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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 10 January 2019

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Rail Fares

1. **Peter Kyle** (Hove) (Lab): What recent progress his Department has made on simplifying the fare structure for rail services. [908471]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): It is vital that passengers feel confident that they are buying the most appropriate ticket for their journey, which was why we committed in our manifesto to review rail ticketing, removing complexity and perverse pricing. The rail review will take a longer-term look at how the railway can support a fares system that delivers value for money for both passengers and taxpayers.

Peter Kyle: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer. Last April, the then rail Minister wrote to me to say that he was conducting a review of fare simplification on the Brighton main line. In oral questions that month, he said that the review would be completed “rapidly”. Only the context of this Government’s handling of rail fares could the best part of a year be called rapid. When will that review be completed and when will fares be simplified on the Brighton main line?

Andrew Jones: My predecessor undertook to review the matter and remove some of the anomalies, and that work has already started, including in the fare review we saw earlier this year and the big piece of work reviewing how pay-as-you-go can be extended across the south-east. There has been a piecemeal approach where it has gone into Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and parts of Surrey, and we are taking a strategic approach to it and that will be happening in the first half of this year.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Devolution to Greater Manchester offers enormous opportunities to simplify rail fares across the area. What has so far been achieved in that regard, and what opportunities have been taken to broaden out the ease of using different modes of public transport across Greater Manchester on a single ticket?

Andrew Jones: That is very much a question for the Williams review of devolution structures in our transport sector. The principle of my hon. Friend’s question, which is about making things more convenient for passengers through smart ticketing, is absolutely right. If we make things easier for passengers, they will be

more likely to use the services. That is a key question for the Williams review, and I will make sure that my hon. Friend’s question is fed through to Mr Williams.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Fares have gone up everywhere, including for Hull Trains, which has been particularly difficult for residents of Hull to swallow because the reliability of the trains has been so poor. I will offer the Minister a gift this morning—an opportunity to be a hero cost-free. I would like him to contact First Group and put extreme pressure on it to give Hull Trains a new train six months earlier than promised. If he can do that, it will improve reliability—and I am not even asking him for any more money.

Andrew Jones: That is quite unusual, to be honest, as we have a lot of requests for money. I will look into what the hon. Lady says and get back to her.

Leaving the EU: Aviation

2. **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on the viability of the aviation sector. [908472]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): The UK Government and European Commission have agreed in principle that the two sides should negotiate a comprehensive air transport agreement. The Department is working closely with the aviation sector to ensure its requirements are factored into negotiations. The Department’s aviation technical notices and the European Commission’s published plans for aviation contingency preparations, alongside proposed EU regulations published on 19 December, clearly demonstrate that, in a no-deal scenario, both sides are committed to maintaining aviation connectivity.

Mr Sharma: I thank the Secretary of State for his response to my question. What is the Department’s estimate of the effect of leaving the EU on the opportunities for the thousands currently employed in the aviation sector as apprentices?

Chris Grayling: I think that the aviation sector will continue to grow and develop as it has in recent years. We will continue to have connections across Europe, as we do at the moment, and, of course, with the plans for the expansion of Heathrow airport, there will be a real opportunity for apprenticeships in the sector and to open up new routes around the world, for example to emerging markets in Asia. I see the next 10 years as ones of great opportunity for the aviation sector.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The EU’s contingency arrangements are welcome, but what estimate has the Secretary of State made of the prospects for airports such as Bournemouth that want to increase their routes to Europe over the next year?

Chris Grayling: The European Union has said that it wants to keep flights at the current levels, and I suspect that they will find that that is not a universally held view among member states.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I am sure that the Secretary of State can chew gum and walk at the same time, so while he is dealing with future viability with our leaving the EU, will he also deal with the current crisis over drones affecting airports? May I give him the opportunity to answer the questions that he did not answer earlier in the week? Were contingency plans agreed with the Ministry of Defence and the Home Office to protect our airports from drone incidents and others, and if not, why not? Were such plans not activated in time because of dithering? Why did they not work? Was that the fault of the Secretary of State's Department, the Ministry of Defence, the Home Office or, indeed, the Cabinet Office?

Mr Speaker: Order. I listened to the right hon. Gentleman's question with great interest. It was tangential to the substantive question, and I just say gently to him that I had been thinking of offering him an Adjournment debate on the matter, until I realised that he had, in fact, just conducted one.

Chris Grayling: Indeed he has, Mr Speaker.

I would simply remind the right hon. Gentleman of two factors. First, the disruptive attack at Gatwick was unprecedented anywhere in the world, and as a result we have been approached by airports around the world to learn more about how we tackled that. Secondly, as I have said, I am not able to discuss in the House the nature of the technology used for security reasons, but when a similar issue arose at Heathrow earlier this week, the response was very rapid indeed.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that regional air connectivity within the UK is a priority as we leave the EU? Can he remind operators such as British Airways that reducing routes from Aberdeen International airport in my constituency disrupts business and leisure travel?

Chris Grayling: I agree with my hon. Friend, and that is why we have put down a clear requirement that as Heathrow expands a proportion of its capacity is set aside for regional connectivity within the United Kingdom. It is really important that an expanded Heathrow is a gateway for the whole United Kingdom to opportunities around the world, as well as within the country.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I chair the parliamentary air safety group, and I know a little about the aviation sector. During consideration of a statutory instrument upstairs recently, I challenged a Minister to tell me which chief executive or chair of any airline he had talked to about this subject. I have talked to them, and they are terrified of the impact of a no-deal Brexit. He could not name one.

Chris Grayling: I have talked to the chief executives of every major UK airline. I have also talked to representatives of a significant number of international airlines.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): As the Secretary of State has spoken to the chief executives, he will of course be aware of their concerns about the contingency agreement only allowing for a freeze in the services of British airlines as they stand at the moment

. What reassurances can he give airports such as Edinburgh that this will not in fact be the case, and that expansion will happen should we have to leave the EU?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Lady says, "should we have to leave the EU". The country has already voted to leave the EU and we will next week vote on an agreement that would continue current aviation arrangements. If she is concerned about the contingency plans put in place by the European Union, will she join the Government in the Division Lobby next week to support the agreement?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Can the Secretary of State further outline discussions held with Belfast City and Belfast International airports to secure enhanced trading routes post March, and to evaluate what changes the airports may have to make?

Chris Grayling: I have had regular conversations with the leadership of the Belfast airports. Working with them in several areas, I want to see them expand their international flights. More flights are, of course, being planned for next summer, and I hope and believe that they have a strong and prosperous future with better links around the world.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): The Prime Minister's deal looks dead and we could well be heading into the chaos of a no-deal Brexit. If that is the case, we will no longer be a member of the European Aviation Safety Agency. Given that we do not currently have a bilateral air safety agreement with the US, can the Secretary of State give a guarantee that in the event of no deal there will be no disruption to flights?

Chris Grayling: Yes. The Civil Aviation Authority has been working for well over a year to ensure that in the event that we do not continue as a member of EASA we have a properly functional British alternative.

Community Transport

3. **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support community transport operators. [908474]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The services run by community transport operators are of vital importance to our transport sector and communities. During the most recent financial year, the Government supported community transport operators with almost £3.1 million through the bus service operators grant. A number of projects from the £11.5 million building connections fund will also provide new community transport links to support those most at risk of isolation.

Alex Cunningham: That is a tiny amount to invest in community transport. My constituency is largely rural, and people in our villages—particularly older people—are left isolated because profit-making bus companies are not interested in serving them. There is some community provision, but very little funding. Will the Minister offer my isolated communities some comfort and commit more money to that sector, either directly or through the combined authority?

Ms Ghani: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that community transport operators, even within his own community, opened a new service as recently as a few months ago, with extra support from the Department and the bus service operators grant fund. I looked on his local council website to check what was happening with community transport, and there was a reference to the funding that the Department for Transport had provided. The council said that the excellent public community transport in the borough was being provided by funding provided by the Department for Transport.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Until recently, the No. 5 bus service that passes through South Killingholme in my constituency was supported by a Government grant. The local authority is making provision for community transport to provide an alternative, but it will not replace the existing service. Will the Minister agree to meet me to discuss whether other funding streams can be found to support the service?

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend is a strong advocate for his constituency. I am not exactly sure which funding stream he is talking about, but let us sit down and talk about it, and see what we can do.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Meadowgreen health centre in Sheffield is moving, leaving the entire Lowedges estate completely unconnected to its GP surgery. Does the Minister agree that, under such circumstances, passenger authorities should be required to consult on bus routes to ensure that they are connected to GP surgeries? Will she write to South Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive to ensure that it does just that?

Ms Ghani: The hon. Lady raises two very important issues. I will meet her to see what I can do to help out. She is right that if bus services are being changed, there needs to be communication with not only the traffic commissioner, but the local community. I am more than happy to sit down with her to see what is happening.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): When can we expect a full Government response on the sections 19 and 22 permits?

Ms Ghani: Those are two very important permits, and I know that they have previously caused some anxiety in the sector. Of course, we carried out a consultation. I want to make sure that we respond appropriately, which is why we will take our time to make sure we get it absolutely right. It is important to note that we are working with community transport operators and the Community Transport Association, which receives a substantial amount of funding from us. It is important to note that the status quo as it is today for community transport operators continues.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): What steps is he taking to ensure that community transport groups will not require a licence when the Government align sections 19 and 22 permits with EU regulations? The proposals that went out for consultation still carry a risk that small and medium-sized groups will need to pay in the range of

£80,000 to £100,000, which would lead to the widespread disruption of those services. Does the Minister understand those risks?

Ms Ghani: I no doubt do not need to point out to the hon. Gentleman that I am a she, not a he, but no matter.

We are very supportive of community transport operators, which was why the consultation was so important. We will make sure that our response actually fits the fantastic voluntary work that takes place within our community transport network.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): Community transport is a lifeline for many older or disabled people who would otherwise be trapped in their own homes, yet the Government propose to introduce a significant and unwanted extra burden on the charities that run those vital services. Age UK has reported that the majority of its community transport services would be forced to close because of the Government's mistaken proposals. Will the Minister commit to reconsidering her approach and to working with, rather than against, the charities that run those vital services?

Ms Ghani: I am a little confused by the hon. Gentleman's statement, because the Government are yet to put out our response. We are working with the charities sector, including with the Community Transport Association and community transport operators. There is an EU regulation that we are trying to make this fit into, but we are committed to ensuring that our community transport operators continue to operate. That is why we have the £3 million fund and the £11.5 million building connections fund.

Leaving the EU: Ports

4. **Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): What steps he is taking to reduce potential disruption to travel at UK ports in the event of the UK leaving the EU without a deal. [908475]

9. **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What steps he is taking to reduce potential disruption to travel at UK ports in the event of the UK leaving the EU without a deal. [908480]

16. **Sandy Martin** (Ipswich) (Lab): What recent steps he has taken to prepare UK ports for when the UK leaves the EU. [908487]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): The Department has been working for some time to ensure that traffic can continue to flow through UK ports as frictionlessly as possible in all scenarios when we leave the European Union. This has included engaging closely with others across Government, and with ports and their representative bodies. As regards ferry capacity, I refer the House to the two statements I made earlier this week.

Tommy Sheppard: The Government will forgive the House some scepticism about their efficacy and intention in this regard. Surely the Seaborne fiasco shows that only one of two things can be happening: either there is abject incompetence in the preparations for no deal; or the Secretary of State and his Department are not really taking them seriously. Which is it?

Chris Grayling: What is disappointing is that I would have hoped that the hon. Gentleman, as a Scottish Member, would welcome the additional opportunities for Scottish business as a result of expanded services from east coast ports to northern Europe provided by DFDS, which is a very substantial part of the contracts that we have let.

Martyn Day: Seaborne Freight has negative equity of just over £374,000, with one director being investigated by the Government for a trail of debt related to previous companies, yet due diligence did not flag this up. Can the Secretary of State confirm whether that is because due diligence guidance was to look not at individuals' trading history, but only at Seaborne's proposals? Why was such guidance provided?

Chris Grayling: As I said in the House earlier this week, we will not be paying Seaborne until ferries operate. From the point of view of business in Scotland, we have made sure that there are additional routes available from the east coast ports to northern Europe. In the event of a no-deal Brexit, which I hope will not happen, that should be a really valuable alternative for Scottish business, and the hon. Gentleman should welcome that.

Sandy Martin: How long has the Minister's Department estimated it will take to recruit and train the thousands of additional customs officers who will be required if we leave without a deal, and what conversations has he had with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs about this?

Chris Grayling: I am very confident, as I have said, that HMRC will be ready. Of course, the point is that, at the moment, we do not collect customs tariffs or carry out checks. The Government have said very clearly that our prime priority in a post-Brexit world will be the fluidity of trade; other things can follow. Security, of course, remains of paramount importance, but beyond that, other things can follow. That is the approach the Government have taken.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I have two ports in my constituency, with ferry connections running from Milford Haven and Fishguard to Ireland. Those ports assure me that they have the skills and the capacity to handle a variety of Brexit scenarios, but all they see at the moment is the promise of further argument and gridlock in this place. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we have a duty in this House to provide a way forward for this industry? Those who take comfort in just opposing everything are failing in their responsibilities.

Chris Grayling: I agree with my right hon. Friend. The reality is that it is all well and good Labour Members saying, "We don't want no deal," but then they are going to vote against the deal. They have not come up with any credible alternative plan, so I am afraid I take with a very large pinch of salt most of what the Labour party says at the moment.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm to the House that the Government have signed the common transit convention, which means that, in the event of a no-deal Brexit, customs declarations and import duties, as now, will be required to be paid only when the goods arrive at their final destination?

Chris Grayling: That is absolutely correct. In very many international trading scenarios using the common transit convention, customs processes can be at the start and the end of the journey. That is one reason why I felt able to say to the House earlier this week that I was confident that, in all circumstances, trade would continue to move relatively freely.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): It has been reported that the Secretary of State's Department is in talks with two rail freight companies about options to provide additional services via the channel tunnel and High Speed 1 to ensure supplies of food and medicines in the event of blockages at Kent ports. It is also claimed that the Department has written to Southeastern trains warning of possible disruption to its services if additional daytime freight movements are required. Is his Department really contemplating emergency rail timetables in the event of a no-deal Brexit? Has he written to Southeastern regarding such contingency plans? Should the many thousands of rail commuters in Kent be bracing themselves for possible disruption?

Chris Grayling: No. The story is untrue.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudon) (SNP): The Secretary of State's responses in Tuesday's urgent question on the Seaborne fiasco were disgraceful. He has awarded an emergency ferry contract to a company with no boats, no ports agreement, no personnel, debts and key personnel with dubious trading pasts. Parliament needs answers. How was Seaborne identified as a company that merited direct negotiations for an emergency contract?

Chris Grayling: It is a bit like the proverbial stuck gramophone record. I said very clearly, earlier this week, that we have let contracts with a number of operators, of which Seaborne represents about 10%, and we pay no money unless the service is delivered. To clarify further what the Chair of the Transport Committee said a moment ago, we are talking to a number of other potential outlets, in case extra capacity were to be needed—rail, ports, maritime—but nothing else has been decided. We have not issued instructions to any rail company about disruptive timetables and we have not taken any further steps to put additional measures in place. We are simply checking the lie of the land so that we can respond to all eventualities.

Alan Brown: This is an emergency contract that the Secretary of State thought was so critical it could circumvent EU procurement rules for direct negotiation, yet he says, "It's only 10%" and "Don't worry, if they don't deliver, they don't get paid." That means they don't deliver that emergency service. We know how sensitive Dover is; there are predictions of delays that could lead to 30-mile queues. If that 10% is not delivered, what is the impact on Dover?

Chris Grayling: This is why 90% of the new contracts are with DFDS and Brittany Ferries. As I said, I am disappointed that the Scottish National party does not welcome the DFDS contract that will provide additional routes from east coast ports to northern Europe, which will be beneficial to Scottish business.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Putting to one side the ridiculous and desperate allegations of the Secretary of State that Labour is anti-business and his

banal allegations over Brexit, I point out that the Seaborne fiasco lays bare his total incompetence and the complete failure of due diligence. Before granting the ferry contract, was he aware of the debt or the promissory note between Ben Sharp, now Seaborne's CEO, and Mid-Gulf Offshore, acknowledging Sharp's indebtedness to that company of over \$1 million, which remains unpaid?

Chris Grayling: That clearly got under the hon. Gentleman's skin because he really does not like Government supporting new start-up businesses. The reality is, as I said earlier this week, that due diligence on this contract was done by Slaughter and May, Deloitte and Mott MacDonald, as he would expect, and off the back of that we formed a contract which we pay nothing for until the service is delivered.

Andy McDonald: Here's another one the Secretary of State might not answer. As a result of this debacle, a variety of legal challenges to the Secretary of State may well flow from, among others, existing freight service providers with capacity. On Tuesday, he said that Seaborne will be able to run ferry services immediately, but on Wednesday the Government said that Seaborne will not be able to open the route between Ramsgate and Ostend until late April at the very earliest. Surely that puts Seaborne in default of its contract to deliver services from 29 March and the contract is therefore void. In those circumstances, should not he reverse his appalling judgment and cancel the contract without delay?

Chris Grayling: We will hold all the companies that have presented us with proposals to the terms of their contracts.

CrossCountry Rail Franchise

5. **Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Whether the next CrossCountry rail franchise will include a requirement to purchase new rolling stock. [908476]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): The current CrossCountry franchise runs until October this year, with a possible extension to October next year. The hon. Gentleman should be assured that we are working to look at all options for the new CrossCountry franchise, including rolling stock. We will look at adding much needed capacity to the CrossCountry services as soon as trains become available.

Luke Pollard: In November, an unbelievable 30% of CrossCountry trains to Plymouth terminated early at Exeter because the Voyager trains could not get through Dawlish in bad weather. As well as placing orders for new rolling stock for the long term, will the Minister look at requiring CrossCountry to use the GWR HST trains that are currently being replaced with newer trains, to give Cross Country extra, interim, Dawlish-proof capacity?

Andrew Jones: I had a very positive meeting with the hon. Gentleman and his local council leader yesterday. We agree on the importance of the south-west economy, in particular its connectivity, and we recognise entirely the issue with the Voyager trains and how they are affected by the salt water to which they are exposed.

CrossCountry is working on an engineering solution to that and we are working on adding capacity to the franchise. Passenger numbers have grown by 25%, so we need to put more rolling stock into it. We will look at where we can get the trains from to expand that capacity.

15. [908486] **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): As the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) outlined, there are constant issues with CrossCountry services west of Exeter due to their lack of resilience on the Dawlish coastal stretch. Can the Minister outline to me, and reassure me, that both the future rolling stock requirements and the work that we are doing to improve the resilience of this iconic coastal line will make a difference?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. Protecting the line at Dawlish is crucial and sends a broader signal that the south-west is open for business, with all the connectivity that implies. So this is a national priority. Essential work is under way now to repair four existing breakwaters in the area. We have committed £15 million for further development work. Ensuring that the line is resilient, and that the south-west is open for business, is a priority.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Before Christmas, I travelled between Leeds and Sheffield on a CrossCountry train and experienced what my constituents regularly experience—as many passengers standing as sitting. The simple fact is that the four-car trains on the busiest part of the route between Leeds and Birmingham are simply inadequate. When we get a new franchise, will the Minister ensure that those four-car trains are extended, so that there is the capacity for people to actually get a seat on them?

Andrew Jones: I recognise entirely the crowding issues that the hon. Gentleman describes and has experienced personally, and which I have also experienced personally, so we are certainly looking to add capacity in the next franchise. We are also looking to add capacity before that franchise comes into force, if we can find it.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Like Sheffield, we do not get much salt water in the west midlands, but West Midlands Railway is now purchasing over £1 billion-worth of new rolling stock. Could not the Minister use that model with the CrossCountry franchise?

Andrew Jones: I am aware of the new rolling stock that is coming in to the west midlands; indeed, it is coming in across many parts of our network. We have a fantastic story on rolling stock coming in over the next two years. I will look at what my hon. Friend says and get back to him with an answer.

Manchester Oxford Road Station

6. **Graham Stringer** (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): What steps he is taking to reduce delays at Manchester Oxford Road station. [908477]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): Richard George was appointed by the Secretary of State to review the operational performance challenges on the railway in the north of England,

following the introduction of the May 2018 timetable. That includes the performance of services operating through the Castlefield corridor, which includes Oxford Road. The Department continues to work with Transport for the North, Richard George and the industry to find solutions to improve performance.

Graham Stringer: A review simply is not good enough. More than three quarters of trains at Oxford Road do not comply with the timetable. We have had delays, cancellations, reviews. We need an immediate implementation of the Northern Hub investment programme—extra platforms at Salford, and extensions of platforms at Oxford Road, moving to new platforms 15 and 16. Will the Minister do that, and reject the ridiculous idea that this problem can be solved by digitising the signalling system, when there is such mixed rolling stock on these rails?

Andrew Jones: The problem, which is clearly there because the Castlefield corridor is a bottleneck on our network, will be solved using a variety of solutions, some of which will be technical. Funding has been set aside in CP6 and we are working on what that will be spent on.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): My constituents, who use the line from Oxford Road through my constituency to Liverpool Lime Street, continue to experience repeated delays and overcrowding, and they are told to expect that situation to continue at least until April. What penalties will Northern face, as much of this seems to be due to lack of rolling stock or of train crew?

Andrew Jones: If any of the train operating companies is in breach of its franchise, there are mechanisms to hold it to account. Northern is run through the Rail North partnership, which is a combination of the Department for Transport and Transport for the North.

Rail Travel: Affordability

7. **Mary Creagh** (Wakefield) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the affordability of rail travel. [908478]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): The Department is very mindful of the affordability of rail services and we have capped regulated fares in line with inflation for the sixth year in a row. Last week we announced our intention to extend the 16-17 railcard, offering 50% off all rail journeys. Together with the recently launched 26-30 railcard, this means that everybody up to the age of 30 will have access to discounted rail fares.

Mary Creagh: I thank the Minister for that reply, but 2018 was an abysmal year for rail travel, with tens of thousands of services cancelled in Yorkshire and across the country. Services in Yorkshire are among the least reliable anywhere in the UK and it is having a huge impact on Wakefield city centre. Will the Minister look again at the Transport Committee's excellent recommendation to enable season ticket holders to have a discount on their season tickets on the worst-performing lines, which at the moment are TransPennine Express

and Northern? Both are heavily used by my constituents, who do not have time to claim for every train service that does not turn up on a daily basis.

Andrew Jones: I am acutely aware that passengers across the north—and, indeed, other parts of our network—did see an unacceptable service in 2018. Those Northern passengers most directly affected received targeted compensation worth about 8%—obviously, far more than the increase that we have just seen. Further compensation funds are available. We are agreeing with Transport for the North about how that money should be spent.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I warmly welcome the decision to extend discounted fares for 16 and 17-year-olds. Four of the five secondary schools in my constituency have no sixth form. We require our students to stay in education until they are 18, and they have to travel by train either north to Kent or to the south coast.

I have always been a big believer in giving it 100%. May I encourage Front Benchers to have that as their long-term aspiration, so that we give a 100% discount on rail fares for 16 and 17-year-olds?

Andrew Jones: That would indeed be a very bold aspiration. Obviously, we want to make sure that we have a viable rail service. If we can offer greater value, we certainly will—that is why we have capped rail fares in line with inflation for the sixth year in a row. We are keen to offer value across the rail network wherever we can.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): Ministers will be aware of how long it takes to get right down to Penzance in my constituency.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): Too long!

Derek Thomas: Too long. They will also be aware that people very much depend on that form of transport. The truth is that average wages across my constituency are about a third of those in the rest of the country. Will the Minister give consideration to whether there can be some fairness for my constituents so that they pay less for travel, given their dependency on the network and the distances they travel?

Andrew Jones: If it is possible to deliver greater value, we will of course look at those opportunities. Part of the Williams review is about rail fares. I will make sure that my hon. Friend's comments are fed over to Mr Williams for his consideration.

Heathrow Third Runway: Highway Vehicles

8. **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): What steps he plans to take to reduce a potential increase in highway vehicle trips resulting from a third runway at Heathrow airport. [908479]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): As the hon. Lady will be aware, the airports national policy statement requires 50% of passengers to use public transport by 2030, rising to 55% by 2040. It also requires 25% fewer staff car trips to work by 2030,

and 50% fewer by 2040. In addition, I expect Heathrow to meet its public pledge of no greater airport-related road traffic.

Ruth Cadbury: The terminal 5 inspector recommended that that expansion should be dependent on additional rail access, and we have seen the consequences locally of that not having happened. The Department for Transport's own figures say that a third runway will put an additional 54,000 vehicles a day on our local road system. Will the Secretary of State make any further expansion at Heathrow conditional on western and southern rail access?

Chris Grayling: I want to go further than that. Western rail access is currently in development and we are in the early stages of preparation for southern rail access. We are also making provision at Old Oak Common for a Chiltern connection into that station that will provide a link into Heathrow. High Speed 2, of course, will arrive at Old Oak Common and deliver an opportunity to connect into Heathrow from a different route. Finally, it is my hope that the Mayor of London will, notwithstanding the financial challenges at Transport for London, deliver the Piccadilly line upgrade, which is so important.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): The terminal 5 planning conditions, set as part of its go-ahead, were that there would be no third runway and that there would be a legal limit of 480,000 flights a year. Now, of course, we are getting a third runway, and last week Heathrow asked—and, I presume, will be granted—permission to go beyond its 480,000-flight cap. Is not the reality that any assurances—legal, ministerial or public pledges from Heathrow—are utterly meaningless?

Chris Grayling: My right hon. Friend has made her point succinctly. She will understand, though, that if an application comes forward from Heathrow to change the current rules, it would be wrong of me as Secretary of State to pass comment one way or the other at the moment.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Secretary of State has mentioned the Piccadilly line upgrade, but he knows that that—and, indeed, Crossrail—is there to cope with existing and future passenger demand, and not Heathrow expansion. Given that we know that Heathrow, as always, will do nothing to cope with the problems that it causes, what will the Government do when there is this massive increase in passengers, a 50% increase in flights and no capacity on those lines to deal with those?

Chris Grayling: Even an expanded Heathrow is forecast to need only 6% of capacity on the Piccadilly line and, as I said a moment ago, we are already moving ahead with western access and starting the process of southern access. I am making provision for a Chiltern route into Old Oak Common, connecting to Heathrow by Crossrail, and HS2 will come to Old Oak Common as part of the first phase of that project. I think we are doing rather a lot to prepare for surface access to Heathrow.

Access for All

10. **Damien Moore (Southport) (Con):** What recent progress his Department has made on implementing the Access for All programme. [908481]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Access for All has delivered step-free, accessible routes at more than 200 stations since it was launched in 2006, and a further 19 stations are currently under construction. To build on that success we have made a further £300 million available to extend the programme, and 300 stations have been nominated for that funding. I expect to announce the successful stations in April.

Damien Moore: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer, and one station to be nominated is Hillside station in my constituency. My hon. Friend highlighted the criteria that will be used, but does she agree that stations such as Hillside, which play host to less frequent sporting events such as the Open at Royal Birkdale, which hosted 235,000 spectators, should be taken into account when these applications are decided upon?

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that Hillside station has indeed been nominated. When preparing for nominations, the industry was asked to include any relevant factors, and Hillside's nomination included details of the Open. Every factor will be given due weight during the ongoing selection process, and all I can say for now is that I hope there will be good news for my hon. Friend and his constituents in April.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): To get from the car park to the south side of Flint station in my constituency involves two footbridges, and that is one of the projects that was nominated in November last year. Will the Minister assure me that access to funds for those projects will be maintained in the current spending review?

Ms Ghani: We have £300 million available at the moment and we have received 300 nominations. All the issues that the right hon. Gentleman has raised will be taken into account. It is important to note that journeys with step-free access have increased from 50% in 2015 to 75% today.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): As the Minister knows, if someone wants to get from one platform at Beeston station to the other, the advice is to take a taxi all the way round, which is wholly unacceptable. I am grateful for her acceptance of that fact, and we also bid for funding. Last year she agreed to come to Beeston station to see it for herself. Can she now assure me that she will certainly come before Easter?

Ms Ghani: My right hon. Friend knows that we have spoken about Beeston on a number of occasions, and I apologise for having failed to visit the station already. I will do my very best to accompany her to Beeston station in the near future.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Will the Minister ensure that the Access for All project is delivered in Northwich station in my constituency, to allow people with mobility problems and disabilities to use it?

Ms Ghani: I cannot provide that assurance right here and now. We had 300 nominations and the decisions will be made in April. If the station was nominated—I do not have the list in front of me—I will ensure that it is considered as efficiently as possible.

Rail Electrification

11. **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Network Rail and train operating companies on plans to extend the electrified rail network. [908482]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): This Government are investing at record levels in our rail network as part of the biggest rail modernisation programme for over a century to provide reliability and capacity. Passengers expect high-quality rail services, and we are committed to electrification where it delivers passenger benefits and value for money. We will also take advantage of state-of-the-art technology to improve services.

Christian Matheson: It strikes me that a lot of official capacity is currently being sucked out of the Department by preparations for a no-deal Brexit, and that is slowing up projects that should be pushing ahead. What progress is being made on plans for electrification of the Chester to Crewe and north Wales line or, if not electrification, on the procurement of the electro-diesel trains that are the next best option?

Andrew Jones: The work on Brexit is not in any way changing the delivery of service improvements across our rail network, and one has only to consider how much is happening across the network to prove that point. We are delivering a £50 million project to upgrade the north Wales railway, including a new signalling system, and rolling stock will be picked up as the franchise is renewed.

17. [908488] **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Passenger numbers on the transpennine route are set to double over the next 20 years, but still it appears that the upgrade is being downgraded. Given that one third of transport spending in England is in London, will the Transport Secretary help to redress the imbalance by matching Labour's commitment to Crossrail for the north?

Andrew Jones: I do not accept the premise of the hon. Gentleman's question. The transpennine route upgrade is a significant project and we are modernising the entire route. We will be investing £2.9 billion in the first phase of this ambitious upgrade, between Manchester, Leeds and York. The work will commence in the spring. It is the biggest single project of rail enhancement in this country during control period 6. It is complementary to the work on Northern Powerhouse Rail, which is also being developed.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Would it not make a lot more sense to electrify the whole of the midland line, rather than stopping at Kettering in Northamptonshire? If that happened, we could save some of the £56 billion that HS2 will cost us, and save about 30 to 40 houses in Derbyshire that are due to be knocked down. All those things could happen if the Minister electrified the midland line, and passengers would get to London 30 minutes quicker—not that I want that—which is one of the promises the Government have made. For God's sake, make a big hole in that £56 billion and electrify the midland line.

Andrew Jones: Well, I can tell the hon. Gentleman that we will not be cancelling HS2, which is a positive project that will generate significant extra capacity right across our network. It is part of a modern, 21st-century rail network. With regard to the midland main line, we do not need to electrify the whole line in order to deliver the journey improvements, and we will see passenger benefits from a brand new fleet of trains from 2022.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Labour's commitment to electrification has been unwavering, yet the Government have pulled electrification projects across the country. Last month we learned that the transpennine route will no longer support future freight, meet journey time ambitions or, without electrification, deliver on reliability either, depending instead on heavy and polluting diesel bi-mode trains—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The former Secretary of State is chuntering animatedly from a sedentary position about a period of time and a mileage—that is to say, about a length of track—but I can assume only that at this stage, albeit in a very amiable and jocular fashion, the right hon. Gentleman is talking to himself. There are some dangers in that.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): What are they, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: Only time will tell.

Rachael Maskell: As I was saying, it is a downgrade of a downgrade, so why will the Minister not listen to the advice of rail experts, which I know the Secretary of State has had, and fully electrify the route in control period 6?

Andrew Jones: That was absolute nonsense. Labour electrified 10 miles of existing network in all the 13 years it was in government. There has been more electrification in the north-west alone under this Government than in all those 13 years, so we will take no lessons from the Labour party on this. With regard to the transpennine upgrade, we are spending £2.9 billion. It is the biggest single project in control period 6, as I explained to the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) only a moment ago. Rather than criticising, Labour Members should be supporting this project, and perhaps asking why they did not do it. We will take no lessons whatsoever from the Labour party, which did nothing at all for our rail network.

Crossrail

12. **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the delay to Crossrail on the London economy. [908483]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the important question of Crossrail. He will know that it is a wholly owned subsidiary of Transport for London, and it is for TfL in the first instance to evaluate the future. Notwithstanding recent hiccups, we feel excited about the potential for the project.

Andrew Rosindell: I thank the Minister for his reply, but he will understand the huge disappointment in Romford, where we were hoping that Crossrail would be coming into action much sooner. At least partly because of the Mayor's poor financial management of TfL, we have to wait a lot longer, so will the Minister assure the House that the new funding package will bring Crossrail to fruition much sooner?

Jesse Norman: As I said, Crossrail is a wholly owned subsidiary of TfL. It would be wrong for me to comment on the way the Mayor has handled TfL's finances—that is a matter for him—but I will say that it is a very important project. As my hon. Friend will be aware, there is a new chief executive, Mr Wild, and he is understandably taking time to review the project fully before he publishes his own views.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Last night, the *Evening Standard* reported that officials from the Department for Transport and TfL were first notified about the Crossrail delays in June 2016. Will the Minister confirm that that is correct?

Jesse Norman: I have not seen the report that the hon. Gentleman describes, but he will know that in July we published a written ministerial statement touching on the question of whether there might be delays. It is striking that the Secretary of State was not notified until the end of August, and there has been some suggestion that TfL was notified before that.

EU Motor Insurance Directive

13. **Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con):** What assessment he has made of the effect of the revised EU motor insurance directive on innovation in the UK motorsport industry. [908484]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): The issue of Vnuk and insurance is very important and my hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise it. Our assessment is perfectly clear: if it is not amended, the proposal has the potential to shut down UK and European motorsport industries. We take it very seriously. Of course, there would be further impacts on innovation throughout the UK automotive industry, and potentially more widely.

Mark Garnier: I am grateful for the Minister's response. From my conversations with the Motorsport Industry Association, I know that it cannot sing the praises of the Department and officials more highly in respect of this incredibly important point. If the motor insurance directive comes into force, not only will it completely destroy the market for the most innovative part of our automotive sector, but during the transition period it may also destroy the UK domestic market. I know that the Minister is doing everything he can to try to sort this situation out, but I ask him to redouble his efforts and work as hard as he can to make sure that we do not lose the crown jewels of our motor industry.

Jesse Norman: I thank my hon. Friend very much for the recognition of the work that my officials and I have been doing on this issue, which we take extremely seriously. Lotus, Williams, McLaren—this country has

a £10 billion motorsport industry. These ill-judged arrangements might put it at risk, and we are determined to do everything we can to prevent that.

Public Transport: Sporting Events

14. **Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab):** If he will hold discussions with the Rail Delivery Group and the Premier League on public transport for people travelling to sporting events. [908485]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): Officials from my Department have met the Premier League, most recently in November, to discuss collaboration between the railway industry and football bodies to improve travel to and from football matches. The Rail Delivery Group is a key partner in that ongoing collaboration.

Dr Allin-Khan: Football fans in this country are often stung when fixtures are rescheduled for TV, meaning that they regularly miss out on the cheapest train tickets. The Premier League, the English Football League and the Rail Delivery Group are all in favour of a fans' fare scheme, but the Department for Transport is dragging its feet. Will the Minister agree to meet me to discuss how we can address this important issue, which affects so many football fans in this country?

Andrew Jones: The joint project involving the Rail Delivery Group, train operators, football bodies, supporters' groups, British Transport police and the DFT has been set up to look into a range of issues around football-related train travel. That work includes the exploration of a flexible ticketing offer for supporters, including for when matches are rescheduled. I am happy to have a conversation with the hon. Lady. I would be interested to hear whether she will condemn the strikes throughout the north on Saturdays, which are affecting football fans' capacity to get to their matches. Let us hear Labour say something on behalf of football fans throughout the north, and not in support of strikers.

Mr Speaker: Having heard the right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) from his seat, we can now have the considerable joy of hearing him on his feet.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Will the Minister look at the responsibilities across his whole Department and other sectors covered by his Department as far as such situations are concerned? Last night, the M1 was closed for four hours, thus preventing all the supporters of Burton Albion from getting to the Etihad stadium. Will there be an inquiry into why it was necessary to close the M1 for four hours on both sides?

Mr Speaker: They missed a lot of goals.

Andrew Jones: My right hon. Friend makes a very valuable point with which I entirely agree. We will look at this matter across the Department.

Topical Questions

T1. [908496] **Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): May I begin by extending the condolences of the whole House to the family of Lee Pomeroy, who was tragically murdered on a train in Surrey last week? I pay tribute to the three members of staff who dealt with the tragic situation and all the British Transport police who responded to it; they all acted with great bravery. While I am talking about bravery, let me also pay tribute to the British Transport police officer who was stabbed in Manchester during the terrorist incident a few days ago.

Liz McInnes: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer and share his sentiments about the terrible attacks on our trains recently.

On 2 January I was at Castleton station in my constituency, watching train cancellation after train cancellation as my constituents were trying to get back to work after the new year break. Does the Secretary of State think that it is fair to hit rail passengers with an above-inflation rise in fares, given the clear decline in punctuality and reliability, and worsening overcrowding on our trains?

Chris Grayling: We have set a limit in line with inflation for the increase in regulated fares. Transport for the North and the Rail North Partnership have additional financial resources from the compensation package provided last summer that they can use on lines that continue to be affected by underperformance if they choose to do so. I would be very happy to see them do that.

T3. [908500] **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): The Minister will be aware that it is illegal for a taxi not to collect someone with a guide dog, yet 42% of taxis still refuse to do this. Will the Government please bring in strict new guidelines to raise awareness throughout the taxi and minicab industry?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): My hon. Friend raises an important issue. For over a decade it has been illegal for taxi and private hire drivers to refuse assistance dogs, and I am clear that they must comply with the law. We cannot risk lowering people's confidence and ability to travel independently. Licensing authorities have the power to stop this happening by training drivers to understand their duties and by prosecuting them when they fail to comply. We are considering the recommendations mentioned by my hon. Friend and will publish a response in due course.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): Owing to undercutting caused by the exclusion of seafarers from equality and minimum wage legislation, UK seafarers only account for about 15% of all seafarer ratings in the UK shipping industry. That is shocking. But now that the Secretary of State has spent £103 million of UK taxpayers' money on these UK ferry contracts, will the

Minister tell us whether any UK seafarers will be employed, and will the crews be protected by UK employment legislation? Yes or no?

Ms Ghani: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman is mistaken and has not heard what the Secretary of State mentioned earlier. No money has yet exchanged hands and it is up to the company how it crews its ships. It is important to note that we are working with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to ensure that we can deliver the national minimum wage for our seafarers.

T8. [908505] **Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): I was alarmed to see the traffic chaos as a result of yet another incident on the A5 at Mancetter island this week caused by an overturned lorry. I have raised this issue before, so it is not an isolated incident. Will the Minister agree to meet me to discuss this precarious junction and look at what more can be done to protect local residents who live alongside it, as well as motorists using it?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): My hon. Friend has been a very tireless campaigner for transport issues in his constituency and I would be delighted to meet him.

T2. [908499] **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): In my constituency, it has been suggested that our regional Mayor—the West of England Combined Authority Mayor—has the power to adopt an underused bit of highway from Highways England to construct an east of Bath park-and-ride, and the council has failed for a long time to find a suitable site. Is it the Minister's understanding that the regional Mayor has these powers, and does he agree that such a use of existing land is an elegant solution?

Jesse Norman: I will resist the temptation to comment in advance on the elegance of the solution, but I think it is a very interesting idea in principle. As the hon. Lady may be aware, it would require the transfer of the road from Highways England and the agreement of the Secretary of State. We would also want to be sure that any changes were consistent with the combined authority's long-term transport plans. Subject to those constraints, we would be very interested to see it.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Neither the police nor the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency has records of foreign-registered vehicles that have been in the UK for more than six months, which means that our roads are more dangerous and there is not equality under the law for British nationals. What are the Government going to do about this issue?

Jesse Norman: As my hon. Friend will be aware, the problem concerns foreign-registered vehicles. For British nationals, there is an equality under the law. I recognise that there is concern about this issue. He knows that we seek vigorously to apply road traffic legislation where we can. This is for the police, in the first instance. In some cases, local authorities use international debt recovery agents. However, I recognise the problem that he describes.

T4. [908501] **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What was the total cost of Operation Brock, and will the Minister relay the lessons learned?

Chris Grayling: I do not have the costs immediately to hand. However, the point about Operation Brock is that it is designed to replace Operation Stack and provide a solution well into the early 2020s in the case of disruption at the channel ports, which I do not want to see. To do the work on the M20 and the work that has happened on the M26, the cost is in the low tens of millions of pounds, but I will be able to give the hon. Gentleman an exact number. It is really important that we do not see a repeat of the disruption of 2015 in Kent.

Ms Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Knutsford commuters have been repeatedly promised an upgrade to the Knutsford to Manchester line to two trains an hour. However, after excuses and procrastination, that is now not happening at the time it was meant to happen. It is unacceptable to have such an unreliable and irregular service for such a busy part of the country. Will the Secretary of State intervene, speak to Northern, speak to Network Rail, and get this promise fulfilled?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (**Andrew Jones**): I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend that we want to see reliable services offering high capacity. She speaks well on behalf of her constituency. I will of course look into the matter and get back to her.

T5. [908502] **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The *Financial Times* reports that the EU has warned the owner of British Airways, IAG, that its plans to allow flights to continue in and around Europe in the event of no deal are not acceptable. When asked how BA plans to ensure that its plans are acceptable, its chief executive replied, "Magic". Given the Cabinet Secretary's repeated assurances that these negotiations are in hand, what more serious assessment can the Secretary of State give us that this will be resolved?

Chris Grayling: This is really an issue for the Spanish and Irish Governments; it does not affect British Airways at all, as it will be covered by the transitional arrangements as well as by the international agreements we have in place. It is an issue for Iberia and for Aer Lingus, which will clearly want to carry on flying within the European Union.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I declare my interest as a member of Kettering Borough Council. What further progress is being made by the roads Minister and his team towards tabling the statutory instrument to facilitate the decriminalisation of parking in Kettering?

Jesse Norman: As my hon. Friend will know, we have discussed this at some considerable length over a long period. The matter currently rests with discussions with Northamptonshire County Council, but we are pushing ahead as fast as we can on it.

T6. [908503] **Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): Following December's fiasco at Gatwick airport, the Secretary of State displayed his characteristic Midas touch when he said on Monday:

"The Government are taking action to ensure that passengers can have confidence that their journeys will not be disrupted in future".—[*Official Report*, 7 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 101.]

Twenty-four hours later, Heathrow passengers found themselves having their flights suspended following another drone sighting. When can passengers expect this promised action to have the desired effect?

Chris Grayling: First, let us be clear: there is no perfect, off-the-shelf system available to airports that will simply deal with this problem overnight. I pay tribute to those in the police and the military, and across government, who responded so quickly to the Heathrow problem, ensuring that the runway was closed for a very short length of time, and to the team at Heathrow who did the same.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Now that the consultation on the High Speed 2 working draft environmental statement has closed, has the Minister had any indication of when HS2 Ltd will publish its response? Can she ensure that every submission will be given careful consideration?

Ms Ghani: I can indeed assure my hon. Friend that all submissions will be given appropriate consideration, and the report will be published in due course.

Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): Currently just one out of 10 tube stations in Kensington is step-free. That is unacceptable. The council and London's deputy mayor for transport tell us we must rely on developer funding to pay for it, which will never be enough, and in some instances they suggest funding just one platform in one direction, which is insulting. Just 50 stations out of 270 are step-free in the capital—the worst record in Europe. Will the Minister review Government funding to address the severe lack of inclusivity across our capital's transport system, which is a national disgrace?

Ms Ghani: I believe that the hon. Lady is talking about the underground, which is the responsibility of the Mayor. Transport in London is devolved to the Mayor and delivered by Transport for London. It is for the Mayor to determine how to increase step-free access at underground stations. If the hon. Lady is embarrassed about the situation, I suggest she takes this case straight back to the Labour Mayor of London.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): Heathrow flight paths go over the most densely populated part of our country—London communities. Drones are a clear public safety risk, as things stand. Does the Secretary of State agree that we should review the decision to further expand Heathrow and have more flights over more communities, on public safety grounds?

Chris Grayling: I am afraid I do not agree with my right hon. Friend. Airports in this country and around the world are now working intensively to ensure they can deliver technology that will deal with this issue. That needs to be done long before we ever get to the point of expanding Heathrow airport.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): How much additional funding will the Department require in the 2019-20 financial year in the event of no deal, and has the Treasury approved that?

Chris Grayling: We have an allocation of funding for next year, but almost all our expenditure has taken place within the current year—it is in the region of £70 million. That is the prime amount we are spending. In the next financial year, if we require some of the contingency capacity to which I have committed, there will be a cost. As the House is aware, the maximum that we have contracted for is £103 million.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Can the Secretary of State give us an update on the midland main line delayed franchise? As he knows, I am very grateful for the conversation we have had. Stagecoach has taken out £35 million of profit, and it appears to be running down an otherwise excellent system. Can he tell us when the franchise will be awarded?

Chris Grayling: The slight delay to the issuing of the new franchise is for complex reasons related to rail pensions. I have noted the issues that my right hon. Friend has raised. I am concerned about it. It would be unacceptable for any current franchisee to run down the franchise in the run-up to renewal, and a strong message is being sent to the company that, if that is happening, it has to stop right now.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): It is not clear to me what the unforeseeable emergency was that allowed the Secretary of State to award the contract to Seaborne Freight outside the rules. Did he receive explicit legal advice about that, and if so, will he consider publishing it?

Chris Grayling: We are confident that this was a proper procurement process, handled by the procurement team in my Department in the normal way.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Finally—what a difficult choice. I call Huw Merriman.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I'll buy my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) a cup of tea in a minute.

Will the roads Minister meet me to discuss how we can transfer a section of the A21 through Hurst Green from the hopeless Highways England to East Sussex County Council, before more of my constituents end up in hospital?

Mr Speaker: I do wish the hon. Gentleman would wear his Arsenal tie a bit more often.

Jesse Norman: I will not comment on that sartorial choice. Of course I completely disagree with my hon. Friend's description of Highways England, but I would be delighted to meet him.

Justine Greening *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Yes, I will take a point of order, which I think is of some salience.

Justine Greening: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In relation to the debate we are about to have, the Government have said that they have already accepted some amendments. That is a concern, because they seem to directly contradict the withdrawal agreement that this House is debating whether to approve. In itself, it is a legal document that has been negotiated and agreed with the European Union and 27 member states, but, again, the Government seem to have accepted amendments I am not sure you have yet selected for debate. Can you tell me whether that is in order?

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the right hon. Lady for her point of order. It is important that people, within this Chamber and outside, know the procedure and know the facts. No amendments have been accepted by anyone to date for one very simple and compelling reason: no amendments have yet been selected by the occupant of the Chair. Moreover, no amendments can be selected by the Speaker until the last day of the debate, which is to say next Tuesday, as required by the Order of the House of 4 December. Some people it seems—certainly not the right hon. Lady—really do need to keep up.

Business of the House

10.40 am

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

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

MONDAY 14 JANUARY—Continuation of debate on section 13(1)(B) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018.

TUESDAY 15 JANUARY—Conclusion of debate on section 13(1)(B) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018.

WEDNESDAY 16 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill.

THURSDAY 17 JANUARY—Debate on a motion on mental health first aid in the workplace, followed by debate on a motion on children's social care in England. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 18 JANUARY—The House will not be sitting.

I would like to follow the remarks made by a number of Members this week and offer my condolences following the sad passing of Lord Ashdown and Lord Foster, two much-loved and popular figures who gave so much to politics and to their parties. Their families are in our thoughts.

I know Members will have been as shocked and appalled as I was to witness the abuse levelled at our colleague, my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry). I hope we can start this new year in Parliament by setting a good example for others to follow.

Finally, I hope all hon. Members had a calm and restful break over Christmas. I would like to wish everyone a happy and productive new year.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the business, albeit just one week's. I join her in paying tribute to Lord Ashdown and Lord Foster, who were both very great servants of this House. I, too, want to express our solidarity with the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry). She should never have been treated and abused in that way while going about her lawful business. Other hon. Members are also suffering these difficulties. They are doing so quietly because there are cases ongoing.

May we have a date for an Opposition day debate please? We have not had one since 13 November. The Leader of the House helpfully gave us the Easter recess dates. She knows what I am going to ask: when are the May dates? The House needs to plan.

This is a Government without a majority. They are in crisis and in denial about the crisis. The Government have faced two defeats in one week, breaking records. This is the first Government to be defeated on a Finance Bill since 1978. Our constituencies, businesses, the science community, the NHS, security and this House have made it clear that the Government should rule out a no-deal Brexit, yet the Government have refused to do so.

In fact, the Government are making plans for no deal. That is why this House, elected by our constituents, cannot rely on Government mantras or a Cabinet who discuss the fantasies of 50-year-old swingers and arrange a no-deal scenario with 89 lorries when 10,000 lorries use the channel ports, and when contracts are being given out for services that do not exist. A concerned House voted for an amendment to ensure the Government come back within three sitting days, because they cannot be trusted.

How many times over the years have we heard it said in this place, "No, this can't be done"—"No, women can't have the vote", "No, women can't be on the Floor of the Chamber. They have to be up in the Gallery", "No, the Fixed-term Parliaments Act can't be altered"? In fact, it can be done. A well-respected former Attorney General tabled an amendment and Parliament rose up, because the evidence was clear.

In December, the Government agreed and tabled a motion, and the vote was agreed for 11 December, but the Government pulled the vote. The Government said no to this House, no to a vote, and treated a democratically elected Parliament with contempt while themselves being in contempt. Will the Leader of the House categorically confirm today that the meaningful vote will take place on Tuesday 15 January?

There are no new amendments, legal or otherwise, to the agreement. It is the same old agreement. Nothing has changed, other than a written statement by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster yesterday announcing the publication of a policy paper on UK Government commitments to Northern Ireland—warm words and reassurances, but still the same old agreement. The right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) has called this "cosmetic" and "meaningless". Can the Leader of the House say whether a new agreement will be tabled before Tuesday, or will the House be voting on the same old agreement?

On Monday, the House debated the fifth report of the Committee on Standards. My right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) intervened on the Leader of the House and asked what she meant when she said that the purpose of the review

"will be...to address outstanding areas, such as how to incorporate into the scheme visitors to constituency offices".—[*Official Report*, 7 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 125.]

Several colleagues have approached me and said they are unclear what she meant. Will she explain, in a letter to all Members, what that means, and will she ensure that all Members are consulted?

Later that day, the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) made a point of order to clarify another matter. He said that

"if there is no order of the House that a debate must end at a particular time, and if Members are standing at the moment of interruption, then that debate should continue at another time, when time becomes available".

Madam Deputy Speaker said:

"I took the decision that the Question ought to be put to the House".—[*Official Report*, 7 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 135.]

I do not recall the Leader of the House challenging the Chair on the ruling. Can the Leader of the House respond to all the questions that I and other Members might have asked if the debate had continued and tell us when she will respond?

[Valerie Vaz]

On a slightly different matter, will the Leader of the House look at the delays in the personal independence payment appeals? A constituent of mine sent in an appeal in July 2018. My constituents are still waiting for an appeal date. It seems that the Department for Work and Pensions has missed all evidence submission deadlines, and my constituents have been told they will have to wait 27 weeks for an appeal. This is unacceptable and is affecting the most vulnerable.

On a happier note—well, I am not sure about that, but it was a significant day—yesterday saw the official launch of the MPs' guide to procedure. I was pleased to see that the Chair of the Procedure Committee was there, along with the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) and my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel). Four hundred copies have been given out. That shows what the House staff can do and their tremendous talent. Every single page, including the design, layout, words and review, was done in-house. We should nurture that talent in-house and thank everybody who took part—all their names are on the inside cover. In particular, I should mention those you mentioned in your foreword to the guide, Mr Speaker: John Benger, Mark Hutton and, of course, Joanna Dodd, who had the unenviable task of editing the whole thing. It is a very good tome.

May I add my congratulations to the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) and the hon. Member for South West Devon (Sir Gary Streeter) on their knighthoods, and that great public servant, Roy Stone, who served this House so well? In particular, I should also congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Tynemouth (Sir Alan Campbell). I have always called him Sir Alan!

Sadly, next week will be the last in which Fiona Channon will serve the House. She has been here since 1999 and has had roles in the Estates Team and the Committee Office. She has always undertaken her duties with efficiency and courtesy and has been incredibly professional serving this House so well. She will be missed. She is only down the corridor in the House of Lords, but I hope she will come back. Fiona, thank you very much for everything you have done to help us function.

Andrea Leadsom: I thank the hon. Lady for the warm gratitude that she showed to those who work so hard in this House. I absolutely share that, and I particularly point to Fiona Channon, who has done so much in this place, and to Sir Roy Stone, who has done so much in the Whips Office for a very long time.

The hon. Lady asks when there will be an Opposition day debate. As she will appreciate, there is a lot of important business at the moment, but the Government will, of course, abide by our obligations to provide Opposition days. I note her point about the May recess, but I am glad that she acknowledges that we have just announced an agreed Easter recess.

The hon. Lady asks if we will rule out a no-deal Brexit. As she will appreciate, that is the legal default position. Members of the House have the opportunity next Tuesday to vote for a deal that would rule out no Brexit, and I encourage them to take that opportunity. She asks me to confirm that, as I have just announced,

the meaningful vote will take place on Tuesday 15 January, and I refer her to the business of the House that I have just read out.

The hon. Lady asks about the point of order that was raised concerning visitors to constituency offices. She was on the working group on the complaints procedure, so she knows full well—I am surprised that she is asking me—what the group decided about the question of how to deal with complaints from people who come to our constituency offices, sometimes with very grave problems.

We, as Members of Parliament, always seek to help our constituents, but sometimes we cannot do so for various complex reasons, as all hon. and right hon. Members will know, and constituents sometimes take against the result. The working group, which the hon. Lady was a part of—and you, Mr Speaker; we had regular conversations about this—decided that in order for the complaints procedure to get up and running for six months, we would deal at a later point with the complexities of people with various mental health issues and grievances that might not be valid in a complaints procedure sense. We agreed in the House that the question of how, if at all, we could deal with the complaints of constituents in our constituency offices—either to our constituency staff, or to us, as Members—would be looked at in the six-month review of the complaints scheme, which kicks off on 21 January. I will, of course, be delighted to write to all hon. and right hon. Members on that point, for clarity.

On the hon. Lady's point about the talking out of a vote the other evening on the Standards Committee report, I can absolutely reassure her that both the Member who raised the point of order and the actions of the Deputy Speaker were entirely in order. You might want to confirm that, Mr Speaker, but that is a matter for you. The advice I have taken is that both were entirely in order.

With regard to PIP, if the hon. Lady wants to write to me, I will of course take up her serious constituency matter. I point out that this Government have ensured that there has been an £8 billion increase in real terms since 2010 in the amount of money that we spend on supporting people with disabilities.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): As many people may have noticed, I have not been in this Chamber as much as I might have liked over the last three months. As the House will know, I was acquitted just yesterday in Southwark Crown court of all charges relating to the 2015 general election. I know that business questions are generally a call for debate, but in respect of election law we fundamentally need legislative change. In this area, it is surely unacceptable that innocent people are dragged through the courts, at enormous expense to the public purse, on the back of abstract law.

My case went through a variety of court processes prior to trial. In March, the Appeal Court, in front of the Lord Chief Justice, agreed with the long-held principle that election expenses can only be so if authorised by a candidate or agent. The Supreme Court, in July last year, overturned that view to one of mere use, whether authorised or not.

The opportunity for ne'er-do-wells to get involved in election processes and cause prosecutions is surely obvious. Everyone acknowledges that there are huge grey areas

between the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000—it deals with what is usually called the national spend—and the Representation of the People Act 1983, which covers local spend. Electoral Commission guidance is confused and sketchy. I would not want anybody in this House, from either side, to go through what I have been through over the last three years. Surely, it is in the interests of the House and all Members that we have clear and unambiguous law, and I hope that a campaign for clarity in this area will be supported across the House.

Andrea Leadsom: Can I say to my hon. Friend that I am delighted for him that he has been fully acquitted? I congratulate him on that. My heart goes out to him over the difficult time he has had in recent years in clearing his name. I think all hon. Members across the House would recognise, on a non-partisan basis, what a difficult time he has been through. It is fantastic that he has been found not guilty of any offence.

It has become apparent from broader legal proceedings that election law on spending in 2015 was fragmented and unclear, with even the courts divided on the interpretation of the law. The Government will take steps, working alongside the Electoral Commission, to ensure there is a clearer and more transparent framework in future elections. It is in everybody's interests that we get this right, and the Government are committed to protecting and strengthening electoral integrity.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. I join the tributes to Lord Ashdown and Lord Foster, congratulate Sir Roy Stone on his well-deserved honour and wish Fiona Channon all the best.

Yesterday was truly appalling and embarrassing. For the second business week in a row, Government Members were reduced to nothing more than a braying mob, finding conspiracy in car stickers. Once again, we found the Leader of the House centre stage as the principal cheerleader, egging her colleagues on in that unedifying spectacle. This has to stop, Mr Speaker, and the Conservatives must start to respect the authority of the House and the authority of your office.

This is utterly appalling hypocrisy. The Government have done their level best to curtail debate and withhold information from the House. They were even compelled by the courts to allow us to have a vote on leaving the European Union, and only successive votes of the House got them to reveal vital information about their Brexit deal. They have been found in contempt of Parliament. It is absolutely right that they are stopped.

Do you know what, Mr Speaker? This is called taking back control—a concept the Government might be a little familiar with. The House must have its collective view known, and you, Mr Speaker, are to be commended for ensuring that the view of the House will always come first. The Government had better get used to it, because Parliament is increasingly asserting itself. As this chaotic Government continue spectacularly to collapse, this House and its membership will pick up the slack. If the Government want Government versus Parliament, they will be on the losing side, because we are now in the majority.

There is no business scheduled for a week on Monday, the day the Government are now obliged to come back with an alternative to the Prime Minister's deal. Will the Leader of the House confirm that that is exactly what they will do? Will they come back and explain the options, and is she actively considering what those options are? This feels a little like the end of Tory days. It is unusual for a country to witness such a chaotic and spectacularly shambolic collapse of a Government. Perhaps we can have a debate—we might call it a vote of confidence—so that this country can be shot of this chaotic Government once and for all.

Andrea Leadsom: I genuinely value the hon. Gentleman's views. I listened to him very carefully, and I agree with him that taking back control is absolutely essential. The fatal flaw with his assertion is that what happened yesterday was not Parliament taking back control. What happened yesterday and in the days running up to it was that a number of hon. Members tried to table amendments to yesterday's business of the House motion. *[Interruption.]* A number of them, on both sides of the House, tried to put forward amendments to the business motion. The Table Office said the motion was unamendable and undebatable. *[Interruption.]* An hon. Gentleman shouts from a sedentary position, "How do you know?" I know that the Table Office turned Members away, saying that the motion was unamendable and undebatable.

If the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire looks carefully at "Erskine May", he will see that "forthwith" means unamendable and undebatable. As for his point about Parliament taking back control, the issue is that the role of the Chair is to uphold the rules that Parliament has made for itself, not to change those rules arbitrarily. So yesterday was not an example of Parliament taking back control, but an example of a differentiation between the Members who were told that the motion was unamendable and undebatable, and those who were told differently.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether the Government would accept the Grieve amendment; of course the Government will do so. The Prime Minister has shown her willingness always to return to the House at the first possible opportunity if there is anything to report in relation to our Brexit deal, and we will continue to do so.

Let me finally deal with the hon. Gentleman's point about "no confidence". As I have said time and again, should this House have no confidence and should the official Opposition put an issue of no confidence to the House under the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, the Government will provide time for it to be debated, as is the convention. The official Opposition have not chosen to do so, and therefore this House has confidence in Her Majesty's Government.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I have looked forward to hearing from colleagues who have a chance to participate in the business question—as, of course, the Leader of the House has not merely the opportunity but the obligation to do—so I will content myself simply with saying this.

There was nothing arbitrary about the conduct of the Chair yesterday. This Speaker is well aware of how to go about the business of chairing the proceedings of the

[Mr Speaker]

House, because he has been doing so for nine and a half years. I hope that colleagues will understand when I say that I require no lessons or lectures from others about how to discharge my obligations to Parliament and in support of the right of Back-Bench parliamentarians. I have been doing it and continuing to do it, and I will go on doing it, no matter how much abuse I get from whatever quarter. It is water off a duck's back as far as I am concerned.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Last night in Westminster Hall, during a debate about the armed forces, a Minister put the case very eloquently for more spending on defence, not just because of the threat that this country faces, but because of the wider benefits to society of our armed forces. Would it be possible for us to have such a debate in Government time, so that we could really make the case for investment in our armed forces?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sympathetic to my hon. Friend. He will be aware that in the Budget the Chancellor pledged an extra £1 billion for the Ministry of Defence over the next two years. Defence questions will take place on Monday, and I encourage him to raise the matter then.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the two Backbench Business Committee debates next Thursday. That is very welcome, given that both debates have been pulled on previous days because of the overrunning of other business.

My I give notice that the Committee has received an application for a debate on Holocaust Memorial Day? If any time could be found during the week beginning 21 January so that we could mark that day, the Committee would be most grateful.

Finally, let me issue a little advertisement. The Backbench Business Committee—in collaboration, of course, with the Liaison Committee—is inviting applications for a departmental estimates day debate. The date is yet to be determined, but it will have to be prior to 18 March.

Andrea Leadsom: As ever, I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving a heads-up of his Backbench Business Committee requests. I will certainly take them away and look at them carefully.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The present is formed by what we know, and the future is shaped by what we learn. In that spirit the Workers' Educational Association reaches 50,000 people a year through a network of branches and an army of volunteers. It teaches everything from architecture to arithmetic and from computer skills to competence in English, and yet, alarmingly, it now faces a 28% cut in its core funding. You, Mr Speaker, will doubtless be familiar with the words of the Commission on Adult Education from 1919:

"Adult education is a permanent national necessity, an inseparable aspect of citizenship, and therefore should be both universal and lifelong".

Is this generation to forget what its forefathers knew: whatever disadvantage people face, they deserve the chance to bask in the light of learning?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly agree with my right hon. Friend about the importance of learning. I am not aware of the organisation he mentions, but I am sure he will, in his usual way, seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise the issue directly with Ministers.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Can we share some understanding for the Leader of the House, who is obviously struggling a little bit at having been defeated in yesterday's vote? It is sometimes very difficult when one loses a vote, and we really should show some appreciation for how she is struggling to reconcile herself with being in that losing position.

Perhaps the Leader of the House, however, can confirm that she is keeping space free on Monday 21 January, for after the Prime Minister's proposals have been defeated, so that the House will be able to debate what comes next. She would not want to fail to comply with the instructions of the House, albeit she is a bit sore at having lost on that particular point. Finally, can she confirm, excellently, that she will also be publishing the advice her officials are giving her about Monday 21 January since she was entreating the House and the Speaker to publish all the advice that is given to him?

