critics say that there should be no second referendum, the fact is that we have already had two. In advance of the second vote in 2016, those who wanted to leave the EU claimed that the public did not understand the consequences of the common market when we first voted in 1975 so, as was their right, they argued for another referendum. Now, the same group who want to leave argue that another referendum—a third one—would be an insult to those who voted three years ago, because it would be tantamount to saying that those who voted to leave did not know what they were doing. The truth is that nobody knew what they were doing in 2016—if indeed they did in 1975. Only a few anoraks, mainly in this place, actually thought they knew what they were doing, and I have to say that some of them—unfortunately, scarily—still think they know what they are doing.

If there has been a mistake in this sad saga it is that we should never have had either referendum in the first place, and that is the fault of nobody but us politicians. We are responsible for this self-inflicted chaos, not the electorate, and we have a duty to resolve it.

If I have learned anything from all of this it is that yes/no referendums are not the right way, not even the honest way, to make complex policy in the interests of our country. They have been deviously misused by politicians to win general elections: the promise of a 1975 referendum won the election for Labour, just as the proposed 2016 referendum won the election for the Tories. What we should honourably do in the future is make it clear in our manifestos what we stand for and then put that to the public in a general election. I reluctantly have to say that Ted Heath was right in 1970 when he put in the Conservative manifesto that he would negotiate to take us into the common market and did so. That is what we should resolve to do in the future.

Where do we go from here? In crisis, we should stay calm and do the sensible thing, not the emotional thing: when in a hole, stop digging. As we stand, we have clear choices: a no-deal Brexit, the Prime Minister's no-point Brexit, or no Brexit at all. The choices might well look unpleasant and humiliating, but this is where we are as a country.

For my part, I am not a fan of our present-day EU and its institutions, and there is much that we should change: the common agricultural policy is a disgrace; our fishing communities are treated unfairly; the free movement of labour was introduced too quickly without thought or consideration for low-paid workers; and as for the unelected bureaucrats and their unaccountable budgets, they drive me crazy. But to leave in panic with the Prime Minister's proposed deal while remaining under the yoke of the unelected control of foreign powers is madness; it would be a betrayal, and it in no way honours the will of the British people, even in what was a flawed referendum vote in the first place. We would do better to stay in the EU and give the rest of them hell, particularly the unelected bureaucrats.

To stay where we are is my conclusion to this humiliatingly unsolvable problem, because the fact is that what was promised by the leave campaign in 2016 is not and never was deliverable. We just have to accept in life that there are some things that we cannot do. For my part I always wanted to score the winning goal in a World cup final in the last minute for England at Wembley after extra time, but I have reluctantly come round to the view that it is not going to happen. Likewise to be the first nation to leave the EU in opposition to 27 other countries and get a good deal for Britain at the same time was always, to say the very least, naive.

Some say that the Prime Minister has done her very best and she deserves a measure of sympathy; sorry, but I have none, because my concern lies with the fate of the British people, who have been led by this Government—her Government—into extremely dangerous waters.

The fact is that the Prime Minister has been centrally involved in this circus, all the way through, from the point when David Cameron and his Ministers opportunistically started the process. The Prime Minister should go back to Brussels and make it clear that we will not be bullied. We should leave, if we must, in our own time and on our own terms. And if we need to take up the option to delay or revoke article 50, of course we should do that. We should do whatever is in the interests of the British people, and if that creates uncertainty for our markets and an embarrassment for the Government, so be it.

My dad did not fight his way through the second world war to be humiliated, and I will not be voting for this cap-in-hand deal or any other remotely like it.

6.20 pm

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): My views on Brexit are well known. As a prominent campaigner for Scottish Vote Leave, my views were well known by my constituents before I was elected to this House. I respect the fact that colleagues and other MPs have very different views, often genuinely and passionately held, but I hope that, regardless of those deeply held views, we can all agree that we all want what is best for this country.

Did Members know that the number of people who voted leave in Scotland is similar to the populations of Glasgow and Edinburgh—Scotland's two largest cities—combined? Over 1 million Scots voted to leave the EU, yet they are wholly under-represented both in this place and in the Scottish Parliament. There is growing frustration and anger among Scottish leave voters about their being airbrushed out of Scotland's story by the narrative of some that Scotland voted to remain, and that that is Scotland's voice. Well, I will not be airbrushed out of here. *The National* can attack me and bully me as much as it wants, and people can vandalise my office or protest outside it as much as they want, but I will never give up speaking up for the 1 million Scots who voted to leave the European Union.

I am not just a Brexiteer. I am a committed, dedicated and most passionate Unionist first. Our United Kingdom is something that we have built together, and the ties that bind us go beyond the nations to individuals. For over 300 years we have traded together, fought for freedom and peace together, and built our lives together. That is why in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum I campaigned with my head, heart, body and soul to keep this United Kingdom together.

It is because I am a Scottish Unionist that I cannot in good conscience support this withdrawal agreement. I share the concerns of other colleagues and Democratic Unionist party Members that the backstop arrangement would mean hiving off Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK, with Northern Ireland being kept in a separate regulatory regime. Northern Ireland would be left in the single market for goods and agrifoods, while Great Britain leaves, an arrangement that would give Brussels more say over the rules in Northern Ireland than our own United Kingdom Parliament.

The backstop would require that Northern Ireland follows around 300 EU regulations, and if the UK were to diverge from one of them, it would mean a border down the Irish sea. If the EU were to change any regulation and the rest of the UK did not follow, despite having no say over those changes, it would impose a border down the Irish sea. Northern Ireland would be left in full harmonisation with the EU.

I have heard the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and other Ministers say that, to avoid a border down the Irish sea, Great Britain would align with Northern Ireland, but what does that mean in practice? It means that the UK would be tied to EU rules that it would be voiceless to change or oppose. That would not be taking back control. It is the opposite of what people voted for and worse than the current arrangement.

[Ross Thomson]

The prosperity of our Union is dependent on our own internal market and the thousands of jobs that depend on it, so any barriers that are put in the way of that and that affect our ability to trade within the United Kingdom are hugely damaging. I therefore struggle to comprehend how anyone who believes in the integrity of the UK can support a deal that would keep Northern Ireland in the single market. How could anyone want to see new burdens and regulations put in place on trade going east to west across the Irish sea? That would mean that goods manufactured in my constituency of Aberdeen South that move to Belfast would be subject to new customs declarations and the issuing of certificates—new barriers to trade within our own country.

I recognise that the Government have attempted to address these real concerns, and that they have brought forward new measures, but it is with regret that I feel that those measures do not go far enough. What I read today seemed more like a public relations exercise than a real remedy to the problems. The backstop arrangement will be part of an internationally binding treaty, which means that by its very nature it will supersede any domestic legal provisions. Furthermore, the arrangement fails to hold true to what was agreed in the joint report of December 2017. So, to coin a phrase, nothing has changed. The withdrawal agreement does protect the Union—the European Union. Sadly, it does not protect our own.

There are wider concerns about the withdrawal agreement. The backstop means that we could be trapped in the EU indefinitely, with the EU27 having a veto. We would be unable to strike our own trade deal. The advice from the House of Commons EU legislation team is that the backstop customs arrangement would be

“a practical barrier to the UK entering separate trade agreements on goods with third countries”.

As a Scot, I know that one of our greatest exports is Scottish whisky. Its global reputation for quality is absolutely unmatched. The industry has been optimistic about the opportunities presented by Brexit to sell its product into the exciting new and growing markets in the world. The withdrawal agreement recognises and protects more than 3,000 geographical indications. The agreement is not a trade deal—in fact, we cannot even talk trade—but under it, the UK will protect EU GIs, such as Parma ham and feta cheese. That has the potential to prevent us from reaching free trade agreements with the US or India, which are the big markets for Scottish whisky. In trade deals, we need to protect our own GIs, not the EU's. Furthermore, US ambassador Woody Johnson has clearly stated that if the withdrawal agreement is passed, it does not look like it would be possible to agree a bilateral UK-US trade deal.

Finally, we will have to pay £39 billion to the EU. That is £1,400 per family in the UK. Ordinary taxpayers should rightly feel that they are not getting very much for that amount of money. I recognise that in a negotiation one side does not get everything that it wants and the other side nothing. However, nowhere in the agreement can I see a significant concession that the UK has achieved. Unbelievably, the EU appears to have got everything that it wants. It is therefore little wonder that

the EU Commission is claiming that the power lies with it—that its mission is to prove that leaving the EU does not work.

In conclusion, yes, Brexit is an unprecedented challenge for our country, and it requires a national effort to meet that challenge, but Brexit is not an existential threat to our Union. That is why I am horrified that before us is a deal that leaves Northern Ireland behind and treats it like a foreign territory. I will not stand by and allow our United Kingdom to be broken up by the back door. No Unionist can ever accept that. The Conservative and Unionist party cannot accept that. The UK Parliament cannot accept that, which is why MPs must vote down this deal.

6.29 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton North East (Sir David Crausby).

After a month's delay, we have to begin by asking: what exactly has been gained by putting this vote off from its scheduled date in December? What has the Prime Minister achieved by her tour of European capitals and her pleas to fellow EU leaders? There may well be some kind of letter, or statement, or clarification issued between now and the vote next Tuesday. No doubt the Government will try to make the most of that if it comes, but after a month's delay, it does not feel as though anything of substance has changed in the proposals before us.

All of us are conscious of our responsibilities. We are conscious of the stakes before us, and also conscious that this issue, almost like no other, cuts across party political lines. After two years of debate on Brexit, we find our country deeply divided, sentiments unleashed that we thought we would not see again in Britain, our politics paralysed by irreconcilable red lines, issues that would normally be top of the political agenda neglected and downgraded because of the huge political energy sucked up—and all the while, the rest of the world look at the UK and wonder what has happened to us.

The Brexit vote in many parts of the country, including in the Black Country, which I have the honour of representing, was driven by a deep sense of loss—a loss of an industrial past that had brought good jobs and prosperity, a loss of a sense of pride and purpose for some of our towns and cities contrasted with a present where, far too often, the jobs are low-paid and insecure and where people and areas feel ignored and abandoned. Any attempt to understand how we got here has to appreciate that sense of loss. The question is how we respond to that sense of loss with leadership that offers some actual answers rather than simply giving people someone or something to blame.

Once the Brexit vote happened, the country had a choice: a complete break with the European Union with the consequence of a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and huge economic and industrial disruption, or a rule-taking Brexit where we left legally speaking but still obeyed most of the same rules. It was a choice between a Brexit that raised the question of what is the price, and a Brexit that raised the question of what is the point. What was never on the cards was to pretend that we could keep all the current advantages of EU membership and have all the new freedoms promised by the Brexiteers. The failure to

be candid about that is the root cause of the disillusionment with the draft agreement put before us. Even more damning, the failure to be candid about this had nothing to do with putting the national interest first. As always with this issue, year after year, it had far more to do with fear of being candid because of the internal politics of the Conservative party.

The flaws in this agreement are about far more than the Northern Ireland backstop. Let us be clear: the backstop is an insurance policy in case a trade agreement that does the same thing as the backstop is not reached, and that same thing is such a degree of alignment with EU rules that there is no need for a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic. That requirement has not been imposed on us; it is reiterated and supported by the Government and signed up to explicitly in the agreement of December 2017. No one has done this to us. It is a commitment that we have made.

Brexit also promised to give the UK control over borders, laws and money, yet the agreement before us does the opposite. In fact, it crystallises the disempowerment of the United Kingdom. We will still be paying in for years to come, but we will no longer have any say over the laws we obey. That does not enhance sovereignty or control. It simply leaves us paying tens of billions of pounds for a worse deal than we have at present. And remember: this is only the withdrawal agreement. Negotiations on the future have not really begun, but we know a couple of things about them. We know that service industries, which form 80% of our economy, are to be thrown under a bus, and we know that the degree of access that we have to EU markets in the future will be closely related to the degree of alignment with the rules that we are prepared to make, even though we will no longer have a say over them.

On the economics, the Government have not even tried to deny that the proposal will make the country poorer compared to our current arrangements. Every study of every scenario, including the Government's own, has admitted that. Never before—certainly not in peacetime—have a Government brought forth a proposition that they admit will make the country poorer and then said that we must proceed at all costs. Perhaps that is why this deal seems to satisfy neither leavers nor remainers.

This deal has done one great service to us. It has shown us how much worse the proposed arrangement is compared with the deal that we have now—whereby we are rule makers, not rule takers, usually to the significant advantage of our world-leading industries; there is no backstop or hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic; and there is no interference in the multinational supply chains on which our industries depend.

The Government's argument does not really dispute that. They know that is true, and they have stopped really arguing for the withdrawal agreement on its merits. Instead, they are really desperate for the transition period, the singular advantage of which is that it is not really Brexit; it is staying in the European Union, except for the singular disadvantage of it, which is that we are absenting ourselves from the decision-making forums where the rules that we will obey are decided. The only argument that Ministers have left is that this agreement is better than the total chaos of no deal, but that is a humiliating choice for the country.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend is making an eloquent speech, and he has made the excellent point that the deal we have now is the best deal available. But if we are to take leadership on this, and if we are to remain in the European family, should we not look at reforming the European Union? The message from the British people is clearly that the European Union is not perfect as it is now, otherwise we would not have had the result that we did, and we should be striding forward to try to reform the European Union if we are to remain.

Mr McFadden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and it is significant that a number of other countries would agree with us on that, even in the two years since the vote took place.

As I said, this is a humiliating choice for our country. We are the fifth biggest economy in the world, a major defence and security power, and one of the few countries in the world with global cultural reach, but we are being told by our Government that we have to accept a deal that they admit and know makes us weaker and poorer, because the only alternative to it is economic carnage. That is no choice for the country to have to make. We are also told that we have to vote for the deal because people are fed up talking about Brexit. The argument goes, "Just get on with it. Get it over with", but that is both irresponsible and an illusion. It is irresponsible, because boredom is no basis on which to take a decision as serious as this about the future of the country. We should not be told that we have to resign ourselves to the disempowerment of the United Kingdom under the illusion that if we do so we can then simply change the subject.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): My right hon. Friend made reference to the history of the internal politics of the Tory party leading this agenda. Is he also clear that we are not sure what type of Brexit we would actually end up with? The potential is that we will now have several years of just more of the Tory infighting that we have had over the past decades.

Mr McFadden: It is more than a potential—it is a racing certainty. It is an illusion to think that this argument is finished on 30 March if we agree this withdrawal agreement—that is simply not the case. That is precisely because, as my hon. Friend indicated, the political declaration leaves the fundamental questions unanswered. The only thing it makes clear is that our market access will depend on the extent to which we agree to common rules. The issues of economics and the border that create the dilemma between a "what's the point Brexit?" and a "what's the price Brexit?" go on and on into the future. They are unresolved, and that will continue. That is not the fault of the civil service or because of some establishment plot—it is the fault of Brexit itself and the failure to level with the country about the choices it would involve. What we have learned, in the end, is that we could not have our cake and eat it—not because someone was mean to us or conspired to steal our prize, but because this was always a false promise.

I am clear that the sense of loss that drove the Brexit vote is real. The need for a new plan to offer a better chance in life to working-class communities is urgent, but endorsing a plan that makes our country poorer and weaker makes it more difficult, not less, to answer

[Mr McFadden]

the genuine grievances felt in parts of our country. The first step to forming a new plan that offers real answers is to cast off the absurd victim complex that tries to portray our country as some kind of colony of the European Union. That is not true, it never was true, and we have wielded far more influence, with far more success, than that nationalist myth would ever allow for.

It is within our power to address many of the causes of Brexit without endorsing the self-harm contained in the proposals before us—or, indeed, participating in the dishonesty that tells working-class communities that their problems would all be resolved if only we could reduce immigration. Far too much of the debate about immigration has treated it as a danger to be feared rather than a fact of the modern world. Of course we should have a system with rules, but there is no rewind button to a country and a world that is not coming back. Every developed economy, including ours, will be more diverse in the future than in the past.

If the Government win the vote next week, we proceed on that basis, but if not, what then? In recent days, Parliament has exerted its will to take more control over this process. I simply say to Ministers that it is unacceptable to say that if we do not endorse this proposal, the only proposal is to drive the country towards no deal. Parliament must be allowed to express its view on the alternatives that are there, including extending article 50, the legal judgment that has shown that we can revoke article 50 if we wish, and the option of going back to the people themselves. These options must be allowed to be put before Parliament, they must be allowed to be voted on, and the Government must stop trying to drive Parliament into a choice between the proposals before us and the disaster that leaving without a deal would represent.

6.43 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), who is as erudite as ever.

Like many colleagues—perhaps I am being a little glib here to a certain extent—I did not actually come into politics to bang on about Europe. I am a social liberal and economically of the right—dry as a bone, in many respects. I wanted my political life to be, effectively, advancing that twin track of social liberalism and economic free marketarianism. However, we are where we are.

Before I was first elected in 2015, I knocked on about 30,000 doors during the two and a half years of the campaign, and I have to say that in most instances I found that Europe was probably about No. 10 on the list of issues raised on the doorstep. Much higher on the list was immigration and its conflation with Europe, which the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East spoke about. During the referendum campaign I visited Solihull College, and I was struck by the fact that many of the young students talked about wages and the lack of housing, and they equated that with EU migration in effect. That is one of the key reasons why so many people—a uniquely high number—in the council estates in the north of Solihull came out to vote.

Serving as an elected representative comes with acute responsibilities. I fundamentally believe that we have a duty to honour the clear commitments made by this House before the vote and after it and to deliver Britain's

departure from the European Union. I am especially wary of any effort to put the question to a second referendum. Not only would there be serious practical difficulties in any such effort—not least deciding on the question and simply completing the legislative work needed even to hold one—but it would pose a real problem for our democracy. There is no avoiding the fact that it would stand in a dishonourable tradition of Brussels taking questions back to the voters until it gets the answers it wants, nor that the Government and both the major parties have been quite clear that they would deliver on the result of the 2016 referendum. It may be tempting at this moment in the spotlight to clasp tight the political comfort blanket of a second referendum, but it is a fool's path for this democracy and this country. It sends us further down the rabbit hole.

We should remember that the EU has evolved since we voted leave. The hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) mentioned the need for change from within, and I argued about that at the time of the referendum. In Britain's absence, the push towards a full federalist agenda has accelerated and is very notable. That may well be a good thing for the EU in the long run, but it highlights that we want increasingly different things. We have held it together over many years, but those fissures are now widening. Even if we were to somehow get back into the EU by a second referendum or at a later stage, the proposition would be very different from today. Backtracking on the referendum would not sell the British people on the euro or the rest of the federal project, and the tensions that led to the referendum would not only continue but deepen further in the years ahead.

As for the withdrawal agreement, I share the view of the Attorney General that while it might not be perfect, it is temporary. I am deeply concerned by the backstop, both because of its implications for our practical sovereignty and because of its special treatment of Northern Ireland. However, on reflection, I believe that it is sufficiently uncomfortable for the EU that the EU will not wish to trap us in it indefinitely, and article 50 cannot be taken as a basis for a lasting future relationship.

I also need to think about what is best for my constituency. Solihull is a proud exporting town with a real global footprint, home to not only great British brands such as Jaguar Land Rover but numerous manufacturers and service providers that rely on frictionless access to European markets. As the MP for a town that enjoys a visible goods trade surplus with the EU, it is my responsibility to support a Brexit that meets the needs of Solihull's employers and exporters. This deal, while not perfect, does at least smooth our departure and avoid severe economic disruption in March.

Some Members are convinced by the warnings of so-called "Project Fear", and it is true that some of the wilder predictions about the consequences of a leave vote have proven far too pessimistic over the last couple of years. However, it would be rash to simply disregard the expertise of the likes of the Bank of England. Those models have a logical basis, and as someone who has been involved in economics and economic theory in the past, I think it is foolhardy to go on this adventure on a wing and a prayer without understanding or at least taking account of the experts whom we fund to supply us with this information. Even if those models are not a certain outcome, they are a real risk to jobs and businesses

across the country owing to the inevitable economic dislocation that may last only a few weeks or months but could last years.

I aspire to a future relationship based on a free trade deal with the EU and an ambitious drive to grow our links with the rising economies of Africa, Asia and Latin America, but if we have to take a little longer to get there in order to protect the livelihoods of my constituents, I am prepared to do that. Of course, Labour Members insist that such compromise is unnecessary, and that if only they were in power, they would deliver a deal that avoided all the difficult trade-offs that feature in real negotiations. Their so-called six tests are a mere wishlist. It is extremely reckless for self-styled moderates to risk Britain crashing out of the EU by voting against a deal on the orders of leaders who see only an opportunity for political gain in the chaos that that would unleash.

The right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) made a notable and wide-ranging speech earlier. It was incredibly thoughtful, and a prime example of the lawyer's art. It was also a history lesson, and he danced on the head of a pin. Unfortunately, he did not take an intervention from me, despite my requests. Had he done so, I would have told him that the 9,000 car workers in my constituency—as well as those in the west midlands manufacturing supply chain, which has delivered the second biggest growth of anywhere in the UK over the past five years—and even the unions in those companies all want a withdrawal agreement. They want an orderly exit from the EU, and that should be front and centre in our minds. It should also be on the minds of Labour Members, and I know that it is for many of them.

I want to address my final comments to my own colleagues. Let us deliver Brexit. Let us leave the EU. Let us not, like Samson, bring the temple crashing down around us. Purity is never a fully achieved state beyond the womb, so let us compromise and work together right now to deliver on the referendum promise. Let us protect jobs and let us move forward, because if we do not, we are in serious danger of creating fissures in this country so deep that we will never be able to close them.

6.52 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I am in no doubt that this is the most serious matter I am ever likely to vote on while serving in this House. It is crystal clear from the speeches that we have heard from hon. and right hon. Members right across the House, before and after the Christmas break, that the Prime Minister's Brexit deal does not command a majority in the House. Furthermore, I do not believe that it commands a majority of support in the country. Today I want to lay out exactly why I cannot in all good conscience vote for this deal. The bottom line is this: I will not vote for my constituents to become poorer. I became an MP—as I am sure the majority of Members did—to improve the lives of all those living and working in my constituency. To vote for a proposal that would fundamentally undermine that notion would be a dereliction of my duty to my constituents as their Member of Parliament.

I fully appreciate that the Prime Minister has an incredibly difficult task to fulfil. There is no easy way to reconcile the 52% with the 48% while also reaching an

agreement that the EU27 and this House can agree on. Sadly, however, the Prime Minister has left us facing the worst of both worlds. We would be outside the European Union and economically weakened, but having to accept EU rules on which we would have little or no say. This deal does not please the 52% or the 48%. In truth, it seems to please no one at all.

There is little point in revisiting the events of the past three years, but I feel it is important to outline how I came to this position. I was not a Member of this House when the decision was taken to hold the referendum in 2016. Indeed, I was first elected only 49 days before the referendum took place. It goes without saying that I think David Cameron's decision to gamble the future of our country and the stability of our Union to settle an age-old row within the Conservative party was an act that was as shameful as it was reckless. Following the referendum, I respected the result of the vote by going through the Division Lobby to trigger article 50. For me, that was a turning point. At that point, the Government could have sought real cross-party consensus among Members from all parts of the United Kingdom on negotiating a way forward. Instead, they have sought to subvert this House and the views of the devolved Administrations in Wales and Scotland at every turn.

Then of course we had the 2017 general election, when the Prime Minister, now infamously, said to us, "nothing has changed". That may have been as true of the cruel austerity this Government have inflicted and continue to inflict on our communities as it has been of this Brexit deal. However, something did change at this point, which was that the British public simply said no: "No, we're not going to give you a majority so you can bulldoze your hard Brexit through. You need to work together in the name of the national interest to find ways forward that will enable our country to prosper."

The Prime Minister could have worked with my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) to ensure the deal answered Labour's six fundamental tests. These tests were indeed a high bar to set, but that is for a simple reason: Labour Members are not interested in securing a deal at any cost. Instead, we are committed to ensuring that our constituents in every corner of the United Kingdom, including my constituents, will be better off in the future than they are today.

More than 18 months on, in one regard at least clearly nothing has changed. The Prime Minister remains hellbent on selling this botched deal, which neither honours the referendum result nor answers the concerns of the 48% of people who voted to remain. Leading British entrepreneur and star of "Dragons' Den" Deborah Meaden recently said, and this struck a chord with me:

"How did we end up here? I warn against this when doing deals all the time. Ending up accepting a position you would never have accepted at the start simply because you are intent on completing the deal".

This comparison is a powerful one.

I would never be one to second-guess the electorate, but Members across the House have to ask themselves: if this deal and all its implications had been presented as the official leave campaign back in 2016, can they be confident we would still have had the same result? I do not think we would have, but that is what we are being asked to vote on. We are being asked to vote for something that supposedly honours the referendum result.

[Chris Elmore]

When we delve deeper and take a look at the impact this would have on people across my constituency, it becomes clear that this is not a situation I can accept on their behalf. Let us take manufacturing, which plays a key role in my constituency and across Wales, with 143,000 people employed by the manufacturing industry in Wales alone. Whether it is insulation, toilet paper or parachutes, they are all made in my Ogmores constituency. The automotive sector is another large employer in my constituency. Those involved have repeatedly shared that their operations have already suffered as a result of uncertainty about future trading arrangements. I have also spoken to many farmers in my constituency, and they are worried about the future of their exports, with 90% of Welsh lamb currently being exported to countries in the EU. I fail to see how this withdrawal agreement provides any certainty for people living in Maesteg, Llanharan, Pencoed or for anyone else in my constituency that the industries that provide their income will have the certainty they need.

The political declaration is nothing short of a wishlist, which binds us into years of further wrangling, using resources that we could divert to investing in the Welsh economy. Investing in projects such as the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon, the long-awaited rail electrification beyond Cardiff and, indeed, all the thousands of projects across Wales that are supported by EU funding would be a far better use of our time and money and would be of far greater benefit to the people of Wales than the further uncertainty we have now been promised by this Government.

Indeed, we still have not had answers from Ministers about what will happen after 2022 to the £600 million of EU funding that supports businesses and projects across Wales to thrive. I invite Ministers to explain to the House today what will happen to this funding. If they fail to do so, they simply cannot argue that my constituents and Wales as a whole will be better off after Brexit. But, of course, we have not actually had any Ministers stating that the UK will be better off under this deal. The Government of the day are trying to sleepwalk us into a situation where we will be worse off and, to use the famous phrase, we will not be taking back control.

I know that 52% voted leave and 48% voted remain in 2016, but I can tell all Members another certainty about the so-called will of the people: not one of the 52% or the 48% voted for this. In my constituency—whether in relation to the nearby automotive industry, the steel industry, the public sector, the agricultural industry, shop workers, our pensioners or, might I add, our young people, who have had no say in all of this—I have yet to be presented with an argument from any single Government Minister that gives me confidence that this deal will make them better off or improve their lives.

Any Member, including your good self, Mr Speaker, will know that I am one of the Members who is a fan of procedure in this House and, indeed, of our unwritten constitution. I proudly sit, perhaps nerdily, on the Procedure Committee. If the Prime Minister is unable to get this deal through Parliament on Tuesday, it is constitutionally right that there should be a general election to let the country decide how Parliament and the country itself moves forward. If a Government—any Government through history—cannot command a majority in this House on their flagship piece of legislation, they must fall.

However, if we are unable to achieve that because of another of David Cameron's ridiculous legacies, it is only right that with Parliament in deadlock, we put the question back to the people and let them decide. Parliament is sovereign, but we answer to the people. If we are unable to break the logjam, there remains no option but to let the public across all the nations that make up our great United Kingdom have a say.

Throughout this process, the Government have treated this House with contempt, they have treated the devolved Administrations with contempt and, above all, they have treated the communities we all represent across the United Kingdom with contempt. The Prime Minister's delay before Christmas, which stopped Members like me speaking on the day the withdrawal debate was withdrawn, treated me with contempt. Opposition Members are sick of the nonsense from the Government.

I worry about what is happening in this country, because of the division, insecurity and uncertainty that members of the Government and the Prime Minister are placing on the British people. We have seen that just this week. The change in political discourse that we have seen over recent years is, of course, not unique to the United Kingdom. From the election of President Trump to the rise of the far right across Europe and the continuing threats to peace around the world, we are living through extraordinary times. Such times call for extraordinary solutions and a fundamental rethink of how we do things.

I am not for one minute saying that there is a silver bullet answer to the problems we face as a society, but I am 100% confident in saying that this deal does not even provide the first stepping stone towards bringing our country together. I know that members of the Government continue to parrot the line that we still wish to be an outward-looking nation, but as with the line about the "country that works for everyone", I have a grave fear that the reality behind the rhetoric will be as apparent as the Government's majority in this House.

If this deal or a similar fudge is allowed to pass through this Parliament, I believe that years from now we will look back and ask ourselves a very simple question: was it worth it? I understand that many Members across the House will have grappled—and still will be grappling—with this question. To those who are still wavering, I say only this: until we can be sure that any deal will make our constituents better off and ensure that the next generation is more prosperous than the one that preceded it, we have a democratic duty to oppose it.

During his first speech to the House, Vernon Hartshorn, Ogmores' first Labour MP who was elected just over 100 years ago, was told by another Member to "go back to Glamorgan" and talk to the miners he was standing up for in his speech. I am sure that Mr Hartshorn took this somewhat flippant advice on the chin. Indeed, he did just that and throughout his time in office continued to fight for the communities I now proudly represent and for the industries that support them. In voting against this deal more than 100 years on, I simply seek to do the same.

7.2 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ogmores (Chris Elmore). We have one thing in common, in that I was also due to

speak on the day the Government pulled the debate. I welcome the opportunity that all Members now have to put their views on the withdrawal agreement on the record in the House of Commons. I strongly disagreed with the Government's decision not to proceed with the debate in early December. It seems that the only progress that has been made since is the progress towards the Brexit date. In respect of the deal, sadly nothing has changed.

I approach this debate as someone who voted remain, but I admit that I was a reluctant remainer. I was unsure what the future would hold if we left the European Union, but as someone from a farming background I saw many problems within the farming industry that were caused by the European Union. I did vote remain in 2016, but I am a democrat and I respect the decision taken by the country.

The Moray constituency, which I represent, was split right down the middle. After more than 48,000 votes were cast, just 122 separated leave and remain. I am acutely aware that no matter how I vote in this place, I will be unable to please all my constituents. Indeed, a combination of my strongest supporters and my fiercest critics will, for a combination of reasons, either wholeheartedly agree or disagree with how I ultimately vote. That is a situation that I and many others right hon. and hon. Members are in.

I also want to say at this point that I commend the Prime Minister for everything she has tried to do to achieve the deal. With the work she has put in, no one can question her determination and drive to ensure that there was a deal on the table. At every point in the process challenges were put in place. There are many aspects of the deal that I support, but there are others that I do not. In this debate, I will focus on the two key areas where I still have the most significant concerns.

The first surrounds the future of our fishing industry. While the number of fishing boats and active crews in Moray is just a fraction of what it once was, there are many people and many communities who still feel extremely strongly about this industry and are passionate in their feelings. I promised, at the election that brought me here and since then, that I could not support a deal that did not deliver for our fishing industry. I maintain that point of view.

I would say, however, that I fully understand why many of my Scottish Conservative colleagues feel they can support the deal with regard to fishing. The ambiguity in the wording suggests that we can become an independent coastal state with control over our waters and over who fishes what, where and when. Unfortunately, that same ambiguity in the wording allows many in the EU to feel they have the opportunity to maintain or even increase their access to UK waters going forward. I welcome the political declaration and what it has to say about the future of fishing, and indeed the Prime Minister's own very strong stance on the issue, but I have to reconcile that with my own belief that if we as MPs vote with the Government next week, we will be rubber-stamping the deal with no guarantee that the promises in the political declaration will ever be achieved or delivered.

At this point, I would like to make mention of the Scottish National party, as we so often do. There are four of its Members here today. I have made my views clear—*[Interruption.]* I am just saying that I thought four was a good number for the SNP to have in the Chamber.

I have made very clear my views on the future of the fishing industry and why I cannot support the deal because of them. It is rank hypocrisy, however, to hear from the SNP that they would stand up for the fishing industry. These are the same SNP Members who say they want Scotland to go back into the common fisheries policy as an independent country. They cannot claim to hate the CFP and then say they will go back in and reform it.

Stephen Gethins rose—

Douglas Ross: I will definitely give way to the hon. Gentleman in a second, but I will do what he did—he gave way to me earlier on the proviso that I would answer his questions, so perhaps he will answer my question if I give way to him. How would the SNP reform the common fisheries policy, and how successful have any other reforms of the CFP been to date?

Stephen Gethins: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I will slightly differ from him in that I will answer his question, while he did not answer mine. I urge him to read the Fisheries Jurisdiction Bill, which would have taken us out of the CFP while retaining our place in the EU and which his party rejected. Now can he tell me: how does our fishing community get the fabulous produce that is produced in his constituency and mine to the markets they need to get to if we are outside the customs union?

Douglas Ross: Mr Speaker, I have to be very careful with my language. I do not want to accuse the hon. Gentleman of misleading Parliament, but he did say, when he accepted my invitation to intervene on me, that he would answer my question and he has singly failed to do that. How would the SNP reform the common fisheries policy if we were an independent nation away from the United Kingdom trying to get back into the European Union? Yet again, SNP Members cannot answer that question, so they should not go back to fishing communities in Moray and across Scotland and say they would stand up for our fishing industry. It is very clear that they would not. There was a very clear decision in many coastal communities: they voted to leave the European Union because of the common fisheries policy. It is very clear that the only party that would take them back into it is the SNP.

Ross Thomson: Does my hon. Friend agree that even Scottish Government analysis shows that one of the biggest winners from Brexit will be the Scottish fishing industry? It is the stated policy of the Scottish Government to stop Brexit, which would throw that sea of opportunity away.

Douglas Ross: I agree with my hon. Friend. That evidence was given to the Scottish Affairs Committee in the House of Commons only today. The Scottish Government produced their own report showing the thousands of jobs that will come to the Scottish fishing industry and the huge boon that that will be to our economy.

The second issue that causes me concern, as a proud Scot in the United Kingdom, is the future of our Union. Many right hon. and hon. Members have passionately outlined their concerns about the backstop, and I echo those fears. We hear that the backstop will be bad for both the UK and the European Union so

[Douglas Ross]

neither side will want to enter into it. As an alternative, some have suggested extending the implementation period. Indeed, the Prime Minister mentioned that at Prime Minister's questions today, and the Secretary of State also said in his opening remarks that the Government now support the proposal for MPs to vote on either extending the implementation period or entering the backstop. For me, however, neither of those options is suitable, because extending the implementation period would cause as many problems as the backstop itself. We would remain tied to the European Union and, for example, the common fisheries policy for longer, abiding by their rules while having absolutely no influence over the policies.

On the backstop, I have found ambiguity where I wanted certainty. Article 132 of the withdrawal agreement allows for a one-off extension of the transition period "for up to one or two years."

That is very particular wording. Why not a one-off extension for up to a maximum of 24 months? I have sought Government legal advice and the opinion of several Cabinet members, and they are also unable to agree. Some believe "up to" means that it could be a few months, while others believe it means up to one full year or up to two full years because any extension by the EU would have to run for a full year's budget. We do not have clarity on that important issue, which the Government are now offering as a solution to concerns over the backstop.

I also note what has been said today about a possible veto for Stormont, but that does not address all the issues with the backstop. Today of all days—the second anniversary of the Assembly collapsing in Northern Ireland—the proposal seems to have been rejected by the DUP, the Ulster Unionist party and Sinn Féin, so it seems to be struggling to garner support anywhere.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I assume that the hon. Gentleman understands how seriously my party takes the backstop with regard to Northern Ireland—I am glad he has mentioned it. He said that he was a reluctant remain voter. Has he now had a road to Damascus experience with regard to Brexit?

Douglas Ross: If the hon. Gentleman listens for another 90 seconds, he will be able to decide whether I have trod that road.

After weeks of wrestling with my concerns about the agreement and seeking assurances over the issues I have highlighted, I have not been able to resolve them. I would like to support the Prime Minister and my Government, but I must also stand up for those who elect me. This is not a decision I have reached quickly or easily, and I am sure that, ultimately, history will judge each and every MP on how we vote and decide whether we got it right or wrong. In doing so, however, history will have the benefit of hindsight—something none of us is blessed with.

My decision comes down to this: my overarching belief that I am elected to this place to be Moray's voice in Westminster, and not Westminster's voice in Moray. I have to put my constituents and my constituency ahead of my party and my Government. It is for that reason, Mr Speaker, that when this debate concludes and you

call the Division on the withdrawal agreement, it will be with a heavy heart but a clear conscience that I will not be able to support the Government and I will vote against this agreement.

7.13 pm

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Two and a half years ago the Prime Minister stood on the steps of Downing Street and promised to tackle society's burning injustices. I for one was glad to hear that speech, and I hoped that it would mark a real change in direction from this Government.

We could debate endlessly the reasons why people voted to leave the European Union, and of course they were varied. For many, however, there was a feeling that the system is broken, that working hard is no guarantee of getting on, and a fear that their children will end up worse off than they are, earning less, finding it harder to secure a decent home. People, rightly and understandably, feel angry about that. However, instead of the radical changes needed to our economy and society, the energy and attention of our Government have been sucked into the black hole of Brexit. Nothing has changed for those the Prime Minister vowed to help. Those injustices still fuel discontent. We have an underfunded universal credit system bringing misery to thousands. We are in the midst of a housing crisis in which many children are living in heartbreaking conditions and vulnerable people are sleeping on our streets—and dying on them, too. None of that will be resolved by leaving the EU. None of that will be resolved by the Prime Minister's Brexit deal.

The leave campaign said we would take back control, but to many of my constituents—to the mother of two who contacted me because she was worried about her family's security after the Prime Minister called her husband a "queue jumper"; to the scientist concerned about jobs in Glasgow once the life sciences industry loses vital European funding; and to the businesses that do not even know on what terms they will be able to sell to our biggest trading partner in three months' time—it feels like we are doing the very opposite.

Five years ago, I fought passionately to keep Scotland in the United Kingdom. Together, we are stronger. Our economy is more successful and our influence is greater. We can pool risks. Our businesses benefit from selling to a larger market, without barriers. We share values. We share our history. We share a desire for our loved ones in different parts of the country to be able to live, work and travel where they want with ease. I am certain that Scotland's best future is in the United Kingdom, and for the same reasons I believe the United Kingdom's interests are best served within the European Union.

In 2017, the people of East Dunbartonshire elected me to fight for Scotland's position in the UK and for the United Kingdom's position in the EU. That is the manifesto I stood on. The Liberal Democrats have led the fight for a people's vote so we keep the benefits of our EU membership and remain a leading and influential member of the world's most successful economic and political bloc. I am delighted that so many MPs from all parties are coming together and working beyond party lines for the public to have the final say on a deal, with the option of keeping our EU membership.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): At the end of the day, if push came to shove—if we came to a crunch—and there was a choice only between Scotland remaining in the UK and Scotland remaining in Europe, which would the hon. Lady choose?

Jo Swinson: We are trying to unpick a Union we have been in for 40 years. Look at the chaos that is causing. The last thing we need is the chaos of trying to unpick a Union of 300 years. If this experience tells us anything, it is how disastrous that would be.

We need a people's vote. Two and a half years on, we know that leaving the European Union will not make us richer. It will not bring in £350 million a week for the NHS, despite what that bus said, and it will not be the "easiest trade deal in human history,"

despite what the International Trade Secretary said. Those were fantasies of the leave campaign. Brexit has become a national embarrassment. It will make us poorer, it will hurt our NHS and it will weaken our Union.

Perhaps strangely, I have recently found myself agreeing with both the former Brexit Secretary, the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), and the Prime Minister. The right hon. Gentleman is right that the Prime Minister's deal is worse than staying in the EU—we would be bound by the rules but lose our say over them—but the Prime Minister is right that this is the best Brexit on offer.

I despair at the arrogance of those, whether they sit on the Conservative Benches or the Labour Front Bench, who claim that they could negotiate a better deal. They live in the land of make-believe. Here in the real world, there are no magic beans to put food on the table and there are no pots of gold at the end of the rainbow. Even my five-year-old could tell them that unicorns are not real. And, frankly, I am horrified by those who are so cavalier that they countenance no deal as a serious option. How lovely it must be to live in an ivory tower, claiming French residency or setting up investment funds in Dublin as the poorest people in society pay the price for an ideological Brexit.

Quite simply, there is no deal that will ever be as good as being members of the European Union; there is no Brexit that works for the whole United Kingdom; there is no Brexit that keeps our economy strong and jobs safe; there is no Brexit that gives us first-class public services. We need a way out of this mess. We should give people the chance to choose, in full knowledge of the Brexit deal on offer, what future they want for their children. I urge the House to vote down this deal and call for a people's vote.

7.20 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called, Mr Speaker. As a Member who was denied the opportunity to speak first time around, I am pleased finally to get the opportunity to speak up and set out my views on this important issue.

On the withdrawal agreement itself, I wish to focus on my main area of concern, which, unsurprisingly, is the backstop. There is no question but that the backstop has the potential to build a regulatory border in the Irish sea beyond that which already exists, although I accept that it would be in areas where divergence is

fairly unlikely, such as industrial goods standards. While I am satisfied that the backstop will not create any new material differences between Great Britain and Northern Ireland on day one, it clearly provides a mechanism for those differences to appear and deepen over time. With no guarantee as to how long the backstop will operate, we will be in a constant political battle between loosening ties with the EU—and with it Northern Ireland—and keeping our country aligned and so failing to take back control in a variety of areas. Given that none of us can see into the future, I am concerned that the backstop will not future proof the integrity of the Union in the long term, if we find ourselves using it for more than a couple of years.

