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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 15 January 2019

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

The Secretary of State was asked—

NHS Workforce Shortages

1. **Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): What recent steps he has taken to tackle NHS workforce shortages. [908556]

8. **Helen Jones** (Warrington North) (Lab): What steps he is taking to recruit and retain additional staff in the NHS. [908563]

17. **Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): What recent steps he has taken to tackle NHS workforce shortages. [908572]

19. **Jim McMahon** (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): What recent estimate he has made of the level of staff shortages throughout the NHS. [908574]

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): Good morning, Mr Speaker. The NHS employs more staff now than at any time in its 70-year history, with a significant growth in newly qualified staff since 2012. We have increased the number of available training places for doctors, nurses and midwives, and taken further actions to boost the supply of nurses, including offering new routes into the profession and encouraging those who have left nursing to return. The long-term plan, which was announced last week, sets out the framework to ensure that the NHS has the staff it needs.

Neil Coyle: Guy's and St Thomas's, which is based in my constituency, offers globally renowned, first-class healthcare, but the trust has seen a massive drop in applications from other EU member states, including of almost 90% in midwives alone. All vacant posts across the NHS present the risk of longer waiting times and risk patient safety, so why did the Government not publish the workforce strategy in the so-called long-term plan? When will it appear? Will the Government reinstate nursing bursaries to address the shocking staff shortfall across the NHS?

Stephen Hammond: As I said a moment ago, the long-term plan sets out a framework to ensure that, over the next 10 years, the NHS will have the staff it needs. To ensure that we have the detailed plan the hon. Gentleman wants, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has commissioned Baroness Harding to lead a rapid and inclusive programme of work to set out a detailed workforce implementation plan, which will be published in the spring.

Helen Jones: Fifty per cent. of the staff the NHS will need in 15 years' time are working there now, yet one in 10 nurses is leaving, 80% of junior doctors report excessive stress and six out of 10 consultants want to retire at 60 or before. Does the Minister not accept that this Government have presided over a disastrous decline in morale in the NHS, and will he say what the workforce plan will do to address it?

Stephen Hammond: Nurses are at the absolute heart of our NHS. There are 13,400 more nurses since May 2010. We have announced the biggest expansion of nurse training places, with 5,000 more available from 2018. Alongside that, we are opening up new routes. As the hon. Lady will know, the workforce is at the heart of the long-term plan and, as I have just said, a detailed workforce implementation plan will be published in the spring.

Stella Creasy: Last week, a 14-year-old boy lost his life in my local community, yet in September, when the Department wrote to my local community asking for ideas about mental health provision, I wrote back to Ministers asking for an urgent meeting to talk about how we could get mental health workers into our schools to work with young people who might be at risk of being involved in gang violence and youth violence. With the shortage of mental health workers at a rate of one in 10, can I finally have that meeting with Ministers so that we can talk urgently about how to support such young people and save not only money, but lives?

Stephen Hammond: The answer to that question is yes. The Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), will be delighted to meet the hon. Lady.

Jim McMahon: The most recent Care Quality Commission inspection of the Royal Oldham Hospital said that it failed to meet safe staffing numbers in maternity and it only had 85% of the required staffing contingent in surgery. There is a human cost to that. We see list after list where people have died, including children, because of unsafe staffing numbers in that hospital. Where is the urgency that is required to address that? Will the Minister meet me about this particular hospital to see what more can be done?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Gentleman is right. I recognise that the overall CQC rating was that the hospital requires improvement. I understand that the funding that has gone into it has been more than adequate and that it is improving. However, I recognise the concerns he raises and I would be delighted to meet him to discuss them.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Will my hon. Friend congratulate Conservative-controlled Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council's health and wellbeing

board, and its approach to NHS workforce shortages? It has, for several years, been working on collaboration between GPs and community services, which is in line with the 10-year plan. Will he look at the registers of the Professional Standards Authority, which are not mentioned in the long-term plan, and see if he can make better use of the 80,000 properly regulated practitioners on those registers?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend is right to recognise that community provision lies at the heart of the long-term plan, and that a number of health service professionals make up that community provision. If he wishes to write to me about registers, I will be delighted to respond.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): The Minister knows about our difficulties in recruiting obstetricians, which has led to what we very much hope is the temporary closure of the full obstetrics service at Horton General Hospital in Banbury. We are doing everything we can locally to rectify that situation. What more can the Minister do to help us nationally?

Stephen Hammond: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's campaign and her tireless work on behalf of her constituents. Figures from the Royal College of Midwives show that there are over 2,000 more midwives on our wards since 2010. The NHS plans to train 3,000 more midwives over the next four years, and as of last September there are over 5,000 more doctors in obstetrics and gynaecology than there were in May 2010. The NHS is hoping to fulfil what my hon. Friend wants to see.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that since the Brexit referendum in June 2016 there has been an increase of 4,000 EU nationals working in our NHS?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend and I do not always agree on everything about the EU, but numbers and statistics show that he is correct on that matter.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Clearly, it is important as we move forward with the NHS to train more doctors and nurses. What is the Minister doing to encourage young people to start training to become nurses, doctors, and for other positions in the health service?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend is right, and we are ensuring more routes into the nursing profession, such as nursing apprenticeships and nursing associates. We are training more GPs, and we are determined to get 5,000 extra GPs into general practice. A record 3,400 doctors have been recruited into GP training and, as part of the long-term plan, newly qualified doctors and nurses entering general practice will be offered a two-year fellowship to support them to stay there.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The long-term plan admits that staffing shortfalls are "unsustainable", yet incredibly there is no mention anywhere in the document of the damage done by the abolition of the nursing bursary. The plan contains an ambition to double the number of volunteers within three years, and although we should rightly celebrate the fantastic contribution made by volunteers, is it not

damning that, with a record 100,000 vacancies in the NHS, the main plank of the Government's strategy to tackle the workforce crisis is to rely on volunteers?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that volunteers in the NHS provide an invaluable service, but he is completely wrong to suggest that any part of the long-term plan relies on volunteers. There is an expansion in numbers of nursing associates to deal with those vacancies and, as I have said to other hon. Members, we have seen an increase in the number of doctors in GP training. Obviously, he will welcome the £20.5 billion a year that is going into the national health service. That will inevitably mean more doctors and nurses, which is why we are making more training places available.

Leaving the EU: Contingency Planning

2. **Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab):** What progress his Department has made on contingency planning for the UK leaving the EU without a deal. [908557]

3. **Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab):** What progress his Department has made on contingency planning for the UK leaving the EU without a deal. [908558]

18. **Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP):** What preparations his Department has made for the UK leaving the EU in March 2019. [908573]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): We do not want a no-deal scenario in our exit from the European Union, but it is incumbent on us to prepare in case. We asked medical suppliers to stockpile a further six-week supply over and above normal levels, and that work is going well. We will continue to work to ensure the unhindered supply of medicines in all Brexit scenarios.

Wes Streeting: The Prime Minister's threatening of this Parliament and the country with no deal is entirely reckless, irresponsible and unnecessary. It is also causing unnecessary fear and anxiety among a range of clinicians and patients who rely on the consistent supply of life-saving drugs. The Secretary of State says that the Government are stockpiling medicines for up to six weeks. Will he do the right thing and commission an independent assessment of those plans so that patients can be reassured? Better still, will he go back to the Cabinet and say that no responsible Health Secretary would allow no deal to take place, no responsible Prime Minister would allow no deal to take place, and this House will not allow no deal to take place?

Matt Hancock: It is incumbent on me as Health Secretary and on my team to ensure that we prepare for all potential scenarios. Of course, because of the overwhelming vote of the House in favour of the withdrawal Bill, no deal is the law of the land unless the House does anything else. If the hon. Gentleman is so worried, the best thing that he and all his friends can do is vote for the deal tonight.

Ian Murray: Would it not have been a better use of taxpayers' money to have spent hundreds of millions of pounds on frontline patient care rather than on no-deal

planning? The Secretary of State has just said to my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) that the Government have to prepare for all possible scenarios. A responsible Secretary of State would rule out one of those scenarios, which is no deal.

Matt Hancock: As I said, thanks to the votes of Members in all parts of the House, no deal is a matter of the law of the land. They can't get away from it: if they don't like no deal, they need to join me in the Lobby tonight, and vote for the Prime Minister's deal.

Tommy Sheppard: In Scotland, 6% of all social care staff are nationals of European countries. In England the figure is 8%. In Scotland, despite the Scottish Government paying the real living wage of £9 an hour, that comes nowhere near the £30,000 threshold proposed for a tier 2 visa. Can the Minister tell us here today what action he will take to avert a staffing crisis in social care?

Matt Hancock: We have brought into place already the EU settlement scheme to ensure that those EU workers who are working in social care and in the NHS can and should remain here and continue to contribute, as they do so valuably.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I know the Secretary of State wants to avoid a no-deal scenario, but can he look at the case of prescription foods, which my constituent Cait, who has PKU, relies on for keeping her life, and make sure they are also covered by no-deal planning?