Andrea Leadsom: I am slightly disappointed at the hon. Gentleman for helpfully mansplaining my job to me. I am perfectly able to carry out my job, and I have already answered the question put by the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) by saying that the Prime Minister will, of course, abide by the terms of the Grieve amendment.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): May I ask the Leader of the House to consider giving legislative time for the introduction of a housing ombudsman? I and a number of other Members are having problems with cowboy builders, particularly a building firm called Southworth Construction in my constituency, which is building substandard homes. A number of companies headed up by similar directorships have folded, and the situation is causing great concern to not only my constituents, but those of other Members.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a great champion for her constituency, and I am aware that many Members are concerned about the quality of house building. She will be aware that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is looking carefully at this issue and what more can be done, but I absolutely applaud her for raising the matter in the Chamber. I encourage her to perhaps seek a Westminster Hall debate so that other hon. Members can join in with the conversation about what more needs to be done.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Jayden Moodie was a 14-year-old little boy who was mown down by thugs in my constituency on Tuesday night and then stabbed to death. He is the sixth child that my community has had to bury in the last 18 months; many more have been stabbed or attacked with guns in my constituency. I know that the Leader of the House will understand the concern that I and my hon. Friends the

Members for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) and for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer) share about policing and the importance of police resources, but we also want to prevent these instances, and too many of the histories of these young people involve exclusion from mainstream schooling. Too many of our young people are being written off. The Government announced last March that they were doing a review into exclusion, so may we have an urgent update on that review and on what is being done to put proper support into helping these young people to save their potential, rather than seeing more families having to bury children because of youth violence?

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady that we have to do everything that we possibly can to stop young people getting into this life of danger to themselves and to others around them. She will be aware that I have already given two days of full debate on what more we can do in the area of prevention. We also have Home Office questions on 21 January, and I encourage her to raise this matter then. She will be aware that the Government have introduced our serious violence taskforce and that we are committing hundreds of millions of pounds to community projects that seek specifically to get young people out of those directions that lead to a life of knife crime, and potential death to themselves or their colleagues. We need to do everything we possibly can, and the Government are absolutely committed to this.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): World Cancer Day is on 4 February, and I am delighted that you, Mr Speaker, and the Lord Speaker have kindly agreed to the request to illuminate the Palace of Westminster in pink to mark that day. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Elaine Monro from Selkirk in my constituency, the Cancer Research UK volunteer who suggested that proposal? Can we also find time for a debate to look into the causes of cancer and how we can address them?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in commending Elaine for her excellent idea. Fighting cancer is a top priority for the Government, and survival rates are at a record high. There are around 7,000 people alive today who would not have been if mortality rates had stayed the same as they were in 2010, but there is much more we can do. Our 10-year plan for the NHS will radically overhaul early detection and boost research and innovation, so I think we are in a good place. There is more to do, but we are committed to eradicating the terrible problem of cancer.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Further to the comments from my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), and previously from my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer), Jayden Moodie's murder has shocked us all. Notwithstanding the other important issues we are discussing at the moment, I think the country would expect us to reflect on what we are going to do about the fact that a 14-year-old boy has been brutally murdered on our streets. He had just moved from my constituency to Walthamstow. We can be outraged and shocked, as we all are, but what are we going to do about this? What is this Parliament going to do about it? We can all say that this or that should happen, and I know that the Leader

of the House shares this concern—she has mentioned the serious violence taskforce and the Government's strategy—but surely the Home Secretary should be coming to the House on a regular basis to update us on what is happening, and on what is and is not working. Nobody wants to see this happen again. We cannot rewind the clock, but we owe it to Jayden Moodie and to all the other victims, and their families and communities, to show that we know what is going on, that we care, and that we are going to work with them to do as much as we can to stop this.

Andrea Leadsom: Again, I totally agree. We owe it to Jayden's family to do everything we possibly can. I can outline some of the specific actions that the Government are taking. There is a £200 million youth endowment fund to provide support to children and young people who are at risk from a life in the world of knife crime, gangs and drugs, to try to stop that. There will be £22 million over the next two years for a new early intervention youth fund to support youth groups and communities in their attempts at early intervention and prevention. There will be more than £1 million for the anti-knife crime community fund to help communities themselves to tackle knife crime. There are youth violence intervention programmes such as Red Thread in London—it is expanding to include Birmingham and Nottingham—and some of those projects go into hospitals after young people have been attacked with knives to try to persuade them at the bedside to choose a different path. We have also been carrying out the #knifefree campaign, and the police have Operation Sceptre, which is looking at a proposal for knife amnesties. So the Government are doing a lot, but I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman that we owe this to Jayden's family, and to all the families of the many people who are suffering from this appalling spike in knife crime, which is absolutely unacceptable.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): May we have a debate in Government time on borrowing by local councils? One only has to read *The Times* today—I am sure that the Leader of the House has—to see that it is getting out of control. Taunton Deane Borough Council has borrowed £16 million to build a spec hotel on a derelict site, which is a potential disaster for the taxpayers of my constituency and neighbouring constituencies, and the council leader is far too close to the developers. We need a proper instruction from central Government about the borrowing that councils can use to buy spec developments, so may we have time in this place to discuss the matter?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an issue that is clearly of great concern to him. I recommend that he raises the matter in a written parliamentary question to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ask about the specifics of the legitimacy of that project.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Following the questions from my hon. Friends the Members for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), the murder of Jayden Moody two nights ago in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow, although close to the boundary with my constituency, marks a new low in the wave of violent crime, and knife crime in particular, that has swept

[John Cryer]

across London and other parts of Britain. The problem is wide and deep. It seems to be getting worse, and the resources are simply not there to deal with it—that view is shared across the House, not just by Opposition Members. Under these circumstances, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling said, the Home Secretary and junior Home Office Ministers should be regularly asking the Speaker whether they can make statements to update the House on what is happening and to allow us to question the Executive.

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to all the hon. Members who are raising, as they often do, this appalling problem of the rise in knife crime, which is incredibly concerning. I will not repeat the answer that I gave to the hon. Gentleman's colleagues, but we also have the Offensive Weapons Bill, which seeks to make it more difficult for young people to obtain knives online and so on. I encourage hon. Members to seek a Backbench Business debate or a Westminster Hall debate before such time as I can offer more parliamentary time. I have given two days of debate to the matter, and we have Home Office questions on Monday 21 January, so the hon. Gentleman may want to raise the matter directly with Ministers then.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): May we have a debate on the importance of academic freedom? Universities are about the free and frank exchange of ideas, even if they are unfashionable and unpopular. Is it not wholly unacceptable to suggest that a respected academic such as John Finnis, emeritus professor of law and legal philosophy, who has taught at the University of Oxford for some 40 years, should be removed from office simply for holding traditional Catholic views? Is that not the opposite of diversity and open, robust debate?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important point. It is essential that young people at university learn how to engage in robust debate and to challenge views with which they may not agree. The solution is not to silence those who make them. The Government said in our response to the Joint Committee on Human Rights' report that we have concerns about the culture in universities in relation to free speech, and we made it clear that all

"education is a place where students should be exposed to a range of ideas, including those that may be controversial and unpopular—and where they learn to think critically and challenge those who they disagree with, not shut them down."

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I congratulate Sir Roy Stone on his knighthood.

Could time be found for a debate on the urgent matter of the incarcerated Kurdish MP and former mayor, Leyla Güven, who today entered her 64th day of hunger strike in protest at the continued isolated imprisonment of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan? Members of the Kurdish community in Wales, including Ilhan Sis of Newport, are among 200 Kurds worldwide undertaking hunger strikes in solidarity. Ilhan is currently in his 25th day of fasting. We should send a clear message of support to fellow democratically elected representatives who have been arrested and imprisoned for the very act of representing their people.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise that issue here. It is vital that all those who seek to represent their communities in a legitimate and law-abiding way should be free to do so. She will be aware that we have Foreign Office questions on Tuesday 22 January, so I encourage her to raise the matter then.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Can we have a debate about traditional events such as the burning of the clavier? This Friday I will be joining thousands of others in Burghead to watch clavier king Dan Ralph and his crew carry a barrel of burning wood and tar through the village up to Doorie hill, where it will then burn out, to celebrate new year. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Dan Ralph on his 31st year as clavier king, and in congratulating everyone involved in keeping this ancient tradition alive?

Andrea Leadsom: Fantastic. My hon. Friend, as ever, raises what sounds like a superb event in his constituency. I certainly hope that clavier king Dan Ralph continues to attend for many years to come.

The Government fully recognise the contribution that the UK's oral traditions, social practices and festive events make to the country's cultural fabric, and we continue to encourage communities to celebrate these practices and continue them for future generations.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I listened very closely to the Leader of the House when she said that the Prime Minister will abide by the result of yesterday's vote. The Leader of the House did not categorically guarantee that that means her Government will schedule the next motion for Monday 21 January after the Government lose the meaningful vote next Tuesday, as we anticipate. Could she do that? Will she also confirm where and when she will lodge copies of the advice she receives from officials on these matters, as she also indicated in a previous answer?

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely reassure the hon. Lady that my advice was that the amendment selected yesterday would not be in order and would not be selectable. That is the advice I received, and I hope that is very clear. With regard to whether the Government will abide by the Grieve amendment, the Government will abide by the Grieve amendment, and I hope that is now entirely clear.

Mr Speaker: Order. The responsibility for the selection of amendments—I say this not just for Members of the House but for those attending to our proceedings—is, of course, a matter for the Chair. It is a matter for the representative and champion of Parliament; it is not a matter for a representative of the Executive branch, who is the Executive's representative in the Chamber of the House of Commons. I will do my job, and other people can seek to do theirs.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Before Christmas I raised the serious concern about the escalation of aggravated burglaries in my constituency. These are organised gangs of thugs who break into people's houses when they are home, beat them up and steal their goods, and they steal their address books so that they can move on to the next house. Unfortunately, this has escalated over Christmas and new year, and I understand

from colleagues on both sides of the House that it is happening in other constituencies, too. Can we have a debate in Government time on how we challenge aggravated burglaries and on how we support the police in taking action so that we bring these criminals to justice and imprison them, as they deserve?

Andrea Leadsom: I share every one of my hon. Friend's concerns about this matter. It is horrendous for anybody who has been burgled. I have a constituent who was burgled recently and found it absolutely traumatising, so he is right to raise this serious issue. We have Home Office questions on 21 January, or he might want to seek an Adjournment debate to discuss the particular problem for his constituents.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I surprise the Leader of the House by telling her that in May 2019 I hope to celebrate 40 years in the House? In all those years I do not remember a worse atmosphere in the House. There is something deeply wrong with how we are talking and communicating with each other, and stress at work is not a good thing wherever we work.

I would like an early debate, and I would like the Leader of the House to take the lead. I look at her and realise that she has a really tough job. I have known Leaders of the House for whom the job has been a doddle—their Government had a majority and they got their legislation with no problem, and they often had a very easy Speaker who did everything the Executive told him or her to do.

The fact is that the Leader of the House has a tough job. She has no majority and she is losing votes, which is very stressful. I do care about her, and I worry about her. Sometimes people lash out when they are under stress, but she has a responsibility to do something about how we treat each other in this House. Let us take the initiative and have a debate, which she could lead, to start giving an example to people out there that we can treat each other decently and positively. Will she please take a lead on that?

Andrea Leadsom: I am really grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what he said and the way he said it. He is absolutely right that in this place we do need to treat one another with courtesy and respect. Every Member who comes here is elected by their constituents to represent them, so it cannot be right that any of us should seek to control any other one of us, but at the same time we do have a shared desire for Parliament to be a good role model. I will think carefully about the hon. Gentleman's words and I will absolutely never flounce again; he has my undertaking.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Later this year, there is the triennial replenishment of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. That is an incredibly important fund, which has contributed to the reduction of deaths on a wide scale across the world. May we have a debate on the importance of the fund, especially as some of the progress is stalling, not because of lack of work, but because of resistance to drugs, for instance in the case of malaria?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an incredibly important point and I am extremely sympathetic to it. Eradicating TB, malaria and the problem of HIV/AIDS

is absolutely vital for the sake of our world. I would encourage him to seek a debate, perhaps in Westminster Hall, and I will consider whether we can give Government time to such a debate.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): The Leader of the House is no doubt aware that Josep Costa attended Parliament this week as the Deputy Speaker of the Catalan Parliament, and met the Deputy Speaker of this House, the right hon. Member for Chorley (Sir Lindsay Hoyle). Catalan politicians, and indeed the former Speaker of the Catalan Parliament, are facing trial in Spain imminently for supporting the manifesto of their properly elected Government and respecting the will of their own Parliament. I am sure that no one in this House would want our Speaker placed in a similar position for any potential misdemeanours, but will the Leader of the House provide Government time to allow us to debate the situation in Catalonia, and for other Members to express their anger at some of the situations that properly elected politicians have to face in their own country?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. Spain is a key ally. They are a very strong democracy and it is right that they, as they do, abide by their own laws at all times. Nevertheless, the hon. Gentleman raises an important point. He may well wish to seek an Adjournment debate, or to ask a question at Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs questions on 22 January.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): May we have a statement from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government about ongoing issues to do with conduct by some members of Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council? Following my Adjournment debate on Sandwell last year, many issues are still outstanding in respect of the standards and conduct of some councillors within that authority. Only last weekend, *The Times* reported an email exchange between the leader of the council and West Midlands police, where Councillor Steve Eling called for the immediate arrest of a blogger who had criticised him and the council and stated that, if that individual was not arrested, the police would be in contempt and it would be a matter for the Home Secretary. Will the Leader of the House find time for a Minister from the Department to come to the House to explain what the Government will do to help my constituents in Rowley Regis understand what is going on within Sandwell Council?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises what sounds like a very concerning situation. I would strongly encourage him to seek a further Adjournment debate, so that he can debate it directly with Ministers, or perhaps seek to see one of the Ministers in the Department to raise these very specific issues directly.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): As temperatures drop, we need more than ever to tackle the growing epidemic of homelessness, which is frankly killing people. I will be joining the Big Sleep Out at Huddersfield Town stadium in March, raising funds locally. If any Members want to join me for a night under the stars, they will be very welcome, but we need to do much more. Government efforts are clearly not working. They are not enough;

[Paula Sherriff]

they are inadequate. So may we have a debate on how we may reach a cross-party consensus on how we move forward and end the cancer that is homelessness?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is right to raise the issue, and I commend her for taking part in the Big Sleep Out; it sounds slightly romantic, but I am sure it will not be. Obviously, homelessness is a scourge on our society—it is incredibly difficult, as we have seen ourselves just outside Parliament. I have certainly worked with the House authorities to look at what more can be done to support those who are homeless outside this place.

Right across the country, as the hon. Lady will be aware, there are complex reasons why people become homeless. I am aware, for example, that Westminster City Council says that there are places for homeless people, but getting them to use them is difficult for a number of reasons. There is a lot more that we are doing. We have committed more than £1.2 billion to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping, and we have clear targets to reduce the problem of homelessness and rough sleeping over a very short period.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): The original version of the Greater Manchester spatial framework that the Labour leadership in my region drew up was so bad that it was criticised by 27,000 residents, as well as Conservative colleagues across Greater Manchester—it was rightly torn up and started again. The new version of the GMSF is better, especially as it has more of a focus on the redevelopment of Bolton town centre. Can we have a debate on the importance of listening to local residents, who emphasise the importance of redeveloping our town centres and brownfield sites, rather than Labour's focus on using the green belt first?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an incredibly important issue. All of us share a desire for more homes to be built and for our high streets to thrive more while ensuring protection for the green belt. He is absolutely right to raise the issue. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can discuss it directly with Ministers.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I hope that the Leader of the House can advise me on how to get the Government to take action on this. People fleeing domestic violence face the most uncertain time in their lives. If they have come from a country outside the European economic area, they can apply for a destitution domestic violence concession. If they are fleeing domestic violence but are originally from inside the EEA, the response that I have had from the Government suggests that they should go to their home country: they cannot apply through the domestic violence concession route. How can I get the Home Office to take the issue seriously? I have had reports of women returning to abusers because they have no recourse to public funds on fleeing their abusive homes. Please will the Leader of the House advise me on how to get the Government to take the matter seriously?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very concerned to hear what the hon. Lady has said. As she will be aware, the Government have committed £100 million of funding

into projects that support organisations helping women who have suffered violence. If she writes to me with the specifics of the case she is talking about, I will be very happy to take it up on her behalf.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): The Labour leadership of Crawley Borough Council has recently wasted about half a million pounds on a delayed IT project at great expense to local taxpayers. When constituents have made freedom of information requests of the local authority, they have been obstructed. May we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government about the importance of the efficiency and probity of local councils such as Crawley's?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a concerning case. Too often, there are examples of projects going wrong and wasting taxpayers' money, which can never be right. He will be aware that there are clear rules about the use of taxpayers' money in such examples. I encourage him to table a parliamentary question to the Department to seek a ruling on this specific issue.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I have been contacted by a constituent who lives part of the year in Portugal. They are concerned about being able to drive and hold car insurance in both countries if they have to exchange their UK licence for a Portuguese one: they need to continue to drive in the EU if we leave the EU. I cannot be the only Member with a constituent who has that concern. I am aware that Transport questions took place earlier; I tried to catch Mr Speaker's eye, but I was out of luck. Will the Leader of the House ask the Transport Secretary to come to the Floor of the House to make a statement about these licensing issues and issues of car insurance for those who live part-time in the European Union?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman did not get to ask his question directly to Transport Ministers, but I will do my best. There is now a Government communications plan to try to provide specific answers to such questions. I did not have prior notice of this question, so I do not know whether this issue is included in that plan, but through national radio and so on the Government are directing consumers and householders to the gov.uk website to seek specific answers to questions about what will happen when we leave the EU. If the hon. Gentleman would like to write to me, I would also be willing to take up the issue with the Department on his behalf.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): To the great relief of children and parents in Rugby, Yum Yum World, our Willy Wonka-style high street attraction, has been saved because its unfair business rates bill was finally slashed by £59,000. The Valuation Office Agency has two years to respond to a challenge on business rates, which is far too long for a small business that is overpaying by such a huge amount. May we have a debate to consider the priority of institutions such as Yum Yum World keeping our town centres alive?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate Yum Yum World on its survival. Plenty of children and some adults will be delighted by that, but go easy on the sugar everybody!

My hon. Friend raises an important point about business rates and how we can keep our high streets thriving. He will know that the Government have made changes worth more than £13 billion in aggregate to businesses, including taking more than 600,000 small businesses out of paying any business rates at all. Our dedicated Retail Sector Council brings the Government and retail sector organisations together to consider what more we can do to ensure thriving high streets.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): My constituency staff and I have challenged a large number of unfair private parking penalty charges. We have won back more than £700 for local constituents who were wrongly charged, including a constituent who was charged outside a doctor's surgery for dropping off his wife who has a serious long-term health condition. The Parking (Code of Practice) Bill, promoted by the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight), was accepted by this House. Will the Leader of the House say when we can expect that Bill to return to this place, and whether it will get Government support? I am sure there will be a lot of interest from across the Chamber.

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sympathetic to what the hon. Lady says, and by coincidence, my office has also been dealing with a number of complaints about unfair parking tickets. It is a real problem, and MPs often successfully challenge such matters on behalf of our constituents—I share the hon. Lady's success levels. She raises an important point about the private Member's Bill and, as she knows, I attempted to schedule six additional days for the consideration of private Members' Bills. Unfortunately that motion was subject to an Opposition amendment and was therefore not put to the House. However, I intend to work through the usual channels to provide further information on days to consider private Members' Bills.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): May we have a debate in Government time on cyber-bullying? The Leader of the House will know that before Christmas I raised the case of a 13-year-old boy in my constituency who took his own life, and it is an issue on which Members across the House would like to come together and discuss. Will she welcome the new campaign on this issue, headed by Dame Esther Rantzen, which was launched on the Channel 5 show "Do The Right Thing" on Sunday evening?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an issue that matters a great deal to all families, parents and young people across the country, and I know that many right hon. and hon. Members are also concerned about it. The Government have sent a clear message to schools that bullying—including cyber-bullying—for whatever reason, is totally unacceptable. We are providing nearly £3 million in support for anti-bullying projects and, as part of this, the Diana Award has developed a number of resources to help students and staff deal with cyber-bullying and understand reporting together with social media providers, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): There is mounting public concern in Glasgow about the impact of continued council cuts on vital community

services. On Tuesday night, Dennistoun Community Council organised a meeting, which was filled to capacity, in protest at the proposed closure of the Whitehill pool, and further cuts are proposed for Haghill sports centre and for golf courses and libraries in my constituency. Glasgow City Council has had a 10% cut since 2011, and the proposed cut for the coming year is 3.6%. Local government cuts in Scotland are five times the cut that the Scottish Government have had, which is a huge amplification. Will the Leader of the House therefore consider holding a debate in Government time on the huge impact that austerity is having on all levels of government and on vital community services across our country?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear that the hon. Gentleman's constituents are concerned about potential cuts, which of course are decisions for local councils to make. What I can say is that councils have access to over £200 billion to deliver local services up to 2020. In areas such as social care, which we know are under pressure, the Government have provided more money. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise his particular concerns directly with Ministers.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): Last week, eight-year-old Penelope Jones from Bedworth visited my regular surgery, having written me a letter about improving her local play area. I appreciate that it is not in the gift of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House to provide the zip-line and extra swings that Penelope asked for, but it served as a timely reminder that we represent all our constituents, not just those who are old enough to vote. May we therefore have a debate on how we can better engage with young people and encourage constituents of all ages and backgrounds to engage more positively with their local representatives?

Andrea Leadsom: I think that is a really good idea. I congratulate Penelope on getting involved and trying to improve her local community—hopefully she will keep up her interest for many years to come, and perhaps even stand for Parliament one day. As part of last year's suffrage centenary, the Cabinet Office has developed various resources for use with young people by teachers, or indeed by representatives, which are designed to educate and encourage them to participate in our democratic society.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): In 1944, eight-year-old Tony Foulds was playing football in Endcliffe Park when a US B-17 bomber flew over and, after swerving to avoid hitting him and the other children, crashed in the woods, killing 10 soldiers. Every single day since then, Tony has maintained the memorial to that B-17, for 75 years. Will the Leader of the House consider meeting Tony and me to discuss how we can honour him, and will she raise with her Ministry of Defence colleagues the prospect of a flypast to mark the 75th anniversary on 22 February?

Andrea Leadsom: That is a heart-warming story, although obviously one that started in tragedy. I congratulate Tony on his absolute commitment to the memorial, and the hon. Lady on raising it today. I would be delighted to meet them both and to raise the matter further with MOD colleagues.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Just a few days before Christmas, the manufacturing firm Kaia in my constituency closed its doors, telling staff that there would be no pay before Christmas and that they might not have a job in the new year. The West Lothian and Livingston community rallied around and the women of West Lothian set up a hub to ensure that toys, food, money and vouchers were available, so that no one would go without at Christmas. May we have a debate on how quickly the Redundancy Payments Service moneys can be disbursed, and on what can be done to ensure that these companies maintain their pension liabilities, that cowboy chief executive officers, such as the one who runs Kaia, who flew out of the country as staff were being told their fate, are brought to justice, and that we do everything we can to support the workers during this difficult time?

Andrea Leadsom: I think that we are all incredibly sympathetic to the hon. Lady's constituents who were given such terrible news in the run-up to Christmas, and we join her in congratulating and thanking all those who made sure that they could still celebrate Christmas. She raises some important points about how businesses behave if they are failing. She will be aware that the Matthew Taylor review has raised some serious issues relating to pensions management and so on, which the Government are looking at closely. I encourage her to apply for an Adjournment debate so that the matter can be raised directly with Ministers.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I say to the Leader of the House that I do not think there is anything wrong with a good flounce—sometimes in life it can be useful—but I do not think that we should flounce out of the European Union. I am concerned that the Solicitor General said that we would manage to have Second Reading of the European Union withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill before Christmas. That cannot now happen until at least 28 January, if at all, and only if next Tuesday we proceed as the Government intend. Therefore, what will the Government do to ensure that we have proper legislation in place before 29 March, and will the Leader of the House seriously consider—do not rule it out now—that we might have to delay leaving beyond that date?

Andrea Leadsom: First, I simply concede to the hon. Gentleman that I am quite sure he would be a better flouncer than me in all circumstances.

Chris Bryant: Division!

Andrea Leadsom: I think it would be agreed unanimously.

Chris Bryant: It's an outrage!

Andrea Leadsom: Not in the slightest—we love the hon. Gentleman dearly.

It is absolutely not the Government's intention or policy to do anything like flounce out of the EU. We are looking at our meaningful vote on Tuesday and it is absolutely our intention that we win that meaningful vote, introduce the withdrawal agreement Bill and have a smooth transition out of the European Union. As the hon. Gentleman will know, my job is to make sure that the legislation passes through both Houses, and it will

not surprise him that I look at that issue closely on a daily basis. I am confident that we have enough time to get the withdrawal agreement Bill through both Houses.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Like many in the House, I was delighted with the Home Secretary's decision last year to make cannabis available for medicinal use. Unfortunately, for many people like my constituent Murray Gray, a little boy, this has not helped to ease their pain. We have heard stories of over-rigid regulations and the difficulty of getting what is now a legal medicine. Will the Leader of the House consider holding a debate in the House to tackle the thorny and grown-up question of whether we should decriminalise and regulate the cannabis market to overcome this problem?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that the decision was taken that cannabis oil can be used for medical purposes and it is not the Government's policy to consider the broader deregulation of the use of cannabis.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Jaguar Land Rover is today set to announce 5,000 job losses in what will be the biggest hammer blow to manufacturing in this country since the closure of Longbridge. When Longbridge closed, it was all hands on deck: we had taskforces and visits from Cabinet Ministers. When will we get an action plan of that kind of force from this Government? Will the Leader of the House tell us when she expects Cabinet Ministers to come forward and explain how we are going to ensure that every single one of those people who lose their jobs today is back in employment as soon as possible?

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman is right to raise this very concerning report. Jaguar Land Rover will make its statement at 3 o'clock today. The Government will of course respond in full at the appropriate time, but we need to wait until the company has let us know its specific intentions.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Just to reinforce what my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) just said about Jaguar Land Rover, it is very important that we get a statement from the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy about what discussions he has had with Jaguar Land Rover. It is very important for Coventry and the west midlands. As I have said before, once a company has announced 5,000 job losses, there is a knock-on effect on the supply chain, so we may well need to use a multiplier of two or three. It is important that people in Coventry know what the situation is. Lots of constituents have written to me about this issue over the past few weeks, so it is important that we get that statement.

Andrea Leadsom: I say again that we were all very concerned to hear this report, but we need to wait and see what Jaguar Land Rover itself has to say. The hon. Gentleman may have noticed that the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is standing by the Chair and will have heard his remarks. I am sure that the Secretary of State intends to respond fully as soon as we know exactly what the details are.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): On new year's eve, 40 people were arrested at a flat in Fulham in my constituency, following a serious knife attack nearby. The police told me that the flat had been rented out on an Airbnb-style let and then used for a party that attracted people from a wide area. The Government deregulated Airbnb lets in London; may we have a debate on re-regulating them to stop properties in residential areas being turned into hotels and hostels and, increasingly, becoming the focus of antisocial and violent behaviour?

Andrea Leadsom: I was not aware of the incident raised by the hon. Gentleman, but it sounds extremely concerning. I encourage him, perhaps in the first instance, to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can describe the exact incident that took place and hear Ministers' direct response.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): Around the time of the centenary of the Armistice, many of us had the privilege to attend events in this place and in our constituencies. After that, there were many programmes involving schoolchildren, and I hope that the Leader of the House can give us some time in which to debate the matter. I refer to a wonderful programme of Cefn Community Council, where research was undertaken by primary schoolchildren from Ysgol Cefn Mawr, Ysgol Rhosymedre and Ysgol Min y Ddol in order to provide information about each of the 130 fallen from their community. It is an extraordinary programme that is a credit to the community of Cefn and is something that we should mark in this House.

Andrea Leadsom: I join the hon. Lady in congratulating all those who were involved in this fantastic initiative. Bridging the gap between the generations so that young people understand the sacrifice of those who came before them is vital. All of us have enjoyed the amazing tributes paid by young people to those who fought and died during the great war.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Leader of the House organise an urgent debate on incineration contracts? Gloucestershire County Council has just had literally pulled out of it the news that it has spent an extra £100 million on a half a billion pound contract at the Javelin Park project in the Stroud constituency. It cannot be the only local authority that is watching council taxpayers' money just being burned on bad value for money. Will the Leader of the House order an urgent inquiry and a debate on the issue?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. There are Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions next Thursday, so I encourage him to raise the matter then.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Is it not about time that the Government started to be straight and honest with the British public? The Prime Minister has continued to repeat that there is a Brexit dividend, despite the fact that we all know there is not a Brexit dividend and, indeed, the Government's own figures show that there is not a Brexit dividend. May I unusually ask the Leader of the House for us not to have a statement and not to have a debate on the Brexit dividend, because it does not exist?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman makes a really important point about the issue of economic forecasting that presupposes different alternatives. In my view, economic forecasting is only as good as the inputs into the forecasting model. Although he says that there is not a Brexit dividend, the fact that I would rely on is that once we have left the European Union, we will no longer be paying the billions of pounds in net terms that we were previously paying to the European Union.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): In the week before Christmas, my local food bank in Penge gave out 300 parcels to some of the most vulnerable. It is an outrage that at a time of year when most people are out celebrating, Tory austerity has meant that far too many rely on food banks for essential supplies. Can we please have a debate on the impact of Tory austerity on food bank usage and food poverty across the country?

Andrea Leadsom: Let me first pay tribute to all those who help out with food banks, either by donating to them or by running them; they do an amazing job in all our constituencies. The hon. Lady is right to point out that we absolutely do not want people to have to rely on food banks. However, there are now 630,000 fewer children living in workless households, and the numbers both of people and of children in absolute poverty are at record lows, with 1 million fewer people and 300,000 fewer children in absolute poverty at a time when income inequality is also down and lower than at any time under the last Labour Government. We are building a fairer society, jobs are growing and wages are rising faster than inflation. These are all very good things and are to be welcomed.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): How is it in the interests of our constituents that this House is prevented from expressing its views on an issue as important as Brexit? Does the right hon. Lady see her role as Leader of the House as ensuring that the Government can prevent this House from expressing its view in that way?

Andrea Leadsom: I think it is absolutely vital that the House gets the opportunity to express its view, which is why we have five days of debate prior to the meaningful vote.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): One of my constituents who has worked all her life had to take a part-time job, leading her to access benefits for the first time. Imagine her surprise when she was paid a week early before Christmas so that the company's head office could close for Christmas, but then lost £250 of universal credit. This goes against the grain of the Government's mantra of making work pay. Can we have a statement saying what the Government are going to do about this anomaly in universal credit, and will they look at these individual cases?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman often raises constituency cases, and he is absolutely right to do so. If he wants to write to me about that case, I can take it up with the Department for Work and Pensions on his behalf. I am certainly aware that that is not the intention. The point about universal credit is that it allows for flexibility in benefit payments to people whose job circumstances change. But if he will write to me on the individual circumstances, I can take it up for him.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I know that the Leader of the House will be as concerned as I was this morning about some of the findings of the Environmental Audit Committee report showing that there were higher levels of hunger among our children than in most other countries in Europe. In Hull, we are pioneering the 50p school meal, jointly subsidised by Hull City Council and schools, but it is now under threat because of the cuts to school budgets and is having to go up to £1. May we please have a debate on whether austerity really has ended in some of the most disadvantaged parts of this country?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is quite right that I share her concern about any child going hungry. I know that this is a long-standing and intractable issue, particularly during school holidays. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who has long tried to seek the opportunity for school lunches to continue even during the holidays. It is a very important issue. However, I would draw the hon. Lady's attention to the fact that with the increase in our economy—the real rises in wages, the growing number of jobs, and universal credit, which makes sure that benefits are not withdrawn as people increase their working hours—the opportunities for people to increase their earnings are now there more than ever before. We are seeing that the result of that is a decrease in absolute poverty and a decrease in the number of workless households, and therefore a decrease in the number of children being raised in workless households, all of which are very good things in our society.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): The all-party parliamentary group on home electrical safety will shortly publish the results of a consultation on the need for better regulation of online sales. Websites such as Amazon, Wish.com and eBay are not doing enough to prevent the sale of illegal and unsafe goods to UK customers. Shockingly, Wish.com is openly selling zombie knives and knuckledusters without any checks on the age of the buyer. Will the Leader of the House consider a debate in Government time on better regulation of online sales?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very important point. I know that Members right across the House would wish to see more done to stop online sales being a free-for-all. She raised a particular point about zombie knives being sold online. She will be aware that that will be made illegal under the Offensive Weapons Bill, and I encourage her to raise that point specifically with Ministers during its remaining stages in this House.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Before Christmas, I asked the Leader of the House for a debate on Yemen, and told her about my constituent, Jackie Morgan, whose daughter had been kidnapped in 1986 and was now trying to flee from Yemen. I am grateful for the help that the Government have given so far, particularly the Middle East Minister, who has been very helpful indeed. However, now that she has got out of Yemen, there is also the issue of her husband, who is with her and who wants to travel to the UK with the family, understandably. Will the Leader of the House encourage her Home Office colleagues to step up to the plate as her Foreign Office colleagues have done to help this family?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very glad to hear that there has been progress for the hon. Gentleman's constituent. I say again that Yemen is the world's worst humanitarian catastrophe, and the UK is fully committed to doing everything it can to support resolution there. I would encourage him to raise this directly at Home Office questions on 21 January, or if he wants to write to me, I can take it up on his behalf.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Irn-Bru carnival at the Scottish Event Campus in Glasgow has been running autism-friendly sessions, which encouraged people with autism to enjoy all the fun of the fair over the festive period. There are good initiatives elsewhere in Glasgow to help people with autism and their families, such as a dedicated space within the St Enoch Centre. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating those involved? Can we have a debate to encourage other businesses right across these islands to put in place similar measures?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly join the hon. Lady in congratulating all those involved. It is vital that we all get a better understanding of the challenges for people with autism, so that we can fully appreciate their strengths as well as the problems they face in dealing with everyday life. I would absolutely encourage other businesses to take up similar initiatives.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Could we have a statement to clarify the position with regard to WASPI women who are submitting maladministration claims? The recent referral to the High Court has led to my constituents receiving letters saying that their cases have been closed, yet the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman has confirmed that those cases that relate to communication have merely been put on hold. That is causing massive confusion for a group of women who have already suffered from communication problems.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point that clearly needs to be raised directly with Ministers. If he writes to me, I can take it up with them, or he might like to seek an Adjournment debate, so that he can talk directly to them.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Over the Christmas period, I was contacted by many constituents who shared with me horrific and disgusting images of foxes being slaughtered in hunts. I do not know whether there is a loophole in the legislation or just a flagrant disregard for it, but we urgently need a debate on how the Hunting Act 2004 is working and whether it needs reviewing.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise that point. The Hunting Act is clear that hunting should be restricted to trail hunting, and it is vital that the police uphold the law. He might like to seek a Back-Bench business debate, so that Members can share their concerns.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): New research from the Scottish Parliament Information Centre has shown that my constituents in Inverness and Nairn alone are paying

£1 million a year more due to unfair delivery surcharges. Can we have a statement on when the Government will finally act to end that scandalous rip-off?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman has raised that in the Chamber before, and he is quite right to do so. That is completely unfair, and I encourage him to seek the opportunity to raise it directly with Ministers, so that they can respond to his request.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Prime Minister is today meeting the Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe. Could the Leader of the House confirm that the Prime Minister will raise the concerns already raised by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about the resumption of Japanese whaling? Will the Leader of the House ensure that there is a statement in the House as soon as possible, to give feedback as to the Japanese Government's response to those concerns?

Andrea Leadsom: I cannot confirm exactly what the Prime Minister will be raising, but I am confident that she will raise that serious and concerning issue. We have DEFRA oral questions next week, so perhaps the right hon. Gentleman can find out then from Ministers what was specifically discussed.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): In the event that the deal is voted down next Tuesday and there is a vote of no confidence, with the Opposition parties joined by those on the Government Benches who want a no-deal Brexit, what provisions do the Government have to avoid a no-deal Brexit by default—something the great majority of people in this place and certainly the great majority outside it do not want—during the period of the election, in terms of deferring or revoking article 50?

Andrea Leadsom: As I said earlier, this House has confidence in Her Majesty's Government, and if the official Opposition believe that not to be the case, it is for them to put forward a motion of no confidence under the terms of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011. The convention is that the Government will then give time for that to be debated. It is not for the Government to try to second-guess what the official Opposition would choose to do.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Like the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), I was delighted when the Government legalised medical cannabis at the start of November. What has become clear, however, is that there are significant financial, bureaucratic and cultural barriers preventing consultants from prescribing. The system is not working. May we have a statement or a debate in Government time on how we can make it easier for people to access the medicine they need?

Andrea Leadsom: I think all right hon. and hon. Members were delighted when the decision was taken swiftly to make cannabis oil available to those who need it for medical purposes. Obviously, we need to have a

period for this recent decision to bed down, but I encourage the hon. Gentleman perhaps to raise the issue at Home Office questions on 21 January to see when Ministers intend to review how the system is working.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Advice Nottingham's new report on housing in my city has revealed that there are only 23 properties available with rents under local housing allowance rates, including only three three-bedroom houses. The local housing allowance is supposed to be supporting low-income families to rent, but it is not. May we please have a debate in Government time on the impact of the housing crisis on Nottingham?

Andrea Leadsom: I am genuinely sorry to hear that. The hon. Gentleman will obviously be concerned about the lack of housing available in his constituency. He will be aware that since 2010 the Government have brought social housing waiting lists down by over half a million and delivered many more council houses than was the case under the Labour Government. Nevertheless, we have huge ambitions to do more. We are putting in place measures to enable the delivery of more social and affordable housing, but he might want to seek an Adjournment debate to raise the specific issues for Nottingham.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On Sunday 6 January, President Sisi inaugurated Egypt's largest Christian church a day after a deadly bomb blast near a Coptic church that killed a policeman and wounded two others. Efforts to promote tolerance are to be welcomed, but we must acknowledge that the situation on the ground for Christians in Egypt remains very, very dangerous. Christians were attacked multiple times in the past year, including the November 2018 terrorist attack where three buses carrying Christian pilgrims were ambushed, killing seven and wounding 19. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement or a debate on this issue?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman reports horrific occurrences. It is absolutely unacceptable that anybody anywhere is hounded, tortured, punished or bombed for the sake of their faith, race or gender. He is right to raise this issue, as he often does in this place. Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions are on 22 January. I encourage him to raise it then.

BILL PRESENTED

ASYLUM SEEKERS (PERMISSION TO WORK) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Christine Jardine, supported by Catherine West, Dame Caroline Spelman, Tim Farron and Sir Edward Davey, presented a Bill to make provision for certain asylum seekers to be granted permission to work; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 1 March, and to be printed (Bill 313).

European Union (Withdrawal) Act

[6TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Debate resumed (Orders 5, 4 December and 9 January).

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'.

12.8 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): May I begin on a personal note, Mr Speaker? I am very, very grateful to Members on both sides of the House, from all parties, who very kindly contacted me or sent messages over the course of the Christmas holidays following my son's accident. I am very grateful for the kind words that many sent. My son is recovering well and I just wanted to register my appreciation.

A second brief point I want to make is that I want to ensure that as many colleagues as possible have the opportunity to intervene during my remarks. I recognise that we will be addressing a number of important issues today, not least the vital importance of maintaining environmental protection and the protection of workers' rights, but I also recognise that many colleagues wish to speak, so I will try to keep my answers as brief as possible.

It is perhaps appropriate, Mr Speaker, given that this is a debate on European matters, that we should be emulating what happens in European football competitions by having a second leg of this debate following the first one. In hotly contested European matches, strong views are sometimes held, not just about the merits of each side, but about the referee, but all I want to say is that I am personally grateful to you, Mr Speaker. You sat through the whole of the first leg of this debate and intend to sit through the second, which is an indication of how important this debate is and how seriously you take your responsibilities. Across the House, we all owe you thanks for how you have facilitated this debate.

I also want to thank the many civil servants in my Department and elsewhere who have worked hard to secure the withdrawal agreement with the European Union. Officials, negotiators and others sometimes find themselves in the firing line but unable to speak for themselves, so let me speak for them: the dedicated public servants in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department for Exiting the European Union and other Departments have worked hard to honour the referendum result and to secure the best possible deal for the British people. I place on record my thanks and those of my Government colleagues for their wonderful work.

As everyone acknowledges, the deal that we have concluded is a compromise. Those who are critical of it recognise that there are flaws, and those of us who support it also recognise that it has its imperfections, but how could it be otherwise? There are more than

600 Members, all with different and overlapping views on Brexit and its merits, and on how it should be executed. Some 17.4 million people voted to leave—a clear majority—and we must honour that, but we must also respect the fact that 48% of our fellow citizens voted to remain, and their concerns, fears and hopes also have to be taken into consideration.

We are dealing in this negotiation with 27 other EU nations, each with legitimate interests, with which we trade and many of whose citizens live in this country. We consider them our friends and partners in the great enterprise of making sure that a rules-based international order can safeguard the interests of everyone. Inevitably, then, we have to compromise. I recognise that during this debate many principled cases for alternatives will be advanced. I will respect, and have respected, the passion and integrity with which those cases are made, but it is also important to recognise that those who support this compromise, including me, are passionate about delivering on the verdict of the British people in the referendum in a way that also honours the interests of every British citizen. That is what this agreement does. It honours the referendum result while also respecting the vital interests of every part of the United Kingdom and every citizen within it.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The difficulty is that we do not know the extent of the compromise because negotiations on the future agreement have yet to begin, and because we will have paid the money upfront and will be unable to walk away from these negotiations, so we will be in a weak position. Can my right hon. Friend reassure me about the level of compromise that is likely to be made?

Michael Gove: I very much take on board my right hon. Friend's point. As I will explain in greater detail in my remarks, I think we are in a far stronger position than many allow. The £39 billion that we will be giving to the EU is in part settlement of our obligations and in part a way of ensuring we have a transition period so that we can adjust to life outside the EU. The backstop that has been negotiated—let us all remember that originally the EU wanted a Northern Ireland-only backstop, but we now have a UK-wide backstop—allows us, as a sovereign nation, freedom in critical areas. These are freedoms that honour the referendum result and create real difficulties for European countries, which I will explore in greater detail in a moment.

It is critical that we recognise that the agreement the Prime Minister has negotiated will mean that we will be outside the direct jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, outside the common fisheries policy, outside the common agricultural policy, outside the common foreign and security policy and outside the principle of ever closer union, and that we will have control of our borders and our money. The days of automatic direct debits from this country, at whatever level people might think appropriate, will end, and as a result the referendum verdict will be honoured.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Earlier, the Secretary of State said that the deal laid out by the Prime Minister was a good deal for everybody in the UK. Can he seriously stand at that Dispatch Box and say that our friends in Northern Ireland are getting a good deal out of this deal?

Michael Gove: I absolutely can. One of the opportunities that the citizens of Northern Ireland would have as a result of the deal is unimpeded access not just to the rest of the UK market, which is essential for the maintenance of our Union, but to the rest of the EU. That is why the Ulster Farmers' Union, Ulster business and so many in Northern Ireland's civil society have said that, with all its imperfections, the deal protects not only the integrity of the UK, but their livelihoods, jobs and futures.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): My right hon. Friend mentioned the Ulster Farmers' Union. Has he had time today to see the letter written by the presidents of all four farmers unions to every Member setting out quite clearly why no deal would be so damaging to the interests of rural communities?

Michael Gove: I have read that letter. It has been sent to every Member, and I would ask every Member to give it close attention. Our farming communities, like our country, were split over whether to leave. A majority of farmers voted to leave, recognising the opportunities that being outside the CAP would present, but I have yet to meet a single farmer who believes that a no-deal Brexit would be the right option for this country when the withdrawal agreement in front of us provides the opportunity for tariff-free and quota-free access for agricultural products to the EU.

I will say a bit more about the specific challenges of a no-deal Brexit. It is an intellectually consistent position, but it is important, even as we apprise it and pay respect to its advocates, that we also recognise the real turbulence that would be caused, at least in the short and medium term, to many of our farmers and food producers.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I find myself in agreement with the Secretary of State about the risks and dangers of a no-deal Brexit, but his claim that people will be better off flies in the face of the Government's own economic analysis, which suggests that people will be poorer, the economy smaller and economic growth slower. How can he stand at the Dispatch Box and say something the Government have found to be otherwise?

Michael Gove: The report emphatically does not say that people will be poorer. It is important to pay proper respect to projections while also applying the appropriate analytical tools. Some of the economic projections for no deal and Brexit have proved to be unfounded. Projections have been wrong in the past and may well be wrong in the future, but it is the case—here I do agree with the hon. Lady—that, irrespective of projections for different paths, there are certain brute and unalterable facts about no deal, including the imposition of tariffs by the EU, that would create friction and costs, and that would mean, at least in the short term, economic turbulence for parts of the UK economy.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend welcome the great news from the port of Calais that it will not create any barriers and that our trade will flow perfectly smoothly if we just leave the EU on 29 March, and the news that there will be aviation agreements so that planes will of course fly quite normally? Does this not show that "Project Fear"

is just a caricature of itself and a disgrace in seeking to sell us short and to lock us into something we have agreed to leave?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend makes two very important points. It is absolutely right that there have been some lurid and exaggerated stories, both during the referendum and subsequently, about the impact of certain Brexit scenarios, and he is absolutely right that in aviation and the commitments of some of our partners who manage ports there have been welcome signs. It is also important to recognise, however, that the European Commission has made it clear that, in the event of a no-deal Brexit, there will be 100% checks on products of animal origin and live animal exports, which will add significantly to friction.

Tariffs would also be imposed, and while overall tariffs on agricultural produce in the EU are around 11%, which can be discounted by changes in the valuation of sterling, it is also the case that the import duties on some products, such as sheep meat, are more than 40%, and in some cases considerably more. That would certainly impose costs on our farmers and food producers. They are resilient, imaginative, energetic and dynamic, and in the long term, of course, they will flourish, but these are undeniable short-term costs.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that it is important to listen to the likes of GE Aviation, which employs a lot of people in my constituency and says that a

"disorderly 'no deal' exit...would prevent...challenges for our operations, supply chains and customers",

and exhorts me and others to ratify the withdrawal agreement, which would

"provide business with the certainty it needs"?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Again, across business there was a range of voices—for remain and leave—during the Brexit referendum, but what is striking is that many prominent voices among those who argued that we should leave have also made it clear that they believe that a no-deal Brexit would be the wrong outcome. They see significant opportunities for Britain outside the EU. Lord Wolfson, one of our most talented entrepreneurs in charge of one of our biggest retail chains, and Richard Walker, the chief executive of Iceland, one of our most dynamic and environmentally friendly supermarkets, both voted to leave the EU. They believe that to be the right choice for Britain and they both—employing thousands of our fellow citizens—also say that a no deal would pose significant challenges.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The right hon. Gentleman is a real optimist on Brexit. How long does he expect it will take to negotiate the political agreement and finalise all its details?

Michael Gove: I expect that that will be concluded by the end of the transition period.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is not "Project Fear" when the National Farmers Union and all the agricultural unions warn of an embargo on animal product exports, which

[George Freeman]

are currently worth £3.15 billion, in the event of no deal? In the case of the lamb industry, 94% of its exports go to the EU. This is not “Project Fear”; this is serious “Project Business”.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a good point. There have been some exaggerated claims about the impact of a no-deal Brexit, and the British economy is resilient. He is absolutely right, however, that farmers in some of our most vulnerable sectors, in constituencies that Members across this House represent, would be significantly adversely affected in the short term.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for quoting my constituent Richard Walker, who has highlighted the fact that the jobs of 24,000 employees at Iceland depend on frictionless trade and that it is really important to support a deal, because no deal would be catastrophic for not only Iceland, but Arla Foods and several other food producers in this country.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It is always important to get things in proportion, but across the business spectrum—from those who argued for remain and for leave—there is a strong consensus that no deal would, in the short to medium term, cause significant harm.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): My right hon. Friend is being generous in giving way. I want to pursue his argument about the sheep meat implications of a WTO-terms Brexit. He referred to the introduction of tariffs of more than 40%. Will he confirm that that would apply on day one of moving to WTO terms?

Michael Gove: Yes, I am afraid that it absolutely would, and a tariff of 40%—it is just above 40%—is one of the lower ones. For example, there are tariffs on some meat exports of more than 140%, and in one case there is a tariff of more than 200%.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Some people suggest that we could reject this deal and go back and get a better deal from Europe. Does my right hon. Friend share my concerns about the great uncertainty in that, not least because the European Parliament shuts down in mid-April for the European elections, leaving many months in which no negotiation will be possible?

Michael Gove: Yes. As DEFRA Secretary, I suppose that I should say that a bird in the hand is worth more than however many we might find in the bush. My hon. Friend makes an important point. We have negotiated hard and effectively. We have not secured everything that we wanted, but we have secured a great deal of what we wanted. Now is the chance—I think the country wants us to do this—to unite behind this deal across the House and to deliver on Brexit in a way that delivers for every citizen.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): A few moments ago, my right hon. Friend mentioned live animal exports. Is it the case that if this agreement were to be approved,

many of our constituents who want an end to live animal exports would find that that was not allowed?

Michael Gove: Not quite. Live animal exports on the island of Ireland would have to continue, but we could further restrict—and, if we wished to, even ban—live animal exports from GB to the rest of the EU.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): My right hon. Friend is being very generous in giving way. To continue the point about tariffs and sheep meat, the fact is that the situation that has been outlined could happen, so what specific preparations have been made? What contingencies, compatible with WTO rules, can be undertaken in the event that those tariffs come in so that we support our hill farmers and so on?

Michael Gove: That is a very fair point. One thing that occupies most of my time as Secretary of State for DEFRA is planning for various contingencies. In exceptional circumstances, there are market interventions that we can take to help this particular sector. The broader point is that whether we are in the EU or out, WTO rules on the level of state aid that we can give to farmers will bind our hands in any case.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State has just mentioned state aid, particularly in agriculture. Is he not concerned that the deal allows the Commission oversight of state aid for four years post the transition period, and that with the Northern Ireland protocol, the Commission may have an overview of state aid in agriculture for ever? That would mean that if we wanted to diverge from the common agricultural policy, the Commission could prevent us from doing that. Is that not a reason to throw out this deal?

Michael Gove: I have great respect for the hon. Gentleman, but that is a misunderstanding of the agreement. The entire United Kingdom could diverge from the common agricultural policy and introduce new methods of support—

Lloyd Russell-Moyle *indicated dissent.*

Michael Gove: We absolutely could, including in Northern Ireland. Of course, there are restrictions on the amount of state aid that we can give, but those restrictions operate as a result of our membership of the WTO as well.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The Secretary of State and I were both in Oxford last week for the farming conference, and indeed we had lunch together—[*Interruption.*] It was a very nice lunch.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Vegan?

Kerry McCarthy: Well, it was vegan, but the Secretary of State had cheese.

There is definitely a consensus that no deal would be absolutely disastrous for the farming community. The Secretary of State is totally focusing on the risks of no deal, and to me that is something of a red herring. We could easily avoid no deal—it is entirely in the Prime Minister's power to avoid no deal either by extending or

revoking article 50 if we get to that cliff edge. Can the Secretary of State now talk about the deal that is being put before us for the meaningful vote and try to persuade us of the merits of that deal, rather than talking about no deal?

Mr Speaker: The Secretary of State might wish to describe to us his cheese selection and his salivation over it.

Michael Gove: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was happy to embrace my inner vegan with the hon. Lady earlier this month. We had some delicious vegan parsnip soup, and also some cheese that was produced by the Sustainable Food Trust.

I have sought to respond to questions from several colleagues about the impact of no deal, and I will say more about the merits of the deal in just a second. I will say, however, that it is not just within the power of the Government, but within the power of us all to ensure that we secure a deal. The hon. Lady is a constructive and pragmatic member of this House, and I know that she has concerns about the deal, but one of the best ways of avoiding no deal would be for her to join many other colleagues across the House in supporting the deal.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I have a small point for the Secretary of State before he explains the benefits of the deal, in his view. My savvy constituents like to participate in the biggest horse race event of the year, the Grand National, which this year is on 6 April, and being savvy, large numbers of them tend to bet on Irish horses. With no deal, can they be certain that Irish horses will get to the Grand National?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. In the event of no deal, the tripartite agreement, which is part of EU law, falls. Of course, the bloodstock industry, the horse racing industry and others can take mitigating steps, but the current free movement of equines would be harmed, although it would be protected by this deal.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP) *rose*—

Michael Gove: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, and then I will try to make a little bit of progress. I am sure that there will be further interventions in due course.

Alan Brown: In the Secretary of State's post-Brexit nirvana, there will be a different customs and trading arrangement with the EU from the one that exists just now, and that will be managed with no hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. The Government have consistently said that that will be done with the use of new technology. What is the timeframe for the invention, trial and deployment of that technology, which will mean that there are no cameras and no infrastructure—no anything—on the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland?

Michael Gove: A lot of work has already been done—including by Members of this House, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr Fysh)—to point out how we can have a frictionless border and avoid checks

at the border, so that we can move out of the backstop and into a new trade agreement with the European Union.

Today the focus of this debate is principally, although not exclusively, on the environment and on workers' protection. It is important to put on record the work that has been done across this House while we have been in the European Union to protect our environment and ensure that workers have a brighter future. However, it is also important to stress that this country has had ambitions higher than those required by our membership of the European Union—ambitions that have been fulfilled in a number of areas.

The right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), when he was Secretary of State in the Department of Energy and Climate Change, introduced climate change legislation that was significantly more progressive and ambitious than what was required by our membership of the European Union. On plastic and waste, this Government are going further than we are required to do by the European Union, to ensure that we pay our debts to this planet. Look at workers' rights, holiday rights, maternity leave, maternity pay and the national living wage. In every single one of those areas, our ambitions have been higher than required by the European Union.

It is not the case that membership of the European Union is necessary to safeguard our environment or to guarantee high-quality rights for workers. This agreement makes it clear that we will apply a non-regression principle when it comes to workers' rights, to health and safety and to employment rights. That principle, which will be very similar to the one that occurs in many other trade deals, will ensure that there is no race to the bottom. The Government will also—this is in the withdrawal agreement—create an office of environmental protection to ensure that our environment is safeguarded and that appropriate principles that were developed during our time in the European Union, such as the precautionary principle, are applied in an appropriate way.

However, there is a critical distinction between what the withdrawal agreement allows us to do and what the EU insists that we do. The withdrawal agreement allows us to take back control. The office of environmental protection will scrutinise this Government's or a future Government's application of environmental principles, but the House will decide how those principles are interpreted. For example, if we want to put the emphasis on innovation in certain areas in a different way from the European Union but still strive towards high environmental goals, we can. We can have both higher levels of protection and, critically—this was the message of the referendum—democratic accountability, with power flowing back to this place and all its Members.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State confirm that the forthcoming environment Bill will establish a legal right for citizens of this country to take the Government to court if they fail on environmental standards?

Michael Gove: Yes, absolutely. It is important that citizens have the right to access not just the courts but other means to ensure that environmental rights are protected. The creation of that new watchdog, which of course will be democratically accountable, will ensure

[Michael Gove]

that citizens do not have to go to court, but the Government and other public bodies will be held to account for their actions in safeguarding the environment.

Sir Edward Davey: Will that new body be statutorily independent?

Michael Gove: Yes, it absolutely will be independent. There will be an opportunity for the House to engage in pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill that will give effect to that body.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Is the Secretary of State not concerned that, if the deal delivers such a glorious future for the United Kingdom, all the other member states of the European Union will look enviously on it and the integrity of the European Union itself will be challenged? Everybody will want a better deal than membership, which we currently have and, by definition, has to be the best possible relationship with the EU.

Michael Gove: It will be for other countries to decide, but yes, I think other countries will be envious of our position. For the sake of argument, I think some Italian politicians will look at our ability to have quota-free and tariff-free access to their markets and yet to be outside the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, have full control of our borders and pay no money, and ask themselves, “Why is it that the UK has a better deal?” It will be for them to make their own judgments, but people under-appreciate the strength of the position that this deal puts Britain in for the future.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State mentions that we will move out of the orbit of the ECJ. Instead, for trade deals, particularly on fracking, we will be in the orbit of international investment tribunals. He may know that in the case of Lone Pine Resources, the Canadian Government were fined hundreds of millions of dollars for their moratorium on fracking in Quebec. Is he not concerned that, if we leave the defence of the European Court of Justice and try to restrict fracking, we will be open to attack by frackers? That would not be good.

Michael Gove: I entirely understand the hon. Gentleman's concerns, but robust legal protections, including licensing and permitting, will continue to ensure that hydraulic fracturing, if we have it, is governed by a set of rules that safeguard and balance the interests of the environment and the interests of property owners and those who wish to generate economic growth.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I want to go back to the Secretary of State's point about Britain being the envy of other European states because of the position it will be in post Brexit. Is it his contention that the Brexit scenario we are currently going through has enhanced Britain's international reputation?

Michael Gove: It is certainly the case that, if we look at the flow of individuals who want to come to Britain—[*Interruption.*] This is an important point. One of the critical questions about the attractiveness of our nation is how many people want to come here. The fact that so

many people want to make a life in Britain is an indication of the strength of our position, and the significant investments by tech giants, Toyota and a number of others indicate that Britain continues to be an attractive destination not just for individuals but for investment.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): As a Scot who believes in the United Kingdom's ability to take things forward, I am very much behind our moving from the EU, as voters requested in the referendum. In noting the good work on the environment that my right hon. Friend has championed, may I ask him to specify what opportunities this Brexit deal will create for us to leave a better environment for the generation that follows us?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have already said that we wish to embrace higher standards for plastic, waste and resources, but there is another big opportunity, which I know he is very keen on us taking as we leave the European Union—the opportunity to take back control of our exclusive economic zone and our fisheries, and to ensure that the environmentally damaging and economically wasteful common fisheries policy ends.

The Scottish National party, which has many talented Members, some of whom are in the Chamber, is committed—[*Interruption.*] I will not blight their electoral prospects by naming them and explaining how much I admire them. The SNP is committed to staying in the European Union and the common fisheries policy, in direct defiance of the Scottish Government's own analysis, which points out that there could be billions of extra pounds and 5,000 extra jobs in the Scottish economy if we left the common fisheries policy. The leader of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation told the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs yesterday that he was suffering “foot-stamping frustration” at the Scottish Government's inability to seize that opportunity.

Why do the Scottish Government want to stand in the way of 5,000 new jobs being created? Is it ideology? Are they placing separatism above the true interests of Scotland? [HON. MEMBERS: “Always!”] I hear cries of, “Always” from Scottish Conservative colleagues. I fear that, despite my respect for our Scottish Government colleagues in so many ways, my Scottish Conservative colleagues are absolutely right. Those jobs will be created only if we embrace the opportunities of being outside the common fisheries policy.

It is not just in fisheries that jobs can be created. Outside the common agricultural policy, we will be able to embrace methods of productivity that improve our food and drink sector—our biggest manufacturing sector—and provide new jobs, new investment and new technology. It is also the case that, with environmental services and our energy, dynamism and innovation—including ultra low emission vehicles, which my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary has championed consistently—we can turn post-Brexit Britain into an environmental and economic superpower.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): As my right hon. Friend knows, I cannot wait to leave the European Union on 29 March, but I have deep concerns about the backstop in the withdrawal agreement. If we do not

want to use the backstop and if, in the event that we do use it, it will be only temporary, why does he believe the European Union is reluctant to give the legal clarity that we and the Democratic Unionist party are looking for?

Michael Gove: I think the European Union and its institutions will provide more clarity, but let me try to provide an additional element of clarity. The backstop is uncomfortable. It is uncomfortable for me individually as a unionist, and it is uncomfortable for my friends in the House who represent Northern Ireland. However, it is important to recognise that the European Union originally wanted a Northern Ireland-only backstop. The Prime Minister pushed back against that. We now have a UK-wide backstop. Critically, as I mentioned, that creates difficulties for other European nations.

Immediately after the conclusion of the withdrawal agreement, we heard from President Macron. It was clear from his comments that he recognised how unhappy French fishermen and citizens in Brittany and Normandy would be if the backstop came into operation and they lost all—100%—of their access to UK waters as we took back control. We shall be able to say to France, to the Netherlands, to Denmark and to other nations, “I am afraid you are locked out of our waters” and at the same time, “but we have access to your markets without tariffs or quotas.” We shall be able to say, “Your citizens cannot come here except under our rules” and, at the same time, “We are not paying a penny for these privileges”—and, at the same time, “We are outside the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice.”

European nations will say to the European institutions, “We thought that you were not going to allow cherry-picking. Why does Britain have this bowl of glistening cherries? We thought you would say that the Brits could not have their cake and eat it, but they are enjoying an array of privileges, access routes and opportunities, while at the same time not paying for them, not accepting our citizens and not allowing our boats into their waters.”

It will be the case—it is already the case—that entering the backstop will be seen by European nations and European politicians as a consummation devoutly not to be wished. That is why I am so confident that we will be able to secure an agreement, pursuing the principles of the withdrawal agreement, that will ensure that we have the free trade that we want and the control that the British ask of us.

Alan Brown: The Secretary of State spoke of cherry-picking, but he cherry-picks his own statistics when he talks about 5,000 possible new fishing jobs. The SNP was always opposed to the common fisheries policy and argued against it for many years. When it comes to cherry-picking, what does the Secretary of State say about the 80,000 post-Brexit job losses predicted by the Fraser of Allander Institute? What is he doing to address that?

Michael Gove: It is the case that, if the Scottish National party votes for the deal, we shall be able to secure jobs in Scotland and across the United Kingdom, and also to secure those 5,000 additional jobs. The hon. Gentleman is right: the Scottish National party has said that it is against the common fisheries policy. However, while it has willed the end, it has not willed the means,

which is leaving the European Union. The Scottish National party’s position is—how can one put this? To say that you want to leave the CFP but not to do anything about it, and to seek to frustrate the legislation that will allow us to leave the CFP, is inconsistent at best and a simulacrum of hypocrisy at worst.

John Redwood: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for making it clear that in certain circumstances we would ban all continental European fishing vessels from our waters, but will he confirm that, when we take back control, the fish will be for our fishermen to land and process here?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend has made a very good point. In the event of leaving the European Union and in the event of the operation of the backstop, which neither of us wants to enter but we recognise of course is a possibility, we would have sovereign control over our waters. We could decide who came here and on which terms, and we could negotiate with other countries knowing that we were in a position of strength.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for what he has said so far. He will understand very well the position of the Democratic Unionist party in relation to the backstop, and he will know that my constituents clearly voted to leave. There are two matters about which we are concerned: the backstop and that control of fisheries will remain in our hands. There has been a question mark over that, too. The Secretary of State has been to Northern Ireland and met the MPs and the Unionist people, and he understands their opinion. May I suggest that what he needs to do now is remove the backstop? That is only way in which he will gain our support.

Michael Gove: I quite understand, and I have enormous respect not only for the hon. Gentleman, but for the sincerity and clarity with which he and his parliamentary colleagues have put their views. I hope that over the next few days we can help to ensure that all the interests of Northern Ireland are safeguarded more effectively than ever within the United Kingdom. As I have pointed out, the backstop is uncomfortable for many of us, but it is also uniquely uncomfortable for the European Union, which is one of the many reasons why I think we will conclude a deal before that.

Angela Smith: I thank the Secretary of State for being so generous in giving way. He talked about the sovereignty of British waters and about taking back control, but will he guarantee that in any negotiation for a trade deal with the European Union there will be no retaliation, and that the interests of the processing side of the fishing industry will not be sacrificed in return for sovereignty over British waters? The processing side is much bigger than the catching side, and it must not be sacrificed.

Michael Gove: That is a very fair point. Mr Scatterty, who represents seafood producers in Scotland, has been very clear about some of the opportunities presented by Brexit, but also about some of the other important points to be borne in mind.