All these issues have been long rehearsed, so I will not dwell on them further, but the fact is that without a backstop there is no deal, and if there is no deal, there is no transition period. That is why I strongly welcome the paper the Government released today, which is probably the most explicitly Unionist statement by a UK Government in at least a couple of decades. I was grateful primarily because of the request I have made of numerous Secretaries of State that the Government continue to work at ensuring a role for the Northern Irish Assembly—and Executive, if it is sitting—as was included in paragraph 50 of the December joint report, in order to ensure regulatory divergence has an element of consent. There are areas, of course, where Northern Ireland would wish to follow new EU rules—for example, to protect the single energy market—but there will be an issue if that is imposed over the heads of the politicians and institutions of Northern Ireland, particularly where it creates new barriers or materially increases an existing barrier with Great Britain. I wonder, however, if the commitment to domestic legislation could be strengthened and whether there is some mechanism by which it could be incorporated into the withdrawal agreement to give the greater certainty that the DUP and the Ulster Unionist party are looking for.

Moving on to the political declaration, Opposition Members are right: it is thin and does not provide a clear pathway to what our future relationship will look like. Instead, it provides a spectrum of opportunities for where we could end up. It seems to point in a direction slightly looser than the Chequers deal, which was a proposal I was quite comfortable with when it was settled on. Ultimately, it kicks the can down the road on all the major issues until the middle of 2020.

We have to be prepared for months of further argument on all these points domestically before we even get to the EU negotiating table, and those negotiations will be tough. I hope the Government have learned some lessons from this first phase of negotiations in terms of how they organise themselves and how they construct a negotiating position and work better with the various groupings in this Parliament so that when they properly start negotiating the second phase, they do so with a strong domestic mandate. That is the only way we will get a meaningful and lasting agreement with the EU that works.

I believe that the Prime Minister has reached the best deal that could have been achieved within the parameters set out in the negotiations. It is a compromise. It is not the deal that I wanted, but its acceptance would bring some certainty and allow us to move forward. It achieves many of the things that the EU said were not on

[Paul Masterton]

the table. It is a bespoke arrangement that maintains industrial tariffs at zero and keeps us closely aligned but without the jurisdiction of the ECJ. Cherries have been picked and cake has certainly been eaten.

I come back to the fundamental point that it is risk to vote down the deal in the hope that something better will materialise. My inbox is full of emails from constituents asking me to vote down the deal but in order to get a range of different outcomes, and they cannot all get what they want. For me, this is not about rolling the dice. It is not about whether I or my constituents who use 38 Degrees can afford for the gamble not to come off and to end up somewhere worse. I have to make this call in the interests of the 90,000 people of East Renfrewshire, where there are wildly different views and personal circumstances. Many of my constituents simply cannot afford for this not to work out. If I were to vote against the deal, and if no other magical solution arrived and we crashed out in March, I would feel wholly responsible for the economic impact on families and communities in my constituency that would result. I fully appreciate the range of views across the House, but I do not personally feel that I could be complicit in that outcome, and I will therefore support the deal on Tuesday.

A vote against the deal is not a vote to stop Brexit—if it were, dozens of my colleagues would not be preparing to bring it down—but, facing all the facts, I think that it seems likely to be rejected. Let me repeat a statement that I have always made, and which, indeed, I made at my selection meeting in 2017: I will not support a no-deal Brexit. In East Renfrewshire, 75% voted to remain in the European Union. Mine is the highest remain-voting seat held by a Conservative. My election was not the result of a promise in our manifesto to deliver Brexit but the result of a promise to protect the Union, and the greatest threat of the Union is a chaotic no-deal Brexit.

If the deal is voted down, I will work with colleagues on both sides of the House to put in place an achievable plan B. I will continue to argue for my preferred alternative of remaining in the European economic area as a member of the European Free Trade Association, with a bespoke customs protocol to protect the position in Northern Ireland. I will argue for a rejection of the political institutions of the EU but a retention of the principles at the heart of why we joined: a Common Market 2.0. We will need the withdrawal agreement for that, but I make a commitment to my constituents to re-evaluate my position with a genuinely open mind.

I urge the Prime Minister, if the deal is defeated, to announce immediately that there will be indicative votes on a series of options, on a free vote, so that we can properly test the mood of the House. In the weeks ahead, I will vote in the manner that secures a sensible and orderly exit from the European Union, and sets us on a pathway to a future relationship that works for East Renfrewshire and every part of our United Kingdom. I will vote—not just on Tuesday, but in every vote thereafter—in the manner that I consider to be in the best interests of this great nation. Ultimately, that is the only way I shall be able to go home from this place and look my constituents, and my children, in the eye, knowing that I did what I felt was right for them and their futures.

There are many Conservative Members who, like me, voted to remain but accept, admittedly reluctantly and with some misgivings, that we are leaving the European Union. We have compromised at every stage of the process to try to find a way to make this work, and the deal before us is as far as I am prepared to go. If some of my colleagues want to blow this up in pursuit of an ideologically purist fantasy, fine—go ahead—but I am done. My patience and good will will be gone, along with the patience and good will of many other Conservative Members.

Would it not be something if, when the history books are written, it emerged that it was owing to the arrogance and belligerence of the hard-line Brexiteers in refusing to compromise that, rather than ending up with this imperfect Brexit, they ended up with no Brexit at all?

7.27 pm

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), and it is an honour to speak in probably the most important debate that has taken place during my time in the House.

Given that there is less than three months before we leave the European Union, we urgently need a good Brexit deal. What we have seen, however, is the Health Secretary almost boasting about buying thousands of extra fridges in which to store vital medicines in case we crash out of the European Union in March. How on earth has it come to this? We have ended up here because of the Government's catastrophic failure to negotiate a good deal in good time. This is a Government who had no real idea what they wanted, a Government who have spent more than two years negotiating with their own Back Benchers, and a Government who have tried to sideline Parliament at every turn.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) has set out the key failings of this deal at length, so I will restate our Labour view very briefly. The deal does not meet our tests, and it certainly does not work for our country. I have always set one key test for any Brexit deal: does it give people in Blaenau Gwent security about their future after the UK has left the EU? This deal fails to do that, mainly because it is bad for trade and jobs. Crucially, it does not guarantee tariff or barrier-free access to European markets for our businesses.

Our economy has millions of moving parts. Many manufacturing industries rely on just-in-time supply chains, with daily deliveries of key components. A no-deal Brexit would cause chaos, particularly for our automotive, farming and food processing sectors. Around 3 million jobs across the UK depend on trade with the EU—100,000 in Wales. Any disruption to supplies or extra hurdles when exporting goods would have an impact on people's livelihoods at the other end. The best way to protect livelihoods is through a permanent customs union and strong regulatory alignment with the EU. That is why a permanent customs union is backed not only by Labour, but by the TUC and the CBI. However, the Government have completely ruled out that sensible step that would protect jobs and the economy. Without it, our businesses do not have the guarantees they need, workers and consumers do not have the assurances they deserve, and my constituents do not have the certainty about their jobs that they should have.

When I speak to my leave-voting constituents, many want the same things. Some still want to leave but recognise that it is complicated, some have expressed sympathy for the Prime Minister, and some have even expressed sympathy for me, but we all see a Government at sixes and sevens, with no obvious way through this impasse. As my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor set out, Labour wants a Brexit that puts jobs first. If the Prime Minister still cannot provide that, we need a general election. If that is not possible, we must consider extending article 50, so that we do not crash out, or a further vote. One thing is for certain, though: I cannot vote for this Prime Minister's mangled deal.

7.31 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) and to take part in this debate, which is historic by any definition. I rise to speak in support of the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration, because my fundamental political belief is in pragmatism. I am no ideologue or absolutist, and the success of the Conservative and Unionist party has been its willingness to adapt to present realities, and to work practically to deliver what is in the national interest.

It is in the national interest for us to leave the European Union in an orderly way, by agreement, and to continue to have close and co-operative relationships with our European neighbours. It is in the national interest for us to achieve a free trade arrangement whereby we can continue to trade freely across borders without the encumbrance of barriers, tariffs and burdensome charges. It is in the best interests of our economy, businesses and jobs for this Parliament to get a grip on the practicalities of our predicament. It is in the interests of our democracy and public confidence in Parliament for this House to deliver on the instruction of the British people that we should leave the European Union. The people's vote of June 2016 answered the question asked of the people by this House. This House must now honour that answer.

We must be careful to ensure that our opposition to the deal is not simply about waiting for a perfect one. What we have on the table before us is not a perfect deal. It is not an entirely comfortable deal, but it is acceptable. Compared with the risk of leaving the European Union in a disorderly way, without an agreement, this agreement is a good agreement. It secures the rights of citizens and provides for a transition period and an orderly departure from the European Union. I would much prefer no backstop, but I accept that the commitments that we have given to the people of Northern Ireland, which we must honour, make a backstop of some form or another an inevitable element of any agreement of any description.

David Simpson: I respect the hon. Gentleman, as he knows. He talks about the backstop and Northern Ireland; he said he will support this agreement, but does he understand the difficulty that we have with the backstop, and the serious repercussions it will have for the future of Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom?

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. The respect that he describes is reciprocated—to him, and indeed to all his colleagues, whom I recognise as Unionists. I do understand the complexities, and a lot of the emotion as well, around the issue of Northern Ireland's place in the United

Kingdom, but I have thought long and hard about Northern Ireland, as well as Scotland, and I believe that the backstop does not have to, and must not, represent a threat to the integrity of the United Kingdom, and that those of us who want to honour the decision of the people on 26 June must work together to make Brexit happen. Otherwise, we will have a crisis of political confidence in this country. There are so many people—sadly, on both sides of this House—who do not want to honour the result the people gave us in June 2016. The alternatives on offer are this agreement, no Brexit, or a hard, no-deal Brexit. I will come back to those points, but I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention. Negotiations are about achieving the acceptable, but very rarely about achieving the perfect. The withdrawal agreement is a predictable compromise that is bearable for both sides—and, crucially, it delivers on the referendum result.

Since shortly after being elected to this House, I have served on the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee. Its latest report revisited evidence we had received 12 months earlier from businesses in strategically critical sectors of the UK economy—automotive, aerospace, pharmaceutical, and food and drink. We collected evidence on their response to the withdrawal agreement, and as we make clear in the report's conclusion, while they would have preferred to have stuck with the status quo, they now need clarity and certainty, and for that reason, their consistent message to the Committee, and to the House through the report, is that we should support the withdrawal agreement. They were also very respectful of our democracy and accepted the result of the June 2016 referendum—something that so many in this House seem unprepared to do. These business leaders were prepared to accept that result, and they were actively seeking to apply a pragmatic approach to an undoubtedly complex set of problems. It is now for us parliamentarians to be pragmatic and deliver the certainty that businesses need, and we do that by supporting the withdrawal agreement.

I am a Unionist; it is core to who I am. I have an unshakeable belief in our country and its peoples, in Scotland and in the United Kingdom, the most successful political union in the history of the world. My warning to colleagues is simply this: nationalism is waiting in the wings. The withdrawal agreement is, in my judgment, no threat to the Union, but no deal is. The threat in Scotland is from the Scottish Nationalists; they want the disruption that no deal would bring, because their nationalism is more important to them than any other issue. They and their leader make no secret of the fact that their single unifying purpose is to break up the United Kingdom, and that transcends every other single issue, economic or social. They want chaos; they want the disruption, because they believe it will give them the platform to launch their bid, much talked about within their ranks, for a second independence referendum, so that they can break up the United Kingdom.

I say to those who advocate no deal, particularly Conservative Members, that to me, as a Scottish Unionist, they exhibit some of the same symptoms as the SNP. Like the SNP, they appear to be prepared to sacrifice jobs and prosperity to realise their version of our future.

Alan Brown: The hon. Gentleman talks about nationalism. Who gave EU citizens the vote in the 2014 referendum? Who gave EU citizens the voting franchise, and who did not?

Stephen Kerr: I am not sure what the hon. Gentleman's intervention amounts to, but I am grateful for his having had the opportunity to make it.

I appeal to colleagues, particularly Conservative colleagues, not to sacrifice the good for the sake of an unrealisable perfect. A second referendum, a no-deal Brexit or a general election all point to more uncertainty, and I cannot support any of those outcomes. We must remember that we voted as one United Kingdom to leave the EU.

My constituents in Stirling are weary of Brexit and of the shenanigans that go on in this House. They want us to move on. They want us to turn the page. Every single one of them wants us to deal with the pressing issues that affect their life and the life chances of their family. Irrespective of who they are or their story, we need to deliver stability and certainty. We need to turn the page. Voting for this agreement is the best way to do that, and I commend it to the House.

7.41 pm

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr)—he is truly an honourable gentleman. He was about to conclude his speech by saying that we voted as one Union and that we should leave as one Union. Well, I am a Member of Parliament for a part of this Union that is going to be left behind, and I will develop that point further. He fairly conceptualises what the aspiration was but, sadly, the faults and flaws of this withdrawal agreement rest in the concluding sentence that he never quite reached.

I, like the hon. Gentleman, am not an ideologue on this issue. Three of my hon. and right hon. Friends are sitting around me, all intently listening, and they know what I have said to them privately. For my whole life, Northern Ireland and this United Kingdom have been a part of the European Union. I have known nothing else, and it has not been a motivating or driving factor for me politically. It did not lead me to come to Parliament to campaign to leave.

I campaigned, very enjoyably, with the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) in my constituency of Belfast East during the 2016 referendum. I proudly voted leave because I was frustrated by the fear, the threats and the intimidation from those who said, "If you don't do what you're told, Northern Ireland will descend back into chaos. If you don't do what is expected of you, the peace process is in jeopardy." I found that line offensive.

I campaigned for a leave vote believing there was aspiration in what was being outlined, and believing that the people of this country engaged with that aspiration. Today, motivated not by leaving the European Union but by Unionism, I find it offensive that we have a Government, a Parliament and neighbours in the European Union who want to undermine our precious Union. It is deeply disappointing and it is not where we should be. It goes against every grain of my political ideology and it goes against the grain of the Prime Minister's expressed political ideology.

The Belfast agreement has been mentioned quite a few times in this debate by Government and Opposition Members of Parliament. The hon. Member for Stirling, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell)

and the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) all talked about the Belfast agreement. The Father of the House, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), indicated that the Belfast agreement—that hard-fought document for peace—contains a commitment to an open border in Ireland. It simply does not. I will give way to any Member of Parliament who wants to explain to me where that provision is in the Belfast agreement. It is not there. It is based on mutual respect, interconnected co-operation and better relationships between the people of Northern Ireland and the people of the Republic of Ireland.

What has gone wrong in this withdrawal process? What fundamental problems has the Prime Minister made? The first was to believe the political aspirations of others over what her own head should have told her. The Belfast agreement does not preclude a border on the island of Ireland. There is a border on the island of Ireland. We have differentials in duty rates. We have physical infrastructure. It was a mistake to believe that the aspiration to have no hard border on the island of Ireland meant that there should be no infrastructure whatsoever, because there is infrastructure today. There is this fanciful notion of cameras being attacked or any infrastructure being subject to vandalism or worse, but it is there today. There are cameras right across the main roads and arterial routes that take people from Northern Ireland to the south. We have different currencies and we implement different rules and laws. We have smuggling as a consequence of the fact that we have tariff differentials. As a former Minister in the Northern Ireland Office, the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) knows that full well, as does the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet.

Secondly, as a country we were wrong to accept the premise that we had to solve the border question without knowing what the trading relationship was going to be. Who decided that that was a good negotiating strategy? How do we provide the answer when we do not know what the question is? Yet these are the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We accepted that premise from the European Union.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I have every sympathy with the position expressed by the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) and understand entirely his motivation, yet for me the major issue is that according to the Attorney General's interpretation of the backstop, in circumstances in which the backstop becomes operational, Northern Ireland must treat Great Britain as a third country for trade purposes. That offends my Unionism. It offends my sense of being part of the United Kingdom. Surely that is the issue that we need to address and resolve.

Gavin Robinson: My right hon. Friend and party Chief Whip is of course absolutely right.

The third and final thing that we were foolish to accept was the notion that there had to be a solution to the border problem because in the event of no deal there would be a hard border. What did we see just before Christmas? The publication of the preparation plans from the European Union and the Dublin Government. What was strangely absent from those

documents? Any provision for border infrastructure. It is a shibboleth. We have spent two years tearing ourselves apart trying to solve an issue that does not amount to a hill of beans.

I have to represent constituents in east Belfast who have a range of opinions, but there is one recurring theme: reject this deal. People say, “Reject the withdrawal agreement because it does not honour the aspirations of Brexit”; “Reject this deal because I want to stay in the European Union”; and “Reject this deal because I want a second referendum.” What is the thing that unifies them all? It is the rejection of this deal.

The White Paper published today does nothing to satisfy the constitutional concerns that we have. This is not just about economics. The withdrawal agreement outlines a scenario where we would not only have to face, but have coerced upon us, further implementation of forthcoming EU regulations, not to mention the 300 that are already there, which were referred to in the Attorney General’s advice and which span 69 pages. These 300 pieces of legislation will apply to Northern Ireland compulsorily. They could apply to the rest of the United Kingdom voluntarily. It is offensive to me as a Unionist that we need an Act of Parliament in this place to recognise our part of this country. That cannot be right. That should not be right.

When the Prime Minister spoke in the Waterfront Hall in Belfast on 20 July 2018, she said that the reality is that any agreement we reach with the European Union will have to provide for the frictionless movement of goods across the Northern Ireland border. We accept that. She went on to say that equally clear is that, as the United Kingdom Government, we could never accept that the way to prevent a hard border with Ireland is to create a new border with the United Kingdom. Sadly, that is what we have.

When the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland spent time before Christmas going around trying to sell this withdrawal agreement, she was filmed on BBC Newsline with a group of ladies from the Resurgam Trust in Lagan Valley who said, “Secretary of State, we don’t like this deal because it treats Northern Ireland differently.” With all the majesty of her office, the Secretary of State said, “It does not treat Northern Ireland differently.” And do you know what? The ladies were not in a position to challenge her authority on the matter. Yet there is no annex for Aylesbury; there is no protocol for any other part of the United Kingdom in this withdrawal agreement. There are no separate provisions, no backstop, no loss of democratic accountability or democratic involvement in the production or the assessment of future regulations on our trading relationships, and the White Paper today does not change that. We can see it in the withdrawal agreement—we can see it in the text—that the UK Government are committing to enforcing, over the heads of the Assembly and its Members if they were to disagree, implementation of rules over which we have no democratic control or say. That is not taking back control. Mr Speaker, you have heard and presided over sessions and speeches in this Chamber, and heard speeches outwith this Chamber, that have continually said that this is about taking back control of our laws, our borders and our money. On that test, this withdrawal agreement fails.

I do not want to extinguish hope, and I will conclude with this: the next number of months will undoubtedly be febrile in this place, as they have been, and within

the country. I do not doubt the sincerity of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and his colleagues and his team in delivering on the referendum commitment. All we ask is that Northern Ireland is not treated differently from any other part of this United Kingdom; that we honour our shared commitments, our shared history, our shared values and our shared aspirations; that we do it collectively; and that we work, post Tuesday, on how best we deliver a workable solution.

7.53 pm

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): I was fortunate to speak in the December debate, so I will do my best to be brief. It is a tremendous honour to follow the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson). He has made a very powerful case and he demonstrates his tremendously strong rhetorical skills.

I listened to the shadow Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union very closely. In his words, he said that this is not a vote about Labour’s proposals; I agree. We are voting on the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration. I agree with the withdrawal agreement and I will be supporting it. I listened to Labour’s desire for a customs union and for a close relationship with the EU to protect our vital Union of the United Kingdom and to protect business and jobs. The shadow Secretary of State agreed with the Government Front-Bench team that there must be a withdrawal agreement to protect citizens’ rights. I echo the words of the Minister for the Cabinet Office that this should not be about semantics. This is not about Labour’s plan, but that is because there have been so many versions of Labour’s plan. The Government have had to come up with a finely negotiated plan, which we are now trying to get through this House.

The shadow Secretary of State said that he had agonised over voting for article 50. That set off a time-limited process, which we had to negotiate with the EU, and here we are; we have nearly arrived at the end of it. During that time, I have never heard a concise, cohesive plan from the Opposition. I can only conclude that despite the deal’s perceived faults, to avoid no deal, and to protect jobs and citizens’ rights, as the shadow Secretary of State agreed a deal should do—and recognising that there must be a withdrawal agreement and, I am afraid, a backstop—Members on both sides of the House, following on from article 50, should support the deal. It is the next step so that we can negotiate our future with the EU and the rest of the world. This is in stark contrast with those who simply do not agree with Brexit, although I respect that that is what they campaigned on.

The SNP rejected Brexit pretty well in the same way that it rejected the result of the independence referendum. SNP Members quote figures of doom and gloom, which is disappointing because we are here to be optimistic. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) said that those who oppose this deal could be the handmaidens of a hard deal—of no deal. This disappoints me, because back in 2014, as a consequence of possible separation, the SNP was happy to negotiate with the EU as a third party. That is in tremendous contrast with the suggestion of Armageddon, when we would have to negotiate with the EU as a third party.

Industries in my Gordon constituency have embraced Brexit. In good faith, they expect elected politicians here actually to get on with it, so I implore the SNP and

[Colin Clark]

others who reject Brexit to think again, to deliver on what we pledged and to respect the Brexit referendum with a deal that works for business and jobs. These industries want us to make progress and move on to the next step, because the political declaration leaves a great deal of scope. There are not many Members present on either side of the Conservative side of this debate, but the political declaration would allow scope for a deal that would very much accommodate what both sides of the debate on the Conservative Benches and the Opposition are arguing for.

The Government are making no-deal preparations. The Treasury Committee heard from the Bank of England that the financial system is robust in all situations. That is a very good thing and that is what the stress-testing was; it was not suggesting that the economy would drop by 10%. We cannot go back. The country has moved on, but it seems that this place is frozen in time while the rest of the country is moving on, including my constituency. I heard on the radio this morning the chairman of the port of Calais, who said that the trucks will keep moving under all circumstances. The rest of the world and the rest of Europe is moving on, while this place is frozen—stuck back in the EU referendum.

We know that the currency markets and the stock market have built-in risk, and that companies have pent up investment in their balance sheets; as we heard on the Treasury Committee, their balance sheets are in rude health. My good and hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) said that he is a pragmatist. Well, I am an optimist and I believe that there can be a positive result from Brexit, so next week let us give the economy and the mood of a nation a lift. Let us support the Prime Minister's deal and get on with Brexit.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his magnificent succinctness, upon which he should be congratulated.

7.58 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): As we have a little more time than I thought we would, before I get into the substance of my speech tonight I just want to start by thanking you, Mr Speaker, for your support with regard to the harassment and targeting of MPs on and around the estate. The abuse that the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) and others on both sides of this House and this issue are being subjected to is truly despicable and genuinely worrying for the stability of our democracy. My worry is that the genie may be out of the bottle and the country may not heal for decades, no matter what happens here. That is why, as others have said, this is probably the most important decision and vote that I will have made in my almost 14 years as an MP, and perhaps may ever make.

I say this as I have had brought to my attention details of a threat that I have just received, calling me “a traitor who should be hung for treason”.

This threat was not even made anonymously. It was made very publicly and traceably, and the man—I believe it is a man because I have seen a photograph of him—who made this threat must know that it is public and easily traceable, which makes this change in our national and political discourse all the more worrying. My crime that

precipitated this threat was to be one of the 213 MPs of all parties to have signed the letter against crashing out without a deal—which we now know, after the vote last night and today, is the will of the majority of Members in this House. I say all this to reinforce the point about the pressure of the political climate that we are all operating in and dealing with. I know that none of us is taking any of this lightly at the moment.

Two years ago, over 62% of people in Sunderland voted to leave the European Union. That is an average across the three Sunderland constituencies. My canvassing told me at the time that the vote in my constituency may have been more in the region of 65% to 67%. The fact that—as I am sure you know, Mr Speaker—Nissan, the most productive car plant in the whole of Europe, is in my constituency explains why that first result on results night had the impact that it did on all of us, not just the three Sunderland MPs. I campaigned and voted to remain in the European Union, and did so because I believed that it was the best decision for the security, social cohesion and economy of the north-east and the country as a whole. Despite this, I recognised that a majority of my constituents had voted to leave, and I set out to respect the result of the referendum.

In that vein, I have largely refrained from commenting publicly on Brexit or speaking about it here—check *Hansard*!—choosing instead to listen to my constituents to understand the result, the vote. So I ran two surveys on Brexit. I took great care to read all of the significant amount of correspondence I received on the topic. I held three large public meetings. I engaged regularly with major employers in my constituency, such as Nissan, Rolls-Royce, BAE Systems and others, to hear their concerns about the process as it has unfolded over the past two years. Many of these companies, in particular, have been unnecessarily placed in a position by this Government where they are already spending vast sums of money on preparations for a no-deal scenario—something that none of us here will ever allow to happen.

Voting, and how one votes, is an extremely personal decision, and it would be wrong of us to claim to know exactly what led people to vote in the way that they did. We do know, however, what issues come up on the doorstep, in emails and letters, and through polls and surveys. We also know what was promised to people. As part of the survey that I ran last year—I ran one straight after the referendum and then one again last year—I asked people who had voted to leave in 2016 to rate a number of factors involved in their decision from “very important” to “unimportant”. The three issues with the highest number of people ranking them “very important” were, first, the principle that decisions about the UK should be taken in the UK; secondly, concerns that remaining would mean little or no choice about how the EU expanded its membership or powers; and thirdly, the incentive of trade opportunities outside the EU. It will be noticed that in this sample, immigration did not make the top three of the “very important” issues. It was an issue that people could choose but was actually near the bottom of the list in the final analysis. Make of that what you will.

During the referendum, people were also promised that voting to leave would mean more money for the NHS, more controls on immigration, and significant trade opportunities around the world—and ultimately that it would mean “taking back control”.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend accept that they were also led to believe by the leave campaign that this would be a very simple process?

Mrs Hodgson: Absolutely. That would be one of the biggest ironies of any of our political careers, as we are all finding out that it is anything but simple. It has got to be the most complicated thing I have ever had to try to get my head around.

Can anyone in this place honestly say that the deal on offer delivers any of the things I have listed? Far from delivering back control, this deal means giving up our voice within the EU and becoming rule takers until at least 2020, at which point the problematic backstop could come into place. The Government's own analysis shows that the economic benefit of further trade deals around the world is minimal, will not come for a while and will be outweighed by GDP falling by around 3.9% under their deal.

With regard to immigration, the Government's recent White Paper failed to provide overall clarity on the issue and included plans to disgracefully label workers on less than £30,000 a year as "low-skilled". That policy will only contribute to existing staffing shortages in the NHS in particular, as it rules out nurses, care assistants and paramedics coming from abroad. As shadow Minister for Public Health, I am well placed to know that the much promised extra money for the NHS—remember the £350 million on the side of that big red bus?—could not be further from the truth.

It is no wonder that all this lack of clarity has left people on both sides of the debate hugely disappointed. Indeed, in recent weeks I have received hundreds of emails, letters and postcards regarding this deal, as I am sure every single Member of the House has. There are people who say that the Prime Minister's deal fails to respect the result of the referendum and would like me to vote against it. There are people who would like me to vote against this deal and then push for a people's vote. There are people who would like to bypass another vote altogether and for us to remain a member of the European Union. There are people who would like a Norway or Canada-style deal, and there are people who believe that we would now be better off leaving the EU without any deal at all.

However, it is astonishingly clear from the percentages of 87% to 13% that very few people would like me to vote for this deal. It is no wonder that almost 60% of those who took part in my survey now think that the electorate, as well as Parliament, should have to approve any deal agreed with the EU before it is ratified.

Almost nothing of what was promised and expected has been delivered. People who voted to leave the EU are not happy with this deal. People who voted to remain in the EU are not happy with this deal, and 87% of my constituents who contacted me about this deal are against it. As such, I will be voting against it when the question is put on Tuesday.

Mr Speaker: What an extraordinarily succinct contribution that was. Of course I am paying attention; I never cease to do so.

8.7 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The public, frankly, are fed up with this, but they are also worried. I have been overwhelmed with correspondence

from my constituents, 69% of whom voted to remain, and many of whom have since changed from leave to remain supporters. They have raised concerns about the treatment of EU nationals and the impact that it will have on the NHS, and they are angry at the tone of the negotiations. Today's carry-on after Prime Minister's questions does nothing to restore anyone's faith in the Government or the Tory party.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): My hon. Friend says that many of her constituents are moving from leave to remain. Is it not the case that many of them are also moving from no to yes on the question of Scottish independence as they watch this play out?

Carol Monaghan: That is exactly what many of the emails say—they voted no in 2014 because of their concern about European Union membership, and now their worst concerns are coming to pass.

I was in Romania last year as part of a parliamentary delegation. Everywhere we went, there was a celebration of Europe and its membership of the European Union. People showed great pride in the country having been a member since 2007. It was notable that one issue raised fairly regularly with the delegation was the brain drain that Romania was experiencing. It was seeing its most talented and very best young people moving to other parts of Europe. We gain benefit from that, and we should continue to.

Let us compare that with the UK. We joined a trade organisation very reluctantly in the early 1970s because we were being economically disadvantaged by not being a member of it. Almost immediately afterwards, there was a referendum to see whether that had been the right decision. Had we really done what we should have done? Throughout that time, we heard about European bureaucracy and about how things were being done to us. There was lots of comedy about it. I remember episodes of "Yes, Minister" in which people talked about sausages and bendy bananas. It is rather ironic that we are talking about the bureaucracy of the European Union and European Parliament when, just along the corridor, we have a whole pile of unelected bureaucrats sitting in this building.

The nature of the arguments in the referendum campaign also caused me deep concern. There were stories about millions going to the EU that could be spent on the NHS instead. There was scaremongering about swarms of migrants. A lot of this was stoked up by the right-wing media, and it was received by a public who were looking for leadership. EU nationals were blamed for the strain on schools, the health service and social housing, but let us be clear that the majority of EU nationals in the UK are of working age and are contributing. Three to 18 is the age of education, but the majority of EU nationals here are not in that age group. The biggest strain on our health service comes from those who are over 70, and that does not generally include EU nationals.

When I first came to London to sit in this place, I had a flat in a building where more than half the flats were empty, because they had been bought up and banked by foreign money launderers who used them as a place to keep their investments. Those flats were empty when homeless people were sleeping out on the streets. That was not the fault of EU nationals. If we want to deal with the housing crisis, we need to build houses for

[Carol Monaghan]

social use—for people who need houses. We need to stop building houses that are going to sit empty in the centre of London.

Alan Brown: On that theme, is my hon. Friend aware that the UK is currently the most unequal country in the EU? The people who financed Vote Leave are the very ones who are going to do their best to make the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. That will be the Brexit dividend.

Carol Monaghan: We know that a no-deal Brexit is going to be economically disastrous. We also know that when an economy is wrecked in such a way, people with money, power and connections are in a position to exploit the situation for their own ends. No doubt we will see that happening if we are stupid enough to leave without a deal.

Following the vote to leave, where was the political leadership? Who was countering the right-wing media? Who was reaching out to the EU nationals here? The answer is that Scotland was. On the very first day after the vote, the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, stood up and said, “You are welcome. We want you. We value you. Please remain. You are our friends, our family and our colleagues.” That is powerful. I and many of my colleagues wrote to every EU national in our constituencies. The majority of them cannot even vote for us in this place, so there was no personal gain for us in doing that. We did it because it was the right thing to do. But what did we see from the Prime Minister? We saw her talking about “queue jumping” by EU nationals, implying that they were cheating their way into jobs, and we now see them being asked to pay a £65 fee to apply for settled status. How can they feel valued with that sort of action?

The biggest issue for me is the position of EU nationals and the loss of freedom of movement—[*Interruption.*] The deal does not protect freedom of movement—not for EU nationals here or for our people moving elsewhere. It does not support that. My husband is an EU national. He spent 17 years in the Royal Navy as a commissioned officer, with two and a half years of that time spent under the ocean, yet he has British nationalists telling him to go home if he does not like things here, and he is not unique in that. The worst thing is the patronising manner in which people have been dealt with. He has been told, “You should be okay.” What? Because he is white and speaks English? We are not interested in being part of a xenophobic society that pulls the drawbridge up behind us.

Our universities have expressed concerns about Brexit. They are concerned about the loss of EU funding, both in Horizon 2020 and in successor programmes. They are concerned about the threat posed to the rich collaborations that are supported and underpinned by freedom of movement. Universities UK has said that over half of all UK-based European Research Council funding is received by non-UK nationals living in the UK. That accentuates the risk that we could lose out on talented and highly mobile researchers.

With the immigration White Paper, the Government said, “Well, if you’re skilled, you’ll be okay.” I have asked a series of written questions about what is meant by high, medium and low-skilled jobs. I have been told

that high-skilled is degree level, medium is A-level or HND level, and low-skilled is GCSE level. However, that is at odds with the salary thresholds that will apply. For early-stage researchers and post-docs or for early-career nurses, teachers and even medics, the definition of skills does not match the salary threshold.

Stephen Kerr: The reality is that what the hon. Lady is describing is actually up for consultation. I am sure that she and other Members, including Conservative Members, will make representations to ensure that Scotland’s interests are looked after in our new immigration laws. She is making a valid point, but she is talking about what will happen, when this is in fact a consultation document.

Carol Monaghan: If the hon. Gentleman looks at the contributions from SNP Members over the past couple of years, he will see that when we have talked about salary thresholds, the message we have sent has been strong, clear and consistent. Salary thresholds do not work, and they specifically do not work in Scotland, where people earn less than in parts of the south-east of England. It would be good if the hon. Gentleman joined us in calling for the scrapping of these salary thresholds.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about the salary thresholds. My experience of dealing with many constituents, who are treated very shabbily by the Home Office, is that they work all the hours God sends and still cannot reach the thresholds to get their families to come over from other countries. I have a constituent who missed out by a matter of pounds and was not able to bring over their family.

Carol Monaghan: My hon. Friend confirms the point that I was making.

I want to move on to Euratom. Since the vote in 2016, I have regularly raised issues about Euratom. When I have asked about the arrangements for importing radioactive sources for medical scans and cancer treatments, I have been accused of scaremongering. Let us be clear: Euratom regulates nuclear facilities and materials. Outside Euratom it is still possible to carry out such regulation, but Euratom also guarantees a supply of medical radioisotopes. There are only a few reactors worldwide that actually produce them. They have short half-lives and have to get from production to use point very quickly, and Euratom guarantees that. What arrangements is the UK putting in place to make sure that we can get them here very quickly? If we do not have them, the 500,000 diagnostic scans and 10,000 cancer treatments that take place every year will not be able to happen. That is fundamental, and we have not had answers. Articles 79 to 85 of the draft agreement talk about Euratom, but there is nothing in it about future supplies and no answers about future arrangements.

I will not be voting for this deal because of the impact on our universities and our research collaborations, because we have not had any answers about the medical radioisotopes that are currently supplied by Euratom and because of the economic dangers to Scotland in being removed from the single market and the customs union but, ultimately and fundamentally, because of the removal of freedom of movement, which we on the SNP Benches hold so dear.

8.19 pm

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan). I do not agree with much of what she says on the Union—I value the Union of the United Kingdom—but I do agree with her about this deal. I think this deal will make our people poorer, guarantee that we have less money to spend on the NHS than what was promised, and cede sovereignty from this country to the European Union—a deeply ironic state of affairs and not what was promised. I also believe that the deal is increasingly making our country a laughing stock across the world—something we cannot afford to be in these dangerous times.

I do not want to talk too much about economics today. Such discussion has characterised this debate and has perhaps been one of its great flaws. Indeed, one of the great flaws of the attempt to win the referendum for remain was to concentrate so much on the economics. I want to talk a bit more from first principles about the role of Britain within the world and what the deal will mean for us. As well as affecting the economic future of generations in this country, the deal will determine the role of our country in the world. It will affect whether we fulfil our historic mission to be a leading country in the world or resile from it.

I fear that this Government, whose 30-year civil war is the cause of the mess we find ourselves in, and who cling so desperately to power, will not have the capacity or wherewithal to rise to the challenge we face. Instead, they prefer self-deception and jingoism. They would rather peddle delusions about Britain after Brexit than face up to the real problems that gave rise to it, still less find solutions that might resolve them. The country cannot afford, and this House cannot afford, to indulge the fantasists in any corner of this House for a minute longer.

We are just 79 days away from Brexit and it is time—it was time long ago, truth be told—to tell the truth to the country about Brexit, because there is no global Britain after Brexit. It is a con, Mr Speaker, on your family and on mine. Brexit is a retreat from the globe, starting with disengagement from our part of it. It is a recipe for isolation and an abdication of our responsibility within our continent of Europe. At the very moment when Britain is most needed, when our influence and power might provide ballast and security for a Europe that is squeezed on the one hand by a demagogue in the White House and on the other by a despot in the Kremlin, and at a point when an expansionist China is looking hungrily at all corners of the world—a moment when we could be providing our traditional role within Europe and the world—our myopic response has been to look inwards and backwards, while lying to ourselves and our people that we are doing the opposite: that we are returning somehow to our roots in empire and, to use that dreadful, meaningless phrase, “going global”. It is a claim as facile as it is false.

The reality is that this generation—my generation—of politicians has failed our people. We have failed to rise to the challenges of our age, either within this country or, increasingly it seems, within the world. We have failed to offer an honest analysis of and realistic solutions to the problems of our country and the problems across the globe. The root cause of those problems should be clear to us all. In shorthand, it is that economic development in the east and south has created challenges to our

western economies, driving deindustrialisation, inequality and immigration. The sense of loss that my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) said is felt in his community is felt in mine—a loss of status, purpose and opportunity. Globalisation is the shorthand, but the key thing is that there is no shortcut to solving these problems, and Brexit is absolutely not the solution. Brexit will compound all these problems. “Stop the world, I want to get off,” is not a political prospectus or a realistic view of how to run a global, integrated economy.

The nostalgia and nativism that are so evident on the Government Benches may be enough to feed the beast of the European Research Group, but they will not feed our children. Blaming foreigners and immigrants—the other—while hawking sepia-coloured myths of betrayal and loss has been a tried and tested strategy of populists and worse the world over since time immemorial, but we surely know that it is neither right nor real. It is also neither right nor real to offer some misty-eyed romantic notion of socialism in one state, as some in my party attempted to do. The solutions to globalisation lie in collective international actions on taxation, on economic and environmental collaboration, and in the building of a new generation of institutions to deliver security, equality and sustainability in Europe and beyond.

Building walls never works, because the people eventually smash them down. Earlier generations understood that. They learned it the hard way through their experience of war and they built the means to withstand those problems. Our country played a central role in building those institutions, defeating people who would divide us on race, and defending liberal values of equality, freedom, tolerance and democracy. Now, when that project and the institutions we built need to be renewed and reformed, what are we doing in Britain? We are waving the flag and we are withdrawing from the fight. That seems to me to be neither right nor honourable.

Nor does it seem right to saddle future generations with increased debt and further decades of austerity. We are living in a situation of through-the-looking-glass politics when Ministers produce pamphlets that show we are going to cut our economy by up to 10%, while the very next day they deny the reality of their own predictions. We all know the truth. The experts do not get it right to the decimal point, but their ballpark predictions will be right. They said the Brexit vote would devalue the pound and see a diminution of investment in our country. That was true and it will be true that we will see a drop-off, perhaps as much as 10%, if we go down the route of Brexit.

Colin Clark: The hon. Gentleman mentions several statistics, but what about the 500,000 jobs we were going to lose? Does he not agree that the job numbers have actually increased? That was fearmongering. Would he like to comment on the jobs number?

Owen Smith: Jobs have increased; I do not deny that for a moment. I think there are good questions about the nature of those jobs, but the most valuable jobs that have been created under the Conservative Government, such as the manufacturing jobs in the automotive industry, many thousands of which I absolutely concede have been created in recent years, are the precious jobs that are most at risk if we exit with no deal and even if we exit with the bungled deal that is currently before us.

[Owen Smith]

Isolated economies do not prosper. That is an economic fact of life in this integrated modern world. We are proposing, whatever the rhetoric, to isolate our economy from its most important trading partners. It does not make economic sense and it does not make moral sense. Never forget that this Government came to power promising to free future generations from debt. It will not be forgiven or forgotten if they saddle future generations with debt. Nor will it be forgotten or forgiven if my party does anything less than tell the whole truth about Brexit and maintain our opposition to it in principle and in practice. My hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) wrote earlier this week:

“If we thought Brexit was wrong in June 2016, then it is still wrong today - just with more proof.”

He is right. There is no jobs-first Brexit, no Labour Brexit and no better Brexit. I gather the latest iteration is a sensible Brexit. Well, there is no sensible Brexit either. Brexit will eat the jobs and eat the capital, political and financial, that an incoming Labour Government will need to implement the radical programme that my hon. Friends on the Front Bench are rightly advocating.

Any Brexit is irreconcilable with Labour's traditional social democratic mission and its twin foundations of providing equality and freedom. Throughout history, different wings of my party have always understood that those tandem aims were at the heart of what we stand for. Bevan said that there is no freedom without an end to poverty. Crosland said that our job is to pursue equality and freedom. There cannot be one without the other, just as there cannot be a cake-and-eat-it Brexit. If we are to be true to that mission, we surely cannot accept any outcome that will limit the ability of our people to live and work in this country or elsewhere. What have we come to that we have a Prime Minister who tells the country to celebrate curtailing the rights of our citizens to work and live abroad? It is plainly out of kilter with reality, and it is plainly wrong for our people.