Matt Hancock: We are working to ensure that the prioritisation of not just medicines, but medical products and other things needed for the health of the nation, is taken into consideration. There is detailed work under way that is clinically led; the medical director of the NHS is heavily engaged in that work and works very closely with the Department on it. I am very happy to go through the details of my hon. Friend's constituency case to make sure that that is also being dealt with appropriately. I am glad that, because she does not want no deal, she will be voting with the Government tonight.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Legislation was passed two years ago so that the Secretary of State could end profiteering by some drug companies. Now drug shortages after a no-deal Brexit could mean soaring costs across UK health services, so why have the Government not set the regulations from this legislation so that we can use the powers and avoid a black market in medication?

Matt Hancock: We have already taken action to ensure that the cost of drugs is reduced. I am very happy to write to the hon. Lady with the extensive details of the agreements that have been made. The legislation is indeed important; so, too, is working with the drugs companies to make sure that we keep those costs down and yet also get the drugs that people need.

Dr Whitford: As the precursors of medical radioisotopes have a half-life of less than three days, they cannot be stockpiled. I have frequently asked the Government how they will maintain a steady supply if there is a no-deal Brexit. Can the Secretary of State answer—and please don't say "Seaborne Freight"?

Matt Hancock: No, absolutely, we have ensured that there will be aircraft available, and air freight, to make sure that we can get those isotopes that have a short shelf life and cannot be stockpiled, and that there is unhindered supply. I make the following point to the hon. Lady and her colleagues, with an open mind and in a spirit of collaboration: if she is worried about no deal, which she seems to be, she and her party should support the Government tonight.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State boasts of being the world's biggest buyer of fridges to stockpile medicines, but if sterling drops because of the Government's mishandling of Brexit, the parallel trade in medicines could mean that stockpiles rapidly deplete as medicines are quickly exported back into the EU. Will he impose restrictions and suspend the necessary export licences that he is responsible for? Otherwise, he risks his fridges standing empty.

Matt Hancock: Of course, we have the legislative tools and powers the hon. Gentleman describes at our disposal; we know that. Nevertheless, stockpiling is going according to plan—it is going well—and the pharmaceutical industry has responded very well, with great responsibility. But I say, rather like a broken record—[HON. MEMBERS: "You are."] Yes, and it is important that I say it again and again and again. There is one route open to the House to avoid no deal, which Opposition Members purport to be worried about. They cannot complain about no deal unless they are prepared to do something about no deal, and to do something about no deal, they need to vote with the Government tonight.

Jonathan Ashworth: If the Secretary of State has those powers, he should use them now. This is going to be the biggest disruption to patient safety we have ever seen. He is also proposing emergency legislation that means patients might not get access to the medicines their GPs prescribe. Can he tell us whether an insulin patient will be able to get their prescription within a day of presenting at a pharmacy? He is the Secretary of State for Health; why will he not do the responsible thing and rule out no deal, which will do so much damage to the NHS and patients?

Matt Hancock: Because of the votes of most of us in the House, including the hon. Gentleman, no deal of course is the law of the land unless the House passes something else. He is a reasonable man. He is a mentor of the old Blairite moderate wing of his party. He is absolutely a centrist. I do not believe that, privately, he believes in the hard-left guff that comes from other Opposition Front Benchers. He is a very sensible man and I like him an awful lot, so after this session and before 7 o'clock tonight, why does he not take a look in the mirror and ask himself, "In the national interest, is it best to vote for the deal and avoid no deal, or is it best to play politics?"

Mr Speaker: Order. Let me say very gently to the Secretary of State, who is renowned for his charm in all parts of the House, that his likes and dislikes are a matter of immense fascination to colleagues, including the Chair, but what is of greater interest is his brevity.

Fibromyalgia: Diagnosis

4. **Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of primary care in diagnosing fibromyalgia; and if he will make a statement. [908559]

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): Diagnosing fibromyalgia can be difficult because there is no specific diagnostic test and symptoms can vary. A range of support exists to help GPs, including an e-learning course developed by the Royal College of General Practitioners and Versus Arthritis, and a medical guide on diagnosis and treatment developed by Fibromyalgia Action UK.

Toby Perkins: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer. I just hot-footed it here from Westminster Hall, where an excellent debate on fibromyalgia took place this morning. We heard a huge amount of evidence about people who suffer with fibromyalgia having waited more than a year to be diagnosed and having received treatments irrelevant to their condition. Clearly, diagnosis is not working at the moment. What more can the Minister tell us about investment in research to improve diagnosis and to try to get better outcomes for fibromyalgia sufferers?

Caroline Dinenage: I feel that my colleague the Secretary of State has set the bar for compliments to Members this morning. On that basis, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his Westminster Hall debate, which raised a key issue. The Department's National Institute for Health Research welcomes funding applications for research into any aspect of human health, including fibromyalgia. Its support for that research over the past five years includes £1.8 million funding for research projects and £0.6 million funding for clinical trials through the clinical research network.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Will the Minister endorse the excellent work by Sue Worrall and her team at Walsall Fibro and ME Link, whose monthly meetings seek to tackle the isolation frequently associated with those conditions?

Caroline Dinenage: I warmly welcome the organisation that my hon. Friend mentioned. There are some outstanding voluntary community-led organisations up and down the country that provide invaluable support for people who suffer from this condition. We know that symptoms can vary and that it can be incredibly distressing, so that support is enormously valuable.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The effectiveness of primary care in this and many other areas is undermined for the most vulnerable and poorest communities by this Government's insistence on putting out GP contracts for competitive tender, even when there is no competition to serve poor communities. The Watson review of GP partnerships was published today. Will the Minister commit to reviewing the requirement for competitive tender for GP partnerships?

Caroline Dinenage: We do of course support the recommendations that were part of that review. We have announced massive investment in primary and community services and spend on those services will grow as the NHS budget grows.

Cannabis-based Products: Medicinal Use

5. **Ronnie Cowan** (Inverclyde) (SNP): What guidance his Department has issued to clinicians on the prescription of cannabis-based products for medicinal use. [908560]

13. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What recent clinical advice he has sought on the licensing of cannabis oil for medicinal purposes. [908568]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): The Government acted swiftly to change the law to allow cannabis-based products to be prescribed for those patients who might benefit, with advice from the chief medical officer and the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. NHS England and the CMO have written to clinicians in England highlighting the interim clinical guidance available.

Ronnie Cowan: When the Government announced that they were prepared to allow medical cannabis under prescription, the decision was welcomed by many people throughout the United Kingdom who suffer from a range of conditions, but the process that has been adopted has failed to deliver. When will the Government take steps to facilitate GPs to prescribe and pharmacists to provide the appropriate effective forms of medical cannabis?

Steve Brine: We commissioned the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence to produce further guidance that should be out by October. Doctors are right to be cautious when the evidence base remains limited and further research in this area is vital. The change to the law will facilitate that. The National Institute for Health Research has called for research proposals to enhance our knowledge in the area and I think that that is absolutely right.

Mr Speaker: I call Alistair Carmichael. Where is the fellow? I hope that he is not in Orkney and Shetland because that would be a pity. Never mind, I am sure that we will see him ere long.

NHS Facilities

6. **Mr William Wragg** (Hazel Grove) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve and upgrade NHS facilities. [908561]

15. **Colin Clark** (Gordon) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve and upgrade NHS facilities. [908570]

22. **Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve and upgrade NHS facilities. [908578]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): In September, we announced £145 million to upgrade NHS facilities for winter and, last month, £1 billion as part of the NHS long-term plan. Future capital spending decisions will be for the spending review.

Mr Wragg: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his answer. He will know the importance of Stepping Hill Hospital to my constituents. Will he work with me and others to ensure that the hospital can secure additional

capital investment to expand accident and emergency, improve outpatient facilities and provide additional car parking?

Matt Hancock: I look forward to working with my hon. Friend and his local colleagues on what we can do to support Stepping Hill Hospital further. He is an assiduous representative for Hazel Grove who makes the argument very clearly, both to me and to the NHS Minister, who has already heard from him on several occasions. We did manage to provide £1 million for upgrades to Stepping Hill Hospital ahead of this winter and we understand the case that they make.

Colin Clark: Since 1980, Aberdeen University has been at the forefront of MRI development. May I invite the Secretary of State to visit Aberdeen medical facilities to see the fast field-cycling scanner, a development of national importance to stroke diagnosis?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I love going to Aberdeen and look forward to another reason for going to the north-east. Of course, Aberdeen University and the UK have been at the cutting edge of this innovation for years and must be for years to come.

Rebecca Pow: I first thank the Department for supporting me in my case for upgrading the theatres at Musgrove Park Hospital.

Having skilled staff to work in these places is really important and the University Centre Somerset is one of just two places piloting the nursing associates programme. It is growing really well and it is a vital stepping stone between healthcare assistant and nurse. Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating the college on how well the programme is going and meet me to discuss the option of a degree course?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely. We support nursing associates and I am delighted to see the rapid expansion that is taking place. We want more universities and higher education institutes to come to the fore to provide that sort of education. I cannot wait to meet my hon. Friend.

Mr Speaker: Including, of course, as the right hon. Gentleman knows from his recent meeting with me, the University of Buckingham in my constituency.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): One of my constituents, who is 17, seriously ill with breathing difficulties and in need of urgent specialist care, is waiting for a room to be available at the Royal Brompton. Is the Secretary of State aware of any delays and whether these have been caused by not having sufficient NHS facilities at the Royal Brompton to meet such urgent demand?