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): When I was in the Library doing my research for the debate, I came across a 2014 Government leaflet, produced of course by a Conservative Government, which states, under the heading “An influential voice in important places”—that was why Scotland should vote no—

“As one of the EU’s ‘big four’ nations, the UK is more able to protect Scottish interests in areas like agriculture and fisheries.”

May I ask the Secretary of State what has changed?

Michael Gove: Several things have changed since 2014. First, of course, there was a coalition Government then. Secondly, we have had a referendum in which the people of Scotland voted to stay in the United Kingdom, and another referendum in which the people of the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. But one thing has not changed: the interests of Scotland’s farmers and fishermen are better protected by maintenance of the Union than by the separation that the Scottish National party and the Scottish Government want to see. We remain influential, not just in respect of our relationship with the EU27 but globally. We have a stronger voice in trade negotiations, a stronger voice in environmental protection, and a stronger capacity to protect and enhance the interests of Scottish citizens as one United Kingdom. That is why the people of Scotland voted to stay in that United Kingdom, and that is why our Union will endure.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): For how much money is the Secretary of State applying to the Treasury fund for fisheries protection in case the backstop has to come into force, or, indeed, we have to leave on a no-deal basis? My local fishermen who fish out of Berwick and Amble are concerned that there is already not enough fisheries protection in those waters, and there would need to be a great deal more to ensure that we did not end up with something like the cod wars all over again.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend has made an important point. The Ministry of Defence, in which she served with such distinction, has a suite of new offshore patrol vessels—state-of-the-art fisheries protection vessels—and we are negotiating with both the Treasury and the MOD to ensure that the work of those vessels will be complemented by the aviation and technological capacity that will guarantee that our fishermen are properly protected.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making his case most powerfully. In relation to the backstop, I can confirm to him that those of us who speak to European politicians and diplomats know that they have no desire to see something that gives us a competitive advantage endure in perpetuity. Moreover, European law makes it very clear that the provisions of the treaties do not permit a backstop to be permanent.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that it would be perfectly reasonable for us, with the assistance of the Attorney General, to seek further and better clarification of the definition of “temporary” in the protocol, which could be sensibly done, to reassure Members such as those from Northern Ireland who have legitimate but answerable concerns?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is the case not only that the legal position is that the backstop must be temporary, but that European politicians do not want it to endure, for the reasons that he has outlined, explored and explained, and on which I touched earlier.

There are, of course, a number of alternatives to embracing the withdrawal agreement. Indeed, the Opposition have put forward not just one alternative but 16 in the lifetime of this Parliament. They believe, Tommy Cooper-style, that—just like that!—they can negotiate a new deal with the European Union in the next 70 days which would give us freedom to diverge in relation to state aid in a way that would give the UK a competitive advantage that the EU allows no other nation on earth, and which would at the same time allow the UK to be in a customs union. That would mean that the EU could not negotiate trade deals with other countries—this is Labour policy—without the UK’s agreeing to those trade deals, and therefore exercising a veto. No other country on earth has the ability to veto the EU’s own trade deals, but that is what the Labour party wants.

There are also a number of different depictions of some of the fantasy alternatives that have been suggested. They have been described as unicorns. I have to say that the official Labour party position is to chase a whole carnival of unicorns across the European plain, none of which are capable of being delivered. In a broadcast earlier today, the shadow Justice Secretary was asked 23 times what Labour’s position on Brexit was, and 23 times he was incapable of answering.

The Labour party has had 16 different positions, and they cannot ask a question that is put 23 times. They do have six tests, but what do those six tests mean? Well, let’s listen to the words of the shadow International Trade Secretary, the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), when he was asked about those six tests. He summed them up pithily in a word which in Spanish translates as “cojones” and in English rhymes with “rollocks.” I know, Mr Speaker, that there are some distinguished citizens in this country who have put on their cars a poster or sticker saying “Bollocks to Brexit”, but we now know from Labour’s own Front Bench that its official Brexit position is “bollocks.” *[Interruption.]* I am quoting directly from the hon. Member for Brent North, and I am sorry that he is not in his usual position, because it is not the role of the Government to intervene in how the Opposition dispose of their positions but I have to say that the shadow International Trade Secretary is a jewel and an ornament to the Labour Front Bench: he speaks the truth with perfect clarity, and in his description of Labour’s own policy may I say that across the House we are grateful to him—grateful to the constant Gardiner for the way in which he has cast light on the testicular nature of Labour’s position?

Sir Edward Davey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Have you made a new ruling on parliamentary language that I am not aware of?

Mr Speaker: I have made no new ruling on parliamentary language. I was listening, as colleagues would expect, with my customary rapt attention to the observations of the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural

Affairs. I richly enjoyed those observations and particularly his exceptionally eloquent delivery of them, which I feel sure he must have been practising in front of the mirror for some significant number of hours, but on the subject of that which is orderly—because a number of Members were chuntering from a sedentary position about whether the use of the word beginning with b and ending in s which the Secretary of State delighted in regaling the House with was orderly—the answer is that there was nothing disorderly about the use of the word; I think it is a matter of taste.

Michael Gove: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I always enjoy the Secretary of State's contributions from the Dispatch Box; he speaks with so much enthusiasm that I almost fall into the trap of thinking he actually believes what he is saying. On people saying things that are accurate, may I remind him of the things his campaign, Vote Leave, said during the leave campaign? It talked about state subsidy for steel; does he really believe in that? It talked about reversing changes to tax credits, expanding regional airports, more roads, new hospitals, hundreds of new schools and more places in them, raising pay for junior doctors, new submarines, maintaining all current EU spending—and that was alongside the £350 million per week for the NHS. When it comes to making promises that are questionable, the right hon. Gentleman has got an A-level.

Michael Gove: It is interesting that the hon. Gentleman talks about A-levels, because if the hon. Member for Brent North is my favourite Labour Member, he must be my second favourite as he has just run through a list of many of the policies that this Government have delivered. We have delivered more outstanding school places—more than 1.8 million children are in good and outstanding schools compared with 2010. We have delivered a pay rise for junior doctors and others in the NHS. We have created new hospital places. We have created hundreds of thousands of new jobs. I will be very happy to see the hon. Gentleman feature in the next Conservative party election broadcast as he runs through the achievements that this Conservative Government have delivered in the national interest.

John Mann: We can all manage a rhetorical flourish, the right hon. Gentleman better than most, but does he not agree that part of the problem we have had since the referendum is that his side and this side are spending the vast majority of their time on the rhetoric and repeating the arguments, rather than focusing on the critical issue of what we are going to be doing next? May I put it to him that this is probably not the time for rhetorical flourish, but that instead it is the time for serious discussion?

Michael Gove: That is a great question from the hon. Gentleman, for whom I have an enormous amount of respect, and who has taken a brave and principled position on Brexit as on every issue he has faced as a Member of this House. It is right that we hold up to scrutiny some of the alternatives that are put forward, in order to say that they are not realistic and not deliverable so that we can focus on what is realistic and deliverable. He also makes the important point that

Brexit creates opportunities for this House to reshape policy in a number of areas. Many people outside this place, whatever their view of the original referendum result, now want us to focus on dealing with the challenges but also on exploiting those opportunities.

I want to say one thing briefly, however, about an attempt by some Members of this House, in all sincerity, to put forward a case that would mean that instead of focusing on the opportunities and dealing with the challenges we would simply be rerunning the arguments of the past, and that is the case for a so-called people's vote—a second referendum in other words. There are people I really like and respect who put forward this case so I hesitate to put the contrary case, but I have to, because if we were to embark on a second referendum, we would spend months in this House debating how to construct that second referendum, and there is no consensus about what the question should be.

Every single Member of this House who argues for a second referendum had previously argued to remain, so if this House supported a second referendum it would be seen by many people as an attempt by those who lost to rerun the contest, and the inference that many would draw is that we did not have faith in their judgment and in our democracy—that we thought they were somehow too foolish, too stupid, too prejudiced to make an appropriate decision. That would do real damage to our democracy, and far from allowing us in this House to concentrate on the NHS, education, the environment and jobs, I am afraid people would see this as not just an exercise in protracted navel-gazing but a thumbing of our nose at the British people. That is why I believe that this is profoundly dangerous and playing with fire in our democracy. I have enormous respect for many of those who make the case and I understand their motivation, but I ask them to use their considerable energy and intellect to focus on making sure that Brexit can work in the interests of their constituents, rather than on attempting to say to their constituents, “You got it wrong.”

Chris Bryant: Every single Minister I have spoken to privately outside the Chamber has said to me that the vote is going to go down on Tuesday. Every single Minister has then said to me, “And then we'll bring it back a second time.” Will the right hon. Gentleman guarantee that if the Government lose on Tuesday they will not bring it back to this House a second time? Otherwise everything he has just said would be a pile of nonsense, wouldn't it?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman is one of those people who is a supporter of a people's vote and for whom I have enormous respect, and he is a keen student of this House and its procedures. We all have an opportunity and a responsibility to think hard about the decision we will take next Tuesday. If we do vote to support the withdrawal agreement, imperfect as it is—it has flaws in my eyes and in his—we will nevertheless then be able to secure a Brexit that works in everyone's interests. That is why between now and next Tuesday evening all I am focusing on doing is talking to the hon. Gentleman and other Members of this House to convince them of the merits of this agreement. That seems to me to be, following on from the point made by the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann), the single most important thing I can do.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): The Secretary of State has been speaking for 50 minutes now and has just said he wants to talk to people to convince them to vote for the Government's withdrawal agreement. Can we hear a little bit about that, please?

Michael Gove: I have in response to questions from a number of colleagues pointed out the many advantages that the withdrawal agreement secures.

Sir Edward Davey *rose*—

Michael Gove: I have given way to the right hon. Gentleman twice; I may do so again, but the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) has made an important point.

We are out of free movement. One of the principal concerns the British public had long before the referendum was that unrestricted free movement meant we could not control who came here on terms that the British people could determine. If we vote for the withdrawal agreement we take back control of our migration policy and can exercise it in the interests of the British people in a way that both safeguards—

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Michael Gove: Not at the moment.

We can do that in a way that both safeguards our economy and ensures we can have a humane policy on asylum. It is also the case that we will have tariff and quota-free access—as near frictionless as possible access—to the European market for goods and agri-food, and that will mean jobs will be protected and preserved across the country, and the competitive advantage that so many of our companies have will be enhanced.

The European Court of Justice's jurisdiction in this country will end, and that means that we can choose to diverge in a huge number of areas. Services account for 80% of our economy and that figure will increase, so a growing part of our economy will be completely outside the control of the EU and its new laws. We can choose to diverge in ways that will increase our competitiveness as well as supporting people in work. We talk about workers' rights, and they are critically important, but the most important workers' right is the right to a job. This withdrawal agreement not only safeguards existing jobs in manufacturing but ensures that new jobs in our economy can be created in a way that reflects the dynamism of the British people.

With respect to Northern Ireland, if the EU wishes to impose new rules on it, we will have the opportunity to say no to those rules. It is critical that people appreciate that we have that power within the backstop. We will be outside the common agricultural policy, with an opportunity to have a new system of agricultural support that makes farming more productive and at the same time safeguards the environment. We will also be outside the common fisheries policy, with the opportunity to create thousands of new jobs and embed higher environmental standards.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Michael Gove: No, I will not.

I respect the views of many Members of this House, and I know that I will have to stand down—sorry, sit down—in just a second to ensure that everyone has their say in this debate. I know that there will be speeches, as there have been throughout the debates, that will be compelling and heartfelt and that reflect the honest grappling with difficult issues that all of us have had to face.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Michael Gove: No, I will not.

However, 17.4 million people were told in that referendum campaign that their vote would be honoured. They were told unambiguously, "What you vote for, the Government will deliver." We have an obligation to honour that mandate. Our other obligation is to do that in a way that safeguards the interests of the British people. All of us might have a perfect version of Brexit—a change here, an alteration there—but we all have to accept our responsibility next Tuesday to decide whether we are going to honour that verdict. Are we going to make the perfect the enemy of the good? Are we going to put our own interpretation of what Brexit should be ahead of the votes of 17.4 million people, ahead of the interests of everyone in this country who has a job, and ahead of the clearly expressed democratic will of the British people? Are we going to endanger their future by either seeking to overturn that mandate or rejecting this agreement and entering what the Prime Minister has suggested would be uncharted waters?

As I pointed out earlier, if we reject this agreement—the current course on which Parliament is set—and have no deal, Britain will of course prosper eventually but it is undeniably the case, because the facts on the ground demonstrate it, that our citizens and constituents will face economic turbulence and damage. That is why, after long reflection, I have decided that we must back this agreement. We must ensure that the British people's vote is honoured, that their futures are safeguarded and that Britain can embrace the opportunities that our people deserve. That is why I commend this agreement to the House.

1.3 pm

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): I was relieved to hear that the Secretary of State's son is making an excellent recovery. I am sure that many Members were shocked when they heard about the accident.

We are here today to debate environmental protections following Brexit. We are at a critical time for the future of Britain's environment and the Government must be ambitious when it comes to protecting our environmental standards; otherwise, we could sleepwalk into an environmental crisis. Unfortunately, the withdrawal agreement does not contain a whole lot of action or ambition. The Government should commit today to strong, enforceable and measurable targets that go even further on environmental standards. We want to see no backsliding, only progress. The onus is on the Secretary of State to get to work immediately to make good on his many promises and to deliver a better environment, post-Brexit.

Thanks to the Labour amendment to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, Ministers have had to publish their draft Environment (Principles and Governance) Bill.

While I welcome its publication, it falls far short of what we were led to expect. Again we have warm words with no substance to underpin them. The withdrawal agreement requires us to establish effective oversight and enforcement of environmental law. Enforcement therefore relies on having an independent and adequately resourced body or bodies to hold public authorities to account. There have been warnings that we are facing a “governance gap” for environmental protection, post Brexit. Nothing can replace the full powers now held by the EU and the European Court of Justice, but a powerful watchdog would make a real difference, so it is disappointing that the proposed office for environmental protection will lack teeth and will not be directly accountable to Parliament. It must be able to enforce the law and it must be properly resourced. We need an environmental watchdog with real power, independence and scope. The office must hold Ministers to account, not do their bidding.

The Government’s track record on the environment has been woeful. They have repeatedly failed to tackle toxic air, they have given the green light to fracking and they have pushed ahead with Heathrow expansion regardless of the environmental impacts. Labour has pressed the Government repeatedly on the need to enshrine crucial environmental principles, such as the precautionary principle and the polluter pays principle, into domestic law. I am pleased that these are in the draft Bill, and I am glad that Ministers have recognised their importance, but will the Secretary of State tell us whether the principles, as drafted, are legally enforceable, and what will need to be included in the national policy statement to interpret their application? He often repeats the mantra that the Government intend to leave our environment in a better state than they found it, but we need to know how the draft Bill will deliver this, with legally binding, ambitious and measurable goals and plans.

There are serious questions as to how effective the proposed office for environmental protection will be if we accept imports with lower environmental standards. The Secretary of State is well aware that some of his colleagues are pushing ahead with plans to open us up to lower-quality imported produce. Brexit cannot be used as an excuse to allow deregulation and the undercutting of our high standards. Will he give concrete guarantees that this cannot happen? Unlike the International Trade Secretary, who has dismissed concerns about chlorinated chicken, I do not see the prospect of importing food produced to lower standards as any kind of prize. The Secretary of State needs to stand up for Britain.

Kerry McCarthy: On that point about ensuring that there is no lowering of standards in any post-Brexit trade deals, will my hon. Friend be supporting my new clause 1 to the Agriculture Bill and a similar amendment that the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee has tabled, to make absolutely sure that we do not see a lowering of standards for food coming into this country? As we saw at the Oxford farming conference last week, farmers certainly do not want that to happen either.

Sue Hayman: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. A number of amendments have been tabled to the Agriculture Bill and we are looking at them closely.

Her new clause is important, and we are taking a close look at it. It would be useful to have a conversation with her about it at a later date.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): The suggestion at the heart of what the hon. Lady is saying is that she has no confidence in the Labour party to champion the cause of the British people on workers’ rights or environmental standards. There should surely be a post-Brexit competition between Labour and the Conservatives on championing those causes, and any political party wanting to slash standards would be condemned by the British people. She should have more confidence in the Labour party.

Sue Hayman: I have absolutely no idea what the hon. Gentleman is talking about.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): This is a crucial time. This is not about what Parliament votes against, but what Parliament actually stands for to make the decision happen. What will the Labour party do to enact the decision that was made two years ago?

Sue Hayman: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is aware that my party does not believe that the agreement on the table is good enough. If it is voted down next week, as many in this House believe it will be, we should go back to the country and have a general election, so that my party can actually look forward to working for a better deal.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sue Hayman: I will make some progress, because many Members want to speak and the Secretary of State was generous with his time.

The Prime Minister said that the environment Bill will be world leading, so where is the duty and obligation within the agreement to reduce the UK’s global environmental footprint? Labour wants to see good-quality, affordable food available to all but that must not come at the expense of environmental and animal welfare standards, workers’ rights or societal protections.

Antoinette Sandbach: The managing director of Arlo Foods warned that a no-deal Brexit would see shortages of products and a sharp rise in prices, turning everyday staples like butter, yoghurt, cheese and infant formula into occasional luxuries. Does the hon. Lady therefore agree that, by voting against this deal, the Labour party risks that outcome?

Sue Hayman: Labour does not want no deal. We understand the risks that that would bring, which is why we are saying that if the Prime Minister’s deal is voted down next week, we should go for a general election. However, we also think that the Prime Minister has had nearly two years to negotiate this deal. She could have had something much better. It is unacceptable that we have so little after two years.

Patricia Gibson: On a point of clarification, if we get to the point where we have the general election that the hon. Lady and her party are seeking, would Labour’s position be to support or oppose Brexit?

Sue Hayman: Our position at the moment is to go for a general election so that we can negotiate an improved deal.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sue Hayman: I will make some progress because many people want to speak.

The Government have failed to put in place any measures in the Trade or Agriculture Bills to ensure that all food and agricultural products imported into the UK will be produced to standards equivalent to our domestic ones. We want British food production to go from strength to strength while protecting our precious natural environment, but that will not happen if Ministers insist on kowtowing to Donald Trump.

On our future relationship with the EU, what mechanisms do the Government intend to put in place to enable continued co-operation on all environmental issues, from biodiversity to collaboration on tackling climate change? Will we continue to participate in the European Environment Agency and the European Chemicals Agency?

Geraint Davies: On standards, is my hon. Friend as concerned as I am that, if we do Brexit, rather than negotiating with the US as part of team EU, which is a big conglomerate, we will be in a much weaker position on food standards, chlorinated chicken and so on? Indeed, I made the point to the Secretary of State about frackers being able to sue us because we will be outside the orbit of the European Court of Justice.

Sue Hayman: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It is critical that we do not allow our standards to fall.

Vicky Ford: Like me, the hon. Lady wants to maintain environmental standards, to have high animal welfare standards and to continue co-operation with Europe on chemicals, for example. However, unless there is a withdrawal agreement, the EU has made it clear that we cannot make progress on the future relationship to agree to such things. Will she please confirm why Labour will not support the withdrawal agreement? We cannot get on with other negotiations without it.

Sue Hayman: I think we have made it pretty clear why we are not supporting the withdrawal agreement. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) made that quite clear in the debate yesterday and I do not want to get into all those arguments again when they have already been clearly expressed on the Floor of the House.

Chris Bryant: The point is that this is about not just the withdrawal agreement, but the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration. The political declaration is so imprecise that it could mean absolutely anything to anybody. There is no security treaty, which is what the Prime Minister was demanding, and there is no surety as to what we will have on the European arrest warrant. That is why we cannot support what is frankly a pig in a poke.

Sue Hayman: Absolutely. My hon. Friend puts the argument in a nutshell. The political declaration contains only one paragraph referring to protecting rights and

standards, which just shows how low down the list of priorities they are for the Government.

What do the Government have planned to replace current EU funding for nature conservation, low-carbon infrastructure, and environmental research and innovation? We also await the return of the Fisheries Bill on Report, so how do the Government intend to safeguard and manage our marine environment, protecting our healthy seas and sustainable fish stocks? British wildlife is also in freefall, so we need the Government to set ambitious and measurable goals to provide certainty for the future of our natural world. We need an action plan and an ambitious timescale in which to deliver the environmental protections that we so desperately need. We need legally binding targets to guarantee that Britain's high environmental standards cannot be threatened.

It is also essential to keep in step with the EU on environmental standards post Brexit and we need to use the status quo as the starting point. We must not pick and choose which standards to apply—we need all of them. We cannot have divergence on standards or weaker arrangements than those that we currently uphold. We must ensure that the rights enshrined in law are not just principles. The work of the European Union and its institutions has enhanced Britain's environment for decades and experts are saying that the Government's proposals are, unfortunately, riddled with loopholes and undermined by vague aspirations that simply do not go far enough in tackling the challenges we face. Environmental organisations do not believe that the withdrawal agreement or the draft environment Bill, as they currently stand, will even scratch the surface when it comes to leaving the environment in a better state. The end result has been watered down and fails to match the powers held by the EU and the European Court of Justice. How does the Secretary of State intend to rectify that?

We also need future environmental policies that go together with a comprehensive future food policy, protecting and enhancing our environment while improving farm productivity and ensuring that we have a stable supply of high-quality British food. Brexit risks setting the UK back, despite all the progress made on environmental protections through our membership of the EU, and the environment Bill presents an opportunity to mitigate those risks. However, that will happen only if the Government go back to the drawing board to ensure that the Bill is stronger and more ambitious and that it fulfils the aspirations previously set out by the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister.

The state of Britain's environment is at a historic crossroads and Brexit cannot be used as an excuse to veer off towards a future of lowered standards that would put our environment at risk. We need to build on the progress we have made so far, which means the Government must set out a robust action plan detailing exactly how they will leave the environment in a better state than they found it. What has been laid before us so far does not do that, and it is therefore not acceptable to the Opposition. It is time for the Secretary of State to fulfil his warm words before Britain's environment pays the price for his Government's failure.

1.20 pm

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): It is a privilege to be called to speak immediately after two important speeches from each of the Front Benches.

I campaigned in favour of Britain remaining a member in 1975. I was too young to vote, but I put leaflets through doors that clearly said we would remain a member of a common market of independent trading states and that nothing about our membership would in any way affect the sovereignty of this Parliament, of which I am proud to be a Member. Unfortunately, in the 40 years since that referendum, we have moved steadily away from that vision, with more and more power given over to Brussels. It is essentially for that reason that I voted against the Maastricht treaty when I was first elected to this place and that I campaigned to leave in the last referendum, in which I was proud to serve on the campaign committee under the chairmanship of the Secretary of State.

I welcome the Prime Minister's subsequent commitments in her Florence and Lancaster House speeches on the red lines that the Government cannot breach in our negotiations, and I fought the election on a manifesto making it clear that we are leaving the European Union and that that includes leaving the single market and the customs union.

The many benefits of leaving the European Union are summed up—as we were reminded by the Channel 4 drama on Monday, which had an interesting portrayal of the Secretary of State—by those three words: “Take back control.” There is no doubt that one of the referendum issues that featured in my constituency is immigration, as summed up in the “Taking back control of our borders” White Paper, but I am not opposed to immigration, which has brought great value to this country.

The farmers and horticulturalists I represent in Essex rely on immigrant labour, particularly seasonal labour, and I understand their concern that that should continue. Equally, like most farmers, as the Secretary of State said, the majority of them voted to leave because they embrace the idea of competing in world markets, being outside the CAP and, instead of being subsidised, receiving payment on the basis of their contribution to the public good, which is a far better system.

The ability for my right hon. Friend to set our policy in this area, as there will be such an ability for every other Secretary of State, is one of the great benefits of our gaining our freedom. That is one reason why I am not attracted to the Norway option that some have suggested, and that I understand my right hon. Friend has occasionally thought about. We on the Exiting the European Union Committee discovered in taking evidence from Norwegian parliamentarians that Norway is still bound by European regulations, and of course freedom of movement is one of those requirements.

The vote was essentially about sovereignty. It was a vote to remove the overall jurisdiction of the ECJ. My Select Committee colleagues and I have been to see Michel Barnier several times, and he is very clear that the Prime Minister's red lines rule out the UK having membership of the European economic area or an agreement similar to those of Norway and Turkey. He told us that the only way in which the UK would not breach its red lines in continuing to have a relationship with the European Union is on the basis of an agreement like the one signed with Canada. He showed us a proposal that not only had a Canada-style trade agreement but had parallel agreements covering security, law and order co-operation and data transfer. Indeed, he set out

a scenario almost identical to the one I would have described had I been asked what kind of relationship I wanted with the European Union.

The only problem was that of Northern Ireland and what would happen at the Northern Ireland border. The Prime Minister accepted that that was an insuperable obstacle, and she therefore made the Chequers proposal. I could not support that proposal principally because it maintained the common rulebook, which would mean still having to abide by EU regulations. The Government have shown a willingness to accept further lock-ins, and under amendment (p), tabled by the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann), we would have to continue to accept EU regulations in employment law.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): Amendment (p), which I support, does not say that we should automatically harmonise with the EU as it strengthens protections in these areas. What it says is that, when protections are strengthened, it will come back for this House to debate and vote on those issues. That means Parliament is still taking back control.

Mr Whittingdale: As I understand it, amendment (p) would require us to accept that all existing EU regulations in this area will be maintained. I do not necessarily say that I am in favour of removing any of those regulations, although it is ironic that, when we debated the Maastricht treaty back in 1992, one of the arguments made by the then Conservative Government under John Major was that we had obtained an opt-out from the social chapter and that we would not be bound by the European employment and social regulations. We were told that we had achieved a great prize. Interestingly, of course, it was accepted that we could be part of what then became the European Union without being part of the social chapter. The indivisibility of freedoms is applicable only when it suits the European Union, and not when it does not.

There are many things about the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration that I do not like. I do not like the fact that we appear to be signing up to paying out £39 billion without any guarantee on what the future arrangement will look like. I do not like the fact that the ECJ will continue to have a say for a considerable period—some 20 years. I do not like the trading relationship described in the political declaration, which seems to be based on Chequers and its continuing adherence to the common rulebook. However, all those aspects could be dealt with in the subsequent negotiations during the transition period, with the exception of money, which is in the withdrawal agreement. The future arrangements can be discussed during the transition period because they are part of the political declaration, which is not legally binding.

John Redwood: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the money is not £39 billion? There is no cash limit, no agreed amount, in the agreement, and there are huge powers for the EU to keep sending us bills of an undescribed amount for decades. It will be a lot more than £39 billion.

Mr Whittingdale: I fear my right hon. Friend may well be right. He highlights the risk we run in making that commitment.

[Mr Whittingdale]

I am willing to accept an ongoing payment, so long as an eventual exit date is set out. I am willing to accept some continuing role for the ECJ on things like citizens' rights. However, the problem is in the withdrawal agreement, which is legally binding and cannot be changed. I am afraid that, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, it is the backstop. It is the fact that we would be locked into a customs union without any ability to leave it unless we obtain the agreement of the European Union. That makes trade agreements essentially impossible. One of the great opportunities of leaving the European Union is the opportunity to sign trade agreements with those countries that the European Union has been trying to sign trade agreements with for decades but has still not succeeded—China, Brazil, India, the United States of America, Indonesia—the countries that will be the biggest economies in the world over the course of the next 10 or 20 years.

Sir Edward Davey: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that the EU signed a trade deal with South Korea, with Japan and with Canada, before many other nations in the world? The EU has actually led progress on these bilateral trade deals.

Mr Whittingdale: I was aware of that, which is why I did not include them, but the countries whose names I just read out are likely to be the five biggest economies in the world. We know that the EU has been trying to sign a deal with China and a deal with America, and has failed so far to do so, principally because it requires the agreement of every single member state, and we have seen how difficult that can be.

Also, of course, the provision of the backstop creates the one thing that the Prime Minister said she could never accept under any circumstances—a border down the Irish sea. If the Northern Ireland protocol and the backstop could be taken out of the withdrawal agreement and put into that basket of issues that we shall settle in the course of the transitional period, as part of the arrangement covering our future agreement for trade with the European Union, that would remove the problem. It is where it ought to be. It was always daft that the Northern Ireland border issue could be determined before we knew what was going to be in the future trade agreement. The Prime Minister herself has now accepted that, actually, over the course of the two years, it should be possible to find a solution that will allow free movement back and forth across that border, on the basis of technology, so the Government think that can be done in the next two years. If we could only get it out of the withdrawal agreement, we would then have the time in which we could demonstrate that it would never be necessary.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I operated a hard border in Northern Ireland for two years. We stopped every car, we searched every car, we checked every person. I absolutely believe it is perfectly possible for there to be free movement across that border, given willingness on both sides and the use of new techniques, particularly things like pre-registration and number-plate recognition. I think that border does not need to be hard.

Mr Whittingdale: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Of course, when he was serving his country in Northern Ireland, we had to have controls on the movement of people because we were facing a serious terrorist threat. Nobody is suggesting controls on the movement of people now. There is no suggestion that we are going to need any measures of that kind. We are talking about the movement of goods.

I do not want to detain the House any longer because a lot of Members want to speak. As I said, the problem is that the backstop is in the agreement and the agreement cannot be changed once it is passed, because it is a legally binding undertaking. If only the Government could find a way of taking the backstop out and putting it into those issues that we will try to resolve over the course of the next two years, I would be happy—well, not happy, but willing perhaps—to support the motion on Tuesday. But unless that can be done, I am afraid that I cannot.

1.33 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): May I start by saying to the Secretary of State that we were all distressed when we heard the news of his son's accident over Christmas, and we wish him all the best for his recovery? We do, of course, enjoy the right hon. Gentleman at the Dispatch Box. That was a bravura performance—such a comedy turn. He referenced Tommy Cooper. I think of him more as a Frank Carson, because it's the way he tells 'em, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The line that I enjoyed best—it was the way he told it—was the one where he said that the EU “will look on enviously at the UK with this Brexit.” That was the best killer line in that speech, because we can almost hear the shrieks of laughter coming across the North sea and the English channel as they observe the plight of this pitiful nation. They are not envious of us; they are feeling sorry for us because we have ended in this pitiful state. If any of them were even thinking of following the United Kingdom's example, they will look at this chaotic Government and decide, “Never in a million years will we do that.” It is the best lesson to any other nation never, ever to engage in such an action.

I loathe the Government's Brexit—I loathe it totally and utterly, from the self-defeating, isolating ugliness of the project to the all-consuming, chaotic humourlessness, to the disgusting way that they are treating the 3.6 million EU nationals who are among our friends, our colleagues and our family members. I despair at what we are doing. I will observe and look at their Brexit deal, but I see no redeeming qualities or features to what this Government are doing with this absurd Brexit. The fact that my country so overwhelmingly rejected this Brexit makes me despair even more of what this Government are doing.

The only reason, the Government tell us, that we should be supporting this paltry document is that it is better than a no deal. My big toe is better than a no deal; my broken finger is better than a no deal, but I am not asking the House to support either of these personal artefacts. What vision! What ambition! Vote for the Prime Minister's deal because it is better than no deal! That is the only reason that we seem to be given, in successive speeches by Government supporters and Ministers, for why we should be doing this.

Huw Merriman: That is a gross generalisation. The reality is that 52% of this country voted to leave, and that is what this deal does. But also, importantly, 48% did not, and this deal will actually see us continue with our relationship with the EU, and in fact deepen it in many regards. *[Interruption.]* Security.

Pete Wishart: It does not even start to—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman does not need to address his points to me. I am beyond redemption. He should turn his attention to some of his hon. Friends and colleagues on his own Benches, and I invite him to do that. I think they are all thoroughly looking forward to his speech. His efforts may be more fruitful with them than they are likely to be with me, because I shall go on to explain why this deal is totally, absolutely and utterly unacceptable to me, to my constituents and to the vast majority of the Scottish people.

I have never seen another example where it has been the main policy intention of a Government to intentionally impoverish, with such chaotic abandon, the people they are notionally there to serve. When the history books judge this little period of British history, in the late teens in this century, they will only ever conclude that this is the greatest example of political, cultural and economic self-harm that has ever been committed by a nation unto a nation.

The fact that we have got to this point will be forever remembered as the greatest single failure of any modern Government in post-war history. And you remember why we are doing this—remember why all this started? *[Laughter.]* They laugh. A referendum. It was supposed to heal the divisions within the Conservative party on the issue of the European Union. Ten out of ten for that, Mr Speaker. What an absolute and resounding success. Not only have they further divided their rotten party, but they have gone and divided a nation and then taken that nation to the very brink. And now, of course, we observe the abyss on the other side of that brink, in all its grotesque horror.

If we look at the Brexit clock—

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Pete Wishart: I was going to move on, but yes, I will give way to the hon. Lady because I quite like her.

Victoria Prentis: I am slightly confused. Does the hon. Gentleman object to referendums, or just the results of referendums?

Pete Wishart: This is where we are with the Conservatives, when they ask banal, stupid questions such as that. The hon. Lady asks me about the referendum. Let me tell her about referendums. We have had two referendums in Scotland. In the first referendum, the people of Scotland voted to remain in the United Kingdom. *[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]* They like that. Scotland is still part of the United Kingdom. We then had a referendum on EU membership, where the nation—the nation—of Scotland voted overwhelmingly to remain. We have not got what we wanted in this referendum, and that means that we have a nation completely and utterly alienated from what the Brexit Tories are doing to us. That is a difficult issue that, at some point, they

will have to confront, just as, at some point, the Scottish people will have to make some sort of constitutional assessment of it, because this cannot stand. We cannot have a nation being taken out of a Union that it values and cherishes, against the national collective will of the people of that nation.

John Redwood *rose*—

Vicky Ford *rose*—

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con) *rose*—

Pete Wishart: I give way to the chief Brexiteer, the newly sirred John Redwood.

John Redwood: Can the hon. Gentleman explain why a decision to withdraw from the European Union is nasty and inward looking, yet a decision to withdraw Scotland from the United Kingdom is the opposite?

Pete Wishart: I say candidly to the right hon. Gentleman that the EU referendum had at its very core—at its cold, beating heart—the case of isolationism and immigration. It was about stopping people coming to this country. That defined every single case for rotten Brexit—every reference was about ending freedom of movement, which is presented as the great prize of this deal and this Brexit. What Scotland wants to do is reach out to the world and be part of an international community, to demonstrate our internationalism and what our sense of community is about. There is the right hon. Gentleman's type of nationalism and then there is my type of all-encompassing international solidarity.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): My area, the west midlands, is massively diverse. I have spent 10 years knocking on doors all over the midlands and all across Birmingham. The issue has nothing to do with immigration—it is to do with sovereignty. That is why people voted to leave. Come with me to the Black Country, Coventry or Birmingham, and speak to voters on the doorsteps. That is what they will tell you.

Pete Wishart: I almost wish that was true—that the debate had been about sovereignty and the great things this country could do. All I ever saw was the disgusting and nauseating posters about immigration; all I saw in the right-wing press was about that issue. Every time I went on a hustings with a Conservative Member of Parliament, it was all about ending freedom of movement and controlling immigration. That was all I heard. That was the repeated message, again, again and again.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Like me, and I presume everyone else in the Chamber, my hon. Friend got a begging email from the Prime Minister shortly before the first attempt to push this through. It listed the benefits of her deal and No. 1—top of the list of the Prime Minister's reasons for supporting the deal—was, was it not, ending freedom of movement. Did my hon. Friend get a different set of priorities? Is it possible that the Prime Minister gave us a priority that we could not support at the top of the list and gave something different to those who now deny that the referendum was about ending freedom of movement?

Pete Wishart: Absolutely; I did get that correspondence from the Prime Minister. I do not know why we are even trying to debate and contest the fact as it has been said by the Prime Minister and everybody on their feet, including the Secretary of State: the great prize of this deal, of this Brexit, is ending freedom of movement. I will briefly come to the consequences of that; they are dire for my nation and for the businesses that depend on freedom of movement. This is absolutely appalling for the young people who will have their rights restricted.

I want to talk about the Brexit clock, which is interesting. Not only are we now at the cliff edge—the front wheels are actually starting to dangle over, yet the clown shoes are still pressing on the accelerator—but a no-deal Brexit is now a real possibility and the consequences are becoming reality as the Government try to run the clock down.

We know about the food shortages, the running out of medicines, the turning of the south-east of England into a giant lorry park and all the real possibilities of leaving without a deal, yet the Government casually prepare for it. They apply millions of pounds to try to deal with it. They talk about it as if it were a realistic prospect—“Don’t worry your little British heads about it. You’ll be absolutely fine if we leave without a deal.” A no deal may be the life’s work and ambition of some of the extreme Brexiteers in this Chamber, but there are dire consequences for the constituents we serve. Those Brexiteers may be indulging in their European Union departure fantasies, but our constituents will have to pay.

The House is absolutely right not to allow that. The vote on Monday evening was very important. It indicates to the Government, lest they did not know, that no deal is unacceptable to the vast majority of this House. I am looking at some of the Scottish Conservatives—not one of them voted for stopping a no deal and against exposing their own constituents to the prospect of the appalling things that would follow. For that, they will pay a heavy price.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con) *rose—*

Pete Wishart: I give way to the hon. Gentleman. Perhaps he will tell me why he is prepared to expose the constituents of Gordon to the prospect and possibility of no deal.

Colin Clark: Companies in Gordon are actually making preparations for Brexit. If the hon. Gentleman really wants to avoid no deal, he should get behind the Prime Minister and support her deal. That would be in the national interest. Let me ask him: what preparations are the Scottish Government, as a responsible Government of Scotland, making for the possibility of no deal? Are they doing anything?

Pete Wishart: I share an office with the Deputy First Minister; I have seen some of the things he has had to deal with and some of the consequences there would be for Scotland. I do not think the hon. Gentleman fully understands what is at stake. Does he understand the idea of food shortages or civil unrest? Police forces have been activated in this country to ensure that that will be contained and dealt with. Those are the prospects for his constituents, yet he is prepared to expose them to that.

I want to talk a bit about my nation; it is great that some Scottish Conservatives are here and so engaged in this conversation. My country wanted absolutely nothing to do with this.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con) *rose—*

Pete Wishart: I will make a bit of progress, then give way to the hon. Gentleman because I quite like him too.

We returned one Member of Parliament with a mandate to fulfil an EU referendum. Nearly every single one of Scotland’s Members of Parliament voted against the EU (Referendum) Bill; nearly every single one of Scotland’s Members of Parliament voted to ensure that we would not trigger article 50. When we were eventually obliged to have that referendum in Scotland, Scotland voted emphatically and overwhelmingly to remain in the European Union—62% to 38%, which is the most emphatic result in any of the nations of the United Kingdom.

David Duguid: I was waiting for the famous 62% figure, which is often repeated, to come up. Does the hon. Gentleman also recognise that in the 2017 general election, 56% of Scottish voters voted for either the Conservatives or Labour, which, at the time at least, was committed to delivering on Brexit?

Pete Wishart: I have heard Conservatives do this before: they include the Labour party in the figures. If the hon. Gentleman knows what the Labour party’s intentions are with Brexit, he is a lot further down the road than I am. It is a bit disingenuous to include a clueless Labour party in those numbers.

We had the most emphatic vote in the United Kingdom, so we might think—as part of the family of nations and being asked to lead, not leave, the United Kingdom—that that vote would have been taken into account and acknowledged. In fact, the exact opposite has happened. Our remain vote has been contemptuously ignored and every effort to soften the blow to a remain nation has been dismissed, with every proposal binned before the ink was even dry. In the process, we are witnessing the undermining of our political institution with a power grab and the binning of conventions designed to protect the integrity of our Parliament. Then the Government had the gall to tell us four years ago that the only way Scotland could stay in the European Union was to vote no in our independence referendum. We now see the consequences of that.

We look at the example of independent Ireland where the weight of the EU has stood in solidarity and support of one of its members and backed it to the hilt. Compare and contrast that to dependent Scotland within the UK, whose views and interests have been ignored and whose institutions have been systematically diminished as a junior partner in this chaotic Union.

This is an exclusively Tory deal. This Brexit crisis was designed, administered and delivered by the Conservatives. Even with all the last-minute overtures they have made, they have taken no interest in working with others or properly consulting and considering the views of other parties or Governments across the United Kingdom. This chaos is theirs to own, and it will define the Conservatives for a generation. It is a Tory Brexit—forever and a day, they are now the Brexit Tories.

As for Labour, I am not even yet sure whether it is a party of Brexit or against Brexit. I know it has a new position today. *[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State has actually scarpered off, as he usually does when the third party is on its feet. That is a massive disrespect, isn't it? The third party is on its feet, and the Secretary of State scampers out of the House. That is so consistent with this Government.

Let me return to my friends in the Labour party, because I think this is the 17th position they have taken on Brexit. They have tried to create a policy of constructive ambiguity, and I am constructively ambiguous about their position. I presume that their view is still to respect the result, and that it is still their intention to take the UK out of the EU. I know I often refer to my Scottish Conservative friends, but if that is the case, it will be dire for Scottish Labour, which has been shown that if Labour supports Brexit, its support in Scotland will fall to 15%.

I have already mentioned immigration, and we know that ending freedom of movement is the big prize in this country. The sheer dishonesty of the immigration question means that the Government cannot even bring themselves to acknowledge that what we do to EU nationals with restricted freedom of movement, the EU will do to the UK. I have tried to get the Prime Minister to accept that that is the case, because it means that the rights that we across the House have all enjoyed to live, to work, and to love across a continent of 27 nations, freely and without any restriction, will be denied to our young people, our children and future generations. The Government cannot bring themselves to acknowledge that, and to look the young people of this country in the eye and tell them that this change will apply equally to them. If any Conservative Member wishes to say that they acknowledge that, I will happily take an intervention—they were rushing to intervene earlier on.

James Cartlidge *rose—*

Pete Wishart: There we go.

James Cartlidge: That is an important point, and I genuinely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way as I share some of those concerns. Does he accept, however, that parts of England had extremely high levels of EU immigration, and although I always welcomed EU immigration—particularly from eastern Europe and so on—it is legitimate for any community faced with such high numbers to express concern about that, and we as politicians should never be deaf to those concerns?

Pete Wishart: I do not think I heard the hon. Gentleman say that this change will apply to young people in his constituency as they try possibly to make their lives in Europe. That was all I wanted to hear. I know that he has concerns about immigration, but our population growth in Scotland depends on immigration, and if we end freedom of movement, every single business in our economy will take a massive hit. Things are different in the hon. Gentleman's constituency and in my nation of Scotland—we require different things. That is why we have called, repeatedly and consistently, for the devolution of immigration so that we can look after those interests, just as he looks after the interests of his constituency.

James Cartlidge *rose—*

Pete Wishart: I have already given way to the hon. Gentleman. I am conscious that I am taking up a lot of time, so I will make a bit of progress.

What happens next? That is the really intriguing question. Like a trapped beast, the Government might lash out and try to take the whole House down with them in an attempt to punish the country for its insubordination. Compromised by contradictory tensions within their own ranks, it is rare that we get a glimpse of a Government and party collapsing so spectacularly as we have seen over the past few weeks. They have lost all right and authority, and their ability to govern is almost gone. They have lost successive debates on important issues.

The Government will lose the vote next week—it seems there is nothing they can do to avoid that. As a result of the vote yesterday, they will have to come to the House with alternative options for how to deal with the situation, but there are two things that they could do to immediately respond to that defeat. First, they could revoke article 50, which they can now do unilaterally because of the work done by some of my hon. Friends and colleagues. The second thing is a bit harder: ask the European Union for an extension to article 50 so that something can be cobbled together to try to keep the issue alive and open for debate. The Government have to do one of those two things, and the important point is how they deal strategically with their position.

I have considered all the different outcomes possible for the Government, and none of them is good—none of them works for this Government because each ensures that some massive constituency will emerge in opposition—but one thing that we have in Scotland is our own particular solution. We have a way out of this Brexit crisis. We do not have to go down with this Tory ship. We can make our own decisions and relationships with Europe. Increasingly, as this Government continue to collapse, as the Brexit options continue to fall in on them and as we see the disaster that is emerging, the choice of independence for our nation becomes more and more appealing. As we go forward into this year, it will soon become the majority option in our country, and soon we will have the opportunity to foster our own sustainable relationship with the European Union.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. I advise the House that on account of the number of Members wishing to contribute to the debate, it will be necessary to begin with an eight-minute time limit on Back-Bench speeches.

1.55 pm

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): I will speak about public trust in Parliament as a backdrop to this debate. I hope you will indulge me, Mr Speaker, if I start by paying tribute to our former colleague, the late, great Mark Wolfson, who served Sevenoaks with great distinction between 1979 and 1997. He was a great friend and parliamentary mentor to me.

I approach the debate with the clear principle—a principle that long ago inspired me as the great, great, great, great nephew of the “Grand Old Man” Gladstone—that because of a great and glorious truth, this Parliament is sovereign. I still believe that elected MPs, as the sovereign representatives of our constituencies, serve in the highest office, and that to be elected to this House

[George Freeman]

is one of the great privileges and responsibilities that our citizens can bestow. This is a moment to remember that.

Parliament is the institution that, more than any other, defends the liberties and order that we enjoy. Parliament historically defied the tyranny of the King, and in the 19th century, it was Parliament that granted rights to so many who had been denied them. Parliament said that all of us are entitled to equal human rights. In moments of crisis, Parliament has always come together, with parties coming together to put country before party. It is now Parliament that confronts this crisis and the biggest decision facing our generation. It is a decision that will redefine Britain's place in the world and, almost more importantly, the trust of a whole generation in our democratic Parliament and politics.

Parliament—yes, a majority of us in this House—decided to ask the people, and in June 2016, they gave us their answer. For that reason, I remain deeply opposed to a second referendum. The people have spoken and it is our job to implement their instruction. However, that instruction was not clear. People voted to leave by a narrow margin. In my constituency, 58% wished to leave, but nationally the result was 52% to 48%. That is not an overwhelming, thumping majority—it was a narrow margin. Many of my constituents who voted to leave said to me, “George, I voted to join a common market; I did not want to be in a political union.” Those people who voted to leave wanted to be in a common market. I put it to the House that there is no majority in the country for taking the result as an instruction unilaterally to pull ourselves out of all European institutions, including by cutting ourselves off from the single market. That is not our mandate, although we do have a duty to implement the will of the people we serve.

Public trust in our politics and parliamentary democracy is at a dangerous low. As well as getting the outcome right, we must ensure that we conduct ourselves in the spirit required of the day—a spirit of repairing the damage done by that appalling referendum campaign, reuniting a divided nation, and restoring trust in Parliament and parliamentary democracy, not least for those who did not get to vote in that referendum and the people whose futures and interests we will shape.

I voted remain in 2016, and as a Minister responsible for a £60 billion industry employing 250,000 people, in which not one man or woman I could find supported leaving, I felt that was my duty. As the MP for Mid Norfolk, I was—and remain—deeply worried about the impact of this decision on our economy and on the economic prospects of my citizens and constituents. However, I always vowed to respect the result, and I have done so ever since the referendum.

I may have voted remain, but in the previous Parliament and the coalition I was one of the leading champions of European reform. Colleagues may remember that I led the Fresh Start Group report, warning of the dangers of Europe's precautionary principle on holding back UK leadership in science and innovation, which threatened to risk a European dark age at a time when the world is embracing extraordinary technologies in agricultural genetics, accelerated access for new medicines and genomics. Such technologies can transform the life chances of our global citizens. It is a time when we in the UK, through

Europe, could lead on taking those technologies around the world. I fought this battle as a Back Bencher and then as a Minister, but the plea for a more innovative and enterprising Europe fell largely on deaf ears.

Yes, I was a remainer, but one who understood all too well the flaws of the European Union. Let no one accuse me of being a lily-livered, root-and-branch pro-European—I am not. [Interruption.] And neither am I a snowflake, as someone chunters from my side of the Chamber. I wanted Britain to lead the reform of Europe so that we, together with Europe, could embrace the extraordinary opportunities for UK science and innovation around the world in agri-tech, health-tech and clean-tech; in food, medicine and energy; to feed, heal and fuel; and to take around the world the technologies that this country leads in, and that, with our European scientific partners, could help to accelerate global development.

The people have spoken and now we have to deliver. The truth is that all parties are split. It is a truth that Opposition Front Benchers would do well to confront. I know that it suits them to position themselves as remainers in London and the south-east, and as Brexiteers up north, but the truth is that all parties are split. I believe that we ought to be pursuing this in the spirit of cross-party co-operation. In my view, we always needed a cross-party council of Brexit, and I was appalled to hear the other day that the shadow Brexit Secretary has apparently received no contact from Ministers about the possible basis of an agreement. It seems to me that unless we reach out across the House, listen to the electorate and signal that we will put party behind country, we are unlikely to find a solution. We have less than 100 days. We are running out of time. There is an angry mob outside Parliament, and they speak for an angriness in the nation. We need an orderly withdrawal.

Despite our differences, it seems to me that we are all agreed on one thing: this deal is not perfect. I have said so myself and I have many reservations. I had hoped that the Prime Minister would come back from Europe before Christmas with a concession on the backstop. She has come back with a concession, and I hope that there will be more before the vote next week. Let me be clear that I have supported no deal as an option for two and a half years in order to get the best deal. The negotiation is over. In my view, it would be woefully irresponsible of the Government to pursue no deal. I will do everything to ensure, yes, that we leave the European Union with an orderly deal, but not with no deal. When I hear Lord Wolfson, an ardent Brexiteer, warn as the chief executive of Next that the cost of food and clothes—basics that our constituents rely on—would go up dramatically with a no-deal Brexit, when I hear the Royal Society warn that a no-deal Brexit would be catastrophic for our science and when I hear the National Farmers Union warn that British agricultural would be hit without a deal, with a potential trade embargo affecting our £3 billion food export industry, please do not accuse me of “Project Fear”; this is serious “Project Business” for the people we serve.

If the Prime Minister's deal does not pass next week, it seems to me that we need a plan B, and I have made it very clear that I personally support colleagues on both sides of the House pushing for the European Free Trade Association model. It would give us access to the single market, but we would be out of the customs union and we would have freedom to do trade deals and to take

back control of farming and fishing. Yes, it has a problem, which is free movement, but remember that it is the free movement of workers, not citizens, and I believe that it would require—I relish this—a bold package of welfare eligibility reforms, along with skills and training reforms, here in the UK.

I will, with a heavy heart, vote for this deal on Tuesday, because we are now in the dying stages and leaving with no deal is unconscionable, but I beg colleagues to ask their Front Benchers to work together across the House in pursuit of something we can all be proud of.

2.3 pm

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I want to say at the outset that the Government are now in such a position that we need a general election. They no longer have any authority, they no longer have a majority and, it seems to me, they no longer serve any useful purpose.

Before making my main points, I want to take issue with something the Secretary of State said in his opening speech—the right hon. Gentleman has unfortunately had to leave the Chamber. Essentially, he argued that a second referendum would be undemocratic. The premise of the whole argument was that the deal people voted for in 2016, or that they thought they were voting for, will be delivered by the Prime Minister's deal, but it will not. The right hon. Gentleman knows that, as indeed does every Member of the House who campaigned in the referendum. We all know that the deal has no bearing on the reasons people voted to leave the European Union, and we should be clear about that. I do not think that it would be undemocratic to go back to the people almost three years later and ask, “Is this exactly what you voted for? Is this what you want to happen?” My first priority, because of what I have said about the Government, is to have a general election. If that is not going to happen, the next best thing, almost certainly, has to be a referendum.

I want to talk about two things. First, I want us to consider Britain's place in the world. Winston Churchill, in his speech to the Tory party conference in 1948—it has been quoted repeatedly, but I think it is worth revisiting—described “three majestic circles” in the following terms:

“The first circle for us is naturally the British Commonwealth and Empire, with all that that comprises. Then there is also the English-speaking world in which we, Canada, and the other British Dominions and the United States play so important a part. And finally there is United Europe.”

Obviously, so much has changed since then that we cannot stick to that as a rigid formula, and I would not argue that we should do so, but let us quickly take each one of those circles in turn. The United States and Canada are both much more complicated places and have new networks of connections between them and with South America. Of course, in the current circumstances, as others have said, the idea that we can have a truly constructive relationship with the present US Administration beggars belief.

The English-speaking world has changed considerably. Our trade and relationship with the Commonwealth, for example with Australia, New Zealand and Canada, are now dramatically different. The idea that we could suddenly revive all those old relationships and everything will be fine is purely fanciful.

We still have, while we are a member of it, a relationship with the European Union. That does give us a bigger say in what happens around the world, because it is not just plucky little Britain as an island state saying something; it is often something we can say in concert with the rest of the European Union. My first point is therefore that we will be a diminished country in the world after we leave the European Union.

Secondly, I want to address some of the concerns that constituents raised with me on the doorstep during the referendum campaign. Yes, the main issue was immigration. It was not just about free movement of labour, although some people did mention that; it was about immigration in general. Another issue was the lack of opportunity for young people, which is a serious problem for many young people in my constituency. Another issue was the need to revive our towns and town centres, and not just in economic terms but with regard to the built environment. Concerns were raised about workers' rights, particularly by those active in trade unions, and of course I agree on that. Concerns were also raised about the environment, which is the subject of today's debate.

I firmly believe that we can get immigration right and better, and that the time is now propitious for us to do so, with Europe. We could implement cross-Europe policies to deal with migrant labour and those who seek asylum through other ports in Europe. The time is right for us to get a good agreement on that with Europe. In recent weeks, my party and the Government have started to publish new immigration policies. Let me be clear: I am not anti-immigration, but I accept that we have to have some kind of rational policy on it.

On education, health and all these other issues, the country is crying out for change and for new opportunities for young people. Why do we have to leave the European Union to get that? We do not have to. If we put forward to the British people a positive programme that still involves our being part of the European Union, they would probably want to go for it. They should certainly be given the opportunity to do so. Our future lies in our hands, but it does not necessarily lie outside the European Union.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before I call the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel) to make the next contribution, I am sorry to remind Opposition Members of what they will have already seen for themselves: namely, that the speech-time facility is not functioning. I am advised that it will not be repaired until the House is not sitting. Opposition Members, who will doubtless be very aggrieved, cannot go on for as long as they want, as the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) chunters hopefully from a sedentary position. They are disadvantaged, but they will have to be assisted by the Whip on duty, who can gesticulate as and when he or she thinks fit. That is a practice not entirely unknown or uncongenial, in my experience, to a Whip.

2.11 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I approach this debate very much conscious of the wide range of views held in the House. As we are on the second leg of this debate, following December's discussions, this is a pertinent moment to go back to what it is we are here to focus on vis-à-vis the withdrawal agreement and how we got

[Priti Patel]

here. Of course, I approach this debate very much with the referendum result in mind. Nearly three years ago, this country quite remarkably put on the greatest show of democracy that we have seen, resulting in the majority—more than 17 million people—voting yes to take back control of our country. They made that choice against a range of forecasts and, to be quite crude, some pessimistic propaganda. They took a bold and brave decision to instruct us Members of Parliament, in this House and throughout the country, to take a new and different path. It was a message to us to reset the political system.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): I am so grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way so early in her speech. Does she agree that, whether people voted leave or remain, at no point during the referendum campaign was there a suggestion that the rights of EU nationals who had been resident in this country, lawfully exercising their treaty rights prior to any prospective Brexit day, should be affected if the referendum resulted in a vote to leave?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right on that point. That was never a feature of the campaign at all. Of course, what did figure in the minds of the British public, irrespective of how they voted, was that the political system—us—had for far too long siphoned power away from voters and almost denuded political decision making in this country. That is where they wanted to see us come together. At the core of the vote was a desire to see our democratic, economic and political freedoms returned to our institutions and, of course, for them to see sovereignty returned, too.

The vote to leave was an endorsement not of a political individual, party or platform, but of our country. It was an expression of self-confidence in where we could go in terms of our place in the world. Amid the debates that we are currently having, the rhetoric now, the wider discussions of a second referendum or even, as some may say, attempts to block Brexit, and amid the stories in the media and a continuation of fear and scare-stories, the essence of choice—the choice that people wanted to see—is being lost. Of course, there are a wide range of views in the House, and I respect all right hon. and hon. colleagues who want their voices to be heard, but we should also remember that Parliament gave the people a choice, and Parliament voted to trigger article 50 and to leave the European Union. We are now focused on fulfilling those commitments.

That brings me to the deal that has been put forward. Of course, many of us want to see Brexit delivered, and we were impressed by the sensible and pragmatic vision for our future outside the EU that the Prime Minister outlined in her Lancaster House speech and in other speeches two years ago. That was a plan that would have restored control of our country, kept a positive partnership with our friends and allies in the EU and, of course, freed Britain to be globally focused and to form close ties with countries and friends around the world. I have no doubt that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister approached the EU in good faith but, as negotiations have progressed, the vision in Lancaster House and other speeches has been diluted, and ultimately ditched. We have seen the EU exercising control in the negotiation at the expense of our national interest.

The deal before us does not deliver the Brexit and the vision that the Prime Minister originally outlined. It allows the EU to continue to make our laws and to impose its Court's judgment on us, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) said earlier. It gives the EU powers to veto our foreign policy and sabotages our international trade negotiations. Ultimately, as the House has heard repeatedly, it threatens the integrity of the United Kingdom. On top of that, we are expected to pay £39 billion of taxpayers' money, as other right hon. Members have highlighted, without guarantees of a comprehensive free trade arrangement and no prospect of departing from the horrors of the backstop without the EU's permission. The equal partnership with the EU that the Prime Minister promised has not materialised; instead, we have a deal that gives the EU licence to dominate us for years to come.

I am conscious that earlier in the debate we heard my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs speak about the environment, fisheries and farming. As a Member of Parliament who represents a coastal community and a farming community, I have said in the House, as have colleagues, that there are so many freedoms that we want to secure outside the European Union when it comes to the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy, yet the deal does not secure them. Brussels will still pose ongoing threats to our fisheries, which will obviously have ramifications for us. The same is true when it comes to agricultural policy. Farmers in my constituency have raised that issue with me.

Of course, the great prize of being free from the EU to negotiate and secure trade deals with growing global markets has been lost in this deal. I do not need to remind the House that by the middle of the century the EU's share of trade in the global economy will be less than 10%. We need to focus much more strongly on our trading relationships outside the EU. Why would we want to remain shackled to the EU and to be dependent on it to set our trade policy when we can be trading further afield? We need to work sooner rather than later to secure those relationships.

I have touched on what the deal means for our precious Union and for Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom. The protocol severely damages democracy in Northern Ireland and imposes laws and rules on the people there without any representation. That goes further than the controls on the rest of the United Kingdom and is simply not acceptable. In the provisions on Northern Ireland we have seen for the first time in modern history a UK Government negotiate to cede part of our country to a foreign power. That is simply not acceptable.

The British people are tired of subservience to the EU and astonished by the one-sided negotiation process that has put the integrity of our precious Union in real danger. We will be trapped in the backstop and trapped in EU institutions; Northern Ireland will be left under the control of a foreign power, which is not acceptable; and under this deal our destiny will no longer be in our own hands. The British people want national leadership that is ambitious for our country—the type of leadership that is clear as to who governs our country and where elected power and accountability lies, and they want decision making that is free from the unnecessary constraints of the EU and EU control, and with that a restoration

of trust in the democratic process that does not see our political establishment renege on the referendum result or our manifesto commitments.

I believe that Parliament should deliver on these democratic, political and economic freedoms by rejecting the withdrawal agreement. We must ensure that we can go further by trying to secure the type of trading arrangements that we originally said we would, but we can do so only once we reject the withdrawal agreement and ensure that the EU is no longer in control of our country.

2.20 pm

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel).

Unfortunately, as is so often the case in this House, we have polarised views on both the leave side and the remain side, for which no deal is ever going to be good enough. I rise to speak because my approach to the nation's decision to leave European Union is to look forward rather than debate the past, to work cross-party where possible, to be constructive rather than destructive, and to seek to unite the country, not divide it further. That is why I support amendment (p), which I have co-sponsored with my hon. Friends the Members for Bassetlaw (John Mann), for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) and for Wigan (Lisa Nandy).

As we debate the conditions under which the UK leaves the European Union, there are legitimate concerns not only about what form the final agreement takes, but about UK Government intentions and the UK's future direction. I am sure that this amendment is not perfect—we know that all amendments in this debate are not legally binding, and there is much discussion about that—but it does speak to the concerns of many in this House about how we can build on the political declaration and get more assurances, and maybe more certainty, from the Government on how we can protect the rights and standards that affect employment, health and safety and the environment, many of which we have taken for granted during UK membership of the European Union. We want to ensure that they do not decline after the UK leaves. Also, in keeping with the desire for the UK Parliament to regain control, amendment (p) wishes this House to be able to debate and decide on any future improvements to protections or rights implemented by the European Union. The choice would be in our hands; we would debate and vote on those issues.

As this amendment proposes, the UK's goal post Brexit should be to ensure that workers' rights do not slip back—that the rights enjoyed by many British employees are protected. Likewise, UK standards on water pollution, pesticides, emissions, energy conservation and carbon reduction must all be protected, with a UK commitment not to walk backwards. Amendment (p) reflects some of the key demands expressed by Labour over the future direction.

For too long the debate in this House has been polarised, with the rhetoric too sharp and many Members on both sides of the House too quick to condemn and too slow to listen. I campaigned for remain. A majority of my voters voted leave, although many voted remain as well. I have always been honest with my leave voters that there will have to be compromise in the final deal that allows us to chart our own future and have more independence over many policy areas—the ability to

move beyond the EU and deal with many of the concerns that led to their voting leave. But I have also been up front about recognising that we need a strong partnership with the European Union as we leave, and much of that strength is through co-operation.

I am also honest that life in the EU was never perfect, despite the relationship being close for good reason and despite the fact that it must remain so. We need to talk less about what we are against and more about what we are for, and I believe that our deliberations on the next steps should reflect that. The British people deserve sincere endeavour from this Parliament. The withdrawal agreement is the headline deal—the divorce. It is not the final deal. Trade-related, customs union-related talks will have to be agreed only once the UK leaves.

I welcomed Labour's support for a transition period, which we demanded back in August 2017. We recognised that the 20-month period to which the Prime Minister signed up would be as important as the past two years have been because there are a wide range of trade and security matters to resolve. We should approach this period positively. It is unreasonable to expect all these matters to have been resolved by this point in the process, but a deal has to be agreed to get to that discussion, and there is still time for talks across this House in order to reach that outcome.

Despite the good work of the EU, I am very proud of the UK having a long history of being at the forefront of high standards when it comes to employment rights and environmental protections. It would be wrong to suggest that the rights that UK citizens take for granted—holidays, maternity leave, minimum pay and our welfare system—exist only because of the European Union. They do not. As a Labour MP, I fundamentally believe they exist because of 100 years of the Labour party and the trade union movement. Despite relatively few periods in office, Labour has made great advances in social change that have become mainstream and to which all parties now lay claim and adopt. These are achievements of this House over many decades, not imports from Brussels or Strasbourg, and not every country in the EU can claim what the UK rightly can.

Chris Bryant: I sympathise with some of that, but the truth is that LGBT rights were quite often forced on Britain by European Court of Justice decisions and European Court of Human Rights decisions, and were not adopted even by a Labour Government. Sometimes we have had to resort to elsewhere.

Caroline Flint: I do not disagree with my—right hon. Friend?

Chris Bryant: No.

Caroline Flint: Shame. I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, who should be a right hon. Friend, but we must not polarise this debate by saying either that the EU is all bad or that the UK does nothing without the EU's permission.