Nor should we in Labour give any succour to a policy that is fuelling the hard-right politics of hatred and repression, the enemies of the social democracy that we all believe in, not even if—I wish to emphasise this point—there is electoral advantage for us in so doing. If there is seen to be electoral advantage for our party letting the Tories carry the can for a Brexit deal that diminishes the living standards of our people and that extends austerity such that we might contest an election and win it on that basis, it would be shaming for my party to pursue that strategy. We would be sacrificing the lives and livelihoods of the people we came into politics to represent.

In conclusion, we have to be clear: Brexit is a terrible mistake for our country, and the only way in which we can reverse that mistake is by asking the people to do so. We have had two years of exposure to the failures, flaws and risks that Brexit entails. Now is the moment for my party to show leadership, to lead the people away from the brink of Brexit, to offer up the proposal that we revoke article 50 and then, crucially, to campaign and win a people's vote and to stay in the European Union.

8.31 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith). I very much agree with his

conclusion that we need to consider the suspension of article 50 and go back to the people of this country.

As others have said, the deal before the House is a bad deal for Britain, and the Prime Minister knows that as well as the rest of us. Her own Government's analysis shows that there is no Brexit scenario in which we would be better off as a country, and Opposition Members know that it will be the poorest of our country who will be most at risk of losing out further.

Crashing out without a deal is clearly the worst option before us. The prospect of food price hikes due to tariffs kicking in, the supply of key goods being disrupted, and huge transport delays is profoundly worrying. If the Government had handled negotiations better and Parliament had been allowed an earlier vote on this deal, the Prime Minister could have averted much of the huge costs and considerable uncertainty that the country faces. Companies are already transferring assets and jobs, notably services businesses, particularly those in financial services. Car manufacturing industries that are of huge importance to the midlands and the north, such as Land Rover and Vauxhall, have delayed investment, cut jobs and shifted parts of their operations overseas—and that has happened while we are still in the European Union. Many of us know from discussions with those running our public services in our constituencies that the shortages of staff in many of those services have been exacerbated as EU nationals start to believe that they are not welcome in Britain anymore.

The Government would have us believe that the choice is between their deal and no deal, but as others have said in this debate, that is simply not the case. They could take off the table the prospect of no deal. I believe that this deal will be defeated, and I hope that when the Prime Minister comes back to the House, she will move very quickly to rule out the possibility of no deal.

Among the many problems with the Prime Minister's deal is the fact that we are being asked to commit huge sums of money—£39 billion and upwards—but we will be a rule taker. We will have no say on rules that will continue to have a profound impact on businesses and jobs in the UK. Crucially, none of the detail about our future relationship with our closest trading allies has been locked down. The fact that we have not even begun seriously to negotiate the future trade deal between the UK and the European Union is deeply worrying.

In my seven years as a Minister, from 2003 to 2010, I worked on trade negotiations. I attended numerous meetings of EU Trade Ministers, made many visits to the World Trade Organisation headquarters in Geneva, attended many meetings with ministerial colleagues from around the world and had many conversations with businesses here in the UK, trade experts and non-governmental organisations. Trade deals are immensely complex. Negotiations take years. Each trade deal strand has implications for other trade deals. The House should not underestimate just how lengthy and complex the negotiations with the European Union would be before any signing ceremony for a UK-EU trade deal.

Turning the non-binding wishlist that is the political declaration into a legally binding trade treaty between the EU and the UK will certainly take longer than the 21 months claimed. It is true that trade experts disagree on how long it will take, but Professor Alan Winters of the independent UK Trade Policy Observatory thinks a

further two or three years at a minimum is inevitable. Uncertainty will become the new normal for export and import businesses here in the UK.

Not only are the issues at the heart of the future trade deal between the EU and the UK complex, but the process of reaching an agreement will change after exit; the exit agreement has to be approved only by a qualified majority vote, but the trade deal would require the agreement of every EU state, each with its own specific interests. The French have already made clear that they will have demands on fishing, and Spain has made it obvious that it will have Gibraltar once again firmly in its sights.

There is then the question of services, which others have mentioned. Let us take just one example: although reform is still needed to the financial services industry, it is critical to our country's future, brings huge financial benefit, particularly to my constituents and others in London, and creates thousands of jobs, yet there is little commitment in the political declaration to the UK and the EU trying to provide each other with significant market access for financial services. That is deeply worrying.

Quite apart from any other considerations, it is difficult to see why the UK would be offered better treatment in a trade deal than EU's existing partners, given the most favoured nation protocol. The EU would be required to extend the same better offer to those partners, without receiving anything in return. It is a dangerous myth to claim that there are huge new trade deals just around the corner to offset the economic damage that people on most sides of the debate accept—at least privately—would be the consequence of our leaving the EU. No country will want to negotiate a trade deal with the UK until we have settled our future relationship with the EU. Indeed, 90 countries already have deals with the European Union that give them a back-door route into the UK market. Worse, the European Union will be in a very strong position in trade negotiations with us, because the backstop will protect its £95 billion surplus in goods while doing little to help us get a good deal on services, where we have the surplus. That backstop will kick in years from now unless we can agree terms.

Once upon a time, a trade deal with the US, too, was touted as easy to agree, the benefits being said to be more generous than anything the EU could or did offer. In my experience, the Americans fight even more ferociously than the French for their trade interests. Donald Trump will demand more access to the NHS for big American companies, and significant reductions in our health and safety standards; chlorinated chicken will be just the start.

Brexiters will not admit—to his great credit, the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly) mentioned it—that every trade deal Britain seeks to negotiate on its own will require us to grant immigration access to our country. India will insist on it, Latin America will insist on it, and Europe will insist on it, too.

It is not just the lack of any serious detail about our future trading relationship that I worry about. The country should take seriously the warnings of the cross-party Home Affairs Committee about the implications of the Government's deal for our future security. The lack of progress in locking down the detail about our future relationship with other security services via Europol, about the European arrest warrant and about how security will operate at our borders in the future is a significant concern.

All the great promises made by the different parts of the Conservative party have, one after another, been revealed to be little more than the emperor's new clothes. The Prime Minister promised that a deal would be easy to get, yet here we are, years off from knowing what our future relationship with the EU will look like. There will not be millions of pounds extra each week for the NHS as a result of leaving. The claim by the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) that there would be no downside to Brexit looks even less believable two years on.

Given that the facts have changed, how divided the House and the country are, and how much more we know now, I remain firmly of the view that we will have to go back to the people. It is not an abuse of democracy to have a further referendum. It would be elitist to think that we in the House know best. The divisions in our country are not a reason not to go back to the people. If anything, they are a major reason why we should. Every serious alternative scenario to the Prime Minister's deal would take time to achieve. To allow those discussions to take place and to allow serious parliamentary discussion, the Prime Minister should bring forward urgent legislation to extend article 50 for at least 12 months. Every careful independent analysis of the benefits and risks of Brexit overwhelmingly reveals that our country will be weaker; we will be weaker with the Prime Minister's deal, and certainly weaker without any deal. I will not vote to make our country weaker.

8.41 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas).

I was planning to deliver this speech on 10 December last year, when, three days into the debate on the withdrawal agreement, the Prime Minister suddenly announced that she was going to defer the meaningful vote and seek reassurances from Europe over the issue of the Irish border backstop. So here we are, one month later, and what has changed? It would appear very little. The Leader of the Opposition asked the Prime Minister on 10 December if she would be bringing

“back the same botched deal...in January”,

which

“will not change its fundamental flaws or the deeply held objections right across this House, which go far wider than the backstop alone.”—[*Official Report*, 10 December 2018; Vol. 651, c. 26.]

It would seem that she has done just that. Nothing has changed and the Government have just wasted 30 days.

Nevertheless, in my constituency of Heywood and Middleton, the Prime Minister appears to have achieved what seemed impossible two and a half years ago: she has united both sides of the referendum debate in opposition to her botched deal. Although 60% of my constituents voted to leave, both leavers and remainers in my constituency are urging me to vote against this deal. Of the hundreds of messages I have received, the majority are asking me to vote against, with only around 20% being in favour.

The British people were promised at the time of the referendum that Brexit would deliver a strong and collaborative future relationship with the EU; the exact same benefits we currently have as members of the single market and customs union; fair management of migration; rights and protections defended and maintained;

[Liz McInnes]

national security protected and cross-border crime tackled; and that it would work for all regions and nations of the UK. Those are Labour's six tests, which are routinely mocked by the Prime Minister and the Conservative party. Those six tests merely set out what the electorate were promised during the referendum campaign. People were told that life in the UK would be vastly improved by leaving the EU, so our six tests actually set a pretty low bar in just asking that the British people be given what was promised—no more and no less. So when the Tories mock our six tests, are they really pouring scorn on the electorate for being so gullible as to fall for the promises of the leave campaign?

EU nationals living and working in my constituency have voiced to me their concerns about their future in the UK. My constituent Regine May, who has worked as an academic for the last 20 years educating our students, expressed her outrage to me at being described by the Prime Minister as a “queue-jumper”, and a staff member at Middleton library asked me whether she would still be able to travel to and from the UK using her German passport. The withdrawal agreement provides no clarity and no reassurance, and nor does the invitation issued over the Christmas period to EU nationals to “pay to stay” under the EU settlement scheme. The Government try to dismiss those and other concerns as “Project Fear”, but they need to wake up to Project Reality.

We have seen unseemly jostling for the Tory leadership as a result of the chaos that has been caused. The Prime Minister has survived a leadership challenge, and the Government have survived being found in contempt of Parliament. It seems that the Government's policy is to carry on regardless. Over the last month the media have been full of possible scenarios that would result from the deal's being voted down, and the Prime Minister has supposedly been on a charm offensive to persuade people to back it, but the message seems to be that we should accept a deal that is known to be flawed and that there is no plan B. Last month one of her Brexit Ministers, the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), asserted that

“a responsible Government plans for everything.”—[*Official Report*, 6 December 2018; Vol. 650, c. 1051.]

However, this Government are saying, “Accept this deal: it's the only game in town.” It would seem that the oft-repeated mantra of no deal being better than a bad deal has morphed into “Any old deal, no matter how flawed, is better than no deal.”

In December the all-party Exiting the European Union Committee published a unanimous and scathing report on the Prime Minister's deal, saying that many of the most important questions about the UK's future relations with the EU had been left unanswered. The Chairman of the Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), said that the deal lacked clarity and represented a huge step into the unknown, and nothing has changed since then. The Committee concluded:

“There are no realistic, long-term proposals from the Government to reconcile maintaining an open border on the island of Ireland with leaving the Single Market and Customs Union.”

The deal does not protect rights at work, and only one paragraph in the political declaration refers to protecting rights and standards, which demonstrates

the low priority that the Government have given to that throughout the negotiations. The TUC has declared that it cannot support a deal that fails to protect rights at work, jobs, and peace in Northern Ireland. It has drawn attention to the weakness of the political declaration, and the fact that it is not even legally binding. Working people have no way of knowing what the UK's future relationship with the EU will really look like, and what impact it will have on their lives. The only certainty seems to be that this Brexit deal will make the country poorer, as is shown by the Government's own economic analysis, with GDP falling by about 3.9% and every region in the UK being worse off.

The UK's overseas territories—places such as The Falklands—did not have a vote, but they will feel the impact of decisions made here in Parliament. They are very concerned about the prospect of crashing out with no deal. Paying tariffs on their trade with the EU will have a major impact on their economies. It would be an act of gross irresponsibility for a Government even to countenance the possibility of no deal, but rejecting this Brexit deal does not give the Government licence to crash out without a deal. It is high time that the Prime Minister stopped threatening such an irresponsible act, which is definitely not in the national interest.

This deal pleases no one. In December I believed that it would be irresponsible of me to endorse it and that I should not support it, and nothing has changed since then. I will not be bullied into accepting this botched deal, because the issue is too important: our country's future, workers' rights, jobs, the economy, security and our international standing are at stake.

8.49 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The proceedings following Prime Minister's questions today highlight yet again the vacuum at the heart of the Brexiteer argument in this place. Having argued until they were blue in the face that Brexit was an exercise—both in the country and in this Parliament—in taking back control, when they were faced with this Parliament taking back control, they were incandescent with rage. That highlights just how hollow their rhetoric is.

A previous Prime Minister naively foisted this vote on a public that had become deeply distrusting of politicians after decades of perceived betrayal and years of brutal austerity measures. Upon defeat, he then ran away with his tail between his legs, abdicating any responsibility whatsoever for the mess that he had created. In any event, the public's patience with this project ran out some time ago, and millions now see it for what it is: utterly pointless and damaging to the fabric of society.

We are now well into January and drawing perilously close to 29 March, but we now have more questions before us than we had in 2016. The Government have tried everything they can to force us into a deal or no-deal scenario, hence the extraordinary scenes in the Chamber today. The right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), claimed that supporting the Prime Minister's deal is a matter of honour, but it is a tad rich for the Secretary of State for International Trade to lecture us on honour, so let me tell the House what a matter of honour is. While the Tories and the Labour party are in complete disarray, the SNP is the only main party in this place that can point to a consistent, collective and coherent position, proudly representing Scotland's overwhelming vote to remain in the European Union.

As evidenced twice in two days, the SNP and many other Members across the House will not let this Prime Minister hold a gun to our heads. We will not be forced to choose between chaos and disaster. Many Members on both sides of the House are angry at how the Government have treated this place, and the desperation exhibited earlier by the Government and the hard Brexiteers in trying to stop Parliament taking back control exemplifies that arrogance. It is clear to me and, I am sure, most people in here that a minority of the public now want to leave the European Union. Indeed, up to 70% of Scots would now vote to remain if they were given another chance.

This Government's current course of action has been taken only because the Prime Minister is running scared from her own party. Make no mistake, however: the Leader of the Opposition is now as much to blame for the position we find ourselves in. Many Labour Members and a large majority of Labour voters would like him to commit to a second referendum, but he stubbornly refuses to do so. As my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) alluded to earlier, that comes despite the good work of the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer). He has managed to inch the Labour party towards a common-sense position, but he is struggling to get the party over the line. That just shows that you can lead the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) to water, but you cannot make him drink. Perhaps he should consider what is in the interests of working people across the UK and in his own constituency.

We are 79 days away from a catastrophic no-deal Brexit that would make people poorer, but our two largest parties are leading the public on a merry Brexit dance, with Labour continually doing electoral maths on the back of a fag packet. If we crash out of the EU, the Tories and Labour will be shamed for decades to come. The right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is not here this evening, but he claimed that a no-deal Brexit is closest to what the public voted for. What an utterly ridiculous assertion that is when leading leave campaign figures such as Daniel Hannan said that no one was talking about leaving the single market; when Nigel Farage repeatedly asked the public whether it would be so bad to be like Norway—I do not need to remind the House that Norway is a member of the single market; and when the former Foreign Secretary himself said:

“I would vote to stay in the single market. I'm in favour of the single market.”

Let us not hear these self-same people trying to rewrite history.

I have to say that looking back I believe those of us who advocated a remain vote were too complacent. Yes, the remain vote was clear and decisive in Scotland, but considering the relentless negativity and xenophobia displayed for years by papers such as the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express*, we did not do enough to stand up for the benefits of the EU, and in particular not enough was done to stand up and support freedom of movement.

Every Member of this House has had the option to travel freely across Europe, and many have enthusiastically grasped the opportunity to work and build relationships across the continent. It is impossible to articulate just how valuable this freedom is. My generation, who have

largely grown up not knowing anything else, grew complacent. It is such a positive and common-sense policy that we took it for granted; our children, including my daughters, might not have that same chance and opportunity. Undoubtedly one of the biggest tragedies of Brexit is that we are ripping away the opportunities that freedom of movement provides from today's young people. Given that younger voters voted overwhelmingly to remain, this would be an intergenerational betrayal unlike anything we have seen before.

If we end freedom of movement we will also be bringing an end to further contributions to our society from many EU citizens who might otherwise have chosen to make their homes and lives here. Migrants from across the EU make our NHS function, start businesses and enrich our culture.

With a mind to today's proceedings and next week's immigration Bill, I asked people on my Facebook page to give me their experiences of freedom of movement. One of the contributions I had back was from someone called Ivan. He said his life had been defined by freedom of movement. He was born in Spain 43 years ago. During medical school, he studied in Spain and Italy, but after graduating he got a placement in Ninewells hospital, Dundee. He has been working for the Scottish NHS since 2002. He has worked all over the country: Montrose, Perth, Dundee, Vale of Leven, Crieff, Kirriemuir, Arbroath. Since 2006 he has been living in Glasgow and is currently medical officer for the Drug Court.

Ivan's family has also benefitted from that freedom. His wife is Irish, living in Glasgow since studying at uni in the late '90's. Moreover, in 2010 she started working in Copenhagen for the United Nations. Their first daughter was born in 2011 in Denmark. Then after moving back to Glasgow their youngest daughter was born at the Queen Elizabeth University Hospital maternity unit in 2014. The oldest has a Spanish passport, the youngest an Irish one, but both girls are Scots through and through. And so is Ivan—he is a card-carrying SNP member.

Ivan wanted me to explain why he is now an SNP voter and member, previously having voted Labour. He has been working in addictions for 13 years and he started to see two contrasting positions. For example, Alan Johnson sacked David Nutt a few years ago from the chair of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs for presenting reputable facts that were not to his political advantage. On the other hand, Ivan saw the Scottish Government trying to implement minimum pricing against public opinion, mass media backlash and two of the strongest lobbies in the nation: the supermarkets and the drinks industry. Ivan says that if he sees a political party willingly going against its own political interests because it believes it will benefit the whole nation, he will pay attention—and that was before this Brexit debacle. In Ivan's team there are doctors from Hungary, Germany, Spain and Italy. His name is Ivan Fernandez Cabrera. To me, and to the vast majority of Scots I am sure, Ivan and his family are every bit as Scottish as my family, my colleagues on these Benches, and even colleagues on the Benches opposite. I am grateful for the huge contribution he and his wife have made to life in Scotland.

We have been strong on this issue. The SNP is clear: we will always stand up for EU citizens and everything they do for our society. Some in the leave campaign

[Gavin Newlands]

cheated and very probably broke the law to deliver that 2016 result, and I will concede that they were extremely effective in selling their version of Brexit to the public, but this vision was an abject lie at best and dog-whistle racism at worst. I am instantly reminded of Nigel Farage standing in front of the infamous “Breaking point” billboard, which conflated the refugee crisis with the EU and treated desperate human beings escaping conflict and seeking safety as if they were a threat. Scotland rejected this bleak, insular vision, and instead chose a different approach: Scotland voted to retain its place in Europe, a fact this Government have tried their level best to ignore since day one.

England and Wales voted to leave the EU and, should the Government get something through, are getting what they voted for. Northern Ireland voted to remain and, for good reason, may have a compromise, which we respect; yet Scotland is being dragged out against its overwhelmingly expressed will and without any of the caveats afforded to Northern Ireland.

The Scottish Government proposed the compromise of staying in the single market and customs union, which would mean retaining many of the economic advantages of being in the EU while leaving its political aspects. Again, this was ignored but, to be fair, Scotland is used to being ignored by Westminster. The actions of the Prime Minister and her Government since the EU referendum are perhaps the best example of that wilful ignorance.

The UK has lurched from crisis to crisis for years. It is clear that the UK is broken and that no Westminster Government will be able to make meaningful strides towards a brighter future, which leaves one inescapable conclusion: that to ensure good governance and the chance of building an economy and a society that is open to the world, tolerant and gives everyone the opportunity to flourish, Scotland must become an independent country.

9 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): This has been an interesting and passionate debate, with a wide range of views expressed. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster may be in a small minority among those who have spoken, but nevertheless, I know he is up for the debate.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) told us earlier that nothing much has changed since the debates before Christmas but, of course, one significant thing has changed. I am happy for the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and me to be winding up this debate, but the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland was due to speak in the original series of debates. The change is a matter of great regret given that Northern Ireland, which did not figure very much in the referendum—although I recognise that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster spoke in Northern Ireland numerous times—has now come to be probably the single most dominant issue. I propose to devote the bulk of my remarks to the situation in that part of the United Kingdom.

It is a shame and a mistake that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has not been with us at some point in today's debate, and I hope the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster will take that message back. It is

obvious that, although a no-deal Brexit would be very difficult for my constituents in Rochdale and for constituents across this United Kingdom of ours, it would be potentially catastrophic in Northern Ireland.

I recognise there are different views, and hon. Members from Northern Ireland have expressed those views, but I have to disagree with the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), who told the House that the European Union did not figure as part of the Good Friday agreement. In fact, the context in which the Good Friday agreement was able to flourish existed precisely because, when the agreement was drawn up, both the United Kingdom—Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom—and Ireland were part of the European Union. There was no question of a hard border across the island of Ireland, and no question of regulatory non-alignment down the Irish sea.

Gavin Robinson: I am grateful to the shadow Secretary of State for allowing me to intervene, because there is a danger that he misunderstands my point. I was referring to the suggestion that there were provisions in the Belfast agreement that specifically said there could be no border infrastructure. I entirely recognise not only the support that is given but the encouragement and full co-operation in developing mutual understanding and respect and in building relationships. Those are the grounding principles to which he refers, and I think they will endure no matter what.

Tony Lloyd: The hon. Gentleman and I are on the same page in hoping that those relationships do endure and are not put at risk.

When I say that a no-deal Brexit would be potentially dangerous, it is not a personal view. It is a view that many people in Northern Ireland have expressed to me, and one of the most influential of those voices is that of Chief Constable George Hamilton. He has put it on the public record many times that he thinks a no-deal Brexit, with the possibility of a hard border and some kind of infrastructure—and not necessarily only on the border—would be a potential source of difficulty for his officers and, ultimately, a potential source of danger to the people of Northern Ireland and, beyond that, the people of the island of Ireland and of Great Britain, too. My constituency at the time was where the last IRA device went off in Great Britain. We are all aware of the absolute ambition not to go back to those days, and a no-deal Brexit is simply unconscionable in that context.

In that light, it is not surprising that the Irish Government have wanted to work hard on this issue. I understand why the backstop was put into the agreement; there is no disagreement among the Opposition that there is a need for a guarantee that there be no hard border on the island of Ireland. What is difficult, though, is to recognise that equally important to the Good Friday agreement was the idea that there be no regulatory misalignment between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. That is the problem that we are currently confronting.

The current situation arose because although both elements I have mentioned are important parts of the Good Friday agreement, the Prime Minister introduced a third element in her Lancaster House speech when she said that there would be no customs union, no single market and no reference to the European Court of Justice. In doing that, she created three incompatible

positions. With any two of those three positions, it would be possible to get a deal, but it is not possible to have a Brexit agreement that satisfies all three. That is the situation we now face. The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union extolled the virtues of this new document earlier but, although I do not wish to be unkind, it says nothing new. There is nothing in it that gives succour to Members who represent Northern Ireland constituencies or to those of us who believe that we should stay together as one United Kingdom in this process.

I refer the House back to the December 2017 joint report of the United Kingdom and the European Union. Paragraph 50 made it clear that

“the United Kingdom will ensure that no new regulatory barriers develop between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom, unless, consistent with the 1998 Agreement, the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly agree that distinct arrangements are appropriate for Northern Ireland.”

There was a guarantee in December 2017, but that guarantee had disappeared by the time we got the protocol. I use moderate words, but that is not acceptable. The House has to understand the emotional setting of the Good Friday agreement. It is not simply about technical trade agreements; it is of emotional significance. It is an agreement about a balance between the two communities. The need for there to be no hard border across the island of Ireland, but also no regulatory dislocation down the Irish sea, is fundamental to guaranteeing the continuation of what the Good Friday agreement achieved.

Gavin Robinson: It would be remiss of me not to intervene again. The point that the shadow Secretary of State is making is incredibly important. The rationale behind paragraph 50 was that it replicated paragraph 12 of strand two of the Belfast agreement. It is now impossible for the Government to say that they implement and respect the Good Friday agreement in all its parts, because paragraph 50, and the parts of the Belfast agreement that I have referred to, do not feature at all in the withdrawal agreement.

Tony Lloyd: Again, the hon. Gentleman and I are on exactly the same page. The Prime Minister also agreed with that viewpoint. On 28 February last year, the hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) asked her to “reinforce her earlier comments” and

“confirm that she will never agree to any trade borders between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom”.

The Prime Minister replied:

“The hon. Gentleman is right: the draft legal text that the Commission has published would, if implemented, undermine the UK common market and threaten the constitutional integrity of the UK by creating a customs and regulatory border down the Irish sea, and no UK Prime Minister could ever agree to it.”—[*Official Report*, 28 February 2018; Vol. 636, c. 823.]

This Prime Minister has agreed to it.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster now has to explain how we get out of this morass. Frankly, it will not be enough to adopt the amendment tabled by the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire), which suggests that there can be a unilateral British disruption of the “no hard border” guarantee, because of course that will not be acceptable to the European Union. When the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster

replies, he needs to sort out how we can unpick this. Back-peddalling may be necessary to try to bring on board votes to keep this deal going, but it will betray the principles on which the Good Friday operates, and we cannot allow that.

There has been a wide debate today about trading relationships, which are crucial. It is important that trade continues. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras tried to reach out across the House on that. It is interesting to see how much the debate has already begun to move on from the Government’s deal to the possibility of a wider deal that Parliament will have to strike. When this deal fails next week, as, I think, most of us believe it will, the House will have to begin a thoughtful process of bringing together the consensus that can take this nation of ours forward.

To return to the Good Friday agreement and the impact of Brexit, as the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster knows, this is not just about trade but about the important issue of security. In his earlier role as Minister for Europe, he told the *Belfast Telegraph* in the run-up to the referendum that

“the ease with which security agencies in the EU could share intelligence provided the best protection against terrorist threats.”

He went on to say that

“while extradition of criminals in Europe in the past could have taken years, it now happens within weeks.”

He said that police can also more easily and quickly share evidence such as fingerprint and DNA files. Importantly, he said this to the people of Northern Ireland—and to the people of the whole of the United Kingdom:

“If you’re outside the EU you can try to negotiate an arrangement, but you’re going to be at the back of the queue”.

As of today, because of this blind Brexit process that we have been offered, we have no knowledge of what will happen with the European arrest warrant, and no knowledge of whether we will be able to continue to use the Secure Information Exchange Network Application and the European Criminal Records Information Exchange System. Those databases are fundamental to law and order across the whole United Kingdom, but also fundamental in the Northern Ireland context. I hope that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster can say something a lot more positive than simply that we can rely on a blind Brexit to guarantee the safety of our citizens.

I also say to the Government that their lack of preparation for the possibility of a difficult Brexit is remarkable. My hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) referred to “fridgegate” and the improbability of the Health Secretary buying in so many fridges, but at least there is some sense of preparation there. In the context of Northern Ireland, the Police Service of Northern Ireland has been asking for extra police for a long time. When my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) was shadow Northern Ireland Secretary, he pressed the Government on the issue many times, asking when those extra police—the Patten numbers—will be made available. At last, those numbers have been announced. But to recruit and train a police officer is about more than just a Government press release. It takes months and months to get them operational. The Government have said that they rely on mutual assistance from police forces in the rest of the United Kingdom, but as a former police and crime

[Tony Lloyd]

commissioner with the knowledge of how stretched our police services are here in England, Scotland and Wales, I must say that the idea that mutual assistance should be the mainstay of the way in which we police Northern Ireland is, frankly, ridiculous.

The one point on which I hope the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster will agree with me is that, while there is the possibility of the armed forces being used during the Brexit process in the rest of the United Kingdom, the one place that the return of the Army would be very difficult to explain and unacceptable is Northern Ireland. I hope that tonight, the Government will guarantee that the use of the Army in Northern Ireland will simply not be on the agenda.

I welcome the 300 extra police officers, but the Government must begin to get real and say that if we are looking at a Brexit-related security situation in Northern Ireland, the PSNI needs the resources to do the job. That feeling should be common across this House. It is a matter not of party political dialogue but of common sense, and I hope that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster will take that point on board.

One of the problems with the Brexit debate is that in some ways it has been very dry and technical. The people my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) talked about—those who felt they had been left out—simply did not know what this debate was all about. That is a really important point that this House has to understand. In the end, this is about the nature of the society that we are. One thing about the Good Friday agreement that was fundamentally important and that went beyond the technical issues, the institutions and all the rest was the process of human reconciliation; it was about saying that we can live better together than apart.

Mr McFadden: While my hon. Friend is on the point of communities that feel left out of the national story, does he agree that nobody in the European Union is preventing us from building more houses, challenging educational inequality, improving the physical environment or doing many of the things that we need to do to create a better future for the type of communities we are talking about?

Tony Lloyd: I fundamentally agree with my right hon. Friend. That is true for those in the west midlands, the north-west of England and other parts of Great Britain, and especially in Northern Ireland, where jobs, housing and decent health services are so important but are not yet on the agenda. Raising our aspiration there is of fundamental importance.

If we are to be true to the Good Friday agreement when it comes to Brexit, the present deal does nothing for the process. This deal divides people. We have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) about the level of hate that has come out of this debate. In Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, we have to get back to a more rational politics that builds hope for the future, but that is not on the agenda with this deal. That building of hope is fundamental in Northern Ireland. When people felt dispossessed, they turned to violence. When people feel dispossessed, they turn to despair. We know the price that society pays for that, and we know

the price that people in Northern Ireland and throughout the rest of the country have paid for that in the past. The Government have to raise their sights, recognise that this Brexit deal will not work, and move on. They must bring this House of Commons together in a way that allows us to get the consensus we need to build a Brexit that offers hope for the future to all the people of this country.

9.17 pm

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): As the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) said, this has been a genuinely interesting debate. It has been good to hear voices from all four nations of the United Kingdom. I have been struck by the fact that, from the opening remarks of the shadow Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), the tone has been moderate. Even when there have been some profound differences—as inevitably there would be in a debate on this issue—for pretty well the entire period of this debate, those differences have been expressed in a spirit of mutual respect and readiness to listen, if not to agree, with what an opponent has said. To take up the final comments of the hon. Member for Rochdale, I hope that that is a harbinger of how this House might proceed for the rest of this debate and in the decisions that will face us in the days, weeks and months to come.

Many contributions so far have focused less on the withdrawal agreement than on the nature of the future relationship. When kicking off the debate, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras said that his preference was for a customs union with the European Union and close future regulatory alignment. Those points of view have been expressed elsewhere in the debate, and we heard hon. Members from Scotland and Wales reflecting the views expressed in the resolutions passed recently by the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly to that effect.

The key decision that faces this Parliament next week is not over what the new relationship should be in the long term. That can only be negotiated, in terms of the European treaties, once we have left membership and become a third country. What we need to do is to take a decision about the terms of the withdrawal agreement. The withdrawal agreement is the unavoidable gateway whether to a Canadian, a Norwegian or a Chequers destination, or to wherever on the spectrum of a future relationship any particular right hon. or hon. Member wishes to end up.

Nor do I believe that it is going to help to argue, as some hon. Members have advocated today, that the way forward is to conclude that these problems are too difficult and there is insufficient consensus, and therefore we simply postpone the article 50 deadline. The policy dilemmas, choices and trade-offs that face us as a Parliament and as a country are not going to go away in that time. Nor are the EU27 and the European Commission going to suddenly start to open detailed negotiations about the nature of the future partnership between us and them until we have actually taken the step of leaving, because while we are a member, we are subject to the obligations of, and have all the rights of, every other member state of the European Union. The treaties, yes, allow and encourage the EU to make trade and political co-operation agreements with third countries,

but only with third countries—it cannot conclude or, indeed, negotiate such an agreement with one of its own members.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said earlier, the House has to confront the fact that the default position both in United Kingdom law and in European law is that we leave on 29 March this year whether or not a deal has been agreed and ratified, and if the House wants to reject no deal, the House has to vote by a majority for a withdrawal agreement that provides for a smooth and orderly exit.

Mr Leslie: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Lidington: I will, and then I want to make some progress, particularly to respond to some of the points made by the hon. Gentleman's Front Benchers.

Mr Leslie: Will the Minister elaborate on something? It is not just about voting for the Prime Minister's deal; it would also potentially be about requesting an extension of article 50. He will acknowledge, will he not, that that facility is permitted under article 50?

Mr Lidington: An extension of article 50 is permitted under that article of the treaty—the hon. Gentleman is right to that extent. But of course such an extension has to be by unanimous consent of both the departing member state and all existing member states. What I am quite clear about in my own mind is that regardless of what opinions were expressed here, or by this or any other British Government, the EU27 are not interested in some sort of extension of article 50. They want this process brought to an orderly conclusion because they have other things, like a future budgetary process, that they need to get on with and think about after the United Kingdom's departure.

Stephen Gethins *rose*—

Mr Lidington: I will give way once more and then I want to make progress.

Stephen Gethins: I respect the way the Minister is going about this, and his generosity. On the article 50 extension—which is critical, regardless of what he thinks—achieving what we all want to achieve by 29 March, and having a proper discussion and getting solutions in place, will be very, very difficult. Has he at least explored the possibility of an article 50 extension with the 27 member states?

Mr Lidington: I have had no discussions with the Commission or with the Council about that. The Prime Minister has made the Government's position very clear on this particular point.

Stephen Kerr: What would any extension of article 50 mean in relation to the European elections? Surely we would not be fielding candidates for the European Parliament—that does not seem to add up.

Mr Lidington: There are certainly no plans to hold elections in this country to the European Parliament. In any hypothetical extension of article 50, that would be an important point for the EU27, because there could be a question mark about the legality of actions by a European Parliament in the future if not every member state had members of that European Parliament who

had been properly elected. That is yet another reason why it would not be sensible for Members of this House who advocate an extension of article 50 simply to assume that the EU27 would happily be prepared to accept that. I do not believe that that is the case at all.

I will now turn to some of the points made. Like the hon. Member for Rochdale, I want to spend a lot of the time I have speaking about the Northern Ireland question, which came up not only in the extremely moving and compelling speech from the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), but in speeches from Members in different parts of the House.

First, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras challenged the Government over the paper that we published earlier today and said that he did not think there was any new commitment in it. There are two things that are completely new. On the other matters, we have put greater flesh on commitments that had already been given at a high political level. But we have not previously committed to requiring Stormont agreement to any new laws that the EU proposed to add to the backstop, and we have not previously committed to giving a restored Northern Ireland Executive a seat at the table at the committee overseeing the Northern Ireland backstop.

I accept, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State did, that the paper we have published today will not be sufficient to meet all the concerns that the hon. Member for Belfast East and his colleagues have expressed, but it marks a genuine step forward in giving expression to our wish to make it very clear that we see Northern Ireland's place in not only the political union of the United Kingdom but the single economic internal market of the United Kingdom now and into the future.

The hon. Member for Rochdale said that his personal test was that there should be no regulatory divergence between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Of course, as he will know, there are some sectors where there is such regulatory divergence at the moment—notably on animal health and trading in livestock—for good practical reasons that are long established. One element of today's package is greater clarity than we have given before that Northern Ireland goods under all circumstances would have full access to customers and markets in Great Britain, and that in the event of a backstop ever coming into operation, we would seek to align regulations in Great Britain with those that applied in Northern Ireland for the duration of the backstop.

Tony Lloyd: This is a serious point, not a polemical one. We now have a situation where the rest of the UK will follow Northern Ireland. If that is the case, why was that not the base case written into the protocol?

Mr Lidington: Because these things are about the sovereign constitutional order of the United Kingdom. They involve decisions that we in this House make and that, in respect of certain devolved matters, we would need to make in partnership and consultation with the Governments in the three devolved areas of the United Kingdom. That is why these are things that we are expressing unilaterally.

Tony Lloyd: This comes to the nub of things, and it is the point that the hon. Member for Belfast East made. If I disagree with the Government proposing any form of regulatory change that affects my constituents in

[Tony Lloyd]

Rochdale, I can vote in this House. The hon. Member for Belfast East does not have that same facility, and that is what is different about this agreement.

Mr Lidington: I want to come on to talk more generally about the backstop. I am not going to hide the fact—the Prime Minister has said it openly—that this is something we find uncomfortable as a Government, but we do not believe it poses the risks to the Union that are expressed by its critics.

I want to take up the point about the Belfast agreement. The question has been raised in this debate and previously, including by the hon. Member for Belfast East, as to whether the protocol breaches the integrity of the three-stranded approach that is embodied in the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. It is clear to me that the text of the protocol says in terms that it protects the 1998 agreement “in all its parts”. That is on page 303 of the document that is on the table. The protocol also refers to the scope for possible new arrangements for north-south co-operation but then goes on to define those as being in accordance with the 1998 agreement.

The Government’s own legal position is clear that article 13 of the protocol does not alter the remit of the North-South Ministerial Council or the north-south implementation bodies; nor does it alter strand two in any way. However, to avoid any doubt on this matter, in the paper today we have again given a commitment to legislate to provide explicitly that

“no recommendations made under Article 13(2) of the Protocol will be capable of altering the scope of...the North-South Ministerial Council, nor establishing new implementation bodies or altering the arrangements set out in the Belfast Agreement in any way.”

Gavin Robinson: The right hon. Gentleman is touching on a fundamental point. The protocol makes reference to compliance with the Good Friday agreement “in all its parts”, but as has been mentioned, paragraph 12 of strand two specifically requires not consultation or involvement but the approval and consent not only of the Northern Ireland Assembly but of the Oireachtas. When we consider new regulations and new engagement with the Irish Republic, that will impinge on north-south co-operation.

Mr Lidington: As I have just said, the Government’s own legal position does not pose the threat that the hon. Gentleman has expressed. Probably the best way for me to respond is, having consulted the Attorney General—who supervised the compilation and publication of the Government’s legal position—to write directly to the hon. Gentleman to set out our case in greater detail.

I oppose a no-deal exit not just because of the economic harm but because I actually believe that a no-deal exit would cause profound and possibly irreversible damage to the Union of the United Kingdom. The tensions in Northern Ireland and in Scotland resulting from such an outcome would be severe. The hon. Member for Belfast East was right to say that there was no express provision in the 1998 agreement for open trade across the border. It is also true that there was provision in the Belfast agreement for the removal of border infrastructure related to security matters.

The hon. Member for Rochdale was also right to point out that at the time of the 1998 negotiations and agreement, this country and the Republic of Ireland had been members of the European Union for many years. The single market had been established, and the assumption that everybody made at that time was that that economic order was going to continue. The question of whether border issues would arise in the event of the hypothetical departure of either state from the European Union was just not considered at the time. It was not a live issue. Indeed, the completely frictionless, seamless traffic of individuals and freight across the border has been one of the elements that has helped to support the peace-building process. We should take note of the Chief Constable’s concerns about security tensions that could arise from a no-deal exit, and we should also be aware of the symbolism of any kind of infrastructure on the border.

I want us to remain in a situation in which people living in Northern Ireland who identify themselves as Irish but have fairly moderate political views continue to support the Union with the United Kingdom. I see opinion polls and I have conversations with people from that tradition in Northern Ireland. Members can aim off opinion polls or aim off anecdotal experience, but I am hearing from moderate people on the nationalist side who have been content with the Union that they are becoming more anxious, more hard-line and more questioning of Northern Ireland’s constitutional status. Their consent, to use the key term, to the Union seems to me to be hugely important to preserving the Union, which I passionately want to do. I completely respect the argument the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) put to me and to the House, but I differ from him on the implications of the backstop.

Mr McFadden: The Minister is making an important point, because the Good Friday agreement says that people in Northern Ireland can choose to be British, Irish or both, and that “both” is hugely valuable. Is not the danger of Brexit that it upsets the equilibrium that allows people to choose to be both?

Mr Lidington: I do think that that is one of the downsides. I am not going to refight a campaign that I fought and lost, along with the right hon. Gentleman, in 2016. As the hon. Member for Rochdale was kind enough to say, I did actually go to Northern Ireland and campaign on the remain side there. We are where we are. It seems to me that the duty we have as a Parliament, confronted with how the people of the United Kingdom voted, is to do our utmost to find a way that delivers on that democratic verdict while, in the context of this particular debate, minimising to the extent possible the rise in the kind of tensions that the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) has described.

The backstop is an insurance policy designed to guarantee that we can in all circumstances meet our commitments, as a Government and as a country, to avoiding a hard border on the island of Ireland. I think it also has the advantage of acting as a safety net for Northern Ireland’s economy. It does of course still take Northern Ireland, along with the rest of the UK, out of the common fisheries and agricultural policies. As I have said before, I do not think we are shying away from the fact that this is an uncomfortable solution for the

UK, but it is an uncomfortable solution for the European Union as well. Both the United Kingdom and the EU have a mutual interest in ensuring the backstop is never needed, and if it ever were, it would be only a temporary arrangement.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I have listened with great patience to what the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has had to say, and I respect the way in which he has put his arguments. However, I have to confess to a slight degree of frustration, because these arguments and some of the issues he has raised were all put in a previous debate; after three days, the Prime Minister came to the House and said that it was clear that her deal would be voted down by a substantial margin, because of the concerns that had been expressed, and that she would go away and get legally binding assurances. I have listened to what the Minister has said, and there is nothing new there; I do not think he will persuade anybody who has not already been persuaded. Where is the delivery of the changes promised by the Prime Minister? What has changed since these arguments were advanced previously?

I hope at some point in this debate, on another day, to deal in detail with all the issues the right hon. Gentleman has raised—all the anecdotal stuff he has talked about and what he has heard—because really what he is arguing in terms of Brexit, nationalism and the future of Northern Ireland is that we should just forget about Brexit. That is the logic of what he is saying. What I would like to hear from him is this: what is new, as far as what the Prime Minister promised is concerned? That is what we are waiting to hear.