Matt Hancock: I have not heard any of the details of that case before now. If the hon. Lady will write to me, I will be very happy to talk to her and engage with her on what we can do for her constituent.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is 12 long months since the Government closed their consultation on whether to upgrade NHS radiotherapy facilities. Meanwhile, in south Cumbria, cancer patients

have to make daily round trips of up to four hours for weeks on end to receive treatment. When will the Government respond to the consultation and when will they invest in satellite radiotherapy provision in places such as Westmorland General Hospital?

Matt Hancock: We will respond to the consultation very soon. We wanted to get the NHS long-term plan published first, because clearly the two are strongly linked. I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman's work chairing the all-party group on radiotherapy and I look forward to working with him.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Plymouth is pioneering health and wellbeing hubs—a new type of NHS facility. I am most excited about the new one in Plymouth city centre, which will include directly employed GPs and mental health, sexual health and dentistry services. We have submitted a funding application to the Minister. When will he be able to fund and support that pioneering project, a new type of NHS facility delivering in some of our poorest communities?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman's neighbour in Plymouth has already brought this to my attention and made the case very strongly for it. I am still waiting for the "Thank you" for the new facilities at Derriford Hospital, but I am a massive supporter of the work that is going on in the local area and the NHS in Plymouth will go from strength to strength under this Government.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): The maintenance backlog across the NHS is deeply worrying. It affects equipment as well as buildings. Two of the 10 operating theatres at Torbay Hospital remain out of action. Would the Secretary of State meet me to discuss the impact that that is having on patient care? It is increasing waiting lists and leading to very short-notice cancellations to make way for emergency cases. Torbay Hospital has a £34 million maintenance backlog. It is deeply worrying.

Matt Hancock: I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend, who makes a very important point. Of course, future allocations of capital are for the spending review. I look forward to working with her to try to sort out the problems in Torbay and across the board.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): A consultation is taking place about the closure of Faith House GP practice on Beverley Road in Hull. It is partly about the premises being less suitable for delivering modern healthcare, but also about how difficult it is to recruit GPs. What will the Secretary of State do about GP services being removed from communities? How will he support the development of GP services in those areas?

Matt Hancock: The £4.5 billion extra in the long-term plan that is going to primary and community care is absolutely targeted at solving problems like that. As it happens, I know Beverley Road in Hull quite well; I had family who lived there. It is very important that the services in primary care and in the community are there and are available to people to ensure that that crucial element of our prevention agenda is strengthened to keep the pressure off hospitals, too.

23. [908579] **Suella Braverman** (Fareham) (Con): Fareham Community Hospital is seeing increased usage these days, thanks to local GPs working together to provide a same-day access scheme. However, patients are disappointed about the lack of a mobile breast screening unit on site. Will my right hon. Friend join me in calling on community health partnerships and Portsmouth Hospitals NHS Trust to explore ways of providing that vital service, which could help hundreds of people every day?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I would love to do that. I will raise it with Mike Richards, who is running a review of the future of screening services. I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in congratulating my hon. Friend on her forthcoming use of maternity services in the NHS.

Registered Nurses: Staffing Levels

7. **Karen Lee** (Lincoln) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the staffing levels of registered nurses in hospitals. [908562]

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): Our policies have allowed the NHS to recruit over 13,400 more nurses into all wards since 2010. Additionally, we have increased the number of available nurse training places, offering new routes into the profession and encouraging those who have left nursing to return to practice, alongside retaining more of the staff that we have now.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I was so enthusiastic about the number of extra staff in the national health service, I might have inadvertently misled my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis): it is 500 obs and gynae doctors since 2010.

Mr Speaker: In calling the hon. Member for Lincoln, I congratulate her on her birthday.

Karen Lee: You are very kind, Mr Speaker. The latest Care Quality Commission report on Lincoln County Hospital found sufficient nursing staff on only four of the 28 days reviewed and a heavy reliance on agency staff. As people know, I was a cardiac nurse for 12 years, and I can tell the House that agency nurses are expensive and create extra work—often they cannot do IVs and they are not familiar with paperwork, so the regular nurses end up doing half their jobs for them. Will the Secretary of State explain to the House why the NHS long-term plan has no policy on effectively tackling understaffing and no mention of reinstating the nursing bursary, which enabled nurses like me to train?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady is right: we want to see more nurses in the NHS. That is why we have provided funding to increase nurse training places by 25% and why the long-term plan will have a detailed workforce implementation plan. She talked about the bursary, but since that was replaced nurses on current training schemes are typically 25% better off. Alongside that, additional funds support learning.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I welcome the fact that my local trust has 94 more nurses than in 2010. What is the Minister doing to ensure greater retention of nurses at my local hospitals, so that they have their own nurses instead of relying so much on agency nurses?

Stephen Hammond: As I said earlier, nurses are absolutely the heart of our NHS, and my hon. Friend is right about the extra number of nurses at her hospitals. She is also right that retention is one of our big issues. That is why the Agenda for Change pay award was put through last year, why we are working with Health Education England to look at other retention methods and why we are increasing the number of training places to ensure that we not only retain nurses but recruit more into the national health service.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I join you, Mr Speaker, in wishing my colleague a happy birthday. I acknowledge that no one knows better than she does about the crisis in nursing staff levels. At the same time, the shortfall in GPs has risen to 6,000, and a third of all practices have been unable to fill vacancies for over three months. Unsurprisingly, waiting times for GP appointments are at an all-time high. As ever under this Government, it is patients who suffer. The situation is set to get worse, with more practices destined to close this year. Why are the Government not taking urgent action to tackle that? When will we finally see the workforce implementation plan that has been promised?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady asks about GPs. As she would want to acknowledge, a record number of doctors are being recruited into GP training. We are determined to deliver an extra 5,000 doctors into general practice. NHS England and Health Education England have a number of schemes in place to recruit more GPs and to boost retention—the GP retention scheme and the GP retention fund—and she will know, as I have said it twice this morning, that the workforce implementation plan, which is part of the long-term plan, will be published in the spring.

Obesity

9. **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce obesity. [908564]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): This Government are taking bold, world-leading action on child obesity that meets the scale of the challenge that we face. We have a soft drinks industry levy, a sugar reduction programme already working, measures on banning energy drinks, calorie labelling consulted on, and a consultation on restricting price and location promotions of sugary and fatty foods which I launched on Saturday.

Andrew Selous: The introduction of a 9 pm watershed on the marketing of junk food to children is the No. 1 ask of the Obesity Health Alliance, supported by Cancer Research UK, Diabetes UK and many of the royal colleges. When will we see that consultation launched?

Steve Brine: I am glad that my hon. Friend mentions CRUK, which has launched a powerful new marketing campaign that Members will see around Westminster and in the media over the rest of this month. We will launch the consultation on further advertising that was in chapter 2 of the child obesity plan, including the 9 pm watershed, very shortly. We are working hard to ensure that the remaining consultations announced in the second chapter are right. I want to get them right

and, when they are ready and we are satisfied that they are the right tools to do the job that we want to face this enormous challenge, we will publish them.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): With recent Northern Ireland figures showing that at least 25% of young people and 40% of teens are classed as overweight or obese, will the Minister outline what cross-departmental discussions have taken place on the strategies to improve the health of young people through co-ordination and interaction with parents and the provision of healthy eating schemes?

Steve Brine: Of course, health is devolved, but we talk to our opposite numbers all the time, as do our officials. Our north star ambition to halve child obesity by 2030 is right and it is shared and matched by our colleagues in Scotland, and we look to our colleagues in Northern Ireland to do the same. Any advice and support that they want from our world-leading plan is more than on offer.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Does the Minister agree with the campaign being advanced by Jamie Oliver to ensure that doctors in training are given more extensive training in nutrition and its benefits for health?

Steve Brine: Yes, I do. I was fortunate enough to visit Southend pier before Christmas to talk to Jamie and Jimmy about this. Nutrition training and the understanding of what is involved in achieving and maintaining a healthy weight varies between medical schools. Some courses have only eight hours over what can be a five or six-year degree. Together with the professional bodies and the universities, we will—as we said in the long-term plan—ensure that nutrition has a greater place in professional education training.

Mr Speaker: We are all very impressed by how well connected the Minister is. He is obviously on first-name terms with these illustrious individuals—*[Interruption.]* Indeed, I am sure they are thrilled to befriend the Minister—no reason to doubt it.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Scotland's childhood obesity plan recognises breastfeeding as the best start to life for babies. Will he look at that in his plans and ensure that the support is available to allow women to breastfeed for as long as they wish to?

Steve Brine: Yes, we will. We recognise that it gives a good start in life. Working with my colleague the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), I will meet one of the groups in that area to talk about it shortly. I know the hon. Lady chairs the infant feeding all-party group, and I am happy to talk to her about that at any time. We see it as an essential start in life.

Mental Health Support Teams

10. **Bim Afolami** (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): What the aims are of the new mental health support teams to be placed in schools and colleges; and what steps those teams will take to improve mental health for young people. [908565]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): The new mental health support teams will deliver evidence-based interventions in or close to schools and colleges for children and young people with mild to moderate mental health issues. In December, we announced the first 25 trailblazer areas in England, and 12 sites will pilot a four-week waiting time to speed up children and young people's access to NHS mental health services, including in Hertfordshire, serving my hon. Friend's constituents.