Our minimum wage is twice that of Greece's and more than Spain's, and many EU member states do not have a minimum wage. Statutory maternity pay in the UK is paid for up to 39 weeks, compared with just 16 weeks in France, 16 weeks in Holland and 26 weeks in Ireland. Many people ascribe paid holidays to the EU,

[*Caroline Flint*]

but the truth is that it was a Labour Government who signed up to the social chapter that led to that happening, and who added bank holidays on top. With regards to equality, same-sex marriage is legal in just 14 of the 28 member states, so the rights that our lesbian and gay citizens enjoy are in many respects rights derived from decisions of this Parliament, not the European Union.

In the coming weeks and during the transition, it is not too late to adopt a different approach—a less confrontational politics. I want the Government to begin a new dialogue across parties, as they should have done earlier. I want them to consult the Opposition on the negotiations around trade now, and to commit to doing so during the transition period. With 78 days until the UK leaves the European Union, it is too easy to talk about further delay. The task is only impossible if we in this House make it impossible. Extending article 50 would not solve anything, and neither would a second referendum. Our conduct in the coming weeks and months can either seek the best deal and heal divisions, or seek to prevent a deal and divide the country further.

I believe that our path has to be one that brings the nation together—a Brexit based on a reasonable deal that protects the standards and rights that we value and shows generosity of spirit to our European neighbours, but which gets on with the task of getting through this process and dealing with the many issues that we did not face up to during our 40 years in the EU.

2.28 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): This Parliament is on trial. The public voted very clearly in the people's vote of 2016. They were told by Parliament and the Government, by the remain and leave campaigns, that they—the people—were making the decision. They were promised that this Parliament would get on with the task, and they now say to this Parliament, “Do just that. Get on with it.”

The public recall that this Parliament is dominated by Members of Parliament serving in the Labour and the Conservative interests. In the 2017 election, every one of us was elected on a manifesto that made it clear that our parties supported implementing the verdict of the British people. The Conservative manifesto went further and made it very clear that we were going to leave the single market and the customs union, as had been pointed out by both remain and leave campaigns in the referendum. The Labour party manifesto set out an interesting and imaginative trade policy for an independent Britain that is clearly incompatible with staying in the customs union. So Labour too, along with the Conservatives, said to the public in 2017 that we would be leaving the customs union as well as the European Union when the decision was implemented.

There are many leave voters now who are extremely angry that some Members in this House think they were stupid, think they got their decision wrong, and think they should have to do it again. Many people in the country who voted remain, as well as many who voted leave, think it is high time that this Parliament moved on from every day re-enacting the referendum debate as if it had not happened and thinking that we can go back over the referendum debate and decision because it did

not like the answer. All those who stood on a manifesto to leave the European Union should remember that manifesto. Those who deeply regret the decision and did not stand on such a manifesto should still understand that democracy works by the majority making decisions. When a majority has made a decision in a referendum where they were told that they would get what they voted for, it ill behoves anyone in this Parliament to know better than the British public and to presume that this Parliament can take on the British public and stand against them, because we are here to serve that public. We gave them the choice and they made that choice.

I want us to be much more interested in the opportunities that Brexit provides and to have proper debates about all the things the Government should be doing for when we leave, as I trust we will on 30 March 2019. I see nothing in the withdrawal agreement that I like. It is not leaving; it is sentencing us to another 21 to 45 months of these awful, endless debates and repetitions of the referendum arguments as we try to get something from the European Union by way of an agreement over our future partnership, having thrown away most of our best negotiating cards by putting them into the withdrawal agreement in the form that the European Union wants. That would be ridiculous, and a very large number of leave voters would see it as a complete sell-out. That applies to a very large number of remain voters as well, many of them in my own constituency. They have written to me and said, “For goodness’ sake oppose this withdrawal agreement, because while we do not agree with you about the ultimate aim, we are united in thinking this is even worse than just leaving”, or, in their case, staying within the European Union. I find myself in agreement with the overwhelming majority of my constituents on this subject. For both those who voted remain and leave, this is a very bad agreement that suits neither side.

The opportunities we should be discussing today in respect of fishing, agriculture and business are very considerable. I again ask my oft-repeated question of the Government: when are they going to publish our new tariff schedule? The United Kingdom can decide how much tariff, if any, to impose on imports into our country. I think that the EU tariff schedule on imports into our country is too high. I proposed to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy that he remove all tariffs on imported components. That would be a huge boost for manufacturing in this country. Instead of having to say to manufacturers that we might end up with some tariffs on components coming in from the EU, because we have to charge the same to everybody, let us be bold and say that we are going to get rid of the tariffs on the components coming in from non-EU sources so that we cheapen the costs of manufacturing in the United Kingdom and give people a better choice on components.

George Freeman: Will my right hon. Friend address the worries of farming families, communities and industries up and down the country facing tariffs on their products going into Europe? This is a £3.15 billion industry facing a very serious tariff threat.

John Redwood: I was going to get on to food, and I will do so immediately as I have been prompted. We run a massive £20 billion a year trade deficit in food with

the European Union, and tariff-free food competes all too successfully against some elements of our farming industry. I want the Government to choose a tariff structure on food that provides lower overall tariffs against the rest of the world but produces some tariff against EU production so that we will produce more domestically. I want to cut the food miles. I want to see more of our food being produced and sold domestically. Our domestic market share has plunged seriously during the time we have been in the European Union. I think it was well over 90% in 1972 when we entered, and it is now well under 70%. There is absolutely no reason why we cannot get back there.

We need to know urgently from this Government what tariff protection there is going to be against EU food once we have left; whether they will take advantage of the opportunity to get rid of tariffs on food coming in that we cannot conceivably grow or produce for ourselves; and whether they will lower the average tariff, because some of the tariffs that the EU imposes are eye-wateringly too high, to the detriment of the food consumer. As we will be collecting more tariff revenue in total when we start to impose some tariffs on EU products, we should be having a debate on how we are going to spend that money. I trust that the Government would rebate it all to British consumers by direct tax cuts of the right kind. There is no reason why the consumer should be worse off, because we are heavy net exporters and we are going to collect an awful lot more tariff revenue on the EU's goods than they are going to collect on ours, unless we do something very radical on our tariff schedule. We therefore need to discuss how to spend that money.

We also need to discuss how we rebuild our fishing industry. I am impatient to get on with this. I do not want it to be delayed. We need to take control of our fish and our fishing industry this year, not sometime, never. Under the withdrawal agreement, we have no idea if and when we would get our fishing industry back. Doubtless it would be in play as something to be negotiated away, because the Government have given everything else away that they might otherwise have used in the negotiation. I want to get on and take back control of the fish now. I want a policy from the DEFRA Secretary on how we can land much more of the fish in the United Kingdom, how we can build our fish processing industries on the back of that, and what kind of arrangements we will have with the neighbouring countries both within and outside the EU whereby we will be free to settle the terms and negotiate our own conditions.

This is a huge opportunity. The fishing industry is one of the industries that has been most gravely damaged by our membership of the European Union, and we owe it to our fishing communities around the country to take that opportunity. From landlocked Wokingham, I can assure colleagues from coastal communities that there is huge enthusiasm throughout the country to rebuild our fishing industry and to see those fishing fleets again expand and enable us to land much more of our own fish. We can, at the same time, have a policy that is better on conservation by getting rid of many of the big industrial trawlers that come from the continent. We can get rid of the system where there are discards at sea or, now, the system where people are actually going to be prevented from fishing completely because the

fishery cannot be managed sensibly, to the detriment of the fish and the fishermen and women undertaking the work.

There is a huge agenda there. Above all, I want the Government to set out how we are going to spend all the money that we will be saving. The Government say that we are going to give away £39 billion—I think it will be considerably more—under the withdrawal agreement. I would like to take that sum of money, which they have clearly provided for as it is their plan to spend that money, and spend it in the first two years when we come out in March 2019. That would be a 2% boost to our economy—a very welcome Brexit bonus.

2.37 pm

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I invite the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) to sign our amendment (p), because through it we want to take back control to Parliament. The substance of the amendment is on workers' rights, environmental standards, and health and safety—that, for me, is one of our red lines; not the only one, but a critical one. That is what this amendment does in directing Government through the negotiation period. I recommend that others around the House sign up to it.

The Government have a dilemma and I want to speak directly to them. This time when the Government are imploring everyone to vote for their deal is the time when we, across Parliament, have maximum leverage over the Government. The Government will need to handle this dilemma in a very sophisticated way. The time for rhetoric has gone—there have been plenty of repeat speeches on what people think; everyone has a view—and the time for negotiating has begun. The Government ought to be getting people in immediately—be it shadow Front Benchers, the shadow Brexit Secretary, or the Chair of the Brexit Committee—and attempting to negotiate directly with them on how we go forward. Otherwise the prospect of no deal gets all the more real—no deal by accident.

The focus here has been inward, and the Government's focus has been inward, on their own party and their Democratic Unionist party deal, rather than outward. It is getting very late in the day, but it not too late in the day. The weakness of the Government's deal is also its strength, in that it puts a lot off into the negotiations on the trade deal. That gives us in Parliament significant influence, if we choose to use it, all the way through.

Mr Speaker, your ruling yesterday has been seen in the context of you being biased in relation to Brexit. That is nonsense. You will have whatever view you want. The huge significance for government must not be lost in this. With a Fixed-term Parliaments Act and a minority Government, your ruling gives Parliament more power over a minority Government in the future. It happens to be a minority Conservative Government now. If there is an election, it could be a minority Labour Government. It is the same principle. This is fundamental, because it changes the way we will have to operate. Will we learn quickly enough, or will we continue with the rhetoric and fall into something that the majority do not want?

There are other red lines. These are not the only things that I or, I think, Opposition Members regard as essential. One of the reasons that my constituents voted

[John Mann]

for Brexit—it was no surprise to me—was that we have not had our fair share. There was a small period under the Blair Government when we got our fair share infrastructure-wise. We gloried in it, and it was brilliant, but other than that, we have not in my lifetime had our fair share. Whoever is in government in the next five years has to give what I call the real Brexit dividend—our fair share—to areas like mine, which means that other areas would get less. That is what “left behind” actually means.

I recall a demonstration I went on outside the power stations, with 5,000 workers. I was the only external person invited, and I spoke. The jobs were going to Portuguese workers and, because of EU laws, they could do nothing about it. We had to pressure the employer, and we succeeded, through civil action. I realised at that point how strong the feeling was, and therefore the result was no surprise. If we want to define a Brexit voter in my area, it is a trade unionist in an organised workplace. That is the core of the Brexit vote, and my area is not unusual in that. Government need to get their head around that and negotiate with the Opposition over the next weekend and the next few weeks, if that is needed to get a deal.

I stood on a manifesto that said we are going to deliver Brexit. Frankly, voters can boot me out—they can boot any of us out for reneging on or sticking to our principles. I do not for a moment demur when people take the opposite point of view. They are very principled people, and I respect them for that. I do not agree with their conclusions, but I respect them for their bravery. Everyone knows that even a second referendum will not resolve the split in the country. Part of what we need to do in this process in relation to the deal is to resolve the split in the country.

My area is sick to death of condescending, patronising words. People in my area knew what they were voting for. They knew why they were voting—and by the way, it was not the same as the vision of the right hon. Member for Wokingham. They were not voting for a race to the bottom, for the lowest common denominator, for lower wages and lower standards and for us to undercut the rest. They were voting for best practice, the highest of standards and to compete with the freedoms. My appeal to Members in my party and others is that now is the time for practical, specific proposals based on what people are in favour of precisely, not what they are against.

This is not just about whether we can get through the next few weeks. It is about whether Parliament and its authority will survive. My voters will walk. They may not vote Tory or UKIP, and they may not vote for me; they will walk. They will say, “The political process is useless and broken. You’re all to blame.” We can reach different conclusions about the outcomes of that, but understanding that reality is fundamental.

We should at least try, with the Labour party manifesto position and our stated objectives, to get a negotiated deal with the Government and vice versa. That is fundamental to the process. Will it succeed? I do not know. We are helping with this, and we are helping, not to be helpful politically, but because this is real stuff: health and safety, environmental standards and workers’ rights are real stuff.

John Redwood: I agree with the hon. Gentleman about how the public will react if their voice is ignored, but will he withdraw his comment that I want lower standards and a race to the bottom? I want higher pay and better standards, and that is what I campaigned for.

John Mann: Well, I shall finish by inviting the right hon. Gentleman and everybody else to sign amendment (p). We should see more amendments like this on equality issues and other red lines, to get the deal through by the maximum consensus based on our manifesto commitments and, more importantly, to hold the country together.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I apologise for interrupting the debate, but this seems important. The media are reporting that No. 10 Downing Street is briefing that its interpretation of yesterday’s vote and the requirements of the legislation is that, if the Prime Minister’s motion is defeated next Tuesday, the debate on the plan B that the Government would be obliged to bring forward would be restricted to only 90 minutes, and they would allow only one amendment to be chosen and voted upon.

Is that your understanding? Can you confirm that the Government could in fact provide as much time as they wanted for a constitutional debate that is so contested and so crucial to the future of our country, and that they could provide for as many amendments to be considered as is needed? Given that the Prime Minister and the Government have been saying that they want to listen, reach out and build a consensus, how, if this is the case, can we believe anything that the Government say?

Mr Speaker: I will respond, but as the Chief Whip is signalling an interest in contributing, I am happy to hear the right hon. Gentleman.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Julian Smith): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Just to confirm, no decision has been made along the lines of what the right hon. Lady has said. The Government will do everything they can to ensure that the House is fully consulted in every eventuality next week, and the information that she has is not correct.

Mr Speaker: I am happy to respond to the point of order from the right hon. Lady, and I thank her for giving me notice of it. She has kindly shown me the press report to which she refers, but she knows that I have not yet had the opportunity to study it carefully. Moreover, it is not our normal practice to respond to any and every press report based upon a briefing from someone who perhaps thinks that he or she knows what the procedures are in this place but does not always fully do so.

It is true to say that the default position under Standing Order No. 16(1) is that debates pursuant to an Act of Parliament must be concluded after 90 minutes, flowing from which there tends to be a practical restriction on amendments because the time has lapsed, and therefore only one amendment in such a hypothetical situation would be taken. However, it is also true to say that such provision is often disappplied by an Order of the House.

I must emphasise that all of this is hypothetical at this stage, and I do not think it would be helpful to speculate on what may happen subsequent to the decision of the House next Tuesday. I can, however, confirm that the right hon. Lady is quite correct in saying that it is perfectly open to the Government, if such a situation were to arise, to provide for a much fuller debate. In those circumstances, there would predictably be a significant number of colleagues who would want to put their own propositions on the paper. I am extremely confident that if that hypothetical scenario were to arise, colleagues would assert themselves.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Could you confirm that it would be open to Members of the House to seek to remedy this potential problem by tabling an amendment to the withdrawal agreement motion for next week, because this matter would inevitably flow from a consequence of the withdrawal agreement not being carried by the House of Commons?

Mr Speaker: I would like to reflect on that. It may be possible for that to be done. If it is possible for it to be done, it may well be a matter of judgment as to whether it is thought to be worth doing. The reason there is no great hurry on that matter is, of course, that I am not even in a position, under the Order passed on 4 December, to select amendments until the final day of the debate. I do not know if the right hon. Gentleman heard me explaining, in response to a point of order from the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) this morning, that it was quite wrong for people to talk about amendments that had been accepted. She mentioned to me in her point of order that allegedly the Government had signalled their acceptance of a particular amendment. That was a wholly inapposite report or claim. No amendment has been accepted at this stage, because no amendment has yet been selected. I am not allowed to select any amendment until the final day, so some people really do need to keep up with what the procedure is. The right hon. Gentleman has plenty of time in which to reflect on these matters.

Yvette Cooper: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I do not want to interrupt the debate further, but the response from the Chief Whip was obviously helpful, even if it is slightly odd that he has now left the Chamber before the conclusion of any further discussion on the point of order. Do you think, Mr Speaker, it would be helpful for there to be further clarification from the Government Benches about what plan there would be for further debates, so that we can have reassurance?

Mr Speaker: What I would say to the right hon. Lady is twofold. First, I do not control the Government Chief Whip any more than the Government Chief Whip controls me. I think we ought to be clear about that. I cannot comment on his whereabouts and they are not a matter of any great concern to me. Secondly, if the right hon. Lady or other colleagues want to explore these matters in the debate in the coming days, they absolutely can do so. All I can say is that, in support of Members in all parts of the House and of all shades of opinion, I will always have regard to the opportunities for Members to put their points and to advance their causes. These are not matters purely for the Treasury Bench. I think we are clear about that.

2.52 pm

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I should start by reflecting that the speech by the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) was one of the finest analyses of what happened in the referendum. The right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) also absolutely hit the nail on the head about where we are today and how we need to progress.

We have heard, and will continue to hear in this debate, reasons why people feel they cannot support the Government's deal. We will hear hon. Member after hon. Member describe in gruesome detail what precise strand of Brexit or non-Brexit they will support. That will be all very fascinating for their local paper or grist to the mill for their next blog, but in the context of what Parliament is doing in this debate and in next week's vote it will be utterly irrelevant. What matters is not what any of us individually think of the deal; what matters is what Members in the Chamber decide. What matters is the maths of who makes up this House.

I am happy to give detailed reasoning to the House for why I am prepared to support the Government. That would be of interest to some of my constituents. It would be welcome news to my constituent who runs a business which employs over 20,000 people and is pleading with us to agree the deal. It would be interesting to the small businesses in my constituency that wrote to me about why ideological Brexiteers are playing with fire when they breezily claim that no deal would be just a bit of mid-air turbulence. We should listen to such people and ask ourselves who is more likely than them to understand the complexity of supply chains or the competitive pricing of their products.

For some in this House the word "compromise" is a pejorative term: a sign of weakness and a word which is too quickly followed by other words like "betrayal". For me, compromise is almost always a virtue. I compromised as a soldier serving on operations. I compromised as a businessman in every negotiation I did. I compromised as a Minister when negotiating in Europe for this country. I compromise almost daily in this place trying to get some of what I want through, rather than getting nothing. Perhaps the best analogy I can use is that I compromised when I got divorced. As one hon. Member said outside this Chamber the other day, "At least his divorce was with only one person, not 27."

As the leading Brexit campaigner Dan Hannan wrote recently, if a 52% to 48% referendum result is a mandate for anything, it is a mandate for compromise. That said, like most in this House I am a democrat and I concede that my side lost. Like about 85% of this House, I was re-elected in 2017—I might add, with the highest ever popular vote in my constituency in any general election—on a manifesto that pledged to respect the result of the referendum. If we look at the bell curve of public opinion on this issue, we see the edges of the bell curve showing the irreconcilables, the small percentage at either end who are either inexorably grieving at the result of the referendum and will do anything they can to undo it, or those for whom the cleanest of breaks with the EU is a theocracy and an ideology on which, as with the other end of the scale, compromise is impossible. And then there is the rest of the country. Here we find an understanding about what we want to achieve: to move from being a country inside the EU with some opt-outs, to one being outside the EU with some opt-ins.

[Richard Benyon]

For many of them, this deal is fine. I support the Prime Minister if she can bring forward any changes and tweaks that will encourage more of our colleagues to join. I also give notice that if that fails I will seek, with other colleagues right across the House, to find a way forward. If that takes me down an EEA or EFTA route, then I will look at that. That would be sub-optimal, but it may be the only thing the House can agree. What I do feel is that there is no majority in this House for no deal. I really urge people to listen to industry and to the letter we received today from the four presidents of the NFU. If one represents a rural area and minds about our food industry and the rural economy, that letter is calm, deliberate knowledge.

In the spirit of compromise, and to ensure there is something for all of us, I am really attracted by the idea that, perhaps on workers' rights, the environment, and health and safety, we could provide a sort of triple lock where if Europe decides to raise standards above where we are today we can say that we will put them to this House. We are a sovereign House of Commons. We can make a decision on whether to support them. I am interested in that.

I wish to say a word to those who want a second vote. If someone is calling for it because they see it as the best way of reversing the first referendum, say so—be honest with the public and do not dress it up with some higher purpose. In passing, I would also say: be careful what you wish for. The further one gets from London and its bien pensant elites, the more one detects an anger and belligerence towards the campaign for a second referendum. The Institute for Government has said it would take four to five months to have a second referendum. We would be putting this poor country through another four or five months of the kind of divisions we saw in the last one. Is that what we really want? The Electoral Commission, the independent body that oversees such votes, has very strong views on some of the points being made about the kind of questions that might be asked.

My discussions with some of the 97% of my constituents who have not written to me on this issue can be condensed down to one simple message: get on with it.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman also accept, though, that if the House were to support the Government's deal, along with the political declaration, it would be a sure fire way of ensuring that this uncertainty and political wrangling continue for years to come?

Richard Benyon: I do not agree with the right hon. Gentleman. It will give certainty. It would certainly give certainty to many of the businesses I have talked about. I think there is a dam holding back investment in the economy. We all see it in our constituencies. If the deal were to go through, I think we would see a mini-boom in this country, as well as a determination to close this off in the minds of the electorate by trying to speed through the final stage of negotiations. If there is another emotion I detect in my constituency, it is one of admiration for the tenacity of the Prime Minister. While not everyone will agree with what she has come up with, I think we can all accept that.

I will finish with a heartfelt plea to people right across the House not to stand absolutely on the principle and clear position of what they would accept, but to recognise that the House of Commons has to raise its game, understand that compromise is not a dirty word and find a solution that we can all agree.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before I call the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), I must advise the House that, after she has spoken, the time limit will have to be reduced to six minutes. [Interruption.] Yes, I recognise that it is a pity, but very many Members wish to take part.

3.1 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon).

Is it not depressing that we are here again having moved on no further in the past five weeks? The Public Accounts Committee has produced nine reports on Government preparedness. Every day we go on indecisively, the Government are spending money preparing for no deal and other options, and that is not to mention the money that will need to be invested, if we leave, in order that we can do all the things currently done through European institutions.

I will not repeat what I said in my speech on 6 December, but I feel I need to mention the 41,500 EU residents in my borough, who are very concerned. The uncertainty that the right hon. Gentleman talked about is doing them and business no favours. I have sympathy with what he said about compromise. I am a remainer. My constituency was very pro-remain, and many of my constituents viscerally want to remain, but the distress and delay is a problem. He talked about a three to four-month plan for a second referendum, which I would reluctantly support if Parliament cannot make a decision, but according to others it would be six months. We need to think carefully about where that would lead us and what uncertainties we would have to live through along the way.

As I said in my last speech, the Government have proceeded recklessly, but today I want to talk about an issue that was never really discussed in the campaign on the mainland of the UK. I should declare that my husband is a dual citizen of Ireland and the United Kingdom. The Northern Ireland border is too often dismissed as a confected issue that does not matter greatly. I did some research. Only 108 MPs in the House today were in Parliament when the Good Friday agreement was signed in 1998, and only 144 of us were here when we had the last republican terrorist attack on the mainland. There is a diminishing number of Members who were here and closely involved in that debate, when our leaders, Tony Blair among them, took us to the signing of the Good Friday agreement.

In December 2017, the *Irish Mirror* reported that MI5 had disrupted more than 250 separate attacks in Northern Ireland alone, with seizures of explosives, weapons and ammunition, and that there had been 16 attacks in 2015-16 in Northern Ireland. There remain serious issues for peace in Northern Ireland and the

security of Northern Irish citizens, as well as of Irish citizens across the border. We have been in the common travel area with Northern Ireland since the Irish Free State was declared in 1922, except for a brief period after the second world war. Ireland has aligned itself with us to maintain that position, in 1952 signing up to our immigration rules on the Commonwealth and in the '70s joining the EU. The Republic of Ireland is not considered a foreign country under UK law. Irish citizens have a special status that confers on them the right to vote here. Under British law they have more rights than EU citizens, including the right to be Members of this House with Irish citizenship alone; they are not required to become British citizens.

It is good that article 5 of the withdrawal agreement confirms that the common travel area and free movement must remain for our Irish cousins, but it is of real concern to me that we have not debated how we will deal with the Irish border. The Prime Minister said in a statement in October 2018, and she has repeated this sort of phrase many a time:

“We are obviously committed to no hard border, and we have made it clear that in any circumstances, including in a no-deal situation, we would be doing all that we could to ensure that there was no hard border. We would look to work with Ireland and the European Union to ensure that there was no hard border, but there has been no commitment in relation to that.”—[*Official Report*, 22 October 2018; Vol. 648, c.61.]

That last half sentence is the real issue.

There are options, but none of them is good. Customs checks could be imposed at the border because Ireland becomes a third country under EU law. How does that chime with our commitment to the common travel area? We could do nothing and temporarily have no border while we work out the political agreement, but if we do so, we could be the subject of a complaint to the World Trade Organisation. We could move checks further away from the border in the so-called max fac—maximum facilitation—option, which the UK proposed and the EU rejected. Even when the UK proposed it, it was still not clear what it was. It involves a bit of number plate recognition, and perhaps taking some goods and checking them.

I have had the privilege of speaking to the Comptroller and Auditor General for the Northern Ireland Audit Office and hearing him describe the travel of goods back and forth across the border, which I know well. UK citizens in Northern Ireland and Irish citizens in Ireland have a lot of business—processing of milk and pork, a lot of other agricultural business—that relies on movement across the border. It is vital that that is maintained, and there is really no answer to that. One of the reasons why I cannot support the deal is that it does not resolve that problem.

There is, as other speakers have highlighted, no simple answer, but we have had weakness upon weakness from this Government. There has been reckless rush and unnecessary delay. The Prime Minister has reached out far too late to Members in her own party, let alone trying to have any cross-party discussions. I was dismayed to hear from the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) that there has not even been proper dialogue with the Opposition Front Bench. There is no authority, and that is of real concern to me. How can we have faith that the sketchy political agreement will be fleshed out and delivered by this Prime Minister in her current weakness?

I think we need to look—I say this rather reluctantly—at revoking or at least extending article 50 unless Parliament can deliver. Even with the three-day deadline, it is difficult to know how we can begin to coalesce around alternatives. I throw that at the Government; as the Executive, they still have power to determine the business in this place. We have to have an opportunity to discuss alternatives. If we fail, we need to consider going back to the people, even with all the problems I have highlighted that doing so would raise.

3.7 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): In these difficult times for our country, it is as well to remember the iron rule of politics: no situation is so bad that it is not possible for politicians to make it worse. I fear that we are in such a situation now. Not to vote for the deal would be to fall into precisely that trap.

I was a remainer. I campaigned across Cheltenham for remain, from the high street to the promenade. I did not do so because I thought the European Union was perfect. It had allowed itself, in many ways, to become inflexible and too remote from ordinary people. Even if I would not have suggested joining on the terms that were proffered in 2016, it seemed to me that the process of unravelling that 40-year relationship would be so lengthy, so complex, so expensive and so divisive that the game would not be worth the candle.

I made that argument and others, which are being reheated, such as that that process would act as a headwind against growth, and I was proud of the fact that 56% of people in Cheltenham voted to remain. But we did not vote as constituencies; we voted as a country. We voted as one nation, and I am first and foremost a democrat. I stood on a manifesto in 2015 that read:

“We will honour the result of the referendum, whatever the outcome.”

Parliament then voted for such a referendum. On Second Reading of the Bill that became the European Union Referendum Act 2015, the then Foreign Secretary said that the Bill had

“one clear purpose: to deliver on our promise to give the British people the final say on our EU membership in an in/out referendum”.—[*Official Report*, 9 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 1047.]

That was voted for by parties across the House—the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats. During the campaign, the Government distributed to every home in Cheltenham a leaflet stating:

“The referendum...is your chance to decide if we should remain in or leave the European Union...The Government will implement what you decide.”

We all know that was the deal. I remember the words of the late and much-missed Paddy Ashdown on the evening of the referendum. Before the result came in, he said:

“I will forgive no one who does not respect the sovereign voice of the British people once it is spoken, whether it is a majority of one per cent or 20 per cent. When the British people have spoken you do what they command. Either you believe in democracy or you don't.”

Some in the House say the margin of victory does not matter. “In a referendum,” they say, “the winner takes all—one more vote is all you need to impose the most ideologically pure version of what you argued for.” I respectfully suggest there are great dangers in assuming that the 2016 referendum result—just 52:48—was a

[Alex Chalk]

mandate for a tungsten-hard no-deal Brexit, which is now one of the two obvious alternatives to this deal. Those who advocate that would do well to remember that, had the EU negotiators simply offered David Cameron a genuine emergency brake that did not dismantle the freedom of movement principle but provided a sensible derogation, it is likely we would have voted to remain.

This deal is a compromise. That means it has positives and negatives. The positives are these. On goods, the EU has accepted that the UK should have a bespoke trade deal, with no tariffs, fees or charges and no quotas. On services, the EU has accepted the principle of arrangements for financial services, which, importantly, will be based on equivalence. British nationals will be able to travel freely without a visa, EU directives will no longer have direct effect and so on.

Against that backdrop, is it any surprise that the deal has been loudly welcomed by Rolls-Royce, Siemens, the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry and the chief executive of UKHospitality? The BioIndustry Association supports it—I could go on and on. The chief executive of BAE Systems, which employs many people in Cheltenham, welcomed the transition period, and GE Aviation, a significant employer in Gloucestershire, said:

“Ratification of a withdrawal agreement would provide business with the certainty it needs. In contrast, a disorderly ‘no deal’ exit in March would present considerable challenges for our operations, supply chains and customers.”

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the experts and others he prays in aid, whose views I certainly give great weight to, have been too easily dismissed? People either call them fake news or say, “They would say that,” or, “They don’t know what they’re talking about; we know better.” There is a dangerous anti-business trend in what some people say, and we must resist it.

Alex Chalk: And this is the Conservative party, which listens to business and wants to stand on the side of people who create prosperity in our country. By the way, if we want to deliver social mobility, we will do that through jobs and enterprise, and by raising tax revenues so we have the greatest possible public services.

Of course there are negatives to the deal; we have heard about those. Concern is rightly expressed about the Irish backstop, but, as the Secretary of State indicated and the Attorney General has said, it is an instrument of pain for both sides. What is a backstop for us is a back door for them. Northern Ireland would have the advantage of being able to access both the single market of the EU and the single market of the UK. Mainland British businesses would be incentivised to relocate to Northern Ireland to supply their goods into the EU. Meanwhile, the process of negotiating trade deals would become a nightmare for the EU, as it would not be able to clarify the frontiers of its single market and the British taxpayer would not be paying a penny piece.

The fact is that all trade deals require some kind of backstop. Canada-plus and Labour’s suggestion—it wants to be inside the customs union but outside the single market—would require one, too. I have heard much

criticism from the Labour party. Some of it is fluent and cogent—we get all that—but, with respect, criticism is easy. As a quote probably misattributed to Teddy Roosevelt goes, complaining about a problem without proposing a solution is called whining. Labour does not want a second referendum, does not want an extension and criticises the Government, saying there is no way they could get meaningful changes to their deal, yet it suggests that it could get a whole new deal by 29 March—a “strong single market deal”, although that is completely lacking in detail and clarity as to what Labour would require. [Interruption.] It is indeed a “unicorn” prospect.

A hard Brexit, I would suggest, is simply not an option. There are concerns about Ireland, and I have real concerns about it. Of course it is necessary to “aim off” with respect to some of the polls, but there is a real risk that if there is a hard Brexit the appetite for a border poll will increase, and there is then a real risk of a united Ireland. There are great risks from a second referendum as well, which I cannot go into now. However, there is an opportunity for us to do something sensible and unlock the wall of investment that is poised over our economy, and I shall be voting for the deal.

3.15 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I have faced many challenges in the two decades for which I have sat in the House, but Sunday 7 August 2011, the morning after the Tottenham riots, was by far the greatest. Walking on broken glass, past burnt-out cars, homes and businesses, comforting men and women who were still in their pyjamas, I saw the place where I had lived for my whole life turned to ashes.

Many members of the community were urging me to say that the killing of Mark Duggan by police, which had sparked the riots, justified that rage: that the families made homeless, the burnt-out buses and houses and the looted shops were worth it. They told me I had to say that that wrong was right. It was not easy, but I had to look members of my community in the face, tell them that the violence was a disgrace, and condemn it unequivocally. Why? Because we have a duty to tell our constituents the truth, even when they passionately disagree. We owe them not only our industry but our judgment. We are trusted representatives, not unthinking delegates, so why do many in the House continue to support Brexit when they know that it will wreck jobs, the NHS and our standing in the world?

This is the fundamental dishonesty at the heart of the Brexit debate. Most Members now recognise that in private, but do not say it in public. Brexit is a con, a trick, a swindle, a fraud. It is a deception that will hurt most of the people it promised to help. It is a dangerous fantasy that will make every problem it claims to solve worse. It is a campaign won on false promises and lies. Both Vote Leave and Leave.EU broke the law. Russian interference is beyond reasonable doubt.

By now, every single campaign promise made in 2016 has come unstuck. Brexit will not enrich our NHS; it will impoverish it. Our trade deal with Donald Trump will see US corporations privatise and dismantle it, one bed at a time. Even the promises on immigration, which has so greatly enriched our country, are a lie. After Brexit, immigration will go up, not down. When we enter into negotiations with countries such as India

and China, they will ask for three things—visas, visas and more visas—and they will get them, because we will be weak.

Then there is the myth about restoring parliamentary sovereignty. The last two years have shown what a joke that is. The Prime Minister has hoarded power like a deluded 21st-century Henry VIII. Impact assessments have been hidden, votes have been resisted and blocked, and simple opponents of Government policies have been bullied and threatened to get into line. Even when we forced a meaningful vote, the Prime Minister cancelled it, certain we would reject her disastrous deal—and oh, we will reject it, because it is a lose-lose compromise that offers no certainty for our future. All that it guarantees is more years of negotiation, headed by the same clowns who guided us into this farce in the first place.

We are suffering from a crisis of leadership in our hour of need. This country's greatest moments came when we showed courage, not when we appeased: the courage of Wilberforce to emancipate the slaves in the face of the anger of the British ruling class, the courage of Winston Churchill to declare war on Hitler in the face of the appeasers in his Cabinet and the country, and the courage of Attlee and Bevan to nationalise the health service in the face of the doctors who protested that that was not right. Today, we too must be bold, because the challenges that we face are just as extreme. We must not be afraid to tell the truth to those who disagree.

Friends on this side of the House tell me to appease Labour voters in industrial towns: the former miners, the factory workers, those who feel that they have been left behind. I say that we must not patronise them with cowardice. Let us tell them the truth. Let us tell them, "You were sold a lie. Parts of the media used your fears to sell papers and boost viewing figures. Nigel Farage and the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) exploited the same prejudice to win votes. Shame on them. Immigrants have not taken your jobs; our schools and colleges failed to give you skills.

Hospitals are crumbling not because of health tourists, but because of decades of austerity that ground them down to the bone. People cannot afford a house because both parties failed to build, not because Mohammed down the road moved in. Wealth was hoarded in London when it should have been shared across the country.

Blame us; blame Westminster: do not blame Brussels for our own country's mistakes. And do not be angry at us for telling you the truth; be angry at the chancers who sold you a lie. As Martin Luther King said long ago:

"There comes a time when silence is betrayal."

So just as I speak plainly to the Government this time around, let me speak to the Opposition about some home truths. There is no left-wing justification for Brexit. Ditching workers' rights and social protections and ending environmental co-operation is not progressive. This is a project about neoliberal deregulation; it is Thatcherism on steroids, pushed by her modern-day disciples. Leaving the EU will not free us from the injustices of global capitalism; it will make us subordinate to Trump's US.

Socialism confined to one country will not work. Whether we like it or not, the world we live in is global. We can fix the rigged system only if we co-operate

across border lines. The party of Keir Hardie has always been international. We must not let down our young supporters by failing to stand with them on the biggest issue of our lives.

If we remain in the EU we can reform it from the top table: share the load of mass migration, address the excesses of the bureaucracy and fix inequalities between creditor and debtor states. We can recharge the economy. We can refuel the NHS. We can build the houses we need after years of hurt. Hope is what we need: remain in the EU; give Britain a second opportunity to decide.

3.21 pm

Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): I do not want to use my speech to talk about parliamentary procedure or the detail of the various options to withdraw from the EU—I will leave that to others to do. What I want to talk about today is trust: not trust in MPs, which the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) has just alluded to, but trust in the electorate, which my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) spoke about.

In 1997, I, like many others, was unhappy that Tony Blair became Prime Minister, but I did not start campaigning for a people's vote to remove him, and the same was the case in 2001 and in 2005. In fact, I think the situation was the same in 2010, 2015 and 2017, as the Opposition would have been disappointed about the outcome of the election, but they did not start campaigning for a people's vote to overturn it. That is because we accept the results of votes in this country, and we should accept this one.

Turning to the point of this whole debate, in June 2016, the British people were given a say on our future relationship with the EU through a simple in/out referendum. We chose to leave. The numbers who voted or the margin of the majority are irrelevant; the question was put and the answer was given.

It should come as no surprise that, in a contest, some people will be disappointed. We should not dismiss their concerns; we should instead try to be as accommodating as possible. That is what people have been talking about today, but we must stay true to the referendum result—we have a duty to do so.

Antoinette Sandbach: Does my hon. Friend accept that when Vote Leave registered, it was registering for a simple "out" vote, but said it was not binding itself to a particular form of out, and that it would be up to MPs to decide how that result was implemented?

Royston Smith: I appreciate my hon. Friend's intervention, but it is not for me to talk about what Vote Leave decided; it is for me to talk about what I think and what my constituents think.

Everyone in the Conservative party, including my hon. Friend, stood on the 2015 manifesto. They promised to give the British public a straightforward in/out referendum. Everyone who voted in December 2015 to legislate for that referendum did so promising to honour the result. Everyone who voted and campaigned in the referendum did so in the spirit of what had been agreed before the vote took place, and again promised to honour the result—at least I assume that they did. Can we really imagine that people were wandering around

[Royston Smith]

campaigning for in or for out, but saying to their constituents and friends, “Whatever happens, if we don’t win, we’ll just renege on the result”? Of course they did not do that; they campaigned saying they would honour the result. Everyone in here who voted to trigger article 50 and everyone in here who voted to pass—[*Interruption.*] I am not saying that everyone here voted in that way. I am talking about everyone who did vote in that way—[*Interruption.*] If Members listen, they can intervene on me. Everyone in the Chamber who voted to trigger article 50 and who voted to pass the European Union (Withdrawal) Act did so because at that time they were doing what they promised their electorate they would do.

In 2017, both two major parties stood on manifestos that promised to honour the result. In my constituency, the Conservative and Labour candidates shared 93% of the vote. Two parties that promised to honour the result of the referendum shared almost the entire vote while all the other parties lost their deposits. Almost every Conservative and Labour Member has promised to deliver Brexit at one time or another. At the time, those who supported remain accepted the wording of the referendum. At no time did they say that the result needed to have a particular majority, or that the consequences needed to be spelled out. Why was that? Quite obviously it was because the remain voters thought they would win. I thought they would win, even though I campaigned for and voted to leave.

The country has followed this soap opera for two years. It has joined us on this journey, which began with the referendum and was followed by a prime ministerial resignation, a new Prime Minister, a general election, Lancaster House, Florence, “Brexit means Brexit”, “No deal is better than a bad deal”, a delayed vote, a vote of confidence in the Prime Minister and, finally, “This deal, no deal or no Brexit at all”. No Brexit at all is not an option. This place voted for the referendum and promised to honour the result. This place voted to trigger article 50 and, in so doing, reconfirmed to the British public that our democracy is more important than political convenience. We all accepted the terms before the campaigns started, and if Members fail to implement the result or attempt to frustrate the will of the people, they are not democrats and I have no idea why they are here.

I would like to offer some clarity for those Ministers who like to appear on the “Today” programme saying that people like me know what they do not want but not what they do want. I met the Prime Minister and I could not have been clearer to her: I want a deal but, as it stands, I do not want her deal. The Prime Minister promised to protect our precious Union. Her deal does not do that, because it treats one part of our Union differently from the other parts. So, for those who repeat that people like me know what we do not want but not what we do want, I will say it again: take the backstop out, and I will compromise again and reluctantly vote for the deal.

This has been a dark time in our nation’s history. It has laid bare the divisions in our country and, by renegeing on the promises we made to the British public, we would plunge our country into an even darker place, and I would not blame the voters if they never trusted a

politician again. Many of the people outside this place believe that politicians are untrustworthy. They think that we spend most of our time talking to ourselves and not caring about what they think. If we fail to honour the result of the most important vote in living memory, we will prove them right, and I will have no part in that. I made promises to my constituents and I fully intend to honour them, whatever that takes. I would rather lose my seat, honour my commitments to my constituents and preserve what integrity is left in this place than behave as so many others are, in their own self-interest.

3.28 pm

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): My friend, Lord Ashdown—Paddy—is being buried today in Somerset, so I hope that the House will allow me to speak about this deal as I think Paddy would have done. The hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) might not have known about the burial service, but my friend Paddy would have been able to apply his critical faculties to the deal and judge it on the basis of what was good for this country. That is what he would have done. I worked for him for nearly 30 years, beginning as his economics adviser, and when he talked about Europe, he talked about the way in which countries needed to co-operate and work together. Internationalism was in his liberalism. He talked about how, working with other countries, this country could regain sovereignty and regain control over global capitalism, and the multinationals that sought to undermine the interests of individual countries, people and corporations. His view was that we were stronger and had more control. That was his approach to the European Union.

However, things went much deeper than that. Paddy was a soldier and a diplomat, and he brought that experience and those beliefs to the European question. It was his commitment to peace and to patriotism—he loved his country—that made him such a strong pro-European. We see that in his books and his speeches when he talks about the dangers of rising nationalism and protectionism around the world. He worried about Trump, Bolsonaro and Brexit, and he thought that Britain being in the EU was one of the best ways of combatting those rises in nationalism and protectionism. In his work in Bosnia, he talked about how the EU’s institutions were bringing peace not just within that country, but within the Balkans. Indeed, if we look at what is happening, the EU is one of the magnets that is ending the hostility between those countries, and it can play a key role. It is an engine for peace, as it has been across Europe.

Of course, as man who was born in Northern Ireland, Paddy would look at the threat to the Good Friday agreement with serious concern. Nearly 3,600 of our countrymen and women died in the troubles, but few have died since the Good Friday peace agreement. People inside and outside this House should think carefully about anything that puts that at risk. Paddy certainly did, believing that the EU was a way of gluing people together and moving away from past hostilities.

I was Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change when Putin invaded Crimea and the Bolsheviks went into eastern Ukraine. There were crisis summits. The European Energy Council got together to work out how to deal with the matter, and one way of undermining Putin was to reduce Russia’s oil, coal and gas exports by

ensuring that the EU became more secure by going green and by trading within itself, making it less dependent on Russia. That meant less money into Putin's pockets and therefore fewer soldiers and rockets. That was how the UK could exercise soft power through the EU. Europe's energy security strategy was written in my office in Whitehall, because we were able to use soft power to try to promote security and peace. That is what the EU is about, and that is why Paddy supported it.

If Paddy applied those same thoughts to this deal, he would say that it is hopeless. This deal would lock Britain into bad diplomacy—diplomacy based on transactions and deals, not relationships. In the modern world, a country should have deep relationships with its neighbouring states. When I was in the coalition Government, I talked about having joint Cabinet meetings in Berlin and in London with the German Government. That did not go down too well on the Tory Benches, but I was trying to ensure that relationships were built on understanding between Ministers, not on press releases. I am afraid that this deal locks us into transactions between now and whenever we find out what Brexit actually means, which will be when the political declaration is eventually negotiated. Beyond that, however, whenever we get to the end of those negotiations—the Secretary of State is dreaming if he thinks that that will happen at the end of the implementation period—we will still be in a much more transactional relationship with the EU, which will damage this country and its interests. Paddy would think that this deal is not in this great country's interests.

I hope that the deal will go down next Tuesday—I will vote against it—but it is unclear what will replace it. There is a clear majority against no deal. Is there a majority for some other deal? I do not know. Perhaps Norway-plus will attract some people. I find it deeply unattractive, because we would have all the costs and rules of the EU, but no voice and no vote. That is why—I am happy to admit this—putting the decision back to the people is a good idea. I hope that they will change their minds. If the people vote on this deal based on what they have seen over the past two and a half years, they will have a lot more information than they had in 2016. Some say, “The people knew what they were voting for,” but I really do not think that that is the case. Over the past two and a half years, there has been the most immense opening of people's minds to what actually happened. In addition, more than 1 million young people did not get a vote in 2016, and they would like a say in their future. I believe that the case for another vote is made.

3.34 pm

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): In September 2014 the people of Scotland were confronted with a choice between remaining a member of the United Kingdom and becoming an independent state. The debate that preceded that vote brought politics alive in Scotland, and it did so precisely because it went to the heart of our national identities and challenged the idea that we could be proud of being both Scottish and British.

As the House knows, in that referendum, the people of Scotland voted to remain part of the United Kingdom and, ever since the result was declared, it has been incumbent on those of us who believe in our United Kingdom to continue defending it. It is in that

context that I considered the withdrawal agreement, because I would never vote for anything that threatened or undermined the integrity of our United Kingdom. I respect colleagues who have taken a different view on this matter, and I fully understand the concerns they have expressed because I initially shared those concerns. I have always been clear that, when we leave the European Union, as I voted to do, we leave as one United Kingdom.

Members may know that my constituency is home to the strategically and economically important port of Cairnryan, which handles approximately 45% of Northern Ireland's trade with the rest of the UK. Any border down the Irish sea or proposal to carve off Northern Ireland from the rest of the United Kingdom would be hugely detrimental to the port, which would be wholly unacceptable.

Although the withdrawal agreement is clear that nothing in it prevents the UK from ensuring unfettered access for goods moving from Northern Ireland to the rest of the UK's internal market, I welcome the specific commitment in the paper published yesterday that the Government will enshrine a guarantee to that effect in primary legislation. I do not want a situation to arise in which the UK needs to enter the backstop arrangement, and the text is clear that the backstop is neither the preferred nor the expected outcome. With the right level of political will and determination, it is entirely possible to reach an agreement on our future relationship before December 2020 and I, like the Prime Minister, sincerely hope we do.

I would have preferred a provision in the agreement that would enable us to end the backstop unilaterally, but that is not in the agreement. Although article 1(4) of the Northern Ireland protocol explicitly states that it is intended to apply “only temporarily,” I cannot help but think that inserting an end date, even one as far away as 2023, would focus both parties' minds on finding a solution. I have no doubt that, when the solution comes, it will come down to money, as I am quite confident that the technology already exists. The proposed backstop arrangement is uncomfortable. However, I am reassured by the words of my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General. Like him, I believe that, compared with the other courses available, this is a reasonable, calculated risk.

The Prime Minister has accepted that this deal is not perfect, and we have to recognise that the withdrawal agreement is only one step in the process of leaving the EU. The Environment Secretary correctly said in his opening remarks that we should not make the perfect the enemy of the good, and I agree. I also believe that, if David Cameron had come back with this deal before the referendum, we leavers would have taken it. For me, Norway-plus, no deal and a second referendum are all less appealing than the deal before us. Even worse is the possibility of a Government led by the Labour Front Bench team who, despite having plenty of time to come up with something, have absolutely no plan for Brexit.

As a result of this deal, we will again become an independent coastal state. In December 2020 we will be free to decide who has access to our waters. We will be able to create a support system that meets the needs of our farming and rural communities, including my own in Dumfries and Galloway. In Scotland the withdrawal agreement has the support of organisations such as the

[Mr Alister Jack]

Federation of Small Businesses, the National Farmers Union of Scotland, the Scotch Whisky Association and the Scottish Fishermen's Federation.

In 2016 a majority voted to leave the EU. The Prime Minister has been clear in her determination to deliver on that result, and we leave the European Union on 29 March. After much deliberation, I have reached the view that this is a deal that delivers for the whole United Kingdom without undermining the integrity of our precious Union. It is a deal that moves Brexit forward. It is a pragmatic compromise that means we leave the political union, the customs union, the common fisheries policy and the common agricultural policy. It ends free movement and it ends the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice over the United Kingdom. It is also a deal that reflects the closeness of the referendum result, by leaving the EU at the same time as protecting our jobs and our economy. Despite my backstop reservations, I support it.

3.40 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): There is no ideal way forward now that will satisfy all. I will not be voting for the withdrawal agreement that the Prime Minister has negotiated. I am afraid it is a mess, and the way she has handled Brexit from the beginning of her premiership has been fundamentally flawed. If we go forward on the basis of her deal and the political declaration, I believe that terrible damage will be done to the jobs, life chances, finances and prospects of my constituents, and to many other people in the rest of the country.

Colleagues from across the House have talked today about compromise, but the Prime Minister and her Government have made no efforts to seek a consensus across this House, or across the country, on the best way forward. From the beginning of her negotiations two years ago, she has focused her efforts on keeping her warring party together, rather than looking to do what is best for the country. She has not sought to set out a range of Brexit options and lead a great national conversation about the best way forward amongst potential options or available choices; she has simply ruled out the ones that she does not think some in her party will support. She has not sought to heal the divisions exposed by the toxicity of the referendum campaign, and the fears and divisions it exploited, or to reconcile the differences between those who voted to leave and those who voted to remain that have been revealed as a consequence.

The Prime Minister has purposefully since run down the clock, to prevent anyone but a small group around her from having a say on the way forward. Her negotiating red lines were more about keeping her most uncompromising Brexit-supporting colleagues on board and preventing them from removing her from office, than about finding a consensus across our nation, but they have had the effect of ruling out sensible and less damaging Brexit options, and now we are being told that it is her deal or no deal.

In my view, the Secretary of State, the Prime Minister and the Government should rule out no deal straightaway. It would be the most irresponsible, self-harming stupidity, and should not be contemplated. Seeking compromise and finding agreement across the House has not been a

focus of what the Government have tried to do, and we need to recall that when they now stand up and say they want compromise.

Let us recall that the Prime Minister did not want the House to have any meaningful say on Brexit at all. She wanted to trigger article 50 without allowing a vote in the House; only public-spirited citizens and the courts stopped her. She wanted to negotiate a deal and implement it without a meaningful vote in this House; only parliamentarians across parties have stopped her. She wants the Executive to take back control of our laws, with its full panoply of Henry VIII powers, not Parliament. Now, with her deal in deep trouble, she talks about compromise, but she has been trying to run down the clock and threaten us with catastrophe if we do not do her bidding, pulling the meaningful vote to waste another month—all to give the impression that it is her deal or no deal.

What are the consequences of the Prime Minister's deal? The National Institute of Economic and Social Research said that the White Paper version of her deal would cost the UK up to £100 billion by 2030 and cut GDP by 4% compared with the status quo. No deal, which she threatens the nation with, would be even worse, seeing a fall of up to 9% of GDP, on the Government's own forecasts, over the next 15 years. GDP would be cut in the north-west by 12% in the next 15 years, hitting manufacturing particularly hard.

My constituents are already reeling from the seemingly never-ending austerity imposed by the coalition and Tory Governments. Poverty is rocketing upwards. Food bank use is becoming institutionalised. The services towards which my constituents used to turn to get help and support at Liverpool City Council and Knowsley Borough Council are severely compromised; both had two thirds of their money removed by the Government. My constituents cannot afford the economic dislocation of the Prime Minister's Brexit, much less a no-deal Brexit.

My constituents did not vote for this. They voted, like me, to remain. Research shows that, since that time, sentiment has moved further towards remain, currently standing at about 64-36, and that accords with my own sense of what is happening in the constituency. My own survey shows an 80-20 split for remain. I accept, of course, that it is not as scientific as opinion polls and research; it is a self-selecting set of people who reply, but they are my constituents. When I asked about the PM's deal, 73% said that Brexit should be stopped altogether, with only 2% supporting her deal. A further 7% said that it was a bad deal but the only one available, so only a tenth were willing to back her deal. Some 80% told me that they expected leaving the EU to be bad for their families and an even higher number said it would be bad for the country, yet that is what the PM now expects me to vote for. I will not do it; I cannot do it.

I will not vote to make my constituents poorer just to get the PM off the hook on which she has ineptly but willingly put herself. The UK faces the biggest political crisis we have had in my lifetime—precipitated by the 2016 referendum, the subsequent general election, when the PM lost her majority, and the botched negotiations. The Government have no majority in this House, yet persist in acting as though they do.

Enough is enough: Parliament must take back control. It is showing welcome signs of doing so. There must be no more delaying tactics from the Government. If the deal goes down next week, Britain must find a new way forward. If we cannot have a general election because of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011—although the possibility has yet to be tested—we should extend or revoke article 50, to enable a people's vote on the deal, with the option of remaining in the EU.

3.46 pm

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): On 23 June 2016, I voted to leave the European Union—not as a Member of Parliament, as I had not yet been elected, but as a resident and parent of four daughters who has always lived in Copeland and hopefully always will.

I do not describe myself as a Brexiteer. I voted to leave because I am proud and desperately ambitious for this country. That pride and ambition are based not on an out-of-date rose-tinted nostalgia, but on fact. The success of our country and our place in the world was secured well before we joined the European Union, and as part of the EU our success has continued. But over recent decades the north of England, despite being responsible for so much of our industrial and technological prowess, has not had the investment, particularly in infrastructure, that it should have had to really achieve its full potential.

Much of the dialogue around Brexit has focused on process. If I am honest, the mantra of control of our laws, borders and money motivates me less than what we are all surely trying to achieve. We are striving for a successful UK. If the outcome, aim and prize of Brexit is a more successful country, I do not want to scupper the very educational establishments and businesses that will be absolutely critical to achieving that outcome.

To be clear, I voted to leave the EU, I want to leave the EU and I respect our country's democratic process. I look forward to Parliament's getting this agreement over the line. As I see it, this is a skeletal framework. Each and every one of us has the responsibility to put the flesh on the bones. The key points of leaving are met in the deal: free movement, the direct jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, and the vast budget payments to the EU all end. We are leaving the common fisheries policy and the common agricultural policy. Critically, citizens' rights will be protected both here in the UK and in the EU, which means that the benefits of healthcare, pensions and other important matters will be protected.

Most importantly, we will have the time, through the implementation or transition period, to adjust. Time will allow us—the people and businesses on both sides of the channel—to adjust to the new arrangements, but the period is limited to December 2020. For my constituency of Copeland, that time to adjust is essential for the nuclear industry. As we leave Euratom and move to a UK regime under the Office for Nuclear Regulation, the extra time afforded by the transition period will ensure that all the safeguards officers, procedures and equipment are in place, along with the bilateral agreements with other countries. Given the international and collaborative nature of the nuclear industry, that is vital. It is especially critical for Cumbria because 27,000 of the 87,000 people who work in the nuclear industry live in Cumbria and depend on that industry. Just about

every household in my constituency has a family member who works in or for a business that is connected with the nuclear industry. That is why I want the security that the withdrawal agreement brings.

The industrial strategy and nuclear sector deal contains much cause for optimism. For more than 60 years, Copeland has led the way, and it was the first place in the world to generate electricity for the grid when Calder Hall was opened in 1957. This Government are the first in a generation to construct a new nuclear power station at Hinkley Point, and I am determined that we will also get Moorside power station built in Copeland.

We have an undisputed need for more low-carbon electricity, and an undeniable, globally respected, safe nuclear capability in Copeland. I will do nothing to damage that, and everything I possibly can to grow that capability further. We must secure more research and development in advanced and small modular reactors. We must export more of our current decommissioning operations, and increase exports of skills, components, products and processes that are working well at Sellafield and being developed by our superb nuclear supply chain. Equally important is securing our farming industry, and I am concerned that extortionate tariffs would not help, but hinder the incredibly hard-working farmers and their businesses. The common agricultural policy will come to an end, to the delight of many Cumbrian farmers. Again, I want to do all I can to ensure that we deliver a UK farming policy that works for Cumbrian farmers and avoids damaging tariffs.

Our place in the world is based on a number of factors that I fear could be hindered, not helped, without this agreement. It is based on the number of top universities we have in this country, the creative industries, award-winning books and films in our language, our time zone, our national resolve, our military might, freedom for the great institutions and think tanks, and the legal and financial economy that has grown in this country. It is based on our road, rail, sea, air and digital connectivity. I will be supporting the agreement.

3.52 pm

Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): I rise almost a month to the day since the original meaningful vote on the Brexit deal was suddenly called off by the Government. Since then, nothing has changed. No new documents have come forward, and no further clarification or revisions have been made. I cannot support the withdrawal agreement and political declaration of our future relationship with the EU because the deal does not protect workers' rights or trade union legislation. The document I have seen, which describes what the future relationship between the UK and the EU will look like, is only 26 pages. Those pages contain a few meaningless phrases about future legislation. On protecting workers' rights they state that

“the UK will consider aligning with Union rules in relevant areas”.

As a lifelong trade unionist, I must ask what kind of deal to protect workers that is. Why have negotiations only achieved a vague wish list of the so-called “high standards”? The only thing that seems clear and certain is that this deal will make the country poorer and severely affect areas such as the Black Country.

[*Eleanor Smith*]

In the 2016 referendum, people did not vote to be worse off. The Attorney General has confirmed that this deal lacks safeguards to prevent UK employment rights from falling behind those of neighbouring EU countries. I am being asked to put on a blindfold and walk meekly into the Lobby, believing that the Government will guarantee the rights of working people, and that if I do not do that it will lead to a no-deal Brexit. It is unfair of the Prime Minister to seek to hold Parliament to ransom in that way. It means that working people have no way of knowing what the UK's future relationship with the EU will look like, and how it will impact on their lives.

The Government have no record of standing up for the rights of working people in the UK—indeed, many Tory MPs have spent years undermining them. The Cameron Tory Government tried to introduce an anti-trade union Bill to take away many of the unions' hard-won rights. The Government fought for years to defend the imposition of employment tribunal fees, which were scrapped only when the Supreme Court found them to be unlawful following legal action by the trade union Unison. Ministers are more likely to speak of a bonfire of red tape. The Secretary of State for International Trade, the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), wrote in 2012:

"To restore Britain's competitiveness we must begin by deregulating the labour market. Political objections must be overridden. It is too difficult to hire and fire and too expensive to take on new employees."

The Prime Minister has refused to rule out scrapping the working time directive, the agency workers directive and the pregnant workers directive. All those are in the EU and currently protect UK workers. After the 2016 referendum, the trade union movement was willing to sit down with the Government to discuss its members' concerns, but the Prime Minister has failed to engage with and listen to trade unions and the millions of their members in this country who need a union to protect their working conditions and contracts.

We now have a deal that nobody wants. When article 50 was invoked, the Government should have called together the leaders of all the political parties in order to form a cross-party Brexit consensus to help in the negotiations with the EU. I understand that the Government have to rule, but this is a matter of such national significance—perhaps the most important event since the second world war—that it will affect our lives and those of generations to come. A strong leader would have reached out to politicians beyond their own party, rather than keeping it to a small clique within Government. Instead, we have a deal that satisfies nobody—neither leavers, nor remainers.

As politicians, we will be blamed for this mess, but the only people to blame are those who have been involved directly in the Brexit negotiations. It is for these reasons that this deal cannot command my support. If it cannot achieve the support of Parliament, the country will need to find a real alternative.

3.56 pm

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my parliamentary neighbour, the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith). I would

like to focus my remarks on the rationale for the decision I have taken, which I believe to be in the best interests of my constituents and this country, on the vote next Tuesday.

I have received plenty of advice from constituents, as I am sure all hon. Members have, much of it contradictory, reflecting the division in the country since the referendum. Many have asked me to represent their views, which, given the range of views and the physical impossibility of being in both Division Lobbies at the same time, it is not possible to achieve. I stood on a manifesto in 2015 that pledged to respect the result of the referendum. I voted to remain in 2016, but 57% of my constituents voted to leave. I have accepted the referendum result, and indeed I stood on a manifesto in 2017 that pledged to do so. That is why I voted with the vast majority of Members of this House—498 to 114, with a majority of each of the Conservative, Labour and Democratic Unionist parties—to invoke article 50.

The Government have had the most complex negotiations to undertake of any Government since the second world war, as evidenced by the sheer length of the EU withdrawal agreement and the number of pieces of secondary legislation that the European Statutory Instruments Committee, on which I sit, is currently scrutinising. There have undoubtedly been many challenges presented by the EU and its 27 other members throughout the negotiations. On some of these we have prevailed, and on some we have not.

Although I would not have started the negotiations by accepting the EU framework for the negotiations in the way we did, I have accepted that leaving the EU after 43 years of membership, during which our laws, regulations and standards have become increasingly intertwined, will require a negotiated deal, and negotiation requires compromise. I spent 20-odd years negotiating as an adviser to companies around the world, so I know that every negotiation comes down to the last moments, when the final compromises have to be made. We are now at that point. The word "compromise" has been used across the Chamber today, and it was particularly well encapsulated by my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) and the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann).

The reason why we are debating this issue so long after the invocation of article 50 is primarily its complexity, but coming a close second is the lack of consensus in the House, which is partly a result of the balance of arithmetic in the House following the 2017 election. We still do not have a consensus, which is why we have had to delay the debate. The only consensus in the House was on the decision to invoke article 50 in the first place.

We have heard from Conservative Members who have a strong tradition of seeking to leave the EU, and I respect their conviction and consistency of purpose. Some of them, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) earlier and my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith) just now, have made it clear that they are willing to compromise and support an orderly withdrawal if the Irish backstop issue can be removed or time-limited. I hope the Government will find a way to give them satisfaction before we vote next Tuesday, but if not, I believe that a willingness to compromise among Members

from all parties is essential in order that we can do our duty as representatives of the people of this country and bring this matter to an orderly conclusion.

Opposition Members have told us that they will not support the deal because it does not reflect what they would like to see in a deal. Some have been straightforward in acknowledging that they wish to ignore the referendum and remain in the EU, but others have not, and they have not come up with any pragmatic suggestions as to what could be done to improve the deal. The official Opposition Front-Bench team has been consistent about one thing, and one thing only: it will not do anything at all to help, and will only try to bring about a general election, because that is its purpose. Opposition Front Benchers are not interested in compromise, whatever their warm words earlier. They have made no suggestions whatsoever on how to improve the deal.

The prospects are extremely alarming to those watching the debate from outside and for the countless businesses and constituents who are urging us to get on with it and provide some certainty to the nation about how we leave the EU in an orderly fashion. That is why, despite the deal's imperfections and my concerns about aspects of it, I shall support it in next week's vote. I will not support any proposal to have a second referendum, because that would be to deny completely the initial referendum, and it would perpetuate the division in this country that we can frankly no longer afford.

4.2 pm

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): When I started to write this speech, I truly did not know where to start, so I will try to explain my feelings and views on this madness as bluntly and simply as possible.

Since long before the ink had even dried on the text, the Prime Minister has been trying to create the narrative that it is a choice between her deal and no deal. But the Prime Minister quite clearly has other options beyond her deal and no deal—she could ask for an extension of article 50; she could keep us in the single market and the customs union; or she could take the choice back to the people—so to say that it is her deal or no deal is a piece of nonsense. She is failing to say to the public that she has deliberately manufactured things to appear that way, in a cynical attempt to save her own skin.

I will vote against the Prime Minister's deal, because of the simple fact that it is an appalling deal for my constituents. That is not just me looking at the deal and making a decision on their behalf: since the deal was announced, thousands of my constituents have written to me, and more than 97% of them have asked me to vote against it.

To explain my thoughts and feelings a wee bit better, I must go back a few years. I often hear Members from both sides of the House—I have heard this today—accuse the Scottish National party of not respecting the result of the 2014 referendum or the 2016 referendum. They are wrong. The key difference between us and those who criticise us is that we do not fear referendums. We do not fear democracy. We do not fear holding up our vision and hopes for a better Scotland to the electorate for them to at least consider. Most importantly, we are not afraid to learn lessons. My presence and that of my SNP colleagues in this Parliament serves as evidence that we do respect the outcome of referendums because when Scotland voted no to independence, we said, "Okay. We didn't convince you. That's fine. So long as

Scotland wants to stay in this British Union, we will respect that. But let us fight to make sure that we get everything that we were promised." If anything, it seems that it is the winners of both referendums who are terrified of being held to account for the promises they made.