Mr Lidington: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the Prime Minister will respond to the debate in the final speech next Tuesday. She has been talking to a number of European leaders in the weeks since this debate was postponed. She will obviously want to respond to the questions that the right hon. Gentleman fairly puts, either during her speech in that debate, or possibly earlier. That is the most I can commit to on behalf of my right hon. Friend this evening. I also say to the right hon. Member for Belfast North and his colleagues that there is certainly a recognition—indeed, an understanding—on the part of the Government of the concerns that they have expressed. We continue to discuss with him and his colleagues how we can seek to provide the necessary assurances about the Union that he is asking us to provide. I will make sure that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is aware of his wish to have a more detailed response to the points he has raised this evening.

I think it is worth the House reminding itself that the EU has an interest, just as we do, in bringing the backstop to an end quickly, should it ever be needed at all. Of course, the fear is often expressed, here and outside, that despite the legal obligation in the withdrawal agreement for the backstop to be temporary; despite the explicit provision in the withdrawal agreement for technology or other measures to be deployed to make the backstop superfluous; despite the duty to replace it as rapidly as possible; and despite, for that matter, frequent public statements by the Taoiseach, the European Commission and other leaders that they have no wish or interest in having the backstop as anything more than an insurance policy, we will still be trapped in it for

many years, or even indefinitely. Ultimately, this boils down to a lack of trust within the United Kingdom in the good intentions of the European Commission and some member state Governments.

The irony is that there is a lack of trust of the United Kingdom on the other side of the table, too. One of the most striking developments since the withdrawal agreement was finalised and published has been the fierce criticism levelled at Michel Barnier by Governments in some EU member states. For them, the backstop, should it ever be used, would allow goods from the entire United Kingdom, including agricultural produce, to access the whole of the EU single market, without tariffs, quotas or rules of origin requirements, and that would be granted without the UK paying a penny into the EU budget, without the UK accepting the free movement of people, and with the UK accepting a much less onerous set of level playing field requirements than those demanded of EU member states.

Alex Chalk: Is it not a fact that what from our point of view might be considered a backstop is, from the European Union's point of view, a back door? Does that not express the EU's concern that we would be paying not a penny piece for something that would provide a material advantage—an unfair advantage, as some would see it—in terms of access to the single market?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is right. Indeed, that fear reinforces the concern that the EU has about the important legal principle that a free trade agreement or association agreement with a third country cannot be based on an article 50 withdrawal agreement, which was intended by the treaty to cover the necessary legal arrangements for a member state's departure from the Union. The Commission knows that for exactly the reason my hon. Friend gives, the longer any backstop were to last, the greater legal risk it would face of challenge in the European courts from aggrieved businesses, whether in the Republic of Ireland, France, Belgium or elsewhere, complaining that that principle was being breached to their commercial disadvantage.

We should not underestimate the importance of the guarantee of no hard border on the island of Ireland and no customs border in the Irish sea. It is no coincidence that the Northern Ireland business community is overwhelmingly and vocally supportive of this deal. However, there are aspects of the backstop that are and will remain uncomfortable. If it were needed, it would mean that a portion of EU law would apply in Northern Ireland for the duration of the backstop—about 40 pages of the 1,100 pages of single market *acquis* legislation.

The Government, as I said earlier, are mindful of the fact that we already have some regulatory differences between Northern Ireland and the rest of the country. We have sought, both in previous statements and in the package we put forward today, to identify ways in which the practical impact of any such requirements can be minimised, so that ordinary businesses and customers in Northern Ireland or Great Britain see as little change as possible.

Nigel Dodds: I promise not to intervene again, because I will deal with these points at a future date. The Minister has mentioned for the second time that there are already regulatory differences. He knows that they

[*Nigel Dodds*]

are extremely small in number, and that they were instituted with the democratic will of the Northern Ireland Assembly under the previous regime in Northern Ireland. They were democratically agreed, and they are for the purpose of controlling animal health effectively. They are not part of a regulatory difference because we are under a different regime for goods or agri-food, so it is entirely spurious and wrong of him to build that argument on the basis that there are already regulatory differences. Having rules about a large part of our economy set by people not in this House and not in the Assembly is a gross offence to democracy in this country.

Mr Lidington: Of course, the arrangements come into force only if this House gives assent to them. This House has a say in what is proposed. Any future additions to areas of law that are covered would require the agreement of both the European Union and the United Kingdom. We have said again today that as far as the United Kingdom's decision was concerned, we would have a legal obligation on UK Ministers to seek agreement from the Northern Ireland institutions before agreeing to any such additions.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister mentions the issue of trust between the EU, the UK Government and Parliament. I say very, very gently to the Minister that there is also an element of trust between the Government and the Democratic Unionist party. There is trust in what the Government are trying to put forward as a solution, but the solution in relation to the backstop is not acceptable. That has to be addressed.

Mr Speaker: That that was an intervention of intoxicating significance I do not doubt for one moment, but may I just say to the hon. Gentleman that as a result of his intervention, he has helped the Minister to double the ration allocated to the shadow Minister? These are important matters, but I think the Minister is approaching his peroration.

Mr Lidington: I do want to make progress. I will just say in response to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that, as I have said to his hon. Friends, we accept and understand their concerns, and we will continue conversations with them to try to seek agreement.

All businesses in our country want certainty. Since the deal was announced, organisations in every part of the United Kingdom—large and small, manufacturing, farming and fisheries—have said they want to get on and see a deal sorted, so they can plan for the future. They are aware, too, of the risks that no deal would carry: 40% tariffs for Scottish beef and Welsh lamb exports, 10% tariffs for cars from Sunderland, Swindon and the west midlands, and the inspections, regulations and form-filling that will go with such arrangements under WTO terms.

I believe that what we have now is an outcome that both those who supported leave and those who supported remain should be able to accept. Let us not forget that

people who voted to leave the European Union were a significant minority in some parts of the UK, and in some demographic groups in the population, in which the majority in 2016 voted to remain. The deal gives the certainty of leaving the European Union. It removes this country from the political structures of the EU and any commitment to an ever closer union. It ends the automatic freedom of movement under European law, leaving it to Governments and Parliaments in the UK to decide how generous or restrictive our policies should be, and it ends the jurisdiction of the European courts in this country.

For those who voted to remain in the European Union—again, they were a significant minority in those places where most people voted to leave—the deal offers a deep and special future partnership between the UK and the EU, reflecting the reality of our deep-rooted ties of history, geography, culture and democratic commitment, and reflecting, too, the fact that, for as far ahead as any of us can see, the EU is likely to remain this country's single most important trading partner.

I believe that compromise in politics is not an insult. The deal that we have on the table, endorsed not just by the British Prime Minister and Cabinet but by the 27 other Governments of the European Union, is one that has been the product of compromise. It has meant difficult negotiations and give and take on both sides. Like most things in politics and in life, it is not perfect, but I believe that it provides a good foundation for us to move forward from the divisions and the agonies of the last two years, towards a future in which the United Kingdom and the European Union can work as close neighbours, friends, allies and trusted trading partners for many years into the future.

Ordered, That the debate be now adjourned.—(Amanda Milling.)

Debate to be resumed tomorrow (Order, this day.)

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

That the draft Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 (Amendment) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 5 November 2018, be approved.—(*Amanda Milling.*)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES)

That the draft Money Laundering and Transfer of Funds (Information) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 29 November 2018, be approved.—(*Amanda Milling.*)

Question agreed to.

Royal Marines: Basing Arrangements

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

9.52 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is time to put an end to the uncertainty over where our Royal Marines will be based in the future. At the outset, I pay tribute to all those who serve in the Royal Marines. As the UK's high-readiness, elite amphibious fighting force, they offer the UK hard power options when diplomacy fails and when disasters strike. Their contribution to our country has been delivered in blood and sweat, and I want to thank the Royal Marines in uniform today; those veterans who have served for their contribution to our national security; and forces families for their support for those who have served.

Tonight I want to focus specifically on the Royal Marines base in Stonehouse in Plymouth. In 2016 it was announced that this historic and spiritual home of the Royal Marines would close in 2023, but three years on we are still not certain where the Royal Marines will move to when Stonehouse barracks close.

This is not the first debate today about the Royal Marines. Earlier my fellow Devon MP, the hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones), made the case to keep open the Royal Marines base at Chivenor. MPs with Royal Marines on their patches are not fighting among ourselves; indeed, there is agreement that we need certainty for the Royal Marines' long-term future, wherever that may be. Certainty is required for 40 Commando in Taunton, as well as for those Royal Marines at Chivenor and those in Stonehouse. As the Member of Parliament for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport, I am proud to make the case for the Royal Marines—the pride and joy of our armed forces—to continue to be based in Plymouth, their spiritual home for more than 300 years.

We all know that the Royal Marines are the UK's finest fighting force, with unique and valued capabilities. I have seen that for myself at the Commando training centre at Lympstone, with the commando obstacle course and at passing out parades. I have seen it in Plymouth, with the Royal Marines at Stonehouse, the Royal Marines band school in Portsmouth, and, on a rather blustery day, on the back of an offshore raiding craft on the River Tamar with Royal Marines from 1 Assault Group.

It is with great regret that I say that the morale of our Royal Marines is suffering, in part due to the uncertainty about their future basing. I know that from speaking to many of them off duty in bars around Plymouth and while door knocking in my city. The latest annual armed forces continuous attitude survey suggests there has been a significant fall in morale across the services. Two years ago, 62% of Royal Marines officers rated morale in the service as high; now, that figure is just 23%.

Since 2010, Plymouth has been on the hard end of cuts to our Royal Navy and Royal Marines. With the cuts to 42 Commando, the loss of the Royal Citadel and the sale of our Royal Navy flagship, HMS Ocean, at a bargain price to Brazil, Ministers have cut more often than they have invested. That must not be the end of the story for the Royal Marines and their long and proud association with Plymouth.

Talk of further cuts continued last summer, when there was speculation that Devonport-based amphibious ships HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark could face the axe, too. If those cuts had gone ahead, there would have been a logical threat to the existence of the Royal Marines. Rumours last April that the Marines might be merged with the Paras only added to concerns that that was being lined up as a real possibility. Time after time, I have stood up in this place to demand answers but, unfortunately, Ministers have refused to rule out the loss of those capabilities. The petition I launched to preserve the amphibious ships and the Royal Marines attracted 30,000 names, the bulk of them from the far south-west.

I am pleased to say, though, that in September, after a long, hard-fought campaign, we were relieved to hear that the Government had decided to save HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark. That was the right decision, and I thank the Minister for championing those ships and the Royal Marines.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his work on saving our amphibious capability; I think he would acknowledge the work the Select Committee on Defence did, too. Does he agree that we all should acknowledge the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), who is another local MP, and the willingness of the Defence Secretary to take on board the message we were trying to relay? He even announced his decision ahead of the modernising defence programme announcement—at the Conservative party conference, no less.

Luke Pollard: Sadly, I did not get an invitation to the Tory party conference this year. I appreciate the point that the Chair of the Defence Committee makes. Our campaigns as a city are best fought when they are cross-party, and I hope that in the future the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) will be here to make the case, too.

Stonehouse barracks is the oldest operational military barracks in the country. Since the Corps of Royal Marines was formed in 1664, it has had a base in Plymouth, close to Devonport. Stonehouse barracks, which opened in 1756, was the Royal Marines' first ever dedicated and purpose-built barracks. There were similar barracks in Chatham and Portsmouth, but Stonehouse is the only one remaining.

Since world war two, Stonehouse has been home to elements of 41, 42 and 43 Commando, and it was home to 45 Commando until it moved to RM Condor in 1971, when Stonehouse became the headquarters of 3 Commando Brigade. I am pleased that the Minister confirmed yesterday that Condor is safe; I hope he will have similar good news in due course for the rest of the Royal Marines bases.

The estate optimisation strategy, "A Better Defence Estate", which was published in November 2016, announced the Ministry of Defence's intent to

"dispose of Stonehouse Barracks by 2023 and to reprovide for the Royal Marines units in either the Plymouth or Torpoint areas".

The promise to provide a "super-base" in Plymouth is much touted by Government Members, and I believe it is a good one, but we have seen little evidence of where that base will be built. As part of a major defence

[*Luke Pollard*]

shake-up, the Army's 29 Commando will also leave Plymouth's Royal Citadel, which the MOD leases from the Crown Estate. In answer to a parliamentary question a few months ago, I was told:

"Further assessment study work is being undertaken to inform the final decision."

It is right that decisions about basing are taken on the grounds of military strategy by those in uniform rather than for party political reasons, but Ministers need to take a decision to address the uncertainty.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way—as Members know, I am a fellow Janner, having been born in his constituency. Does he agree that, much though many of us have great affection for places such as the citadel, which for historical reasons has more guns over the city than it has over Plymouth sound, we must ensure that modern facilities are provided? It will be sad to see these places with great histories go, but we want modern facilities for the Marines, who are a cutting-edge fighting force, rather than to defend a 300-year-old barracks.

Luke Pollard: The hon. Gentleman pre-empted a piece of my speech, and he is exactly right. We need to make sure that the facilities for our Royal Marines and all our armed forces are up to scratch, and 300-year-old barracks are not providing the quality of accommodation required. It is right that in repurposing and reproviding those facilities in Plymouth we provide the Royal Marines with the finest facilities. I agree with him on that point.

Given the months and months of uncertainty, I was disappointed that a decision on basing the Royal Marines was not included in the recently published modernising defence programme. I said prior to its publication that if the MDP did not guarantee the future of the Royal Marines, it will have failed, and it did not even mention the words "Royal Marines", let alone their future basing arrangements. That said, I am encouraged by the words of the Minister about news of their future coming soon.

The lack of clarity is a cancer to morale. Falling morale hits the Royal Navy's and the Royal Marines' ability to recruit and retain the very best. It affects capability, and capabilities affect our strategic options in tough times. The logic of basing the Royal Marines in Plymouth, close to amphibious ships, Royal Marines Tamar and training grounds is sound, but if a base is to be operational by 2023, after Stonehouse barracks closes, work needs to begin this year.

There is strategic importance in keeping the Royal Marines, Plymouth and Devonport together. When the defence review in 2010 reconfigured our defence capabilities, Plymouth was promised it would be the centre of amphibiousness for the Royal Navy. That is a promise that the Government must keep, and Royal Marines Tamar is a good sign that the MOD intends to keep that promise, but without a new home for the Royal Marines, it looks a hollow pledge. Plymouth and Devonport in particular must remain a centre of amphibiousness, in name as well as in strength, and that means not only having it set forth in a strategy but having the ships and the Royal Marines that make that capability what it is today: a world-leading capability that is a deterrent to our adversaries and a support to our allies.

In looking at what facilities can be reprovided for the Royal Marines after Stonehouse barracks closes, the Minister will know—because we have spoken about it several times—that I am also keen to look at the memorials in Stonehouse to Royal Marines who have died to make sure they are relocated sensitively or protected in their current location.

As a proud Janner—someone born in Plymouth who lives in Plymouth—I feel I can say that Plymouth all too often hides its light under a bushel, and then hides the bushel.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. Does he agree that it is essential that there remains a strong military presence that feeds into the local economy and community and that bases are not completely separate from but involved in and a help to the local area?

Luke Pollard: I agree entirely. Military bases might be surrounded by fences and razor wire, but they have bridges to the communities, connections to our economies and bonds deeper than any moat.

Royal Marine bases, such as that at Stonehouse, are part of the social fabric of our city, and I think we should say loudly that we are proud of them, we value them and we want them to remain part of the vibrant fabric of our community, contributing economic activity, expertise and the commando spirit of cheerfulness in the face of adversity to all things Plymouth.

A number of options have been or should be considered in the basing of this future super-base. Whether it is decamping 3 Commando Brigade to the Royal Citadel while Stonehouse barracks is refitted, building a new base at Devonport dockyard or Bull Point, expanding HMS Raleigh to accommodate the Royal Marines, building alongside Royal Marines Bickleigh or brownfield and greenfield options, Ministers must have a plan and make it public shortly.

Plymouth City Council stands ready to work with the Ministry of Defence, especially in assisting in land purchase, if the suggested locations currently fall outside the 3% of the country the MOD already owns. I fear there is little logic in disposing of Stonehouse barracks if Ministers seek to make a profit from the land. It will not deliver any profit and will require a significant multi-million-pound dowry if any developer is to take it on.

Royal William Yard, only a few hundred metres from Stonehouse, has shown that old military buildings can be repurposed beautifully but not without significant investment, ongoing capital support and massive public subsidy. I doubt the MOD is planning on such a scale of public subsidy for the Stonehouse site after it sells it. As a Grade II* listed building, it is not attractive to developers in its current form. Equally, the dated and historic facilities, lack of hot water, problems with heating and dormitory-based set up is not suitable for Royal Marines in the 21st century.

In conclusion, when does the Minister expect to have a long-term base for the Royal Marines announced, and what plans does he have for the Royal Citadel after the departure of 29 Commando? The Royal Marines dedicate their lives to the protection of our country and our national interests. The least we need to do is ensure they have certainty about where they will be based, be

it at Plymouth, Taunton or Chivenor. I welcome the announcement that Ministers will make an oral statement about the better estates strategy in the coming weeks, and I encourage the Minister to use all the energies of his office to ensure that Brexit does not bounce or bump this statement. The Royal Marines and their families, be they in Taunton, Plymouth or north Devon, all deserve certainty about where the Royal Marines will be based in the future.

10.4 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I was not sure whether we would reach this point, given the proceedings earlier today, but I am very pleased that we have.

Let me begin, as is customary, by congratulating the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) on securing this important debate. It has been quite a week for parliamentary interest in the Marines. That, I think, is absolutely fair and understandable, and reflects Members' active interest in and passion for supporting our armed forces and the communities in which they sit. The hon. Gentleman is no exception, as he has illustrated in his powerful and passionate speech tonight.

I can say—and I could then sit down, but I will not—that answers are coming. The hon. Gentleman hinted at the fact that there will be a major statement on the rationalisation of our real estate and some of our assets in the very near future. I hope he recognises the importance of our carrying out due diligence correctly. As he mentioned, many stakeholders are involved. It is important for us to do our homework correctly and then make our announcements accordingly, because so many factors are involved.

The hon. Gentleman touched on the importance of what our military bases represent. They are not just defence assets. They provide homes, jobs and a way of life, and are sizeable communities in their own right. They often have a significant input into the local economy. They are, in essence, living organisms that have a symbiotic relationship with the wider community. Many of our military establishments—Stonehouse is a fantastic example, having been the first purpose-built garrison in the country—have been there for so long that they help to define the areas in which they sit, and add to their reputation.

Members will, however, be fully aware of the wider need to rationalise our defence real estate. It has grown over literally hundreds of years, and now represents 3% of UK land. We do not need it. It is superfluous to requirements, and indeed some of it is required for other purposes, such as housing. We need to use our defence budget wisely. It is simply not possible to retain huge defence real estate in the way to which we have been accustomed in the past—the legacy of sea, air and land assets that were often required and used during two world wars. We have therefore been obliged to conduct a wide-ranging study of Ministry of Defence land, with a view to transforming our estate into one that better supports the future needs of our armed forces.

With that, however, comes more bespoke investment. The hon. Gentleman suggested that Stonehouse was no longer appropriate. I visited that location; the shower units do not work, and Marines are living in eight-man

accommodation. That will not attract the next generation of potential recruits. It is important that we build for the future, which is why we are investing £4 billion over the next 10 years to create a smaller, more modern and more capability-focused estate.

Before I turn to the UK Marine footprint, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will not mind if I echo some of the words used in a Westminster Hall debate earlier today, which focused specifically on RM Chivenor. The Royal Marines play a critical and unique role in the wider spectrum of our armed forces capability. This year they celebrate their 350th anniversary. They have much to be proud of in their long history, including a vital role in Lord Nelson's victory at Trafalgar, securing and defending the Rock of Gibraltar in 1704, the infamous raid on Zeebrugge in 1918 that earned two of them the Victoria Cross, and the D-Day landings in Normandy, where 17,500 of them took part in the largest amphibious operation in history. More recently, in 1982, they were essential to the recapture of the Falkland Islands.

Today, the Royal Marines are the UK's specialised commando force—our elite unit, held at high readiness, trained for worldwide rapid response and able to deal with a wide spectrum of threats and security challenges. They often operate in dangerous and extremely difficult circumstances, from amphibious operations to littoral strikes and humanitarian operations. They are specialists in mountain and cold-weather warfare and jungle counter-insurgency. When diplomacy fails, the Royal Marines provide the UK Government with an impressive spectrum of hard power options with which we can respond. To every one of those Royal Marines, and to the veterans who have earned the coveted green beret, I say thank you on behalf of a grateful nation.

The 2015 strategic defence and security review confirmed our commitment to the Royal Marines. I am sorry that there was much speculation about the future of assets and locations and about the size of the Royal Marines. I hope that the publication of the modernising defence programme has put some of those concerns to bed, with the confirmation that the futures of HMS Bulwark and HMS Albion have been secured.

The House will be familiar with the family of units that make up the Royal Marines Orbat, which is heavily weighted towards the south-west: 3 Commando Brigade is headquartered at Stonehouse in Plymouth, which it is expected to vacate by 2023; 40 Commando is based at Norton Manor Camp in Taunton and is earmarked for a move; and 42 Commando is based at Bickleigh barracks in Devon. In addition, Lympstone is home to the amazing commando training centre. The hon. Gentleman said he had visited the centre, and I have visited it too. It is an incredible place that not only trains UK commandos but attracts trainers from other parts of the world, who come to see our standards of professionalism. The hon. Gentleman also mentioned 29 Commando Royal Artillery, which is based at the Royal Citadel. Again, that accommodation is no longer fit for purpose. We cannot even get the artillery vehicles through the front doors any longer, so we cannot stay in that location. The Commando Logistic Regiment is based at RMB Chivenor, which was debated at length in Westminster Hall this morning. At the other end of the country, 45 Commando is based at Condor, which was also the subject of debate this week. Finally, there is 43 Commando, the Fleet Protection Group, which looks after our nuclear assets.

[Mr Tobias Ellwood]

Turning to the policy surrounding the future basing arrangements, the Government made a series of announcements following the 2016 basing review, with a view to delivering a more efficient and sustainable defence estate. Subsequent feasibility work has revealed that the original plan needs further technical and affordability assessments to ensure that it delivers the Navy's capability requirements while ensuring value for money for the taxpayer. That work has been under way for some time, and as I said earlier today, further announcements will be made in the near future.

The MOD remains acutely aware of the impact of the uncertainty around the final decision, of which the hon. Gentleman spoke, on our service personnel and their families. The principles underlining the future of the Royal Marines basing plan include maintaining operational capabilities, which is first and foremost. Much though any Member would like assets to remain in their locality, we must recognise the duty laid out in the 2015 SDSR, and that operational commitments must come first. The provision of modern, enabled and co-located command and control facilities to manage small and medium-scale enduring amphibious operations is at the core of what our Royal Marines do. They must also have the ability to generate the force, so we must be able to maintain the Royal Marines in the south-west, which will provide easy access to specialist amphibious shipping and land and sea training areas that will enable the Royal Marines to generate the force and deliver the primary amphibious outputs that we expect of them.

Turning to estate optimisation, the Royal Marines will, over time, reduce their overall infrastructure asset base to focus available resources better into a smaller footprint that will be fit for purpose, efficient to operate and sustainable. Of course, the morale component of garrisoning units and their provision of domestic stability must also be protected. The hon. Gentleman touched on that. The morale of our armed forces is important, and co-locating units into smaller geographical areas allows them to support each other and focus on the collective operational output. It also provides opportunities for families to move, but not too far from each other, so that they can invest in a single home

rather than constantly having to move. All of that helps to recruit and retain people into the Royal Marine family.

This consolidation has not just taken place over the past couple of years; it has been part of a 25-year package, which will see the Royal Navy focus more on centres of specialisation. In the long term the aim is to rationalise the number of Royal Marine barracks in the south-west, as I think the hon. Gentleman understands, but also to combine military and infrastructure expertise in order to transform the places where the armed forces live, work, train and operate.

The part our Royal Marines play in fitting into the wider jigsaw of the UK defence posture has come up in all the debates on the subject, and I stress that point because from where I sit the world is changing fast and becoming more dangerous and complex. The threats are diversifying and intensifying. We are a nation that for so long has retained an ability, and indeed a desire, to help shape the world around us as a force for good, but I believe we will soon reach an inflection point beyond which our role on the international stage will be permanently diminished unless we invest more in defence. We will not be able to assist our allies who look to us for international leadership, we will not be able to defend our existing and new trade routes in a post-Brexit world, and we will not be able to robustly defend ourselves in the new arenas of conflict such as cyber and space if we do not invest in defence, and that includes investment in our brave Royal Marines.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue and allowing us to debate it, and for giving me the opportunity to underline the MOD's commitment to our Royal Marines and our armed forces in general. We are committed to their capabilities and to their families, whose support is critical. That is why their interests and needs must be a factor in the estate equation.

As I said this morning, the rationalisation of more than 90 military locations continues, and I look forward to making a statement in the next round—in the very near future—with a detailed announcement of the number of locations.

Question put and agreed to.

10.17 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 9 January 2019

[MR LAURENCE ROBERTSON *in the Chair*]

Diabetes

9.30 am

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered diabetes.

What a delight it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. C. S. Lewis, the great Christian writer, said:

“Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point.”

Every day, our constituents—people across Britain—are tested by the challenges that are the effects of diabetes, which is the fastest growing health crisis of our time. There is barely a family in Britain that has not been touched by it. As so many elderly ladies do, my late mother contracted type 2 diabetes when she reached her 70s. I spoke to colleagues from across the House in preparation for this debate, and many of them, including one this morning, said that they had a family member who had been affected by the disease.

In the last 20 years, the number of people in the UK living with diabetes has doubled, reaching 4.6 million. Every day, 700,000 people are dealing with the worst effects, and 700 people are newly diagnosed as suffering from some kind of diabetes. Amazingly, that is one person every two minutes, so this debate is not only necessary and apposite; rather, I would go one further and say that it is essential.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir John Hayes: I shall just finish the next exciting sentence and then I will happily give way. By 2025, there could be as many as 5 million people living with diabetes in the UK.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way and congratulate him on securing this debate. The statistic for Wales is that one person in 14 is affected. Does he agree that, going forward, we must look at prevention—seeing the warning signs and looking at lifestyle changes—as well as having excellent treatment for those who are formally diagnosed?

Sir John Hayes: Absolutely. I will deal with that during my speech. Information that leads to a better understanding of risk, which in turn leads to prevention, is critical, particularly with respect to type 2 diabetes, which is the type that I mentioned earlier when I referred to my late mother.

I spoke of hundreds of thousands of people who suffer from type 1 diabetes—about 500,000 at the moment, but that could easily rise to 700,000—but of course 90% of sufferers are type 2 diabetics, and prevention is particularly critical in their case.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a very strong case. Is he aware of the new research into the treatment of type 2 diabetes, which suggests that a change of diet can eradicate it, giving the person a clean bill of health?

Sir John Hayes: I was going to refer to the achievements of the deputy leader of the Labour party, the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson), later in my speech, but my hon. Friend obliges me to highlight them earlier than I had planned. He is a model example of someone who, having contracted type 2 diabetes, adjusted their lifestyle and diet, lost large amounts of weight, and fought back against—indeed, fought off—type 2 diabetes, exactly as my hon. Friend suggests. Many other hon. Members, including some in the Chamber today, are living with diabetes. Remarkably, our Prime Minister not only manages to hold down her job with immense dedication and determination, but manages type 1 diabetes simultaneously. I spoke about every family and every constituency, but many Members of this House have personal experience of dealing with both type 1 and type 2 diabetes.

During the debate, I will focus on three areas in which we can make real progress: the human and financial cost of diabetes; how education and technology can enable self-management and improve outcomes for both type 1 and type 2; and how, in the case of type 2 diabetes, intervention on societal and individual levels can prevent the onset and mitigate the effects of such a serious problem.

To prevent just a fraction of the complications arising from diabetes would have a big impact on the national health service, generating significant savings as well as fundamentally reducing pain and distress for individuals. Every week in England, over 160 lower-limb amputations result directly from the effects of diabetes, so the ability to provide high-quality diabetic foot care is of particular concern. The recently published NHS long-term plan makes a renewed commitment to the diabetes transformation fund, and I know that that will be welcomed by the whole diabetes community.

I hope that the Minister will set out what steps the Government are taking to encourage the use of education and technology to better support people in self-managing their diabetes, as that will reduce the burden of diabetes both on the individual and on the NHS. A few years ago, a family came to my constituency surgery, with a tiny, wonderful little girl. She was just about to start school. She had already been diagnosed as a type 1 diabetic. That little girl, Faith Robinson, was wearing technology that allowed her glucose to be monitored and insulin to be administered to her—that was absolutely necessary because she was so young. The family came to me with a request, which I will pass on to the Minister so that he can work with colleagues across Government to ensure that this happens routinely for all constituents who need it. They asked that Faith receive one-to-one support at school to manage that technology. The little girl was under five, and needed people at the school she was about to attend to understand the condition and how to deal with the challenges that she faced.

I estimate that there are constituents across the country in similar circumstances, with very young sufferers who need that kind of care and support. I invite the Minister not necessarily to comment today—I do not want to

[Sir John Hayes]

catch him out; that is not my intention—but to reflect on that and to say more about what can be done for that little girl, who I was able to help in that circumstance, and for many others like her.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I not only congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing the debate but thank him for allowing me to intervene on that point. My second daughter was two and a half when she was diagnosed as an insulin-dependent type 1 diabetic. I very much empathise with the story that he has just told us about his constituent. My daughter was barely able to describe her feelings because she was only just talking at the time, which was really quite challenging for the clinicians treating her, as she was unable to describe the impact of treatment and how she felt.

I agree with my right hon. Friend that the introduction of technology—both a result and part of the significant research efforts in this country by charities and the Medical Research Council—is leading to opportunities in treatment provision, in particular the flash glucose monitoring device, which I know the Government will introduce across the country in a more even way than in the past. That is very welcome, but it remains subject to clinical guidance. I urge the Minister to look at that guidance and the attributes required for people to have access to those devices, because they remain quite restricted.

Sir John Hayes: With the insight and acumen that characterised my right hon. Friend's ministerial career, he has identified a point that I was going to make later. With his permission, I will amplify that in my speech. I was aware of his personal circumstances and of his expertise as a result of having a daughter with diabetes. He will recognise that the average sufferer spends about three hours a year with a healthcare professional. Self-management is therefore critical and, in turn, technology is essential to such self-management. We cannot expect a healthcare professional to be on call every time someone needs support or the kind of treatment that is routine for someone such as my right hon. Friend's young daughter. I entirely endorse his remarks. The Minister will have heard them and will respond accordingly.

In essence, I want a world in which all people with diabetes have access to the right information, advice and training, not just at the point of diagnosis but throughout their lives. People will say, "Well, of course, we all want the very best, and we all want the ideal," but if we do not aim for the very best, we will get something very much less than that, so I make no apologies for being definitive in my determination to aim for that ideal. It is critical that we as parliamentarians should look to more distant horizons than sometimes the prevailing powers in Government—as I know from my long experience of that—would encourage us to do. Such debates as this allow us to do that in a cross-party way, for this is not about party political knockabout but about something much more fundamental.

Only if we can achieve the ideal will people be well placed to gain confidence and to cope as the Prime Minister does—as I have described—and as the deputy leader of the Labour party does. They can manage their condition and do not have their lives inhibited by it, and so believe that their opportunities are unaffected by the condition.

To ensure the early uptake of education, it must be provided in a useful format: digitally and through every kind of agency, whether that is schools working with health professionals, or local authorities, which have a responsibility for public health following the Health and Social Care Act 2012, stepping up to the mark too. I shall say a little more about the co-ordination of that, although the Minister is already aware of my concerns. It is about ensuring that our public health effort on diabetes is co-ordinated, consistent and collaborative. That is vital, for reasons already mentioned by colleagues in interventions.

I welcome the commitment in the NHS long-term plan, as I said, to expand the support on offer for people with type 1 and type 2 diabetes, including through the provision of structured education.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is making incredibly important points. He mentioned the deputy leader of the Labour party, who turned his life around through diet and exercise—nutrition. That is an incredibly important issue in my constituency. Throughout west Cumbria, we have serious levels of diabetes, health deprivation and obesity. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for making what is an incredibly important point about bringing together health education at a very young age, and I encourage the Government to invest in that.

Sir John Hayes: I hope that the Minister, in respect of that excellent intervention and my earlier remarks, will say how he will ensure that that kind of vital education is provided in a format and at a point that works for everyone. This is about getting to people by a means and at a place that will penetrate, have effect and be comprehensible. The objectives in the long-term plan are right, but how we deliver those objectives has become the vital next step.

We have already spoken in this debate about technology. A flexible approach to the provision of technology, as well as education and support, is critical. Once equipped with information and skills, people must have access to, and the choice from, a range of technologies to help them to manage their condition in everyday life, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) mentioned a few minutes ago. For people with type 2 diabetes, that is about ensuring access to the required number of glucose test strips. In the rapidly developing world of type 1 technology, insulin pumps and continuous glucose monitors can radically transform lives.

Decisions on which technologies are available should be made with reference to advice from clinicians, patients and, perhaps most importantly, health economists, who will help to determine value to the NHS.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir John Hayes: I will give way, but I want to make my point before I do so, and it might well inform and inspire my right hon. Friend's intervention: it concerns me that, in contrast to medicines, medical devices and now digital solutions do not have clear processes for appraisal and subsequent funding once approved.

Mr Vaizey: My right hon. Friend has indeed inspired me. I do not have diabetes, but I tried a FreeStyle Libre sensor because a constituent of mine is involved in the

company. Given my right hon. Friend's remarks, he seems to agree with me that a robust process of cost-benefit analysis would show that the more people who were issued with that device, the more the health service would save in the long term from people being able to avoid catastrophic incidents because they could monitor their glucose levels much more effectively.

Sir John Hayes: I agree entirely with my right hon. Friend. In the modern idiom, we need to be technology-neutral about that, because the field is changing rapidly. As new technology comes on stream and improves, we need to be sufficiently responsive to and flexible about those changes to ensure that people get the very best, latest technology available to them, for the reasons he gave.

The limits on self-management by the restrictions on technology inhibit people's wellbeing, confidence and, thereby, opportunities. I want to ensure that the provision of technology is consistent throughout the country. There are suggestions that such provision is patchy, that some places are better than others and that some of our constituencies are not getting all that they deserve. The Minister will not want that, because he is an extremely diligent and resourceful Minister—I know that from previous experience—and I want him to tell us how he will ensure that the technology is appraised properly, is delivered consistently and, accordingly, will change lives beneficially.

Mr Dunne: My right hon. Friend is being generous with his time. May I elaborate a little more on that specific point to give an indication to the Minister of the specifics that might cause difficulty between different clinical commissioning group areas? In my experience, those who are allowed to have clinical access to a glucose monitoring device already need to have their blood sugar levels under control—in single digits, below nine. For many people, however, the monitoring device is the one thing that gives them the ability to get better control of their blood sugar glucose levels. Therefore, if they do not get access to it until they are under control, it does not have the immediate benefit to their lifestyles that it would if the regime were slightly more permissive in the allocation of the devices.

Sir John Hayes: My right hon. Friend makes a very shrewd point about cause and effect. In Scotland, for example, both the processes leading to allocation and the actual allocation of technology are much more routine, as he suggests should be the case. I hope the Minister will tell us today or subsequently how he will ensure that that becomes true for the whole of our kingdom—that the very principles set out by my right hon. Friend become embedded in the way in which we approach technology, ensuring that it is allocated according to need.

We all agree that the resources should be targeted to secure optimal outcomes for the 4.6 million people who have been diagnosed with the condition. In addition to those diagnosed, however, one in three adults in the UK has pre-diabetes and might be at risk of developing type 2 diabetes if they do not change their lifestyle—a point made by a number of Members in interventions. About three in five cases of type 2 diabetes can be

prevented or delayed. A focus on preventing the onset of diabetes should be of paramount importance. G. K. Chesterton said:

“It isn't that they can't see the solution. It is that they can't see the problem.”

By seeing the problem, the solution will be implicit, because many more people will never develop type 2 diabetes if they make those adjustments to their lifestyle.

There is a dilemma, though: is it better that 50,000 people get a perfect solution and are prevented from having diabetes, or that 5 million people reduce their risk marginally? Let me set that out more clearly. Is it better that a small number of people achieve what the deputy leader of the Labour party, the hon. Member for West Bromwich East, has done—losing immense amounts of weight, changing their lifestyle and completely revising their diet? Or is it better that a very much larger number of people make a smaller change, lose less weight and change their lifestyle more marginally, but by so doing significantly reduce their risk of developing type 2 diabetes?

That is a challenge in health education; it affects many aspects of the health service's work. It probably means that, rather than seeing this issue purely from a clinical perspective, we have to democratise the diabetes debate, spread the word much more widely and get many more people to lose a couple of inches off their waist, to lose a stone or half a stone. That effect would be immense in reducing the risk of diabetes, not for tens of thousands but for millions of people.

If the figures I have brought forward are so—I have cited them only because I have learnt them from Diabetes UK and others who have helped me to prepare for this debate—we would change the lives of very large numbers of constituents in a way they would be able to manage, understand, comprehend and act upon reasonably quickly. I want the Minister to reflect on the dilemma I have described; it may not be quite so much of an either/or as I have painted it, but we need a democratic debate about that, which is part of the reason I have brought this debate to the House. Certainly we need an open and grown-up conversation about some of those measures and how we go about tackling what I have described as a crisis.

I do not want to speak forever, Mr Robertson—I know you and others in the Chamber will be disappointed to hear me say that. That will cause disappointment and even alarm among some, but I want others to contribute the debate. However, I have a couple of other points to make so I will move on—having taken a number of interventions already, I hope colleagues will bear with me.

I have been fascinated to read about research funded by Diabetes UK that proves that remission is possible. I would like to take the time to congratulate the hon. Member for West Bromwich East once again and to say that I hope many more people will recognise that remission is a real possibility for them by making changes in what they do.

Part of the issue is how lives more generally have changed. My father cycled five miles to work and five miles home every day, but now most people do not do that. Once many more people worked in manual jobs—my father had a physique like Charles Atlas, but the nearest I have come to Charles Atlas is reading an atlas. Part of the problem is the way we live now; far fewer people exercise implicitly in the way he did, and it seems that

[*Sir John Hayes*]

junk food is more appealing to many people than eating fresh, healthy produce—indeed, that has been recognised by successive Governments as significant for health outcomes.

Evidence shows the best way to reduce the risk of diabetes is through a healthy diet, being physically active and reducing weight. That can be facilitated through societal approaches and targeted individual interventions. Technology, including digital services to support lifestyle changes, is increasingly critical in diabetes prevention. To be sustainable, methods to prevent type 2 diabetes should focus on individual behaviour change, not just short-term activity levels.

We recently learned that, by their 10th birthday, the average child in the UK has consumed 18 years' worth of sugar. That means they consume 2,800 more sugar cubes per year than recommended levels. The current food chain has become badly distorted. Basic knowledge that my parents' generation took for granted about how to buy, cook, prepare and store food has steadily but alarmingly declined.

We have allowed soulless supermarkets to drive needless overconsumption of packaged, processed, passive, perturbing products, and it is time that the greed and carelessness of corporate multinational food retailers gave way to a better model. It is not a coincidence, it is something considerably more than that; as local food retailers have declined—people knew from whom they were buying, understood what they were buying and where it came from—the consumption of processed, packaged ready meals has grown. We need to rebalance the food chain in favour of locally produced, healthy produce and to re-educate people about how to buy, cook, eat and enjoy it.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I will certainly give no lectures on buying and cooking food, but will my right hon. Friend join me in supporting Diabetes UK's Food Upfront campaign, which calls for a front-of-pack traffic light system to ensure that the content and nutritional value of processed foods are much clearer for people who are suffering from diabetes, and for a whole other range of dietary and nutritional needs?

Sir John Hayes: Entirely; in fact, I call on the Minister to do just that: will he introduce a mandatory front-of-pack traffic light labelling system, which is supported not only by my hon. Friend but by 83% of the population when asked whether that should happen? The Minister will be in tune with popular opinion; he will become something of a popular hero by responding to my hon. Friend's request, which I amplify.

Mr Vaizey: We have Belisha beacons—could this not be the moment for Brine indicators?

Sir John Hayes: It could indeed. Not only that—I wonder whether we might consider a watershed on the advertising of junk food. Wherever children go, they face adverts suggesting that they eat all kinds of foods. As children, we never ate those things, did we? We were not exposed to the same kind of seductive, alluring advertising suggesting that children should consume that kind of food. There is an argument for cracking down, and Government have a role to play. Again, that

kind of watershed on junk food advertising is supported by 76% of the population. The Minister would be a double hero if he did that.

Fitness matters, too. There must be a focus on exercise, given that studies illustrate that regular exercise pays dividends in respect of health and wellbeing, including diabetes. That is why we should not build on playing fields, close down sports halls and concrete over green spaces where people walk, play, run and enjoy all the opportunities to get healthy.