Bim Afolami: I thank the Minister for that response. She will appreciate that the answer is not just spending more money on mental health—it is how that money is spent. Can the Minister explain in further detail the nature and scope of the research, scientific and otherwise, that has underpinned the Department's response to the increase in poor mental health in our young people?

Jackie Doyle-Price: My hon. Friend is right: it is important that we get the best value from any investment we make in improving the nation's mental health by making sure that it is evidence-based. On that basis, the Government engaged extensively with a range of expert organisations and individuals, including children and young people, to inform our proposals to improve mental health support, including through a consultation. We also commissioned academics to undertake a systematic review of the evidence which directly informed our proposals and we will, of course, learn from the trailblazers as we commission additional services later this year.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will know that the Health and Social Care Committee interrogated the Government's plans on mental health for our young people. We found a massive gap: many schools that are passionate about their students' mental health have had to cut the provision that they previously provided, including the educational psychologists, the councillors, the pastoral care workers and the peer mentors. Can she tell us—as the Education Minister could not tell us—what her plans will replace? We know that an army of those professionals are no longer working in our schools.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I know that the hon. Lady is very passionate about all this, and I can say to her that, in rolling out this additional support, we do not want to crowd out anything that is there already. It should genuinely be working in partnership with the provision that has already been undertaken, but we recognise that we need to be rolling out further investment. We are introducing a new workforce that will have 300,000 people when it is fully rolled out, but we must ensure that we invest in the training in such a way that it will be effective.¹

Mental Health Services

11. **James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure the adequacy of mental health service provision in the long term. [908566]

16. **Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure the adequacy of mental health service provision in the long term. [908571]

1. *[Official Report, 16 January 2019, Vol. 652, c. 8MC.]*

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): Under the NHS long-term plan, there will be a comprehensive expansion of mental health services with an additional £2.3 billion in real terms by 2023-24. This will give 380,000 more adults access to psychological therapies and 345,000 more children and young people greater support in the next five years. The NHS will also roll out new waiting times to ensure rapid access to mental health services in the community and through the expansion of crisis care.

James Cartledge: I thank my hon. Friend for her answer. She will be aware of the long-running and substantial problems that we have had in our main mental health trust, the Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust. Will she update the House on the latest position there, and in particular, will she tell us what steps the Government are taking to finally turn around this failing trust?

Jackie Doyle-Price: My hon. Friend is quite right: I have stood at this Dispatch Box a number of times to address concerns from all the local MPs in Norfolk and Suffolk. I can advise him and the House that the trust is receiving increased oversight and enhanced support from NHS Improvement. It is in special measures for quality reasons. It is also receiving peer support from the East London NHS Foundation Trust, which is an excellent and outstanding trust. We will continue to take a close interest in developments, but I can assure him that the trust is receiving every possible attention to improve its performance.

Nigel Mills: Will the Minister also set out what steps will be taken to ensure that care for someone experiencing a mental health crisis is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question, because this was top of my list of asks as we were developing the forward plan. The NHS has reiterated its commitment to ensure that a 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week community-based mental health crisis response for all adults is in place across England by 2020-21. All adults experiencing a mental health crisis will be able to be directed to support via NHS 111. This is based on best practice as shown by the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough NHS Foundation Trust. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his interest in this, and I can assure him that NHS England, all the commissioners and I are very much on it.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): Half of all women who experience depression or anxiety in the perinatal period say that their problem was not asked about by health services. There are some genuinely positive things to say about the NHS long-term plan's proposals for specialist services, but what is the point in having services if half the people with a problem do not have it diagnosed? What are we going to do about that?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Gentleman has quizzed me about this a number of times, and I know that he cares very deeply about it. One of the specific issues he has raised with me is the awareness of GPs and their involvement in diagnosing these problems. Obviously we are taking that forward as part of the GP contract. I

can also advise him that there is a significant expansion in perinatal services. We are confident of achieving the national trajectory of 2,000 more women accessing specialist care this year, and more than 7,000 additional women accessed such care as of March 2018.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Recent analysis of NHS digital mental health workforce statistics reveals that NHS England is not on course to meet its targets of 21,000 additional mental health staff by 2021. This means that it is unlikely to meet the goals set in the five year forward view and the recent long-term plan. Mental health services are in real danger of further decline, so may we have an absolute guarantee from the Secretary of State that these targets will be met, and if they are not, will he resign?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I have to advise the hon. Lady that we are on course to meet the targets in the five year forward view, but she is right to raise concerns about the workforce. Frankly, that keeps me awake at night. We are investing in a significant expansion of mental health services and that requires appropriate staff to deliver them. I can assure her, however, that we are in productive discussions with clinical leads in NHS England. We need to be much more imaginative about how we deliver services, and we are seeing substantial gains and improvements in performance through the increased use of peer support workers, who provide the therapeutic care from which many can benefit. However, the hon. Lady is right to hold me to account.

Rare Diseases and Cancer

12. **John Howell (Henley) (Con):** What steps he is taking to improve the diagnosis and treatment for patients with rare diseases and cancer. [908567]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): Our much-mentioned new plan sets out the clear ambition to diagnose three quarters of all cancers at an early stage—up from half today.

John Howell: The blood cancer charity Bloodwise launched its “Hear our voice” report in Parliament last week. Will the Minister ensure that NHS England works with the charity to ensure that blood cancer is included in the 75% target?

Steve Brine: Yes, I will. I spoke at the launch of Bloodwise's excellent report at its parliamentary reception last week. I have been clear since the new ambition was announced that the 75% target applies to all cancers, and we will not achieve it unless we focus on harder-to-diagnose cancers, such as blood cancer.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Given that the number of people suffering from rare diseases in any one country is always likely to be small, and given our changing relationship with the European Medicines Agency and the European medicines market, what is the Minister doing to ensure that the future development of orphan drugs in this country is safeguarded?

Steve Brine: The hon. Gentleman will know that the draft withdrawal agreement hopefully sets us on a relationship with the EMA, but the UK's strategy for

rare diseases, which was published in 2013, sets out our commitment to improve the diagnosis and treatment of patients with rare diseases and to end the diagnostic odyssey that has been referred to throughout the past few years.

People with Autism and Learning Disabilities

14. **Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase support for people with autism and learning disabilities. [908569]

24. **Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase support for people with autism and learning disabilities. [908580]

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): Autism and learning disabilities are clinical priorities in the NHS long-term plan. We are committed to improving the quality of care provided to people with a learning disability or autism and to addressing the persistent health inequalities they face.

Mike Wood: I thank the Minister for her response. The commitment to reducing diagnosis waiting times for children and young people is welcome, but what are the Government doing in this 10th anniversary year of the Autism Act 2009 to tackle diagnosis waiting times for all people?

Caroline Dinenage: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his active involvement in the all-party parliamentary groups on learning disability and on autism. Over the next three years, we will be testing and implementing the most effective ways to reduce waiting times for specialist services. We are developing guidance to support commissioners to develop the necessary services to support all autistic people, and we have launched a review of our autism strategy.

Alex Burghart: As a former governor of a school for children with autism, I thank the Minister for her response. It is well known that people with ASD suffer premature morbidity due to worse rates of heart disease, cancer and death through epilepsy. What is the Minister doing to ensure that fewer people with autism die early?

Caroline Dinenage: These are key elements of the NHS long-term plan, and we will shortly start consulting on mandatory learning disability and autism training for health and social care staff. We will work to improve uptake of the existing annual health checks for people with learning disabilities and will pilot the introduction of specific health checks for autistic people.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister knows of my interest in access to healthcare as chair of the Westminster Commission on Autism. She will also know that a real barrier is having enough people with the skills not only to identify autism, but to support families dealing with it.

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Gentleman is right, and I pay tribute to his hard work in this area. Training is so important, and we want to ensure that all staff, whether clinical, medical or perhaps just on reception, have the necessary training to be able to help to support people with learning disabilities or autism.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): What are the Government going to do about people who have suffered acquired brain injury? One in four major trauma centres have no neurorehabilitation consultant, meaning that such people all too often fall between the cracks and do not get proper support. Will the Government change that?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Gentleman chairs the all-party group on acquired brain injury, and we are working on the recommendations of his report. This is such an important issue, and we want to make sure that nobody falls through the gaps.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are running late, but I do not think Health questions would be complete without the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb).

Local Authority Public Health Budgets: Prevention Vision

20. **Norman Lamb** (North Norfolk) (LD): What assessment he has made of the effect of changes to local authority public health budgets in 2019-20 on his Department's ability to achieve its "Prevention is better than cure" vision. [908575]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): Local authorities will receive £3 billion in 2019-20, ring-fenced exclusively for use on public health, but our ambitions for prevention go far beyond any one pot of money. "Prevention is better than cure" was widely welcomed, and we will build on it with a comprehensive Green Paper later this year.

Norman Lamb: The number of people attending sexual health clinics is up 13% over four years, and the number with gonorrhoea and syphilis is up 20% over the last year, yet the Health Foundation says that funding for sexual health is down 25%. Will the Secretary of State and the Minister be making a powerful case, as part of the spending review, for proper investment in public health, and particularly in sexual health, given their commitment to prevention?

Steve Brine: Yes, of course. Matters for the spending review are just that, but one thing that the right hon. Gentleman, as a former Health Minister, will have noticed—and probably welcomed—in the long-term plan is that we are going to look at the commissioning of, and therefore the funding flow for, sexual health services as part of the long-term plan.