As I mentioned earlier when I intervened on the Secretary of State, I went to the House of Commons Library, where the wonderful staff dug out this HM Government booklet that was sent out during the Scottish referendum. The Government, of course, were a Tory coalition—the Secretary of State corrected me—but Tory none the less. And I have to be honest about this booklet: there is a stoater on every page. Page 1 speaks of "All the advantages of the pound".

That is the same pound that had an 18-month low. Later, the booklet mentions "Safe savings and pensions". I wonder whether WASPI women would agree with that. It went on to state that there would be

"More support for public services",

which was followed by an austerity agenda. And then there is the quotation I mentioned earlier:

"As one of the EU's 'big four' nations, the UK is more able to protect Scottish interests in areas like agriculture and fisheries."

The last page reads:

"Together with England, Wales and Northern Ireland, Scotland has created one of the world's most successful families of nations."

Now, that is a legitimate point of view, but it is one that does not hold up to scrutiny. Call me biased, but this does not feel very successful right now. If you are an EU national, a nurse or a student, or if you are working on the minimum wage, I doubt this feels successful. If you are a lorry driver in Dover, I imagine it feels even less successful.

I believe in independence for Scotland for democratic, logical and moral reasons, but when Scotland voted no to independence, at least we came here for a genuine fresh start—to try to make this Union work better and find some compromise where possible. After all these promises and all the precious Union chat that is dished out by the British nationalists of this place, when Scotland votes to remain in the EU, it is cast aside as irrelevant because it was a UK-wide vote, where Scotland was treated as a region. The people of Scotland watched as our Scottish Government tried to make sensible suggestions and compromises with the UK Government with regards to Brexit, such as asking for continued Scottish membership of the single market and the customs union. This was not even considered.

If Unionist Members truly believe that Scotland should be subject to an English and Welsh EU result, they concede that we are not a family of nations and that, to Westminster, Scotland is no more than a province; or they could live up to their partnership of equals patter and recognise that the second largest nation in this family of nations has outright rejected leaving the EU, and show us the respect that we are due. Either way, this hypocritical doublespeak will not wash much longer with Scotland. As with most things on the Government's plate these days, time is running out. And to be honest, who knows how much longer Scotland is going to stick about?

4.8 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I shall support the Government on Tuesday because the withdrawal agreement delivers on the referendum while gaining control of our money, laws and borders. If people want to know what

[Mark Pawsey]

the UK is getting out of this agreement, they should look once again at the opening remarks of the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Since the withdrawal agreement was announced, I have engaged with many of my constituents, from those who want to leave with no deal and cut all ties with the EU to those who were arguing for a second referendum. Of course, this agreement is not going to satisfy either of them. It is a negotiation, so it has to go between two parties. I have done enough negotiation in my career as a businessman to know that neither party gets everything they want out of a negotiation. Having said that, I recognise the concerns that have been expressed about the backstop, and I hope that my colleagues will be given some comfort on that issue in the coming days.

I also recognise the lack of detail in the political declaration because, of course, that is the next stage; that is what we come to once we accept the withdrawal agreement. Based on my business background and the evidence that I have heard from the business community as a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, I think this deal is right for our country.

Of course, the voice of business is important. Some of my constituents have told me that it is too loud and that big business is running the show, but I have to say to them, and to the Opposition, that when big business does well, workers do well. There are more people in jobs, there is more secure employment, people in work get more hours, and there are more promotion prospects. When business does well, pensioners do well, because its profits fund the pensions that people receive. When business does well, the economy does well, and generates the wealth to do all the things that we want Governments to do. It is therefore vital that the views of business should be listened to.

There are important voices from big business and from smaller businesses. Only today, I have heard from the Coventry and Warwickshire local enterprise partnership, which surveyed businesses across the region in December, and 60% of them argued that Brexit is negative. They are concerned about pricing uncertainties as a consequence of the value of the pound, reductions in sales, the administrative burden on exports, loss of confidence and delayed investment plans.

As a west midlands MP, I have particular concerns about the motor industry. Coventry is its historic home. The business declined due to issues in the '70s, but in recent years it has been resurgent. London Electric Vehicle Company in my constituency has built many of the electric vehicles that people are seeing around the streets of London, but regrettably—I hope this is not an early case of postponement of investment—it took a decision only yesterday to delay the introduction of the electric light commercial vehicle. We have seen tremendous improvements in Jaguar Land Rover under the ownership of Tata, but there has been more bad news on that today. Members will rightly point out that that is due to changes in the diesel legislation and a downturn in the Chinese market, but it is also linked to Brexit. In addition to the company itself, we must remember the 200,000 companies in the supply chain.

We have seen investment in the UK from Japanese companies. This morning, the Business Secretary talked on the radio about Margaret Thatcher's welcome to

Nissan in the north-east. In our evidence session in the BEIS Committee, the managing director of Toyota reminded us of why it was here. Margaret Thatcher said to the head of Toyota, "Come to the UK, where you can build cars as part of the European Union and export to the European Union as a free and open arrangement." If we do not accept this deal—if there is any danger of us crashing out—how are we going to attract that level of investment in the future? In fact, the Prime Minister of Japan is in the country today. He has spoken about the need for predictability and stability. I want to be able to say to him that Britain is the best place to set up and grow businesses.

The Committee heard from other manufacturing sectors. We heard from aerospace that the deal is not perfect, but the longer it takes to get certainty, the more likely it is that investment decisions will go against the UK. The food and drink sector spoke of real concerns. Business welcomes the language in the declaration but is bothered about business that would otherwise have come to the UK going overseas. Only yesterday, the chief executive of Rolls-Royce, which has a plant in my constituency, stated in a letter:

"I have been clear that a deal is better than no deal for Rolls-Royce, our customers, suppliers and employees. Agreement of the Government's deal will provide certainty which all businesses require and will ensure an orderly withdrawal from the European Union."

Getting the right deal for business is phenomenally important to the UK. I encourage my hon. Friends to bear that in mind. I also ask Opposition Members to think long and hard about the consequences for the businesses in their constituencies if, as a consequence of voting down the deal on Tuesday, we end up with no deal.

4.14 pm

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey). Like many other Members, I have been contacted by hundreds of constituents in the last few weeks about the meaningful vote. The vast majority of those people, whether they voted to leave the EU or remain, have asked me to represent them by voting against the Prime Minister's withdrawal agreement, as they all agree on one thing: this is a bad deal.

I voted to remain in the EU because, among other things, my region is a net gainer from the EU, and our economy is heavily dependent on trade with Europe. However, 59.5% of voters in my constituency wanted to leave, and across the whole borough, which incorporates the Tynemouth constituency, 53.7% voted for Brexit. I was shocked and disappointed by the result, both locally and nationally, but I accepted it as a democratic result.

I know that the vast majority of voters I spoke to before and after the referendum all held very sincere views, whichever way they decided to vote. A number of voters in North Tyneside said that they voted to leave so that we could take back control of our borders, laws and finances, but during the referendum campaign, many voters on both sides told me of their concern about immigration and freedom of movement. Many realised the absolute need for EU workers across all roles in our economy in the north-east, including on our farms and even in the abattoir in my community. However, on the other side, there was grave local concern, because in recent years a number of employers have taken

advantage of the fact that they could employ EU workers on short-term contracts directly through employment agencies based outside the UK, undercutting the going rates of pay and bypassing local skilled workers in the process. I challenged those procedures with the employers, as they were fair neither to the EU workers, who were being cheated of pay, nor to our local workforce, who desperately needed these jobs.

Leave voters could not be swayed by the argument made by or to me on behalf of many businesses—large and small, each important to our local economy in creating work directly and via the supply chain—that the uncertainty of Brexit threatens their businesses and the local economy. It is estimated that 140,000 jobs in our region depend on trade with the EU. The North East England chamber of commerce has pointed out that the EU remains the region's top export market, worth 57.5% of overall trade, or £1.8 billion, compared with 40% nationally.

The chamber's third quarterly economic survey results for last year reported less international trade activity and cited Brexit uncertainty as the key reason, which resulted in a 6.75% downturn on the quarter and 0.35% on the year. The chamber's survey for the last quarter of 2018 highlighted that, while scores for growth in domestic sales and a rebound in exports showed business performance and confidence improving towards the end of the year, "uncertainties and concerns surrounding Brexit, chiefly expressed in terms of future market conditions, demand shocks and increased costs are dampening many businesses' confidence."

It is a sad reflection that this deal goes nowhere to meeting Labour's six tests, does not protect jobs, workers' rights or environmental standards and gives no certainty of frictionless trade to our businesses. My constituents, whether leavers or remainers, have made it clear that this deal does not meet their hopes and expectations for our region's future. I want the best for the people of North Tyneside and for the whole of the UK. I will support the views of my constituents and of those on my Front Bench and will therefore vote against this deal.

4.18 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is a privilege to speak in this debate, which is important and, to some degree, painful for me, because I voted to remain in the European Union in the 1975 referendum and in 2016. I have not changed my view. My constituency voted to remain, but this was a national poll, and I respect it. My duty, as I see it, is therefore to ensure that we leave the European Union but do so in a way that, as has been observed by many Members, recognises the narrowness of the result—something that works for those who voted to remain as well as those who voted to leave, and for the majority of my constituents. The margin therefore, as the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs observed, is not a mandate for a hard Brexit. It is, in the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), not a mandate for some Teflon-coated departure from the EU. I suggest to the House that it is a mandate for a managed, orderly and considered withdrawal that keeps close and important ties in our economic interests.

My manifesto, my personal message to my electors, was that I would respect the outcome of the referendum, but would do so in a way that protected their jobs, businesses and livelihoods. I will support the Prime

Minister's deal for that very reason. It is the best opportunity and the best alternative we have to deliver that. No one else has put a viable alternative plan on the table. With every respect to Opposition Members, the suggestion that the Leader of the Opposition will provoke a general election and find anything even remotely better is risible to the point of being beyond parody. We have to get on with this deal.

For me, that means in particular dealing with arrangements for the financial services sector, which is critical to my economy. It is critical to the economy of the whole of the UK. About 11% of the economy is generated from financial services alone. We are an 80% services economy. We must get this right. Some 36% of my constituents work in financial and professional services. The total financial services sector contributes some £72 billion in tax revenue. Everyone I speak to in that sector—since I have been in this House, I have worked closely with the City of London, City UK and others—says to me, "We would have preferred to have remained, but with a transition period, above all, we can manage it." Everyone in financial services, everyone in the whole of the services sector and beyond whom I speak to says, "The key thing is we must have transition. We cannot have a crash-out." With nothing else on the table, this deal is the only appropriate way of avoiding that crash-out. It gives us time to negotiate the future arrangement. That is the really important thing: not just that we withdraw in an orderly fashion, but that we then have time to develop the key future relationship with our EU friends and neighbours, who are always going to remain very significant trading partners for us.

World trading patterns may well change and other parts of the world may become more significant, but the EU will always remain a very, very important partner for us. The truth is that trade deals elsewhere, as we all know, take time to develop. That is true, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) observed, even with America and the EU, who are willing partners, never mind in other cases. Some emerging economies—India, China and others—have been particularly resistant to the liberalisation of their markets in services. Having a transitional period is therefore absolutely vital. That involves compromise. I have some issues about the backstop, but I think it is workable, as I said in my intervention on the Secretary of State. There are means whereby we could seek future clarification on the legal definition of "temporary" within the protocol. As has been observed, compromise is not a bad thing in politics. In fact, we should be positively saying more often that compromise is a mature thing. It is a mark of mature politics and that is what the Prime Minister has sought to achieve.

Throughout my constituency, people come up to me and say the deal is not everything they wanted, whichever side they were on, but it keeps the show on the road in terms of the economy. They say that it enables them to develop our new relationship in a sensible way. The Prime Minister deserves credit for working hard to try to get it through. They say, "Do your best to back her." That is what I will seek to do.

If this deal were to fail, the worst possible result would be to leave without a deal. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, who I am delighted to see in his place, is right to observe that were that to be the case, it is important that this House and Parliament be active participants in deciding the way in

[Robert Neill]

which we go forward. Even better would be to remove that uncertainty for businesses—one constituent of mine says that that is pressing in terms of his own firm's viability—at the earliest opportunity, vote for the deal and then get to work moving forward. The onus is on this House. If we fail in that regard, all other options perhaps do have to be considered, and we might have to go back and seek the advice of our electors. I do not want to do that, because that would be a failure of maturity and judgment in this House. Taking back control means us stepping up to the mark and taking a decision. In my book, that means supporting the Prime Minister's deal.

4.24 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): My constituency voted in 2016 to leave the EU. Although I voted to remain, as a democrat, I believe that it was right to accept the will of the people, and so I voted to trigger article 50 in March 2017. I believe, however, as a democrat and a politician who uses evidence in their decision making, that it is not only my right but my duty as an MP to consider new evidence as it becomes available. That is how a democracy should work. The new evidence I am talking about is the draft withdrawal agreement and political declaration, evidence from my constituents and expert analysis, and I would like to take each in turn.

To be where we are, two and a half years after the EU referendum, following a month in which absolutely nothing has happened, is a shocking indictment of this Government. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) spelt out the situation yesterday: months of torpor, the Government, with their strategy and their red lines, digging themselves into a hole they cannot get out of, and now, unfortunately, this appalling deal. I have gone through the nearly 600 pages that amount to the withdrawal agreement. It covers very little other than the backstop agreement, the rights of EU citizens, how much the UK has agreed to pay the EU and the transitional arrangements. It is clear that we will become a rule taker, not a rule maker. How on earth is this taking back control?

On so many levels, too numerous to mention, we will lose out. As Lord Kerr of Kinlochard said in the other place last month, the political declaration is a blindfold Brexit and a gangplank to the unknown. It is nothing more than a non-binding, meaningless wish list that will do nothing to bring the certainty that our businesses, economy and people need. Our future relationship with the EU beyond 2020 still has to be negotiated.

My constituents, to whom I have been listening very closely, are growing more and more concerned. There is evidence, not just from those who have been contacting me but from those I have been meeting regularly in my door knocking and at my surgeries, and evidence also from recent polls, that their views are shifting. There is also the evidence from data and expert analysis. I know some people do not like using experts, but this is a time when we really should value them, as I think we are doing, given the experts on the Benches over there.

On this expert analysis, I want to cover two aspects in particular. The first is the evidence of the unlawful activities of the Vote Leave campaign and the second is

the evidence from recent economic analyses. We cannot ignore the fact that the Vote Leave campaign was recently found guilty of significant breaches in spending. In addition, there is evidence of potentially illicit involvement in their campaign by a foreign power, in both the funding and the spreading of propaganda and disinformation during the referendum. The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee report in the summer exposed this and was most compelling. I have argued since that there was enough evidence to start an investigation.

The second—and for me key—aspect is the impact on the economy. We already have significant poverty and inequality across the UK. Whatever analysis we take, from the Bank of England, the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, the Treasury and so on, all exit scenarios show that the economy will shrink. All show no deal as disastrous, a “close deal” or Chequers-style deal almost the same, and Norway somewhere in the middle. There is further evidence from the Institute for Fiscal Studies that certain sectors will be particularly affected and that we will be poorer as individuals. We really should be referring to this.

The impact of reduced growth on our public finances—on public spending and services—will be significant. It is estimated that by 2023, we will be borrowing £15 billion a year more as a result of leaving the EU. This is at the same time as spending demands—for examples, for pensions and social care—will be increasing. Our NHS is already in crisis. How will this affect the resources it needs? We already know that the £350 million a week for the NHS was a lie. Social care is also in crisis. As a result, there were 50,000 emergency admissions of people with dementia in 2017. How much more will that figure be as a result of Brexit and what will happen with a dwindling pot for universal credit? In the last Budget, the Government restored only half of what they cut in 2015.

For all the reasons that I have set out, I cannot support the Government's motion and I will vote against the deal. I will also support a vote of no confidence, if one is tabled. If not, or if it fails, I urge the Government and colleagues to consider a citizens' assembly as a way forward. Such assemblies have been used in various countries as democratic circuit breakers on contentious and complex issues. A citizens' assembly could detoxify Brexit and help to restore confidence in politics as a form of democratic renewal. It could be a precursor to a new people's referendum, and could even consider the questions for such a referendum. I hope that all this will mean that we need to extend article 50. I know that that is anathema to many, but I think it is a way forward.

4.30 pm

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): When we relinquished responsibility to the British people on 23 June 2016, the people, in the largest democratic exercise in this nation's history, answered. They bravely rejected the easiest option, and now we, as legislators, must be brave, too. The great British resolve demonstrated, in a single act—an act that made me proud to be British—a will to self-govern and to push back against further integration. The British people did so not because of some fear of migrants, as some would have us believe, but in the belief and hope that our nation of Great Britain and Northern Ireland could unshackle itself and once again stride out into the world.

The withdrawal agreement and the deal represent a failure to truly comprehend the scale of the disfranchisement felt by many working people. For some, leaving the EU is not a priority, but the Government have misjudged the resolve of those who care deeply about it, and the instruction that they have given. The Prime Minister and the negotiators staked all their chips on immigration and fundamentally misunderstood the fact that the vote to leave was about more than that. It was an expression of self-will and self-government.

If we fail to listen to those concerns, we will make the gravest of errors. We will rightly be judged by our actions in the coming days, and I will not put my name to something that sells the UK short. Like many of my colleagues in this House, I have constituents who have never voted before but who saw the opportunity to take part in an historic democratic event. That huge but silent group of people felt that the systems and arrangements within the EU no longer worked for them, and they saw the referendum as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to use their voice for change. I will not ignore them.

Before I move on to the withdrawal agreement, I will raise some specific concerns about the implementation period. The north Cornwall sea is a productive mixed fishery, which has a number of fish that are known as choke species. Early next year, the discard ban will come into effect, and our Cornish boats will be tied up when they reach their quota limits, through no fault of their own.

The withdrawal agreement allows for the implementation period to be extended. Any extension would be devastating to an industry that has suffered for years under the deeply unpopular common fisheries policy. It would be impossible for me to ask fishermen in my constituency to consider signing up to that when they have been under a 40-year stranglehold from Brussels. They need access and improvements to their rights now, not in two years' time. Any extension of the implementation period would be completely unacceptable. We know where we want to get to on fisheries but in the 585-page withdrawal agreement there are more pages devoted to the pension rights of EU civil servants than there are to fisheries. That has not gone unnoticed in places such as Cornwall.

I cannot support the backstop set out in the withdrawal agreement. No independent country could or should allow trade policy to be set by a third party. Far from offering control, the backstop would mean that the UK ceded control on an unprecedented scale. No businessperson would enter into a contract without a break clause or review date. No member of the public would enter into a mobile phone contract without a break clause or end date, in which the conditions could be changed while the contract was in place. Signing up to the backstop would place a sword of Damocles over this Parliament and Parliaments to come.

In short, it is my view that the backstop, if it is implemented, will be used as a stick with which to beat the UK and force us to accept whatever terms the EU wants to trade on. How can we return to the British people two and a half years since they gave us an instruction and offer them a relationship worse than the one we are already in? We can leave the EU by triggering article 50, but we will have no way of exiting the backstop.

President Macron has already made it clear that he wishes to exchange fisheries access for trade. The UK Government should not be in that position. I am told

that if we have not reached a deal by the end of the implementation period, we will have a choice between extending the transition period and entering the backstop. That is like picking a favourite Kray twin. I am not in the business of doing that, and it is not what Governments in this country should be doing.

I have heard people say, "Let's put this issue to bed. Let's vote for this withdrawal agreement and get on with it." If we vote for this deal, far from solving this issue for a generation, we will extend the implementation period, lose our sovereignty and enter a backstop with an arbitration panel. We will be talking about this issue for 10 years. People will rightly ask, "What's your plan? What should the Government do?" We should mandate staged payments of our divorce bill to ensure we get a better trade outcome, we should put an end date on the implementation period, and we should either completely remove the backstop or, at the very least, time-limit it.

This is now a matter of trust. Do we trust the EU to follow through with delivering a trade deal after the Government have burnt through all their leverage? Do we trust the EU not to place us in a backstop we cannot get out of? These issues are too important to leave to trust alone; they must be made conditional in the legally binding text of the withdrawal agreement. It is a simple fact that, at this time of division in Parliament and the country, the British people need us to deliver on the specific mandate they gave us back in 2016.

4.36 pm

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann). I, too, will vote against the deal next week, but probably for different reasons.

Earlier this week, more than 100 Back Benchers from across the political divide met the Prime Minister to stress the economic self-harm that would be inflicted by a no-deal Brexit—a point the Business Secretary made today and earlier this week. I was of course grateful for the Prime Minister's time, but I sat there thinking, "Could things have turned out differently if this meeting had taken place two years ago?" If she had reached out to Labour, the SNP, the Liberal Democrats and others instead of spending all that time negotiating with her party and giving too much ground to the extreme Brexiters, who always put ideology before people's jobs and livelihoods, we might be in a very different place.

That, of course, would have involved compromise on all sides, not just in the Conservative party, and it certainly would not have pleased the right-wing Eurosceptics on the Tory Benches, but the Prime Minister might have brought on side Members from other parties. I believe, for example, that there is a majority in the House for continued membership of the customs union, because most Members understand the importance to our economy of having no delays at the UK-EU border and of just-in-time manufacturing. However, due to the Government's lack of cross-party working, she faces pretty certain defeat next week.

It was totally irresponsible to delay the vote in December and run down the clock. The Government have wasted a month seeking reassurances on the Northern Ireland backstop that have yet to materialise, but they have done nothing to address the concerns of hon. Members from different parties about the economic impact of the deal.

[Emma Reynolds]

Businesses tell us that the lack of certainty is already leading them to decide either to invest elsewhere or to hold off investing in the UK. The delay has also meant an eye-watering amount being spent on planning for no deal—an eventuality that the Prime Minister and most of her Cabinet in reality will not countenance. Just think of all the things we could have done with that money to improve people's lives—preventing homelessness and rough sleeping; hiring extra doctors, nurses and teachers; and putting more police officers on our streets.

The Government like to lecture us about acting in the national interest, but I am afraid they have put party interest before the national interest at every turn. Now they are trying to blackmail us into voting for this deal or crashing out without a deal. I am sorry, but it will not wash. I cannot, in all conscience, vote for a deal that will make my constituents poorer and the economy smaller. I cannot remember a time in British history when the Prime Minister and the Chancellor recommended a course of action that they knew would make people worse off—and that is according to their own economic analysis.

There is a simple reason the Government's deal does not please either those who voted remain, such as me, or those who voted leave, as we heard from the hon. Member for North Cornwall. On the one hand we lose sovereignty, control and our seat at the table; on the other, the deal is worse for our economy than the current arrangements. The Government made a huge mistake very early in the negotiations by laying down the red lines that we must leave the customs union and the single market. They simply have not levelled with the British public.

Exciting as they may sound, trade deals with countries around the world, even if negotiated quickly and in our favour—which is by no means certain; look at the President of the United States—would not make up for the trade that could be lost with the EU, our biggest trade partner. In trade, geography matters. As business has made clear, it is not just a no-deal Brexit that would be catastrophic. Anything short of staying in the customs union would threaten just-in-time manufacturing in, for instance, the aerospace and automotive industries, and the integrated supply chains that have built up over so many years.

The other huge failing of the Government is that they have not addressed the causes of Brexit. They have done nothing to bring our divided country back together. They have done nothing to address the sense of loss in many of the communities, including those in my constituency, that voted for change. They have done nothing to tackle the regional inequalities that drove the Brexit vote.

The Government have refused to come up with a plan B to be implemented if the deal fails to win a majority next week. However, talking to colleagues on both sides of the House, I sense that there is a cross-party mood in favour of finding a way forward, and coming together to find an alternative. I am not sure exactly what that is yet—[*Laughter.*] Conservative Members may laugh, but I think that much more cross-party work is going on between Back Benchers than anything the Government have done.

We must have a chance to consider all the options, which include going back to the people; the so-called Norway-plus arrangement, in which we would stay in the single market and the customs union; and an extension of article 50. If the Government will not come up with a plan B, it is incumbent on us to do so, because the prosperity of our constituents depends on it.

4.42 pm

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I rise to speak in this important debate as the Member of Parliament for arguably the most pro-Brexit constituency in Scotland: 54% of my constituents voted leave. Although I voted remain—only just, after much soul-searching—and continue to respect the views of those who voted remain and would still prefer to remain, I firmly believe that we in the House have a duty to carry out what the majority in Banff and Buchan, and indeed in the UK as a whole, voted for in the 2016 referendum.

In the 2017 general election, 56% of voters in Scotland, and 85% across the United Kingdom, voted for parties that were committed to delivering on the democratic will of the British people—to leave the EU. The people of the United Kingdom have given us a clear mandate to leave the EU, and leaving the EU is precisely what the withdrawal agreement delivers.

When I publicly declared my support for this deal, I was immediately confronted by social media ideologues saying, “Ah, but have you actually read the agreement?” And yes, I had read the agreement. In fact, I am supporting it precisely because, when we look at it as a whole rather than taking single lines of text out of context, which usually happens on social media, it is clear that it delivers what the British people voted for.

Some argue that this agreement is not the best deal that could have been made with the EU. Perhaps it could be said, with the benefit of hindsight, that certain aspects might have been negotiated differently, but that is in the nature of negotiations. The outcome is rarely perfect, and, as other Members have pointed out, there will always be some compromise. That said, this agreement—an agreement that is available to us now to facilitate a pragmatic transition towards the opportunities that Brexit presents—will deliver on the result of the 2016 referendum, bringing an end to freedom of movement, introducing an ability to sign trade deals with others, bringing an end to vast annual contributions to the EU budget, and bringing an end to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice.

We will be out of the one-size-fits-none common agricultural policy, allowing us to develop our own fit-for-purpose agricultural frameworks and policies, working with devolved Administrations to develop a system that works in the interests of farmers and rural communities. Only today, we all, as Members of Parliament, received letters from the four different presidents of the farmers unions across the UK illustrating the risks identified by farmers from a no-deal situation.

It will come as no surprise to Members that I also mention that we will be out of the common fisheries policy—a “big, fat opportunity”, as described just yesterday by Bertie Armstrong, chief executive of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation. It is an opportunity for fishing communities such as those in my constituency.

Since being elected last year, I have been consistent in my fight to get the best possible Brexit deal for the fisheries sector. In that time, the Government have confirmed that we will be leaving the CFP when we leave the EU and will become an independent coastal state like Norway, Iceland and even the Faroe Islands. I have pushed for assurances that we must not cave in to EU demands that any future trade agreement be tied to continued free access to our waters. Despite the best efforts of Michel Barnier, President Macron and the fishing nations of the EU, there is nothing in this agreement that provides this free access to them. We have seen the anger and disappointment shown by EU fishermen precisely because this withdrawal agreement does not deliver the continued free access that their negotiating team promised.

Despite what is often asserted by politicians on the Opposition Benches, this withdrawal agreement does not represent a betrayal of Scottish fishermen. In fact, I find it extremely strange that the SNP and others are so keen to declare such a poor outcome for our fishermen when the future fisheries agreement has yet to be agreed. The fishing industry can see through the doom-mongering. In fact, during a recent meeting I had with local representatives of the fishing industry, I was asked by one of the processing sector's key leaders in my area to pass on a message to my colleagues across the House. That message is to stop using fishing as an excuse not to accept this deal.

Yesterday, in evidence given to the Scottish Affairs Committee, the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, Scottish Seafood Association and National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations stated their support for the withdrawal agreement. Like them, I am supporting this agreement as the best means to move towards the best possible Brexit outcome. While I recognise that it is not perfect, we must not let perfect be the enemy of the good. I believe that this agreement is better than no deal and certainly better than no Brexit. This agreement delivers on the democratic will of the British people to leave the EU while delivering an outcome in the national interest.

Many people have expressed concern about the backstop. Although I share many of those concerns, such as the lack of a unilateral mechanism for the UK to leave such an arrangement, I have made my decision on a balance of risk. The backstop would come into effect if the UK and the EU had not agreed a solution to the Northern Ireland border within the implementation period. Neither the UK nor the EU has a desire for the backstop to be enforced, and maximum focus should be on achieving the agreement on the future economic partnership by July 2020.

On top of the moves this Government have made in providing reassurances to the fisheries sector—that we are to leave the CFP and become an independent coastal state, and that there will be no trading off of access to our waters for favourable trade deals—I am sure Ministers will forgive me for reminding them that even after we leave the EU I will continue to campaign for the support of and investment in an industry that is so critical to our coastal communities.

People in Banff and Buchan voted to leave the EU because, as well as the other benefits mentioned by me and others in this debate, Brexit presents such a great

opportunity for our fishing industry and our communities, and this deal is a good first step towards making those opportunities a reality.

4.48 pm

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I rise to speak as someone who voted remain in the 2016 referendum and I am astonished to find today's debate has been dominated by the use of the word "compromise", not because I do not agree with compromise but because for two and a half years we have had no sign of compromise, particularly from the Prime Minister—no attempt to reach out across the House, no attempt even to reach out across the Benches of her own party. So I am astonished suddenly to find, two and a half years later, that the deal on the table—the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration—is being presented to us and we are suddenly being told that we have to compromise. It seems to me that compromise has any meaning to the Prime Minister only when it relates to her deal and is on her terms.

I stand as somebody who did not vote for the article 50 Bill. As a result, I was accused in the media and by hard-line Brexiteers of being a traitor, but actually the reason I did not vote for the Bill was that I did not think that enough time had been given to building the necessary consensus across the House to make the process work. I believe that those of us who took that line have been proved correct.

I have repeatedly voted for amendments to legislation that want to deliver a deal that keeps the United Kingdom in the single market and the customs union. I am one of perhaps only 100 MPs who have done that repeatedly as legislation on Brexit has gone through the House. On every occasion, we were told that we were traitors to the cause of Brexit and denying the will of the people, but those votes were an attempt to compromise and to arrive at consensus on the best way forward, in the national interest and in line with the vote that was delivered in 2016.

Now, my colleagues and I on the remain side who do not like this deal are suddenly being told that we are on the extremes of the debate. There is nothing extreme about wanting to stay part of the largest trading bloc in the world, and there is nothing wrong or extreme about voting against a deal because it promises to make the country poorer.

The Prime Minister drew Brexiteer red lines around her negotiations, and because of that the deal before us includes a political declaration that gives no clear indication of the way forward for the long-term trading relationship. That means that if we get a new Prime Minister or another Brexit Minister in six months' time, there will be no guarantee that we will not end up with a hard Brexit of the kind that could take about 7.6% off GDP. This is a blind Brexit, and it is impossible to listen to the language of compromise and to go along with it on the basis of a political declaration that gives us no clear shape for the way forward.

The problem is that the Prime Minister's approach to the negotiations has effectively boxed the Government into a corner, with nowhere else to go. Parliament must not be intimidated or threatened. MPs who genuinely believe—not because of their ideology but because of a genuine belief—that the closest possible relationship

[Angela Smith]

with the European Union is the right way to go must be given the right to vote against this deal without threats or intimidation. That is really important.

If Parliament decides next week not to support the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration, it is the responsibility of the Government, not Parliament, to present their plan B. In that context, it will be incumbent on the Government to start talking seriously to Members of Parliament on both sides of the House to establish the way forward.

My feeling, however, is that there will be no consensus, because of the Prime Minister's approach, which has driven the Government into a corner, and because of her Brexiteer red lines. We are going to be in an impasse, and on that basis, the only way forward is to go back to the people for a people's vote. Colleagues say that that denies the will of the people, but we now know what leave looks like. Two years ago, at the time of the referendum, we did not know that. We were presented with fantasy promises about what leave would look like, none of which has been delivered. The people therefore have the right to have the final say and to give their informed consent on whether this agreement should form the basis of our future relationship with Europe.

I say to those on the Government Front Bench that I will be voting against the agreement next week, but if, before the vote next Tuesday, the Prime Minister were to offer a people's vote in the form of a final-say referendum, I would seriously consider voting for the motion on the basis of an amendment that would give us the referendum we are looking for. I do not think that the Government will do that, but it will be on the Prime Minister's and the Government's heads if they refuse to listen to the views of people in this House and refuse to understand that the people of this country want a final say. The polls are telling us that, and it is for this Parliament to listen to the people and go back to the people.

4.54 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I was brought up to believe strongly that the EU was a force for peace and prosperity. My maternal grandmother, whose parents had been badly affected in two world wars, is still a great believer in the European Union. My father has spent his career embedding British values in European projects. I am an Erasmus scholar, and I used to work for the Christian Democratic Union of Germany. I am also a linguist of sorts, although my daughter did say the other day, "Mummy, you think you speak Italian. Sadly, nobody else agrees." I cut my political teeth in the events leading up to 1989, when students from around the EU acted together to overcome communism, which was really exciting for an 18-year-old.

So, I was a remainer, but stronger by far than my respect for the EU is my love for this nation, for our institutions, for our hard work, for the rule of law, and for the common law, in which I have spent my whole career working. I believe in our flexible—if I can cheekily say that to you, Mr Speaker—but stable constitution, and in a robust democracy that has endured for centuries, and that is why I cannot support a second referendum.

I wonder whether my European Research Group colleagues have ever read to the end of the fabulous leaflet that was delivered to all households before the

2016 referendum. Colleagues might remember it, but I bet my ERG colleagues never got to the page near the back, which reads:

"This is your decision. The Government will implement what you decide."

The back page says, in bold, that

"The EU referendum is a once in a generation decision."

We must do this.

Colleagues will realise that this is a considerable compromise—to use the word of the moment—for me. It is one that I will make because I respect the decision of my constituents and of others across the nation who voted to leave, but I say to colleagues—particularly fellow Conservative Members—who propose to vote against the withdrawal agreement that they must compromise, too. I politely and respectfully say to Opposition Members, respecting much of what the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) just said, that it is ridiculous to think that they could negotiate a better deal from where we are now.

The Prime Minister, for whom I have considerable respect, and thousands of civil servants, for whom I also have considerable respect, have spent two and a half years working hard to get this agreement. It has tariffs at zero. It does quite a lot—not everything we want, but quite a lot—for citizens' rights. There is clearly a lot more work to do, but it is a fair start, and it is where we are at this minute. I say to Conservative Members that there is a real risk that those who want a harder Brexit will end up with no Brexit at all. As a democrat, I do not believe that that would be the right outcome—although let me say that if there is a second referendum, I will campaign with every fibre of my being. Let us hope that rabbits can be pulled out of the hat in the next week.

Chris Bryant: We don't want rabbits.

Victoria Prentis: The hon. Gentleman must remember that I am a keeper of ferrets.

Today's debate has been completely different from the debate before Christmas, during which I set out sensibly—without talking about ferrets—the views of the people and businesses in my constituency. I love the EU, and I love the UK more than the EU, but I love Banbury much more than both. I ask all Members, setting aside both ideology and pride for a minute, if they can, to think about their constituents and the jobs that will be at risk if we head for a no-deal Brexit, which would be a complete disaster. Could we please unite around this deal, which is frankly the only one on the table? Together—I agreed with some of what the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge said about working together—we could then start setting out a positive vision for a global Britain. Let us vote for this deal and move on.

5 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): In his denunciation of Stalinism from exile in Paris in 1951, the Polish poet and diplomat, Czesław Miłosz, wrote in his seminal book "The Captive Mind":

"Men will clutch at illusions when they have nothing else to hold to."

He was, of course, admonishing his fellow citizens who had sought to convince themselves that any progress

was to come from the road to servitude that had been planned for eastern Europe in the wake of two world wars.

As we reflect today on the Herculean tyranny that engulfed the people of Europe in the form of gulags, gas chambers and a wall in Berlin, it is surely right that we ask ourselves whether we really want to embark on the road the Government are asking us to take next week. The Government are asking Parliament to clutch at their illusions. As we consider a document that seeks to sever our membership of the Union of Europe, we should remind ourselves time and again of what that great peace project was born from.

As Europe stood at the gates of hell, as it did for years, great leaders across the continent pulled it back and authored the fragile but imperfect peace that millions of us enjoy today. Those of us who believe in that peace should defend it and guard it with jealousy. After centuries of war among our people, a pan-European social, diplomatic and economic architecture, underpinned by rules, reason and a desire to keep the peace, is what our forefathers gifted to us.

UK citizens, not least in Scotland, have been among the largest beneficiaries and most enthusiastic participants. Just look at the rhapsodic uptake of the freedom of movement. Where once the skies and waters of Europe were filled with warring air forces and navies, now our skies are filled with innumerable airlines packed with people. Our waters and skies were once the scenes of war, and now there is free movement across a market of 500 million people.

Gone are the days of tyranny, war and walls. Instead, a new easyJet generation have had their hearts and minds opened to the continent. We have all been made immeasurably richer by the ability to move around the continent, driven by a desire to do commerce, exchange ideas, experience new cultures and share our own. Surely free movement is an unparalleled triumph of democracy.

Look at what opening up the nations of Europe, and all the advancements of humankind that followed, has done for Europe. Look at what it has done for countries that were once satellite states of the Soviet Union or that lived under one of Europe's assorted dictatorships. It has transformed nations and economies. Where once stood communism and Nazism, there now stand strong democracies across the continent with a free press, an open economy and civil society.

Freedom of movement is quite literally the living embodiment of the freedom that wars have been fought over, yet here we have a Government presenting the ending of that diplomatic achievement as some kind of gain. Only a fool could think so. Only the historically illiterate could champion the ending of the freedom of movement.

In my constituency there are just under 1,500 EU nationals in active employment, with many more studying or living in retirement. I cannot, in all good conscience, return and tell them that I have voted to end the very right that has allowed them to come here and, worse, that they will have to pay £65—essentially a tax on foreigners—and go through a registration process, all to enjoy the rights that they currently enjoy and have enjoyed for decades.

I foresee Scotland regaining her independence, which I want with every fibre of my being. I believe that the nations of the UK will always be the friendliest of

neighbours, looking out for each other and looking out for each other's interests in the different forums that underpin the international rules around the world.

James Cartledge: Which currency would that independent Scotland use?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I will confine my remarks to the issue at hand.

The current constitutional arrangement forbids Scotland from interacting on an equal footing either with our neighbours in the rest of the UK or, indeed, with the other nations of the European Union. We in Scotland can see it every day, whether the hon. Gentleman likes it or not—we see the cost to Scotland of not being an independent country and member of the European Union. Instead, we are locked in a Union that has little appetite to take Scotland's interests into account. Nobody is buying the empty platitudes of the “plucky Brits” that once struck a chord at home and abroad. This is the stuff of white noise and it makes us a laughing stock in the capitals of Europe.

I do not want this miserable deal imposed on Scotland, but I also do not want it imposed on the people of the rest of the United Kingdom. It is solipsistic; it is isolationist; and at times it is even capricious—I want nothing to do with it. The deal puts us on a devastating path, as the security landscape across the continent and the wider world is ever more complex. So I will not vote for a deal that discards our security needs—needs that the Government fail to take seriously.

The day when we were originally due to vote on the deal, 11 December, marked five years since the then Yanukovych Government in Ukraine opened fire on young protesters in Maidan Square who wanted to join the European Union. How perverse that this sorry Government would ask us to vote to leave that European Union on the day that marked five years from when the so-called “heavenly hundred” were killed by their own Government for wishing to join the European Union.

I say this to progressives around the UK: Scotland has stood by you since Brexit was voted for in 2016. When Scotland finally—finally—regains its independence and seeks to join the European Union as an independent member state, I say to our progressive friends around the UK: just as we stood by you, we want you to stand with us.

5.6 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): The hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) has made a superb speech. I want to pick up his statement that free movement is very important, and that the economy is very important. I would say that it is more the case that it is free markets that have enabled people to move around the European Union and to go on holidays to other European Union countries. That has really broken down barriers. Also, on the military side of things, NATO has been an incredibly important part of what has kept us together and has brought us peace in our time.

In terms of the debate we are now having, there is a huge question of trust in our democracy and, if we get this wrong, it can damage our democracy. I believe that part of the debate that we have been having has been undermining people's recognition of our democracy.

[Chris Green]

The referendum was not an opinion poll that people were asked to participate in. It was an instruction from the country to leave the European Union, and it must be seen as such. There are different ways of interpreting that instruction, but I do wonder about some of the things that people say about the referendum.

Some people talk about the influences on the British people during the campaign—they claim that Russia had an influence. Some people allege that the electorate were ignorant or not sufficiently informed. Some of that rhetoric is pretty disappointing. My view is that, in the polling booth, the vast majority of people were responding to their lived experience within the European Union over a period of years or decades. The importance of free markets has just been highlighted. We joined the Common Market. Over a period of years we saw it transform into the EEC, then the EC, then the EU, and now we are on the verge of creating a united states of Europe. We can see the External Action Service. We can see the diplomatic and foreign service side of the European Union. We can see the developing European Union military. We can see these things happening. We can see that, with ever-closer union, there is a track that the European Union is on, and it is a question of whether we go quickly or slowly. We recognise that we are on that track into ever-closer union, so we must decide whether to continue along that track or leave. The British people could see where we came from, where we are and where we are going, and, having seen that clearly, chose to leave.

I believe that the withdrawal agreement will be defeated on Tuesday; there is overwhelming opposition to it, which is not to say that there is any particular support for any other solution. I am very concerned that this defeat will be seen as an opportunity to extend article 50, although we know that the European Union most effectively concludes negotiations towards the end—the last week, day or hour. The defeat might even be seen as an opportunity to cancel article 50, have a fundamental renegotiation and go for the Norway option, perhaps. We have been in this process for well over two years. Can we really tell the British people that we ought to start again and seek a brand new option?

I am even more concerned about having a second referendum; actually, precedent suggests that the time-scale for EU referendums is once in every 41 years. The British people have given their instruction to Parliament. If we disregard the vote, saying that the people were ignorant or not sufficiently well informed by their betters, that will be incredibly damaging to our democracy. We cannot and should not do that. Why would people bother to vote again if this vote was so easily dismissed?

Those who demand a “good, well informed” referendum often give no answer to the issue of what the question would be. From what I can see, there would be three options. Remain would definitely be on the ballot paper, even though it was rejected decisively first time around. A World Trade Organisation-rules Brexit would probably also be on it, as would the Prime Minister’s withdrawal agreement. In that referendum, the Brexit withdrawal agreement and WTO options could get 33% of the vote each, while remain could get 34% and so win. That result would be considered decisive. We do not know

where we will end up if we go down the route of having an additional referendum. We should be cautious about being so dismissive.

I believe that we can unite the British people. Their understanding of leave is fairly clear already—most people would understand Brexit to mean taking back control of our money, borders, laws and trade. Most people also want more direct democracy—not referendums, but in terms of voting for the Member of Parliament who makes the decisions.

5.13 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): It is nothing short of a tragedy that today we are discussing this totally inadequate deal at the 11th hour, with the threat of “this deal or no deal” still being exercised by the Government, despite there being no majority in the House for no deal. It did not have to be this way.

As many others have said today, the Prime Minister should have reached out across the House to secure a cross-party agreement that we and the country could coalesce around. Instead, she pandered to her own Brexiteers and set ridiculous red lines, which is why I am voting against the agreement. It rules out a permanent customs union with a British say; it does not deliver a good deal on services; it would limit access for British businesses to vital EU markets; and it does not sufficiently guarantee workers’ rights or consumer or environmental protections. There are no guarantees that equivalent arrangements with EU programmes and agencies will survive the Brexit process. There is also a lack of clarity about our security arrangements and what will happen in Northern Ireland. Indeed, the political declaration is so big and conditional that I am surprised any Member could vote for this deal. I cannot understand what they think they are voting for.

I want to concentrate on four areas regarding why I think this is a bad deal, and why leaving the EU is not good for my constituents. First, as others have said, it will make my constituents poorer. The North East England chamber of commerce—not a bunch of remoaners—say that more than half its members believe that leaving the EU will have a negative impact on their company. Treasury analysis from 28 November shows that the north-east will be worse off after Brexit, with a GDP reduction of between 3% and a massive 16%, and with pharmaceutical and automotive industries most at risk. The loss of funding from the European Regional Development Fund for infrastructure and skills development will be a huge blow to the region, and as yet the Government have given no guarantees that the Prosperity Fund will replace that funding for the north-east.

The second issue is university funding. It is no coincidence that the previous two higher education Ministers resigned their positions, because they know this deal is bad for our universities. Universities UK has been clear about what is needed from the Government in terms of guaranteeing access to the EU’s research and innovation programmes and research networks, yet what we see in the political declaration is very vague language indeed:

“The parties will explore the participation of the United Kingdom in the European research infrastructure consortium”.

That is no guarantee whatsoever. The third reason is that the EU provides strong policies that seek to protect our natural environment, heritage, rights at work, and

helps us to tackle climate change, but again there is no guarantee from the Government that those policies will be maintained.

Fourthly, I come to Northern Ireland. A few weeks ago I asked the Prime Minister to come back to the House with guarantees to ensure that the Good Friday agreement would not be put at risk by her deal. I therefore read the addendum on Northern Ireland with great interest, but I was saddened because, although it mentions the importance of the unique relationship with Ireland, and of fostering the development of the seamless border that now enables unprecedented levels of trade and co-operation, it contains nothing to say how that will be achieved. All the points in the addendum relate to the operation of the Northern Ireland Assembly, and I am afraid I was led to believe that the Government have not realised that the Assembly has not been sitting for two years. We need to hear a lot more from the Government about how they will ensure that the Good Friday agreement—in particular the cross-border institutions and structures that support it—will not be diminished whenever Northern Ireland leaves the EU. The Government have heard from other Members about the issues with the backstop, but I want to hear about the Good Friday agreement.

Paul Masterton: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Blackman-Woods: I am sorry, I will not because we are short of time.

If the deal is voted down next week, as we expect it to be, and if there is no general election, the House must have the guts to go back to the country and ask again for people's opinion on this deal. When people voted in 2016, in good faith, we did not have the details of this deal, and in order to make progress it is important to allow them to be considered.

5.19 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods). She might wish to refer to the speech made by the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), given her knowledge of Northern Ireland, who made it very clear that this agreement does in fact protect the Good Friday agreement.

I made a promise to my constituents that I would work to deliver the result of the referendum by implementing a pragmatic Brexit. I will be voting for the Prime Minister's deal, despite my concerns—and I have very many—because of that promise. However, I want to quote my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), who spoke powerfully yesterday. He said:

“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?”—[*Official Report*, 9 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 472.]

That encapsulates perfectly how I feel. I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green), my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) and my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith) that I stood on a manifesto that committed me to a “deep and special partnership” with the European Union, including a “comprehensive...customs arrangement.”

I say to ideological colleagues that after this vote I will have done my duty and delivered on my promise. From then on, my duty will be to do what is best for my constituents and for future generations. Of those constituents, I want to talk about farmers. I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Farmers are one of the groups likely to be most affected by Brexit. The first and biggest risk to them is tariffs, and the second is phytosanitary checks. Even Brexiteer Ministers such as the Environment Secretary know the risk. He told the Oxford farming conference about the impact of tariffs, pointing out that there would be no upside—he might have said different things during the referendum campaign, but I cannot comment on that. He said that

“new tariffs would undoubtedly exceed any adjustment in the currency markets”.

We export 15% of our beef and more than 30% of our lamb. Of those exports, more than 90% goes to the EU. A tariff on those goods can be as high as 87% and averages around 40%. That would be devastating for livestock farmers. Eddisbury is a big dairy constituency, producing about 3% of UK dairy. Some 90% of all UK dairy exports were to the EU. A report from the LSE warns that tariffs of between 41% and 74% will be imposed on dairy produce in the event of no deal. The UK managing director of Arla Foods has warned that

“most likely we would see shortages of products and a sharp rise in prices, turning everyday staples like butter, yoghurts, cheese and infant formula into occasional luxuries.”

It would make exports from both sectors uncompetitive and would send my local farmers to the wall. With half of all farms making less than £20,000 a year, and a fifth making no profit at all, such a huge increase in costs would be the death knell for many UK farmers.

Beyond tariffs, non-tariff barriers could hit farmers hard. Sustain noted in its evidence to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee:

“Generally, when standards start to diverge then costs start to accrue in tracking the difference between the products. What kind of paperwork will have to be provided? What kind of proof of certification or standard-setting will there have to be, and also what kind of inspection regimes, particularly at borders?”

Those are questions that the farming community is having to wrestle with daily as a consequence of irresponsible rhetoric about no deal. I urge all Members to give some much needed certainty and reassurance to farmers and other businesses across the UK by voting for the deal. It may not be perfect but if Brexit is to be delivered, it is the only way forward.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) said, though, if the spirit of compromise is not present in the House, I will no doubt ultimately join my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) back on the campaign trail. I say to my ideological colleagues that if they do not support this deal, they risk no deal. From now on in, after the vote on this deal, I will vote for the best interests of my constituents, which is definitely not no deal.

5.25 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): This is undoubtedly one of the most important votes that I or anyone else in the House will participate in during our parliamentary careers. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) that we should not be here. The very fact that we are where we are, having this debate 78 days before exit day, is a sign of failure. It is a sign that the people have been badly let down by the politicians to whom they look for leadership.

Brexit began as a crisis of the Conservative party's own making. From the red meat of a referendum thrown to Eurosceptic Back Benchers to the red lines drawn up before a Tory party conference speech, for them it has never been about the interests of this country or of the people we have been sent here to represent. The whole process has been characterised by complacency and, indeed, by an astounding degree of arrogance on the part of some from whom we should have expected better. There was the casual approach to the referendum itself—a vote that was called with not a thought given to the consequences of it being lost—and article 50 was triggered when the country was clearly not ready, just so that we could show that we were “getting on with it”. Even then, as the clock started to tick down towards exit day, we were still not putting in the work and still did not have a clue as to what we wanted from our soon-to-be-former EU partners, let alone having a clue as to how we could go about getting it.

We saw Government Ministers display shocking ignorance, whenever they appeared before Select Committees, before the House or in the media, of the potential consequences of Brexit. The Secretary of State for International Trade said that a UK-EU free trade agreement would be

“one of the easiest in human history”.

The former Brexit Secretary, the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), said:

“It is like threading the eye of a needle: if you have a good eye and a steady hand, it is easy enough”.—[*Official Report*, 7 December 2016; Vol. 618, c. 233.]

I assume the right hon. Gentleman is still searching in the haystack for that oh-so-elusive needle, let alone getting round to threading it.

This idea that Britain is somehow—perhaps because of its history or the empire, or perhaps because we have always punched above our weight as a small island—subject to different rules and can do things a different way is a total fallacy. We cannot dictate terms to the European Union. We certainly cannot tell the people of Ireland what to do these days. We cannot demand trade deals entirely on our own terms. They are deals: they require agreement. That seems to me to be an absolutely fundamental, basic point that so many proponents of Brexit have entirely missed. Freedom is nothing unless we have somebody else who agrees with us and wants to go along the same path. The rest of the world is not waiting breathlessly for us to leave the EU. They are not eager to give us exactly what we want just because it is Britain asking. Any future trade deals will involve compromise and lengthy negotiations.

I have something of an obsession with the pig trotter protocol, which we discussed in the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee yesterday with the International Meat Trade Association. I have this obsession

partly because of its comedy value, although it is not so funny for the pigs involved. It was first talked about in 2008 and then resurrected by David Cameron after he led a huge trade mission to China. We are still trying to negotiate the sale of pigs' trotters to China. It is a product that we do not need and that China likes, for some bizarre reason.

The fact that it has been so difficult to get a tiny deal like that in place should be a wake-up call to people as to how difficult it will be to get these fully comprehensive trade agreements with all these other countries that actually do not want exactly what we want. Australia and New Zealand have been pressing us about lamb quotas post Brexit. US Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross has said that yes, he does want a race to the bottom on standards post Brexit. He does not want to agree to a deal whereby we do not allow chlorinated chicken and hormone-pumped beef into this country. That is why I tabled new clause 1 to the Agriculture Bill so that we can try to avoid that scenario.

I was one of 122 Members who voted against the triggering of article 50. That decision has been more than vindicated every day since that vote. I will vote against the Prime Minister's deal next week and I will support a people's vote, should the opportunity arise. It is now the only way I can see to get us out of this mess. That people's vote would obviously have an option to remain on the ballot paper.

The promises made in 2016 are not going to be delivered, and any Brexit deal will impoverish my constituency as well as the whole UK. No deal would be a catastrophe, but I reject any attempt to use that threat to strong-arm us into supporting the Prime Minister's deal. Article 50 could be extended or, more sensibly, revoked. Rejecting what is clearly a bad deal does not mean accepting no deal, and it is entirely within the Prime Minister's power to take no deal off the table.

The choice before us now is not between deal and no deal. The choice is whether we accept Brexit on the terms on which we know it would happen—the terms that the Prime Minister has been able to agree with the EU—or whether, now that we know what Brexit looks like, we still want to do it. This journey began with the British people and it is only right, now that we know the facts, that they choose its final destination.

5.30 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Mr Speaker, I am sure that you will remember that famous quote of Dean Acheson, the former United States Secretary of State, who, when addressing the West Point Military Academy in 1962, said that Great Britain had

“lost an empire and not yet found a role.”

Here we are, many decades later, and the fact is that in relation to the continent of which we are a part—this core relationship—we still have not found our role.

There are three fundamental choices available to us and we have to make a decision pretty swiftly about which one to go with. No. 1: we can be fully in, although that would now require a second referendum to overturn the original one. No. 2: we can be fully out and completely separate from Europe, trading on WTO terms. No. 3: we can find a compromise and have what I would call a semi-detached relationship—half in, half out.

Like many colleagues, I have reservations about the backstop, but I will support this deal because we are a semi-detached country by nature. It suits us to have that type of relationship because it is in our DNA. We are a European nation with many close ties with our European neighbours, yet we have the Commonwealth. We have a very strong relationship with the United States and the English-speaking world—with countries that play cricket, football and all the rest of it.

John Major once talked about trying to make Britain a country “at ease with itself”. Leaving through that semi-detached compromise deal may not be perfect in every way, but we would become a country at ease with itself in terms of our relations with our European partners. However, if we go for the other two options, we will not be a country at ease with itself. Having a second referendum would be saying to those who voted leave and want to vote leave again, “Your vote did not count.” That would leave lasting bitterness and great division in our society. Equally, choosing no deal and WTO terms—a very alluring prospect for those who voted on sovereignty grounds—would also leave great bitterness. I want briefly to focus on the latter option because it is certainly growing in popularity in my constituency and in my association. Some may dismiss it, but there is a logic for people who voted on grounds of sovereignty: they want the deal that they believe provides the greatest sovereignty. For many, that is leaving on WTO terms. However, sovereignty is about far more than legal power. It is about agency and power in the real world through the economy and so on.

There are three key points. First, leaving with no deal on WTO terms is based on a fundamental contradiction, which is this idea that we can go and negotiate trade deals. Those trade deals would be with the countries with which we currently trade on WTO terms. In other words, its fundamental premise is that we should upgrade those trade deals to superior preferential terms, and do so by relegating our preferential access to the EU to standard WTO terms.

Secondly, people talk about a managed no deal. This is a free market economy. The idea that by sticking a few billion pounds in Government Departments, we can suddenly have command and control of the UK economy come April is for the birds. We know from history that we cannot manage the market and we cannot manage consumer sentiment. We certainly cannot manage business investment sentiment. That will be so critical in the months after we leave, and it is why we should reject no deal.

My final point on no deal is this. Let us say that we ignore the worst-case scenario, although that is of course a worry for all of us—let us take it at its best. At its very best, someone who advocates a WTO no deal, particularly if they are a hard Brexiteer, is saying that after all this effort, all this campaigning and all these years, the best we can do on leaving is to give British industry standard terms that are, in mortgage terms, the standard variable rate. They are bog-standard, ordinary, plain, common-or-garden trade terms available by default to any country on earth: nothing special, nothing preferential. In my view, that is not good enough for British industry and not good enough for my constituents.

I believe that this deal, for all its failings, does satisfy the requirement of giving us that new semi-detached relationship. We will have strong economic ties with Europe,

which are vital, and yet, over time, once we have established frictionless trade—once we have left through a robust withdrawal agreement that secures our departure in a steady state—then, yes, we can negotiate trade deals around the world.

People should not be dismissive of that, because there is a real-life version of being semi-detached—it is called Norway and it is called Switzerland. Whether we take those countries as models or not, we can see that they are prosperous, rich, successful, happy countries that trade in the single market—one through the EEA, the other bilaterally—and yet have trade deals around the world and strong links in the global economy. We can do the same. We should have confidence in ourselves and say that when we get into the long-term negotiations, we will be successful because we will be positive about it and realise that this is an opportunity. I encourage everyone to think positively, back the Prime Minister's deal, and help us to have this happy, steady state.

5.36 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): So here we are in January 2019 bearing the brunt of David Cameron's back-of-a-fag-packet politics of 2015. His ill-thought-out plan aimed to appease the Brexiteers in his own party at a time when he thought that he was invincible. That know-it-all attitude is exactly why people turned out to vote leave: they wanted to vote against the establishment.

Never-ending austerity since 2010 has driven a rise in in-work poverty. Our constituents have been hit hard in the pocket. People are fed up and they are angry, with food bank use in Swansea up 50% since universal credit. Life is challenging at the best of times, and being stuck in a Catch-22 situation of spiralling personal debt and stagnant wages means that people have got angrier and angrier. I understand how that feels, because it is why I am standing here. When faced with the lies on a bus and promised a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow—let us throw some unicorns in as well—Brexit was painted as a way out.

But the promised land was not based on facts. In total contrast, as we hear from Scottish National party Members, in the 2014 Scottish referendum, a 400-plus-page White Paper was published called “Scotland's Future”. It gave a detailed assessment of the impact of Scotland leaving the United Kingdom—not a leaflet, as shown by the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) earlier. Why did those hard facts not exist for us? We did not know what we were voting on.

At the beginning of the debate yesterday, I was taken aback to hear the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) intervene on the Secretary of State for Exiting the EU, saying:

“This House is not representative of the people.”

The Secretary of State responded:

“the majority of the House voted to trigger article 50. It is...incumbent on Members...to be clear what they are for.”—[*Official Report*, 9 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 393.]

Well, I beg to differ. I did not vote to trigger article 50, and neither did the rest of the 2017 intake. The Prime Minister called a general election to try to convince the UK that she could provide a strong and stable Government. It didn't work, did it? Members lost their seats—67, I believe. Let us not forget that the make-up of this House has changed considerably since 2016, pretty much like public opinion, which has also changed since 2016.

[Tonia Antoniazzi]

Opinion certainly has changed, as I have seen since I have been the Member of Parliament for Gower, and the electorate has changed as well. Since June 2016, there are 2 million more people in the UK who have reached voting age. According to the House of Commons Library, that is estimated to be 2,400 in my constituency alone.

To add to the confusion about how constituencies voted in 2016, the ballot boxes were not counted by constituency. In my case, Gower was counted as part of the city of Swansea. Across three constituencies, the majority for leave was a mere 3,629. I would call that a marginal win. I took a marginal seat after it was held by a Tory for only two years, and I, along with the other new Members elected in 2017, prove that opinions have changed.

The House of Commons Library's independent research on the vote estimates that Gower was 49.3% leave and 50.7% remain. That picture has changed significantly since 2016. Like most MPs, I have received a vast amount of correspondence from constituents. When analysed, it gives me statistics of 82% remain and 18% leave. From all that correspondence, 61% are asking for a people's vote. I realised that I had to test that in the constituency, so I held public meetings. Our mock ballot in each of those meetings showed pretty much the same—80% remain and 20% leave.

Since the 2017 election, this House is the most representative it has ever been, and I am very proud to be here. The Secretary of State says that it is incumbent on Members to know what they are here for, and I want him to know that I know exactly why I am here. I am here to represent the fact that my constituency has not only changed its allegiance to Labour, but it has changed its mind on Brexit.

Moreover, my constituents want the Government to know that small businesses in my constituency such as Rose and Rebellion—a baby carrier business exporting all over the world—have lost 50% of their business directly because of impending Brexit. What assurances will the Government give to protect companies like those that are struggling to compete with America, which is swamping the market?

From the parliamentary logjam to the Government can-kicking, there is no simple answer to Brexit. There is no Brexit that is good for the United Kingdom. This Government have proven that they cannot be trusted and are not capable of winning. My constituents deserve to see the light at the end of the tunnel. I am applying sense and good logic to give us a way out of this logjam. Why can the Government not? That is why I am backing a people's vote. We need to move this on and get back to the issues.

5.42 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): When I was elected in 2015, it was on the basis that we pledged to give the people the opportunity to determine whether they wished to stay in the European Union or leave. I for one felt that, having given people that opportunity, it was not for me as an MP to then tell them which way they should vote.

I wrote to every single one of my constituents and invited them to 10 meetings across my constituency before the referendum. I also provided them with

information from the House of Commons Library, so that they could make their own mind up. During those meetings, I explained what an article 50 process would look like and what a reformed EU would look like, should we vote to remain. I did not expect to be talking about article 50 again, but, to my surprise and disappointment, given the way I voted, my constituency voted to leave by almost 60:40, and the country by 52:48. I declared my vote on the night because I did not wish to influence any of my constituents. I made it clear to my constituents that, having been elected by the ballot box, which gives me the authority to speak here now, I do not feel that I have the right to then ignore that ballot box when it gives a different determination from the vote I cast.

I swore to honour the referendum result. That is what I believe I am doing and will be doing when I vote for the Prime Minister's deal on Tuesday. I can then look in the eye those who voted leave and say that I am voting to ensure that we leave the European Union on 29 March 2019, that we will take back control of our borders and immigration, that we will leave the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy, that we will leave the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice and that we will stop paying moneys in, save for those agreed in the withdrawal agreement. Equally, I can look in the eye my constituents who voted to remain and wanted us to continue to have a trading and security relationship with the European Union. That is what the withdrawal agreement does and what the political declaration sets out. That is what we have two years to put in place. I feel I can honour that result.

Many of my colleagues will not vote for the deal. Unlike me, it has been their life's work to see us leave the European Union. The direction of travel that Parliament is currently focused on may mean that they never get an opportunity to vote for leaving the European Union if they do not vote for it this time around. It may well come off the table. Equally, other Members are more persuaded by the argument for a second referendum, or the latest and ludicrous thing I have heard about, which is a "people's assembly". That is what I thought I was standing in right now, making this speech. But we cannot delegate our responsibility. This House, by 498 MPs, voted to allow the Prime Minister to trigger article 50. That means we have to take responsibility for the outcome. We have a deal that will give us that outcome. Anything else would be a complete denial not just of the referendum result, but of the vote that night when 498 MPs said that this was the way to proceed.

I am very concerned about the House not agreeing to the withdrawal agreement, because the no-deal scenario fills me with great dread. It is all well and good for many people and many of my constituents to say, "No deal will be absolutely fine. We were warned the worst would happen after the referendum result and it didn't happen." However, Bank of England models suggest that the economy will be 11% worse off by 2030 in a no-deal situation. It is all well and good for individuals to say that it will be fine, but they will not be the ones going into the Division Lobby to vote for a no deal—I will. What if it turns out not to be fine? What if I knock on my constituents' doors to be told that they have just lost their job, are about to lose their house and do not know what they were going to do with their family because it has turned out that it was not all absolutely fine? They would say, "It's your fault, Huw Merriman MP,

because you made that happen.” I will not play Russian roulette with my constituents’ lives, their security and everything they hold dear just because “It may be okay”. I say to all those right hon. and hon. Members who may be willing to take that risk: be careful what you end up playing with.