There is a link between poverty and ill health, as Members in the Chamber know very well. Although 6.6% of Britons have diabetes, that percentage falls markedly in wealthy areas. In Richmond upon Thames, 3.6% of residents have diabetes; in Bradford, the number rises to 10.4%. In south Lincolnshire, where my constituency is located, 7.3% of people have been diagnosed as diabetic. Such health inequalities must be addressed. It is with that in mind that I have campaigned so hard for the protection and maintenance of our parks and green spaces, which are often the only places that communities in less advantaged areas have to exercise, play sport and get healthy. In the case of diabetes prevention, do we perhaps take too puritanical an approach by rigidly pursuing individual outcomes? As I said, contrast that with what I described as the democratisation of the debate and the wider view that I have begun to outline today.

I commend, finally, the work of Government and the NHS on moving towards a fresh approach to diabetes in the NHS long-term plan, with a commitment to double the number of diabetes prevention programmes to 200,000 places. None the less, hon. Members will agree that that is a fraction of the 12.9 million people who are at high risk. Will my hon. Friend the Minister say how he plans to take a measured approach and appraise the evidence for all available solutions that might reach the wider population, beyond those targeted special programmes for that relatively small number—well, 200,000 is not a tiny number, but it is a relatively small proportion of the total number of people at risk of contracting diabetes?

Much commendable progress has been made, but it is now time for the Government to do several things. First, they must intensify their public information campaign and encourage everyone to speak about their own type 2 diabetes with their healthcare professional. Secondly, they should ensure that healthcare professionals offer a range of proven solutions, be that education or technology to enable self-management, or the resource to facilitate prevention at scale. Thirdly, they should continually review a rapidly changing environment and update the House on the tough political decisions being made to tackle this crisis of immense proportions. Politicians can no longer afford to abnegate their responsibility to a so-called expert class driven by bureaucracy. Too much is at stake. I know that the Minister will not be able to respond now to all my points, but I invite him to meet me and other concerned colleagues once he has had a chance to reflect on some of the issues, so that we can take the debate forward.

I began with C. S. Lewis, and I will end with him as well:

"We all want progress...If you are on the wrong road progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road and in that case the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive man."

I do not think we are entirely on the wrong road, but we must be honest about what more we can do. That is not for our own interests or sake, and it is not even for the Minister's heroic reputation, which I championed earlier. It is for all those who are suffering, or who might suffer, from the crippling illness that is diabetes.

10.1 am

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) on giving us the opportunity to debate this subject, and on the comprehensive way he introduced it. He rightly spoke about the potential of technology—I will say more about that in a moment—and about the distinction between those who deal with type 1 diabetes and those with type 2 diabetes. It is important always to make that distinction, because type 1 diabetes is an autoimmune condition over which the person involved has no control. It is not a lifestyle-related problem; someone is born with a predisposition to diabetes and something—we do not really understand what—will trigger it at some point in their life, often at a young age. There is also increasing incidence of people developing type 1 diabetes at an older age, which is a relatively new phenomenon. I will confine my remarks to type 1 diabetes and consider what can be done to help people better to manage their condition.

The Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation is working with Cambridge University to develop an artificial pancreas. The problem with type 1 diabetes is that the pancreas does not work to produce the required levels of insulin—indeed, in most cases it produces no insulin at all. Currently, a person can have a device for continuous blood glucose monitoring, and if it is judged that the condition is not being managed satisfactorily, they can also have an insulin pump. Those are two separate devices; the beauty of the artificial pancreas is that through an algorithm the two are linked, so while the person receives continuous blood glucose level monitoring, the algorithm also enables the insulin pump to respond to a requirement for additional insulin, depending on the blood glucose level. The potential is enormous, and I commend the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation for its work. The technology the right hon. Gentleman referred to is now close to being so good that type 1 diabetes will become much easier to manage, which is important.

Before Christmas, I secured an Adjournment debate on the development of the artificial pancreas in which I mentioned the fact that people are now devising their own artificial pancreases. It seems mostly to involve young people who, in some cases, are technologically savvy enough to devise their own algorithms and link a blood glucose monitoring device to a pump. They are devising those devices in their bedrooms or other normal settings. Someone who is a bit older contacted me after the debate and said, “I didn’t devise this in my bedroom. I’m an engineer and I did it on the kitchen table.” The point is that people are capable of doing such things. I am not saying that that is the way forward, because although many of those devices work and people are pleased with the results of the things they have devised, it cannot be right that they are being left to create such devices on their own without them being quality assured

and tested by people who are competent to do so. It shows, however, the potential of what people can do for themselves.

We should not fool ourselves into believing that technology will resolve all the problems, because the situation is difficult, particularly for some young people. Think about when we were teenagers: no matter how well disciplined or well behaved people are, the lifestyle of a teenager does not easily lend itself to monitoring a diabetic condition. Going out with a group of friends for a meal or drink and having to adjust one’s insulin level with an injection can be awkward. Young people also face challenges with the way their condition is perceived by their peer group. In some instances, people confuse type 1 and type 2 diabetes and young people in school get bullied on the basis that they have brought their diabetes on themselves because they eat too much sugar. I have seen examples of that. An autoimmune condition is not triggered by one’s lifestyle at all, yet people get bullied on that basis and it is important that they receive the necessary support.

One of my worries—I hope the Minister will try to address this when he responds to the debate—is that there is often a need for psychological, or even in some cases psychiatric, support because the challenges of being a young diabetic are such that people need other support. Schools, by the way, need better training in supporting pupils with diabetes. There have been examples of young people becoming hypoglycaemic and, when they have tried to raise their need to deal with it with the teacher, being told off and humiliated because they happen to have that condition at that time.

Luke Graham: The right hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. I have friends and family members with diabetes, and there are tell-tale signs. At the moment there is a great schools initiative to encourage teachers and students to do CPR and first aid; perhaps spotting the tell-tale signs of a hypo could be included in that package, and promoted in schools. Will he join me in supporting that?

Mr Howarth: Yes. I will not labour the point, but the hon. Gentleman is right. I would add that quite often teachers are left with such responsibilities, although they have enough challenges in their working life, but there is a need for someone in the school to have the expertise and to be trained to deal with young people with type 1 diabetes.

I know that I assured you, Mr Robertson, that I would try to be briefer than I have been, but I am coming to the end of my remarks, and the matter is important. I join the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings in saying that it would be useful to have a meeting with the Minister to discuss the matter in more depth and get his thoughts on how to move forward. There is much that we can do to make people’s lives better. I hope that the debate will inform that process, and that we will be able to move forward on the basis of consensus across the House. The Minister faces challenges, and Members of this House will want to share the burden of them.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): I am looking to call the Scottish National party spokesman at 10.28, and we have two more hon. Members wanting to speak, so please bear that in mind.

10.11 am

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate, because diabetes is so significant in the UK. There are 4.6 million people with diabetes and on current projections we are on track to have more than 5 million people suffering from it by 2025. Ninety per cent. of people with diabetes have type 2, and being overweight or obese accounts for 80% to 85% of a person's risk of developing the condition, so I shall focus my remarks on what is causing the hugely unwelcome surge in diabetes across the UK and, more importantly, what we need to do about it.

The shocking fact is that a quarter of children go into primary school reception overweight or obese. By the time that they leave, one third are overweight or obese. They are being educated, but overall they are becoming less healthy, which has worrying implications for their future life chances. In the UK at the moment, 30% of all children and 60% of adults are overweight or obese. The worry is that that has become almost normalised. People do not notice it and do not think it is a problem. To me, that is a huge social justice issue. Obesity rates are twice as high in the most deprived communities as in the least deprived. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) made that point eloquently in his opening remarks.

I was particularly impressed by the remarks of our wonderful chief medical officer, Dame Sally Davies, just before Christmas. She hit hard at a number of targets and came out with some important truths. She had the food industry in her sights—she said that it benefits from selling unhealthy food, that it does not pay for the harm it does, and that it clearly has not done enough. She raised the fact there is added sugar in baby milk and baby foods, for goodness' sake. What is the justification for that, other than to put babies and very young children towards a life of sugar addiction? That is scandalous and we should call it out. Frankly, the Government should ban it as soon as they are able, and if we have to leave the European Union to do so it should be an early priority at the beginning of April.

I did not come into public life just to ban things. The corollary, of course, is that we need to make the healthy choice the easy choice, and to be all about promoting wonderful, healthy, delicious, nutritious—often British—food. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings made that point well, too. Dame Sally Davies discussed whether there might be a need for price subsidies for fruit and vegetables. Let us make fruit and vegetables—good food that will not cause obesity and diabetes—more accessible, available and affordable to our constituents. That could be done through the taxation system. Dame Sally also called for sugary milk drinks to come within the soft drinks industry levy, which is entirely sensible.

It is worth looking at some of the foods currently on supermarket shelves. Taking children's breakfast cereals as an example, 37 grams out of 100 grams of Kellogg's Frosties are sugar. The figure for Kellogg's Crunchy Nut cornflakes is 35.3 grams per 100 grams. For Kellogg's Coco Pops it has come down a little bit, but there are still 30.9 grams of sugar per 100 grams. Those are pretty appalling figures, when we think how much sugar that is.

In 2017, some own brands were not much better. Lidl Golden Balls had 36 grams of sugar per 100 grams. Aldi Sugar Frosted Flakes had 35 grams per 100 grams. Tesco Frosted Flakes had 34.9 grams. Those are Public Health England figures and some relate to August 2017, while some, such as the Kellogg's ones, are current. We need to call that out. Not enough progress is being made, and unless healthier food is available for our constituents we shall not turn the supertanker around. We know from Public Health England that chocolate confectionery and biscuits between them account for more than 300,000 tonnes of sugar going into our diet every year. That is more than from all the other food categories put together.

My first plea is that we should do more with food manufacturers. They need to get with the programme and to know that many of us in the House have them in our sights. I am a Conservative and believe in the free market. I do not want the state to produce our food. However, there is a serious challenge, because we all pay for the NHS through our taxes and the food industry is causing a large part of the problem. Dr Chris Marshall, one of my best local GPs, had to defend the diabetes prevalence in his area and what was happening about it, but it is not fair to blame GPs when so much is stacked against them because of the food industry, among other things. The food industry needs to raise its game. It has been getting away with too much for too long and the Government need to play hard ball with it.

Active travel is another area I want to consider. I came to the House of Commons on a bicycle this morning, because I could. For our children, when we design new housing estates, let us make sure they can bicycle or walk to school. Let us get more cycling and walking in cities. That is a design and planning issue. Officials and a Minister from the Department of Health and Social Care are here for the debate. We need a cross-Government strategy to build in active and healthy travel for children and adults to help the situation.

Calorie information is also relevant. Public Health England tells us that women should eat up to 2,000 calories a day and that men should eat up to 2,500. I wonder whether anyone here knows how many calories they had for breakfast, or how many they will have for lunch or supper. What is the point of giving us that daily total if none of us has a clue how much we eat? Here is a suggestion. For people who are waiting 10 minutes to see the doctor, why not have on the surgery wall examples of the different meals that the British public mainly eat, with a rough idea of how many calories there are in them? Would not that be a start to education? It would be free, easy, and a good use of the surgery wall in a public space where we all sit and wait. Why do not we try to get some of that public information out there so that we can do something and know what we are doing?

We have talked about schools. I do not blame teachers, who have more than enough to do trying to teach children, but they have a public education role. Given that we have gone from one quarter of children to one third being overweight or obese, there should be much more emphasis on providing proper education to children on food when they are taught to cook.

We must also look to Parliament. There has rightly been a move, which I am sure you approve of, Mr Robertson, to make this a more plastic-free Parliament. I approve

of that and it is right, but the information in our catering outlets about their offerings is not as good. Let us set an example on our own doorstep.

10.20 am

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I too congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) on this excellent debate. The contributions have shown that we could have spoken at much greater length, given the breadth of issues faced.

I will talk from a personal perspective. Two years ago I received a phone call from my doctor's receptionist, who said that the doctor would see me at 4 o'clock. Not catching on, I thought that was somewhat strange as I had not requested an appointment. I explained that I was in the House of Commons and very busy. She said, "Well, how about 9 o'clock tomorrow morning?" I agreed to go along on Friday, thinking that perhaps there was some issue that was going to be raised with me as a Member of Parliament.

I had forgotten entirely that I had had a regular blood test following quite a serious illness. A few years ago, I was in hospital for the best part of a year, in and out, and at one point none of my internal organs, including my pancreas, was working. I was obviously on quite a lot of painkillers. One of the many things the doctor had evidently said was that I could be diagnosed as diabetic in the future but, to be honest, during that period of my life I was pretty much out of it on painkillers, so I did not listen particularly.

I was completely aghast when I turned up at the doctor's and he said, "You're diabetic, and at the end of this meeting I will probably have to inject you with some insulin and you may be on insulin for the rest of your life, but there are other options." In the end, he decided that he would try to manage it through other drugs initially and I never went on to an injection regime, but it was quite scary.

It was also, I thought, quite embarrassing. I felt rather guilty and perhaps stupid for having been obese. Ironically, because of my illness, I was quite thin having come out of hospital. I had lost about five stone in total, so I was not a typical case, but I had eaten too much and not exercised enough. I am now getting back on track and staying on track, but when, as Members of Parliament, something happens to us, we have an insight into what our constituents are suffering from and their experiences.

There was a call in the debate for the best possible solutions. I would argue that we need a lot more diversity and that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Diabetes is complex. A distinction has rightly been made between type 1, type 2 and juvenile diabetes, and while I have not spent the time on it that others have, there is a medical case for making further divisions in diabetes, particularly within type 2, for reasons that I suspect we do not fully understand.

On prevention, if I could have talked to my younger self and continued to exercise through my late 20s and 30s as I had as a child, I would perhaps not have the problems I have now. My diabetes is very much under control, and I praise the work of diabetes nurses around the UK, who have a little more time than the doctors and can coach people and point them in the right

direction. For example, they mentioned a book to me, "Carbs & Cals", which has pictures of typical meals and typical sizes and goes through the grams of carbs and the calorie intake—exactly like the type of poster that my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) wanted to see in doctors' surgeries.

We should have diversity because some things have worked for me and some things have not. The shock of being diagnosed as diabetic made me change my ways. For months I would not touch chocolate and I would have no carbohydrates whatsoever. I went on a course about diet for diabetics that took a slightly different approach, which I went on to adopt, counting carbs and managing things precisely. Personally, that did not work for me and abstinence from sugar or carbohydrates worked better, but maybe for others it is different.

Exercise, for me, has worked well. I am hoping to run the London marathon, but whenever I do something such as that I question it. If I speak to anyone who has run a marathon, they talk about the big meal beforehand and say, "Make sure you have plenty of carbs the night before—lots of pasta and so forth that will release slowly." One of the benefits I find in doing that is that I understand a little more about how carbohydrates are broken down, not just theoretically, but personally, and how my body reacts to carbohydrates and sugar.

When I left the doctor's surgery I had the prick test for glucose. I ended up having three different machines, one of which eventually linked up to my iPhone. I do not now need to do a prick test on a regular basis, but I find it useful as a way of understanding my short-term glucose as well as the six-monthly blood test that I do. Personally, as a type 2 diabetic, while I do not need to monitor my glucose on an hour-by-hour basis, I would find it useful to have something on me for a week so that I could see the effect of having a tiny bit of cereal this morning, or the difference in my glucose if I have had two glasses of wine the night before. What is the difference between running five miles and 10 miles? How many carbohydrates should I have to compensate? We need a lot more diversity in provision over time.

Having outed myself as a diabetic—as I said, one should not feel shame about it, but I did for quite a while—and spoken about it in the House of Commons, I hope that I, like a number of hon. Members, can be an advocate for diabetics across the country, understand not only my condition but those of others, and help to improve the situation over time. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings for raising this incredibly important issue in the House.

10.27 am

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) for securing the debate, for his very knowledgeable introduction and for the consensual nature of the debate that has taken place.

We have had a number of contributions; I will just touch briefly on the main speakers. The right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) reminded us of the importance of recognising the two different types of diabetes, which cannot be emphasised enough. I was

[*Martyn Day*]

also interested in his comments on the artificial pancreas. The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) raised the risk of diabetes being normalised and the impact of obesity, and the food industry's contribution to exacerbating the problem. The figures he quoted on sugar intakes were genuinely frightening and should be a lesson to us all. The hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) gave his personal experience of his diabetes being under control. The very interesting thought of what we would say to our younger selves is one that we need to take out to our constituents in order to make an impact on the problem.

Health, of course, is a devolved matter. Consequently, it seldom features in my casework as a Member of this Parliament. That said, many of my friends have diabetes, either type 1 or type 2. It is the fastest growing health threat of our time and a critical public health matter. Diabetes is increasing rapidly, and one person in 20 in Scotland is now diagnosed with the condition—I stress diagnosed, because there will be many others who are undiagnosed. The latest figures published by Diabetes UK show that more than 3.5 million people in the UK were living with a diagnosis of diabetes in 2016-17, with just less than 290,000 of them in Scotland. Diabetes UK also reported that if nothing changes, more than 5 million people in the UK will have it by 2025. That is a figure that a number of people have used, and it is worth repeating to emphasise the impact of this health crisis.

In the Forth Valley area, which covers part of my constituency, more than 14,500 people are living with diabetes and there are more than 9,000 people with diabetes in West Lothian, which covers the other part. That helps to put the issue into perspective across a number of constituencies.

It is estimated that more than one person in 16 across the UK has diabetes, either diagnosed or undiagnosed, and it is worth remembering that around 80% of diabetes complications are preventable. I believe that in Scotland around 10% of NHS spending goes on diabetes—I think the English figure is fairly similar. If 80% of that is preventable, think how much we could save by tackling this problem, in addition to the benefit to people's lifestyles that could be achieved. Many of those complications are preventable or can at least be significantly delayed through early detection, good care and access to appropriate self-management tools and resources, of which access to diabetes technologies is a fundamental part.

When I last spoke about diabetes, a couple of years ago, we talked about technologies. I confess that at that time I had not really witnessed much of them first hand, so I was pleased over the festive break when I saw one of my friends, Paul Kingsley, who has lived with diabetes for some time. He has a Libre patch sensor and an insulin pump. He showed me how that worked, which was interesting to see. It has made a real change to his life. I can remember when he had to do the prick tests and take his needles with him everywhere he went. Technology is making a big difference to people's lives.

With the challenge of the increasing numbers of people with diabetes, access to the technology to help those living with the disease becomes ever more important. There are 19,000 new cases of diabetes diagnosed every

year in Scotland and numbers are set to increase year on year, particularly with rising levels of obesity. Early results from ongoing research, led by Mike Lean at the University of Glasgow and Roy Taylor at Newcastle University, showed that it is possible for some people to put their type 2 diabetes into remission using a low-calorie, diet-based, weight management programme, delivered by their GP. I believe that, as a result of those promising results, NHS England has committed to piloting a remission programme for 5,000 people with type 2 diabetes in 2019, and the Scottish Government, through their "A Healthier Future" plan, pledged £42 million to the prevention, early detection and early intervention of type 2 diabetes. There is a lot we can learn from each other from these processes and as the results of these tests come out.

NHS boards in Scotland will be able use that funding to deliver programmes to prevent type 2 diabetes and to put it into remission. One such programme that receives funding from NHS Forth Valley is the Braveheart Association, a Scottish charitable incorporated organisation based at Falkirk Community Hospital. The Braveheart programmes have been designed to provide resources to support and improve the health and wellbeing of Falkirk communities. They create community-led activities and outreach health services to improve the health of local people. One of the initiatives is Braveheart Plus peer support groups, which focus on those living with type 2 diabetes and coronary heart disease. One beneficiary of Braveheart's walking project is a lad called Ali, a sufferer of heart disease and diabetes, who was initially reluctant to take part. Through participation, he now leads his own bi-weekly group, enjoys meeting new people and is able to manage his health conditions much better.

There is little doubt that eating a poor diet and being overweight or obese cause serious health problems, such as type 2 diabetes, cancer and heart disease, and it is clear that we must take decisive action. The SNP has an ambition to halve childhood obesity in Scotland by 2030, which is one reason the Scottish Government are consulting with the public, and food and retail industries on restricting in-store marketing and promotion of foods high in fat, sugar or salt, with little or no nutritional benefit. That is very important; I think we have all been tempted.

Andrew Selous: On that point, does the hon. Gentleman agree that it would be good to hear from the Minister about when we will get the consultation on the 9 pm watershed and on promotions? Both are promised, but we do not yet have a date for them.

Martyn Day: I fully agree; that would be very useful to have.

I think we have all been guilty of impulse purchases when out shopping. It is always worse if we shop when hungry and there is a temptation to get fast food and a quick fix. We are all more than capable of cooking good quality meals, but convenience and lifestyle often get in the way of that. There is a lot we could do if there was a better marketing regime. The consultation in Scotland is part of the diet and healthy weight delivery plan, which will inform an assessment of impact and possible legislation.

No debate these days can be complete without some reference to Brexit, and why should this one be any exception?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): We were so close.

Martyn Day: Yes, but it had to come in, given the requirement to stockpile insulin. Diabetes charities have warned that lives could be put at risk without reliable supplies of insulin, as the UK imports the vast majority of its stocks of the medicines. In response, stockpiles have been increased, which is good. Dan Howarth, the head of care at Diabetes UK, said in September:

“Insulin and other diabetes medication aren’t optional extras for the millions of people in the UK who rely on them. It’s incredibly important that the companies involved in their production and distribution, and those involved in guaranteeing their entry into the UK, work together so that supply continues uninterrupted.”

I would be grateful for reassurances from the Minister that that will indeed happen and about how long our supplies will last should we face the worst-case scenario.

10.35 am

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Robertson.

I thank the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) for securing this important debate, especially after the excesses of Christmas—in which I am sure we all indulged, which is relevant to the topic we are discussing—and for his characteristically informative, entertaining and articulate opening speech. I also thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part: my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth), the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), who is co-chair of all-party parliamentary group on obesity and does excellent work in this area, and the hon. Members for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) and for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day). They made excellent contributions.

As we have heard—I will repeat these facts because they are worth saying again—there are 4.6 million people living with diabetes. Over the last 20 years, the number of people diagnosed has more than doubled. Every day, around 700 people—one person every two minutes—are diagnosed with diabetes, which is really quite shocking. Diabetes UK estimates that if nothing changes, more than 5 million people will have diabetes in the UK by 2025. That is why this debate is so important, and I am pleased to be here to discuss treatment, remission and prevention.

I start with treatment and care. Once a patient has been diagnosed, it is crucial that they get the right treatment and care for them. Technology can play a role in that, particularly for people with type 1 diabetes. New technologies mean that patients can be treated and monitored, which can help to reduce diabetes-related complications in the long term. However, access to those technologies is subject to a postcode lottery, as are many other things. I have heard of huge variation of availability and use across the country. I was pleased to see the Government commit to making life-changing flash glucose monitors available for patients with type 1 diabetes by April 2019. Will the Minister please also ensure that basic technologies, such as test strips and meters, are available to all patients who clinically need them across the country? We cannot just say that everyone with type 2 diabetes would clinically need them—although

I have bought myself one and they are good for monitoring—but if people need them clinically, they should be available, not subject to a postcode lottery.

Such technology can be redundant if patients do not know how to use it, or do not know enough about their condition and how to manage it. That is why educational courses, such as the one that the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East said he attended after his diagnosis, should be widely available, to give patients the knowledge, skills, support and independence to look after their own health. I was pleased to see that get a mention in the long-term plan earlier this week. Can the Minister please elaborate on when he expects the “structured education and digital self-management tools” to be expanded?

It is crucial that patients know about their diabetes and the health risks associated with it. According to Diabetes UK, there are over 160 lower-limb amputations every week in England that are a direct result of diabetes. As someone with type 2 diabetes, I find that really scary. Four out of five of those cases could have been prevented. Local foot care teams help to prevent thousands of amputations each year, but diabetes-related amputation is now at an all-time high. Does the Minister have any strategy to reverse that trend?

Finally on treatment and care, one person in six occupying a hospital bed has diabetes; at some sites it is as many as one in four. The majority of patients with diabetes are admitted for treatment of a different condition, but while in hospital their diabetes should not be ignored. When diabetes is not adequately cared for in hospitals, harm can result from the in-patient stay. Acute or long-term conditions can develop further, adding further costs to the NHS and complications for the patients.

The long-term plan includes a welcome commitment to introducing diabetes in-patient specialist nursing teams to improve recovery and to reduce lengths of stay and readmission rates. Will the Minister indicate when he expects that to begin? Will he also assure us that those teams will be available in all hospitals across the country?

On remission, as we have heard, my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) has been very vocal about his own transformation—it has been huge—and the remission of his diabetes owing to exercise and changes in his diet. He has done a fantastic job, as we have all acknowledged, and I wish him all the best. Diet changes, when I stick to them, have also helped me in my management of my diabetes. When I have totally cut out sugar and reduced all carbs, as the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East said helped him, that has made a massive difference. While there is currently no evidence that diabetes can be completely cured, even by changes to diet and lifestyle—I am told that once someone is diabetic they always will be—people can take steps to control, reduce or even reverse symptoms of diabetes, and to put their diabetes into remission.

As we heard from the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk, research and trials by Professor Roy Taylor of Newcastle University—I am very proud that a north-east university is leading the way on this—have found that a low-calorie diet of 800 calories a day, which is low but manageable, can actually reverse diabetes, which was recently listed by *MadeAtUni* as one of the

[Mrs Sharon Hodgson]

UK's 100 best breakthroughs in health. That is certainly an area that needs to be explored further. However, not everyone can make those changes on their own, and patients must have access to medical support and dietary advice if they wish to try. The NHS has confirmed that it will pilot diabetes remission services in England and Scotland. Some places are already rolling out the service informally. For example, I know that some GPs in Tyneside are piloting this model. Will the Minister please tell us when expects those pilots to begin?

On prevention, 12.3 million people are now at an increased risk of developing type 2 diabetes. Of course, not all of those will go on to develop diabetes, but such a high number of people at risk is deeply concerning. Type 2 diabetes has several risk factors, but as the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire highlighted, being overweight or obese accounts for as much as 80% to 85% of someone's overall risk of developing the condition.

Almost two in every three people in the UK are either overweight or obese. I am obviously one of the two at the moment. I strive and hope to be like the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East, who said he is now the one out of those three. I congratulate him on that. I am back on a diet and cutting out sugar and carbs again and trying my best. However, if it was easy, nobody would be overweight. It is hard, and Christmas is not the best time to try to diet. This is why the nudge theories introduced by Public Health England are very welcome, along with proper traffic light food labelling and the "Eatwell plate", for example.

However, we have to acknowledge that our society has become increasingly obesogenic and sedentary, and we have to address that as soon as possible, starting with the next generation in particular. In that regard, the Government launched the second childhood obesity plan last year, which I hope will help to tackle this problem if they implement all the policies within it and do not only consult on them. Clear calorie labelling and introducing a 9 pm watershed for adverts for food and drink that are high in fat, salt and sugar are two steps that the Opposition would introduce if in government, to help to reduce the high level of obesity in this country.

However, it is not all about diet, as Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson is always telling me, but about exercise, too. Inactive children become inactive adults, which increases their risk of long-term conditions. According to ukactive, only 50% of seven-year-olds meet recommended physical activity guidelines. We therefore need to make sure that children have the space and resources to participate in sports, activities and play, which will benefit them in a host of ways, not just their health.

Nor should we forget the over-55s—or anybody, actually. According to ukactive, a total of £80.5 million could be achieved in NHS and healthcare savings on diabetes if one third of inactive over-55s were supported to be active over the next 10 years. The Secretary of State says that prevention is better than cure, and I think that that figure alone shows that it is.

The long-term plan committed

"to fund a doubling of the NHS Diabetes Prevention Programme over the next five years, including a new digital option to widen patient choice and target inequality."

That must target people from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups, who are six times more likely to develop type 2 diabetes. We must ensure that any prevention programme reaches those communities as a matter of urgency.

To conclude, people with diabetes are sadly at greater risk of serious but largely preventable complications. For example, they are twice as likely to have a heart attack or a stroke. For those of us here who suffer from diabetes, that is a sobering fact. We must ensure that their diabetes is properly managed and cared for, so as to avoid those serious complications. What the Government do next as part of the long-term plan will be beneficial to those with diabetes, and I know that patients, campaigners and all of us here will keep a close eye on developments.

10.47 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): It is nice to see you in the Chair, Mr Robertson. I thank all Members for their contributions and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) for securing the debate. He introduced it with his usual flourish, and I know that people watching will have been interested in what he said and the issues that he raised.

We have to keep these issues high on the agenda. They affect a lot of people and we talk about them a lot in Parliament; I cannot think of a Health oral questions that I have been involved in as a Minister when diabetes has not come up. There is a reason for that: because it affects so many of us and our constituents. We must keep raising it.

This is a timely debate. We published the long-term plan for the NHS on Monday. Diabetes features prominently in the plan, which is no accident. We would expect it to, and if it did not, we would have a debate on why not. However, more than that, the plan has a strong focus on prevention and on building a health service for the needs of the 21st century that supports people to manage their own health—not only for diabetes but across the piece—and wellbeing.

We really support that agenda in this Department and with this Secretary of State. That matters for patients—our constituents—with diabetes and others. Chris Askew is a very good man and chief executive of Diabetes UK, and his welcome for the long-term plan and the diabetes sections within it greatly attests to that.

We have heard some excellent contributions. I very much enjoyed listening to the intervention from my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) and his suggestion about Brine labelling; my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), who gave us insights about his two-year-old daughter; and my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), who talked about the food industry and child obesity. We also heard speeches from the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth), who talked about an artificial pancreas, which was very interesting, and from the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman). I should be able to cover all those items. If I do not cover everyone's points, I will of course write to them, as is my usual practice.

I have to say that I particularly enjoyed the contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge). It was a very powerful and insightful speech, as it always is from him, and it was delivered from the heart. He made the very good point that we are all different. That is one of the challenges not just for diabetes care, but for healthcare generally. Healthcare is not an exact science. I say that not as a doctor, but as someone who spends a lot of time with doctors.

My hon. Friend also made a point about the complexity of diabetes. In reality, it is a spectrum. We have heard a lot of talk this morning about type 1 diabetes—from the right hon. Member for Knowsley, for instance—and about type 2 diabetes from many others. But increasingly we hear about—it is not a new term—type 1.5 diabetes, otherwise known as LADA, or latent autoimmune diabetes in adults. As I understand it, that is not a clinical definition, but is generally used to describe a slow-onset form of type 1 diabetes that is often mistaken for type 2 diabetes. There are many support services for that condition, and people are increasingly talking to their doctors about it. There is lots of clinical debate around it, but the topic has been around since the 1970s. That goes to the heart of my hon. Friend's point. Diabetes is a complex condition. There is a spectrum for diabetes, as there is for many other conditions.

I, too, pay tribute to the NHS staff, to the diabetes nurses and the doctors, but also to the support groups. My constituency has the Winchester and Eastleigh diabetes support group, which I spoke to recently. We will all have those groups in our constituencies. As MPs, we are very used to having in front of us people who are far more expert on the subject than they have come to talk to us about than we are—every single one of my constituency surgeries is an example of that—but never is that more true than when we talk to people with diabetes, who have a great and expert knowledge of their condition and the management of it. If they do not, we need to help them to have better, expert knowledge of their condition, because that is as much in our interest as it is in theirs.

There are a couple of points to touch on. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings, in introducing the debate, and my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire touched on the food and drink industry and healthier eating. It is important that we build on the world-leading action set out in both chapters of our childhood obesity plan. We have already seen real success. More than half of all drinks in the scope of the soft drinks industry levy are being reformulated. That is equivalent to removing some 45 million kg of sugar every year, as a result of the so-called sugar tax. And some products in the sugar reduction programme are exceeding their first-year targets. For example, a 6% reduction is being achieved for yoghurts.

We will consider further use of the tax system to promote healthy food—the challenge that my hon. Friend put to me. He mentioned sugary milky drinks. The Treasury was very clear, when former Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne launched the sugar tax, that in 2020—next year—we would review the sugar levy and whether to extend it to milky drinks. As the Minister, I for one will certainly be welcoming that.

As part of chapter 2, we have already held consultations on ending the sale of energy drinks to children and on calorie labelling in restaurants. We are reviewing the feedback and will formally respond in due course. We will very shortly be launching consultations on restricting promotions of fatty and sugary products by location and price, and we will be consulting on further restrictions, including a 9 pm watershed, at the earliest opportunity, with the aim of limiting children's exposure to sugary and fatty food advertising and driving further reformulation. What I will say, in answer to the challenge that I have been given on those products, is that not everyone agrees that we should do this. Let us be honest: there are people in our party who do not. I challenge them to look at the challenge that we have in our country with obesity and what it is costing our country and our health service. If we believe in a publicly funded health service, we believe in a public health system that challenges these kinds of condition, so I say to my hon. Friends: keep raising the issue in the House. Next Tuesday they will have an opportunity to do so.

Alongside that, we are committed to exploring what can be done on food labelling when we leave the European Union. My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham), who is no longer in his place, raised traffic light labelling. We cannot do that as a member state, but we will soon be free. Some companies have decided to take it on themselves. Kellogg's, the cereal manufacturer, which has been mentioned this morning, announced just before Christmas that it intends to do that. I welcome that and give credit to Kellogg's for doing it.

Wherever possible, the aim is of course to prevent type 2 diabetes from developing in the first place, which is emphasised in the NHS long-term plan. I am very pleased that NHS England and Public Health England, for which I have responsibility, and Diabetes UK, working hand in glove, have had great success in working on what is the first diabetes prevention programme to be delivered at scale nationwide anywhere in the world.

Andrew Selous: Will the Minister give way?

Steve Brine: Very briefly—be quick.

Andrew Selous: I, too, am very pleased that Kellogg's has brought in traffic light labelling, but does the Minister agree that, with Kellogg's Frosties at 37 grams of sugar per 100 grams, there is much more to do as far as Kellogg's is concerned?

Steve Brine: Not only do I agree with my hon. Friend, but the company would agree with him. It is very aware of how much pressure that I and the Government are putting on it to change its products. I would say that it is top of my Christmas card list. Many other manufacturers have not yet made it on to my list, and I ask them to step up and raise their game to the level of the best. I am sure that they can.

In 2018-19, the diabetes prevention programme achieved full national roll-out, making England the first country in the world to achieve full geographical coverage. That is a great achievement, and the figures are good. As set out in the long-term plan, NHS England intends to double the capacity of the programme up to 200,000 people per annum by 2023-24. As my right hon. Friend the Member

[*Steve Brine*]

for South Holland and The Deepings said, it is a modest number in context, but it is also a big number. This is still the largest diabetes prevention programme of its kind. He asked whether we keep these things under constant review and whether we have the ambition to go further. You bet we do, and I think we need to.

There has been much talk this morning about technology. We are also developing an online, self-management support tool called HeLP, comprising a structured education course that has content focused on maintaining a healthy lifestyle for people with type 2 diabetes. That includes content on weight management and alcohol reduction—that can of course help with many health challenges—and cognitive behavioural therapy related to diabetes-related distress. NHSE hopes, once the tool has been developed, to roll it out in the summer of this year.

Sir John Hayes: In my opening remarks, I called for a new system for appraising technology and ensuring that it is allocated according to need and consistently across the country. On education, it does seem to me that there is a littered landscape. We have Public Health England, the NHS and local authorities. That littered landscape could easily lead to complication, confusion and even, possibly, contradiction, so will the Minister look at that, too?

Steve Brine: Of course I will look at it. I talk to Public Health England regularly about all these matters, and I take my right hon. Friend's challenge on board. In the time that we have, I cannot respond in any more detail, but I totally take his challenge on board.

There are public health campaigns such as One You, the behavioural change campaign aimed at people in the 40-to-60 age bracket—sadly, that now includes me—and designed to motivate people to take steps to improve their health through action on the main risk factors, such as smoking, inactivity, obesity and alcohol, which will help to reduce the risk of developing type 2 diabetes.

I would like to say so much more, but as ever in the House of Commons there is no time to do so. What I will say is this. We have great ambition in the long-term plan. The long-term plan is a living document, a document that we will build on—we have ambitions to go even further—but I hope that the Government and I, as the Public Health Minister, have shown our commitment to improving outcomes for people with diabetes and living with it through treatment, but also to helping to prevent people from developing it in the first place. Our constituents demand that from us, and our health service, if we believe in it as a publicly funded, free at the point of use health service, which we do, needs us to deliver on that, and we will.

10.58 am

Sir John Hayes: I think that this has been, as the Minister generously said, a useful debate, but I hope that it is also the start of a process, rather than the end of a story. That process should involve, exactly as the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) recommended, a continuing dialogue with Government. I hope that the Minister will agree to the meeting that I suggested with a small delegation of colleagues, so that we can explore further the matters raised briefly today. There are real issues in relation to prevention and education, as I hinted a moment ago, but also with regard to treatment, as the Minister has acknowledged. The long-term plan puts the strategy in place. We now need to ensure that that strategy is delivered in a way that brings relief from need for constituents across this country. That need is illustrated by the commitment of all those who have contributed to this debate. I am immensely grateful for your stewardship of it, Mr Robertson, for all the contributions and for the Minister's typically robust but sensitive response to the remarks made this morning.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered diabetes.

RMB Chivenor: Planned Closure

11 am

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the planned closure of RMB Chivenor.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank the other hon. Members who have taken the time to take part during the busy parliamentary schedule. In the 10 minutes or so for which I intend to speak, I will make the point that we should reverse the announcement originally made in November 2016 to close the Royal Marines base at Chivenor in my constituency.

For those who do not have an encyclopaedic knowledge of such things, I will say exactly what we are talking about and why it is important. RMB Chivenor has been a part of the military landscape of North Devon and this country since May 1940. Prior to that, it was a civil airfield, but it was taken over by the RAF as the second world war kicked in. It played a vital role in our air defences during the second world war.

The proud military history of RMB Chivenor has continued ever since. It is now a Royal Marines base, home to a number of vital regiments. It seems to me that, in the world in which we live, which I think most people would agree is an uncertain one, now is not the time to consider the closure of such a vital and historic military base.

RMB Chivenor is home principally to 3 Commando Brigade. It is unique in a number of ways. First, it is home to branches of all three of our armed services. The Royal Marines—the principal force there—and the Commando Logistic Regiment use the unique environment, which I will speak about a bit more, in a way in which no other environment could be used. They use it for training, practice and maintenance, and they are able to do so because of the unique facilities that that location brings. It is also home to 24 Commando Regiment of the Royal Engineers, which carries out an absolutely vital role in the maintenance of the infrastructure and hardware on which our military relies. Completing the link to its historical background, it is home to a significant RAF contingent as well.

The second reason I believe RMB Chivenor is unique is its location. It is on the side of the estuary and contains sand dunes, wide open spaces and, crucially, access to a waterfront. It is a huge space that simply does not exist elsewhere. There is no other space, in my estimation, that would allow the Royal Engineers and particularly the Royal Marines to carry out their vital work.

As I mentioned, in November 2016, as part of the defence establishment's review, the then Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), announced in the House that RMB Chivenor would be closing. The community of North Devon immediately mobilised—as it is so good at doing—effective campaigns to try to reverse the closure decision. I asked a question in the House on that first day as soon as the announcement was made, and have continued to push ever since.

I want to make it clear at an early point in my remarks that this has been a non-political and cross-party campaign. Many local councils, political parties, business

organisations, economic groups and residents' groups right across North Devon have been involved in the campaign to seek to reverse the closure of RMB Chivenor. All the local authorities have played a part: Devon County Council and North Devon Council, which are the principal authorities; and the local councils of Barnstaple Town Council, Braunton Parish Council and Heanton Punchardon Parish Council, which is the small parish in which RMB Chivenor actually sits. All those councils have campaigned hard to reverse this decision, as have many business groups and local residents. However, it is incumbent on me as the MP, with the unique access that gives me to Ministers and Parliament, to be the voice of the North Devon community, which I have done. I believe the Minister bears the scars of that to this day, as do many of his colleagues in the Ministry of Defence.

The campaign immediately swung into action and the then Secretary of State accepted my invitation to visit RMB Chivenor. I convened a roundtable of many of the organisations that I have just mentioned. The then Secretary of State somewhat took us by surprise when he told us that the closure of RMB Chivenor is “not a done deal”. That has given us hope.

However, time is now slipping away. It is now two years and two months since that original closure decision was made. The North Devon community and I feel that it is time to put an end to this uncertainty. The strength of feeling has not gone away in the long period since the original announcement; if anything, it has increased. There are now more people making the argument for reversing the closure of RMB Chivenor and there are a number of arguments as to why it is so important.

I have touched on why in my view, for military reasons, we must preserve the unique environment of RMB Chivenor as a military base. However, I do not seek to advance that argument today—it is an argument for the military, civil servants and Defence Ministers. As North Devon's representative, I seek to make a very clear argument that the hit to the local economy of North Devon would be very difficult for our local community to accept or stomach.

Quantifying the economic advancement that RMB Chivenor gives North Devon is difficult. Some 1,200 military personnel are based at Chivenor at any one time, but that can fluctuate due to military needs, logistics and whatever operations might be ongoing. It is absolutely clear, however, that the families based at Chivenor play an enormous role in the local community. They send their children to local schools. They spend their money in local shops. They avail themselves of local service industries and businesses. The spouses of military personnel based at RMB Chivenor work in other jobs in the local community.