Topical Questions

T1. [908581] **Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Last week we launched the NHS long-term plan, which delivers on the vision for how the extra £20.5 billion that we are putting into the health service will be spent to get the best return for the taxpayer. The long-term plan is built on the principle

that prevention is better than cure, and there will be a new focus on personal responsibility that reflects and complements the responsibility that the NHS has to us all.

Mr Betts: Looking to the last financial year, I am sure that the Secretary of State has seen a National Audit Office report that says that auditors gave a qualified opinion on 38% of local NHS bodies, expressing concerns about overspending and value for money. The Comptroller and Auditor General said:

“A qualification is a judgment that something is seriously wrong”.

Does the Secretary of State accept that many of these problems are down to local bodies struggling with the effects of austerity and real-terms cuts to their funding? Does he also accept that he is ultimately responsible for spending in the NHS, and does he accept responsibility for the totally unsatisfactory state of affairs that the NAO has identified?

Matt Hancock: That is a very big question, and the very big answer comes in the form of the £20.5 billion that is going in, but it is not just about the money. We also need to ensure that, at all levels, we strengthen the leadership capacity in the NHS, because the best hospitals that deliver the best services, that hit their targets and that are the best clinically are also the ones that have the best financial results. Strengthening leadership, making sure that the money is available, as appropriate, and ensuring that we deliver for patients are at the core of the long-term plan.

T4. [908584] **Mr Robert Goodwill** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): Before Christmas we had the brilliant news that £40 million of capital funding has been allocated for a new state-of-the-art A&E facility at Scarborough Hospital, which will transform emergency care for my constituents. Can the Minister update me on similar ambitious plans for Whitby Hospital?

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): My right hon. Friend is right to welcome the announcement for Scarborough Hospital, and I understand that the full business case for the redevelopment of Whitby Hospital is going through the Hambleton, Richmondshire and Whitby governing body for approval on 24 January. I am assured that the clinical commissioning group remains supportive of the redevelopment of Whitby Hospital and, if it is helpful, I would obviously be delighted to meet him after 24 January.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): This Government's cuts to council budgets have meant that 100,000 fewer people received publicly funded social care over the past three years, and 90 people a day died while waiting for social care last year. What does the Secretary of State think it says to their families that the social care Green Paper and the meaningful funding settlement have been delayed again?

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): The hon. Lady knows that we have given councils access to nearly £10 billion over a three-year period to address this very issue, but she is right to highlight the issues at the heart of social care. We will be publishing the Green Paper very shortly.

T8. [908588] **Andrew Lewer** (Northampton South) (Con): Perhaps the worst private finance initiative contract in the country was awarded in 2001 to Shaw Healthcare for the rehabilitation of elderly people coming out of hospital. Northamptonshire County Council has been paying Shaw for a service in which more than 50% of beds have been lying empty. What steps can the Department take to manage the problems that have arisen from this and other PFI contracts?

Stephen Hammond: Departmental officials have worked alongside the council to engage with Shaw Healthcare to identify the causes and explore the solutions to minimise the number of empty beds under the PFI. Through improved contract management and regular meetings with Shaw, significant improvements are being made, and contract changes are under discussion to further improve performance. This aligns with the Department's best practice centre for PFI contracts, as the Chancellor announced in the Budget—

Mr Speaker: Order. I appreciate the natural courtesy of the Minister in looking in the direction of the person questioning him, but the House wants the benefit of his mellifluous tones, so he should face the House. We are grateful to him.

T2. [908582] **Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The closure of ward 6 at Bishop Auckland Hospital will mean the loss of 24 beds, which is why 14,000 people have signed a petition to keep it. Will the Minister now step in to ensure that we keep ward 6?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady will know that in the long-term plan we have committed to ensuring that more people are treated and that more money is spent in hospitals. The decision on closure is for local organisations, as she will know, but, as I have said to other hon. Members, my door remains open and I would be delighted to meet her.

T9. [908589] **Gordon Henderson** (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): As we heard earlier, obesity is a major health problem in Britain. Nationally, 1,100 people per 100,000 are admitted to hospital because of obesity-related problems. This is a particular problem in Sittingbourne and Sheppey, where 1,700 people per 100,000 are affected. That is the highest rate in the whole of Kent and Medway. Does the Minister recognise the huge strain that such a statistic puts on the budget of the Swale clinical commissioning group, and, if so, what steps will he take to provide the funds needed to solve the problem?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): Yes, of course we recognise the economic strain that obesity puts on the NHS, which is why we are taking the action we are, including with our renewed focus on prevention. The measures in the plan include doubling the capacity of the diabetes prevention programme and the further 1,000 children a year we hope to treat for severe complications relating to their obesity. That should help my hon. Friend's CCG, as well as mine and those of all Members.

T3. [908583] **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): A senior Bedford GP was told by the East of England Ambulance Service that a patient who required urgent admission

would have to wait 10 hours for an ambulance. I am deeply concerned about this response time. Will the Minister urgently investigate why patients are being deliberately downgraded when an ambulance is called from a GP surgery?

Stephen Hammond: A number of MPs, including the hon. Gentleman, have raised issues about the trust's performance, and a range of actions have been put in place. He will be pleased to know that I met the performance director in December. I have been discussing several support mechanisms involving both the NHS and the Department, and I continue to receive reports. He will also be pleased to hear that the trust's performance improved over December.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Children's hospices provide vital support for children with life-limiting conditions and their families at the most difficult of times. I welcome the £25 million of extra investment in these services, but what more can be done to support children's hospices across the UK?

Caroline Dineneage: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the incredible work of children's hospices across the country. Up until now, there has been a disparity between their funding and that of their adult counterparts, which is why I was delighted when, as part of the NHS long-term plan, we announced plans to increase funding for children's hospices by as much as £25 million a year over the next five years. We can always do more, however, and we are always open to suggestions.

T5. [908585] **Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab):** I have recently been contacted by constituents who have faced long waits in A&E at Wigan Infirmary. Figures show that one in four patients have waited longer than four hours. Can the Minister explain how removing waiting time targets will improve the situation?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that these waiting time targets need to be improved upon, which is one reason why we are putting so much extra taxpayers' money into the NHS. Of course, waiting times also need to follow clinical need, and we are taking advice on that.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Genome sequencing and other fourth industrial revolution techniques play a key role in the detection and treatment of cancer and other diseases. How is the NHS adopting those new techniques?

Matt Hancock: The use of new technologies is drilled through the new NHS long-term plan. Genome sequencing holds great opportunities to improve the health of the nation, and my hon. Friend is a great advocate for it.

T6. [908586] **Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab):** As I have seen recently in my own constituency, access to mental health services is sometimes deplorable. Notwithstanding what the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), said earlier about all the plans, how long will people have to wait before those services actually get better?

Matt Hancock: The biggest proportional increase in spending in the NHS—it has taken place faster than the average rate, over a five-year period—is in mental health services, alongside the increase in primary care and community care. That money will come on stream with a £6 billion cash injection for the NHS overall in April, in just over two months' time. So we are getting on with it, but there is a lot of work to be done.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): NHS Property realised £43 million when it sold St George's Hospital in my constituency, yet a £17 million bid for a new health centre there has not been successful. Will my right hon. Friend commit himself to looking at that again in order to convince communities that they benefit when local NHS assets are sold?

Matt Hancock: Absolutely. I look forward to working on that with my hon. Friend and local commissioners, and also to working with my hon. Friend before the spending review, when the next round of the capital allocations will be set.

T7. [908587] **Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab):** In line with the long-term plan, leaders in St Helens have integrated health and social care teams and budgets, and there is a joint role for an accountable officer and director of social services. Can the Secretary of State assure me that that successful place working will not be put at risk by restructuring in NHS England and NHS Improvement, and indications in the long-term plan that integrated care systems need to be formed on sustainability and transformation plan footprints?

Matt Hancock: Yes, 100%. That is exactly what is in the plan, and I am delighted to have such support. This is precisely the direction in which we need to go in integrating care to ensure that patients are served better, whoever is the ultimate funder of the service.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): In the event of an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest, access to a defibrillator can make the difference between life and death. Although there are tens of thousands of defibs across the United Kingdom, the majority are not known to the ambulance service, so will the Minister join me in welcoming the British Heart Foundation's efforts to map the location of all defibs so that ambulance services can direct people to their nearest heart restarter in an emergency and, hopefully, we can save more lives?

Steve Brine: Yes, I will. We work closely with partners such as the BHF to harness new technology. Ultimately, this is about using data—big data—to ensure that patients benefit, and that is at the heart of the health service.

T10. [908590] **Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab):** We have an excellent advocate for those with motor neurone disease in north Wales, one Vincent Ryan. He has drawn my attention to the fact that the social care Green Paper was expected before the new year, but the Health Secretary has now said that it will be published before April, more than two years after it was first announced. Can the Secretary of State confirm that, whenever the Green Paper does arrive, it will address social care provision for adults of working age living with a disability as well as older people?

Matt Hancock: Yes. The hon. Gentleman is right: that is absolutely critical.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What advice can the Minister give to elderly and vulnerable people who missed out on the first wave of flu jabs? Are they still available?