I take the view that we would be a lot worse off from a democratic perspective if we saw a second referendum, the can being kicked down the road or no Brexit at all. How difficult would it be for us to go back on the campaign trail and knock on the doors in the general election to ask people to put their faith in democracy if we have just denied the democratic result that they thought they had gained in 2016?

Compromise is not a very sexy word, but when we look at the percentages, 52% versus 48%, it was always going to need a compromise to unite those two positions. It is possible for us to leave the European Union, but it is also possible for us to leave and enter into a new trading arrangement. It is also possible for us to look outside the European Union. The European Union is a great 28-country club if you are a member, but not if you are an African country that is getting poorer and poorer because it will not trade because it pulls up the walls. The population of Africa is due to double in the next 25 years. That is where we should be looking, not just for our own future but for their future too, and for a global economy that comes to us. That is why I will support this deal on Tuesday.

5.48 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Diolch, Mr Speaker. This debate, and the votes that will follow next week, will probably be the defining moments of this Parliament. They will certainly determine Ceredigion’s prospects and prosperity for decades to come. The withdrawal agreement and the declaration on the framework for the future relationship can perhaps be described as the Government’s attempt to convince Parliament to abandon the familiar benefits and certainty of the status quo, and risk it all by embracing the possibilities of the unknown and moving towards a relationship with the European Union whose opportunities are apparently unencumbered by the constraints of reality.

The matter in question is deeply significant and serious. This is our future relationship with our closest and largest trading partner and ally. It is therefore our duty as parliamentarians to challenge the ambiguity and the risks inherent in this deal, especially in the political declaration on the future relationship. As detailed in the Government’s own analysis, the UK will be poorer over the next 15 years under all possible scenarios than it would have been within the EU single market and customs union.

Ceredigion is reliant on the knowledge and rural economies. The education sector alone accounts for 20% of our economic output and sustains around 5,000 jobs in total, more than 2,800 of them directly supported by the county’s two universities. Agriculture is key to wealth and job creation, with every £1 generated translating into £7.40 for the local economy through supply chains and spending. Each job in farming supports another 3.5 in other sectors.

There is a lot of uncertainty at the moment, but there are a few things we can be certain about. We know that the single market is a vital export destination for Welsh

food and drink, with more than 80% of exports going to the EU. We know that the Welsh universities thrive on our membership of the EU and particularly benefit from the contribution of staff and students from the EU, as well as from European Research Council funding. We know that both the agricultural and higher education sectors will therefore be heavily impacted by changes to our relationship with the EU and devastated if we were to leave the customs union and single market.

That said, we do not know what the future relationship under this deal will look like, despite our having triggered article 50 two years ago and having debated the matter ever since. During this time, sectors such as agriculture and higher education have been plunged into unprecedented uncertainty, so it is entirely understandable that some find the prospect of a period of stability appealing and therefore the Government’s deal worth supporting. Let us be clear, however, that the proposal is no more than a 20-month stay of execution, not a reprieve. It offers a brief respite, but no assurances for the long term.

Uncertainty over the future relationship will continue to plague businesses and communities throughout the transition and most likely beyond. Far from the detailed and substantive document promised, the political declaration merely sets out a spectrum of potential options. The details will materialise only on the conclusion of yet further negotiations. While the Government have stated repeatedly that they will not entertain the prospect of another referendum, it is unclear what role Members of Parliament, as the elected representatives of the people, will have in the negotiations and whether they will have a role in the ratification of any agreement reached.

Admittedly, the declaration expresses a great deal of ambition for a close trading relationship, but to echo the Brexit Select Committee, ambition is no guarantee of success, and the experience of the past two years does not instil great confidence in the Government’s ability to deliver on such ambition or indeed to engage with others to seek compromise. It has been heartening to hear a lot tonight about compromise. Those who argue that opponents of the Prime Minister’s deal have not offered alternatives are mistaken and have not been listening. Several alternatives have been aired this evening. Back in January 2017—two years ago—a colleague in the Senedd, Steffan Lewis, in co-operation with the Welsh Government, published a White Paper detailing a range of options and a conclusion about what they thought was the best future relationship for Wales and the EU.

Ceredigion voted to remain, and conversations I have had with constituents have given no indication of a change of heart. The Government present us with an offer of embarking on a voyage to an unknown destination, warning that it will leave us poorer and possibly lead to ruin, yet they nevertheless ask us as parliamentarians to relinquish any say over the choice of destination and to renounce all influence over the course charted. Given the reservations I have expressed, this is an undertaking that I cannot in good conscience support.

5.53 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Thank you for calling me so early in this debate, Mr Speaker. One of the great things about being called at this late stage is

[Eddie Hughes]

that I get the opportunity to listen to other people articulate the case far better than I could. My comments might be slightly briefer as a result of having listened to the other arguments, not least those of the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann), who gave a very impassioned speech, much of which chimed with what I think the people of Walsall North would think. It is unfortunate, however, that I am following the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) and his beautiful baritone. He speaks for a rural community in Wales that is in contrast to the urban industrial one that I represent in Walsall. There are many elements to this argument that need to be represented, although when we vote we will make a binary decision about whether to walk through the Aye Lobby or the No Lobby. I am sure that each of our constituents will interpret that decision differently, in the same way, perhaps, as the 17-odd million people who voted for Brexit each thought that they were voting for very different things.

In my constituency, I have found most recently that the loudest voices—the ones that I have heard most of—are of those who would like a no-deal Brexit. In Willenhall and Bloxwich, we are definitely on the hard Brexit end of the spectrum. When I campaigned and voted for Brexit, I had in my mind something akin to a very hard Brexit. For example, I expected us to absolutely minimise the amount of money that we had to send to the European Union, so I find it a bit heartbreaking that that figure is close to £40 billion, and that we are paying it up front before we know what the final deal will be on our trading relationship. But all deals require an element of compromise.

Over recent days in Parliament, I have seen the idea that the possibility of a no-deal Brexit is diminishing. Clearly, that will be disappointing to the people of Willenhall and Bloxwich, but they need to understand that it is Parliament that decides. I do not think we should expect much sympathy from the general public, but I feel that an incredible responsibility rests with us. When I campaigned for Brexit, it was all very well me shouting at the TV at home and having my own opinion about how things should be. It is a bit like being a spectator on the sideline at a football match shouting that the referee or the managers should make different decisions. When we are in the game, we must be cognisant of our responsibility and of the number of different elements that we need to consider.

I am a naturally optimistic and enthusiastic person, and that is how I view the future. Now, here is a peculiar thing. We talk about the financial forecasts and people say that Brexit might make us less well off, which would be a terrible thing. Imagine, Mr Speaker—this might be difficult—that you are a plumber. You work for a good company, for which you have worked for a while, and you are, no doubt, an excellent plumber. But there are some things about the job that you are not happy with. Occasionally, your employers send you to work away from home, away from your family. They make you work weekends. They issue policies and edicts that you do not like, and things that you have to comply with because you work for them.

People say to you, “Do you know what? If you were to go out on your own, you could be a self-employed plumber. You could develop a business and employ

other people.” You think about that, and you realise, “Hang on a second. That is likely to mean that I have to work harder initially while I build up a client base. I will have to do my own accounts and work longer hours. That seems counter-intuitive, given what I am trying to achieve. I am complaining about having to work away from home and having to work weekends. If I go self-employed, that is exactly what I might end up doing.” But you are a good plumber, Mr Speaker. You have great ability and great confidence in your ability to strike out and make deals yourself, work for yourself and create a business that employs other people. You can not only create a very bright future for you and your family, but develop jobs and opportunities for other people. So that is what you decide to do. You quit your job and you decide to go it alone in this brave new world.

Mr Speaker, I have faith in you and your plumbing abilities in the same way as I have incredible faith in this country. We have some of the best universities in the world. We are developing technology for things such as driverless cars. Who would not have faith in the potential for the United Kingdom, working collectively, to forge a great place in the future?

I heard the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) say to the Secretary of State that he was laughing at the idea that the EU might, in the future, look longingly at us and the deals that we had struck. I say that that is rubbish. I have confidence in this country and our ability to do great things. When people look back at what we have achieved, they will know that we did the right thing when we left the European Union.

5.59 pm

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes). We both represent proud towns, but I will vote against the deal because it is my assessment that it would leave people in my constituency worse off and make their jobs less secure.

Back in June 2016, I approached the EU referendum not as my town's local MP, but as one of Stockton's local GPs. My experience of working in the NHS taught me the principle of informed consent, which is given based on a clear appreciation and understanding of the facts, implications and consequences of an action. Do we really have informed consent for this Brexit deal?

Did people have a clear appreciation of how this interpretation of Brexit would affect health and social care, for example? Half of us will get cancer. Did people really give their informed consent for us to leave the European Medicines Agency and get new cancer drugs six months later than other countries, or to risk our health and social care workforce? We depend on people from EU countries coming here and sharing their skills.

Did my constituents who make car parts for Nissan give their informed consent for a Brexit deal that the North East chamber of commerce says threatens the very future of car manufacturing in the north-east? Their jobs will be on the line when we cast our votes next week. This is no small thing: will “taking back control” be any kind of compensation for not having a job?

What if someone wants to retire to the sun? Sorry—no. There will be no ongoing entitlement to go and live in Spain. Was informed consent given for that? Young

people will lose their right to study and work in Europe. Did they give their informed consent for that? Did members of our armed forces who have served our Union give their informed consent for us to go back to the bad old days of conflict in Northern Ireland? Peace in Northern Ireland was hard won, and it will be under threat if we leave the EU in this way.

My constituents were told clearly that their lives would be better, that the rest of the world would be queueing up to trade with us and that the NHS would get more money. We now know that none of those things will happen. Informed consent was never obtained for this version of Brexit. That detail just was not there.

Brexit has never been about igniting the better, prouder country that my constituents want. The whole Brexit project stems from a group of people who want fundamentally to weaken our country's safety net. They want to water down workers' rights, pension protections and leave to care for children—those extra costs of employment that we in the EU have all agreed to share. They are a good thing that unions and workers support, but they are threatened by Brexit.

Let us be clear: this version of Brexit does not have the support of the NHS either. The Royal College of General Practitioners says:

"It is essential that the public are fully informed about the damage exiting the EU could potentially cause to the health service."

Nurses and midwives say the same. Brexit will damage because it will lead to less money for the NHS, as our economy grows less than it would; damage because it will exacerbate the existing staffing crisis; and damage because it will delay access to new drugs. It just is not worth it.

I spend my weekends listening to people on the streets of Stockton South. Opinions are mixed and emotions strong, but my constituents have given me two clear messages. First, they agree that Brexit is not going well. They are as frustrated as I am with how the Government have handled it, and they do not want me to vote for this deal. Secondly, they want a final say—a public vote on the final deal—now the facts about Brexit are clear. If Parliament cannot agree what to do, we need to go back to the people for a people's vote, which would be the first chance for everyone to give their truly informed consent, knowing all the facts about what Brexit means.

There is nothing to fear from more democracy. We owe it to the people we represent, before taking this giant risk to the future of our country, to check with them that we truly have their informed consent.

6.4 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): It has been a pleasure to listen to many of the speeches that have been made today, and I thank the hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) for his.

I will support the Prime Minister's withdrawal agreement when we vote for it next week. I do not celebrate the fact that we are leaving the European Union, but I do recognise that this was the decision of the British people.

I have seen at first hand the ways in which being a member of the EU can be a force for good, enabling us in the UK to work with neighbours on common issues such as environmental matters, financial market reforms

and the building of a network for scientific co-operation. What my kids loved most was the end of charges for mobile roaming. However, I have also seen an EU that has changed dramatically from the Common Market that we joined, and many people throughout our country were very uncomfortable with that.

We gave the people the vote. I campaigned for remain, but leave won. We told people that their vote would be respected, but they were also told, again and again, that a no-deal Brexit was not what would happen. They were told, "Trade will continue. The Germans want to sell us their cars. We will get a trade deal. It will be easy."

Many of my constituents work in areas that are not covered by the World Trade Organisation. Leaving without a deal is not a good deal, and a no-deal Brexit is not what people were promised. The withdrawal agreement gives stability on citizens' rights and gives businesses a breathing space to transition from where we are today to a new relationship. The declaration on the future framework paves the way towards the deepest trade partnership, and the deepest security partnership, into which the EU has ever entered with a third country—and yes, it does cover environmental protections and workers' rights.

I know that Labour Members would like more detail on the long-term relationship, but time after time, EU negotiators—my contacts across the EU—have said to me, "We cannot give you that detail until you accept the withdrawal agreement." I say to Labour Members, "You want to tear up the whole negotiation and start again, but that is really high-risk." Come 18 April, the European Parliament will shut for its elections. Its Members will be gone. There will not be another European Commission until autumn, possibly not until Christmas or, according to some people, not until after Christmas. Meanwhile, what will happen?

Last week, Universities UK warned of the risks of no deal to our science community, and the real possibility of a brain drain. This week, the manufacturers' organisation published its annual survey. Our businesses are diverting investment, stockpiling and reviewing supply chains.

Yesterday in the Chamber, the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) warned us of the real risk that no deal could lead to a border poll in Northern Ireland and the break-up of our own United Kingdom. I was born and grew up in Northern Ireland, and my friends and contacts also say that that is a real risk. I know that Members from the Democratic Unionist party—my contacts on the other side of the Chamber—are concerned about the backstop, but I believe that we will be given more reassurance. The Irish Prime Minister said that this week, and I know that when the EU negotiators want to move, they can move fast. Let us make sure that we get that reassurance.

I know that colleagues also want more detail on the future framework—that is apparently why they will not vote for the withdrawal agreement—but they will not have it until we pass the agreement. I say again that no deal is not a good deal, and that a second referendum will not reduce uncertainty or risk. At the time of the last referendum, I campaigned in 58 Westminster constituencies. I genuinely believe that there is a significant risk that the result of a second vote could be even more anti-EU than the result two and a half years ago. Going back to square one will not reduce uncertainty or risk either.

[Vicky Ford]

I will vote for this deal because everything that I have seen leads me to believe that it is the best way to protect jobs and security, enable us to have a long-term relationship with our neighbours across the EU and deliver the future framework that Members on both sides of the House want so that we can care for the lives and livelihoods of our constituents.

6.10 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), although I do not agree with her analysis. Next week, we are set finally to vote and make one of the most important decisions that this House has taken. It is a decision that will have enormous and lasting repercussions for our communities, our economy and our security.

Over the past few weeks, I have taken the time to reflect on this deal and what it would mean for the people of Leigh. My constituency is made up of post-industrial towns in the north, and the deal will particularly impact us because of the fragile social and economic landscape we face after the real hardship we have endured over the last few decades. With the decline of our manufacturing base and then austerity cutting to the bone, we have been left feeling isolated from the economic prosperity seen in some of our cities. We face higher than average unemployment, ballooning social issues on our streets and a social mobility crisis that threatens the life chances of our young people.

When I looked at this deal, I considered two points. First, does it respect the referendum result, in which the majority of my constituents voted to leave the EU? Also, crucially, does it deliver on the message my constituents sent and provide a blueprint for transformative and inclusive prosperity for all our communities that will help our towns to thrive and prosper once again? Looking through the deal and the political declaration, I can only conclude that, for three key reasons, this will be a bad deal for our constituency that will fail to deliver that foundation for the future.

First, the deal will not safeguard the existing jobs and businesses in the constituency. Without the assurance of a permanent customs union, our manufacturers in Leigh will be left with uncertainty and without an assurance of frictionless trade. We have seen before that when businesses and the economy take a hit, our town economies are the first to suffer. Secondly, the deal does not protect our workers' rights. If we accept it, we risk the lowering of rights and standards by a future Tory Government. As a Labour MP, I cannot and will not vote for a deal that does not guarantee all our hard-fought rights and protections.

Thirdly, this deal does not protect our national security. Through my work in the shadow Cabinet Office team, I am well aware of the critical cyber risks facing our nation and of how much we rely on threat information from our European partners. It is simply not good enough to "aspire" to a close security relationship. Our national security needs concrete reassurances; it is not a bargaining chip.

Those are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to my serious concerns about the deal. Representing a community in desperate need of transformative investment, there is no way I could support such a gamble. If the

last 10 years have taught us anything in Leigh, it is that in times of struggle our post-industrial towns are the first to be hit. I cannot risk that for our community again.

It feels we have got nowhere in the last two years. Nothing has changed, including the heated and often polarised debate. It is upsetting to witness MPs—mostly female—on the receiving end of some of the most vile abuse, be it online or via email. If there is one thing that the Government must take control of, it is the narrow arguments on Brexit. The same characters are preaching the same rhetoric, and as a country and a community we have not moved forward or even reunited.

We are left in a truly sorry state of affairs, and what pains me most is that it really did not have to be this way. Instead of negotiating in seriousness and respect, recognising the close relationship the UK wants with the EU—our closest and most important partner—the Government wasted two years fighting among themselves and botching together a deal that pleases nobody. Therefore, whichever way people voted in the referendum two years ago, one thing is miraculously unifying my constituency: we do not want the Prime Minister's deal.

We are calling the negotiations out for the failure that they are. We reject this botched, blindfold Brexit, and we agree that we must, and certainly can, do better than this to keep our country strong and safe while helping our communities to thrive into the future.

6.15 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I will start by taking some time to reflect on the issues that I heard about in 2016, and have continued to hear about since, while representing a seat that voted substantially to leave the EU. I completely understand the valid and sincere reasons why people on both sides voted how they did. Our area, once the beating heart of Britain's industrial empire, has seen 30 years of deindustrialisation and rising unemployment, with our youth unemployment now two and a half times the national average. Many towns, including Leigh, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Jo Platt) just so articulately described, feel a sense of being left behind, of anger, of loss and of betrayal. Just six months before the referendum, our steelworks was closed by this Government, with 3,100 jobs lost overnight. So, when people were asked back then, "Are you happy with the status quo, or do you want things to change? Do you want to make Redcar, Teesside or Britain great again?", of course they were going to vote out of anger and frustration. They were going to vote to take back control when they were told that the blame for our troubles lies in Brussels.

However, it was not the EU that closed our steelworks. The Government had no qualms about state aid when they stepped in to take a stake in the Port Talbot works just a few months later. It was not the EU that drove down our industry and manufacturing in favour of an economy based on the financial and services sectors. The EU did not take £6 billion out of public spending in the north in the past eight years, and it did not give us zero-hours contracts, a low-pay economy, austerity and food banks. However, many in my patch at that time simply said, "What's to lose? It can't get any worse." The facts are clear now in a way that they were not in 2016, as there is plenty to lose and, as always, it is people in work in areas such as mine who stand to lose the most again.

The Government's impact assessment showed that the economy of the north-east will be hit to the tune of 16%. That is not just a "Project Fear" figure; that means real jobs and real wage packets. That will mean homes repossessed, businesses going under, and personal tragedies like we saw in 2015 after the closure of the steelworks. There is no way in which I or anyone in this place who claims to want the best for their constituents should even be contemplating a no-deal Brexit, although we see the Prime Minister wielding it as a threat to steamroller her failed deal, which is reckless and irresponsible.

I want to take a moment to focus on a sector that remains a huge international asset in our area. The chemicals industry employs around 7,600 people in Teesside. We have the second biggest chemical cluster in Europe and the biggest in the UK, and it is heavily integrated with supply chains that span the English channel. Companies such as Huntsman process chemicals in Redcar and send them to Rotterdam for the next stage of processing. If there are any costs or delays, companies will just shift their entire processing operations to Europe, taking jobs with them. Chemicals cannot be stockpiled, and any delay is deeply damaging. However, it is not just a no-deal Brexit that would jeopardise that precious industry. The chief executive of the North East of England Process Industry Cluster told me that while the Prime Minister's deal is better than no deal, any kind of Brexit will leave the crucial industry worse off.

The Government have already made one industrial site in my constituency a wasteland, and I am not prepared to risk a second when we are working so hard to get back on our feet. I cannot accept the Prime Minister's deal, which is an historic and unprecedented concession of sovereign control. It leaves us in a weak negotiating position internationally, £50 billion worse off, and no clearer on our future relationship with Europe. The Chancellor himself told us that it will make Britain poorer. If it is not what people voted for, why on earth are we putting ourselves through this pain? We must now extend or revoke article 50 and go back to the people—this time with the truth and a picture of what the reality of Brexit actually is.

To those who say that they just want this over and done with, I am afraid to say that the Prime Minister's deal will be just the beginning. We will be bogged down in negotiations for a decade, with a slow haemorrhaging of our power and wealth. To those who say another vote is a betrayal, I am afraid to say that the betrayal has already happened. The betrayal happened in 2016: when people were promised something that could not be done, and when they were promised £350 million a week for the NHS, the exact same benefits as being in the EU and the easiest deal in history. When a promise cannot be kept, everything that follows from it is a betrayal, and we need to face up to that and be honest.

To those who say there is a better deal yet to be negotiated, I am afraid to say there is no other deal. There is no jobs-first Brexit or sensible Brexit. This deal is Brexit. This is all there is and, after two and a half years, the public can see it is a disaster. They know it has gone horribly wrong and they do not like where we are headed. It is disrespectful to say that they have to be bound by a decision they made two years ago when they know that this is not what they were promised. They do not like the mess we are in and, like me, they do not recognise the Britain we are becoming.

Our Britain is not insular, fearful, jealous, selfish, pompous or cruel. It does not look backwards to a world that never was or blame other people for our failings. Our Britain is decent, kind and compassionate, but firm and fair. Our Britain is confident in its values and of its place in the world. It respects other nations and actively wants to stand alongside our friends, partners and neighbours. This Britain wants to have its say. I have absolute faith in the British people to find a way through where the Government and Parliament have failed. We must put this back in the people's hands.

6.20 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I am glad to have the chance to contribute to the debate, but I will be brief, as so much has already been said.

I say from the start that I will be voting against the Government's agreement, which is not an agreement but a short-term fix that raises huge questions about backstops and borders. The political declaration is a statement of intention. There is no deal. There are promises, politely-termed phrases and wishes for our future relationship with the European Union, but wishes will not protect workers' rights, jobs or our living standards.

We are two years on from the decision to trigger article 50 and less than three months away from the date on which we are due to leave, and what we have are some temporary arrangements and the intention to negotiate longer-term deals. We have no certainty.

What confidence can we have that we will, in fact, reach final agreements that protect our economy, our jobs, our environment and so much more? What we have now does not address the key issues facing my constituents. My constituents did not vote for a worse life. Many of them have already been hit hard by the Government's policy of austerity, and it is not right for me to support this deal and make things worse for them. Over the past two years this Government have failed to negotiate a firm future arrangement. How can we possibly believe that, during the implementation period, they will be able to negotiate and agree the positive arrangements that we need?

It cannot be the case that it is this deal or nothing. The Government have cynically left putting this deal to the House to the last minute in a determined effort to put the pressure on and say, "You must support this or it's no deal." It is the Government's responsibility to allow this House to have real influence on the terms of the deal we need.

No deal is not an option. The Government know that leaving without a deal would not be in our interests, the interests of business or the interests of individuals. Some are calling for a clean break, but the Minister knows full well that there will be nothing clean about no deal, which would leave us trying to navigate the rugged coastline of the former agreements of our last 40-plus years in the EU.

I am glad to have been one of the Members on both sides of the House who wrote to the Prime Minister to say that no deal cannot be an option. We need a much better deal that will protect jobs, the economy, workers' rights, the environment and the living standards of my constituents in Blaydon. This deal does not do that, and we must have the opportunity to change it, by extending article 50 if necessary.

[Liz Twist]

Over the last year, thanks to my constituent Barbara McGovern, I have been working with colleagues on both sides of the House in the all-party group on phenylketonuria, or PKU, which is a metabolic condition. Those with PKU have a very restricted diet that eliminates protein. Failure to do so leads to serious neurological and developmental problems affecting all aspects of life from childhood. It is not curable—although if the Government would agree that Kuvan could be prescribed, that would help 20% of sufferers, such as my constituent Archie McGovern—and those with PKU rely on prescribed foods, many of which are imported from overseas. It is not a question of choice; they need those dietary products. These people are really concerned that post Brexit, those products will not be available in time and in the quantity required to ensure their continued availability. People with PKU, and those with many other conditions who have fears about the continuing supply of their medicines or products, are hugely concerned for the future, and we need a firm long-term agreement to ensure that those supplies continue to be available—not in the short term, but right into the future. The Government's withdrawal agreement does not offer that permanent solution, and buying 5,000 new fridges will neither help nor reassure.

Finally, I want to talk briefly about my constituents' views. So many have taken the opportunity to contact me, and their messages have reflected a wide range of views from "I want to remain" to "Leave now with no deal" and everything in between. Of course, many of them are asking for a people's vote. My constituency voted leave. I respect that decision, but I do not believe that my constituents voted to be worse off, to risk environmental protections, such as those covering the Blaydon Quarry landfill site in my constituency, or to risk employment rights and, of course, jobs. It is clear that a huge majority of those who have contacted me are asking me to reject the deal that is on the table, and that is what I will be doing next Tuesday.

I could go on, but so much has been said already that I would simply repeat what many other hon. Members have said and will say in the rest of the debate. I will therefore end by reiterating that the deal is not in the best interests of my constituents and I shall vote against it.

6.26 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I prepared a speech, but at 5 pm I decided to scrap much of it because I wanted to express how I and many of my constituents feel. We are hurting, Mr Speaker, and I often feel that I am in a horrid dream—a nightmare that has continued from the moment when I broke down in tears at the referendum count on result night. At that moment I felt—I still feel this now—that something had been stolen from me. Viscerally, something had been taken from me, and not for others to gain from, but to be destroyed and torn up. My rights, my citizenship, my culture—all had been ripped away from me and many of my constituents.

On my way home on that miserable morning, I of course went to my local shop. I chatted to my Spanish friend there, and all that I could say was, "I'm sorry. We have failed you." We in the remain campaign failed millions of migrants who work here, who live here and

who made this place their home, and we have made them feel less welcome. But why should our failure—my failure—in the campaign harm them? Why should a failure of 2016 bind our future and mean that we fail forever? There is a principle in democracy that no Parliament may bind future Parliaments. There is a principle that no votes may bind future votes. The '75 vote did not bind us in 2016, so why now do we say that the tyranny of history should for some reason bind us to a decision that I think was a manifest mistake?

I am against referendums generally. We live in a parliamentary democracy, and I believe that we should avoid them if we can. But once the genie is out of the bottle, the only way of getting it back in—the only way of ending this nightmare—may well end up being, at the end of this long journey, whenever it is, another people's vote.

Many women in Ireland, after losing the referendum in 1983, immediately started building and working for another referendum to overturn that awful decision. Three referendums later, they managed to do it. There was a vote in Taiwan a few months ago to ban same-sex marriage, which passed, stripping people of their rights and their identity. Do we castigate the women of Ireland for pushing to overturn the will of the Irish? No: we celebrate the role of those women who overturned an historical wrong. Do we tell the LGBT people in Taiwan, "I'm sorry, but you just have to live with the fact that you can't now marry"? No: we say to them, "Continue fighting and pushing on—democratically, of course—and try to overturn the absolute wrong that has been done to you." I feel that an absolute wrong has been done to our country—to me.

I believe that there is no good Brexit for Britain. It just does not exist. No Government can produce a good Brexit. Yes, if Labour got in, we would limit and mitigate some of the damage, but even then we could not produce a good Brexit. Brexit is fundamentally linked to a xenophobic, petty nationalist view. That is not to say that those people who voted for Brexit are xenophobic or petty nationalists. When I lived in Yorkshire and we voted, unfortunately, for a British National party MEP and I had BNP councillors up the road from me, I did not say that the voters in those wards were xenophobic and racist. I said that they had made an historic and terrible mistake, and we worked for four and five years to make sure that those people were kicked out. This is a horrible and terrible mistake that was initiated by extremists in UKIP who infected the Tory party. We must now say that that mistake must be undone.

Of course, people are right to say that there are problems with the European Union. It is not perfect. Of course some of the rules on state aid, for example, are problematic. But the deal in front of us enshrines all the same state aid rules without any of the opt-outs and agreements that we could get from the Commission. This deal is far worse for the left than remaining in the European Union. That is why it must be rejected. That is also why we on the left must understand that staying in and reforming is the only feasible option for socialists.

We must also understand that there are some goods in things such as state aid rules. They stop a race to the bottom. For example, the recent European Court of Justice rulings against Ireland and Google mean that there is not some sort of Dutch auction of giving tax breaks and giveaways to multinational companies. We live in a global capitalist world and in a system where

multinational companies can have more power and clout than many nation states. The only way we can counter that and do things on climate change and other big international global issues is to work together and form a democratic union. My God, the European Union is far more democratic than some things in this country—just look down the road at the other place.

6.32 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle). He and I disagree on answers to Brexit, but no one can doubt his passion for his community and the causes that he champions. I wish to make a brief contribution in that spirit of conciliatory debate.

I wish mainly to speak to amendment (p), which I have tabled along with my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) and my hon. Friends the Members for Bassetlaw (John Mann) and for Wigan (Lisa Nandy). We hope that our amendment is the start of a conversation: a process to understand that there are various things wrong with the Prime Minister's deal that mean that we are unlikely to be able to support it next Tuesday—things that will probably not be resolved by next Tuesday. But whatever the result on Tuesday, it is the start and not the end of a process.

We as a Parliament have to be honest and up front with ourselves about where we go after Tuesday. On Wednesday morning, we are not suddenly going to have a magic answer coming from the rejection of the deal. We will see people who ardently advocate leaving on WTO terms with no deal going into the same Lobby as those who ardently want a second referendum with a remain option, and to campaign for remain. I am sorry to burst their bubbles, but one half of that unlikely coalition will be very disappointed in whatever we get out of Brexit as a result of our votes in this place.

The grown-up response is to look at the cross-party group—it exists, unfortunately, mainly on the Back Benches, not the Front Benches—who want to find a way of getting through this that does the least economic damage to our country but respects and understands that those who voted leave did so not because they were duped by words on the side of a bus, or because they were not clever enough to understand the Facebook ads put towards them, but because they had deep-seated anxieties about the inequalities that exist in this country. The amendment would, I hope, start that conversation.

For me, as a Labour and Co-operative party member, and someone who has worked in the trade union movement, how we protect and enshrine workers' rights in future is fundamental to the sort of country we want to be. A number of those rights have been derived from Europe, but we must be honest about the fact that a number of rights that Europe now holds up as a bastion of its good practice came from work done by the United Kingdom in the first place, by driving those changes through Europe and providing the bar that everybody else needs to reach.

We must protect those rights and ensure that we do not regress or water them down once we leave the European Union. Any new changes from Europe must be considered by this place, and once we have brought back sovereignty, we will choose whether to adopt them. My argument will be that we should adopt all

such measures and continue in step with Europe, because in my opinion any change or improvement to environmental standards, consumer protections or workers' rights is a good thing.

Angela Smith: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Gareth Snell: I am afraid I will not. Everyone else has had their time, so I will carry on.

It is important to find a mechanism that protects those rights, and does not kick the can down the road with another referendum, or simply add procedure and stop talking about the people. Too much of this debate—we saw this yesterday on both sides of the House with tedious and continual points of order—has been about a point of process that does not progress the debate further, or resolve the fundamental issues that are important to my constituents in Stoke-on-Trent, and those of hon. Members across the House.

At some point in this Parliament we must decide what we are for—not what we are against, or what we wish to rehash or reargue, but what we are for. I wish that the conversations I was privileged to have this week with Government and Opposition Front-Bench speakers had taken place two years ago. I wish that the Government and those on the Labour Front-Bench had got together after the general election to try to hash out some sort of plan. Such a plan would not have pleased everybody or given them what they wanted, but we need a pragmatic approach to find a way of healing the country, bringing forward the things we know are important, and delivering a Brexit referendum outcome that does not do economic damage to our country. We must ensure that people who voted leave, and those who voted remain, feel that they have a stake in the future of our country.

My frustration with this process is, and continues to be, that we appear to be moving away from a pragmatic middle and towards two extremes. Those who do not support a second referendum are labelled as hard Brexiteers who wish to sell their country down the river, and those—like many of my colleagues—who hold the principled position that we should have a second referendum are an affront to democracy. Neither of those things is true, but at some point we must face facts and understand that the country voted to leave—albeit marginally—and our job as parliamentarians is to work out how we take that forward and bring everybody together. The amendment that I have tabled is one way of achieving that unity. It by no means solves everything, and it will not remove a number of the concerns that I still have about the vote on Tuesday, but if we can use it as a starting point after that vote, I hope we will have achieved something better.

6.37 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): People in my Stockton North constituency voted two to one to leave the EU. They wanted to take back control, they wanted £350 million a week more for the NHS, and many had genuine and understandable issues with freedom of movement and immigration. They voted for other reasons too—they were discontent with their lives after six years of Tory austerity, and unemployment in my constituency is still double the national average. They felt ignored in a society where the rich were getting richer, poverty was, and is, on the rise, services were

[Alex Cunningham]

being cut, and they saw limited prospects for their lives to get better. Worse still, they believed that their children faced an uncertain future.

However, people did not vote to be worse off, or to see chemical and other energy-intensive industries on Teesside devastated, with a huge impact on jobs and investment. They did not vote to weaken food standards, for their own movement to be restricted, or for hard-won rights for workers to be set aside. They did not vote for a backstop arrangement to protect Northern Ireland, leaving us to abide by EU rules without influencing them for who knows how long. Yet that is exactly what they will get with the Prime Minister's deal.

We are on the cusp of shattering the hopes of our people. If we vote for isolation from Europe with the Prime Minister's deal, not only will we find ourselves on the outside, but we will face an indefinite period of uncertainty. If we were to find ourselves with no deal at all, we would be cast aside from our most lucrative markets, left floundering in the world, dependent on countries across the globe for trade deals, and face the prospect of surrendering our standards for everything from food to chemical manufacturing.

I am always mindful and respectful of that voting statistic from people in my constituency, but my constituents are not daft. They know that the false promises made about NHS funding, immigration, taking back control, and so many other things, will not be delivered. They also know about the controversy over the illegality of the leave campaign.

I cannot possibly vote to satisfy everyone in my constituency, from the no-deal leavers to those demanding a second referendum and many in between, but I can vote to protect them from a bad deal and from no deal. The Government are failing to deliver a prosperous deal for our country. I favour a general election or, failing that, a second referendum, which, according to my own and national surveys, the majority of my constituents now want.

My votes are also for the north-east of England, which is a huge net exporter of goods to the EU and depends on markets there for cars, chemicals and countless other manufactured goods. It also depends on the EU for expertise, grants and tourists. Much of that is starting to go wrong, as evidenced by members of the North East England chamber of commerce, whose quarterly economic survey results recently reported less international trade activity, citing Brexit uncertainty as the key reason. The region looked set for a record year of trade, outperforming 2017 in the first and second quarters of 2018, according to the chamber of commerce, but a 10% decline in exports to the EU represented a reduction of £200 million in business, dwarfing other gains.

As some Members might know, I have a long-standing interest in UK energy, having spent a large part of my career working in the gas industry. A year on from the launch of the Government's industrial strategy and the Helm review into the cost of energy, a new report published last month by UK Steel shows that UK producers face electricity prices twice those of their direct competitors in France, and 50% more than those of German producers. Gas prices also remain high, at more than twice those of US manufacturers and three times those of Russian producers. Carbon prices have

also sustained new peaks during the autumn period. In short, the cumulative impact of the cost of decarbonising energy risks becoming unaffordable for chemical businesses in my constituency. The truth is that this deal does nothing to help that and little to allay the fears of industry in any of those areas.

Ministers are also trying to replicate all manner of regulations in British law, but companies in my region—international companies—tell me that it is not good enough. One set of EU regulations, the REACH—registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals—regulations, are critical to my region. I have been contacted by many of the companies affected. SABIC is an international petrochemicals company and an employer in my constituency. Its chemical products and technologies are utilised in a vast number of everyday essentials, such as medicines, food, drinks, tele-communications, IT, clothing and much more. The volume of its activities, in terms of exports and imports, and the complexity of just-in-time supply chains, with multiple border crossings involved in moving raw materials to finished products, mean that any disruption will adversely affect the competitiveness of its business and the potential for future trade and investment. That is industry telling us that we cannot simply trust that things will work out and that we can go it alone. Industry employers—the people who pay the wages of millions of people—are saying that this is a problem.

By voting against this deal and against a no-deal Brexit, I am standing up for my constituents and their industry. If the Government cannot secure a deal that has the confidence of Parliament, and if Parliament cannot persuade the Government to change tack and seek a different kind of agreement, based on a strong customs union and other links to guarantee trade, investment, jobs and people's rights, we should either have that general election or return the matter to the people in a second referendum.

6.43 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Speaker—you are saving the best til last. This is an important debate that will shape the future of our country for years to come. It was an eventful few days before the House rose for the Christmas recess, and the Prime Minister probably wishes that she was still on holiday. This Government became the first in modern times to be found in contempt of Parliament, through their refusal to publish their legal advice. The Prime Minister then announced that the Government would be pulling the parliamentary vote on the withdrawal agreement after days of impassioned debate in this House. The Conservative party then threw itself, and the country, into further political chaos with a vote of no confidence in the Prime Minister's leadership.

The Prime Minister survived and promised to listen to the House's concerns by securing legal changes to aspects of the withdrawal agreement. She found herself in office, but not in power. Having failed to secure any meaningful changes to her withdrawal agreement, I suspect she will soon find herself out of office as well.

Let us not be kidded that this deal commands any kind of majority in this House. It can barely command the confidence of the Cabinet, with stories constantly in the press of Cabinet Ministers urging the Prime Minister

to prepare for the deal to be voted down and to start to look at alternative options. I do, though, commend the Prime Minister for bringing some much needed unity to the country: her deal has managed to unite those who voted to remain and those who voted to leave in opposition to it. She has united both in hatred of the deal.

The Prime Minister tells the country that her deal is the best one on the table, yet she did not have the confidence to put it to the House as originally scheduled before the Christmas recess. If she really believes that it is the best deal, why has she chosen to attempt to scare MPs into supporting it by stepping up preparations for no deal? In Operation Brock, 150 lorries were supposed to turn up, but only 89 did. She could not even get that deal right.

Why has the Prime Minister not chosen to make the case for her deal on its own merits? She went into the 2017 general election telling the British people that no deal was better than a bad deal. She set out a series of red lines that would drive her negotiations with the EU. Well, things have certainly changed. The Prime Minister now tells the British people that a bad deal is better than no deal, and those red lines have been abandoned, just like many of the Prime Minister's previous promises. Remember when she said that she would not call a snap election? I have to say thanks to the Prime Minister: thanks for bringing me down to Parliament to be here today as a voice for the people of Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] Thank you.

This is certainly a bad deal. It fails to protect jobs and living standards. It risks the workers' rights, environmental standards and consumer protections that we currently enjoy through our EU membership; it fails to properly protect the rights of EU nationals living in our country and UK citizens living in EU countries; and it risks dividing our United Kingdom, with economic hardship for working people in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the English regions, as the Government's own forecasts highlighted.

The Prime Minister continues to play games with this House and the country because she knows that this deal will be voted down on Tuesday. It is about time that she ruled out the prospect of no deal. A no-deal Brexit would be devastating for our economy. It is time for the Government to get real and provide some certainty for the businesses, workers and communities that are concerned about the prospect of no deal.

My constituents in Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill do not just reject the Prime Minister's deal because it fails to protect their jobs and living standards, and workers' rights; they reject her deal because it highlights the unfairness at the heart of her Government. They are a Government who are prepared to put forward this deal or entertain the idea of no deal, despite the real and damaging consequences for some of the poorest people and communities in my constituency and others across the UK. They are a Government who have pushed 14 million people into poverty. In case the Secretary of State did not hear me, I will repeat it: a Government who have pushed 14 million people into poverty, including in my constituency, because of their failed welfare reforms, such as universal credit. They are a Government who have pursued austerity, cutting our public services and creating an economy in which workers are paid less and have greater job insecurity.

My constituents do not just need the deal to be rejected; they need a general election and a change in Government. They need a Labour Government who can negotiate a Brexit deal that unites the country and delivers a fairer Britain. More importantly, they need a Labour Government who invest in our communities, tackle low pay, end job insecurity and bring our vital services back into public ownership.

When the deal is rejected on Tuesday, I urge the Prime Minister to reflect on the fact that she has failed to deliver a Brexit deal that protects working people and their livelihoods; to recognise that she no longer commands the confidence of this House; and to recognise that she has failed to deliver for the country. She should call a general election so that the British people can elect a Labour Government who will get to work tackling the real issues of delivering a Brexit deal that works for the many and not the chosen few. And let that Labour Government stop anyone else being pushed into joining the 14 million people in poverty in this country.

6.49 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): We have heard more than 50 impassioned speeches today from both sides of the House, from Perth to Don Valley, from Cheltenham to Walsall and from Tottenham to Ceredigion. I will not attempt to reference every single speech as I certainly would not do them justice, but it is clear that all Members who have spoken recognise the weight of responsibility on their shoulders—the critical decision that they must make to support their communities.

What also became clear from today's contributions is that the Prime Minister's deal has not found consensus in this House. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs began by stating that we should not let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Well, this deal is significantly deficient in qualifying for the presumption in this well-known quotation. This deal is simply not good. It does not work for business and industry, it does not work for working people and it does not work for our environment. In fact, as we have been sitting here today, the former head of MI6 is reported to have told the Government that it threatens national security.

The withdrawal agreement and the outline political declaration will not ensure the relationship with the European Union needed for UK businesses to operate unhindered post Brexit. The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee has already stated that

"no business that we have taken evidence from held the view that—from an industry perspective—the Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration provide a deal as good as the one we already have with the EU".

For instance, in the likely backstop scenario, the withdrawal agreement does not provide for a customs union as we enjoy now. As the Institute for Public Policy Research said, it provides for a "bare-bones customs union", meaning that it does not cover areas such as services, trade or public procurement, and it certainly does not provide for frictionless trade between the UK and the EU. Specifically, it will not address non-tariff barriers such as VAT and product regulation checks, which will have a significant impact on industries such as car production and pharmaceuticals—sectors that are essential to our industrial strategy. Indeed, the Attorney General's advice confirmed this, stating that, during the backstop,

[Rebecca Long Bailey]

“Great Britain will no longer be a member of the EU’s Single Market for Goods or the EU’s customs arrangements. This means that any GB goods crossing the border into the EU will be subject to third country checks by Member State authorities”.

Let me turn to the outline political declaration, which is hardly worth the paper it is written on, quite frankly. It includes phrases such as “explore the possibility”. But even if the aspirations listed there were implemented, that would not guarantee frictionless trade. In the best-case scenario, there will be barriers to trade in goods and market access for services will be reduced. That is a fact.

As the IPPR also summarised,

“there will be significant barriers to trade in services between the UK and the EU. UK firms will only have EU market access under host state rules and will lose the benefits of single market treatment... Under these plans, we should therefore expect significant new non-tariff barriers in goods, particularly in heavily regulated sectors such as chemicals and pharmaceuticals.”

Clearly, this is not a good deal for UK business as the Prime Minister keeps alleging. The fact that we are still discussing it today—two months since its inadequacy was revealed before Christmas—rather than negotiating a better deal is harming businesses in the here and now. It takes only a quick Google search to see that businesses up and down the country are already delaying investment, implementing mitigation plans and, in some cases, cutting jobs and moving operations.

Significant manufacturers such as Bombardier, Rolls-Royce and Cobham have applied to come under the jurisdiction of regulators in other EU countries, and this week Aston Martin triggered its contingency plans—at an accumulating cost, according to its chief executive. Indeed, as we have been sat here today, Honda has announced that it is doing the same and implementing its contingency plans.

I am sure that the Secretary of State will quote some of the business organisations that have cautiously welcomed the Prime Minister’s deal, but I gently say to him that they are doing so with a gun held to their head. They have been presented with a false choice between this deal or no deal by a Government who are recklessly threatening the worst-case scenario and attempting to run down the clock. In fact, it is economic sabotage.

The will of this House has been clearly expressed. There is virtually no support for no deal, and it would therefore be unthinkable for the Prime Minister to proceed down that road. Indeed, according to media reports this morning, even the Secretary of State himself agrees with this principle. If this is true, political posturing in the media is simply not good enough. Will he assure businesses today that the prospect of no deal will be taken off the table?

This unambitious deal will not only hinder the UK in terms of trade, but risk a bonfire of the regulations that ensure that high standards are maintained. Members across the House will recognise the strength of feeling that our constituents have on Brexit. However, I can assure you, Mr Speaker—we have heard from many Members on this issue today—that none of them voted for the watering down of workers’ hard-won rights after we leave the EU. Unfortunately, however, despite assurances from the Prime Minister that

“existing workers’ legal rights will continue to be guaranteed in law”,

the TUC’s verdict is that the deal

“doesn’t guarantee jobs or rights at work into the future.”

Indeed, Thompsons Solicitors has stated that the so-called non-regression clause in the political declaration will be “ineffective” in maintaining workers’ rights, and the IPPR has stated that it is not sufficient to maintain current protections, individuals cannot even bring about proceedings and if the EU raises standards, the UK is permitted to simply fall behind.

Indeed, attempting to use all parliamentary levers to mitigate against—

Caroline Flint: Those of us who have put our names to amendment (p) realise that it is not perfect and that, like all other amendments, it is not legally binding. However, does my hon. Friend agree that whatever happens next Tuesday, if there is a willingness, we can open up discussion about how we can ensure, going forward, that we can, in law, see a way to enshrine the protection of these workers’ rights, and would she be willing to engage in such dialogue?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I thank my right hon. Friend for her comments. I can certainly state that the sentiment behind the amendment that she and various colleagues have tabled is to bolster workers’ rights and make sure that our workers’ rights in the UK do not fall behind those in the EU.

John Redwood: Will the hon. Lady say who is threatening these rights? No party in this House wants to reduce them, and there are clear promises from the Government, so it is not an issue.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comment. However, with my tongue in my cheek, I say that I am not looking at a party that has a track record in this House on bolstering workers’ rights, so my confidence will certainly need to be increased significantly over coming weeks if I am to believe his statement.

Going back to the comment by my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint), I certainly hope that the Secretary of State welcomes the sentiments outlined in the amendment that she recently tabled with colleagues, because, as he knows, a combination of the deficiencies of the withdrawal agreement and the Government’s unwillingness to listen to the concerns of MPs has forced Members across the House, such as my right hon. Friend, to gymnastically attempt to secure debate on key issues by any means possible.

My right hon. Friend is right in stating that to secure real confidence in this House, the Government do need to go much further. So far, their words fall far short of what Labour has been asking for. As the TUC has stated, they do not provide the binding long-term guarantee that working people need. It would be very helpful if the Secretary of State stated today, unequivocally, that he will guarantee that the UK will not be permitted to fall behind future improvements from the EU on workers’ rights, environmental protections, and health and safety standards. If so, in the light of the withdrawal agreement’s deficiencies, what legislation does he propose to legally reflect this position?

Simon Hoare: What the right hon. Member for Don Valley actually asked was whether the shadow Secretary of State and her Front-Bench team would take part in these cross-party discussions, not what the Secretary of State would do. It is a very simple question. The right hon. Member for Don Valley does not need me to speak on her behalf, but will the shadow Secretary of State answer that question?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. Perhaps he was missing during the contributions, but numerous Members have outlined the Government's inability to liaise with Members across the House to develop a consensus. I share the sentiments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley on the need to work together across this House to deal with the many issues outlined during these debates and ensure we find a deal that provides a consensus that we can all rally around. Unfortunately, we do not have a Government who have been capable thus far of delivering that. I will move on, because I know we are short of time.

I want to talk briefly about environmental and climate protections. We know that non-regression clauses in relation to environmental protections would not be subject to the arbitration procedures set out in articles 170 to 181. Instead, standards would be enforced at the domestic level and through far weaker state-to-state procedures that are rarely effective in international treaties. The political declaration, meanwhile, contains only hortatory statements regarding climate, energy and the environment that have no legal effect. How can we trust this Government to maintain domestic standards when they have taken quite an active role, shall we say, in opposing EU progress on energy and climate change?

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): We are now tackling air quality, and that is through the EU and environmental regulations, but the Government had to be taken to court three times. If such a health and environmental crisis engulfs us again, who will protect us if we are not in the EU? It will certainly not be this Government.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention; he makes an important point. The Government's track record has been rather deficient, to say the least. For example, in 2017 this Government lobbied for EU renewable energy and energy efficiency targets to be reduced, made non-binding or even scrapped. Is it now this Government's position after Brexit to adopt and maintain to 2030 at least the same ambition as that in the revised renewable energy directive and energy efficiency directive? If so, how can we trust the Government to honour that position?

Of course, no deal in relation to energy and the environment would be even worse, risking chaos and catastrophe for energy, climate and the environment according to the Greener UK coalition of non-governmental organisations. As I have outlined, it is extremely irresponsible of the Government to leverage the disaster of no deal to hard-sell what is quite frankly a dismal alternative.

I will bring my comments to a close. I have outlined briefly some of the deficiencies in the withdrawal agreement and political declaration, which, in their present form, demonstrably divide the House and, indeed, Britain.

They will not protect jobs and the economy. They will not protect workers' rights, environmental or health and safety standards, and they give barely any indication of what our future relationship with the EU will look like, causing chronic uncertainty for business.

Members have a choice: do they vote for a deal that they know will make us worse off, with a huge question mark for years to come over our future relationship with the EU, or do they demand the negotiation of a better deal for Britain that will secure support in Parliament and the country? That deal can be found, but this Government have demonstrated that they are not capable of delivering it.

7.3 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): I pay tribute to colleagues for an excellent debate. We have had some important contributions, and that justifies the time given to Members to state their views clearly. It is incumbent on all of us, and particularly the Government, to reflect carefully on the contributions made.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) said, Parliament is sovereign and

"to be elected to this House is one of the great privileges and responsibilities that our citizens can bestow."

All of us who were elected in 2017 had a particular responsibility, knowing that we would vote on probably the most important decision that this House will take during our time in it, which is the terms of our departure from the European Union and our future relationship with it.

In that respect, this is not simply a matter for the Government, important though that is. It is for every Member to be able to shape and participate in our deliberations. That has been reflected in the contributions of many Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk talked about reaching out across the House. He expressed the view that there is no majority for a disorderly no-deal Brexit, but of course avoiding that requires an agreement that the House can enter into. I say to the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) that to take the prospect of no deal off the table is in the hands of this House: it comes through agreeing a deal.

Sir Edward Davey: Will the Secretary of State say how he thinks the House could best be involved in reaching a decision for the country if the Prime Minister's deal is voted down next Tuesday?

Greg Clark: I will come on to describe and respond to some of the contributions that have been made. It is very important to consider the constructive contributions that many Members have made, which can, in the days ahead before the vote, be reflected in the decision that is taken on Tuesday.

In that regard, let me start by mentioning the contribution of the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint). She was right to say that we should be proud of the record of this House over many centuries in establishing a defence of and a commitment to the rights of workers. That gives us cause to be proud around the world, certainly in Europe. We should be determined to continue that tradition. It is fair to reflect that this has involved

[Greg Clark]

Governments led by her party and Governments led by my party. The Labour party introduced the minimum wage and the Conservative party introduced the national living wage. Going back to previous generations in Parliament in different centuries, this House has always taken an active view in these matters. The amendment that she and her hon. Friends have tabled is entirely in accordance with that. Far from, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) put it, involving a ceding of those decisions to the European Union, what is attractive about the contribution that has been made is that it firmly gives to this House the opportunity to make a sovereign decision on how we want to act on the opportunities that might exist to constantly upgrade and strengthen workers' rights. That should be something that is open to us.

The hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) made a powerful speech and a notable contribution. He said that the time for rhetoric had gone and that the time for negotiation had come. I think that that is a way in which we can proceed and his contribution was consistent with that. He was determined to avoid no deal by accident, which a majority do not want. Again, he reflected on the fact that the Trade Bill, as well as the motion before the House, will give very significant power to this Parliament to shape the ongoing relationships we have with other countries. He made references to the importance of exercising the authority of this House to ensure that all parts of the country, including those whose communities have not felt advantaged by our membership of the European Union and the conduct of the economy over decades past, are heard and recognised as they deserve to be. I will come on to say something more about his amendment in a second.

In the same spirit, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury very powerfully made the point that compromise is a virtue and something to be prized in this House. He also made the point that the mandate for compromise reflected in the narrowness of the result—even though it clearly indicated the preference of the population to leave—should be reflected in our deliberations.

The right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) emphasised the important point about our proximity to our trading partners in Europe and reflected on the fact that if we want to engage in good and close trading relationships, as all Members do, it makes sense to think very clearly about how we can do that with those who are geographically closest to us.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), who has over many years given much thought to these matters, nevertheless set out a case that I could not agree with. I hope that I do not mischaracterise his contribution, but he asserted that we should be aiming for greater national self-sufficiency in certain of our trading relationships. He mentioned foodstuffs. I am a proud Kent MP—some of the produce of Kent, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) will attest, is among the best in the world—but to aim for a model of national self-sufficiency while failing to recognise, as David Ricardo did all those centuries ago, the benefits to all if we concentrate and specialise is not something that we should embrace.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) reflected on the economic benefits of the deal and how they would benefit his constituency. The hon.

Member for Salford and Eccles talked about business having a gun to its head. Not at all! Many businesses and business organisations campaigned for remain during the referendum and yet have recognised that what the Prime Minister has negotiated is a settlement that would allow them, and therefore our constituents, to continue to prosper.

John Redwood: As the Secretary of State is in love with free trade and Ricardo, would he agree with my proposal to remove all tariffs from imported components for manufactures to give our manufacturing a boost?

Greg Clark: My preference is to be part of the arrangements that we benefit from now in terms of our manufacturing industry, but as a general proposition I believe that we should be engaged in reducing tariffs. Part of our contribution to the EU has been that we have been probably the foremost advocate in Europe for the reduction of tariffs. That would be a good thing.

Sir Edward Davey: Could the Secretary of State tell the House what David Ricardo had to say about non-tariff barriers, which are the main issue in trade agreements today?

Greg Clark: The right hon. Gentleman reflects the reality of trade today and in the time of Ricardo, which is that it is not simply about the tariffs, but about the arrangements and impediments we put in place. Again, that is one of the important parts of the agreement we have entered into.

I wanted to mention the right hon. Gentleman's speech and from the Dispatch Box associate the whole House with his reflections on a previous Member, Paddy Ashdown, who I understand was buried in Somerset today. He would no doubt have made a fine speech in this debate, and the right hon. Gentleman was right to make reference to him.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) made the point again—this was a theme of the debate—about the need for compromise and support in securing an orderly withdrawal, and he reflected on the fact that our debates and their conclusions are watched by businesses and boardrooms around the world. It is important that we live up to the reputation we have long enjoyed in this country as a dependable place in which to do business—a country where we come together and take pragmatic decisions and offer that confidence to the world.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) emphasised the point that when businesses do well, workers do well and pensioners do well. Workers' rights are a theme of the debate, and we need that prosperity in order to advance our constituents' circumstances. That is something that Mrs Thatcher was particularly alive to. My hon. Friend referred to her pitch to Japanese investors in the early 1980s, and on the day on which the Prime Minister of Japan is visiting Downing Street, it is appropriate to recall that Mrs Thatcher made the case to Nissan, Toyota and Honda that this country was skilled, innovative, flexible and able to command markets across Europe. That is as true today as it was then.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) reflected on taking a pragmatic view. He campaigned very vigorously to leave the European Union—

Robert Neill: Remain!

Greg Clark: He campaigned to remain in the European Union—I was never under any misapprehension about that—but he advocated a managed, considered and orderly approach. He stated in his election address in Bromley and Chislehurst that that was the approach he would take, and I think he has delivered on that commitment during this Parliament. He has also pursued his commitment to achieve a deal that protects jobs, businesses and livelihoods.

Robert Neill: I campaigned to remain, as my right hon. Friend did. He may recall that I have referred to the importance of a managed no deal for a particular business in my constituency. He may be interested to know that since the debate in which I spoke about that, I have had an email from the managing director, who said that with a managed deal—the Prime Minister's deal—his business is survivable. In the event of no deal, he says, it will downsize 75%, close or leave the UK. That is what is at stake.

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the stakes. This is a matter that engages all Members of Parliament. We all have a responsibility to our constituents now and for the future, and every one of us will need to make an individual decision that reflects that.

I want to mention a few colleagues, and I am sorry not to be able to do justice to all the contributions that have been made; there were more than 50 of them. The hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) said—wrongly, I think—that it was too late to engage across parties and across Parliament. If I have misrepresented her, I would be delighted to hear it; I was going to admonish her gently for saying that. If we believe, as I do, that this is the most important decision that this Parliament will take, it is never too late to establish that agreement.

Emma Reynolds: The right hon. Gentleman invites me to correct the record. I did not say that it was too late; I said that it would have been better to do so earlier. As I said at the end of my speech, I really hope that if the deal is voted down on Tuesday next week, the House will come together. Quite a lot of cross-party working is going on among Back Benchers—more, I am afraid, than is happening between the Government and the Opposition.

Greg Clark: I am delighted to know that, and I am delighted that that is the hon. Lady's view. It is important that Front Benchers do likewise, and I was a bit disappointed that the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles did not take up the invitation to participate in establishing what this House can support.

I think we all admire the optimism and enthusiasm of my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), which he referred to. This is a matter that merits such optimism and enthusiasm. His contribution to the debate, looking at how energy can be applied to finding a solution, is much to be commended.

Let me reflect on the amendments that indicate the progress that can be made. It is important to reflect that the standards of workers' rights we have in this country

not only meet but often far exceed EU standards. The right hon. Member for Don Valley pointed out that the UK offers 39 weeks of statutory maternity pay, compared with the 14 weeks required under the relevant EU directive. We in this House have given fathers and partners a statutory right to paternity leave and pay—something the EU is only starting to consider. Less than a month ago, I said at the Dispatch Box that we were laying legislation to repeal the so-called Swedish derogation from a European directive, removing what many in this country see as a loophole that allows employment agencies to undercut agency workers' wages.

Those sentiments and that approach are reflected in amendment (p), which was tabled by the right hon. Lady and her colleagues. It is in keeping with traditions on both sides of the House, and we very much agree with its spirit and intention. Today's contributions show what can be done in this instance and may be a totem for what is possible more broadly. We stand ready to engage in discussions on the amendment. As ever, we need to look very carefully at its implications and drafting, but I am hopeful that it will be possible for us to accept it.

The amendment rightly mentions the environment. We have no intention of lowering our ambitious environmental protections after we leave the EU. We have a duty to continue the leadership we have exercised on that in Europe and across the world. It seems to me that we also have a responsibility, given that time is running out before 29 March, to take advantage of the availability of a means of preventing a damaging no-deal Brexit. It is difficult for investors around the world to understand why the most rudimentary trade terms available between any nations on earth should govern our relationship with the rest of the European Union.

I hope that the tenor of today's debate continues in the days ahead. I say on behalf of my colleagues that hon. Members' contributions will be listened to seriously, taken into account and acted upon, as I indicated in response to the amendment relevant to today's discussions, so that, in the weeks ahead, the whole House can move towards a greater sense of compromise and resolution to implement the decision that the people of the United Kingdom took. At the same time, we must ensure that we can move our economy forward and strengthen our workers' rights and environmental protections, recognising the House's ambition to establish this country, now and in the future, as one of the most successful and admired in the world in terms of the economy, workers' rights and the environment. I commend the motion to the House.

Ordered, That the debate be now adjourned.—(Amanda Milling.)

Debate to be resumed tomorrow (Order, 9 January).

Mr Speaker: We come now to the Adjournment.

I find it extraordinary, to the point of being inconceivable, that all colleagues present should not wish to remain so in order to hear the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) dilate on the subject of the Europa School, Culham, but if there are colleagues who do not feel motivated to do so—unaccountable though I find that—I trust that they will leave the Chamber quickly and quietly, so that those of us who remain, including the occupant of the Chair, can listen with our customary rapt attention to the hon. Gentleman.

Europa School

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

7.24 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I am grateful for the Minister's attendance. He and I have talked about the Europa School at some length on a number of occasions, and he was, of course, responsible for the reply from the Department for Education to a petition that I presented in the Chamber not so long ago. My purpose this evening is first to highlight the importance and the unique history of the approach to languages that is demonstrated at the school, secondly to highlight the approach to providing the European baccalaureate as the final qualification for those leaving it, and thirdly to ask some questions and make some comments arising from the Department's response to my petition.

The background to all this is, of course, the situation in which we find ourselves as a country in the context of our relationship with the European Union. I am sure we all feel the need to end the current uncertainty as soon as possible, but that is felt nowhere more keenly than at this school, where the educational future of children is at stake.

The Europa School is one of the free schools created as a result of this Government's initiative. It is in Culham, in my constituency, but it serves a wide area, mostly in Oxfordshire and in the surrounding areas of neighbouring counties. Under the terms of the free school, parents have agreed to the provision of a certain type of education that I will describe in more detail shortly, but let me first say something about the school's importance and its unique history.

The initial meeting to discuss the establishment of a free school in Culham took place in 2011 with the then schools Minister, my noble Friend Lord Hill. The meeting was sponsored by me and attended by representatives of parents and educationalists who wished to speak in favour of the proposal. The aim was to meet three demands. First, residents of the county had given the clearest possible support for the new school; secondly, its founders wanted to bring a new form of education into the state school system; and thirdly, we all wished to build on a secure and well-established foundation of education in the European Schools curriculum, which leads eventually to the European baccalaureate.

At its core—this is the first of my major points—was a proposal to offer something that had not been offered before in the UK state system, and, indeed, had not previously been offered in the whole of the European School system. The proposers offered a complete, thoroughgoing commitment to full bilingual education from reception class onwards. Pupils would not simply learn the other language, but would learn through that language. They would learn the linguistic rhythm of that language. This was planned to be truly deep language learning, not just the acquisition of a second language overlaid on the first.

The Europa School was set up as a free school because that is what the parents wanted, which is a key component of the free school movement. The parents wanted that particular type of education to continue through the free school. It was a way of approaching subjects in languages. The pupils were taught subjects

through all those languages, so they could end up learning history in German or geography in Spanish, and so on. That is a valuable way of teaching. The parents wanted that system to continue in the school, and it is being continued.

During Education questions, I asked the Minister whether he accepted that the school was proving popular with parents of all types, including those from the UK, and that it was a good model of language teaching to follow. He replied that he shared my admiration for the Europa School, and I want to build on that today. I understand that we are anticipating an Ofsted report. I believe that everyone expects the school to have done rather well out of it, and I hope that that expectation is fulfilled. However, this approach needs to be set in the context of Brexit, and the difficulties of negotiating a Brexit that does not see the school become a casualty.

The European School, Culham—not the Europa School—had for some time been destined for closure, as the resourcing for such a school at Culham could not be justified within the European Commission's budget for European Schools. A closure date of 2017 for the European School had already been announced. A plan was therefore advanced for the new free school to grow year by year as the European School diminished, and for the two schools to share the use of the Culham site on an agreed basis. An important aspect of this is that the free school was oversubscribed by some 30% at its opening in September 2012 and it has remained significantly oversubscribed at every subsequent admissions round since that date.

What promises and commitments has the school made? First, it sought to open multilingual education to all the residents of Oxfordshire. Secondly, it determined that the new school would have an important commitment to sciences and mathematics, particularly when the plans for the secondary school came into play. The school started with two stream languages, German and French, each joined with English, but it has recently added Spanish as a third stream language.