The effect on the local economy of North Devon, although difficult to quantify, undoubtedly would be serious. I am afraid to say that the uncertainty that we have had to put up with since November 2016 is only adding to that sense of uncertainty. It is time to put a stop to that. It is time to ensure that we keep RMB Chivenor open to ensure the long-term good of the area's economy, the military personnel based there and the community in which they play such a major role and, I believe, the long-term military good of the job that RMB Chivenor does.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I gave my hon. Friend notice that I would intervene. I could not reiterate more strongly the points he is making. The same applies as strongly if not more strongly to Norton Manor Camp in Taunton, where 40 Commando is based. Economy-wise, society-wise and location-wise, there is a strong case for that camp remaining. It has been there for more than 23 years and has had significant investment from this and other Governments. It plays a huge part in our local economy. A new welfare centre, which cost up to £1 million, is about to open. We also have a new rehab and gym centre, which is well positioned for the Marines.

We need to look closely at why we would ever consider closing that camp, which also has the sword of Damocles hanging over it—it may close in 2028. Talking of swords, it is being awarded the Firmin sword of peace, which shows how revered those professional teams of people are.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Order. Interventions must be brief.

Rebecca Pow: Does my hon. Friend agree that it needs a rethink?

Peter Heaton-Jones: I could not have said it better myself—and I would not dare to. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Many of the arguments that she advances for her base, as strongly as she always has, apply precisely to RMB Chivenor.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Heaton-Jones: Of course I will give way to a fellow Devon MP.

Luke Pollard: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. This is a day of talking about the Royal Marines. The uncertainty that he spoke about is important. Does he agree that it is a cancer for morale not only in Taunton and Chivenor, but in Stonehouse Barracks and across the south-west? That is why we need certainty from the Minister about the future long-term basing arrangements for the superb Royal Marines.

Peter Heaton-Jones: As always, the hon. Gentleman speaks passionately for his constituency, which I completely understand and which I seek to do for my constituency as well. The two are intimately linked, because the original plan put forward by the Ministry of Defence would move some of the work done in Chivenor in my constituency, and in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), to his in Plymouth. There might be a slight conflict of interest between us, but we want the same thing: an end to the uncertainty. I suspect what that looks like is slightly different for us, but I want an end to the uncertainty, as does he, and as does my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane, because that is causing the damage. We need a final decision, which should be that RMB Chivenor is saved.

The base provides employment not only for the military personnel based there but for people from the local community, so it is a significant boost to the local

economy in terms of direct spending, the supply chain and local employment. Local public services such as the school I mentioned where many of the children of service personnel are educated would suffer a significant hit given the formula for per pupil funding.

We must look at the military and international situation. The world is becoming a less certain place. There are challenges to the foundations that have kept the peace, by and large, in the post-war period. Rivals are pushing us further. In such a climate, the Royal Marines are vital. Their flexibility and expertise are invaluable and must be preserved.

It is said that amateurs talk about tactics, but professionals study logistics. RMB Chivenor is home to the Commando Logistic Regiment and 24 Commando Regiment Royal Engineers, which are vital in any combat scenario. Again, RMB Chivenor provides them with a unique environment as a training ground. The landing beaches, the dunes and the estuary provide a unique combination of facilities for practising seaborne landings.

I want to give the Minister ample time to respond, so there are three key questions we need to ask. First, given the relatively small amount that the base costs to run, does it make financial sense to close it? Secondly, given the unique environment that it provides for all the work that is undertaken there, does it make logistical sense to close it? Thirdly, given the role it plays in the defence of our country, does it make military sense to close it? I believe the answers are clear.

I have raised the issue in the House on many occasions. Until now, the answer from the Ministry of Defence has been a pretty straight bat. A statement was issued by the MOD to the BBC on 3 January, in which an MOD spokesperson said:

“It remains the intention to continue with the release of sites set out in the Better Defence Estate Strategy announcement in Autumn 2016.”

In other words, the plan is for the closure to go ahead. I thank the Minister and say to him that it is time to put a stop to this. It is time to reverse the closure decision, end the uncertainty and save RMB Chivenor.

11.15 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): It is a pleasure to respond to the debate. As is customary, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) on securing the debate in Westminster Hall and on what he has done to represent his constituents and the armed forces by passionately making a case, lobbying and campaigning to get answers and discover what will happen to an important asset for our defence posture. He will be aware that the base sits in a wider frame of more than 90 sites that are being considered, and that there is a programme—a timetable—for us to release the news, for understandable commercial reasons. I will expand on that later. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's work and I thank him for the invitation to visit Chivenor. I was hugely impressed by what I saw there and that has very much influenced the decisions that I hope to expand on later.

My hon. Friend spoke about the role that military bases have, not just as important defence assets but as sizeable communities that provide homes, jobs and a way of life, and whose supply chains link with the local

economy. They are a living organism that has a symbiotic relationship with the wider community. The base—the garrison or whichever military establishment it sits in—develops a bond with the local community, as is the case with Chivenor, as he described.

Many of our military establishments have been in a place for so long that they help to define the area and add to its reputation, so it is always with some trepidation that any Defence Minister would try to tamper with or affect the size or longevity of a garrison, fully appreciating the strength of feeling and pride that local communities have for our military. A local bond is developed with service personnel and it is understandable that hon. Members would wish to ensure the long-term future of military bases in their constituencies, but hon. Members will also be aware of the wider need to rationalise our defence real estate.

The MOD owns 3% of the UK. We need to spend our limited defence budget—as much as I would like it to rise—wisely. It is simply not possible to retain in perpetuity that huge defence real estate, which is a legacy of the sea, land and air assets required to fight two world wars. We have been advised to conduct a wide-ranging study into MOD land, with a view to transforming our estate into one that better supports the future needs of our armed forces. With that comes more bespoke investment. We will be investing more than £4 billion in the next 10 years to create smaller, more modern and capability-focused bases and garrisons. I hope that hon. Members understand that it is important for such studies to be led by the armed forces, taking into account the issues and views of stakeholders.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Minister has done more than most to flag up the need for more investment in defence. Can he assure us that, where contraction takes place for the reasons that he has explained, contingency plans are in place so that, if this country should regrettably ever find itself involved in a major conflict, expansion could equally easily occur?

Mr Ellwood: My right hon. Friend, who is the Chair of the Defence Committee, makes such an important point. That is why Chivenor is interesting, because it has an airstrip, which is built on a flood plain. Do we want to lose that asset? We saw what happened at Heathrow yesterday. If things actually go in the direction that he suggests, it is important that we choose wisely which parts of our real estate that we close down and which parts we might need in the near or long-term future.

Rebecca Pow: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: I am conscious of time and I have a lot to get through; I will give way for a very brief intervention.

Rebecca Pow: I will be very brief. One of the reasons the bases are really important in the south-west, and it is a reason they should not all be moved to Plymouth, is in attracting personnel to work for the Royal Marines. In Taunton and Chivenor, we draw from the midlands region, and much as we think Plymouth is a great base, is it potentially too far away and may therefore detract?

Mr Ellwood: I will not get into a debate about various aspects of the estate. The south-west does very well from the Royal Marines' perspective and indeed from the armed forces' perspective as well. I go back to the point that we have to make these difficult decisions on the basis of what is best for the armed forces, as well as for the wider communities. However, I have heard my hon. Friend's point, and no doubt we will discuss it further in tonight's Adjournment debate in the main Chamber.

Before I turn to the base at Chivenor itself, as I did in yesterday's debate about RM Condor I will first pay tribute to the Royal Marines as a whole, because I would like to acknowledge their critical—indeed, unique—role, which my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon also acknowledged, in the wider spectrum of the armed forces' capability.

The Royal Marines were formed in the reign of Charles II in 1664; they will celebrate their 355th birthday this year and they have much to be proud of. They played a vital role in Lord Nelson's victory at Trafalgar; earlier, in 1704, they had secured and defended the Rock of Gibraltar. Of course, there was also the infamous raid on Zeebrugge in 1918, in which two Royal Marines earned the Victoria Cross; and the Royal Marines were there at the D-Day landings, when 17,500 Royal Marines took part in the largest amphibious operation in history. More recently, in 1982 they were essential in the recapture of the Falkland Islands.

Today, the Royal Marines are the UK's specialised commando force, our elite unit that is held at very high readiness and trained for worldwide rapid response. They are able to deal with a wide spectrum of threats and security challenges, and often operate in extremely difficult and dangerous circumstances, from amphibious operations to littoral strikes to humanitarian operations, as well as being specialists in mountain and cold weather warfare, and jungle insurgency. When diplomacy fails, it is the Royal Marines that provide the UK with a wide spectrum of hard power options with which we can respond. On behalf of a grateful nation, I say to all the Royal Marines who have earned that coveted green beret, "Thank you."

Looking to the future, the strategic defence and security review 2015 mapped out our commitment to the Royal Marines themselves, and I am pleased to say that, following the recent modernising defence programme, the future of HMS Bulwark and HMS Albion, which have been the subject of many Westminster Hall debates, has now been confirmed; the Royal Marines' winter deployment programmes in Norway will continue, as will their training with their US counterparts; and shortly we will see women joining the ranks of the Royal Marines in close-combat ground roles for the very first time.

RMB Chivenor is located—as my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon said—on the beautiful north Devon coastline between the town of Barnstaple and the village of Braunton. It started life as a civilian airfield in the 1930s. It then became RAF Chivenor in 1940 and was used as a coastal command station. After the war, the station was largely used for training, and that training role continued until the 1960s. In 1974, the RAF formed 2 Tactical Weapons Unit, flying BAE Hawks from Chivenor until 1994, when the airfield was

[Mr Ellwood]

handed over to the Royal Marines, although the RAF presence continued for a number of years, as RMB Chivenor was also the base for search and rescue flights.

As my hon. Friend also highlighted, today RMB Chivenor is home to over 1,200 personnel from all three services, who make up the Commando Logistic Regiment Royal Marines. It is also home to 24 Commando Regiment Royal Engineers. Those based at Chivenor provide the second-line combat support to the force, which is a critical role. They provide invaluable support—the constant re-supply chain that is needed for any final phase of an operation. For the initial 30 days of any operation, they are able to provide essential supplies for the frontline commando units by the transfer of stores from ship to shore, making the force totally self-sufficient. That is what is so unique about 3 Commando Brigade. It is widely acknowledged that a force's combat capability and ability to achieve its commander's objectives are defined by its ability to support itself logistically on operations. That is exactly what the base achieves.

At RMB Chivenor, we have been studying how best to ensure that the base is able to continue to have access to the facilities that the personnel there require to live, work and train. However, we have also been investigating the opportunities to make best use of the Royal Marines bases and Royal Navy bases across the south-west, which my hon. Friend mentioned earlier, to ensure that we make the most of our facilities to create the best possible future for base laydown for the Royal Marines across the country. Our intent remains to rationalise the number of Royal Marines barracks that we have in the south-west, but we recognise that the Ministry of Defence does not exist in isolation. As we continue with our plans, we will engage with relevant stakeholders at every level to ensure that sites are considered for use in a way that benefits defence and the surrounding local communities.

With regard to RMB Chivenor, we recognise the benefits of retaining a Royal Marines presence there. I make it very, very clear that RMB Chivenor will continue to have a role to play. However, I invite my hon. Friend

to listen to the next oral statement on the MOD's defence estate plans, which is coming round the corner very soon.

I know that my hon. Friend wants answers, as do the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) and, no doubt, my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the Chair of the Defence Committee. However, I ask him to appreciate the process that we must go through in the MOD as part of the wider rationalisation of over 90 sites, to ensure that we are able to move assets around the country, and so that we know which assets are best to continue and which are best to close, which are best to endorse and which are best to amalgamate. These are very tough decisions indeed.

Although my hon. Friend has said that in more than two years no answer has been given, we need to get this process right and we must ensure that the right decisions are made. I hope that he can read between the lines of what I am saying, but I can provide no further details today. I simply say now that more details will be coming in the next few weeks.

I will end by underlining a point that has been made a couple of times in this short debate. Our world is getting more dangerous and more complex, and ever fewer nations have the ability and desire to help to shape the world on the international stage. When it comes to hard power, it is the people in our armed forces who allow our Government to step forward and stand up to those who wish us harm. Critical to that is the role of the Royal Marines, and critical to the work of the Royal Marines is their logistical capability. I hope that my hon. Friend is as satisfied as he can be at this stage by the response that I have given him today. Again, I invite him to listen to the next oral statement on the defence real estate, when I will be able to expand in more detail on the formal future of RMB Chivenor, an important asset to Britain.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

Bailiffs: Regulatory Reform

[MR NIGEL EVANS *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered bailiff regulatory reform.

As ever, Mr Evans, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, and I wish all hon. Members a happy new year. As we embark on a year that will be dominated by Brexit—as we saw in the Chamber just a minute ago—it is good to focus on another concern of our constituents. I called for this debate on reforming the regulation of bailiffs because a shocking case of aggressive behaviour by bailiffs in my own constituency was presented to me at an advice surgery, and I have heard countless other examples from hon. Members and from the charities involved. I thank my local paper, which published an article on the topic over the Christmas period, and members of the public who got in touch with me.

My main message to the Minister is that we simply cannot let bailiffs become a law unto themselves. The Government need to take urgent action against bailiffs who break the rules, behave aggressively and act with apparent impunity. According to the evidence presented by Citizens Advice, StepChange and other organisations, this is not just a few bad apples, but a widespread problem. Although I welcome the call for evidence that the Government announced last year, I stress to the Minister that we are not discussing a minority of bailiffs, and I urge her and her Department to recognise that. After all, we have to face up to the scale of the challenge if we are to find the right solutions.

Some 2.2 million people in England and Wales have been contacted by a bailiff in the past two years. The regulations that the Government introduced in 2014 are welcome, but there are huge problems with the lack of enforcement. Since the introduction of those reforms, Citizens Advice has recorded a 24% increase in problems with bailiffs. One person in three who has experience of bailiffs has seen them breaking the rules, and 40% have suffered intimidation. Unfortunately, the fee structure has created a perverse incentive for bailiffs to make visits and reject repayment offers, which we have seen time and again, as they can charge fees of £235 for every debt they collect in person.

I first became aware of the severity of this problem last year, when a disabled constituent came to see me at an advice surgery. Let us imagine for a moment being in her shoes: you and your partner are just getting up. You hear a knock at the door. Your partner goes to answer it. You hear loud voices, then feet on the stairs. A total stranger strides into your bedroom. You are absolutely terrified. The first thing he does is pick up your purse and take out all the cash. You think you are being burgled, but you are not: you are being visited by bailiffs. My constituent's experience, unfortunately, is not an isolated case. Another man told me that bailiffs used humiliation in front of his neighbours to gain entry to his home. He said:

“They tried to push their way into my house saying they have a right to. When I asked to see the court papers the bailiff said—you have already had them and he would only discuss the case in the house. He then started shouting so that other people”

including his neighbours

“could hear him—this was obviously to embarrass us”

and to intimidate the man.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate on an issue that is faced by people across the country. Regarding the point she has just raised, does she agree that the current regulations give perfectly innocent people no opportunity whatsoever to prevent a visit by bailiffs or verify the authenticity of visiting bailiffs when they are not the debtor concerned? One of my constituents faced that situation—a traumatic ordeal along the lines that the hon. Lady has outlined.

Emma Reynolds: From all the cases that I have heard about, those experiences are traumatic and have a lasting effect on the people involved. In many cases, they are not necessarily the debtor—they are not the person who owes the money—but they are still treated in an appalling manner. That is not to say that the debtor should be treated appallingly either, but bailiffs do not seem to have regard to the rules, which is that they can seize possessions that belong only to the debtor.

That brings me to another example—a person from the constituency of the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien), whose son was in debt and who bravely spoke out on the radio today about his experience. He said:

“We invited these men into our home so that we could understand what was going on and in the belief that we could then work with them to resolve the problem. All they did once inside our home was to threaten us with public humiliation. At no time did they advise us of any of our rights. We were told that although we were in our own home that the only way we could prevent them seizing our property”,

including this gentleman's car,

“was if we could produce receipts.”

I do not know about other Members, but I would not have a receipt for my car at hand if someone were to knock on my door. I know that the hon. Member for Harborough will speak in more detail about his constituent, whom I thank for coming forward.

In another case, a woman told me:

“I went to close the door and the bailiff put his foot in to my hall to prevent me from shutting the door. I got through to the police, explained the situation, was told he had no right to demand to come into my house. The bailiff had gone by then and did not return but I felt very intimidated and for a while found myself checking through the window before opening the front door.”

How awful that a person should not feel safe in their own home.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. I wanted to raise the case of a constituent of mine, in which a bailiff put his foot in the door because he wished to enter the property, but the property he wished to enter did not belong to my constituent—the bailiff wanted to see a tenant of my constituent. Even so, not only did that cause a lot of problems when the police were eventually called, but of course the body camera worn by the bailiff was not working at the time, so no one corroborated whether my constituent was indeed assaulted.

Emma Reynolds: How very convenient for the bailiff involved! We had a similar case in my constituency. At one point, we were told that there was a body cam, but when we pressed to see the footage, we were then told that there was not a body cam. The hon. Gentleman raised that in the form of a written question to the Minister and we should consider it. It will not solve all of our problems, but it would go some way towards helping to look at these disputes.

One man told me that, although he had moved out of his mother's house and the debt was his and not hers, the bailiffs told her that if she did not pay, her son would go to prison. They marched her to the post office, where she was pressed to withdraw £550 to cover the debt. His mum was 73 at the time. There are countless examples of bad practice from all over the country.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Like other Members, I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Is she aware that there is a private bailiff trade body called the Civil Enforcement Association? Its code of conduct says that its members should be

“professional, ethical...polite, honest and non-threatening”, yet all the examples that my hon. Friend has given are of behaviours that are the exact opposite. In 2016, the Civil Enforcement Association received 255 complaints about its members yet expelled none of them. Is that not a perfect example of why we need better enforcement and regulation of the bailiff industry?

Emma Reynolds: I could not agree more. I have had contact with that trade association. It is simply not realistic to expect a trade association, which is there to represent its members, to take action against those members. In fact, the lead of that organisation was on “World at One” on Radio 4 today claiming that there was a robust complaints procedure. I beg to differ and will address that point towards the end of my speech.

The worst case of this kind that I have heard—I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) has raised it with the Minister and will speak about it today—is the devastating case of Jerome Rogers, who took his own life. He had offered to pay back the debt in stages, but the bailiffs refused. I pay tribute to the brave campaigning of his family, who are here today. We owe it to them to do all we can to change the culture of the bailiff industry so that they are there to help, not penalise people. There is a positive example from Hammersmith and Fulham Council in London, which has stopped using bailiffs to enforce the collection of council tax arrears because it thinks it is better to try to work with the people involved and help them pay back that debt rather than forcing them into a spiral of ever more debt.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for mentioning Hammersmith and Fulham Council, which as she correctly said stopped using bailiffs to enforce council tax debts from April last year. Collection rates have not gone down since. One council cabinet member said:

“We have done this by intervening early with residents who may have trouble paying council tax, speaking to them in a respectful and supportive way to develop a sustainable repayment plan that both protects the council's income while avoiding forcing people into making bad financial decisions to avoid bailiffs, such as resorting to payday lenders or missing rent payments.”

Should not all local authorities and anyone trying to enforce debts adopt that as their philosophy?

Emma Reynolds: I could not agree more and would love to see other councils around the country follow that example, for which I thank my hon. Friend, who I am sure played a part in bringing that about. When we hear these cases, it is incumbent on all Members of Parliament to bring them to the Government. It is incumbent on all councils and any other public authorities that are owed money to seek a constructive way to get that money and to help people pay that debt back rather than threatening them with bailiffs.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Five or six years ago, I had a Bill that would have established an independent body to regulate bailiffs. I had some very nasty cases in my constituency at the time, which prompted me. Unfortunately, the Bill did not go through because the Government stopped it. I hope my hon. Friend's Bill gets through, because it is important that we regulate bailiffs properly and give them proper training.

Emma Reynolds: An independent regulator, training for bailiffs and standards that are enforced are essential—I will come to that towards the end of my speech. I put on record my thanks to my hon. Friend for trying to push the issue a few years back. I hope I can follow in his footsteps. I have applied for a ten-minute rule Bill, and I hope I can get something on the statute book, although I also hope the Government will beat me to it.

The examples I quoted remind us that anybody could end up in this situation, although in many cases, the people involved are vulnerable. Often it starts with a small fine or debt that escalates, and it can spiral out of control. Citizens Advice recently found that such experiences have a very negative impact on people's mental health and financial position. Some of those who are likely to fall into debt already have a mental health problem.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Bailiffs are supposed to have training to identify vulnerable people and to behave appropriately, but the reality is that it is not always obvious that someone has a disability or is suffering from mental ill health. Much more robust legislation needs to be put in place to protect those people.

Emma Reynolds: We need more robust rules and we need more robust enforcement. My constituent is disabled and was facing a fine because her disability badge was out of date. That was because she was moving from disability living allowance to the personal independence payment—that is another story. She was told by the bailiff that she did not look disabled. Her vulnerability has been questioned at every turn when I have raised her case. I thought it was obvious, because she is disabled, that she is vulnerable, but it is not always that obvious, as my hon. Friend says. We need much better procedures in place so that bailiffs recognise that.

Of those who had a negative experience with a bailiff, Citizens Advice found that seven in 10 reported increased stress and anxiety. I am sure that that very much chimes with the experience of the constituents that Members are here to represent. It certainly chimes with the experience of mine. Eight in 10 felt that the experience had a lasting effect and one in two saw their finances deteriorate further.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Is the practice by bailiffs of not accepting affordable repayments a cause for people getting further into debt, thus exacerbating the problem and leading to unfortunate experiences for those people?

Emma Reynolds: Indeed it is. It seems to me that it is not in the interests of the local authority. For instance, Hammersmith recognised that if people are forced into more debt, they are unlikely to be able to pay it off. As I understand it, there is no compulsory obligation on bailiffs to accept a repayment plan, which the Government should consider carefully. In fact, all the incentives seem to be stacked against the bailiff being cautious or sympathetic to the debtor. All the incentives seem to be for the bailiff to collect as much money or as many possessions as possible on that visit.

Bailiffs have extraordinary rights to seize possessions and the police are the only other profession that I can think of that is permitted by law to enter someone's property. The police can do so only if someone is suspected of serious criminality and they have to secure a search warrant and read someone their rights. Those with a complaint can report the police to the Independent Office for Police Conduct. Bailiffs too need a court order, but there seems to be no requirement for bailiffs to tell someone their rights. Indeed, evidence suggests that bailiffs often misrepresent people's rights to gain entry to their home and seize possessions.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The hon. Lady is moving on to the area of complaints, which is close to my heart. Does she agree that there needs to be a simple system that people can use that includes something like mediation—alternative dispute resolution—that is quick to implement but very friendly and not as intimidating as going to court?

Emma Reynolds: The hon. Gentleman pre-empted the next section of my speech, which is all about that. Short of taking a bailiff to court, there is no meaningful way of seeking redress, because there is no simple or clear complaints procedure. Arguably there is no meaningful complaints procedure, although I will come to that.

In the case of my constituent, I complained to the local council, which was enforcing a parking fine. The council and I complained to the bailiffs company, but it disputed my constituent's version of events. I complained to the bailiffs trade association, which we have discussed. I got a letter back saying that it was the word of my constituent against the word of the bailiffs. I raised the case in Parliament and we are having a debate today, but even as an MP, I felt powerless to take the case any further, which was deeply frustrating. Can it be right that, short of taking the case to the courts, our constituents have no other means of redress? It cannot, and the bailiffs know it—they know that most people in debt will not have the money to take them to court. There have been only 56 complaints in the courts since the 2014 reforms despite reported widespread bad practice.

One couple explained to me that their attempts to take a complaint forward had been blocked at every opportunity, including by claims from the bailiffs company that letters had been lost in the post—that old chestnut—and had taken nearly a year and cost thousands of

pounds. Bailiffs are largely unaccountable, which is why I am calling on the Government to bring forward urgent reform.

Specifically, I call on the Minister to take forward the proposal of a cross-party group of MPs led by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves). In a letter sent to the Minister today, they ask the Government to set up an independent regulator to enforce the rules. The regulator, which could be an existing body or a new body, should have a range of powers and responsibilities to set and enforce rules, and standards for bailiffs, and to take both a reactive and proactive approach, investigating firms and individuals where there are complaints but also proactively monitoring standards. Crucially, a regulator must ensure access to redress. Alongside that—this speaks to the point of the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell)—we need a fair, free, simple and transparent complaints procedure.

Crucially—I very much speak on behalf of my disabled constituent on this point—bailiffs must be required to identify vulnerable households. To end the targeting of vulnerable people, there have to be clear procedures for referring debts back to creditors when enforcement is not appropriate.

The impact of those reforms must be to change the culture of the industry. There are not enough sanctions on bailiffs, and all the incentives drive bailiffs in the wrong direction—to penalise people rather than help them. The debt advice charities are highly regulated. The debt collectors are also regulated. The bailiff industry is an anomaly. I ask the Minister to take urgent action. They are not difficult reforms and, crucially, implementing such changes would mean that bailiffs played by the rules and treated people with the respect that they deserve.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Order. As Members can see, there is a lot of interest in taking part in the debate. I intend to call the Front Benchers just before 3.40 pm. I plead for self-discipline and restraint regarding time when Members make their contributions. I call John Howell.

2.50 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans, and to follow the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds), who introduced this important debate.

The debate is timely. The subject is very much on the lips of the Minister and of members of the Justice Committee, as both the Minister and the Committee are undertaking inquiries at the moment. The Ministry of Justice inquiry, which has called for evidence, will look at the effect of the 2014 legislation, which although it has brought some benefits, clearly did not go far enough and has created new problems, as the Lady told us. Those problems are due to the behaviour of many bailiffs—the way they go about their job is a real problem for us. I believe the Ministry of Justice has promised that any proposed changes will be put out to consultation, so we will all have the opportunity to engage with them.

The Justice Committee also decided to conduct an inquiry on the subject, and we discussed yesterday how it would feed into the Ministry of Justice inquiry and

[John Howell]

how we could submit it as evidence. The Committee's inquiry will look at the 2014 legislation and the way in which complaints are handled and dealt with throughout the process. Two issues emerge above all: the extent of regulation and the complaints system. The two are of course associated, but they need also to be looked at separately.

As the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) mentioned, the Civil Enforcement Association exists, but it is not independent. The system of regulation is effectively one of self-regulation or, in this case, pretty much no regulation. I listened to all the points made by the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East about why the system of regulation is not very effective. One point that came in, but was not actually mentioned, is that no sanctions can be levelled against a firm of bailiffs conducting its business in such a way.

Rachel Reeves: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. The Civil Enforcement Association is just a trade body. People have to pay a fee to be a member, but a bailiff does not have to be a member. The answer is to have an independent bailiff regulator capable of banning and prosecuting bailiffs who break the law. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is in the interests of bailiffs who respect the law and their customers, particularly vulnerable ones?

John Howell: I very much agree with the hon. Lady's description of how the regulatory system should work, but I do not think we should concentrate solely on the regulatory system. I completely take on board everything she said about what the regulatory system needs to include, but we need also to examine how complaints are dealt with if we want to have an effect on bailiffs who are not doing their job properly or are abusing their position.

The current complaints system has seen an enormous increase in people trying to make complaints, but fewer people have been able to do so legitimately. I propose to the Minister that, before she proceeds with the results of the call for evidence, she and I have a conversation. I chair the all-party parliamentary group on alternative dispute resolution, and I think we have the solution to the problem. The solution, which the rail system is using to try to deal with complaints, is to have in place a system of alternative dispute resolution, including such things as mediation, that can deliver quick advice.

One great thing about alternative dispute resolution is that it is much cheaper than going to the courts. That is what we need. If the Minister would like to have a conversation with me, I will propose a system to do that. From the experience that we have of how ADR has been used elsewhere, I think it will satisfy all the requirements that the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East set out.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Order. We are looking for contributions of around four minutes if everybody is to get in. I call Sarah Jones.

2.56 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) for introducing the debate so eloquently that it is almost impossible to imagine the Government not wanting to act. I think there is cross-party agreement that action needs to be taken, which has to be incredibly powerful. I know that the Minister is listening, as she has listened to me previously, and that she will have listened to everything that my hon. Friend said.

As we know, bailiffs are the only part of the financial sector that is not regulated with an independent regulator. A powerful case has been made already in the debate, and by Citizens Advice and many other voluntary organisations, that the problem is worsening, that it is not being fixed by the changes made in 2014, and that something should be done. My involvement arose from a meeting with a constituent, the mother of Jerome Rogers from New Addington, who in 2016 ended his life at the age of just 20. Jerome had two £85 traffic fines from Camden Council that he had received in the course of doing his job as a motorbike courier. Due to the escalation of that fine and enforcement by Newlyn plc, the fines spiralled to more than £1,000. The Minister is aware of the case and last year she very kindly met with Jerome's family and with me.

Jerome's case is particularly tragic, but we must not think that it was a one-off. The coroner found that the bailiffs involved with Jerome had complied with the industry's guidelines—guidelines that are self-written and self-enforced, as we have discussed. That is not something to be proud of; it simply highlights how flawed the guidelines are and how flawed the system of self-regulation is across the whole bailiff industry—especially in view of what Jerome was subjected to in the months leading up to his death. Each of these things underlines a systemic problem rather than a problem specific to Jerome.

Jerome was refused an affordable repayment plan. He called the bailiff after being told that he would be receiving a visit to his home and was told that he needed to call Newlyn. Newlyn then told him that he must pay the debt in full. After the bailiff visited his home, adding more money to his debt in the process, he was finally offered a repayment plan, but at £128 per week it was clearly not affordable. His average earnings were about £97 a week, and less than £20 after his work expenses. If Camden Council had offered him a repayment plan of £10 per week there and then, he could have paid off both £65 fines in three months.

Secondly, Jerome's motorbike—his only means of earning money—was clamped. There was dispute over the valuation of the bike and whether it was even legal to clamp it, but looking beyond the valuation, it is surely wrong that a person's sole means of income can be taken away by bailiffs. Thirdly, the enforcement fees were duplicated because the two cases were treated as separate, which is in the interests of no one but the bailiffs, who can charge £75 per case for simply writing a letter. It makes no sense that £150 can be added to a debt for a few pieces of A4 paper, or that two cases cannot be dealt with in the same letter. Bailiffs charge hundreds of pounds per case for every visit to a property, which might explain why they refused a repayment plan

before the bailiff made his visit. The coroner viewed the bailiff's behaviour as intimidating and raised the possibility that his actions could have been viewed as a form of harassment. They involved sitting outside the house for a prolonged period without telling Jerome why he was outside.

The fourth issue is one that has already been spoken about: the bailiff was paid by results. He had the potential to earn more if he seized assets, but if the debt was not cleared he would not get paid. Debt collection agencies are prohibited by their regulator, the Financial Conduct Authority, from paying enforcement agents through such commission models. Those models are common in the bailiff industry, but we cannot stop them leading to bad practice when bailiffs have the power to seize assets and enter homes. It is systemic.

Andy Slaughter: There is FCA regulation in the private sector to some extent, but not in the public sector, as in my hon. Friend's example. Extraordinarily, the National Audit Office's recent report found that in many cases Government bodies are worse at fulfilling their duties. Does she agree that the Minister should look particularly at what local authorities and central Government Departments are doing in the area?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend makes a good point. We must tackle all the aspects; we cannot just say that it is a problem for local authorities without also looking at independent regulation.

I realise that I have already spoken for longer than I should have, Mr Evans. I wanted to give other examples of cases and stories that people have written to me about, but I will write to the Minister about them instead.

The trade body is not fit for purpose as a regulator. Indeed, it has written to me, as have other bailiffs, threatening legal action:

"Please desist from using this tragedy to lobby for changes that are unrelated to the actions of the enforcement agents."

The chief executive officer of the trade body called our work on behalf of Jerome's family

"a means to attract publicity for a populist campaign on behalf of the debt advice sector."

For shame! That is not what we are doing; we are trying to honour the memory of Jerome and fix a system that is clearly broken. I really hope that the Minister will listen. I will work with her, as we all will, to make sure that we bring in the right kind of regulation.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Order. If I let hon. Members know that their speeches are timed on the monitors, it may assist them to keep to the four-minute mark.

3.3 pm

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) on securing this important debate; she spoke incredibly well. She referred to the treatment that my constituents received at the hands of bailiffs. Let me add a little about their experience by quoting from a letter they wrote:

"My wife & I (both retired) were woken up by loud banging on our front door at 7.22am. When I answered the door I was confronted by two men who announced that they were bailiffs... The first we knew of the matter was when they...turned up at our door... We were...in shock...at the threat of a tow truck arriving at our door to remove our car and that we were to be humiliated by our possessions being publicly removed from our house... Later that day my wife and I sought advice from our local Citizens' Advice Bureau... The CAB advisor informed us that we could have refused the officers entry...and that we could have signed a Statutory Declaration of ownership covering goods not belonging to our son which should have prevented our property being taken in lieu for my son's debt. At no time did the officers inform us about this... My wife and I have never broken the law. Both my wife and I used to work for the prison service. We have both since we retired, been active as local volunteers... I...find it reprehensible that two pensioners should be coerced, albeit politely, into having to hand over their pension savings for something that they are not in any way culpable for. Nor can we believe that British law supports the kind of action we have experienced."

They are absolutely right. It is clear that the law needs to change and that we need to go beyond the 2014 reforms, and I am glad that the Government have announced the call for evidence. I praise the campaigning work of Citizens Advice and the debt charity StepChange. I think six main things need to change.

First, we need an independent regulator, and I welcome that being raised explicitly in the current review. When I took up my constituents' case, I was astonished to find that there was no independent regulator, given that there are industries such as the parking industry in which far less serious things happen but in which there is a clear independent regulator. Debt collectors who are not bailiffs and do not have bailiffs' powers have a regulator, so this is a historical anomaly that needs to be fixed.

Secondly, once the regulator is set up, it needs to improve the process. Part of that is about communication—if my constituents had been informed about the debts at an earlier stage, they could have nipped the whole problem in the bud—but part of it should also be about the offer of an affordable payment plan, as several hon. Members have said. Affordable payment plans have become the norm in most types of debt collection and for most utilities, because we know that vulnerable people are much more likely to pay if they are offered a structured plan rather than getting a big demand all at once. As it happens, my constituents are bright, articulate, hard-working people, but even they felt totally humiliated by the process. Imagine how those who are more vulnerable feel.

Mr Jayawardena: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is only right that homeowners should be notified of the fact that a bailiff is about to attend? Of course, we should recognise data protection concerns as well.

Neil O'Brien: Absolutely. That point brings me on to the third thing that needs to change: people need to be told what their rights are. My constituents never were. If someone is arrested, they are told their rights; the same thing should happen if a bailiff visits.

Fourthly, there must be a clear and simple complaints procedure through the new independent regulator, backed up with swift fines for bailiffs who break the rules. Fifthly, there must be controls on fees. My constituents' son's original debt was increased by half again, and we have heard about the tragic case of Jerome Rogers,

[Neil O'Brien]

which is incredibly moving. I was shocked that a publicly funded institution had initiated the debt collection against my constituents. As hon. Members have said, the incentives in the industry are to seize as much as possible in order to do as much business as possible, and there is no link between fees and ability to pay. Finally, the new regulator should improve training standards for bailiffs, as some have only a few hours of training. That is truly shocking.

A great injustice was done to my constituents, who are hard-working, law-abiding, public-spirited people. We are lucky to have a very able Minister guiding the Government's response to the call for evidence. Every single day in this country, vulnerable people are being maltreated purely as a result of a historical anomaly. I know that she will want to put that right as soon as possible.

3.7 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) on getting today's debate on the agenda. I agree wholeheartedly that we should be helping people, not penalising them, and that there is certainly a need for regulatory change on the British mainland.

May I cite the example of Northern Ireland? Bailiffs do not operate in Northern Ireland; we have a very different system, which I recommend that the Minister should examine when she considers how to take action on the points raised today. Indeed, the attitude of, "If you have it and you haven't paid, we will seize it", I see on popular television programmes, which is alien to many people in Northern Ireland who face debt issues.

Enforcement officers in Northern Ireland can go out only if they have a court order and are accompanied by a police officer. Enforcement is strictly and specifically done via court order, and the individual in question knows that it is happening and, ultimately, when it will happen. This is therefore not a common practice, as it is on the British mainland. Even in the Republic of Ireland, where bailiffs do operate, the court order has to contain the name of the bailiff who will go to the person's home. It is an open and transparent system, which can be challenged.

Why is that the case? Northern Ireland's troubled past is very clear. Having gangs or groups of people who are allowed to "enforce" in Northern Ireland without police supervision could be very dangerous, given our paramilitary past and the issues that pertain there. Indeed, there are some very detailed cases that show why that should be avoided. Most recently, for example, in Roscommon in the Republic of Ireland, a Northern Ireland enforcement team was employed by a bank to seize a property that a mortgage had not been paid on for 16 years. The enforcement order in the Republic of Ireland contained the name of the bailiffs who would attend the property and remove the people who had not paid for it. Unfortunately, it spiralled into a very serious crime situation.

The bailiffs, or the enforcement officers from Northern Ireland who were employed, many of them ex-soldiers and some of them ex-police officers, were charged upon by about 40 people in a gang. A chainsaw was taken to the door, the door was removed, and the bailiffs were dragged out of the property, tied up and beaten. One of

them received a fractured skull, another a broken arm. The dog that they had with them to do security work and to look after the property that evening was killed. One of the bailiffs was forced with a gun pointed to his head to eat the faeces that the dog had left. So we had a very serious situation.

Thankfully, the Guards in the Republic of Ireland have arrested four people and hopefully charges will pertain in that case. However, it shows the difficulties in a situation that has grown up with crime, and I see crime developing here on the British mainland in many of our cities, where there is anger and instant "law of the jungle" retribution. We saw that here in this city last night, with people stabbing a boy who had driven into their car. Allowing that sort of attitude to develop in a country will lead to a law of the jungle mentality. The culture change that the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East argued for is therefore absolutely essential.

We do not need gangs of people to be asked to do this work; rather, we need a managed response to debt. Debt has to be addressed and ultimately, of course, paid, and the person has to take responsibility for paying off their debts. But when enforcement officers humiliate people, and when they feel vulnerable in their own properties and do not know their rights, as Members have described, that needs to be addressed through proper regulation. I therefore support the motion moved by the hon. Lady and hope that the Government will look at the example of Northern Ireland and ask, "How have they been able to get away from creating a situation that would have deteriorated into a downward spiral of the law of the jungle?"

3.11 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Thank you for calling me, Mr Evans. It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow the other interesting and vital contributions. I want to present a slightly different perspective. I have a debt collection agency in my constituency that has been very concerned and wanted me to speak in this debate, because it felt it was important to put on the record the practices of the good debt collection agencies. The hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) said it was not fair on those who play by the rules, although there are clearly many examples of highly concerning practice, which Members from all parts of the House have highlighted, and I certainly do not take away from those for one second.

The point behind my contribution is to highlight for the Minister how the good debt collection agencies operate. Bristow and Sutor employs 156 people in my Redditch constituency and is already proactively improving the way that it operates, because it recognises many of the concerns that have been raised. Indeed, collecting debt in a fair and compassionate way results in more debt being collected, which is what we all want. We need to see that debt collected because it makes a vital contribution to our public services.

Importantly, Bristow and Sutor's agents are all directly employed by the company. They are not on zero-hours contracts and are monitored and trained by the company directly. They have body-worn cameras when they go out and visit clients. The company has named people who deal with a particular client when they are visited and its agents are trained to deal with all the situations that they might come across.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that reputable firms should be the loudest advocates for a system of regulation, so that they can mark themselves out from the rogue agents that behave unconscionably and make innocent people's lives a misery?

Rachel Maclean: Yes. I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention; I completely agree. I was going to say that this particular firm is not against further regulation at all. It merely makes the point that it needs to be done in consultation with the debt enforcement agencies, looking at the best practice of some of the good agents, who carry out vital work that needs to be done to recover funds that will go into our local government coffers. When I visited that firm in my constituency, it made the point that its recovery rate is much more effective than those of some of its competitors. It is the second largest enforcement agency in the country and covers 16% of all local authorities' collections. It is not the one that the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) referred to, and it does have a good reputation locally. I wanted merely to place that on the record, and I agree with my hon. Friend that we need to totally overhaul the system.

Emma Reynolds: I am interested in what the hon. Lady is saying. She has made an important point about that company employing its agents directly. Does she feel that that has made a difference in its behaviour and practices?

Rachel Maclean: Absolutely. I have visited the company, which is a long-standing employer in the constituency. People have worked there for many years, starting their careers in that business. The company takes that very seriously, otherwise it would not have loyal employees for such a long period who care about doing their jobs properly and respectfully and about treating their clients with dignity in extremely difficult situations. That gives further assurance that there is proper oversight.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachel Maclean: I am sorry, but I need to conclude. I know that people want to speak. I very much support the calls for an independent regulator.

3.15 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) on securing this important debate and on the way in which she introduced the subject. As we have heard, we have all had many constituents contact us when they have received a bailiff's letter or had a bailiff turn up at the door. Although we would want our constituents to contact us as soon as possible, when things might be a little easier to resolve, we have to remember that quite often a Member of Parliament is not the first port of call for someone facing a debt situation.

There is the question of household debt, the availability of easy credit and, as we have heard, the way in which a seemingly small debt can spiral out of control once an enforcement process begins, so we need to think about

what more we can do to stop debt becoming the debilitating and all-consuming terror that it often is. To paraphrase a former Prime Minister, we should be not just tough on bailiffs, but tough on the causes of bailiffs, but that is perhaps a wider debate for another time.

I appreciate that there are important distinctions between the powers of a bailiff appointed by the court and a debt collector, but are those differences apparent to the public, particularly when someone knocks on the door unexpectedly demanding money? We know bailiffs must provide evidence upon request by the debtors, as well as sight of a warrant providing them with authority to enter, but how many people in such a pressurised situation will have the presence of mind to ask for those things?