Steve Brine: Yes, they are still very much available. People should make an appointment through their GP or their wonderful pharmacist.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): While working a night shift in A&E this weekend, I was struck by the fact that I was working alongside so many members of staff from our EU—Italian, Irish and Spanish. I am proud that St George's Hospital is paying for the visas of those vital staff post Brexit, but can the Secretary of State tell me why the financial burden of retaining them and improving their morale is falling on NHS trusts and not the Government?

Matt Hancock: I welcome what St George's is doing, and I welcome all the people from the EU who are working in our NHS—in greater numbers than on the day of the referendum. They are welcome here, and I look forward to their working here long into the future.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Each month I hold my memory caf  s for those suffering with memory loss, dementia and Alzheimer's, and their carers, families and friends. What support are the Government providing for those suffering with such memory loss conditions?

Caroline Dinenage: We remain absolutely committed to delivering the challenge under dementia 2020 and to making England the best country in the world for dementia care by 2020. As part of that, we are more than happy to do everything we can to support steps such as the memory caf  s of which my hon. Friend speaks, which are such a valuable local community resource.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. I was going to call Mr Skinner, who I thought was perched a moment ago.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: He is perched again; in fact he is more than perched.

Mr Skinner: The Secretary of State has been very fond today of talking about the long-term plan. I am 86 years of age, and the reason I am able to ask this question is because under Labour—is he listening?—the money that went in was trebled from £33 billion to £100 billion, an increase of £67 billion. That is why I am still here: I had my operation for cancer, and it was successful; I had an operation for a bypass, and it was successful; and I had a hip replacement, and I can still walk backwards. That is the Labour story—just remember it!

Matt Hancock *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. Before the Secretary of State responds, let me say that the ferocity and eloquence of the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) are legendary, but all he is really telling us is what the Chair already knew, namely that the hon. Gentleman is indestructible.

Matt Hancock: The hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) and I both come from Nottinghamshire mining stock, and we both support the NHS, which was first proposed from this Dispatch Box by a Conservative Minister under a Conservative Prime Minister, and has been presided over by a Conservative Secretary of State for most of its life. I am delighted that those operations, including under a Conservative-led Administration, kept the hon. Gentleman ticking, because what an adornment he is—I look forward to voting with him this evening.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. As I am often moved to observe at Health questions, demand tends to exceed supply, as in the health service under whichever Government, but we must now move on.

Points of Order

12.42 pm

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Just before Christmas I wrote a letter to the Prime Minister asking if she would be respectful of the mandate in the Scottish Parliament for a second independence referendum by agreeing to a section 30 order. The response came about a month later, and I have to say that it was not respectful of UK member Parliaments at all—in contrast, of course, to the European Union. Indeed, the response was not from the Prime Minister, but from the Secretary of State for Scotland. This is an example of the Government arbitrarily changing the rules—something they complained about last week. Should the Prime Minister herself not be responding to these things or, in an innovation, has she passed to the Secretary of State for Scotland the power to grant a section 30 order for a second independence referendum?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman both for his point of order and for his characteristic courtesy in giving me advance notice of it. However, what I have to say to the hon. Gentleman might disappoint him. The hon. Gentleman is perfectly at liberty to put his inquiry to the Government Department of his choice, and indeed the most senior Minister of all, but it is the entitlement, constitutionally and procedurally, of the Government to decide by what route a reply is provided. Although there is some consternation etched upon the contours of the hon. Gentleman's face that he got a reply from the source he did not want and not the source he did want, I am afraid that he will have to live with that and bear it with such stoicism and fortitude as he can muster.

James Heapey (Wells) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday you said you would adhere to the advice of the late Lord Whitelaw and cross bridges only when we come to them. I think we would all agree with you on that, but in the interests of knowing what bridges might be crossed, you were asked yesterday to confirm that only a Minister of the Crown could move a motion to extend article 50, and I wonder if you have any update on what you described at the time as being a holding response.

Mr Speaker: No, I do not, for the simple reason that although I am extremely delighted that the hon. Gentleman has been willing to learn from me and, more particularly,

from Lord Whitelaw, that point has not been reached. I appreciate the assiduity of the hon. Gentleman and his nimbleness in being ready to spring to his feet to raise a matter of immediate concern and preoccupation to him, but that crucial point at which some ruling might be required, though of great interest to him, has not yet arrived. So there we are. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman chunters cheekily from a sedentary position, “When might it be?” The hon. Gentleman has to learn the art of patience. If he is patient and deploys Zen, he will find that it is ultimately to everybody's advantage.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. You said yesterday that you were very “happy to reflect”. Can you give the House a sense of when you might have had the chance to reflect, and reassure me that it will be before such a motion is proposed?

Mr Speaker: What I would say to the hon. Lady is that at the point I am ready to say something on important matters of procedure that require a statement, I hope she will trust that, on the strength of nine and a half years in the Chair, I do know when that point is. Much as I appreciate the diligence and commitment in the Chamber of the hon. Lady, and recognise that there is a desire on the part of many Members, often at short notice, and sometimes on a co-ordinated basis and sometimes not, to raise points of order with great enthusiasm, there is no need for it now. At the point at which a ruling is required, it will be proffered to the House by, if I may say so, an experienced Chair. I think it would be regarded as a courtesy by the House if we could proceed to the presentation of a Bill, for which the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) has been patiently waiting.

BILL PRESENTED

EUROPEAN UNION (WITHDRAWAL) (No. 2) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Nick Boles, supported by Liz Kendall, Norman Lamb, Yvette Cooper, Nicky Morgan, Hilary Benn and Sir Oliver Letwin, presented a Bill to make provision in connection with the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 314).

Public Sector Supply Chains (Project Bank Accounts)

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

12.47 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require public authorities to pay certain suppliers using project bank accounts; and for connected purposes.

It is exactly a year ago today since the construction giant Carillion announced it was going into liquidation. At the time, there was widespread concern about what that would mean for the completion of major public sector projects already under way, including hospitals and HS2, which Carillion was also working on as part of a consortium. There were also real worries for the 30,000 or so small businesses that, as part of Carillion's supply chain, were also working on these projects. After Carillion's collapse, thousands of those subcontractors lost major contracts and were left reeling with substantial debts. A survey of building, engineering and electrical firms showed that small businesses were, on average, owed £141,000 by Carillion, out of a total of £2 billion owed to suppliers. The vast majority of those suppliers never received any recompense. Following on from those losses, it has been estimated that 780 small building firms went into insolvency in the first quarter of 2018 as a direct consequence of Carillion's collapse—that is a 20% increase in insolvencies on the previous year.

Neil Skinner, whose construction firm Johnson Bros. is based in my constituency, and who is here today, was one of Carillion's suppliers and lost £176,000. Neil told me:

“Carillion often went over sixty days” before it paid him,

“with a lot of chasing, and once the job for a particular customer was finished our sanction, to stop working, was gone and their payments just stopped”,

even though Carillion still owed money for the job that Johnson Bros. had done for it.

“They resorted to using all the familiar late payment tactics, from finding fault with an invoice, referring us to their India accounts office, statement queries, disputed invoices paid, and so on.

Then, lastly, they imposed a 15% non-negotiable discount on our work or they would send all unpaid invoices back to their quantity surveyor's (QS) department. We reluctantly signed this contract and then they went ‘bump’ the Monday after signing and 10 days before the first part payment was due.

As a result of Carillion's late payment tactics small enterprises like mine have been suffering greatly, if not terminally.”

Neil added:

“Large companies know late payment can destroy small businesses like us, but they rely on these tactics to ‘cook the books’ and be seen to be profitable themselves. Carillion went under owing us well over 15% of our annual turnover and, following a difficult year last year, this money is much needed to help us survive.”

By ensuring that all public sector projects over £500,000 use project bank accounts, my Bill would not only protect small businesses from losing money owed to them should the tier 1 supplier become insolvent, as Carillion did, but stop small businesses being paid late by large companies. PBAs are ring-fenced bank accounts

into which monies due to firms providing construction or other works are paid. The accounts are ring-fenced in a trust arrangement so that if a tier 1 contractor becomes insolvent, the monies for the subcontractors are protected. They do not disrupt contractual arrangements, but instead of public bodies paying tier 1 contractors directly, the public body pays money directly into the PBA. The tier 1 contractor and suppliers are then all paid simultaneously, usually within 15 to 18 days.

The Government are already using PBAs successfully in many areas. For example, Highways England uses them for all its works, and by 2020, £20 billion of highways work will have been paid through PBAs. They have also been used in building projects in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Even some local authorities are using them. Internationally, many Australian states mandate for PBAs to be used in construction projects, and last year the European Commission agreed to use PBAs for European projects.

In addition to payments to small business suppliers being protected and being received more quickly, there is also a reduction in disputes and disruption, as suppliers are less likely to suspend their work when paid promptly. The costs of public sector projects are reduced as well, as the greater security of payment provided by PBAs is factored into suppliers' pricing. PBAs are a practical, tried and tested measure to protect small businesses and make sure that they are paid promptly.

I have been campaigning against late payments since 2011, when a haulier in my Oldham East and Saddleworth constituency came to me and told me that he was struggling to survive because a mainstream supermarket chain was delaying payments. He was scared that he was going to go under. When I investigated the problem, I was staggered to see how endemic it is right across the country. Four out of five companies across all sectors experience late payments and are owed money, with 68% having to write off bad debt. One in three small businesses admit that late payments are forcing them to rely on bank overdrafts to keep up with their overheads, and more than a quarter say that late payments are forcing them to pay their own suppliers late.