Critically, the freedom offered by the free schools programme to allow free schools to set their own curriculum has been essential. The founders of the Europa School adopted the European Schools' curriculum, modified by the mandatory elements of the English national curriculum. Thus, by the time of the all-important interview at the Department for Education, there was a distinctive offering to support the bid for pre-opening status. From the deep educational theory came the view that giving a child a second language from their earliest schooling was like giving them a second life—that is, an alternative cultural world in which they could immerse themselves. From the practical world came the view that multilingualism is in no way elitist: what the taxi drivers of many European cities achieve linguistically must be within the reach of schoolchildren, given the right environment and experiences.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a fascinating speech extolling the virtues of the Europa School in his constituency. I have had correspondence from constituents expressing their admiration for the school and I would like to associate myself with those comments. Does he agree with me on two brief points? First, does not the success of the Europa School show the success of the free schools

programme? Secondly, does that success not also illustrate that, while Britain may be withdrawing from the political structures of the European Union, she remains an enthusiastic participant in the culture, friendships and co-operation of Europe?

John Howell: I agree with both my hon. Friend's points. The school's success shows the importance of the free school movement and our commitment to continuing our co-operation in Europe. I thank him for making those points.

I was particularly proud when the Europa School was specifically mentioned here in 2011 when the then Secretary of State for Education announced that the school was to open as a bilingual free school in 2012. That was not the first time that the residents of Oxfordshire had reason to be grateful for the support of the House in determining the educational provision available to their children. The quality of education at Culham through the European Schools programme had long been held in high regard. David Cameron had supported the unique educational offer provided at Culham, seeking to preserve and enhance it.

I should like to praise the system of education offered under the free schools programme. We must not forget that in this case the school was principally set up to deal with parents of mainland European origin in the area. However, the approach to teaching languages has proved immensely successful—so successful that we are now in a situation where British parents are keen for their children to enter the school and be taught in that way. I ask the Minister to acknowledge this and to confirm that he will do all he can to encourage the continuation of this form of education.

Moving on to the question of the European baccalaureate, the Europa School became an accredited European School in 2014. This means that the school has approval to continue offering the European baccalaureate and to teach the European curriculum. This accreditation was confirmed at a more recent inspection in 2018 by the European Commission. No money flows from Brussels to the school as a consequence of that status; it is simply a validation of the quality of teaching and assessment in the school.

What is so valuable about that accreditation and affiliation? The European baccalaureate uniquely obliges all candidates to take written and oral examinations in at least two languages. The examinations do not just test competence in the additional stream language; the students, as I have pointed out, actually study history and geography through those languages, and use the stream languages as the mode of learning and assessment. As a result, students have a linguistic competence in their stream language on leaving similar to the linguistic competence of university undergraduates. At the same time, all students must study mathematics and at least once science subject to an advanced level. That outcome is not delivered by the UK A-level system. This free school also requires a leaving qualification that properly recognises the numerous years of education that are involved in becoming bilingual and studying diverse school subjects in two languages.

As a responsible step in school governance, the principal and governing body of the school have explored whether the international baccalaureate could be adopted as an alternative qualification. However, there are significant

limitations: examination and study of subjects through two languages is not mandatory; support for the English and German stream combination is weak; the middle years syllabus differs in significant ways; and, most of all, there is a risk of losing expertise among the teaching staff.

The school wants to be able to continue offering the European curriculum and to offer the European baccalaureate as its qualification for school leavers, and I support it most strongly in that aim. In conversation, the Minister likened the situation to the owners of a copyright. In this case, the copyright is owned by the European Commission, not by the Department for Education. I understand from the Minister that the Department is happy for the school to continue teaching the European baccalaureate, but the problem lies in the attitude of the European Commission. In this situation, I would like to ask the Minister to ensure that the Department for Education can continue to be a friend to this free school, to negotiate strongly on its behalf, and to offer a no-holds-barred assessment of how the school can continue even if the UK is not a member of the EU. I urge the Minister to explore every avenue as a matter separate from Brexit. I hope that this excellent educational establishment may continue its development in the direction that the founders of the free school have planned.

Finally, let me turn to the Department's response to my petition. I was glad that the Government were successful in securing a provision in the withdrawal agreement that allows for Europa School's continued accreditation as a European school until the end of August 2021. Beyond the withdrawal agreement, accreditation to deliver the European baccalaureate is available only to schools located in an EU member state. Continuing to deliver the European baccalaureate beyond that depends on a decision by European Union member states and the European Commission, through the European Schools board of governors, to change the rules on accredited schools. What are the Government doing to help the school talk to the European Schools board to try to get an agreement to include the school within its ambit after 2021? The Minister said:

"At present that seems highly unlikely."—[*Official Report*, 20 December 2018; Vol. 651, c. 16P.]

This may be a lawyer's view, but I note the term "at present" in his statement, so I ask him to set out the full position and the likely changes he expects, so as to provide the school with the degree of certainty it requires.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) pointed out, there is something special about free schools, particularly in what they can teach and the way that they can teach it. The Europa School illustrates that above all, which is why I have spent the last few minutes telling Members about it. It is a good example of how free schools work, how they can take the attitudes of parents and make them a reality, and how they can, in this case, through the European baccalaureate, continue to offer something of enormous benefit to children. I would like to see the extent to which we can provide support for the school at this time.

7.39 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) on securing this important debate. I pay

[Nick Gibb]

tribute to him for his assiduousness in championing the Europa School not just today but over many years. He has acted to secure the best interests of parents, pupils and teachers at the school, particularly in his dealings with Ministers and with the Department for Education.

As I said in response to my hon. Friend's question in the House on 17 December, I share his admiration for the Europa School and its very high academic standards. As continued accreditation as a European school depends on decisions by the European Schools board of governors, I recognise that the school and its community of pupils, parents and staff are facing a period of considerable change and uncertainty as the UK prepares to leave the EU. I assure the school and my hon. Friend of my ongoing support during this period, and I will work closely with him in making sure that the school receives that support.

The Europa School, as my hon. Friend said, opened as a free school in 2012. Its creation was driven by a group of parents who wished to continue to offer a European Schools-style multilingual education following the decision to close the European school in Culham in 2007. That decision was taken by the then Education Secretary in the last Labour Government as there were no longer sufficient numbers of pupils who were the children of EU officials employed at the Culham centre for fusion energy to justify its continuation as a European school.

As my hon. Friend said, the Europa School is the only accredited European school in the UK, and it teaches the European baccalaureate, which comprises the last two years of secondary education in a European school or at a school accredited by the European Schools board of governors. Pupils follow a combination of language, humanities and scientific subjects, with subjects taught through more than one language.

The Europa School has a thriving community, and it is held in high regard by parents, pupils and the local community. As of 1 January, there are 442 open free schools across the country, and the schools will provide around 250,000 places when at capacity. As my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) said in his intervention, free schools like the Europa School are creating thousands of high-quality school places, as well as bringing innovation to the wider education system and diversity to local provision.

Ofsted's latest information shows that 85% of all free schools with inspection reports published by the end of November 2018 are rated good or outstanding, and secondary free schools are among some of the highest performing state-funded schools in the country. I congratulate the Europa School on being one of eight European schools to have achieved a 100% pass rate for students who completed the European baccalaureate in 2018, which is a particularly impressive achievement given that 2018 was the first year of pupils at the free school taking the qualification.

Within the primary phase, I am pleased to note that the school has achieved an improvement in its key stage 2 results, with the proportion of pupils achieving the expected standard in reading, writing and maths increasing from 68% in 2017 to 69% in 2018. That places the school above the national average of 64%.

I note that the school had two inspections last term, with an inspection from the European Schools system in early September followed by Ofsted in December. The Ofsted report will be published shortly. The European Schools inspection will inform the European Schools board of governors decision to grant accreditation from 2019 to August 2021.

The defining feature of the European Schools curriculum is, of course, its focus on foreign languages, which this Government strongly support. I very much welcome the Europa School's success, and boosting language teaching is central to this Government's ambition. Having a command of foreign languages is more important than ever as we leave the European Union and forge a new relationship with our European friends and global partners. Languages provide an insight into other cultures and can open the door to travel and employment opportunities. Languages can also broaden a pupil's horizons, helping them to navigate and succeed in new environments.

The Europa School is an accredited European school. Accreditation to deliver the European baccalaureate is available only to schools located in an EU member state, which means that, in addition to the exemption it receives from the Department for Education to deliver this qualification, the school must also receive accreditation from the European Schools board of governors, consisting of all member states of the EU and the European Commission.

The withdrawal agreement with the EU contains a provision that the UK will remain covered by the European schools convention during the implementation period after we leave the EU, but that would not have been enough to allow Europa to retain its accreditation during this period. That is why the UK negotiators sought, and were successful in securing in the withdrawal agreement, the inclusion of the regulations on accredited European schools. That allows for the continued accreditation for Europa to offer the European baccalaureate until the summer of 2021. I am very pleased that we were able to secure that transition period for Europa as part of the separation provisions in the withdrawal agreement. It will allow the school sufficient time to transition to a new curriculum.

The accreditation to 2021 is subject to renewal of accreditation by the European Schools board of governors, which will take place in April 2019, and we expect that to be granted, given the clear intention of the withdrawal agreement and the strong performance of the school. I would like to assure my hon. Friend the Member for Henley that officials in the Department have been working closely with the Europa School to prepare for its future after we leave the EU and it is clearly for Europa and its board of trustees to determine the right curriculum to enable the school to continue after the implementation period ends. The implementation period will allow time for the school to complete this transition.

I am pleased to hear that the school has recently been successful in its candidacy application to be able to teach the international baccalaureate diploma from September 2020. That will allow the school to continue its focus on language teaching, and to operate with an international focus and ethos. All international baccalaureate students learn to express themselves confidently in more than one language, and this qualification will allow the school to retain its advanced language teaching and a unique offer of education to pupils.

Once the accreditation process is complete, the Europa School will join 138 other international baccalaureate world schools operating in the UK.

This Government have been clear that we do not want or expect a no-deal scenario. The UK and the EU have agreed the terms of the UK's smooth and orderly exit from the EU in the form of the withdrawal agreement and a detailed political declaration on the terms of our future relationship. Nevertheless, the Government will continue to do the responsible thing and prepare for all eventualities. I welcome the fact that the Europa School is also taking a responsible approach and preparing for the UK exiting the EU without a deal.

I am pleased to say that, with the Department for Education's support, the European Schools board of governors agreed at its December meeting to maintain Europa's accreditation until the end of this academic year, even in the event of a no-deal exit. That will enable the 32 pupils currently in year 13—S7, as it is referred to at the Europa School—to complete their sixth-form studies and take their exams. In addition, the school and DFE officials are working with the European Schools system to secure arrangements for the 47 year 12 pupils, who are due to sit their European baccalaureate exams in summer 2020.

The European Schools system has been clear that its rules require accredited schools to be in an EU member state, and therefore accreditation would not be available beyond 2019, but I am pleased that it is working with Europa and DFE to consider alternatives for the pupils due to sit their baccalaureate in 2020. It has been proposed that Europa could operate in partnership with another European school to deliver the baccalaureate in 2020. I thank the principal of Europa and the director of the European School in Bergen for their work to put the arrangements in place.

While we are optimistic that we will secure the necessary support for this arrangement, it is dependent on further legal consideration by the European Schools system and a vote in the board of governors' meeting in April. The Department will, of course, continue to make a very strong case for this agreement to be adopted for 2020. I do need to make it clear, though, that the European Schools system views this partnership arrangement as a "one-off" arrangement for the current year 12 pupils only. It is not considering a similar arrangement for 2021 in a no-deal scenario. Our current understanding is that it will not apply to those pupils currently in year 11. I recognise the difficult position in which that leaves the school and its pupils.

I very much welcome the fact that Lynn Wood, the principal of Europa School UK, and Professor Andrew Parker, the chair of the board of governors, have taken a responsible approach in being open and honest with

affected pupils and their families. I understand that Ms Wood and Professor Parker have written to the parents of the 54 pupils currently in year 11 so that they can make appropriate choices about their sixth-form education and ensure that arrangements are in place in the unlikely event that we leave without a deal. I also understand that Europa is investigating whether the school could be exceptionally authorised by the International Baccalaureate Organization to start teaching the international baccalaureate as early as September, as an emergency measure, should the need arise.

I assure the Europa School UK community that the Department is committed to supporting the school and its pupils and will work closely with the school as the future position becomes clear. I will work closely with my hon. Friend, who will monitor the situation very closely himself.

My hon. Friend raised the question of the future position of the Europa School as an accredited European school beyond the provisions set out in the withdrawal agreement. I recognise that the wish of the Europa School is to continue to deliver the European curriculum and baccalaureate once the UK has left the European Union. The Government are not in a position to allow or not allow the school to offer the European baccalaureate to its students as an equivalent A-level after 2021; that is a matter solely for the board of the European Schools system.

Although the system also allows for accredited European schools operating in national education systems, the European schools regulation on accredited schools is clear: only schools in EU member states can be accredited as European schools. It does not provide for accreditation in non-EU countries. That is why it was important that we secured a transitional period for Europa through the withdrawal agreement. The school must therefore continue to prepare to transition to a new curriculum, and I am pleased that it is making good progress on that.

I am grateful for my hon. Friend's support for this issue and appreciate the difficult position that the school finds itself in. I thank the pupils, staff and wider school community for supporting the school through these uncertain times. I am sure that the school will continue to be highly successful in offering a strong, quality education through the delivery of a broad curriculum with a focus on language teaching. Europa pupils will continue to be well placed to succeed in a global economy, and the Department for Education will continue to support the school to prepare for its future.

Question put and agreed to.

7.52 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 10 January 2019

[MR NIGEL EVANS *in the Chair*]

Crown Post Offices: Franchising

1.30 pm

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered franchising of Crown Post Offices and the effect on high streets and local communities.

I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Just before Christmas, we learned that 74 Crown post offices faced closure or franchising to a retail branch, including my local one in Wigan. Taken alongside the 150 that have already been closed or franchised, that represents a staggering loss of 60% of the network in only five years. Crown post offices might be a small part of the overall network, but they are significant, historically accounting for between 10% and 20% of overall profits.

Many of us in the Chamber remember the anger when post offices were closed under the previous Labour Government. We should have learned then that the Post Office is important to the people of this country: it is our asset, we own it and we are proud of it. When the coalition sold off Royal Mail, two thirds of the public were strongly opposed. But here we are, and once again we have been cut out of the consultation.

The Post Office says that it has been consulting, but there is every reason to believe that those consultations are nothing more than a sham. The 2017 wave of closures was announced before Ministers had even bothered to respond to their own consultation, in which 75,000 people had urged them to think again. When the Aberdeen office was franchised, WHSmith advertised for new counter staff—at what was described as the “fantastic” level of the minimum wage—while the consultation was still going on and before any consultation with trade union representatives about terms and conditions.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful argument. Does she agree that, as with our argument for postal workers, we demand better working conditions, pay and prospects in public assets that perform well? Does she agree that modern post offices can give more service to the public, but that that must not mean less for the workers in them?

Lisa Nandy: I could not agree more, and I know that my hon. Friend is a tremendous champion of that workforce in his Bury constituency. That point goes to the heart of how a publicly owned service should set the standard for how we treat our workers and our customers. I absolutely agree with him.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate, and I wish her, the Chair and all Members a happy new year. She made the important point about ownership of the Crown network. We are the owners but, in addition, the Government are the sole shareholder, so by proxy the Government are

closing down our public services. We need the opportunity to have not just a debate, but the information before anything happens.

Lisa Nandy: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. On that basis, I was quite horrified at what happened last month when I went to my Crown post office to talk to the staff. I went with a representative of the Communication Workers Union, who had notified management in advance, but an area manager was then sent all the way to Wigan to block me at the door. We were chucked out of the building, but for some time I stood outside in the street in the freezing cold to talk to staff about their concerns and fears. A number of counter staff who had initially been keen to talk emailed me later to explain that they had been put under significant pressure not to come outside.

Why is a publicly owned business trying to intimidate and silence its own staff? It was particularly telling that the area manager said that she had been sent by the press office. This is an organisation apparently more concerned about appearances than about the rights of its own workforce.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent case. One of the most disillusioning things for staff is that this business hawks itself around to every and any shop that might try to fit a Crown post office into it, on the basis that that is better than a properly run, properly financed Crown post office. Does she agree that that can do nothing but disillusion staff?

Lisa Nandy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that is the view expressed very strongly by my constituents in Wigan. Over in Oldham, Members have had a significant response to a public petition that they set up for precisely that reason.

A Citizens Advice report showed that in those post offices that have been franchised, the result is longer queues, reduced counters and a significant loss of experienced staff. No wonder disability groups and pensioners groups have been critical of such plans.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. I wish her campaign in Wigan every success, as I do the campaigns of my hon. Friends the Members for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) and for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) in their constituencies.

For us in Blackpool, sadly, the boat has already sailed. Our Crown post office, which was a grade II listed building, now lies empty, while my constituents have to go down stairs, which is not easily accessible to people with disabilities, to an unprepossessing place in the middle of the shopping centre. Does my hon. Friend agree that, besides the intimidation she described, the Post Office is on a hiding to nothing purely in commercial terms if it continues to outsource branches in that manner to WHSmith, which is widely regarded as one of the worst retailers on the planet?

Lisa Nandy: I agree, and I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) might have an issue from his constituency that is relevant to that point.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, and I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden). In Reading, we have serious accessibility issues. The existing Crown post office is to be shut. It has been there for some time, is busy and has ground floor access, which is welcome for many local disabled people. Unfortunately, the post office is now to be moved into the upstairs of the very busy WHSmith branch on Broad Street in Reading. The lift access is only by a relatively small lift to the first-floor premises to be used.

My constituents are concerned about that, and about the additional problem of the sub-post office in the village of Caversham, which has been closed due to other, unrelated matters. Local businesses rely on that local post office, as do many elderly and disabled people. I agree with both my hon. Friends about accessibility, which is paramount for disabled people, elderly people and small businesses. I urge my hon. Friend to continue her campaign and the Minister to look into the matter.

Lisa Nandy: Many Members have similar anecdotes from their constituencies—I can see that the Minister is listening, and I am grateful to her for doing so. I have learned that access to post office counters in WHSmith is a huge issue for those with mobility impairments. Some, such as the one that my hon. Friend has just mentioned, have been located on the first floor in premises that do not have an adequate-sized lift. Yet over 1 million people have their social security paid into a post office card account.

The Minister is supposed to represent the interests of the public in discussions with Post Office Ltd and UK Government Investments. Will she tell us whether she has asked colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions to carry out an equality impact assessment of the consequences of franchising on disabled claimants? I have seen no evidence of such discussions or of an equality impact assessment by the DWP. What discussions has she had with her DWP colleagues, and will an equality impact assessment be placed in the House of Commons Library as a matter of urgency, and certainly before any further action is taken?

Last year, as my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) alluded to, WHSmith was voted the “worst retailer” on the high street by *Which?* readers, and it has been in the bottom two for eight consecutive years—it turns out that there is a lot of competition for worst retailer on the high street, so that takes some doing. Why, therefore, are the Government handing our valued public service to the worst retailer on the high street?

Significant sums of our money are being spent on, in effect, privatising the Post Office, using the worst business model available, yet apparently we do not get a say. At a recent meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on post offices, which is chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss), the network and sales director told MPs that “this is a commercial decision for us alone”.

Yesterday, I received formal notification of the consultation on the Crown post office in Wigan. The document that I was sent said:

“the change of management of the branch to one that is operated by a retail partner rather than by us directly is a commercial decision for Post Office Ltd and therefore we are not seeking feedback on this aspect of the change.”

That shows complete contempt for the public who own this service.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this incredibly important debate. The Minister know about this, but in my hometown of Tain in the highlands, our post office has been moved into a wee narrow newsagent where there is no room to swing a cat. That means that when a pensioner wants to talk about his or her pension or any other aspect of PO services, there is no confidentiality whatever. On 22 March, that newsagent will shut. We do not know where the new post office will be. There is a feeling of helplessness among my constituents. People in my home town want to know what will happen. I take on board the hon. Lady's point that we, the people, do not feel we are in control.

Lisa Nandy: The hon. Gentleman's constituents clearly have a very strong voice here.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. The Crown post office in Motherwell was closed down and there was a consultation. As we all know, the consultation consists of simply saying, “Can we have your opinion on the new place we have decided to put the post office?”, but then totally ignoring that opinion. Does the hon. Lady agree that this is yet another example of Tory privatisation of public services by default?

Lisa Nandy: I absolutely agree that that is happening, and the public can see it is happening, which accounts for the anger and the public response, particularly from older people, who the Conservative party has traditionally been very concerned to attract. It would be worth reflecting on the fact that the National Pensioners Convention has come out very strongly against the latest wave of Crown post office closures, because it can see where it is going, and it will not be in the interests of its members.

It concerned me when it became apparent at the all-party parliamentary group meeting that, should WHSmith fail, there is no plan B at all. There have been widespread media reports that WHSmith is in trouble. In fact, we have been here before. When the bizarre decision was taken some years ago to move branches of the Post Office into, of all places, Bargain Booze, which then folded, we were left in crisis. It seems there is no learning happening. Unless the Minister tells me otherwise, the Post Office has no plan B for what will happen in the event of WHSmith's collapse.

Matt Rodda: Will my hon. Friend give way briefly?

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab) *rose*—

Lisa Nandy: I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens), as she has not yet spoken.

Jo Stevens: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I am losing my post office in the centre of Cardiff, the capital city of Wales. It is our last post office in the city centre. Does she agree that the *Financial Times* got it absolutely right when it said:

“Once a high street without a WH Smith seemed unimaginable. Now it seems almost inevitable”?

Lisa Nandy: I absolutely agree. I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East, as he said he would be brief.

Matt Rodda: I thank my hon. Friend for indulging me. I want to raise the mismanagement and the way in which the Post Office does not seem to engage with local retailers or look for suitable retail outlets to place sub-post offices. The problem we had in Caversham, not in Reading town centre, is just that. A local pharmacy shut and the post office then shut. It has taken months for Post Office officials to find new premises. Elderly and vulnerable people do not know where the post office will reopen and are very concerned. I would welcome the Minister meeting with residents to discuss this matter.

Lisa Nandy: My hon. Friend highlights a key issue that simply has not been heard, understood or addressed by the Post Office. These postal services matter not just to customers and staff but to our towns. In recent years, many towns across the country have been hollowed out. Bank branches have closed, and as the Centre For Towns has showed, bank closures have hit towns harder than cities or rural areas. Many of the banks that have closed branches in the centre of Wigan over the last few years were at pains to tell me that the service would not be lost because customers could use the post office, but now we find that the post office is closing.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. Does she agree that WHSmith having been voted the worst retailer should ring alarm bells for the Government, and that the plan should be suspended on that basis?

Lisa Nandy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Minister will hear “suspended”, “halted”, “paused” and “moratorium” over and over during this debate. It is not just about bank closures, the threat to the post office and the fact that WHSmith is in trouble. Many towns that face the loss of their Crown post office have had closures of major department stores such as Marks & Spencer, House of Fraser and Debenhams. Like the Crown post office, those are destination stores—they attract people into our town centres who then stay and shop elsewhere. There is a very real prospect that our town centres will begin to fall like dominoes. A perfect storm is hitting our high streets.

My Crown post office in Wigan has stood on its site in the centre of our town for 134 years. It has weathered a global financial crash and two world wars, yet apparently it cannot survive three years of Tory Government. One of our major concerns is about the lack of proposals for the building, which is owned by the Post Office. It is a striking building right in the centre of town. Will the Minister tell us what is envisaged for those buildings? Will we see derelict and abandoned buildings blighting our already struggling high streets?

Albert Owen: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The Government are trying to regenerate town centres, yet they are closing down buildings. In a town in my constituency, the building has been empty for some years and is a blight on the landscape.

Lisa Nandy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; that is a story I hear over and over from colleagues around the country. Behind those losses is a loss of spending power in our towns. Over several decades, good jobs

have been lost and replaced by minimum-wage, insecure work. Young people have left and there has been a significant loss in the working-age population. The jobs that remain do not pay enough to sustain our local services. We have felt the anger from those areas in recent years, so why do the Government allow this process to continue?

WHSmith employs its staff on part-time contracts at the minimum wage, whereas post office counter staff typically earn £21,000 a year. It matters for the viability of our town centres that people are paid properly, and for the health of our nation that people are treated properly. In my view, this failed economic model was one of the direct causes of the heavy leave vote in constituencies such as mine. It has caused justifiable anger in our towns, so why is that failed economic model being employed?

Surely, if Government mean what they say about listening to those who have been left behind and about trying to reinvigorate our high streets, they must abandon this plan right now and seek an alternative. All the plan means, as the Communication Workers Union puts it, is that post offices are on “a path of managed decline”.

For the 800 or so staff facing transfer or redundancy, I suspect that this will be the final straw. The vast majority of staff who faced franchising were not subject to the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006 in either of the last two rounds of transfer. Workers in Wigan tell me that it has been a tragedy to watch services run down over several years. Some of them have worked for the Post Office for decades, but this is the final straw.

The Post Office faces pressure from the loss of traditional services such as letters and from falling Government revenue, but it is by no means without assets. Last year it announced profits of £35 million. That should have been the catalyst to retain experienced and well-paid staff and expand into new areas—in France, La Banque Postale, established a decade ago, made a profit of €1 billion in 2016—but instead, it has cut staff and branches and awarded the chief executive a 7% pay rise. Behind the latest wave of closures is a story of greed, exploitation and carelessness with the social fabric and economic heart of our communities.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful speech. Nottingham city centre post office is incredibly well used and very busy. When that transfers to WHSmith—the Post Office is not interested in what local people have to say about that—a lot of the staff will not transfer but will choose to leave. The post office will lose some of those experienced staff, who probably have a very good relationship with existing customers. On behalf of all of us who face a post office closure in our towns and cities, does she share my concern that that is a huge problem and a dereliction of the service we have come to expect?

Lisa Nandy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, but it does something else: it prevents the Post Office from being able to adapt, change and build new strategies for survival in the future. A lot of the staff standing on the cold street outside the Crown post office before Christmas told me that in recent years they had come to believe that what was happening was a deliberate strategy to run down our postal services, to the point that they are

[Lisa Nandy]

no longer viable or sustainable. That would be a shameful thing for the Government to preside over, without acting. Those staff, our towns and our communities deserve so much better than that. I ask the Minister today to place a moratorium on the franchising programme and to bring together stakeholders for a conversation about how to grow the business and make the Post Office fit for future challenges, rather than selling off one of our most valued public services to a failing retailer.

The Minister has consistently told us that it is not the place of Ministers to intervene, but perhaps she will take a leaf out of the book of her colleague who presented a petition to the Commons urging the then Business Secretary to instruct the Post Office to halt post office closures and listen to the people. That was back in 2008, and the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) was absolutely right. If the Prime Minister recognises the role of Government in protecting this publicly owned national asset, then surely so must the Minister.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Order. I can see that there are a lot of people who want to speak. I do not intend to put a time limit on speeches, but I want everyone to speak who wants to, so please show some time restraint.

1.51 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) for her thorough and eloquent opening speech, which set out very clearly why this is such an important subject. It means a lot to my constituents, particularly in the Middleton area, where in October last year we learned of the plan to move our busy town centre Crown post office into a branch of WHSmith. My constituents are extremely concerned about the potential loss of their post office from its current site and its proposed move into a struggling retail outlet in the town. If I was told that the branch of WHSmith was moving into Middleton post office, to increase its footfall, that would have made a lot more sense. I might have supported the move as mutually beneficial, but to do it the other way round is simply farcical.

WHSmith faces an uncertain future. Last year it announced the closure of six of its high street stores, plus the planned closure of 24 of its budget Cardmarket outlets, over the next three years. It is well known that WHSmith's high street stores have struggled and that they are shored up by overpriced airport, railway station, motorway service and hospital outlets.

Gordon Marsden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is not the time of year to promote chocolate or other consumables, but would she agree that some of the prices that WHSmith charges at the outlets in railway stations and other places are scandalous in terms of the mark-ups?

Liz McInnes: My hon. Friend is right. There was a scandal last year about a particular hospital outlet that was charging eight times the high street price for toiletries, and getting away with it because it had a captive audience. Last year, a 7% rise in trading profits at WHSmith's

hospital and travel stores helped to offset a 3% fall in sales and profits at its high street stores, so we clearly have a business that is struggling. It is a huge risk to relocate vital post office services into a business that is closing stores and might lose more.

Over the past five years, the Post Office, which is entirely owned by the Government, has announced the closure of 150 flagship Crown post offices. The announcement that a further 74 Crown post offices are to be closed and franchised, including the one in my constituency, means that the Crown network will have been cut by 60% since 2013. Closing flagship branches, getting rid of experienced staff and putting counters in the back of a WHSmith is not the plan for growth or innovation that the post office network so desperately needs, and does not offer the level of service that the public should expect. At best, the relentless closures point to a lack of vision; at worst, they suggest the managed decline of a public asset.

My constituents have shared their concerns with me about the potential closure of our post office, and a local petition to save Middleton post office has so far attracted nearly 1,000 signatures. Our high streets are already struggling, and the loss of our flagship post office will be a major blow to Middleton town centre. Many constituents have made the point that it makes no sense to move the post office counter service to WHSmith 500 metres away, disconnecting the counter service from the sorting office, which will remain where it is. We are assured that public consultation on the future of Middleton post office will be happening at some point but my constituents are quite rightly concerned that this is already a done deal and that their responses will be ignored. I would like reassurance from the Minister, which I can pass on to my constituents, that she will ensure that any public consultation is meaningful and that the concerns of the general public will genuinely inform and shape any final decisions.

The chief executive of WHSmith, Stephen Clarke, has said that the franchising of post offices into his stores is attractive to the Post Office because his stores cost less to rent and run. It is wholly unacceptable that this is used as justification for backdoor privatisation of our Government-owned post offices. In the absence of a business plan for the Post Office, it would seem that saving money is the only motivation for the move. It seems odd that a party that claims to be the party of business has no clear plan for improving the performance of the post offices it runs. It is also highly significant that the so-called party of business cannot turn out a single Back Bencher for this important event.

I end by asking the Minister to put a stop to the process of privatisation by the back door and to begin a review of how the Post Office can grow its business through new products and innovation. We expect nothing less from the self-styled party of business.

1.57 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans.

The post office has historically been a focal point of any community. Until recently, in my own community—in my constituency—there were five post offices within walking distance. Now there is one, which is inside a general store. We still have a few post offices in Swansea, but most of them are franchised, including the Crown post office in Morriston.

Crown post offices offer a crucial service to the local community and their potential loss will always be a great concern to that community. Citizens Advice tells us that over half the population consider a local post office to be one of the most important services in the local community. Moving Crown post offices into private hands is a worrying trend; most importantly, we do not want it to lead to the number of post offices on our high streets declining further, and we certainly do not want any more job losses than have already occurred. It is becoming a real problem in Wales, where we have seen the greatest percentage drop in the number of post offices, with 25 closing between 2017 and 2018.

Current employees of the Crown post office must have their employment protected. That issue is being championed by the Communication Workers Union with its Save Our Post Office campaign. The CWU rightly makes the argument that the decision to franchise Crown post offices to WHSmith will hugely affect those who are currently employed by Crown post offices, moving them into lower quality jobs with WHSmith, with inferior wages and hours.

Jo Stevens: I declare my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Does my hon. Friend agree that, although staff moving from the post office to WHSmith, for example, will have their terms and conditions protected under TUPE, their pensions will not be protected, and so they stand to lose a significant amount from the transfer between one employment and another?

Carolyn Harris: That is of great concern to staff members I have spoken to. WHSmith, as we have heard, was recently voted the UK's worst high street shop. Why are we transferring a cherished brand, the Post Office, into the hands of a negatively viewed private retailer? Since 2012, 484 post offices around Wales have been modernised or moved into premises such as convenience stores, newsagents and pharmacies. Citizens Advice carried out mystery shopping in 122 of those post offices across Wales and found accessibility concerns about one in five of them.

We cannot let the transformation of post offices across the UK alter the service that they offer to our communities and particularly to vulnerable consumers. Crown post offices are integral community hubs, offering valuable services to our high streets, and the decision to franchise a further 74 is a grave mistake. It is putting jobs at risk, putting services at risk, and potentially eroding the good will and spirit in our communities.

2.1 pm

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) on securing this important debate.

Crown post offices, like the postal service itself, are at the heart of our communities. Up and down the country, post offices are hubs for local people and their neighbourhoods. They bring people together, they connect people, and at a time when community institutions, from pubs to community centres to libraries, are closing at record rates, we need our post offices as never before.

I pay particular tribute to the post office staff serving my constituents in Croydon North. I had the opportunity of visiting the Post Office depot in Factory Lane just

before Christmas; I repeat here, on the record, the thanks I offered the staff there for the fantastic job they do for the rest of us all year round, not only in the very busy Christmas period. It is sad in the extreme that, instead of protecting these vital and publicly owned assets, the Government are complicit in what my hon. Friend calls their managed decline. It is particularly galling for the public that they are paying more while getting less. The costs of getting rid of staff and refurbishing the franchisee's stores are met by the public, but they all lead to a reduced service.

It is a tragedy to see our postal services being run down in this way. Fewer counter positions means more time spent queuing, especially at busy times of the year such as Christmas. The loss of post offices presents particular difficulty for older and disabled people who are less able to get around—particularly, as we heard earlier, if new facilities are situated above ground floor level—and overworked staff have less time available to offer help and advice to customers who may need it.

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend makes an important point about people with mobility difficulties. One of the issues that has been raised with me is that of people who have other conditions, perhaps neurodiverse conditions, who find the overload of being in a busy shopping centre particularly difficult. Does he think that has been properly recognised in the proposals to franchise into shopping centres?

Mr Reed: My hon. Friend makes an important point; clearly that has not been taken into account at all. My hon. Friend the Member for Wigan referred to an attempt to site a post office in a retail outlet called Bargain Booze. How inappropriate is that for many people—children, for instance, who might be going to a post office to use its services, but are walking through aisles of cheap, low-quality alcohol? That is entirely unacceptable.

Gordon Marsden: I endorse what my hon. Friend has just said. We had exactly the same situation in Blackpool, where a very well used sub-post office was transferred into that position. We managed to get some amelioration of the presentation of the booze, if I can put it that way, but it is not a welcoming environment for people to go into late at night to get the services of a post office branch.

Mr Reed: I agree completely with my hon. Friend's important point.

Of course, it is not just customers who are suffering from the current franchising model. Many staff lose their jobs, only to be replaced in due time by lower paid staff. That, fundamentally, is how franchise partners deliver a service more cheaply. They cut staff numbers, they cut staff pay and they cut staff terms and conditions. In all seriousness, we are not going to protect our high streets or tackle growing levels of in-work poverty through a race to the bottom.

My final point is about the lack of a real forward vision for our post offices. Of course services have to change as society changes, but change does not only mean closure. The CWU has called for the Government and Post Office Ltd to set up a "post bank", which my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan referred to earlier, along the lines of those seen working effectively in other European countries. Thornton Heath is an important district centre in my London constituency. Like many

[*Mr Reed*]

towns outside our cities, it no longer has a bank at all since Barclays closed its branch last year. Many small businesses in such areas trade in cash, and they need a bank in the locality—in the neighbourhood—to deposit the day's takings. Not all businesses are digital and not all businesses are online. We are driving small businesses into ruin by allowing basic facilities like banking to be withdrawn. What a fantastic opportunity a post bank would be to revitalise our Post Office and our hard-pressed high streets at the same time—and what a crying shame that we lack a Government with either the ambition or the vision to seize it.

2.6 pm

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) for securing this debate. I will be brief because she has said everything that all of us in the Chamber would echo about the problems we have with this proposal.

I draw hon. Members' attention to the Conservative manifesto back in 2010, which said that it would make the post office the front office of Government services. How hollow has that manifesto promise proved? In fact, we could be here all day picking holes in what the Conservative manifesto promised and what the Government have since delivered. To put that into context, we consistently have debates in this Chamber about the dilution of our post office services locally, whether Crown post offices, franchises or the postmasters and postmistresses who run our post offices, because it is not the front office of Government at all.

In 2011, £172 million of Government services went through our post offices. That fell to £168 million in 2012 and was down to £141 million by 2015. In 2017 it was down to £114 million and it dipped below the £100 million mark in the Post Office annual accounts in 2018, at £99 million. That is not the front office of Government; it is the Government withdrawing services from the very thing they are supposed to be protecting on behalf of our constituents.

We can add to that the history of the project. The Royal Mail and post offices were split off under the Postal Services Act 2011. The Royal Mail was subsequently privatised. The Government said they would look after the post office network, but we have seen that post office network withering on the vine since the Royal Mail and post offices were split up under that piece of legislation. Indeed, if we look at the share price of Royal Mail today—it is just over £2.50—we see that the Royal Mail may be in a bit of financial trouble. It is hardly a success for the taxpayers of this country or for the Royal Mail.

Franchising is difficult not just because successful franchising operations end up in WHSmith. We have heard of the problems with that. I draw hon. Members' attention to the Consumer Futures report done in 2012, away back at the start of this process, which said how disastrous franchising into retailers such as WHSmith would be. That has proved to be correct. The Government at that time, when I was the shadow postal services Minister, said that the Consumer Futures report was built on incorrect data, but it has since proved to be absolutely correct when we look at the practice of franchising Royal Mail services.

The Morningside Crown post office in my constituency was a profitable branch at the top of Morningside Road. I can tell hon. Members how popular it was in terms of footfall, because that is where we do our street stalls in south Edinburgh. On a Saturday morning, there is no better place to be than outside the post office, with a stream of people going in and out, looking to engage with their Member of Parliament on various issues. That Crown post office came up for franchising, and the interesting thing about its franchise potential was that no other shop in the local area wished to take the franchised post office. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan mentioned, when asked about its plan B if a franchisee does not come forward or if no franchisees satisfy the criteria for running a Crown post office, the Post Office does not have one; it has no idea.

I remember when we had a public meeting in Alloa with Gordon Banks, the former MP for Ochil and South Perthshire, when Crown post offices there were threatened with closure. Someone from the audience asked Post Office Ltd what would happen when either the franchisee failed or if no franchisee came forward, and the answer was that the Post Office itself would have to invest in the Crown post office. Perhaps we should invest in post offices before they are up for closure or franchising.

I have to pay tribute to Ibrahim Joulak, the sub-postmaster who runs the Bruntsfield post office in my constituency. He will take on the Crown post office by merging his small sub-postmaster's post office and the Crown post office. However, franchised Crown post offices do not have all the services that we expect from the major Crown post offices, further diminishing our constituents' use of the post office, which is a vicious circle for post offices that want to be self-sustaining.

Footfall is key if we want to revive our high streets. The best thing to drive footfall is services that people wish to use, and my constituency postbag certainly shows me that people wish to use local post offices. That drives the local café and the local newsagent, and people moving around our local communities drives the viability of public transport services. We need these linchpins in our local communities.

The most interesting and ironic thing I have seen on the franchising arrangements in my area is that four major high street banks have also closed their branches, and the letter they send to account holders says, "Don't worry, you can use your local post office." Well, they can do so only if their local post office exists. It is the very same problem with the free bus pass in many parts of Scotland. Of course pensioners can travel anywhere they like in Scotland with a concessionary travelcard, but they have to be able to get on a bus.

Jamie Stone: I acknowledge the hon. Gentleman's commitment. As high street banks continue to close branches, could we not turn the whole argument on its head, keep Crown post offices open and offer the banks a one-stop shop in these wonderful old premises that have been there for hundreds of years, thereby giving an additional service to post office customers?

Ian Murray: That is a great intervention. I keep asking the chief executives of the Royal Bank of Scotland and other high street banks why they do not co-host with post offices, bringing together two business models

that are struggling because of the way that we use modern communications and modern banking. The technology must be available. If I can do all my banking on my smartphone, surely the high street banks are able to co-locate with post offices and provide that for our constituents.

Finally, the reason why staff tend not to be TUPE-ed across when there is a franchisee partner is that franchisee partners simply do not want them because they do not want the cost. The reason they do not want the cost is that they want fewer staff. The reason they want fewer staff is that they think the service cannot possibly be efficient and effective unless there are fewer experienced staff, so staff tend to take the quite generous redundancy packages from the Post Office. That experience is then lost and there is a brain drain from the service, and again there is a vicious circle of the service becoming less efficient and less able to meet the needs of the local communities.

It is right for the Minister to come here again. I hope we are not having this same debate about franchising and the closure of post offices again next year and the year after and the year after that. The Minister is new in her role, but I hope she eventually grabs the nettle of the post office network, pauses the franchising process, looks at what the Post Office can do on its profitability and then invests those profits back into the current network, so that we can all have post offices in our communities that are sustainable for the future.

2.13 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) on securing this debate—we can tell from the quantity and quality of the Members attending how important it is. She gave an excellent speech, as others have said, and set out the case so well. I will probably repeat some of what she said, but because it is so important I think it is well worth saying twice, or even three or four times. Maybe then we will get the message across to the Minister, who I am sure will be in no doubt about how strongly we all feel about this.

Over the last five years, 150 Crown post offices have closed, with the closure or franchising of a further 74 Crown post offices announced in October last year. Unlike many of my colleagues, I am fortunate that no Crown post offices in my constituency are scheduled to be closed or franchised under those plans. However, the Crown post office in Sunderland is one of the busiest in the country. I can only imagine the impact on the local community if it were to be closed in the next phase of franchising. I thought I had better get in there now and stake the claim for that one to be taken off any future list.

Post offices are at the heart of local communities and are more than just somewhere for people to buy stamps or post letters. They provide vital services for many across the country, and it is therefore right and perhaps obvious that proposed closures are taking place in the face of significant local and national opposition. That is why we are all here today.

The continued privatisation and closure of Crown post offices risks leaving vulnerable customers and rural communities without access to banking and postal services.

In addition, a 2016 report from Citizens Advice concluded that franchising to retailers in the past has led to inferior services and poor disabled access, which is concerning given the number of disabled welfare claimants and pensioners who access payments via Post Office card accounts. Will the Minister please tell the House whether the Government plan to carry out equality impact assessments to ensure that any post offices that are franchised are accessible to all?

Franchising is often accompanied by substandard service, as we have heard. A constituent of mine who is a former Crown post office employee wrote to me recently to voice his concerns about the impact of franchising on the employment of trained, experienced staff. In fact, Citizens Advice reported that franchising leads to a deterioration in service and fewer staff with less experience. It seems that the economics of the franchise model are based on cutting staff numbers and reducing service provision. Franchise plans put in place by the Post Office in 2014 could work only if 50% of existing Crown post office staff left the service. This expulsion of experienced, knowledgeable staff is all done at a massive cost to the taxpayer, with £13 million paid in compensation agreements to redundant postal staff between 2014 and 2015. Then, after all these experienced staff are let go, their jobs are replaced with low-paid, temporary employment.

Recently announced plans show that many Crown post offices will be franchised to WHSmith, as my hon. Friends have said. Unions have raised concerns about the retailer's employment practices, given that its business model is based on low-wage, part-time jobs paying little above the minimum wage, whereas the usual pay for a counter position at a Crown post office is way above that. How can the Minister justify the replacement of well-paid, quality jobs with low-paid temporary positions? It is exploitative of staff and residents in areas where Crown post offices will be franchised.

I wrote to the Minister recently to voice my concerns and those of my constituents, and I thank her for her quick response. She said in reply that franchising is not a process of privatisation or closure. However, when considering the staff cuts, substandard service provision and poor profits that the postal service has faced in recent years, it appears that this publicly funded service is going through a period of managed decline.

The Minister also told me that franchising was about reducing costs for taxpayers. However, the process of franchising is paid for by public money. Millions have already been spent on compensation agreements with Crown post office staff and on installing and furnishing new, franchised branches. The Post Office will not even disclose the magnitude of some of these costs and has refused to carry out a public consultation on franchising.

Does the Minister agree that the public should at least be consulted before they are billed for substandard service and the loss of publicly owned assets? There has been a serious lack of transparency throughout the process and it is wrong that significant sums of public money are being used to finance the privatisation of the post office network. Franchising leads to poor service, poor accessibility and job cuts. The Government must justify their use of franchising and acknowledge the effect on service provision in all our local communities across the country.

2.20 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) for initiating this debate and speaking so powerfully in introducing it. As many hon. Members have said, she laid out comprehensively the matters that we have concerns about.

I recently met a number of postmasters in my constituency to discuss their concerns, so the issue is not just the collapse of the Crown office network—the 60% decline that we have seen in that network. Last year saw the sale of the Dennistoun Crown office in my constituency; it was franchised off. I remember going along to the consultation that the new franchisee was holding, and he seemed upbeat about the opportunity that he had to make a difference. I was looking at the plans that he had. On the face of it, it was all quite impressive—the layouts and accessibility and the opportunity.

Obviously, at that time I expressed the concerns about TUPE-ing. We have seen that the general trend is that the majority of Crown office staff will leave. As my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) said, staff will have a very generous settlement scheme, but that is because the business model of the franchising is set up so that it is sustainable only if those people take the settlements. TUPE-ing people across on the same terms and conditions is not a sustainable business model for the franchise. It is almost rigged, in a way, to create that perverse incentive to leave. There is a draining out of skills and knowledge and a diluting of employment protections and the standards of employment that people would generally have working in this sector.

The postmasters came to see me because they were concerned. The same guy I was talking about came six months later, and his mood could not have been more depressed. It was just awful to see the change from his initial upbeat enthusiasm. That small business owner had been looking to make an entrepreneurial fist of it, but he felt that he had been conned in the way he had signed up to the deal.

The main concern of the postmasters was the viability of the operations because of the reduction in funding and resource. For example, postmasters now have to rent ATMs at a cost of £8,500 per annum, but they get an income of only £7,500 per annum from those machines, so that is a net loss of £1,000 to the franchisee, just from the obligation to have an ATM on-site. There are associated business rates as well.

The Government have invested £1.3 billion in the post office network. However, that money does not appear to filter down to the franchisees. Banking contracts with new franchisees have changed. Postmasters used to receive 70p per £100 for providing banking services; they now receive only 31p per £100. That creates another problematic and precarious situation for many franchise owners.

As hon. Members have said, there has been a widespread programme of commercial bank branch closures, which has hit my constituency. Near the Dennistoun Crown post office, we have seen the closure of the Royal Bank of Scotland branch in Dennistoun in the last 18 months or so. Before that we saw the closure of RBS in Possilpark. My constituency has increasingly become a banking

desert. It increasingly relies on post office services, which in turn are becoming increasingly precarious because all the Crown offices are being franchised. One has already been franchised, and indeed one franchise cannot be shifted because it is so unattractive to any prospective franchisee.

The situation is not working at all and is not sustainable. Potential earnings have been eroded to the point at which people believe that cash starvation will lead to the closure of many post office outlets. The view is that post offices should go back to being run as they were. My fear is that offloading the Crown office network on to franchisees stores up a time bomb. There could be a wholesale collapse in the provision of postal services across the UK within the next five years because those people literally want to drop the keys and walk away because it is costing them money to run these businesses. It is a drain on their resources. Why on earth would they be paying money to run them? I fear that the Post Office is sort of saying, “Let’s offload this. We’ll create a superficial holding pattern for a couple of years and lock the people into these contracts,” and in two years’ time things are going to drop off a cliff and we are going to see a massive collapse in the overall post office footprint across the UK. That is my real concern.

I hope the Minister takes on board and addresses my points, and that she offers to meet postmasters who have those concerns. Postmasters in my constituency believe that their ability to provide a service, which they want to provide, and employment in the constituency is being severely eroded and that retail operations within the franchises are not sufficient to allow their survival. They believe that contracts should be renegotiated to allow both the service provision and the ability to earn a reasonable living. Of course, the Communication Workers Union actively opposes the franchising of the post office network for that very reason. Employees in those branches believe that they are 39% underpaid.

The model is totally unsustainable and risks further collapse in the post office network across the UK. I hope you will take on board the direct feedback from postmasters in my constituency. Sorry, I hope the Minister takes on board that feedback—perhaps you will as well, Mr Evans, and perhaps your constituents are also affected. I hope the Minister addresses those points with urgency because this is an urgent issue affecting postal services across the UK.

2.25 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) for opening the debate so powerfully. I certainly echo many of the comments that she made. If the Prime Minister did not underestimate the power of Government to intervene, I see no reason why the Minister should not intervene on behalf of all our constituents to ensure that this franchising process is halted. It is absolutely clear that it is riddled with problems. I shall reflect on the situation in my constituency in York and some of the challenges that are being placed at the door of people there because of the decision to franchise the service.

The first issue is the consultation process taking place over the Christmas period—it closed on 28 December—the busiest and most stressful time for post office staff. I pay

tribute to them, but to have this situation hanging over their head over the Christmas period is nothing short of cruel. It also ignores the input that they would have wanted to have into the consultation. The issue is not just them and their jobs, but their customers, whom they care deeply about.

I want to highlight two particular issues: the impact on the local economy in York, and the location of and access to the post office. The post office has been at 22 Lendal since 1884. It has survived two world wars and still stands proud today. It is a busy and profitable Crown post office, which is a real advantage for our city centre which, like many high streets, is struggling. It is at the entrance to our city—a city that attracts 7 million people every year and a city that people will come into on a Saturday or during the week to use the facilities of the post office.

It is in a prime location for transport links, whether people are using the train or the bus to come into the city. Crucially, disabled people are able to pull up outside the post office to access the services, and for those who cycle, there is parking space for bikes outside. The post office is in the most profitable and accessible part of our city. It is boosted by having opposite to it Britain's best pie shop—Appleton's. People have a dual pact whereby they buy their pie and use the post office.

Lisa Nandy: As the Member of Parliament for Wigan, I am duty-bound to assure my hon. Friend that the best pies in the country are found in my constituency.

Rachael Maskell: My hon. Friend may say that, but by all judgment, Appleton's has won the prize for the best pie shop in the nation.

To get back to business, the reality is that York's post office is a profitable post office that works for my constituents. It is in the prime location. If the post office could choose its location, it would still be exactly where it is. However, the post office will be moving to WHSmith in Coney Street. That is not far, but the post office will be going into an area of the city that is struggling and where shops are shutting. The number of empty retail outlets that we see as we walk around is growing year on year and month on month, which is of great concern. People will not be able to pull up in their vehicle outside the post office because it is a pedestrianised area. That means that the post office will be inaccessible, particularly for disabled people but also for older residents.

The area will also have tighter controls in future. Mail vans will not be able to pop by because of the counter-terrorism measures that our city is taking—the Post Office was not even aware of that during the consultation process. If a van were to go there, it would have to be well out of hours because of the new counter-terrorism plan. It would have a very precarious route down a dark alley, which leads down towards the river and has been deemed unsafe under health and safety inspections, let alone if someone were to be in that alley with money—they just would not go there. It is deeply concerning for staff, who would have to use that as the only means of accessing the building other than going through the shop itself.

The post office will be located at the back of WHSmith. It will not be the first business to try to succeed there. Costa Coffee had a business at the back of WHSmith and it failed. In its current location, just down the road, Costa Coffee is thriving, but at the back of WHSmith it

did not work. This does not make sense for the future of the post office. Therefore, its current location is the right place for it.

Jo Stevens: I am glad that my hon. Friend has raised this situation where the post office is transferred and shoved right at the back of an existing WHSmith store, which is exactly what is proposed in Cardiff Central. We know that very few people are going into WHSmith because it is an ailing retailer. Walking right to the back of an ailing retail shop will not make it easy for people to access the postal services they need.

Rachael Maskell: My hon. Friend has made a powerful point. This has to make business sense and, where it does not, it should not proceed. I also highlight the fact that custom will be lost from retailers in the city who bank and place deposits within the post office. They do not feel safe having to walk through and then queue in a retail outlet. They have already said that they will be transferring their business away from the post office. That has to be taken on board. This does not make business sense or economic sense, nor does it make sense for our high streets or my city.

Albert Owen: As my hon. Friend knows, I know the branch she refers to very well from my student days and I use it at Christmas when I visit my daughter. It has excellent services, including an exchange bureau, which can compete with the best. Those kinds of services, which are working in purpose-built buildings, need to be maintained and enhanced. She is making an excellent case, but she makes it for the rest of the country, as well.

Rachael Maskell: It is so important that we do not sell off our family silver, which is exactly what this process will achieve, certainly with regard to my city.

Finally, I want to raise the issue of the war memorial placed in our post office, where 16 fallen men from the first world war and ten from the second world war are honoured. It is unknown today what will happen to that war memorial. I reflect on the words of Harold Wood, who today is 95. In 1942, he defended our city as part of the Home Guard. He said:

“The Luftwaffe couldn't destroy it. It would be sad to see the Post Office do it.”

Our post office survived two world wars, so it would be a shame to close the doors, thereby ensuring that its profitability, service and access will be lost to my constituents.

2.33 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) on bringing this debate to the House. The fact that so many people are here indicates our interest in the subject and the importance of post offices to every constituency. I am pleased to bring—as I often do in Westminster Hall—a Northern Ireland perspective to this debate. I will speak about some of the success stories that we have had recently in post offices and their strategy. I am pleased to see the Minister in her place. She looks very lonesome in that top corner, but from my discussions with her, I understand that she is very much interested in the views we are putting forward. I know her response will be positive and I look forward to hearing it.

[*Jim Shannon*]

I will also make some comments about the high street, because it is important to have a high street. I was just talking to the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), and I said to him that if a shop goes vacant and stays vacant for a while, it almost becomes infectious. It is important to ensure that somebody comes in quickly; otherwise, it will lead to the problems we are seeing across the UK mainland.

I hail from a rural area that has seen the closure of every rural bank in the last five years. The Scottish National party has highlighted the issue of rural banks closing, which is something I have seen in my constituency in the last five years. Any change or alteration of the post office greatly concerns me. We have no banks at all in the Ards peninsula, where I live. Almost every bank that has pulled out—except Ulster bank, which has created a mobile banking service and has a customer adviser in the area once a week—has pointed to the post office and urged people to make the most of the ability to lodge money and lift money through the post office. I have to say that that strategy has been successful in the Ards peninsula for a number of reasons. First, the post offices are there—I will explain how we have been able to keep them over the years—and secondly, two credit unions have opened in Portaferry and Kircubbin, which give some banking opportunities and supplement other facilities.

The figures in the background information may be a wee bit deceptive—I say that gently and with sincerity to those who did it. Some 111 Crown post offices have closed and 1,008 agency post offices have closed. Attempts have been made to build that up by using the outreach service, which can help a bit, but does not take away from the main issue. The role of a post office is not just to do monetary things. Other hon. Members have said that post offices should be doing more where they can, and that is one of the things that I want to look at. What can they offer? Can I do my driving licence there? Can I do my passport there? Can I pay some bills there? Can I do other things? That is what we need to do. I am not sure that the outreach service makes that happen. Therefore, I suggest very gently that the outreach alternative is not really where we are. A well-run network of rural post offices is needed.

I am very aware of any changes to the services offered and I am supportive of colleagues who are losing branches to what has been described to me as privatisation by stealth. That is why I support this debate. I am here to register my support for the post offices and to support those hon. Members who are probably having more difficulties in their constituency than I have in mine because of some of the success we have had.

The briefing from the Communication Workers Union, which I am sure we all received, is clear:

“The Post Office Ltd uses public money to finance the closure and franchising programme.

Everything from compromise agreements to get rid of existing staff (£13 million in 2014-15 alone), to refurbishments on stores it then franchises (£4.6 million was spent on 39 branches), and installing post office counters in franchisees’ premises (the post office refuses to disclose this expenditure), are met by the public. Yet, in return, the public receive a reduced service.”

That is the concern we all share, as hon. Members have said. It continues:

“While Crown offices represent a small share of the overall network, they have historically brought in between 10-20% of the Post Office’s overall revenue”—

a significant amount that cannot be ignored—

“and so any further closures could jeopardise the future of the network.

There is no evidence of respite from the slash and burn approach either, as the Post Office Ltd announced in July that they want to attract new applicants to set up ‘New Network Locations’ in 450 postcode areas throughout the UK.”

That perhaps unsettles the present franchise and network of post offices, as well.

“This initiative will have a substantial and far-reaching implication on the future of every flagship Crown office and Crown office job, as well as impact on Postmasters in sub Post Offices across the network many of whom are already reporting they are struggling financially.”

The two independent reports to which some hon. Members referred—one by Consumer Focus from 2012 and another by Citizens Advice from 2016—concluded that the previous franchising of Crown offices to WHSmith resulted in longer queuing and service times, inferior customer service and advice, poorer disabled access and a reduced number of counter positions. Those facts tell the story. If a service is going to be provided, it should be a good service. If the service is run down and secondary, by its very nature, that leads to the further reduction of the Post Office.

Alongside that, the closure and franchise programme results in the loss of experienced staff, as hon. Members have said. The sub-post office managers in the peninsula that I represent have historically been second to none and we have been truly blessed, but part of that is that they have invested in their businesses. It is not the big firms such as WHSmith that have been offered the franchises, but the smaller shop groups. That has enabled post offices to be retained, because there is an investment, but there also has to be a wage for the sub-postmasters or sub-postmistresses to be able to continue running them.

Having post offices in shops and garages across the peninsula is one way that we have made it work. Someone signing on to work for another company and not as a postmaster or postmistress may not affect quality of the service, but it means the loss of what people see as a community asset. I think all hon. Members have referred to and understood the importance of the community asset that we have.

I have lived on the Ards peninsula for all but four years of my life. It is a close community that has grown, with many people coming to live and retire there. Over the years, the post office has been the cog at its core—a central point for meeting friends. It is also a central point for saying, “You know something? Mrs Jones hasn’t come in this week to collect her money or make a transaction.” The people at the post office know that and then, as they often do, they will call out to see if she is okay. There is a critical community aspect to the post office that cannot be ignored, which is neighbour looking out for neighbour, as we do in this House as representatives.

Albert Owen: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to talk about the social service as well as the postal service. There are also cash-handling services that post offices provide for small businesses. Wherever they transfer to, that service is not available.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. Small businesses are another aspect that I want to mention. When the banks closed, they said, “You can do your business through the post office,” but people need to have that opportunity for lodging money and for getting cash out to pay staff wages. That is really important for small and medium-sized businesses, and that is why the intervention that the hon. Gentleman referred to is critical.

The closure and franchise programme means that the relationships that customers have with staff are lost, and it limits the Post Office’s ability to expand into the new services that customers want it to provide, which is another thing we need to make sure happens. Moving to a model with less space, fewer specialist staff and fewer experienced staff is not a model that customers want or that will bring future growth.

In the short time I have, I will set out how the post office counters have developed in conjunction with small and bigger shops. I will mention some of those places, because it is important for the evidential base—probably no one will know where they are, but hopefully the Minister will get to know them shortly, when she comes to visit my constituency sometime in April, after we get Brexit out of the way. They include Ballywalter, Ballyhalbert, Greyabbey and Kircubbin; Ards town, where Scrabo post office closed but was moved to the Ards shopping centre, which is only a couple of hundred yards away; Stratheden, where the post office was moved out to one of the larger shops; and West Winds, where the same was done. Those examples worked because the shops were big enough to absorb a post office and a counter, and to give a service, but the person who took it on had to have a wage that justified them looking after it, which is important as well.

The Minister knows the pressure on the high street well, as do all hon. Members present. The news stories in the media are always full of negativity—“This store has done well. That store hasn’t done well.” We want to make sure that post offices can play their role. The Crown post office in Newtownards in my constituency is critical to the future of the high street, and we are pleased to report that it has been retained.

Although I am thankful for businesses such as the Spar in Carrowdore, which has incorporated a post office in its shopping outlet that carries out all the post office functions, including foreign currency, and whose staff are certainly highly trained, that does not seem to be the case for all franchises on the mainland, as hon. Members have said. As an MP for a rural area, I give my wholehearted support to those wanting to preserve the skill and make-up of post offices in areas that rely on them as the only monetary exchange.

Earlier, someone said that privacy is sometimes needed for financial transactions. I want that to be recorded in *Hansard*. That is perhaps the one thing I would like to see more often in a post office. We live in an age where everyone overhears conversations about other people’s monetary transactions in the post office, but we do need privacy for some things.

The Post Office was not designated for privatisation and I sincerely oppose an attempt to privatise it by stealth—I put that on the record. The service it provides is truly a lifeline in rural communities and that service must be first class. For that reason, it must be retained.

I look forward to the Minister’s response. I know that in her response, we will hear some of the reassurance we need.

2.46 pm

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): It is a privilege to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) for securing the debate and for introducing it so comprehensively. As she will see, I have been waiting for three years to say some of these things; this is a great opportunity.

My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) started by talking about the impact and importance of post offices in our communities. Before coming here, I was a community worker and an academic studying community work. I can testify that having such institutions on our high street as part of our community is incredibly important. Some institutions, such as libraries and post offices, have been part of our communities for generations, and different generations use them to mingle and come together. They not only form a physical presence in our community, but bring different parts of our community, of different ages, ethnicities and backgrounds, together in the same place. They are uniquely and incredibly important to the cohesion of our communities.

Since 2000, I have lived in the Brunswick Town area of the Hove constituency that I represent. That town is characterised by having lots of the regency houses for which Hove is known. It also had a Crown post office that had been there for many generations. It was a well loved and heavily used post office. I was elected in 2015. Two months after being elected, I was contacted by the Post Office, which said that it was opening a consultation with the potential to close the branch. I immediately met Post Office representatives in my office in Parliament, because if the Post Office was going to have a consultation, I wanted to engage in it in an open-hearted, engaged and positive way. I wanted to make sure that it got all the information it needed to make a decision in the best interest of the community that I represent and that every single voice that needed to be heard would be heard.

When the Post Office’s representatives came to Parliament and sat with me, the first questions I asked were, “Is this a genuine consultation? Are you going to listen to the voices in our community? Are you going to look at and study the facts and base your decision on those facts, or is this a fait accompli? I need to know right now.” They both looked me in the eye and made me an absolute cast-iron categorical promise that it was a genuine consultation that would look at the facts and listen to the community, and that they would base their decision on what they saw and heard.

On the back of that, I engaged fully to try to deliver the voices and the information the Post Office’s representatives needed to hear. I made sure that there was a public meeting one evening, to which 200 local community residents turned up in an open-hearted way, so that they could sit with the representatives, feed in their insight and how they use the post office, and make sure that their needs were taken into consideration. That meeting was a difficult one, because people were really concerned, and I made sure that the people who had come from the Post Office were treated with respect, which sometimes meant challenging the people I represent and ensuring that they engaged in a positive way. In

[Peter Kyle]

other words, I used some of the political capital that they had given me in order, at times, to push back at them. That is a difficult thing to do at such meetings, but in the interests of getting the right outcome it was worth doing.

A petition was set up locally that received 5,400 signatures and there was another petition online that received an additional 2,000 signatures. The voice of the community was heard loud and clear.

The Post Office said of this post office—the Crown post office in Brunswick Town in Hove—that it had spoken to customers who were very willing to make the walk, for 1.1 miles uphill, to another post office, which was in a convenience store that had a counter. However, at the public meeting, not one person said that was the case. The Post Office could not provide me with the names of people who had said they were perfectly happy to make that journey. I went into the Brunswick Town post office several times to speak to customers and I could not find a single customer who said they would rather make that journey of 1.1 miles up a hill than use the post office that was already in their community and that had been there for generations.

So I went back to the Post Office with that information and the Post Office ignored it. I told the Post Office about people who could not make that walk of 1.1 miles, either because they were living with disabilities or living into old age; they simply could not make that journey. The Post Office heard their voices directly, because I made sure that it heard those voices directly.

Then I went in to the Brunswick Town post office, because the Post Office had said to me that in the previous year the footfall and the number of customers for it had fallen. The Post Office showed me statistics to back that up. So, as I say, I went into that post office and when I opened the door I saw something that I had seen very, very regularly—a queue, snaking through the building all the way to the door. Of the three counters, only one was open. In the 15 years that I had lived in that community, I had never seen a situation in which only one counter was open; it was always the case before that the post office had been a hub and all of its counters had been open.