We know that, as part of national standards, bailiffs are expected to treat the debtor fairly at all times. However, one recent example that I came across concerned a constituent who was unable to keep up with the payment plan they had previously agreed because they were in poor health and had been unable to work. The bailiff's demand in those circumstances was to actually request that the monthly repayment be doubled. How is that a reasonable request? How is that treating the debtor fairly at all times? The national standards are not legally binding, which is presumably why we see such outrageous behaviour.

Ruth George: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Justin Madders: I am sorry; other people want to speak, so we have to move on.

An even worse example was when a constituent had agreed a payment plan with bailiffs, which she was paying on time and in full. She then received a letter from the bailiffs requesting that the repayment increase by £30 a week. There never was and has not been any justification given for that proposal. Following that request, and despite the constituent asking for an income and expenditure form to demonstrate that she could not afford the increase, she then received a letter asking that the full debt be repaid within 24 hours or goods would be removed. There then followed the threatening phone calls and visits to the property that we have often heard about. Such despicable behaviour cannot be justified, but in this instance, as in many, the original creditor had washed their hands of the whole business. They do not seem to care how unreasonable, threatening or intimidating the bailiffs get. They just want their money back. Even if they are outsourcing responsibility to recover the debt, they should not outsource their responsibility to ensure that the debt is recovered in a responsible manner.

Demands for unaffordable payment plans are probably the most commonly occurring issue that we get. We often find that bailiffs are unwilling to negotiate and then ask for the full amount owed. They even suggest that debtors should borrow more money to repay the debt. As we have heard, the situation is exacerbated by adding hundreds of pounds to the debt once a visit has been made by a bailiff, which can lead to punitive increases that are often totally disproportionate to the original sum being recovered. I appreciate that those wishing to recover the debts need to recover their own costs as well, but the fees, which are then treated as part of the debt, cannot make it any easier for the individual to repay the debt.

[Justin Madders]

In conclusion, I support Citizens Advice's call for the Government to report annually on the debt to Government and essential service providers, and for the introduction of an independent regulator for the bailiff industry. It is time we gave people confidence that the difficult issue of debt enforcement will be given the same checks and balances that we rightly expect in many other areas of our lives.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): If hon. Members aim for the three-minute mark, perhaps we will be able to get in everyone who wants to speak.

3.19 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) on obtaining this important debate, and my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) on persuading me to sign the letter of the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) about trying to get change through a meeting with the Justice Secretary.

I am making my speech partly in my role as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on poverty. Clearly, poverty and debt are inextricably linked. I totally agree that there is a problem with bailiffs and support the call for an independent regulator. There are also problems with debt. Collecting debt must be a commercial matter. It can be very effective. I have to tell the House that in my business life we have a number of offices and, in 2008 when things were pretty tough in the economy, we were visited by the bailiffs and paid our debt very quickly on the back of that. We did not realise how quickly bailiffs could enter premises on a commercial lease without any notice, but we soon found out, so they can be very effective. However, there are other and better ways to collect debts in many instances.

Debt is a commercial matter and those to whom people are not paying their debts have a perfect right to try to collect them, but several hon. Members have spoken today about local authorities, over which we should have some influence. The local authorities in question should learn from and develop best practice on debt collection. I had a meeting with StepChange, the debt advice charity. Thirty per cent. of the people coming to the charity are behind with their council tax. That is by far the No. 1 area for debt that it works with. There has been a huge increase over the past seven years. Seven years ago, 21% of total debt was owed to utilities and local government. Today 26% of debt is with utilities, but 40% of total debt is with local authorities. Local authorities have been criticised by the Treasury Committee for being overzealous in their recourse to bailiffs and could make a significant difference to people's lives if they adopted debt collection best practice. The Justice Committee will also consider that. Interesting research from Citizens Advice said that one in four people had made their bailiff an affordable payment offer that was rejected. Clearly there is a better way to deal with the matter.

What is best practice? The Money Advice Service has developed what it calls a supportive council tax recovery toolkit for local authorities to adopt, which talks about best practice and how to liaise with debt advice agencies,

taking specific approaches to specific cohorts, particularly vulnerable people. On utilities, I have had dialogue with Yorkshire Water about how it deals with vulnerable households and how it makes sure it identifies those people. According to the Money and Mental Health Policy Institute, 50% of people who are in debt have mental health problems, so it is a case of identifying them and taking a different approach. In my constituency, as in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), an excellent debt collection agency works with the utilities. I have visited it and it takes a supportive and collaborative approach to debt collection. The collection rates are at least as good as those obtained by traditional routes.

I absolutely support the calls for an independent regulator, but I also suggest developing best practice and perhaps creating a requirement for local authorities to follow it in the first instance. That would make a huge difference to people who are in debt and to people in poverty.

3.24 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) on securing the debate. I have long been interested in bailiff practice both as chair of the all-party group on debt and personal finance, and from my long association with Citizens Advice as manager of the local bureau. I had hoped that the 2014 regulations would stop the bad practice I saw when I was doing that work. I saw bailiffs who threatened to take children into care. On one occasion I heard them trying to seize a family pet in front of the children. Perversely, the regulations have created consolidation into bigger firms, and it is easier for the people at the top of those firms to blame individual bailiffs as rogues, and to say that it is nothing to do with them, their training or their practices. I have sympathy for individual bailiffs. As we have heard, there are some very bad employment practices such as working on commission and payment by results. We must stop the cycle of desperate people chasing desperate people.

Bailiffs are still breaching the new regulations. According to StepChange, a third of the 2.2 million people contacted by bailiffs in the past two years experienced them flouting the law. Bailiffs forced entry and took goods needed for work. Half the StepChange clients surveyed in 2016 said that affordable repayment plans had been refused. I have certainly never known a bailiff to accept the single financial statement that most other creditors accept. Complaints are too difficult. Only 28% of people complain and, as we have heard, there have been 56 complaints to the court since 2014. Does that mean that we have had only 56 problems with bailiffs? The charities would certainly dispute that.

To me, the question is not why we should regulate bailiffs but why we should not. Everyone else is regulated. Debt collectors and debt charities are regulated, but bailiffs are free from oversight by an independent regulator despite dealing with people in probably the most vulnerable circumstances who should have the most protection. Their only protection at the moment is guidance. As others have asked, what are the sanctions if that is ignored? Many hon. Members have put forward the same solution: independent regulation twinned with a simplified single free and independent complaints procedure similar to the system used for debt collectors. It is not

only the frontline charities who call for that—some bailiffs firms would like it because they want to get some of the rogues out of the business. Self-regulation has not worked. There is enough evidence to prove that there is a systemic problem and not just a few bad apples. Everyone who deals with people in very vulnerable circumstances is regulated, so I ask the Minister why bailiffs should be the exception. I ask her to act quickly to prevent anyone else paying the highest price, as Jerome Rogers did.

3.27 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I shall not delay the House much. I want to focus on just one area. Many hon. Members have focused on financial recovery, which is entirely appropriate. To assist constituents and improve the perception of the bailiff industry, I want to talk about repossessions.

A landlord can, for any reason, apply to a county court to seek a possession order. That usually happens when a tenant has broken the terms of the lease. Subject to the decision of the court, the tenant will be given 14 or 28 days to vacate the property or, in exceptional hardship, the judge can allow them 42 days to leave. Such an order is presented and communicated to the tenant so that they are aware of it. Many people then decide to see the council, but local authorities tell people to remain in the property until they are physically kicked out.

On occasion, landlords can apply to the High Court to seek an immediate possession order and enforcement by a High Court enforcement officer. That requires no notice. An officer will turn up at someone's house and tell them to pack the possessions that they need for the next few days. They will give them an hour to leave, and they can collect their property at an arranged date later. Imagine the hardship and distress that it causes someone when they are told they must leave the house immediately and that they can then take the paperwork to the council, which will rehouse them.

Will the Minister consider speaking to her colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government about the rehousing of people who have received possession notices, so that they do not have to go through that traumatic experience—particularly if they are elderly or vulnerable, or have children?

3.29 pm

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Evans, and I wish to make a few brief points in this important debate—there have already been many valuable contributions from across the House.

The debate should be seen in the wider context of growing household debt. The rise of rogue bailiffs speaks to a wider malaise in our economy. People face a range of challenges, including insecure work and zero-hours contracts, stagnant wages, benefit cuts and access to affordable credit, which all put pressure on household finances. It is no surprise that the No. 1 money concern for people seeking help from Citizens Advice is household debt. UK households owe an average of just over £15,000 in unsecured lending from credit card firms, banks and other household debt, and unsecured debt is now the highest it has ever been—indeed, it is higher than before the financial crisis.

It is not a sound basis on which to build our future economic prosperity if more of our wages go towards servicing debt than spending on our basic needs. It is therefore not surprising in such an environment that more people are racking up debt and struggling to pay household bills, council tax and some of the other debts we are discussing. It is also not surprising that into such an environment step those rogue bailiffs who exploit people who are already struggling with debt, and who are vulnerable or in precarious circumstances.

Like the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), I am not arguing—I do not think any Member of the House would argue this—that creditors are not entitled to pursue their debtors. It would be unfair on those who do pay their debts if others were not encouraged and made to do so. The issue, however, is about obeying the law and exploiting people, especially if they already face financial hardship and are vulnerable. In truth, ballooning household debt means that bailiffs now have more scope to exploit some of the most vulnerable people in our society by refusing to accept affordable payment offers, and by misrepresenting their rights of entry or acting aggressively or unsympathetically on the doorstep. That is the issue we need to focus on, and where we need Government action.

Members have already mentioned the letter sent today to the Justice Secretary to ensure that the Government take seriously calls from across the House for an independent regulator. As my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) said, the 2014 reforms have not worked and it is now time for such a regulator. I hope the Government seize this opportunity and take heed of the concerns raised and the examples that Members have given, put in place that independent regulator, and ensure that those struggling with financial difficulties are not exploited in the ways we have heard about.

3.32 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans, and to follow speeches on the important matters raised. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) for securing the debate. As we have heard, rogue bailiffs are a blight on the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in our society, and the issue affects those with debt from household bills rather than from consumer credit. People who are struggling to pay their council tax or energy bills—the essentials in life—are having increasing problems with bailiffs.

There are serious, structural problems with how some bailiffs operate, and are allowed to operate, and 850,000 people contacted by bailiffs in the past two years have experienced law breaking. As my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) said, just 56 complaints have been launched with Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunal Service. The complaints system is not fit for purpose and lacks teeth. When someone complains directly to a firm, there are no statutory guidelines about how complaints should be reviewed, or about the sanctions or compensation that should result. The process is long-winded, confusing and inaccessible, and rarely leads to any real consequences for the bailiff involved. However, rule breaking by bailiffs has consequences for those they contact. Refusal to accept

[*Ms Marie Rimmer*]

affordable payment offers is a huge problem—almost one in four people contacted by bailiffs in the past two years had an affordable payment offer rejected.

My constituency suffers from income poverty and has one of the highest levels of suicide. There are also high levels of prescriptions for anti-depressants. One of my constituents, a 65-year-old woman, has already had her personal independence payment stopped and is subject to the bedroom tax. Her gas supply has been capped and she has rent arrears, and has received an offer from the housing association. She now has to pay back a council tax debt at an amount that is simply unaffordable to her. After bailiffs knocked at her door, she was frightened and agreed on the spot to pay the amount suggested. This woman sleeps on a couch—she does not own a bed. As a direct result of bailiff action, my constituent's mental and physical health has deteriorated.

Almost two in five of those contacted by bailiffs in the last two years experienced some sort of intimidation. I call on the Minister to act as quickly as possible and to take steps to alleviate the problems faced by my constituents and those who are suffering across the country.

3.35 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) on securing this important debate. I wish to raise a few cases that my constituents have brought to my attention, and I will focus on vulnerability, which has already been mentioned by some of my colleagues.

Constituents have contacted me in a state of real despair and great distress. One constituent has multiple health conditions, all of which qualify her to be considered vulnerable under the bailiff's own policies and guidelines, but despite her advising the bailiff of that, her vulnerability was entirely ignored and the debt agency would not take it into consideration until my office intervened. At one stage of the interaction between my constituent and the bailiffs, rather than trying to assist or advise her constructively, she was advised that prison might be an option.

Another constituent has two young children and was pregnant with her third. She too would be considered vulnerable under the bailiff's own policies. She regularly received threatening letters about the removal of her property and her possessions. She had so few possessions that she was regularly on the phone to my office, in tears, fearing that her children's toys would be removed to settle some of those debts. The fact that the bailiff would not take into consideration any of the vulnerabilities detailed in its own policies until my office stepped in tells me that the current systems are not working. The extra stress placed on my constituent during her pregnancy made it even worse, and every letter sent and visit made accrued extra financial burden and added more to a debt that she already had no idea how to pay.

Another constituent was harassed by threats of the removal of belongings, and there were many visits and additional letters, ramping up those artificial charges. My office intervened and managed to put in place a reviewed payment plan, but unfortunately the bailiff

entirely ignored that agreement, and the following day they turned up at my constituent's home demanding payment. After an attempt to intimidate my constituent, we had to step in again, but when her health condition meant that she ended up in hospital and unfortunately missed a £10 payment, the bailiff was back at the door as soon as she was out of hospital, demanding payments at a much higher, unaffordable level, and saying that the debt had increased. That was not the case at all, and was completely false advice about the current situation. Fortunately, we were able to resolve the problem again, but this shows that the bailiffs' code is falling short and self-policing is not working. Today, a clear case has been made for far better enforcement, although if that adds to the burdens of local authorities, the Government should not seek to take action without ensuring that additional resources are in place.

3.39 pm

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. This has been a fantastic debate from which I have learned a great deal.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) secured the debate to shine a light on the case of her disabled constituent, who thought she was being burgled when debt collectors forced their way into her home without showing ID, and stole cash from her purse. As we know, that was not an isolated incident. The hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) described a case where constituents of his suffered total humiliation. My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) talked about threatening and intimidating behaviour, and my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) spoke of vulnerable constituents receiving threatening letters and living in fear and anxiety.

My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) spoke about the tragic death of Jerome Rogers. That should concentrate all our minds on the importance of this debate. Jerome was a young man with plenty to live for when he took his own life, but it seems he felt that he just could not go on in the face of the stress and despair he felt after months of interaction with bailiffs. Looking at his story, it is striking how unfair and pointless his treatment was. He was struggling with debt and trying to get out of it, but the odds were stacked against him.

Two unpaid £65 traffic fines spiralled to debts of more than £1,000 in a matter of months. Sky-high bailiff fees meant that there was virtually no cap on what they could take from Jerome. Knowing he could not cope with the debt and the eye-watering fees, he contacted the bailiff company and the individual bailiff dealing with his case, asking to set up an affordable repayment plan. He was met with a flat refusal and little to no human compassion. At least he could earn some money using his motorbike to deliver blood supplies to London's hospitals—but no. It seems that the bailiffs were systematically cutting off every escape route he could think of. They clamped Jerome's motorbike, despite the fact that its value fell far below the £1,350 threshold for seizing or taking control of goods. Not only did Jerome have no money and no agency to solve his problems, but he had the added pressure of the intimidating presence of a bailiff outside his home. The stress was unimaginable, and ultimately Jerome just could not take it anymore.

As many people have said, we are not talking about a one-off case, or a few rogue bailiffs and their firms. Recent research from Citizens Advice shows that one person in three has experienced bailiffs breaking the rules, and half of StepChange Debt Charity's clients said their bailiff refused to accept an affordable repayment offer. This is a systemic failure in our society that must be dealt with.

The legislation covering bailiffs is complex and fragmented. It has failed to protect vulnerable people going through hard times from aggressive and intimidating behaviour. There were some positive measures in the 2014 reforms to taking control of goods, but they just have not worked. It seems that bailiffs are ignoring many of the provisions, as they did when seizing Jerome's motorbike, refusing affordable payment plans or engaging in threatening behaviour. We cannot allow the bailiff industry to continue marking its own homework.

Ruth George: I have had similar problems in my constituency with the bailiffs hired by my local council. Bristow and Sutor—a company that the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) mentioned—uses cameras to take photos of people's possessions and threatens them with those possessions being sold off if they cannot pay a full demand up front, immediately. It also refuses payment plans. My constituents say its bailiffs have even visited elderly relatives, refused to leave their properties and made them feel intimidated. I am sorry to say that even where we have better practice, with directly employed agents, very serious complaints are still being made.

Gloria De Piero: I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution. Story after story shows why reform is necessary. Unlike similar industries dealing with vulnerable people, such as debt collectors, the bailiff industry is not overseen by an independent regulator. As Labour recognised with our successful payday loan campaign, self-regulation is just not suitable for industries with intrusive powers over vulnerable people's lives, homes and finances. It is just too easy for unscrupulous companies to be greedy or to mistreat people when they are at their lowest. None of the main trade bodies for bailiff companies seems interested in enforcing the law or holding the industry to account, and even if they were, they do not have the teeth to do so, just as we saw with payday lenders.

There is also no simple, accessible complaints system for people to report the horror stories or infringements of the bailiffs they are dealing with. The only thing that will do, as so many colleagues have said, is to replace the broken system of self-regulation and piecemeal reform with independent bodies that will hold the industry to account and allow people's complaints to be heard and dealt with. We need either a new regulator or to bring bailiffs within the remit of the Financial Conduct Authority—that went a long way towards reining in payday lenders. It does not matter what body we choose as long as it is fully independent and has the teeth and the will to put a stop to unscrupulous behaviour.

We also need a simplified, free, independent complaints procedure, adjudicated by an independent body. We need to listen to the myriad voices calling for change—organisations that in many cases are working on the frontline of the effects of the broken bailiff system.

They include AdviceUK, the Children's Society, Christians Against Poverty, Citizens Advice, Community Money Advice, the Institute of Money Advisers, the Money and Mental Health Policy Institute, the Money Advice Trust and StepChange Debt Charity.

Many colleagues said that the current system is not fit for purpose. The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) talked about the current system of regulation not working because there are no sanctions, as did the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who also brought a mental health angle to the discussions and suggested some practical solutions. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) talked knowledgeably about how the law needs to change, and made a wider point about use of bailiffs being a symptom of increasing household debt. The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) brought a Northern Ireland perspective to the debate and talked about how enforcement orders are used. My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston made a wider, and important, point about the need to be tough on bailiffs and tough on the causes of bailiffs. My hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) talked of desperate people chasing desperate people and brought her long-standing expertise to the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) talked about how the complaints system is not working and is not fit for purpose, and the wider issue of poverty.

There really is no excuse for the Minister not to act. As the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) explained, some of the bailiff companies are themselves calling for independent regulation. I have a fundamental request. Will the Minister agree to enact a properly independent regulator, and will she set a timetable today to do so? Will she also urge other local councils to follow the example of Hammersmith and Fulham and not use bailiffs? Will she heed the call from the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) for councils to look at how they deal with repossession and rehousing? Every day that we wait is another day of stress and despair for too many people struggling with bailiffs.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): I remind the Minister that it is customary to leave a minute or so for the proposer of the motion to wind up.

3.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) on securing the debate on a matter that I know has affected her constituents greatly, as she spoke to me about it a few weeks ago.

I pay tribute to all hon. Members for the quality and passion of the contributions today. As my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) said, this is a timely debate because on 25 November the Government launched a call for evidence to inform their second review of the 2014 reforms that regulate enforcement agents, in order to ensure that that important area operates well. We have framed that call for evidence against the points that have been raised with us about how the system is not operating as it should. We have heard much today that will help us reflect on that call for evidence.

[Lucy Frazer]

It is interesting that three colleagues—my hon. Friends the Members for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena), for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) and for Hendon (Dr Offord)—all raised examples of bailiffs taking action against people who were not even the debtors.

Mr Jayawardena: I welcome the fact that the Government have agreed to review the matter. Does the Minister agree that it is important to stop innocent homeowners being caught up in the collection of debts that they have nothing to do with, including where those debts have been incurred through fraudulent credit card applications, as in the case of my constituent?

Lucy Frazer: That is a very interesting point, which I just highlighted—three of my hon. Friends raised the issue of whom the action is taken against. I know my hon. Friend feels strongly about this, and it is something he has talked to me about before.

Before I turn to the review in more detail, I want to set out a bit more about the subject of debt enforcement more broadly. Enforcement agent action has been, and is likely to remain, a highly divisive subject. People who experience debt problems represent a broad spectrum of society, including some who are extremely vulnerable and others who deliberately refuse to pay for products and services.

It is important to note the two points that were made in this debate by a number of Members. The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) and my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) highlighted the need for people who owe money to pay their debts, because the recovery of debts is important to the economy and the justice system. My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) highlighted the good practice of a company in her constituency. The Government are committed to ensuring that all enforcement agents treat debtors fairly and operate responsibly and proportionately. Our role as a Government is to strike the right balance between ensuring that debts can be collected effectively while protecting debtors from enforcement agents' aggressive behaviour.

With those principles in mind, and after an extensive period of research and engagement, the Government imposed significant extra regulation on the enforcement process and the behaviour of enforcement agents in April 2014. I am pleased that the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East welcomes those reforms, which included a comprehensive code governing when and how enforcement agents can enter somebody's premises; the safeguards to prevent the use of force against debtors; which goods agents can and cannot seize and, if necessary, sell; and what fees they can charge.

The reforms stopped enforcement agents entering homes when only children are present and introduced important safeguards for vulnerable debtors. They aimed to make all parties more aware of their rights and responsibilities and introduced a new certification process for enforcement agents to ensure that they are the right people for the job. They introduced mandatory training to ensure that enforcement agents have the skills required to perform the role. The Government undertook to review the implementation of the reforms after one, three and, if necessary, five years in order to check that

they are working as intended. The review, which was published in 2018, found that the reforms had many positive benefits, such as better awareness of debtors' rights and how to complain, as well as more clarity for debtors about the fees that can be charged, the processes that should be followed and where to go for advice. However, it also reported that debt advisers and debtors still perceive some enforcement agents to be acting aggressively and, in some cases, not acting within the regulations.

The Government take those concerns very seriously. While many enforcement agents work within the law, we will not tolerate any who pursue aggressive tactics and bad practice, who make people's lives a misery and ruin the industry's reputation. For that reason, we launched the call for evidence to shine a spotlight on the behaviour of enforcement agents. Many of the points that have been raised today are the subject of that call for evidence. The hon. Members for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) and for Wolverhampton North East highlighted the problem of threatening behaviour, which is part of the call for evidence. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley and the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East raised the issue of complaints, which is also a subject for the call for evidence. The hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) and my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough raised issues about training—again, that is a matter for the call for evidence.

The independent regulator, which is part of our consultation, was raised by my hon. Friends the Members for Henley and for Harborough, and by the hon. Members for Coventry South, for Wolverhampton North East, for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) and for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue). The treatment of vulnerable people was raised by the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), and that is also covered in the call for evidence, which is running for 12 weeks until 17 February 2019. As part of that, we are meeting representatives from the advice sector to get a better understanding of the research they have conducted and their concerns, and we will also be talking to enforcement agents and creditors. However, the call for evidence is not just about collecting data; we are very keen to hear from people about their individual experiences. A number of hon. Members have shared the experiences of their constituents, whom I encourage to respond to our call for evidence.

I was very pleased to have had the opportunity to meet the hon. Member for Croydon Central and her constituents the Rogers family, who sadly lost Jerome following visits to their home by enforcement agents. Like others, I am pleased to see them here today. I thank them for their contribution to this important issue and for their continuing efforts to highlight this matter.

A number of hon. Members have suggested that the Government's reforms should go further by introducing an independent regulator, and that there should be a simpler, free and independent complaints procedure. As set out in the call for evidence, we are considering these suggestions. The call for evidence asks whether independent regulation is needed and, if so, what form that should take and how it should be funded. We would welcome any input on all those questions. It also asks about the complaints procedure, as I have said.

In addition to reviewing the behaviour of enforcement agents, the Government are working more widely to help people who fall into problem debt by providing them with protection and ensuring that creditors are acting responsibly. For example, the Government are increasing funding for free debt advice via the Money Advice Service, which will spend £56 million this year to help more than half a million people. After consultation, and via regulations to be laid this year, the Government will implement their 2017 manifesto commitment to introduce a breathing space in order to give people in serious debt the right to legal protections from their creditors for up to six weeks. We will also introduce a statutory debt repayment plan to enable those with unmanageable debts to enter into an agreement to pay their debts in a realistic timeframe. The Ministry of Justice is a member of the Government's Fairness Group, which works with the advice sector to look at the issue of fairness in Government debt management and in enforcement practices.

I would like to end by commenting on the cross-party support to address this important issue. It has been invaluable to me, and I am sure to others, to hear not only people's tragic personal stories, but articulate and thoughtful arguments about the principle behind these issues.

Dr Offord: Will the Minister meet her colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to discuss possession orders and assist local authorities in rehousing people before such a possession order is escalated to the High Court? That would ensure that they were removed from a property immediately, preventing the hardship and stress that many people experience.

Lucy Frazer: I note that my hon. Friend made a very eloquent speech on that subject, which we can of course look into.

Enforcement agents play an important role in recovering money. It is a matter of regret that some are not behaving as they should, and that many members of the public do not hold them in high regard. It is vital that the public have confidence in them.

I thank the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East for the opportunity to respond to this debate, and I look forward to the finalisation and conclusion of the call for evidence on how we can take this matter forward.

3.57 pm

Emma Reynolds: I thank Members from across the House, including our Front-Bench spokesperson and the Minister, for contributing to this debate. They have given such powerful examples of bailiffs' poor, aggressive and intimidating behaviour. What has been striking about this debate—it is not always the case in this place—is the cross-party consensus that the current system of self-regulation is not working. There is a need for an independent regulator, a clear and simple complaints procedure, the training of bailiffs and better protection for vulnerable people.

I welcome the Government's call for evidence and the Justice Committee's inquiry, which has just started. We must see this issue in the wider context of rising household debt, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves). The need for change is urgent. We have to do more to root out aggressive and intimidating behaviour. We have to address the anomaly that somehow bailiffs are not properly regulated but debt advice charities and debt collection agencies are. Above all we must ensure that, in a civilised society, everybody is treated with respect. The focus should be on helping people who get into debt to get out of debt, not forcing them into a spiral of despair, which in some cases has led to the most tragic events, as we have heard, with Jerome Rogers taking his own life.

I know that the Minister is listening to Members of different parties, and I thank her for doing that. I hope that after the call for evidence, the Government can quickly put in place these reforms, for which there is cross-party support. I hope that we can work together to ensure that this aggressive behaviour is rooted out.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered bailiff regulatory reform.

Social Mobility: North-west

[MR ADRIAN BAILEY *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered social mobility in the North West.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. Social mobility is a term that we frequently use, but what do we really mean by it? At its core, we are discussing the life chances of every person in our constituencies, but what impact does the place we live, the family we were born to, our age, our career, our earnings or our parents' background have on our educational and career opportunities and our life experiences?

Perfect social mobility would mean that, wherever we came from and whatever our background and our parents' experiences, we would have a fair shot at success. Sadly, many of the constituencies represented by hon. Members in this debate are all too familiar with what poor social mobility looks like. It means that in areas such as Leigh, the place in which a person happens to live or have grown up in too often dictates their opportunities in life and blocks their shot at success.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I am doubly delighted, as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on social mobility and as a north-west Member, to be present in this debate. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is not just a regional issue, but is much more nuanced? It varies between individual towns, and there are rural issues too. Social mobility is a much more finessed geographical issue than is sometimes imagined.

Jo Platt: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, and I thank him for all the work he does on the APPG on social mobility. I think he is referring to the 2017 "State of the nation" report, which stated that it is no longer inner cities, but remote rural and coastal areas and former industrial areas where social mobility is a huge problem. He will agree that that goes against everything we should stand for as MPs. It cements inequality into our society. It excludes and isolates whole areas of the country from our joint prosperity. It demotivates and demoralises, and can even lead to the breakdown of our social fabric.

Unfortunately, in the north-west we know exactly how that can feel. The region has some of the highest poverty rates and some of the lowest attainment rates in the UK. Fewer than half of children from low-income families—48%—are school-ready. Just 3.9% of children eligible for free school meals gained five A grades at GCSE, and nearly three quarters of local authorities in the north-west have more than one in four workers earning below the living wage. As the Social Mobility Commission said in its annual report, and as I just mentioned,

"old industrial towns and coal mining areas that have struggled as England has moved from a manufacturing to a services-based economy now dominate the areas identified as social mobility coldspots."

As the Member of Parliament for Leigh and, most importantly, having lived in and represented our post-industrial towns, I know exactly what poor social mobility can lead to. I grew up in neighbouring Salford, and I did not have the best start. Back in the 1980s—I am probably giving my age away now—I did not have the best education. I left school without qualifications, and so did many of my peers and friends. I was lucky because I got supported, but that was not the case for many of my friends.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): There are many drivers of social mobility. What more does the hon. Lady think can be done to keep people who have achieved social mobility and become successful in the communities they came from, rather than moving away and taking their success with them? What more can local communities and perhaps local authorities do to help people to remain in place?

Jo Platt: I thank my constituency neighbour for that contribution. He is absolutely right. Particularly in places such as Leigh, we see that if people become qualified, get a good education and go on to university, they do not bring their skills back.

Justin Madders: I am conscious that we do not have much time, so I will be brief. On that point, we found in evidence to the APPG that it is important that people who have moved on go back and give youngsters something to aim for aspirations, ideas and a belief that they can get on and do different things in life.

Jo Platt: Absolutely. I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution and, again, for all the work he is doing in the APPG.

It pained me to read in a recent House of Commons Library analysis that the constituency of Leigh is ranked 501 out of 533 on the social mobility league table, but we must be up front and honest about why we are there. As a post-industrial town, which was once at the heart of the first industrial revolution, we knew what success and prosperity looked like. As the mines closed and the Beeching cuts took away our railway stations, we were left without the infrastructure to prosper and the investment to succeed.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is being very generous in giving way. I congratulate her on securing this debate and thank her for being such a fantastic neighbouring MP. We represent towns and villages across St Helens and Leigh that are intimately linked because they were, and still consider themselves to be, coalfield communities. Does she agree that the Government should continue to support those proud, resilient communities through organisations such as the Coalfields Regeneration Trust and the Industrial Communities Alliance, which are implementing programmes that create employment opportunities, increase social mobility and give ambition to our young people in those communities?

Jo Platt: I thank my hon. Friend for making that really important point. He is absolutely right about the support that is out there for communities such as ours. Later, I will talk about what we can do to come together to make this issue work for places such as Leigh and St Helens North.

We have been left isolated from our booming cities, without the tools to remedy our situation. There is no doubt that the talent and aspiration are there. I am often struck by the energy and determination of our young people, who are desperate to get on in life and succeed, and by the passion of our incredible community leaders such as Peter Rowlinson and Elizabeth Costello in the Leigh Film Society, who work relentlessly to put Leigh on the map. Without outside help and meaningful plans for inclusive growth, towns like Leigh are left feeling helpless.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I am very lucky to live in a constituency that has very good transport links into London. I was in Manchester at the weekend and had the pleasure of travelling on the trams there. Does my hon. Friend think that greater investment in the transport system would benefit Leigh and overcome the social mobility issues?

Jo Platt: I thank my hon. Friend for making that really important point. Again, that is something that I will talk about later in my speech. This is not just about education, but about a whole-system approach, which includes transport. We need to bring it all together.

Let me talk about the pathway of a young person growing up in Leigh and share that experience. The statistics and Ofsted reports show that our school provision is good. We are not letting young people down between five and 16, as they progress through education, but when a young person reaches the stage of deciding their career path, they hit a brick wall. There is no obvious industry to enter as there used to be. We are desperately short of inward business investment, which often comes with the offer of apprenticeships and training. With only one sixth-form college in the constituency, achieving A-levels is difficult. Our young people have to travel out of the constituency to gain decent A-levels. A higher education is even more difficult with no providers at all. Where other constituencies might rely on transport connectivity to access those opportunities, the young people of Leigh cannot. They are brought up in the fifth largest town without a railway station in the country. Those young people are left with the looming question at the end of their mandatory education: "Then what?"

Quite simply, our failure to provide adequate options in answer to that question, which should be at the top of our list of priorities, is an enormous failure of us all as a society. Although I am enormously optimistic that this week's draft spatial framework in Greater Manchester will explore the options for a railway station in the constituency—I will be working closely with Transport for Greater Manchester on that—we must look at the Government's broader responsibility to promote and ensure inclusive prosperity. When I look at their response however, I am left asking, "Where is the pathway for local areas to propose local plans? Where are the resources to tackle?"—in the words of the Prime Minister—"those 'burning injustices'?" And where is the joined-up strategy across Government needed to tackle such an enormous problem?"

As delighted as I am that the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi) will respond for the Government, why has it fallen to the Minister of State for Children and Families to respond to an issue in desperate need of a cross-governmental approach? Social mobility needs

a whole-Government approach that opens the machinery of government up to local areas. This is not only a children's or educational issue, as it feeds into our infrastructure needs and our transport connectivity, and it crosses into the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Ministry of Justice and the Treasury. This truly is a cross-Whitehall task that needs the resources of a cross-Whitehall response.

Too often, token vanity projects from the Government are hailed as the golden bullet for social and economic progress. They include, for example, the creation of the Social Mobility Commission—it went nearly a year without commissioners after they all resigned—the northern powerhouse and HS2. HS2, a prime example, was meant to connect northern communities with London and the south-east—the famous trickle-down model of economic inclusivity. HS2 will cut through the middle of my constituency, however, and offers no connectivity whatsoever. The nearest station to access HS2 will be an hour away for some residents. How does that help our northern communities, which are feeling isolated and held back?

We must also recognise that the Government's response cannot be blanket across the country, but needs to complement and respond to plans drawn up locally with the input of the community, and in Leigh we took the first step last year. I recognised that our towns face unique challenges, so I organised the first Leigh social mobility roundtable, where the local council, schools, businesses, community organisations and stakeholders were all invited to discuss our situation, what can be done and what needs to be changed to help everyone in Leigh to succeed.

As I am sure the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown)—to whom I am grateful for attending our roundtable—would agree, what quickly became apparent is that without Government support for local plans or the devolution of investment and infrastructure decisions, towns such as Leigh will never be connected to the educational and employment opportunities in nearby cities or their thriving economies. Put simply, without a railway line and with such poor road infrastructure, which already struggles to cope with our daily pressures, how will constituents access educational and retraining opportunities outside the town, and why would businesses decide to invest in our towns? The people of Leigh have been left in this never-ending cycle of limited employment, low pay and restricted opportunities to upskill or retrain.

To us, Leigh is a beautiful place to live and bring up a family; a place with rich culture and heritage, near to both Manchester and Liverpool. But we have seen our town transformed from the thriving powerhouse of the industrial revolution to a place left feeling isolated and held back; a place that no longer offers the opportunities that it once did. For the first time, the next generation may not see fulfilled the promise of a better life than the generation before them. That sad reality underlines the importance and urgency of taking action to leave our community on a better footing than when we found it.

I therefore urge the Minister to review the approach that the Government take, recognise the importance of locally produced models and commit to empowering and entrusting our communities with the investment decisions that have such a heavy impact on their lives.

4.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I thank the hon. Member for Leigh (Jo Platt) for securing this vital debate, and I welcome the opportunity to respond on behalf of the Government. She spoke powerfully of her experience growing up and the experience through the eyes of a young person growing up in Leigh.

At this point, it would be remiss of me not to mention my Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris), who was born and bred in Leigh. He grew up and left school with only five O-levels and no A-levels, went to hairdressing college and opened a salon, which became the biggest hair salon and chain in the Leigh area, before he became the MP for Morecambe and Lunesdale. His son is a lawyer from Leigh. That is a true example of social mobility in Leigh. I also thank the hon. Members who have so far contributed to this important debate: my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green), and the hon. Members for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) and for St Helens North (Conor McGinn).

We welcome the debate secured by the hon. Member for Leigh—it is important that we take a close look at social mobility. Rightly, social mobility is a critical priority for the Government and, as she argues, it is a challenge that requires action across the whole of Government in order to make progress. Our social housing Green Paper, for example, makes social mobility a key priority, and we are the Government who introduced the national living wage and increased it at the last Budget. She is also right to single out the importance of good transport connections for regional prosperity. That is why £48 billion will be invested in modernising our rail network over the next five years.

To ensure that our efforts are joined up across Government, the industrial strategy provides a comprehensive plan to ensure that no place is left behind when it comes to boosting opportunity and growth. That strategy sets out the steps that we are taking to spur productivity and to create more high-skilled and high-paying jobs. We are delivering that agenda not only across Whitehall, but through our local industrial strategies, local enterprise partnerships and with mayoral combined authorities.

As a Minister in the Department for Education, however, I hope that the hon. Lady will understand if I focus the majority of my remarks on that subject, although not just because of my day job. As someone who came to this country unable to speak English, I know at first hand how education can change lives and open the doors of opportunity. We still live in a country where someone's start in life far too often determines their future success. Education can and should break this link by helping everyone to fulfil their potential. I am pleased to say that the Government have made significant progress in closing the opportunity gap when it comes to education. The difference in attainment between disadvantaged pupils and their peers has been reduced across all stages of education, and through our opportunity areas programme, we are targeting extra support at some of the most disadvantaged areas of the country.

Yet there can be no room for complacency. It is both an economic and a moral imperative that we ensure the schools system works for all and that it does so up and down the country.

Chris Green: Does my hon. Friend welcome the fact that, on youth social mobility, my constituency comes 73rd out of 553 constituencies from around England and Wales? I also want to support the idea of a huge sense of responsibility—a duty—not only for local entrepreneurs to invest in the local communities but for local councils to support local business, provide opportunities and enable those businesses to invest. It is so much more inspirational when someone comes from our own community.

Nadhim Zahawi: My hon. Friend makes the point about engagement by local councils eloquently. He pursues such engagement passionately, locally and nationally.

We take action in every region and at every stage of a young person's life to close the opportunity gap. I will now take each of the stages of education in turn, reflecting in particular on the progress that we have made in the north-west of England.

Good early years education is the cornerstone of social mobility and we are making record investment in that area. Too many children, however, still fall behind early, and later in life it is hard to close the gap that emerges. Today, 28% of children finish their reception year without the early communication and reading skills that they need to thrive. The Secretary of State has set out his ambition to halve that figure by 2028. We have announced a range of initiatives to deliver it, including a local authority peer review programme, which we piloted in Wigan, and a professional development fund for early years practitioners in 54 local authorities.

The Government are committed to help parents to access affordable childcare, which is why we will spend about £6 billion on childcare support in 2019-20, a record amount. That will include funding for our free early education entitlements, on which we plan to spend £3.5 billion this year alone. I am pleased to say that, in Wigan, take-up of all the Government childcare entitlements is high: 93% of eligible children there took up care that we made available for two-year-olds, which figure is substantially higher than the national average of 72%; equally, 95% of three and four-year-olds took up an entitlement place, which is also higher than the national average. During the first year of delivery, more than 2,700 children in Wigan benefited from the places that we made available under our policy offering of 30 hours of free childcare.

On school education, we target extra support at the poorest areas of the country to raise standards and to attract great teachers to our primary and secondary schools. I know that schools have faced cost pressures in recent years, but I am happy to report that schools in the north-west will attract an average of 2.8% more funding per pupil by 2019-20 compared with 2017-18.

Conor McGinn: Will the Minister give way?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am trying to make headway, but if I have time, I will come back to the hon. Gentleman towards the end.

This year, the north-west received more than £369 million in additional funding through the pupil premium, giving more than 300,000 disadvantaged young people extra support for their education.

On post-16 education, our efforts do not stop when school comes to an end. Social mobility means that everyone must have the right level of ongoing support to help them on to a path to a skilled job. That could be via university, but it could also be a more practical, technical path. I am sure that the hon. Member for Leigh and I agree that getting that right is critical to boost regional growth and to expand access to opportunity for all. In the current academic year, we invested more than £750 million in the education of 16 to 19-year-olds in the north-west, with £80 million of that funding allocated specifically to support disadvantaged students in reaching their potential, whether that is for employment or ongoing education.

For those who want to take the academic route, we will ensure its availability as well. We therefore welcome the fact that more disadvantaged pupils than ever before go on to university. In 2010, more than a quarter—27.6%, in fact—of 18-year-olds from the north-west entered university; by 2018, that figure had risen to one in three, or 33.1%, so the north-west outperformed all English regions outside London and the south-east. Data released by the Department for Education in November of last year showed that 23% of students eligible for free school meals from the north-west had entered higher education by age 19 in 2016-17. That compares with 26% for England, with only London and the west midlands having a higher rate.

In the north-west, the Office for Students has invested more than £15 million through its national collaborative outreach programme, with key programmes in Cumbria, Lancashire, Greater Manchester and Merseyside. The Government have also embarked on a long-overdue overhaul of technical education, which is why we are acting to expand high-quality apprenticeships. In the 2017-18 academic year, the 58,120 apprenticeship starts in the north-west were 15.5% of all such starts in England.

Skills challenges and priorities differ not only across the country, but within regions such as the north-west. We heard that from the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate. We must therefore collaborate with local partners in order to ensure our reforms make sense on

the ground, which was very much his point. That means working with employers and providers, and supporting individuals who want to succeed in life and work. We have also introduced skills advisory panels, which will bring together local employers and skills providers to pool knowledge on skills and labour market needs in the regions. That will help to address local skills gaps more effectively.