It is shocking that, collectively, small businesses were owed £14 billion in late payments last year. Although late payments have come down from their height in 2013, just under half of small and medium-sized enterprises spend around £4.4 billion in admin costs alone on chasing late payments, and more than one in 10 businesses struggling with overdue invoices have to employ someone to chase for payment. Although the private sector tends to be worse for paying late than the public sector, some Government Departments are also failing to meet their commitment to pay 80% of undisputed invoices within five working days. In addition, Bacs research on existing measures to tackle late payments said:

“When it comes to government initiatives...about a quarter...say they are aware of measures to oblige large and listed companies to publish payment practices. However, three quarters...don't feel these measures improve the speed their companies are paid.”

In 2013, I held an all-party inquiry to look into the issues associated with late payments and what could be done about them. The evidence we took from small businesses was incredibly powerful. Our key finding was that late payment reflects the culture in the company, and as we know the culture of a company, or a society, ultimately reflects its leadership. It was clear that late

payment was used as a form of corporate bullying, with large companies exerting their power over their smaller suppliers just because they could. There was also evidence that many large companies are trying to rebuild their balance sheets on the backs of small businesses, and even have business models that rely on delaying payments to their suppliers. For some tier 1 suppliers, they are little more than a funding repository. Late payment like this is unethical and needs to be seen to be as unacceptable as tax evasion.

Before Christmas, I followed up on my inquiry with a roundtable with representatives from small businesses, including the Specialist Engineering Contractors' Group and the Federation of Small Businesses. Although some of my inquiry recommendations had been implemented, it was clear that there was still much to do, and PBAs were seen as a practical next step.

Our small business sector is the powerhouse of our economy, contributing £2 trillion of annual turnover—more than half of all private sector turnover—and providing 60% of all private sector jobs. Small businesses are critical to boosting aggregate levels of productivity in the UK, which, as we know from last week's figures, is at its lowest point in a decade. For a sustainable recovery and healthy growth, we need to support and nurture our entrepreneurs and small businesses. There is so much that needs to be done to tackle late payments and protect small businesses; my Bill is just one step in that process.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Debbie Abrahams, Alex Cunningham, Toby Perkins, Anna McMorrin, Diana Johnson, Rachel Reeves, Peter Aldous, Andrea Jenkyns, Marion Fellows, Caroline Lucas, Stephen Lloyd and Jim Shannon present the Bill.

Debbie Abrahams accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 1 March, and to be printed (Bill 315).

European Union (Withdrawal) Act

[9TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Debate resumed (Orders, 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'.

Mr Speaker: Under the order of 4 December, as varied on 9 January, I am now permitted to select amendments. I have provisionally selected the following four amendments: (a), in the name of the Leader of the Opposition, Jeremy Corbyn; (k), in the name of the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford); (b), in the name of the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh); and (f), in the name of the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron). If amendment (b) is agreed to, amendment (f) falls. Reference may be made in debate to any of the amendments on the Order Paper, including those which I have not selected.

For the benefit of Members and those observing our proceedings, let me set out concisely what will happen at the end of today's debate. This will be of interest to Members of the House and, I think, to those beyond the Chamber, whether within the Palace of Westminster or further afield, attending to our proceedings. At 7 o'clock, I shall first invite the Leader of the Opposition to move his amendment. If it is agreed to, I will then put to the House the original question, as amended. If it is disagreed to, I shall invite the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber to move his amendment. If that is agreed to, I will then put to the House the original question, as amended. If it is disagreed to, I shall invite the right hon. Member for Gainsborough to move his amendment. If that is agreed to, I will then put to the House the original question, as amended. If it is disagreed to, I shall then invite the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay to move his amendment. If that is agreed to, I will then put to the House the original question, as amended. If it is disagreed to, I will then put to the House the original question in the name of the Prime Minister.

That having been explained, I invite the Attorney General, Sir Geoffrey Cox, to open today's debate.

12.59 pm

The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox): I am extremely obliged to you for promoting me, Mr Speaker. Perhaps I can take that as a hint to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister.

Mr Speaker: That was of course always part of the intention.

The Attorney General: I will suggest the next office you could perhaps promote me to, Mr Speaker.

I am more than conscious that last time I had a prolonged outing in this House the verdict did not go well. [*Laughter.*] On this occasion, I intend, if I may, to

[*The Attorney General*]

adopt an approach that I hope will be more to the House's taste. I want to listen to the House's views, and I shall be as accommodating as possible to the interventions of Members of this House, knowing as I do that many of them have very strong views upon this subject.

I have listened with care to the speeches of Members of this House during the course of last week's proceedings, and I have been struck by the heartfelt and eloquent expressions of principled opinion that hon. Members have made. I was particularly struck, though I do not think he is in his place this morning, by the speech late last night—I commend you, Mr Speaker, and those who remained here until after 1 o'clock in the morning to complete yesterday's proceedings—by the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker). He waited, I think, until midnight or shortly thereafter to begin his speech, and made the most passionate appeal to Members of this House to understand the value of compromise. He told the House that the membership of this place confers on us not only the great privilege of participation in the Government but the responsibilities that go with it.

In the past, when this country has faced these kinds of grave obstacles and impediments to finding a way forward, Members of this place have found the resource within themselves to achieve a compromise and to subordinate their ideal preference—the solution that they would like to see—to that which commands a degree of consensus. It is precisely for that reason that I support the withdrawal agreement—not because I like every element of it but for wholly pragmatic reasons: it is the necessary means to secure our orderly departure and unlock our future outside the European Union.

Since 23 June 2016, we have been on a road that has led us ineluctably to this point. One after another, this House has taken the steps, often by overwhelming majorities, necessary to bring us to the brink of departure, and there are now but two steps to take. The first is this withdrawal agreement. It is the first of the two keys that will unlock our future outside the European Union. It is sometimes said in various circles, I understand, Mr Speaker, that if you are moving from one pressurised atmosphere or environment to another, it is necessary to have an airlock. This withdrawal agreement is the first key that will unlock the airlock and take us into the next stage, where the second key will be the permanent relationship treaty.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I appreciate the point that the Attorney General has made with regard to the value of compromise. Anyone involved in any significant negotiation knows that compromise, and the timing of it, is absolutely essential. Is he aware of the most recent comments by the retired former Irish ambassador to the EU, a man who worked on behalf of the Republic of Ireland on the Belfast agreement, who said in *The Sunday Business Post*: “We”—the Irish Government—“were wrong to insist on the backstop—and softening our stance is the only way to prevent ‘no deal’”? Is the Attorney General pushing for that outcome?

The Attorney General: Well, of course I would have been infinitely happier if the European Union had not laid down as one of its cardinal negotiating points and principles that there should be a backstop, but it has

done that. On the basis of its own guidance to its own negotiating principles, it would have been a demand that it always sought, and we are faced with the position as it now is.

If we take this step of entering this withdrawal agreement, we will then enter a stage where we are to negotiate the second key to unlock our future outside the European Union. What I am commending to the House is that we take this key and we unlock the door to that first chamber—that airlock where we can then settle the permanent relationship that is set out in the political declaration.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Attorney General's use of the airlock analogy is very striking, but does he realise that the reason many of us will vote against the deal tonight is that on the other side of the second airlock is a complete vacuum about our future relationship with our biggest, nearest and most important trading partner?

The Attorney General: I intend to address the very point that the right hon. Gentleman raises, because it is important to distinguish between the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration and the permanent treaties in which the long-term relationship between this country and the European Union will be settled. The political declaration sets the boundaries within which those permanent arrangements will be negotiated. The aims of the withdrawal agreement are to settle the outstanding issues that our departure creates. These are two separate and, importantly, distinguishable functions.

The withdrawal agreement commands across the House, I would submit, with the exception of two areas—the backstop and the political declaration—widespread consensus as to its necessity and its wisdom.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): Might I draw the Attorney General's attention to amendment (n) in my name, which calls on him to be a servant of the House and give his legal judgment on whether undertakings about the backstop and our ability to limit it are binding in law, and therefore actionable in law, internationally? Might he draw our attention to the letter he wrote in consequence—maybe in consequence—to the Prime Minister saying that we actually had that legal basis from the Council's conclusions on 13 December?

The Attorney General: The right hon. Gentleman is of course right to say that I published that letter in the spirit of the conversation I had with him—in the spirit of the Government's desire to make clear as much information as this House needs to make its judgments.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): On the backstop, can the Attorney General confirm that fish from Northern Ireland will have tariff-free access into the EU and tariff-free access back to the UK, but fish from Scotland will be subject to tariffs going into the EU, and that therefore Northern Ireland is going to be treated differently from Scotland in the backstop? The Scottish Secretary talked about responsibilities. He said that he would resign if Northern Ireland were given different conditions from Scotland. Is that not the case, and should not the Scottish Secretary consider his position?

The Attorney General: As I understand what the hon. Gentleman said, he has misunderstood. The backstop does not deal with the question of fish at all. It has no policy arrangements—

Alan Brown: Will the Attorney General give way?