So I spoke to some of the staff in the post office and it turned out that eight months earlier a diktat had come down from the Post Office to close two of the counters and not use them; only one of the counters was to be used. Why was that? I am absolutely convinced that the Post Office was running down that Crown post office, by allowing only one counter to be used and by only allowing the staff there—against their wishes—to use one counter.

It was very clear that the Post Office wanted to drive down the customer numbers, so I wrote to it and asked directly, “Have you asked the question and looked into whether the fall in footfall is due to fewer people wanting to use that branch, or is it because more people are finding it difficult to use that branch, or they just give up before they get to the counter in the first place?” The Post Office could not answer the question.

The process ended and the Post office announced in writing that it was going to close the Crown post office in Brunswick Town. There would be no further engagement and within weeks that post office had closed.

This sorry story ends a year later, when I walked down the street in Brunswick Town and discovered that the Post Office had opened a new branch inside a convenience store next door to the Crown post office that it had closed down, because it said there was no need for it. I repeat: next door. I have absolutely no doubt that I was misled, that the community I represent was misled and—worst of all—that the customers who used and depended on that post office were misled and the staff who had given a career and indeed a lifetime in work to that post office branch were misled. The post office staff’s jobs disappeared and the jobs that have been created in their place have no pension liability and no guarantee that they would have the standards that people who work long-term in the Post Office can expect. And those workers were no longer part of the Post Office family.

We have a Prime Minister who stood on the steps of Downing Street and said she was going to maintain those sorts of rights and tackle injustices. The Post Office is one of her companies; it is an organisation that she runs. However, she has allowed it to dwindle, to be stripped of assets and to be taken away from our high streets, and replaced with something that has less value, that makes less of a contribution to our communities, and that offers less stability and value in the workplace to the people who work for it.

I say to the Minister directly that I understand that she has said that it is not her job to meddle with the running of the Post Office. However, in times such as this, I and my community expect her to roll up her sleeves and get stuck in, because if branches are being taken from our high streets, and MPs and our communities are being misled, we are their elected officials, she is speaking on behalf of the Government and we expect her to act.

2.55 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans, and a particular pleasure to follow a very powerful speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle). It was a salutary warning, and I suspect that some of my comments will echo the concerns of others about the so-called consultation process. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) on her powerful introduction. She speaks for all Labour Members on these important issues.

The announcement a few months ago that Cambridge was one of the post offices to be put through this process was met with incredulity in my city. People are absolutely furious. I will say a few things about our local circumstances, trying not to repeat some of the points that have been very well made already, and then make some general reflections.

The Crown post office in Cambridge has around 15 very experienced staff, who between them have 150 years of experience—experience that is likely to be lost if this process continues. The post office has already been moved across the street—that was not a popular decision eight years ago—from one of the many fine buildings in Cambridge, in order, we were told, to secure its long-term future. There are some interesting definitions of “long-termism” in the modern world. That post office is one of the most successful in the region and possibly, I am told by my colleagues in the Communication Workers

Union, in the country. It has been one of the top-selling post offices for travel currency, travel insurance, travel-related products and passport checking. It is one of the top-performing post offices in the area, so we might expect it to be celebrated as a success story.

That post office is also one of the few nationally to carry out biometric services and provide international driving permits, which is what I want to focus on. There has been a huge change in our country for those coming here to work or study, which most of us—who do not have to go through such processes—are probably only dimly aware of. Those people have to have biometric residence permits. If we are to have that system, we also need a system to allow them to register their biometric data, and in my area it is the Crown post office in Cambridge to which they are directed.

[MR GRAHAM BRADY *in the Chair*]

In conducting the research for this speech and talking to people locally about how the whole system works, I stumbled on what can perhaps only be described as a coincidence. In November, just after the announcement of the consultation, guess what quietly happened? That biometric information system has been very quietly transferred from the post office—although it still exists there at the current time—to the local library. However, it is hard to know how anyone would find that out, because if they go to the Home Office website or Post Office website, they will still be directed to the Cambridge Crown post office.

Let us, for the moment, continue to follow the public advice, because biometric residence permits are needed by all foreign nationals from outside the European Economic Area if they want to stay in the UK for longer than six months, extend their visa, or settle in the UK or have other interactions with the Home Office. In areas such as mine, which have huge numbers of people coming to study or work, and contribute to our local economy, this issue is enormously important. For instance, I am told that almost all the 2,000 non-EEA staff at the University of Cambridge will need to have used, or will need to use, those services, and if they cannot go to Cambridge, they will have to go to Huntingdon, Harlow or Romford, which requires hours and hours of travel on public transport.

Jo Stevens: I have a similar situation in Cardiff Central, where the biometric centre was in our post office, which is due to be put into WHSmith. I met with the post office to ask whether the biometric service would transfer to WHSmith, and guess what? It will not. Does my hon. Friend agree that that creates another barrier for people who are already in a vulnerable situation?

Daniel Zeichner: I totally agree, and that is an important point. Apparently, only 37 WHSmith stores across Britain have the wider access for wheelchair users, and if that is no longer available, people from my area would have to travel to Luton, Milton Keynes or London—a major diminution of service. It may be possible that those services can be provided elsewhere. Frankly, who knows? Maybe the Minister can enlighten us. Maybe she can tell us whether the timing of this transfer was random chance or coincidence. Maybe she can guarantee the future of our local library. I do not know, but my guess is that the Government have very little clue about the future, and I doubt that any answers at all will be offered. We shall see.

Other Members have mentioned disability access, and I concur entirely with the comments made about WHSmith in general, which I will not repeat. What I will say is that those of us who have been in and out of WHSmith in Cambridge know that it is already a crowded store. It is not listed by WHSmith as one of its wheelchair-friendly stores, and the idea that it is going to be a pleasant experience for people seems almost unimaginable, frankly. We have huge doubts. These services should be available to people and properly accessible. I say to those running the campaign on behalf of the Post Office that they should be careful of who they are taking on, because we have some pretty powerful campaigners locally. Councillor Gerri Bird led a campaign a few years ago to stop the toilets in the Lion Yard shopping centre in Cambridge being moved from one floor to another. After months of campaigning, she won and the other side lost. I say to the Post Office that it should be careful who it takes on. It would do much better to back down soon, gracefully.

Let me turn to some of the wider issues. As we have heard, the Government have said that they are worried about the high street. That is understandable; we all are. There are huge challenges, but we should not make them worse. This is not just about where a service is provided; as other Members have said, it is about the kind of institution. Many years ago, I worked for John Garrett, the former MP for Norwich South—some Members may just about remember John. He wrote a book, presciently entitled “Westminster: Does Parliament Work?”, which is good reading in these troubled times. I remember going around the local post offices in Norwich early in the morning with him, and the thing that struck us was that at every post office, there was a queue. An accountant, I suspect, would say, “Why are these people standing outside the post office when, if they came an hour or two later, they could just go in and be served?” The answer, of course, was that this was the occasion when most of those people got to see their friends. They were standing outside; as other Members have already said, it was part of a wider social issue. For the bean counters who are looking at the Post Office balance sheet, that probably does not count for anything, but it really counts in looking at the NHS balance sheet, in terms of the impact on people’s mental health from loneliness and so on. That is why the Post Office is a public service, not just a business.

People may also remember a recent, much-loved BBC television series, “Lark Rise to Candleford”. Some will remember the inestimable postmistress Dorcas Lane, who was at the heart of that local community. I suspect that series was much loved partly because it spoke to a conception of Englishness—one of fairness, kindness and public service—that many people still crave. As other hon. Friends have already alluded to, that also goes to the heart of the debate that is happening in the Chamber just a few yards away. Others have written eloquently on these related issues. My hon. Friend the Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas), who was in the Chamber earlier, wrote of the then coalition Government back in 2011:

“The government is not conservative; it is liberal and extreme. Through its indulgence of the banks and corporate and media power, and attempts to sell off parts of our English common life to the highest bidder—forests, waterways, ports, the Post Office, sport and culture—it is systematically destroying the hard-won victories of generations and, in so doing, unravelling the essential fabric of this country.”

[Daniel Zeichner]

These post offices are part of that fabric. For my city of Cambridge—high-tech Cambridge—our post office is part of the essential fabric of our city and our community. I may be dismissed as a romantic socialist, and I would not disown that label, but I will conclude by posing a question to the Minister: what kind of conservative does not understand the place of the post office in an English country town or community?

3.5 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. You will get the idea that today, tempers are fraught and passions are running high. There is genuine concern about the impact of these policies on our communities, which are met with a Government who are stubbornly pursuing a course of action that has no support. You would be forgiven for believing that you are still chairing the 1922 Committee, but no: this is a debate on post offices, with MPs who are genuinely concerned about the impact of these changes on the fabric of our communities and the future of our high streets. We can dismiss post offices as places where people go just to post a letter or send or collect a parcel, but they are more than that: they are the community. They are part of our collective identity, secure a sense of belonging, and are also important to our sense of place. They are critical to the fabric of our community.

Oldham has seen more than its fair share of changes, and more than its fair share of taking the burden of modernisation and austerity. It has seen every single one of its day care centres and every single one of its council-run youth centres closed. It has seen thousands of staff sacked from the local authority. It has seen its police stations in Chadderton, Royton and Hollinwood closed; it has seen every single custody cell in a town of 250,000 people closed. It has seen the magistrates court closed; it has seen the county court closed. It has seen the taxpayer-supported Royal Bank of Scotland close every single branch in a community of 250,000 people, and when RBS decided to close its high street bank, what did it say? It said, "Part of our consideration is how close our existing branch network is to the post office network, because that will provide an alternative banking function for the local community."

In these types of consultations, the organisation contacts the MP for the constituency where the branch is based. Ironically, however, Ward Street, where Oldham post office and the Royal Bank of Scotland sit, is on the boundary between Oldham West and Oldham East. My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) was contacted and consulted about the closure of the Royal Bank of Scotland branch, and I was consulted about the closure of the post office across the road, but never the two shall meet. There was no consideration of the impact that the Royal Bank of Scotland closing would have on the post office, and the Post Office gave no consideration to the impact on the high street and local community of the closure and relocation that it was proposing. That post office has just undergone a significant modernisation programme, with far more self-service facilities to free up staff time and so provide for a wide range of services that will not be transferred to the WHSmith branch in Oldham's Spindles shopping centre. That is important—the branch

is heavily used. We have not been given the exact usage numbers, but the Post Office admits that the Oldham branch is one of the largest and most heavily used branches in the north-west. That branch is extremely valued by the community.

Critically, the branch is located on one of our main streets, where buses drop people off. There are 62 drop-offs every hour on that road outside the post office. Interestingly, just beyond it is one of the steepest inclines in Oldham, which is quite a steep town anyway—anyone who has been there knows that it is a big hill with a town plonked on the top of it. That is the steepest incline down to the shopping centre, so to get from the string of bus stops to the shopping centre where WHSmith is located, elderly people and those with limited mobility will have to go down one of the steepest inclines in Oldham. At the moment, they can park in the loading bay, or on the yellow lines if they have a blue badge, and pop straight in without any problem. They cannot do that in the shopping centre: a blue-badge holder visiting Oldham shopping centre pays the full price, the same as every other car park user. Straightaway, people who rely on transport and their blue badge to use a post office will be hit with a charge that they currently do not have to pay, just for using that essential facility.

Oldham has a far wider range of services than neighbouring Rochdale town centre, where the beautiful, stunning Crown post office was closed with the promise that one would reopen in future. We are now years on and the replacement has not followed. In Ashton-under-Lyne next door, the Crown post office, in a beautiful Victorian building, was closed and then relocated to WHSmith in the shopping centre. Many of the services provided in Oldham are not provided in our neighbouring towns, so Oldham provides services for nearly 700,000 residents who need, for instance, to use a biometric enrolment service. If a non-EU national needs a residence permit or a permit to work, they have to go and use the biometric enrolment service there. If they do not use the current post office facilities—I understand the contract has been let out elsewhere—the nearest venue to go to from Oldham is Sheffield. How does that make sense when we are just about—potentially; who knows?—to leave the European Union and we do not know what immigration arrangements will be in place and what permits might be needed in future.

The idea of downgrading and changing the service is an absolute nonsense. Even now, particularly in Oldham, where we have a large Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Indian community, a very heavily used service will be taken away from local people and will be transferred.

What about the Care Quality Commission ID services? If someone working in the health and social care industry needs their ID checked to make sure that they are fit to work, they have to go to the post office to get it checked. If that service is not transferred from Oldham into WHSmith, people will have to go to Gorton or to Harpurhey, and there is not a single direct bus route to either of those places.

What about CRB checks if someone wants to work with young people? Teachers and youth workers have to get their ID checked. The service is currently provided in Oldham's Crown post office, but is not provided in neighbouring Rochdale or Ashton town centres. The idea of downgrading those services for such a large body of the population is an absolute nonsense that

shows the lack of co-ordination across Government. Has any consultation taken place with a Home Office Minister on the contractual change for the biometric enrolment service? Has any conversation taken place with the Department of Health and Social Care on the changes to the CQC ID services and the CRB check services if they are not transferred to WHSmith? Financial services, ID checking and current and credit card accounts are currently provided in Oldham, but not in neighbouring Rochdale or Ashton town centre, but they have the potential to be lost during the move, too.

We hit the ground running with the campaign in Oldham and started an online petition. Between our street petition that started in December and the online petition, we have about 2,500 signatures of local people. The hallmark of every one of the conversations that took place concerns how baffled people are that the move is even being proposed. People have been told that all the closures and the downgrading of the high street is because of austerity. They have been told how difficult it is for retail and how everyone needs to take their fair share of austerity and that is why they are losing all these other public services. People have been told that and for quite a long time they accepted that that is just the way it is—times are very difficult and that is the impact. Not a single person can explain why the move makes sense. It makes no sense to the community and the people who use the post office. It makes no sense for the high street to lose a vital anchor to support that part of the town centre and our Market Hall and the traders who operate there.

What about the fabric of our community? We have heard many fantastic contributions about the social role that a post office plays apart from the commercial transactions that are provided. When we hear people defending the modernisation programme—I use “modernisation” loosely—they say, “Things have to change. Things will never stay the way they are. You have to keep up with a changing world.” The post office modernisation programme is a good example of how it has tried to keep up with demand. The number of branches in the 1980s was 22,000. It is now down to 11,000, so we have lost half the network over the past 30 years. That is modernisation—if you like closing stuff—but it has taken on a far wider range of services, trying to be more commercial and trying to attract footfall in its premises. By and large, it has done a reasonable job and the community has benefited.

The Crown post offices have shouldered the burden. When we look at the closures across all the post offices, agency post offices are down by 9%, but Crown post offices are down by 29%. We have lost a third of our Crown post office network as a result of successive closures, but still the public pay into the post office network as a vital public facility. What is the deal? There was no public payback with the Royal Bank of Scotland. Taxpayers bailed out the bankers, and what thanks did they get? They walked away from every one of our towns, cities and high streets. What is the payback for the taxpayer with the post office network? What is the community dividend for the investment that we collectively make in essential public services? It cannot be a repeat of the Royal Bank of Scotland’s “to hell with the community, turn your back on the community”, simply because the Minister would not take responsibility and says, “This is just all commercial.” Such decisions

are not commercial when generations of facilities that have been built up to provide that infrastructure in our community will be gone and can never be replaced.

Finally, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) on securing this debate. She has seen the passion in the room today. I also congratulate the CWU trade union for the work that it does in leading the charge against the changes. The Minister has an opportunity. She is a young new Minister looking to set out on her ministerial career and to make her mark. Let everything that we have learnt over the past two to two and a half years be a lesson for everybody. If we pursue stubbornly a narrow direction that does not have support, ignoring what those with concerns say, we will end up in a cul-de-sac and people will be marked by that. I do not believe the Minister wants that mark on her reputation. I believe she wants a reputation as a Minister who understands that we are all here to represent our communities and to listen and to act on the legitimate concerns raised. Let that be her ministerial reputation and not one of stubbornness and closed-mindedness.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Graham Brady (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I will explain that we have just over half an hour before the wind-up speeches need to begin. Three Back-Bench Members are seeking to catch my eye. I would rather avoid imposing a time limit, but if the three can consider each other we will avoid it.

3.17 pm

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) for securing this timely and much needed debate. Much has already been said about the damage that the downgrading of post offices can do, and I want to provide examples of what has happened in my constituency. Over the past few years, both before and since my election, Lewisham West and Penge has seen three post offices downgraded and franchised out in locations in Forest Hill, Sydenham and Beckenham. Two are Crown branches. The Forest Hill post office now operates out of a WHSmith shop, occupying some of the upper floor. Although it is serviced by a lift, it is cramped, the queue is frequently lengthy, and it is potentially an unfit environment for more vulnerable people. We must remember that vulnerable people are more likely to require the services offered by a fully equipped post office, including the elderly, those who might not have access to the internet and those who have difficulty in understanding, speaking or reading English and require a face-to-face service.

In Beckenham, the Crown branch property has been sold off and the service desks moved out of my constituency and up the high street to a WHSmith store. We have heard numerous examples of why WHSmith stores are not fit for purpose as post offices. Some of the services that used to be run in the Beckenham post office are now located in a convenience store, which has the post office that I now have to use, whereas I used to go to the Crown one. I do not want to do a disservice to the very nice chap that runs the post office there, but it is simply not an appropriate location for a post office. It is a convenience shop and space is limited, and it has only one counter. The queue often trails around the whole shop because demand is high, and the one counter

[*Ellie Reeves*]

simply cannot keep pace with the people who want to use the services. For a wheelchair user, or someone like me who often has a pushchair with them or a small child in tow, it is neither an efficient nor a convenient experience. The queue snakes between shelves full of alcohol on one side and the freezer on the other. I have lost count of the number of times when I have been there with my three-year-old and have had to tell him no, he can have neither wine nor ice cream while I am trying to send a parcel.

Joking aside, it is a real issue. The Crown post office in Sydenham has just been franchised out. It is and has always been a hub of our community and I remember using that post office when I was a young girl to get my passport and pay into my national savings account. It has saddened us in Sydenham that the franchise has been awarded to a stationery company, ZCO Ltd, with no good track record of running post offices. We are all incredibly worried. The Crown post office in Sydenham provided biometric services, which a number of my constituents had to use. Now they are being told they have to travel five miles to Brixton to get access to the services. It might not sound far to travel on public transport in London, but let us think for a moment: often it is vulnerable people who need those services. Sometimes they do not have recourse to public funds. Affording the bus fares to and from Brixton is not a very practical solution. With each and every downgrade, initial assurances are offered that services will remain unchanged and facilities will be kept on a par, yet whenever branches in Lewisham West and Penge have been downgraded, the assurances given upon franchising have quickly unravelled, leaving my constituents with a sub-par postal service experience.

As a former employment rights lawyer, I have deep concerns about the employment of staff members at franchised-out branches. When I have written to the Post Office seeking assurances, at the outset, they have always been given, but what is the reality? Some protections exist under TUPE but the CWU found that, in 2014-15, only 10 out of 400 staff from Crown post office branches that were closed were TUPE-ed over to the new retailer. In 2016, the figure was six out of 200—3% of staff. Those are shocking figures. Not only is that bad for jobs and workers' employment; it is bad for customers' experience. People employed by the Post Office service are highly skilled and trained staff, and they are used to the face-to-face interactions that the job requires. When such high-quality trained permanent staff are lost, services inevitably decline.

We should think about the effect that post office closures and downgrades have in the high street. When we ran the campaign to save the Sydenham Crown post office, local businesses said they desperately wanted to keep it because it would mean footfall on the high street. People who went to the post office would shop in local, usually very small, independent retailers. There is now a lot of worry locally about the effect on the high street of the downgrade. Crown post offices provide stability to high streets. A lot can be said about the transition to online commerce, but one step that the Government can and should take to protect high streets is to stop franchising out our post offices. It is not the only solution, but allowing those vital services to continue

on the high street, serving our communities and constituents, is surely in everyone's interest. The downgrades and closures, and the franchising out, need to stop now.

3.24 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham, in such an important debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) on securing the debate. I pay tribute to the Communication Workers Union for its tireless work on this issue. Having served as a union representative with the CWU, I have witnessed the dedication of the union and its members in fighting against Crown post office closures. I have been with Royal Mail for 28 years, so I know that post offices are central to daily life in our constituencies. They serve as the hubs for towns and villages, and are the very lifeline of rural communities. It is not just that they serve the public; they have their complete confidence and trust. Post offices are trusted to deliver, receive and collect goods in letters or parcels daily. The public know that they are staffed by dedicated postal staff who are proud to work in the Post Office network and who not only have local knowledge and contacts but are firmly rooted in the communities that they serve.

Postal workers have good jobs that they are proud to do, with terms and conditions second to none, secured through agreement between the CWU and Post Office management. The principle of the Post Office is that it is a business that serves people's needs, not one that pursues profit. That is the reason why it has dedicated staff who are always willing to go the extra mile, who treat their customers' goods as if they were their own, who always provide extra help and support to vulnerable customers, displaying patience and willingness to help customers in need, who will help and guide customers when a form needs to be filled in, who take the time to speak to their customers, and who use their local knowledge and contacts to contribute to daily community life. It is that sheer dedication to the customers that has made our post offices so cherished by the public.

The Post Office is not a new business. It has lasted over 500 years. Postal workers have been proud to wear the uniform and are proud of the Post Office's history. I remember when the Royal Mail was one big network, dedicated to serving the public good, with postal workers united in purpose to support customers—as they still do. We never missed a single letterbox. We delivered six out of seven days a week. We were out in all weathers, come rain or shine. We dealt with the public's goods across the UK, from Land's End to John O'Groats. We worked day and night to collect, transport, separate and deliver goods within a 24-hour turnaround. For 21 years, I fought successive Governments to stop the sale of Royal Mail, but eventually a Tory-Lib Dem coalition was successful in selling it off. I said then—and say it today—that Royal Mail was not for sale.

Despite the sale of Royal Mail, Post Office Ltd was kept in public hands, but post office closures soon followed, and some post offices began to be moved into the private sector. Along with redundancies, there were attacks on terms and conditions by the new management. Good people, who were dedicated to and passionate about their work, were treated as just a number—and that number was the amount it would cost to make them redundant. A choice was put before them of accepting a redundancy package or continuing in their

job with worse terms and conditions than they had enjoyed. Let me be frank: that is theft. They steal our jobs and our terms and conditions, all of which we won through the collective efforts of our unions and their members.

We were told that some closures were necessary—that some were carried out to protect other post offices and that no further closures would occur. Each time, those promises to the workers and the communities that rely upon post offices were broken. We now face the prospect of the Government giving away more public money to help to sell off a further 74 Crown post offices, severing the connection between the post office and the community and leading to the loss of more dedicated staff. It is another blow to Britain's high streets. That public money is being awarded to WHSmith, a company that holds the hotly contested *Which?* award of being voted worst retailer by consumers. It offers low pay for its staff, poor terms and conditions, and service standards lower than those expected in our post offices. This race to the bottom will simply lead to a decline in the service that the public receive and a decline in standards, which will tarnish the proud history of the post office network and its dedicated staff.

I will do all I can—I know the CWU will do likewise—to fight the planned sell-off of our post offices. From the support shown in this debate by the Labour party, we can say that we will be doing all we can, unlike the Tory party, given the empty seats on the Government Benches. Not one Government Back Bencher has turned up to try to defend themselves. The battle to protect our vital post offices is one that must be fought and, more importantly, it can be won. I pay tribute to Liam Murphy, a CWU rep. I stood alongside him, Glasgow and District Amal postal workers and Carole and David Bowmaker, who are good, hard-working union reps. We fought twice, and we won. East Kilbride still stands today as a Crown post office. If the battle comes again, I will stand with the same people, standing up for that local community. I also pay tribute to the CWU national officer, Andy Furey, who is here today. He has dedicated his life to fighting these battles. He has been all around Britain talking to the people now sitting at home, wondering, “What happened to that good job I had?”

This Government meddle, meddle, meddle. It is their job to meddle, but I ask them to stop the closure and sale of post offices, work with the CWU, listen to local communities and invest in our Crown post offices, protect the high-quality service that the public deserve and expect, and provide some long-overdue job security to the dedicated staff.

3.31 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham.

Liz McInnes: Follow that.

Andy Slaughter: I will, but in my own manner and style. *[Interruption.]* Do not worry, there is no risk of passion. It is good to see you in the Chair, Sir Graham. We have not quite had 48 Members talking about posting letters today, but I hope you feel at home nevertheless. Labour Members are much less fractious, which is helpful.

We have had such a high turnout because of the excellent timeliness of the debate. We have had a good debate, and that is thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), who always captures the zeitgeist.

As a former Hammersmith Broadway councillor, she will know how much we have grievously suffered in Hammersmith and Fulham from the depletion of the post office network. Indeed, the Crown post office in her ex-ward moved some years ago and was franchised into WHSmith. In the past few weeks and months, I have had complaints about the service operating there.

One by one, we have lost every Crown post office through closure or through their being stuffed into a WHSmith branch. Last year, we had one left, which was the Shepherds Bush post office on Shepherds Bush Green. It is a good site and a dedicated building, and it is quite famous, because one of its frequent customers was the comedian Richard Herring. When he had his *Metro* column, he used to write about the Shepherds Bush post office and the more eccentric members of the constituency who he used to meet on his almost daily travels there. It was a good, friendly place, and it had wonderful staff with long service there. It was a busy branch, made more so by the fact, as is often the case in town centres nowadays, that banks were closing branches and referring people to the post office. We thought it was good.

Last year, we were told that the post office had to move because the lease was up on the building and the landlord was redeveloping. Reluctantly, we accepted that. I spent a long time helping to look for another site in the town centre. I spoke to the local shopping centre and we tried to provide something else, but talking to the Post Office is like banging one's head against a brick wall, because the only deal in town is WHSmith. I do not know what the commercial terms are, but I suspect that the Post Office gets the space for free, or something like that, because WHSmith is so desperate to increase footfall in its pretty lousy shops. The Post Office is made an offer it cannot refuse on those terms. That is what happened.

The post office closed and moved a five or 10-minute walk away, depending on mobility, to the Westfield shopping centre. As we have heard, the office is hidden away in the back of a WHSmith with no natural daylight. Because it is the largest shopping centre in Europe and has a good footfall, the office has survived and kept its busyness and activity, but with a completely different clientele. I am glad to see that we have the support of the National Pensioners Convention and many disability rights groups in pointing out that it is not just about the facilities in the post office, but about the accessibility. Most of the elderly and local people who used to use that post office now go to sub-post offices half a mile or a mile away because they are more accessible than where the Crown post office has moved to. None the less, things continued.

The one thing we were told was that, despite the disruption and despite moving to a less favourable and less convenient location, the branch would remain a Crown post office. In all the meetings I had with the Post Office—this was only a year ago—it said that the branch would be a Crown post office with all the advantages of that. Guess what? When the wholesale franchising and closure programme was announced last year, we found out that, no, the branch would become franchised and part of the WHSmith network.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) and many others, I pay tribute to the CWU, which has run an effective

[*Andy Slaughter*]

campaign drawing attention to the issue. The Post Office thought it could get away with it because the public would not notice a change in ownership. The changes were not necessarily, as was the case with Shepherds Bush, about moving the facility, so the Post Office thought there would be no apparent change. The CWU has done an excellent job in drawing attention to the matter, because the implications are severe.

To take the example of Shepherds Bush, the manager will leave and retire after more than 20 years' service. She has been excellent. Half the staff are similarly going to take the settlements on offer and go. The others all want to move elsewhere in the post office network, to those few Crown post offices and other services that remain open. Not one wants to join WHSmith, even though some of the staff at Shepherds Bush have already moved there from other Crown post offices closed in the recent past, including the Acton post office in the seat of my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq).

Why do people not want to work for WHSmith? It is not too difficult to work out. When I looked at the new rosters, sometimes less than half the number of staff will be on duty. I was there just before Christmas, and it is a busy office with queues, yet WHSmith thinks that where five staff are on at the moment, it can manage with two in future. That is bad for the customers and for staff, too. The terms and conditions are appalling in terms of pensions, holiday and pay. People will be on the minimum wage and could be on half the pay they would have earned as an experienced postal worker working for the Post Office. I am sure that many of the staff at WHSmith try to do a very good job, but as an employer it is appalling. Anyone who does not believe me should follow the Twitter account, @WHS_Carpet, which is a rather tongue-in-cheek look at the extraordinary way in which that business conducts itself. We do not know whether it will have a future. What a risk to take, putting post offices into those stores.

I am afraid that Post Office Ltd has shown a contempt for very loyal staff, who have often stayed with it over many years. It has also shown an attitude of defeatism. Where is the leadership? Where is the confidence in the services that it provides? There is none. It is all about cutting back.

That comes on top of a number of other initiatives that have depleted the network. I know that we are not talking about sub-post offices today, but within the last two to three years I have also had three sub-post offices—two of which were the nearest ones to Shepherd's Bush Green—close “temporarily”. I think one has been temporarily closed for more than three years now, on the basis that we cannot find anywhere for it to go.

Overall, the service that is available is becoming worse, and for those who rely on it, which is still many people, there are longer distances to travel and longer queues to stand in. I would like to know from the Minister what the justification is for paying out quite large sums from the public purse to try to induce members of staff to retire, move on or take redundancy at this point. Presumably that only helps WHSmith, because it does not have to inherit those staff under TUPE conditions.

I would like to know what happens to all the equipment in the post offices. Very expensive and often quite new equipment has been fitted there. Is that simply handed

over to WHSmith, or are payments made? I would like to know why senior managers in Post Office Ltd have received 7%—in some cases 9%—pay rises this year, given what they are presiding over. The staff have received less than 3%.

I feel that I have been misled over what has happened in relation to the post office network in my constituency. I also think that the Communication Workers Union and the staff have been misled, because they have worked in good faith over many years to try to ensure that the business is profitable. That has meant, in some cases, reducing staffing—by agreement and in the proper way, through collective bargaining—in a joint effort and in the belief that the management were sincere in their efforts to ensure that this viable Crown network would survive. All they have actually achieved is to do the dirty work of the Post Office, which now has fewer staff that it has to pass over to WHSmith. That makes it easier to do, but even so, it is relying on money.

There has not been a proper public consultation. I was struck by the comment from Post Office Ltd to the all-party parliamentary group that this is

“a commercial decision for us, not them”,

“them” being the public. This is a matter of great concern to the public, and it has not been given proper consultation or publicity.

I end by asking the Minister to consider, even at this late stage, a moratorium on the closures and changes. Please can we look again at the network, and have a proper review of services before we proceed in this way? Otherwise we will stumble through this and be back here again in six months to a year facing more closures of Crown post offices, until the network does not exist at all. It is part of our heritage, and part of something that we can be very proud of in this country. It still provides an excellent public service where it operates, and we are letting down not only the organisation's staff, but all the customers who rely on post offices across mine and each one of our constituencies.

3.43 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I thank the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) for securing the debate and for her very informative introduction, and all those who have contributed for the very consensual nature of the debate. Some 15 Members have spoken so far, which says something about the strength of feeling in the House.

As we have heard, Crown post offices are large post offices that are directly managed by Post Office Ltd and account for about 2% of post offices. I am grateful for the Communication Workers Union briefing, which is very informative. It highlights how, despite that small share of the overall network, Crown post offices have historically brought in between 10% and 20% of the Post Office's overall revenue—a point that several Members have made, and which is well worth emphasising.

There are no Crown post offices in my constituency—unsurprisingly, given how few are left across the country as a whole. Having said that, it is fair to point out that Linlithgow and East Falkirk gained two post offices between 2011 and 2018, increasing their number from 18 to 20. However, that figure includes hosted outreach venues. As we have heard, a variety of services are offered at different ones, which adds to the confusion of the public when such events happen.

On 11 October last year, the Post Office announced an agreement with WHSmith that would see up to 41 further Crown branches relocated within WHSmith stores this year, and WHSmith take over the running of 33 Crown post offices already hosted in its stores. The decision to turn 74 Crown post offices into franchises in those stores is alarming for a number of reasons; Members have rehearsed them well, and I do not need to go into all the technicolour detail again. However, reports that the franchising is being done without consultation with existing local post offices are particularly alarming. That means that competition risks destabilising the existing network even further. There must be more consultation and strategic consideration on franchising. It is alarming to hear that in some cases franchised WHSmith outlets are opening within five minutes of existing post offices, and without any advance notice having been given to existing postmasters.

We know that the Post Office's director of sales and trade marketing has stated that there is no contingency plan in the event of WHSmith collapsing, even though it has, as has been pointed out, experienced 14 consecutive years of sales decline. Although we would not wish that to happen to any business, the reality of our modern high streets is that businesses are folding on a regular basis, so a contingency is, in my opinion, required. That is before we consider the fact that WHSmith was voted the worst high street retailer by *Which?* consumers in 2018, having been ranked in the bottom two over the previous eight years. That raises a serious question about the quality of service on offer from that franchisee.

We must ensure that further franchising happens only after consultation with local businesses. It is essential that our post office network remains robust for communities and businesses across the entire country. Given the mismanagement, the UK Government cannot have that as a priority. Post offices play an important role for our rural businesses and are part of the fabric of our communities. I will not pretend that my constituency is particularly rural, but it has many rural aspects; it is a mixture of small towns and villages between the major cities. Increasingly, as banks have gradually withdrawn from many of our local high streets, post offices have become a last-stop banking facility for many people.

Post offices provide an important part of national infrastructure, particularly as parcel delivery has been growing with the rise of e-commerce, which allows us to have many more businesses throughout our communities. Small businesses, especially rural ones, contribute more than £200 billion to the UK economy. They rely on post offices, with an estimated 80% likely to lose money if rural post offices close. More than 2 million small businesses—62% of all small businesses—use post offices at least once a month, and in rural areas, they are vital, with 36% of rural businesses using post offices at least weekly.

Due to issues including the new postmasters' contract, Crown post offices are closing more and more regularly. The UK Government must ensure that the post office network remains able to cover all areas of the country, especially rural ones. More than 1,500 of the 11,547 post offices in the UK were temporary as of March 2018. That is 426 more than in 2014, according to post office data collected by the House of Commons Library.

Marion Fellows: The question of post offices temporarily closing is really down to the fact that Post Office Ltd cannot contract new sub-postmasters to run them. That is not to the benefit of my constituents in Wishaw, who lost their post office for almost four weeks last summer.

Martyn Day: I thank my hon. Friend for making an excellent point. I hope that the Minister is listening.

The Scottish National party supports a strong network of post office branches, which are the backbone of local communities and businesses. Many post offices are offering a greater range of services, including paying in money, after many local bank branches have closed. Some 537,000 businesses are registered in rural areas, accounting for one in four of all companies. They are very creative—almost half are considered to be innovators—and they contribute, as I pointed out, more than £200 billion to our economy. Small rural businesses are more likely to use post offices for deliveries and paying bills, and twice as likely to use them for withdrawing or depositing cash. Citizens Advice found that eight in 10 small businesses in remote rural areas would lose money if local post offices were closed. That should be a salutary economic warning to us.

The UK Government's disastrous privatisation of Royal Mail and recent mishandling of post office management show that they cannot be trusted with our public services. The current contracts make it harder for sub-postmasters to afford to keep going, as my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) pointed out. At the same time, Post Office Ltd recorded net profits of £35 million in 2017-18, up from £13 million in 2016-17. As hon. Members have pointed out, its chief executive Paula Vennells got a 7% pay rise last year, while postmasters took an average pay cut of 4.5% and 11,500 Post Office workers received a combined £17 million pay cut. I ask the Minister to take urgent action to review the contract for sub-postmasters that was introduced in 2012.

My final point is about the effect on footfall on the high street. Closing a post office and moving its services to a franchisee will not increase the franchisee's footfall, since many of the customers were already using the high street; it simply reduces the footfall travelling across the high street and has a detrimental impact on other businesses. What we actually need is to ensure throughput on the high street. If a post office closes and is moved out of a town centre location, that can be even more detrimental to the local community.

There are many concerns about the proposal and its effect on customers, staff and local communities. At the end of the day, we must remember that the Post Office is wholly owned by the Government. I implore the Minister to step in and halt the process.

3.51 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Sir Graham. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) on securing this debate and delivering an impressive and eloquent speech. Passions have risen high today, which illustrates the value of the post office network to hon. Members present and to people in the community, so it is hugely disappointing to see the empty seats on the Conservative Benches.

[Gill Furniss]

Post offices are a vital community asset that serve as an anchor for individuals and local businesses, as many hon. Members have highlighted. Citizens Advice surveys have shown that half of Britons say that a post office branch is the most important service in their local community. In rural areas, the importance is even greater: one rural resident in five says that without their local post office they would lose contact with friends or neighbours. Post offices are hubs rooted in community and history, and they have innovated: services have grown and now cover some Government services, while postmasters have been innovative in providing new products to accommodate the rise of online shopping.

At the same time, it is not a revelation that our high streets are struggling. In October, the Chancellor took a “too little, too late” approach to the crisis, showing the Government’s lack of commitment to our town centres. Although they shirk responsibility for the collapse of our high streets, the Government are too eager to discount their own role in overseeing the managed decline of a long-established and vital part of our high street: our post offices.

Our debate today has focused on Crown post offices, the large flagship post offices that are in prominent high street locations and are directly owned and managed by Post Office Ltd. Over the past five years, the Post Office, which is entirely owned by the Government, has announced the closure of 150 Crown post offices—40% of its 2013 Crown post office network. The closure and franchise programme has come in three waves, and the latest announcement in October 2018 stated that a further 74 Crown post offices were being closed, with an estimated 700 jobs at risk.

There is a strength of feeling about the closures across all parts of the country. I anticipate that the Minister will argue that this is not a privatisation process, but franchising is by definition a model part of privatisation. This Government drove the disastrous privatisation of our Royal Mail, many of the consequences of which we are seeing today, with private shareholders creaming off millions in dividends while services are on the decline. I am afraid that the franchising programme appears to be an incremental step in the same direction, privatising our Post Office one Crown at a time.

The impact of the closure and franchise programme is significant for the public purse, for the accessibility, quality and breadth of the service provided to the public, and for the sustainability of the network. Our high streets face a crisis and it is being compounded by the Government-managed decline of the Post Office. As I wrote in a recent article:

“The Government may continue to peddle the myth that it has no agency over our high streets—the truth is they are willingly letting a proud institution and the public down.”

They are letting the Post Office fall by the wayside in an appalling act of negligence.

Plucking post offices out of the heart of business hubs, as the closure of local Crowns does, is bad for local business and bad for the Post Office. It exacerbates financial exclusion in deprived areas, where—in the light of the significant bank closures in recent years—local people may have no access to financial services. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) has been vocal about the proposed relocation

of her local Crown away from the town centre and into an area that has seen a 15% decline in footfall over two years. It is an economic fallacy to suggest that shifting a post office to a quieter part of town, away from the economic activity, will be in any way helpful to the long-term sustainability of the network.

Indeed, in allowing the transfer of counters into WHSmith, the Government risk the viability and sustainability of communities’ access to post offices. It has been suggested that WHSmith is shifting its priorities away from the high street, as highlighted by its acquisition of InMotion, a US company known for airport services. That is worrying and raises serious questions about the retailer’s long-term viability and its desire to be on the high street. As my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) told us, there has recently been a 3% decline in profits. It is therefore surprising not only that Post Office is choosing to partner with WHSmith in this way, but that when pressed during a meeting of the all-party group on post offices, Post Office representatives provided no reassurance about any contingency plans that they may have prepared for the event of a collapse.

My hon. Friends the Members for Hove (Peter Kyle), and for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) spoke eloquently about the lack of meaningful consultation in their constituencies. Indeed, during the all-party group meeting, we learned that decisions on closures had already been made and that the consultation process was merely asking for little bits of information about whether people thought they had disability access—someone in the senior management actually said that. I challenged him, saying that the consultations should be asking the public about the closures, and that responsibility for disability access should lie with the management of the post office in question.

Rachael Maskell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the issue of access, because clearly many disabled people use post offices. Does she agree that if the proposal will mean less access to post offices, it should surely be stopped?

Gill Furniss: I very much agree, and I will go into that point in more detail later.

Post Office management claim that they will have six months’ notice if a retailer that hosts a Post Office counter collapses, but in reality a collapse could be immediate and would risk the total closure of the counter. It seems reasonable that contingency planning should be done to prepare for all eventualities. Has the Minister had any discussions with the Post Office about the matter? Can she assure us that she is aware of reasonable contingency plans for any of those scenarios?

My hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) referred to the independent reports published by Consumer Focus in 2012 and by Citizens Advice in 2016, which looked at the impact of closing and franchising former Crown post offices and locating them in WHSmith branches. They concluded that it has led to an increase in queuing and service times, a deterioration in customer service and advice, poor disabled access, and a reduction in the number of counter positions. As hon. Friends have pointed out, the retailer has been voted as providing some of the worst customer service in the UK—surely not a ringing endorsement.

The impact of these changes on local communities is significant, and vulnerable people, the disabled and the old suffer the most. The general secretary of the National Pensioners Convention, Jan Shortt, has said:

“Older people are some of the biggest users of the Post Office, and many rely on being able to talk to expert staff, but the move to franchise services to WHSmith is going to be bad for customers...pensioners will find some of the offices are no longer easily accessible or particularly private. This will become a second class service if we don't stop these plans immediately.”

Similarly, the chief executive of the deaf and disabled rights charity, Inclusion London, and representative of the UK-wide Reclaiming Our Futures Alliance of disabled people and their organisations, Tracey Lazard, said:

“Replacing accessible Post Office premises with a post office counter squeezed into the back of a WHSmith store can leave Disabled people at a significant disadvantage, particularly people with a mobility impairment. Post Office Ltd should be taking action to maximise the accessibility of its premises and services rather than taking this retrograde step that cannot be justified and will instead further Disabled people's exclusion.”

Liz McInnes: Given that Crown post offices are Government property, and that Post Office Ltd is proposing a change that may well be detrimental to disabled people, does my hon. Friend agree that it is absolutely incumbent on it to carry out an equality impact assessment?

Gill Furniss: I completely agree. I am sure we will be asking the Minister whether she will address that, as it would seem that it is completely irresponsible of Post Office Ltd not to do so. It should be at the heart of any consultation with the public and the organisations I have referred to, which represent many of those people.

Despite fierce local opposition to the closures and the franchising programme, the Post Office has not undertaken serious and meaningful consultation and has been clear the closures will go ahead. At the meeting of the all-party parliamentary group for post offices in October, when asked that the consultation process consider the range of views on the matter, senior Post Office representatives were forced to admit that the decisions about the closures had been made, and that the consultation would merely be an exchange of information and a look at further details. Given the Post Office's public mandate and the fierce opposition to the closures, that is astonishing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) highlighted the particular impact that the closures will have on disabled constituents in our communities. There is also the impact on financial inclusion, as well as on the many other services, including the very important biometrics and essential Home Office information and documents that are issued in post offices. In the end, despite huge public opposition, a large amount of public funds have been used, with significant job losses and significant closures.

The Minister will no doubt repeat what she has said before about not having overview of Post Office structures and processes, referring to the fact that these are commercial decisions for the Post Office. However, I refer her to a petition that the current Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), presented in March 2008. My hon. Friend the Member for Wigan cited it earlier, and it is worth mentioning again. That petition urged the Government to “instruct” the Post Office to halt the closure of the post office in Maidenhead and

“to listen to the views of local people in respect of their objection to the closure of this vital part of the local community.”—[*Official Report*, 6 March 2008; Vol. 472, c. 142P.]

Perhaps the Minister could take a lead from the Prime Minister under whom she serves, call in Post Office management and instruct them to halt the closures. Instead of investing in our post offices, maintaining expert staff and broadening the services available, the Post Office under this Government is going backwards.

I applaud the Communication Workers Union for its campaign, Save our Post Office, and its championing and protecting of workers' pay and conditions of service. At the same time as post offices are closing, sub-postmasters are seeing a decline in remuneration. Many have written telling me they are just about breaking even but earning less than minimum wage, and services are declining. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) gave worrying examples of this trend of many sub-postmasters losing their livelihood and acquiring significant debt. I have had correspondence from a sub-postmistress who told me that she is likely to lose her home because the figures she was given when taking on that sub-post office have never been realised.

How is the Minister scrutinising the Post Office's strategy and what it means for the service? Will she outline what consultation there will be to ensure the strategy brings in relevant stakeholders and the public in a proper wide-ranging consultation? I am quite astounded that the Minister did not once come to the House so that parliamentarians could have the opportunity to scrutinise these decisions and what they mean for our constituents.

The Labour party has been clear. We want to grow the service, end the closures of our Crown post offices, maintain good pay and conditions for staff and innovate into the future, because we believe in our public institutions and what they mean to the public. At last year's election, we pledged to create a commission to look into setting up a post bank, which would be an important step forward in financial inclusion and would also provide important income streams to maintain, sustain and grow post office services more widely.

I am pleased we have had the opportunity to debate this important matter today. I urge the Minister to recognise the strength of feeling expressed in today's debate and reconsider her position. I urge her to take a more considered approach with the Post Office—a publicly funded institution—first, by halting the closures and, secondly, by holding Post Office Ltd to account for the decisions it is making that are having a negative impact on our constituents.

4.6 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) on securing this important debate. Although I am one of only a few Tories in the room, I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. I recognise their passion as well as the importance that post offices represent to MPs.

As a constituency MP, I understand the valuable role of the post office for me and for my constituents. Post offices play a vital role at the heart of our communities and are an essential part of our villages, towns and

[*Kelly Tolhurst*]

cities, so the future direction of the Post Office is important not only to the Government, but to all our constituencies.

The festive season has just passed, when the dedication of Post Office staff across the country was shown. They come out in force to help our constituents and deliver the parcels and letters destined for our loved ones. I thank the Post Office and Royal Mail staff for the efforts they have put in over recent months. It is estimated that more than 60 million customers visited post office branches in the run-up to Christmas, and I want to mention one small rural post office in Herefordshire that opened its doors this year to host Christmas dinner for those who would otherwise have been alone. That highlights the social value of post offices, not only within our high streets, but beyond.

To repeat what I indicated in November's debate on post office franchising, this Government value and recognise the economic and social importance of post offices to people, communities and businesses across the UK. That is why we made a commitment in our manifesto to safeguard the post office network and support the provision of rural services.

Ian Murray: On the manifesto commitment to protect post offices, is it still Conservative party policy to make the post office the front office of Government?

Kelly Tolhurst: What is definitely Government policy is to make sure that we have a network of post offices that offer a wide range of services to our constituents, and that that is sustainable into the future. Franchising is not a closure programme. It is a way to secure better sustainability for the future of our post offices, and it is a good thing that Post Office is working with high street retailers to recognise that.

The performance of the Post Office over the past decade shows that the network is at its most stable in a generation. Between 2010 and 2018 we provided nearly £2 billion to maintain and invest in the national network of at least 11,500 post offices.

Jim McMahon: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive response so far, but it would be good to get confirmation that this will move on, because we cannot keep having these debates every few months. Does she realise that the outreach service counts each and every stop that a mobile post office makes as a branch? A single vehicle travelling to a village for half a day each week or every two weeks would class each stop as a branch, which is where the figure of 11,500 branches comes from.

Kelly Tolhurst: I recognise some of the concerns about mobile branches that the hon. Gentleman raises. I can assure him that I am moving on to it, and obviously I have had the opportunity to listen to hon. Members this afternoon. I am sure hon. Members will agree that we do not want to go back to the days when we saw over 7,000 post offices shut, as was unfortunately the case under the previous Labour Government.

The post offices meet and exceed all the Government's accessibility targets at the national level. Government investment in the network enabled the modernisation

of more than 7,500 branches, adding more than 200,000 opening hours per week and establishing the Post Office as the largest Sunday trading network.

The Post Office's agreement with high street banks enables personal and business banking in all branches, providing vital access to cash and banking services to consumers, businesses and local economies as bank branches continue to close. It is right to say that the agreement held with the Post Office and banks benefits our communities, which, as the Minister responsible I have made very clear to Post Office Ltd, to my colleagues in the Treasury and to the financial institutions that I have spoken to. The Post Office is providing a vital service to our constituents, and it should be remunerated for that—in doing so, hopefully that will ensure that our postmasters are also remunerated correctly for the service they provide to our constituents.

Gill Furniss: The Minister talks about banking services, and I would like to bring her back to a point made earlier. When post offices supply ATMs—clearly when banks close down, ATMs often just disappear from the high street or village—the rental is so much that they lose a significant amount of money. Does the Minister want to put that right in order to incentivise keeping ATMs in post offices so that they are available to all our communities?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to say the loss of banks and access to cash has been a concern for our constituents and high streets. To individual MPs who represent a constituency where they feel that their post office is in a position to add an ATM—it is not always possible—as the Government representative I will always feed in specific issues that relate to individual constituencies or branches where we can improve services. I put that offer out there. Give me the details and I will always follow it up.

Gill Furniss: The Minister has been given the details today—they will be in *Hansard*. Postmasters see that they are subsidising the ATM, which just seems wrong to me. I ask the Minister to go back and review that, and to look at finding some way that she can compensate sub-postmasters for that service.

Kelly Tolhurst: I have heard what the hon. Lady has said today, and I will go away and look it. Every post office operates differently throughout the country. There is not a standard rule for all branches, but I will continue to look at the issues that have been highlighted. I care as much about our post office network as any hon. Member does, and that is not just because I am the Minister in post.

The Post Office's financial performance has improved significantly, and consequently the Government funding required to sustain the network has drastically decreased and is set to decrease even further in upcoming years. It is the first time in 16 years that the Post Office has made a profit. There was a time back in the early 2000s when the Post Office had a deficit of more than £1 billion. Things have changed, and we are ensuring that we get value for money for the taxpayer while ensuring that we sustain the network.

Marion Fellows: The Minister is talking eloquently about the profits that the Post Office is making, but the people who run smaller post offices—the sub-postmasters

—tell me that they cannot live on the new contract. When they have to hand back keys to local post offices, does she think it is right that the Post Office is making profit at the expense of these hard-working individuals?

Kelly Tolhurst: I understand why the hon. Lady has raised concerns about sub-postmasters, and she is absolutely right to do so. Whoever has my role in Government—whichever colour of Government—has a duty to defend the Post Office but also to hold it to account. Since being in post I have challenged the Post Office and will continue to do so. Yes, it is commercially independent and operates within terms. We represent the taxpayer, who is the shareholder and owner of the post offices. It is right that we hold the Post Office to account for decisions and that we exert influence where we can.

Changing consumer behaviour has been a serious challenge for post office and small retailers, including many postmasters, which is why in the autumn Budget we made decisions on business rates to ensure that we helped not only some of our sub-postmasters, but small retail more generally.

There is widespread misunderstanding that franchising is a closure programme that will lead to redundancies and the deterioration of services for consumers, but that is not the case. I appreciate that proposed changes to the delivery of post office services can cause concern in some affected communities, but post office branches are not closing—they are being franchised either on site or by relocating them to other high street locations.

Franchising has been common practice since 1635, when King Charles I issued a proclamation allowing the public to use Royal Mail. The model has endured to this day, and the vast majority—11,300 of our 11,500 post offices—are run successfully as a franchise or on an agency basis with retailers, whether large or small. Delivering post office services as part of a wider retail offer is a proven model that brings benefits to the community.

The hon. Member for Wigan raised concerns about the post office in her constituency, which is included in the 40 that will be taken over by WHSmith. Subject to consultation, WHSmith will take over the running of Wigan's central post office. Let me be clear that the community in Wigan like other communities across the UK is not losing its post office. It will be relocated to a nearby WHSmith branch, and the services will be more accessible for customers.

Lisa Nandy: I am grateful to the Minister for trying to address some of our concerns, but the community is not being consulted on whether the post office is moved into WHSmith. A consultation is explicitly ruled out in the documents that I have been sent. Although she says that this is technically not a closure, to our community it is. The post office has stood on that site for 134 years. Some of the staff have worked there for decades and offer the sort of service that will not be possible in WHSmith. When she has finished winding up—I appreciate that she needs time to respond to our concerns—will she consider meeting with a group of us to talk this through and consider what we can do to address some of those very strong concerns, which are not being heard at the moment?

Kelly Tolhurst: It is right that Post Office Ltd is holding consultations. I apologise; the hon. Lady said earlier that she had been chucked out of the store and

that language of intimidation was used. That is quite an accusation to make, and I would recommend that, if that happens to any Member, they should make Ministers aware so we are able to—

Lisa Nandy: That is what I am trying to do.

Kelly Tolhurst: Absolutely, but that has not been done prior to today. We will take those things forward. I have met other Members about other issues in their constituencies.

It is right that the Post Office is commercially independent, because that enables us, as the major shareholder, to hold it to account at a ministerial level, and I am always happy to do that. I assure the hon. Lady that the proposed changes would add six hours a week to the Wigan branch's opening times. She is correct—this goes back to an earlier point—that the ATM will not transfer over to the new site, so I understand her concerns about her constituents relating to that service, which would change in that situation.

Jim McMahon: Post offices are not the same from one street to the next; branches provide very different services. If these are not closures but relocations, is the Minister saying that the services provided by the post offices today will be entirely transferred across to WHSmith, and that there will be no loss of service?

Kelly Tolhurst: The programme of franchising is moving Crown postal services. Our objective is to ensure that, when the post offices are moved, they deliver better services and that constituents have better access to them. Part of the franchising programme is about ensuring we have a post office network for today, which suits the modern retail environment and consumers' changing habits.

Rachael Maskell: Will the Minister follow up the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) and meet a group of us? I am seriously concerned about the reduced access—not necessarily to the building but to the high street in front of the post office—and the impact on my high street and the local economy. Will she meet us to discuss those detailed issues?

Kelly Tolhurst: As I have said—I thought I was quite clear—I am always willing to meet Members who have issues relating to post offices in their constituencies. I said that earlier. I reiterate that I will listen, hold Post Office Ltd to account and take those things forward. That does not necessarily mean that I will agree with some hon. Members' positions, and they will not always be achievable, but I will make Members' cases on their behalf.

The UK visa and immigration biometric enrolment services for the Home Office were available to a mix of 99 directly managed and WHSmith branches nationwide. However, as was mentioned earlier, the Home Office recently awarded that contract to Sopra Steria, which now runs the service in new locations. On the Post Office being in a position to deliver services for our constituents, I will always ensure that we work together to strengthen the services and add value to the services that the Post Office will deliver for the Government.

[*Kelly Tolhurst*]

WHSmith has been operating post offices since 2006 and has proven to be a reliable and dependable presence on the high street. There are some misplaced concerns about the Post Office's contingency plan should WHSmith go into administration. The latest financial results show that the company's high street businesses recorded their third-highest profit in more than 15 years despite the well-documented challenges on the UK high street. The Post Office is not complacent; it regularly meets with all franchisees to ensure they are delivering on the terms of their agreements. That is an ongoing process.

I am concerned that we are running out of time, Sir Graham, and I think the hon. Member for Wigan may want to wind up—or I can carry on. Post Office staff at franchise branches will have the opportunity to transfer to new franchises under TUPE employment protection, which means that they will benefit from the same terms. Alternatively, staff can leave with compensation, and there may be opportunities available elsewhere in the network. WHSmith's post offices are currently performing well, and I have every confidence that the recent deal will help to secure Post Office services on a sustainable, profitable basis in communities across our country.

I hear the concerns about the consultation process, and I have said that I will take them forward with the Post Office. As the Minister, I will not call on Post Office Ltd to stop the franchising process, but I will work with it to ensure that it delivers its business in the best way possible and benefits our communities.

We need a sustainable network. It is not correct that the Post Office owns all the Crown branches—the buildings are not all freehold and some are leasehold. It is right

that the taxpayer holds the Post Office to account and, as the Minister, I will do everything in my power to harness opportunities and to increase services in the post offices. There will be many opportunities and, as the high street changes—I am also the Minister with responsibility for the retail sector—I will continue to work with the Post Office to ensure that we are delivering for our communities and that we increase the services that post offices provide.

4.28 pm

Lisa Nandy: I thank all the many Members who have turned up today to show the strength of feeling that there is in every corner of this country.

I am grateful to the Minister for sitting through the debate, listening to our concerns and taking on board some of the issues relating to the consultation process, but I probably reflect the view of every Member who has spoken when I say that I am deeply disappointed that she has not agreed to suspend the process. There is a moment now—it will not come again—when we can choose to stop this thing that has failed us and our communities for so long, and to start to change course.

I am grateful to the Minister for agreeing to meet me and a group of my hon. Friends to discuss this matter further. I hope she will continue to reflect on it and that she will think again.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered franchising of Crown Post Offices and the effect on high streets and local communities.

4.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 10 January 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Outer Space Act: (Isle of Man)

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): The Government intend to extend, to the Isle of Man, the provision for a limit to be set on an operator's liability to indemnify the Government against claims brought for loss or damage arising from regulated space activity.

Under the Outer Space Act 1986 (the OSA), operators are required to indemnify the UK Government for any claims brought to the Government for damage or loss arising from activities regulated under the OSA.

Before 2015, this indemnity had no limit, meaning that operators were fully liable for any damages their activities caused. This unlimited liability was seen by industry as a commercial disadvantage and a provision was included in the Deregulation Act 2015 to amend the OSA, introducing a limit to the operator's indemnity.

Extending the provision for a limit to be set to the Isle of Man, would have the effect of creating a contingent liability for the UK Government for amounts above the indemnity limit in respect of licences issued under the OSA as extended to the Isle of Man by way of the Outer Space Act 1986 (Isle of Man) Order 1990.

The OSA was applied to the Isle of Man in 1990 and the Government of the Isle of Man has requested that the indemnity limit in the amended OSA is extended to them, so that operators based on the Isle of Man will not be at a disadvantage in comparison with their UK counterparts.

The Government have agreed to extend the indemnity limit to the Isle of Man on the basis that the current letters of agreement that are in place with the Government of the Isle of Man are to be updated and formally exchanged following Parliament's approval of this contingent liability. The updated letters will set out that the Isle of Man Government will meet any liability incurred as a result of Isle of Man space activity, above any indemnity limit set in a licence, that is not covered by insurance. However, the letters maintain the assurance that a request for any contribution from the Isle of Man Government will not be for a sum large enough to destabilise the Isle of Man economy.

When a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability in excess of £300,000 for which there is no specific statutory authority, it is required practice for the Minister concerned to present a departmental minute to Parliament giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances; and to refrain from incurring the liability until 14 parliamentary sitting days after the issue of the minute, except in cases of special urgency.

As a matter of record, I will be laying a departmental minute today.

[HCWS1242]

Energy Council: December 2018

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): The Energy Council took place on 19 December 2018. The UK was represented by the Deputy Permanent Representative to the EU, Katrina Williams.

Communication from the Commission: A Clean Planet for all

Miguel Arias Cañete, Commissioner for Climate Action and Energy, introduced the European Commission's Communication "Clean Planet for all: A European strategic long-term vision for a prosperous, modern, competitive and climate-neutral economy". It stressed the need to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions by mid-century, and that the EU was well placed to lead efforts to mitigate climate change.

All member states intervened, and all broadly supported the Commission's communication. A number supported the Commission's call for net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. The importance for businesses and citizens to inform the debate on reducing emissions and for the transition to be realistic was mentioned, as was the need for Europe to reduce its dependency on coal and invest in renewables. The importance of interconnection and the need to take account of energy security and competitiveness was raised. The importance of gas infrastructure was also mentioned.

In its intervention, the UK welcomed the communication and emphasised the urgency of addressing climate change. It pointed out that the UK Government had sought advice from the Committee on Climate Change on long-term targets. It also gave an overview of the action being taken to make the transition to a more flexible and smarter energy system.

Some member states considered nuclear energy to be an important option for decarbonisation, and called for technology neutrality. The UK said that it is important that member states are able to choose from all routes to decarbonisation.

Clean energy package

The presidency reported that it had reached agreement with the European Parliament on all elements of the clean energy package. It noted that the European Parliament and Council had now formally adopted the directive on renewable energy (recast), the regulation on governance of the energy union and the directive on energy efficiency (recast). Publication in the *Official Journal* was expected on 21 December 2018.

On the regulation on risk preparedness in the electricity sector, the presidency said that the regulation should give member states enough time to develop their plans for responding to risk. Regarding the regulation establishing a European Union Agency for the Co-operation of Energy Regulators (recast), it thought the outcome would allow the agency to function efficiently.

The presidency informed Ministers that in the early hours of the 19 December it had closed the two most complicated files: the regulation on the internal market for electricity (recast) and the directive on common rules for the internal market in electricity (recast). It commented that the deal would allow the internal energy market to operate efficiently and that contracts awarded under capacity mechanisms will be subject to limits on

emissions of carbon dioxide. Furthermore, consumers will be able to choose their suppliers freely, and request dynamic price contracts and smart meters.

The Commission, congratulating the presidency, noted that completion of the energy union was one of President Juncker's 10 legislative priorities.

Comments made by individual member states included recognition of the value of national energy and climate plans, but regret about the deal struck on limits on carbon dioxide emissions for contracts awarded under capacity mechanisms, and concern at the difficulties involved in opening up interconnector capacity and in meeting energy efficiency objectives.

Any other business items

The presidency informed the Council about the state of play on the revision of the gas directive. A number of member states, including the UK, called for faster progress and challenged the latest compromise proposals, but others expressed concern about proceeding with the revision.

The presidency updated Ministers on the connecting Europe facility negotiations, saying that it had secured a partial general approach at the Transport Council. It then provided an update on the hydrogen initiative.

The Commission provided an update on the status of marine energy and external energy relations. A number of member states supported the Commission's calls for more action to make marine technology competitive.

There was a brief discussion on the appointment of the director general for the International Renewable Energy Agency.

Finally, the incoming Romanian presidency presented its work programme, stating its priorities to be formal agreement on the clean energy package, to make progress on the gas directive, the tyre labelling regulation and the mandate for changes to the energy community treaty.

Ministers had an informal discussion over lunch on energy security and external dimensions of energy policy.

[HCWS1241]

TREASURY

Contingent Liability Notification

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

I can today confirm that I have laid a Treasury Minute informing the House of the contingent liability that HM Treasury has taken on in authorising the sale of a portfolio of Bradford & Bingley (B&B) and NRAM commercial loans, acquired during the financial crisis under the last Labour Government, to a consortium formed of Arrow Global Ltd and Davidson Kempner European Partners LLP, who are specialist asset buyers.

On this occasion, due to the sensitivities surrounding the commercial negotiation of this sale, it has not been possible to notify Parliament of the particulars of the liability in advance of the transaction documents being signed. The Chairs of the Public Accounts Committee and Treasury Committee were notified in confidence ahead of the transaction being agreed.

The contingent liability includes certain market standard time and value capped warranties confirming regulatory, legislative and contractual compliance. In addition, there are further remote fundamental market-standard warranties. The maximum contingent liability arising from all contractual claims is approximately £61 million. The impact of the sale on a selection of fiscal metrics is as follows:

- public sector net debt is reduced by £61 million in 2018-19;
- public sector net borrowing is increased by a total of £7.9 million by 2022-23;
- public sector net liabilities is increased by £30 million in 2018-19; and
- public sector net financial liabilities is increased by £30 million in 2018-19.

UKAR will incur an accounting loss of £30 million on the transaction in 2018-19. UKAR is expected to make an overall profit in 2018-19. The net present value of the assets if held to maturity was estimated by UKAR's advisors using Green Book assumptions. UKAR received less than this estimated hold value in exchange for the assets. The Government should not be a long-term owner of financial sector assets and it is right that these assets should be returned to private hands.

I will update the House of any further changes to B&B and NRAM as necessary.

[HCWS1240]

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