We are to introduce a national retraining scheme, an ambitious and far-reaching programme to drive adult learning and retraining. It will be in place by the end of this Parliament. The Chancellor recently announced £100 million to roll out initial elements of the scheme across the country. That accompanies funding announced in the previous budget for the Greater Manchester combined authority to test different approaches to encourage and support adults to undertake training.

I am happy to take an intervention if the hon. Member for St Helens North still wishes to make one.

Conor McGinn: The Minister is so generous to take one intervention from the Opposition in the 10 minutes for which he has spoken. None the less, I appreciate it.

When I visit schools in my constituency, teachers and headteachers tell me that they have less money, fewer resources and larger class sizes. Does that have an impact on social mobility?

Nadhim Zahawi: We have protected the schools budget. I hope that I made that clear earlier in my remarks, when I also recognised that there are financial pressures on schools.

Progress on social mobility is critical to our shared prosperity. No progress is possible without action in every part of a young person's education and in every part of our country. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Leigh for beginning the year with a debate on a subject that is fundamental to our future success as a country. Again, I thank my colleagues for their contributions—my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West and the hon. Members for Ellesmere Port and Neston, for Enfield, Southgate and for St Helens North—and congratulate my brilliant PPS, my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale, on his ability not only to build a great business but to be a very successful musician. He has delivered real social mobility in Leigh.

Question put and agreed to.

Journalists: International Protection

4.29 pm

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered international protection of journalists.

I am very grateful to have the opportunity to debate the very important issue of the international protection of journalists. I am also delighted to see so many colleagues present. We have only an hour so I will endeavour to keep my remarks brief. I thank all those who have helped me with the preparation for the debate and for the more general work they do in this field, particularly Reporters Sans Frontières, Index on Censorship, the National Union of Journalists and the International Federation of Journalists, the Committee to Protect Journalists and the BBC World Service.

Journalists play a vital role in a free society. Their role in exposing corruption, highlighting injustice and holding Governments to account helps to make a democracy function, but it does not always make them popular. Sadly, in authoritarian regimes, that often leads to imprisonment, being taken hostage, intimidation and sometimes even death.

There are varying figures for the past year, but all agree that 2018 was one of the worst years on record for journalists being killed, imprisoned or held hostage. According to Reporters Sans Frontières, 80 journalists were killed in 2018 during the course of their duties; 348 are being held in prison and 60 held hostage. The countries with the worst records are perhaps predictable: in terms of deaths, they are Afghanistan, Syria, Mexico, Yemen and India.

Perhaps the most high profile death was that of Jamal Khashoggi, who died in October in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. It is reported that 11 people are on trial for that in Saudi Arabia, but we have little knowledge of the evidence to suggest that they ultimately bear responsibility. That death was condemned by Turkey—the country in which it took place—but Turkey's record inspires little confidence. Turkey has 33 journalists imprisoned. One journalist, Pelin Üner, was sentenced only in the last few days to a year's imprisonment for her work in investigating the Paradise papers. It is for that reason that international bodies have called for an international, independent investigation into what happened to Jamal Khashoggi. The worst countries for imprisonment of journalists are China, Egypt, Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

I want to mention in particular the work of the BBC World Service, which I have a particular regard for, and the Persian service of the BBC. Its journalists have suffered a relentless campaign against not just them but their families that are still in Iran. BBC World Service journalists in Russia have also found that their data has been published online with an encouragement to hound them. The BBC has made protests against that.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this debate. I chair the all-party parliamentary BBC group, as he will know from his previous role. It is the case that 152 named individuals, many of whom are based here in London, working for BBC Persia have been prevented from

buying or selling property, and their families have been accused of the most hideous things, which is impacting their relatives in Iran. Will he join me in calling for the Minister to do everything he can to protect those individuals?

Mr Whittingdale: I absolutely join my hon. Friend. I will call upon the Minister to make it a routine matter to raise concerns about the safety of journalists whenever we have contact with countries where, sadly, imprisonments or deaths have taken place.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I rise as the chair of the cross-party group of the National Union of Journalists. I am very interested in the figures the right hon. Gentleman has presented. According to the International Federation of Journalists, 94 journalists and media staff were killed in work-related incidents last year. In the light of that, does he agree that the UK Government might be called on to do everything possible to support the call for a new United Nations convention on the protection of journalists and media workers?

Mr Whittingdale: It is correct that there is a small difference in the figures from RSF and the International Federation. What we all agree is that the figures are extremely worrying and have been going up. That is the reason for the debate. I absolutely join the hon. Lady in calling on the Government to do more. I know the Minister will want to set that out in due course.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman is being generous with his time. I welcome this debate. Does he agree in the same vein that the Foreign Office has a very serious and important role in the protection of journalists, and that it must do all it can to protect journalists and our citizens wherever they are?

Mr Whittingdale: I agree. I was going to say and probably will say again that I absolutely welcome the Foreign Secretary's commitment to prioritise this issue and for the UK to take a lead internationally in pressing for more to be done. The hon. Lady's calls have been heard in the Foreign Office and I hope this will prove an opportunity for the Minister to tell us a little about what is intended.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the IFJ. Will he join me in paying tribute to the work of the IFJ and the NUJ? Does he agree that strong trade unions are a force for good in protecting democracy and freedom of expression?

Mr Whittingdale: I do not always leap to say that trade unions are a force for good, but in this instance I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. The International Federation of Journalists does great work alongside the other organisations that I mentioned. This is a priority area for non-governmental organisations and a lot of work is being done, but, unfortunately, one reason for that is that the record is so poor at present.

I talked about countries that perhaps will not have come as a great surprise—places such as China, which has the worst record for imprisonment, and Afghanistan and Syria. Sadly, this is also happening in Europe. I want particularly to mention the murder of Daphne

Caruana Galizia in Malta at the end of October 2017, and the death of Jan Kuciak in Slovakia and Victoria Marinova in Bulgaria. The climate that provokes hostility towards journalism is, to some extent, encouraged by intemperate remarks from people who really should know better. I do not want to single out President Trump, but I think his attacks on journalism generally have not helped in this regard. When someone such as the President of Czech Republic holds up a mock assault rifle labelled “for journalists”, that clearly will lead to a climate in which journalists have reason to fear.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that even in this country we have to be very careful what we say about our attitudes to journalists, as to politicians and everyone else? As a former journalist, I am well aware that one of the prerequisites for the job is the willingness to put yourself at risk to uncover public injustice in this country and abroad. Perhaps we need to be very wary in this country, as elsewhere in Europe, about the intemperate language we use.

Mr Whittingdale: I agree with the hon. Lady. Like almost everyone in this House I suspect, I have had occasion to be deeply unhappy about some of the things that journalists have done, but I recognise that freedom of the press is a vital component of a free society. Therefore, to some extent we have to take the reports that we do not like alongside those that we do.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Since we are talking about Europe, does my right hon. Friend welcome and support the work of the Council of Europe to protect journalists, and the new platform it has set up that makes it very public which journalists have been attacked and imprisoned unjustly?

Mr Whittingdale: I very much support the work of the Council of Europe. I am a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, which also highlights journalistic abuses, but, unfortunately, as I just said, Europe does not have a spotless record. Indeed, the new country holding the presidency of European Union, Romania, has a poor record on intimidation of journalists.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman is being very generous with interventions. He will be aware that the Council of Europe has taken up the case of Mehman Huseynov, an Azerbaijani journalist and human rights activist who has been in prison for nearly two years for the so-called crime of slander. He has been on hunger strike for two weeks. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the British Government should also take up Mr Huseynov's case and make representations to the Azerbaijani authorities?

Mr Whittingdale: I agree entirely with the hon. and learned Lady. I have my own criticisms of Azerbaijan and regard it as a badge of honour that I am blacklisted from visiting. That is a particularly bad case and Mr Huseynov should be added to the list of those whose cases we are pursuing internationally at every opportunity.

I want to allow as many people as possible to speak, so I will make just two points to finish. First, as I indicated, I am encouraged by the Foreign Secretary's statements that he wants to prioritise this. I understand

that the British Government intend to organise an international conference on the subject of the protection of journalists later this year, which is a very welcome initiative. As the newly elected chair of the British group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, I intend to organise a parallel conference alongside the Foreign and Commonwealth Office one. While the FCO can try and reach agreement among Governments that more needs to be done on as wide a basis as possible, we can try to mobilise parliamentarians from different countries to give this priority. I look forward to working with the Minister in due course.

Secondly, there have been calls for a UN special representative for the safety of journalists. That would demonstrate the importance with which the issue is held by the UN. At present, it comes within a broader remit, but the specific appointment of somebody to highlight the safety of journalists would help. I understand that about 30 countries have signed up to that proposition, so I hope the Government will consider adding our support in due course.

Sadly, there are a lot of cases and I could spend a great deal of time talking about them. Hon. Members have taken the opportunity to raise some. I am encouraged that so many Members have come to the debate, so I will deliberately keep what I say short so that as many as possible have the opportunity to contribute.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. I have seven speakers listed and intend to call the Front-Bench spokespeople by 5.14 pm. If Members who I call can confine their remarks to four minutes each, we will get everybody in.

4.42 pm

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Thank you for your guidance, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), who is the new chairman of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, of which I am a vice-chairman. The IPU does very good work on the human rights of Members of Parliament all over the world, and that includes many journalists who are in trouble.

The debate is particularly timely, in the light of the brutal murder of the *Washington Post* columnist and Saudi national, Jamal Khashoggi, in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October, and the very real dangers faced by journalists around the world in carrying out their work. I note that *TIME* magazine collectively named Jamal Khashoggi and other journalists who had been killed or imprisoned as its person of the year for 2018. Its editor-in-chief, Edward Felsenthal, explained that “influence—the measure...for nine decades...of *TIME*'s Person of the Year—derives from courage,”

and that the named journalists and one news organisation being recognised

“have paid a terrible price”

to receive that accolade.

Journalists and the media are important civil society actors and fundamental to ensuring that information is collected, disseminated, exchanged and evaluated to illuminate the dark corners where suffering, discrimination and injustice prevail, and to hold those in power to

[Ann Chwyd]

account to prevent tyranny and corruption. It is not surprising that those with something to hide, or who are motivated by power, greed or hatred, are often particularly keen to undermine, stigmatise and silence those endeavouring to bring their actions and abuses to light, by enforced censorship, the creation of a climate necessitating self-censorship, intimidation, persecution, unwarranted criminal or civil prosecution, imprisonment, or even disappearance and murder.

The International Federation of Journalists, which is a global group, notes that 84 journalists, cameramen, fixers and technicians died last year in targeted killings, bomb attacks and cross-fire incidents. It highlights an ongoing safety crisis in journalism, which was dramatically illustrated by the cruel murder of Jamal Khashoggi. Interestingly—and worryingly—IFJ figures reveal that more journalists were killed last year for trying to cover stories in their communities, cities and countries than for reporting in armed conflict areas. Increasing dangers are posed to journalists by a growing intolerance of independent reporting, by populism, by rampant corruption, by organised crime and by the breakdown of law and order in countries such as Mexico, India, Pakistan, the US, the Philippines and Guatemala.

The Committee to Protect Journalists recently published a report on the number of journalists imprisoned by Governments. At least 251 journalists were jailed in 2018, underlining authoritarian Governments' ongoing attempts to close down critical reporting. According to the CPJ, Turkey, China, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Eritrea are imprisoning the highest number of journalists, as the right hon. Member for Maldon mentioned. For the third year in a row, Turkey, China and Egypt are responsible for more than half of those jailed around the world. Turkey again has the dubious distinction of taking the No. 1 spot, further to President Erdoğan's attempt to stifle all peaceful debate, criticism and potential challenge to his rule. That includes a number of people I met when I took an IPU delegation to Turkey, where we met journalists who were in fear of being imprisoned and subsequently have been arrested and imprisoned. People feel that fear daily: they do not know when a knock at the door will come.

For the third consecutive year, every one of the 68 journalists behind bars in Turkey was facing anti-state charges, including alleged membership of a terrorist organisation, such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party or the Fethullah Terrorist Organisation, spreading propaganda or engagement in terrorist propaganda. Although Erdoğan began the crackdown against his opponents before the 2016 failed coup, repression has undoubtedly intensified since then, with the closure of more than 100 news outlets by decree and thousands of journalists losing their jobs as a result. As mentioned last week, a Turkish journalist and member of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists was sentenced to more than a year in jail for her work on the Paradise papers, simply because those papers and that investigation revealed details of the business activities of the country's former Prime Minister, who is now speaker of the Turkish Parliament, Binali Yıldırım, and his sons, despite the Yıldırım family admitting that the articles about their Maltese businesses were accurate.

Sadly, I appear to have run out of time already, but I want to say that I went to Iraq after the invasion—or the liberation—and met journalists who had to write their copy at that time according to press releases given to them by the Iraqi Government. Of course, they were what Saddam Hussein wanted them to say, rather than their own observations.

I pay tribute to the Institute for War & Peace Reporting, based in Islington, which trains journalists and was then in the process of retraining journalists in Iraq. I went along to one of those meetings and asked whether they had any questions for me. One of them put his hand up and said, "Why did it take you so long to get here?" They now felt that they were free, which they had not been before, to observe what was going on in their country and give accurate reports on the excesses of the Saddam Hussein regime. As an ex-journalist myself, I value the freedom that journalists have and take all over the world, and the bravery they show when they are likely to get into trouble in the countries in which they are reporting.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): I am going to call John Howell now. I am imposing a four-minute time limit on your speech, Mr Howell, consistent with my previous guidance. I indicate to other speakers that after that, there will be a three-minute guideline.

4.50 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I will try to keep it as short as possible, Mr Bailey. I start by re-emphasising the point I made in the intervention; I know that I am a bit of a Council of Europe buff, but I make no apology for saying it here. The issue is of great importance to the Council of Europe, both keeping journalists up to the mark and ensuring they do not exploit people, and ensuring that they are safe and that there is suitable protection for them.

The reason we are concerned about this in the Council of Europe is one of self-preservation. So many journalists from around Europe are there that there is a great need to ensure that their interests are kept up to the mark. For example, the head of the Ukrainian delegation is himself a journalist, and he and I have a lot of discussions about journalism in Ukraine. In addition to Azerbaijan and the problems we have with Russia at the moment, Ukraine is also a place that needs to look after its journalists in a big way where they are under threat from the Russian invasion.

Of course, the Council of Europe relies on the European convention on human rights, and article 10 is the appropriate bit. While I hope it is not necessary all the time to come back to the courts in order to ensure the protection of journalists, I am pleased to see that the European Court of Human Rights has produced a number of judgments that thoroughly protect the rights of journalists.

The other thing that the Council has done, which I will just mention, is to introduce a platform for the protection of journalism and safety of journalists. The platform is a public space to facilitate the compilation, processing and dissemination of information on serious concerns about media freedom and the safety of journalists in Council of Europe member states—it obviously cannot go outside those member states, but it does those things

within member states. The two things required for that are, first, to ensure that we are all alerted on time when journalists' safety is threatened, which it does by putting their pictures up on a public database and, secondly, to take a systematic approach, ensuring that every journalist who is threatened is there, which I think it does.

The platform has a number of things that people need to comply with: there must be a serious concern about media freedom, there must take place in a Council of Europe member state, the information must be reliable and based on fact, and the information must also be in the public domain, which I think is a sensible requirement so that we do not have things that are half-hidden. With all that, I am encouraged that this mechanism is in place to enable the safety of journalism and journalists to be protected.

4.54 pm

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): George Orwell said:

"Freedom of the press, if it means anything at all, means the freedom to criticise and oppose."

I will offer three reflections on that statement in three minutes, but before I do so, I congratulate the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) on his exposition, which demonstrated his typical clarity and brevity. Whatever our political differences, he and I have always shared an enthusiasm—a love, even—for freedom of the press.

That is my first point: the decisions we make in this House matter. In our nation we are lucky to live among only 13% of humanity who enjoy freedom of the press. The vast bulk of the world does not. When we make decisions, as we did last year about whether there should be punitive damages on news organisations that did not sign up to a state-approved regulator, those decisions matter, because dictators around the world look at what we are doing. I am proud that our party changed its policy and our deputy leader said that never again would we advocate that. When did "mainstream media" become a term of abuse? When did "balanced news" become a term of abuse? That has entered our politics as well, and what we do here is important for what happens in the rest of the world.

Secondly, the BBC has been mentioned. I was up early on Sunday morning and heard a religious and ethical programme on Radio 4 called "Sunday" on which Lyse Doucet, the BBC's chief international correspondent, spoke about this very issue. She said that it is the worst time ever in the world to be a journalist, and explained that statement in a couple of ways. She said that the respect that journalists reporting internationally around the world enjoyed when she was young is less apparent now. She said that that was partly because in the past, even the most hard-nosed terrorist organisations needed journalists to get their message out. Now they do not need them so much, and there are more kidnappings. She also pointed out that 98% of journalists who are imprisoned are local journalists, not renowned international journalists from the BBC or CNN. That is because, in the past 20 years, such journalists have had more outlets through social media and so on, but they are also very exposed to oppressive regimes around the world. We must admire and honour them.

My final point relates to another thing that the right hon. Gentleman and I share: a love of Ukraine, which has already been mentioned in this debate. In November

or December last year, I went to a commemoration of 85 years since the holodomor—Stalin's man-made famine in Ukraine. It was British journalists, Gareth Jones and Malcolm Muggeridge, who helped to expose it, all those years ago. Gareth Jones' reporting was printed in *The Guardian*, which was doing good work then, as it is now. That fearless journalism is needed in Ukraine now, particularly in Donbass, to give truthful accounts of what is happening and what Putin's regime is up to in that part of the world. Never has freedom of the press been more needed in Ukraine and, indeed, throughout the world.

4.57 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I will speak specifically and in a little more detail on behalf of the BBC Persian journalists and their families who have been targeted for harassment by the Iranian authorities, as mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), whom I congratulate on introducing this debate.

The BBC World Service states that the Iranian authorities have systematically targeted BBC Persian journalists who are mainly based in London and their families in Iran since the service launched satellite television in 2009. However, recent measures have escalated that persecution and the World Service has serious concerns for the safety and wellbeing of the journalists and their families. I commend the bravery of those journalists and of their families who support them.

In 2017, the Iranian authorities commenced a criminal investigation into journalists working for the service in London, alleging that their work was a crime against Iran's national security. That was accompanied by an asset-freezing injunction preventing 152 named individuals, comprising mainly current and former BBC Persian staff, from buying or selling property inside Iran, as we have heard.

Other measures against the journalists and their families have included arbitrary arrests, interrogation and detention of family members in Iran, confiscation of passports and travel bans on family members leaving Iran to prevent them from seeing their relatives who work for the BBC Persian service, ongoing surveillance and harassment, and the spread of fake and defamatory news stories designed to undermine the reputation of those staff and their families, for example by accusing them of prostitution or infidelity, much of which is targeted at the female journalists.

Since August 2018 there have been targeted attacks on several journalists in Iran's state press, using inflammatory language and providing names and photographs of the journalists. Before I give an example, I ask the Minister if he will once again raise these concerns with the Iranian authorities. Time precludes me from going into the full details, which have come to me this week directly from the World Service, but if I may I will provide the full text to the Minister.

To give a recent example, in August 2018, on Iran's national day for journalists, comments were made about BBC Persian through the Mizan news agency, which is affiliated to the Iranian judiciary, describing BBC Persian staff as a "mafia gang" who

"must be held answerable for their actions against the Iranian people",

[Fiona Bruce]

and who

“will surely be exposed one day before the Iranian nation, and God’s hand of justice will manifest itself through the arms of the Iranian people, and they will be punished for their actions.”

Those who follow Iranian politics will know that language is ominous—it has been used in the past with regard to extrajudicial killings. BBC World Service staff are extremely concerned that the statements represent a significant recent escalation of the threats made against named BBC Persian colleagues.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. I have just realised that my arithmetic was slightly out and that I will have to call the Front-Bench spokespeople at 5.9 pm, so there is a now a two-minute time limit.

5.1 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I will keep my comments short. I only want to raise with the Minister the case of Mehman Huseynov, who, as I said earlier, is an Azerbaijani journalist, human rights activist and blogger who has been in prison for the so-called crime of slander since March 2017. As has been said, independent human rights organisations view Azerbaijan as one of the world’s most repressive countries, and its judicial system is not seen as independent of its powerful Executive. Azerbaijan is a part of Europe, and is not very far from here.

Further charges were levelled against Mr Huseynov in December and he is now on hunger strike in protest against them. The charges against him have been dubbed “bogus” by the *Washington Post*, and his case has also attracted support from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Human Rights Watch and US Senator Marco Rubio.

Because of Mr Huseynov’s hunger strike, his health is deteriorating. The Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights saw fit to make an intervention earlier this week, calling the Azerbaijani deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs to raise Mr Huseynov’s case. She told the deputy Minister that the charges against Mr Huseynov should be dropped because they lack credibility and underscored that the authorities are under an obligation to afford the necessary medical care to Mr Huseynov, whose condition is extremely worrying. She particularly asked the officials to transfer Mr Huseynov to a civilian hospital for medical care.

Mr Huseynov is a very young man. He was born in November 1992. His plight is particularly shocking when one thinks that he is basically in prison for simply exercising what we in this country would take as natural—the right of free speech.

5.3 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I am sorry that I was a bit late coming into the debate, although I was actually on time—we started early. I have two minutes, so I had better get on with it.

I will talk about the protection of journalists in conflict. Some 26 years ago, as the UN commander, I was sent to Bosnia by the British Government with the

explicit instruction that I was not to protect journalists. I was not to look after them, I was not to sustain them, I was not to give them food and I was not to give them fuel. They were not my responsibility and I was to leave them alone.

The Ministry of Defence then accredited 102 journalists to my battalion. I thought that something was weird. Then, on 20 October 1992, I recovered the body of a BBC journalist who had been cut in half by an armour-piercing round. He was a dreadful mess. He was dead, of course, which I was very upset by. His name was Tihomir Tunuković. I brought him back and thought something was wrong. On 1 November, three more journalists were in my hospital. I thought, “This is actually wrong. I have been given rotten instructions here.” They were British journalists but, British or not, any journalist required my protection, so I changed the instructions.

I note that I have 33 seconds left, so I will say only one thing. The Geneva convention should have a new protocol—perhaps the Foreign Office could start that process—to protect journalists, because the Geneva conventions are actually the laws of war and conflict. Thank you, Mr Bailey. I am sorry that I screwed up my speech.

5.5 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) never screws up his speech. He spoke exceptionally well.

I thank the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) for introducing the debate. I was shocked to read some of the stats that have been read out already. The Reporters Sans Frontières worldwide round-up of journalists killed, detained, held hostage or missing in 2018 is sad reading, with 80 journalists killed, 348 in prison and 60 held hostage. I represent Strangford in Northern Ireland. Right hon. and hon. Members will know that there was a campaign of murder and attacks on journalists during that terrorist campaign in Northern Ireland, with newspaper offices and delivery vans burned and offices blown up. That was all part of that 30-year conflict of terrorism and malicious murder.

These people are simply doing their job and reporting the news. While I have sometimes had difficulties with how some news is reported and sometimes struggle with what could be deemed as biased reporting, there is no doubt in my mind of the right of the reporter to present factual information. An impartial reporting mechanism, and not simply a propaganda machine, goes hand in hand with democracy.

The figures for journalists murdered across the world include 15 in Afghanistan, 11 in Syria, nine in Mexico, eight in Yemen, six in the United States and six in India. Some 31% were killed on the job, while 48 were premeditated murders. Many of those figures worry us greatly. Over the past 10 years, 702 professional journalists alone have been killed around the world. That trend is increasing even in Europe, the region that respects press freedom the most but that has experienced the sharpest decline in the Reporters Without Borders 2018 World Press Freedom Index.

It is clear that freedom in any nation should include freedom of the press. That freedom must be protected, and protection is an active thing. It is not tutting when

something goes wrong, but actively declaring, and using diplomatic pressure to assert, that freedom of the press is essential. That is something that I and the House believe in. Hopefully this debate will make things better for journalists across the world.

5.7 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I will make just one additional point. I too have seen at first hand that many people go overseas to report in areas of conflict, in places as far away as Syria and Yemen, but also in conflict zones where the British Government are doing great work on humanitarian support and conflict resolution.

As the Government take forth their strategy and policy this year, I urge the Minister to use our bilateral footprint across the world much more emphatically and robustly at a Government-to-Government level, while at the same time integrating our approach. We spend a great deal of UK taxpayer resource not only on humanitarian issues but on capacity building—supporting institutions, strengthening governance, working with NGOs and civil society organisations. We can support journalists, free speech and freedom of the press.

As we approach World Press Freedom Day in May this year, there is a fantastic opportunity, notwithstanding UN conventions and Geneva protocols, for the United Kingdom to lead the world—as we already do when it comes to aid, foreign policy and our humanitarian approach—to strengthen our profile internationally and to give voice to those who need support to safeguard international freedoms, as well as political and press freedoms. The UK Government could do that quite robustly.

5.8 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The number of Members here despite the magnitude of events in the main Chamber just goes to show the high regard in which we hold international journalists. I do not have time to go through everybody's contributions, but I congratulate the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) on bringing the debate to the House and particularly on his proposals for a UN special representative on the safety of journalists. I think that proposal will garner cross-party support, and I will absolutely add my name to it. I studied media and journalism, and when I was at university I wanted to be a war correspondent—I held the likes of Kate Adie up as absolute stars. I did not realise that dream, but I did end up in another reasonably good job.

Over the holidays, I read Lindsey Hilsum's book "In Extremis: The Life of War Correspondent Marie Colvin". Her incredible life is depicted in a film that is about to come out, "A Private War". The places that Marie reported on included Chechnya, Iraq, Israel and Palestine, Sri Lanka—where she was injured and lost an eye—Syria and Africa. She was, we believe, assassinated in Syria in 2012. She held Martha Gellhorn, who reported the rise of fascism in the 1930s, in high regard; Gellhorn was one of her heroes. The plight of female journalists is a particular issue. As we have seen in recent years, all international journalists are under threat and it is an increasingly dangerous time, but female journalists in particular have had terrible experiences.

In an address that Marie Colvin gave at St Bride's church on Fleet Street when she returned from Afghanistan, she reflected on the injury suffered by a colleague who stepped on a landmine and had to have both legs amputated. She said:

"The expectation of that blast is the stuff of nightmares."

I want to share with the House something else that she said:

"We always have to ask ourselves whether the level of risk is worth the story. What is bravery, and what is bravado?"

Lindsey Hilsum wrote about Marie's determination to bear witness and its importance. She said that Marie was

"the champion of bearing witness so that even if no one stopped the wars, they could never say they had not known what was happening."

That goes to the heart of the issue. Marie's death, or assassination, in 2012 was a tragedy not only for her family and friends, but for journalism and the truth. Her ability to report and bear witness was vital.

Journalists are our eyes and ears on the international stage. They go where we cannot. They see what we cannot see. They hear what we cannot hear. That is particularly important for politicians. There is often a relationship of conflict between journalists and politicians, but we must hold them in the highest regard—indeed, cherish them—because their accounts help to direct our decisions about aid and about troops and intervention. Without them, we are blind to the great atrocities that, as we have heard, many Governments and regimes are visiting upon their own people and other nations.

If we do not protect international journalists, if we do not protect their integrity and their safety, we risk becoming detached and distanced. I want and hope to hear from the Minister what more we can do, particularly from a Foreign Office perspective, because as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on deaths abroad and consular services and assistance, I have interviewed a number of partners of those who have been incarcerated, including Richard Ratcliffe, the husband of Nazanin Zaghari, and Daniela, the wife of Matthew Hedges, who was studying in the United Arab Emirates. Their experiences are unbelievable. We must remember that academics and researchers are just as important as journalists. We must be able to protect them, and we must not fall foul of the trade relationships that we may have with countries coming above the diplomatic relationships that we have, in protecting journalists and others who in order to tell stories travel to places where we cannot go.

Bob Stewart: On a point of order, Mr Bailey. I am so sorry, but I was flustered when I spoke and I want to correct the record. Tihomir Tunuković, whose body I picked up, was killed on Sunday 1 November, not on 20 October. I hope that the record can be amended accordingly.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): I am sure that it can be, Mr Stewart. Thank you for that correction and, indeed, for the very interesting tale that you were able to tell us today.

5.13 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate my right hon. Friend, if I may call him

[*Fabian Hamilton*]

that, the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) on securing and introducing this debate. This is a timely moment to have such a debate, and in many ways it is a shame that it could not be for three hours, not the one hour. I congratulate all hon. Members who have taken part on their excellent contributions. They were brief contributions, but powerful none the less.

I think that Labour Members strongly agree with the proposal made by the right hon. Gentleman that there should be a new UN convention on the protection of journalists. We also heard contributions from my right hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), my colleague and hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (John Grogan), who in the past was, I believe, chair of the all-party parliamentary BBC group, my colleague and friend the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), who always tells excellent and very relevant stories from his own experience, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel). I thank them all for their extremely good contributions.

The brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi last year was a frighteningly vivid reminder of the serious threats that journalists face globally today. It is the most dangerous time to be a journalist globally in more than a decade. As has been said this afternoon, the freedom of the press is one of the most powerful platforms for freedom of expression. It is a means of informing, of scrutinising and of disseminating information and is a fundamental pillar of democracy. Article 19 of the UN universal declaration of human rights states:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

The protection of journalists and their sources is one of the basic conditions for press freedom, but in the last two years alone journalists have been murdered in Europe—in Bulgaria, Slovakia and Malta. Organisations such as Reporters Without Borders have called on Governments, including the British Government, to create a special rapporteur with the responsibility to protect journalists and press freedom. I look forward to hearing from the Minister about that in a few minutes.

I shall give some statistics to remind hon. Members here this afternoon. In 2018, 94 journalists were killed, an increase from 82 in the previous year—far too many. Afghanistan was the most dangerous country in which to be a journalist, with 16 journalists and reporters murdered. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, at least 251 journalists were jailed for their work in 2018. There are currently 126 journalists detained across member states of the Council of Europe, and almost 70 of those are in Turkey, as we heard. It is the case that 98% of jailed journalists are local people imprisoned by their own Governments, that 62% of journalists killed covered politics and political activity, and that 70% of jailed journalists imprisoned globally were arrested on anti-state charges, including terrorism.

Fewer than 10% of the killings of journalists end up with a prosecution. The impunity definitely exacerbates the cycle of violence against journalists. As we have

heard, three countries—Turkey, China and Egypt—were responsible for more than half the journalists jailed globally. There has been an increase in politicians and other individuals labelling journalists as “enemies” and making false and damaging claims about the media.

Examples include Donald Trump—he has already been mentioned today—labelling media outlets such as the *Washington Post* and CNN as enemies of the people; media outlets run by close associates of Viktor Orbán in Hungary listing journalists and academics as “mercenaries” for George Soros; in Turkey, President Erdoğan forcing the closure of media outlets over allegedly “terrorist propaganda” and supporting the 2016 coup attempt; and BBC Persian staff in Iran, as we have heard, having their assets frozen. I am very grateful to Julia Harris from the BBC World Service for the information that she provided to me and all of us this afternoon. She does an excellent job for the World Service. Other examples are media outlets in Venezuela—this has not been mentioned—being forced to shut down by authorities alleging irregularities in their licences and, as we have heard today, authorities in Azerbaijan targeting the last independent news agency in the country, Turan, with claims of “financial irregularities”.

The results are that many media outlets are shut down and quite often the licences and assets of those organisations are given to close supporters of the Government or regime in those countries. Of course, that means reduced media pluralism and the creation of pliant media that will toe the Government line. We all stand against that, and we all need to do more to oppose it and to ensure that journalists have the freedom that keeps our society free and fair.

5.19 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) for securing parliamentary time to debate this very important issue. His passionate commitment to the strategic issues around global media is of long standing. Let me take this opportunity to personally pay tribute to his previous outstanding work in this important and increasingly high-profile field, both as Secretary of State and as a two-term Chair of the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport.

We were also delighted to hear contributions and interventions from a range of other hon. Members, and I will try to respond to the points that were raised, but first, I will share some of what the UK Government are already doing to try to improve the climate for media freedom and our plans to do more over the coming year.

There can be no doubt that media freedom is under increasing attack across the world. The figures speak for themselves: 80 journalists were killed in 2018, 348 are languishing in prison and 60 are being held hostage. It is appalling that these numbers represent a steady increase on those of previous years. Countries are increasingly using restrictive laws to stifle freedom of expression and to prevent the functioning of an independent media. The climate is worsening fast.

Naturally, for many people—even those in public life—it is uncomfortable to find oneself in the glare of the media spotlight, but I hope that all of us, as publicly elected representatives, believe and appreciate that such

scrutiny is an essential part of a vibrant and healthy democracy, and that it is of huge benefit to society as a whole. It is no coincidence that countries with the freest media are also generally the most transparent and the least corrupt. Needless to say, the same applies in reverse. Powerful people may think twice about abusing their position if there is a good chance that their behaviour will be exposed in the media; conversely, an absence of scrutiny can lead to the very worst abuses of power and corruption.

Here in the UK, we have long had a culture of supporting freedom of expression. We are rightly proud of our tradition of an independent media, which underpins the fundamental values of our democracy. As a consequence, we collectively tolerate the excesses and, at times, the low journalistic standards of our tabloid press. That is a price we have to pay. However, in recent days in the vicinity of the House, the Sky News journalist Kay Burley and my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) were subjected to unacceptable levels of harassment.

The wealth of media expertise and innovation in this country not only strengthens our own media sector, but supports the development of a strong and independent media in many countries overseas.

Regarding UK action, I was very taken by the comments made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel). Let me reassure her that posts overseas routinely lobby Governments, often on a bilateral basis, wherever and whenever serious violations occur. My fellow Foreign Office Ministers and I also raise these issues routinely with our counterparts, and we will continue to do so, while also taking up individual cases personally—a point mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), as well.

We promote freedom of expression and media freedom all over the world, and we routinely raise concerns about serious violations with foreign Governments. One such case was highlighted during my trip last week to Vietnam, where I raised with ministerial counterparts concerns about the plan for a new cyber-security law in that country. I know that such discussions go on in visits that Ministers undertake across the globe. We also support media freedom through our Magna Carta Fund in some of the countries where human rights and democracy are most at threat.

In the multilateral sphere, we will continue to use our influence to support media freedom, the safety of journalists and freedom of expression at the United Nations Human Rights Council. A current example of this is seen in Mexico—a country that has been named by Reporters Without Borders as among the world's five most deadly countries not at war. In November, we raised concerns about limitations to freedom of expression and violence against journalists and human rights defenders during the United Nations universal periodic review of Mexico. We raise these issues as important international principles in their own right, but in the past 12 months we have also raised concerns in all the specific countries mentioned in the debate.

We shall also utilise our active and ongoing membership of the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. We will continue to use those important vehicles to highlight our concerns,

galvanise consensus and effect change, and we are looking actively for ways to use them to greater and more meaningful effect.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Tribute should be paid to our own Baron Foulkes of Cumnock, who is the general rapporteur in the Council of Europe for media freedom and the protection of journalists.

Mark Field: That tribute has indeed been paid. I also take on board the proposal that we support a UN representative or convention on the protection of journalists. I know that is something that is actively being pursued.

In the coming year and beyond, we will strengthen our efforts yet further. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon referred to the work being done by the new Foreign Secretary, who is very focused on this issue. We shall continue to work through those important multilateral bodies to galvanise consensus and effect change, and we are looking actively for ways of building on their work. We will also use our membership of like-minded groupings, such as the Freedom Online Coalition and the Community of Democracies, to step up our efforts specifically to promote media freedom and the safety of journalists. We shall continue to work closely with civil society and media organisations to ensure that we use the influencing power of Government to good effect, to complement and build on their own efforts. However, it is also important that we ramp up the bilateral response with countries with which we have strong connections, whether through the Department for International Development or in a range of other areas. We will continue to work together in that regard.

We must also recognise that we cannot do all this work alone. That is why, later this year, we will host in London an international conference on media freedom. Our aim is to bring the issue to global attention, promote the value and benefits of a free media—indeed, a free internet—to a wider audience, and mobilise an international consensus behind the protection of journalists, as the obvious guardians of those freedoms.

A robust, free, vibrant and varied media landscape is also one of the best antidotes to hostile state disinformation. Like restrictions on the media, disinformation also requires a concerted response. Here, too, we feel that the UK is at the forefront of a growing international consensus on the need for action. At home, we are drawing, among other things, on the experience of our Nordic and Baltic partners, which means taking a whole-of-society approach to this matter. That involves working towards three key objectives in relation to disinformation: first, deterring the use of disinformation by exposing and disrupting the perpetrators; secondly, increasing transparency and accountability online to make it more difficult and less rewarding to spread disinformation; and thirdly, making people more resilient through education and empowerment. We are investing £100 million in that effort around the world, which includes, at the moment, £8.5 million in eastern Europe and central Asia alone.

To respond to some specific points raised by Members, my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) talked about Iran. The reports of BBC staff in Iran being harassed and subjected to asset freezes and similar forms of mistreatment are deeply worrying. The Foreign Secretary specifically raised our

[Mark Field]

concerns about the harassment of BBC Persia staff and their families in Iran when he was there during his visit on 9 and 10 December. Officials at the British embassy in Tehran have also twice raised concerns with leading figures in the Iranian Government. Members should be made aware that in December 2018, we once again co-sponsored the UN General Assembly's resolution on the human rights situation in Iran, specifically highlighting the poor record on freedom of expression.

The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) asked about the case of Mr Huseynov in Azerbaijan. We regularly express our concerns about the rights of political prisoners with the Azeri authorities. Over the past two years, we have attended a number of Mr Huseynov's court hearings, and we met with his lawyer most recently on 3 January this year. The UK will continue to follow the case closely and is considering next steps with our international partners.

I will conclude with this thought. A free press is the lifeblood of a healthy democracy, because it holds the powerful to account, helps to expose corruption and lack of integrity, and is one of the best antidotes to disinformation. That is why we must take action to stop the intimidation, harassment and persecution of journalists across the world, and why this year we will place as many resources as we can from the Foreign and

Commonwealth Office—not only financial, but time—behind a campaign to reverse the worrying trends outlined in this debate.

5.29 pm

Mr Whittingdale: I thank all my colleagues who have come this afternoon. My only regret is that we have had only one hour in which to hold this debate, but the fact that so many have spoken, representing five parties from across the House, is an indication of how important the issue is seen in all quarters of Parliament. I was therefore particularly pleased to hear confirmation from the Minister that it will be one of the priorities of the Foreign Office in the coming year, when we will be holding the conference. I hope that this debate will act almost as a curtain raiser, and that we can return to the issue in due course as that conference approaches and thereafter. As I said earlier, I hope to organise a parliamentary conference in parallel to the Foreign Office one, so that parliamentarians from across the world can come together to talk about the issue too. I thank everyone who has come along and contributed this afternoon.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered international protection of journalists.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statement

Wednesday 9 January 2019

CABINET OFFICE

EU Exit and Northern Ireland

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): The Government are today publishing a paper, “UK Government commitments to Northern Ireland and its integral place in the United Kingdom”, which outlines a package of commitments to the people of Northern Ireland as we leave the EU—giving Northern Ireland a strong voice and role in any decision to bring the backstop into effect, and in its implementation in that scenario.

These commitments underline Northern Ireland’s integral place in the United Kingdom and reflect that it is the only part of the United Kingdom sharing a land border with an EU member state. They seek to address some of the questions that have been asked about the backstop in that regard. We recognise that these alone will not address all of Parliament’s concerns—including for those who have focused on changes from the EU. But it is right that we look to do what we can as a Government to safeguard the interests of the people and businesses of Northern Ireland, and respond to some of the key concerns that have been raised.

The commitments include:

Setting out that no new areas of EU law would be applied in a backstop scenario without seeking the agreement of the Northern Ireland Assembly;

Ensuring unfettered access for Northern Ireland businesses to the Great Britain economy;

Providing a strong role for Stormont before the backstop could be triggered;

Giving the Northern Ireland Executive a role in Northern Ireland-specific discussions between the UK and EU under the structures established in the withdrawal agreement;

Outlining that there would be no regulatory divergence between GB and Northern Ireland in areas covered by the backstop in any scenario in which it applied;

A guarantee that there would be no change to north-south co-operation through the protocol, preserving the arrangements under strand II of the Belfast (“Good Friday”) agreement;

A powerful voice for Northern Ireland in future relationship negotiations—putting the voice of the Northern Ireland Executive, along with the other devolved Administrations, at the heart of that work.

The Government are publishing this paper ahead of the commencement of the meaningful vote debate on the withdrawal deal.

I am placing a copy of the paper “UK Government commitments to Northern Ireland and its integral place in the United Kingdom”, and a copy of “Special meeting of the European Council (Art. 50) (13 December 2018)—Conclusions” in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1239]

Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 9 January 2019

EDUCATION

Apprenticeships and Skills Policy

The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on Apprenticeships and Skills Policy on 8 January 2018.

Anne Milton: With respect to the drop in level 2 apprenticeships, which was mentioned earlier, we are not absolutely sure what is behind the figures. Some

90% of starts are still at levels 2 and 3, and of course employment is high, but we need to dig deeper. [*Official Report, 8 January 2019, Vol. 652, c. 94WH.*]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton):

An error has been identified in the speech I gave during the debate on Apprenticeships and Skills Policy.

The correct information should have been:

Anne Milton: With respect to the drop in level 2 apprenticeships, which was mentioned earlier, we are not absolutely sure what is behind the figures. **Some 87% of starts** are still at levels 2 and 3, and of course employment is high, but we need to dig deeper.

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Wednesday 9 January 2019

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