The Attorney General: I am willing to discuss it with the hon. Gentleman later.

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) is rather excitable today. The Attorney General yields to none in his courtesy in the House, but it is not reasonable to expect of him, even with his formidable intellect, the capacity to try to respond to an intervention that he has not heard when he is dealing with one that he has.

The Attorney General: I am happy to discuss the matter with the hon. Gentleman afterwards if he wishes.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that the non-selection of the amendment in my name and the amendment in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), the Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, makes harder the Government's challenge this afternoon to convince those of us who are still concerned about the implications of the backstop? What does he think can replace those two amendments?

The Attorney General: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his question. I have never underestimated the challenge that I face today or the one that the Government face. As I shall come on to say in due course, I have reflected deeply, as he knows, upon the question of the backstop. I have reached the conclusion that it is a risk that it is acceptable to take, even having regard to the perils that it involves if it were to become permanent and the questions that it unquestionably raises in connection with the Union with Northern Ireland.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Will the Attorney General confirm that, while the political declaration is aspirational in style, it is not legally binding in international law, but the withdrawal agreement, as a draft international treaty, would be fully binding in international law? Will he also confirm that he is offering the House an embarrassment of riches? After months of debating the backstop, we now have the airlock as well. Are the Government so desperate that they are now offering the House of Commons a buy-one-get-one-free?

The Attorney General: My right hon. Friend knows what I mean. The airlock metaphor is indicated to demonstrate the distinction that exists. The withdrawal agreement has been negotiated over thousands of hours and is, as he rightly says, the legally binding text and the only legally binding text. It was only ever empowered under article 50 to deal with historic issues and outstanding matters that otherwise would have catapulted citizens, businesses and Governments into legal uncertainty.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Attorney General: I want to make a bit of progress, because it is important to look at what the withdrawal agreement does.

We should not underestimate the legal complexity of our disentanglement from 45 years of legal integration. It has taken two years and thousands of hours of detailed and arduous negotiation, some of it highly technical, to produce 585 pages of the most minute consideration of the possibilities that no deal would create in legal terms for the millions of people who depend upon the certainty of the legal system and rules to which we have hitherto been subject. It provides for the orderly, predictable and legally certain winding down of our obligations and involvement in the legal systems of the EU. If we do not legislate for that legal certainty, as a matter of law alone, thousands of contracts, transactions, administrative proceedings and judicial proceedings in the European Union and this country will be plunged into legal uncertainty.

It would be the height of irresponsibility for any legislator to contemplate with equanimity such a situation. A litigant in court who was dependent upon having concluded a contract on the basis of EU law and then found themselves suddenly having the rug pulled from under them, not knowing what their legal obligations were, would say to this House, "What are you playing at? What are you doing? You are not children in the playground. You are legislators, and this is your job."

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Attorney General: I will give way in a moment. I intend to take many interventions in the course of this speech.

We are playing with people's lives. We are debating the effects of legal continuity. Forty-five years of legal integration have brought our two legal systems into a situation where they are organically linked. To appeal to those who have a medical background, it is the same as if we were to separate from a living organism, with all its arteries and veins, a living organ—a central part from this body politic. We cannot underestimate the complexity of what we are embarked upon doing.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Will the Attorney General give way?

The Attorney General: I cannot resist giving way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Speaker: The Attorney General, as per usual, is addressing the House with a remarkable combination of the intellect of Einstein and the eloquence of Demosthenes. We are all enjoying it enormously—*[Interruption.]* Well, I am certainly enjoying it, but I hope he will not cavil if I gently remind him that 71 Members wish to contribute. I know he will tailor his contribution to take account of that important fact.

Chris Bryant: The Attorney General is making a good point, which a lot of us agree with—legal uncertainty is the worst possible outcome. That is why some of us are so angry that the vote was taken away from us in December. There is not a single chance of the Government getting the necessary legislation through by 29 March, even if the Attorney General were to get his way today.

[Chris Bryant]

Can he confirm that if the vote is not won tonight, the Government will have to defer leaving the European Union on 29 March?

The Attorney General: The hon. Gentleman knows the affection that I hold for him. It is not “my way”. I understand the heartfelt, passionate and sincere views held on both sides. I listened all last night to the speeches from Members on the Opposition and Government Benches. We must come together now, as mature legislators, to ask ourselves: what are the fundamental objections, if there are any, to this withdrawal agreement? Whether or not it can be done by 29 March does not affect the decision we have to take today, which is: do we opt for order, or do we choose chaos?

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The Attorney General admitted that there are two problems with the deal. It is a bit like a yachtsman who, when seeing his yacht on the rocks, says, “That anchor chain was great. Only two links were bad.” That is what he is giving the House. It is a disaster, and well he knows it. My second point is that he misunderstood the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown). He was not talking about fish being caught, but fish as a commodity once caught. If it is landed in Northern Ireland, it is in a more advantaged position for export to Europe than fish caught and then landed in Scotland for export to Europe. He should recognise that and be straight with my hon. Friend, which I am sure he was trying to be, but he misunderstood the point.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP) *rose*—

The Attorney General: I wonder whether I might take the intervention of the hon. and learned Lady.

Mr Speaker: Order. In terms of good form, it is the norm for the Minister occupying the Bench or the Member making the speech to offer some response before taking a further intervention. It may be a perfunctory response, but that is the norm.

The Attorney General: I apologise, Mr Speaker. I wanted to take the interventions together. If the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) is referring, in relation to Northern Ireland, to the quota that is to be agreed by the Joint Committee for landing—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: When it is caught and then sold.

The Attorney General: I would need to examine the issue. I am not certain the hon. Gentleman is right but, again, I have offered to discuss it.

Joanna Cherry: The right hon. and learned Gentleman says he is much exercised about legal certainty, so may I ask him about paragraph 2 of his letter yesterday on the exchange of letters? He said that the letters from the Council

“would have legal force in international law and...be relevant and cognisable in the interpretation of the...Agreement...albeit they do not alter the fundamental meanings”

of the withdrawal agreement’s provisions. He, as a senior lawyer, like me will know that in a competition between the letter of assurance and the withdrawal agreement, the withdrawal agreement, as the international treaty, will triumph. That is the case, is it not?

The Attorney General: Let me say straightaway, as my letter says, that these assurances, in my view, make a difference to the political question that each of us has to take, but, as I said in the letter, they do not affect the legal equation.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): On this point about the legal effect and what the Prime Minister said—five weeks ago today, in fact—about legally binding assurances—does not what Attorney General has just said confirm the fact that legally binding assurances have not been achieved? That is the tragedy of where we find ourselves now, after five weeks. In fact, from our point of view, the thing that would have been essential to get this matter through the House with our support was not even asked for, which are the changes that would eliminate the trap of the backstop.

The Attorney General: First, let me say to my right hon. Friend, the legal equation remains the same. The assurances are binding in the sense that, in international law, they would be a legally binding interpretative tool. What they do not do is alter the fundamental meaning of the provisions of the withdrawal agreement. In that respect, he is right.

I need to come to the first point that I want to make to the House. Let us examine the rest of the agreement. Do we have—

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): Will the Attorney General give way?

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): Will the Attorney General give way?

The Attorney General: I will in a minute.

Do we have before us—the withdrawal agreement—a sensible settling of these critical historical obligations for continuing transactions to resolve, for millions of people, the legal uncertainty of taking ourselves away from the highly integrated legal system in which we were organically linked and, indeed, part of? The 585 pages—

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Attorney General: I must make some progress. I will take many more interventions.

On the 585 pages, what does the agreement do? First, it secures the rights of 1 million British citizens living in the European Union and of 3 million European Union citizens living in the United Kingdom. What are we to say to them if this House today does not take the advantage of resolving and giving them the certainty of knowing that their position is enshrined in fundamental law?

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Will the Attorney General give way?

The Attorney General: I will in a moment.

The agreement settles the bills. It legally allows for the orderly completion of these thousands of continuing transactions—judicial proceedings, accounting procedures—that would otherwise be thrown into a legal void. It provides for a period of adjustment for people and for businesses of the next 21 months, extendable up to two years, to allow our businesses and our individual citizens to adjust to the new realities.

That is what I mean by the airlock. It is quite simple: an airlock enables the human body to adjust to the new pressure it will face when it exits the airlock. This period allows the transition and adjustment of this country to enter into the bright new world that we will enter when we leave the European Union. So I say to the House with all due diffidence and respect: we all of us would regard, would we not, these parts of the withdrawal agreement as essential to create the bridge for our departure from the European Union.

Mr Vara: My right hon. and learned Friend speaks of the legal complexities of the withdrawal agreement, and he also speaks of a coming together. May I refer him to the advice that he gave to the Prime Minister on 13 November in his capacity as Attorney General? On page 2, paragraph 8, he said:

“for regulatory purposes GB is essentially treated as a third country by NI for goods passing from GB into NI.”

How can he talk about coming together, while his own advice to the Prime Minister talks of anything but?

The Attorney General: I understand the force of what my hon. Friend says, but precisely the same prevails in numerous EU countries. For the purposes of regulation, the Canary Islands are treated as a third country to Spain. It is not for the purposes of regulation alone—single market regulations alone. There are examples all around the world of where there are regulatory differences between individual parts of the jurisdiction of sovereign states.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): On a previous occasion, in early December, in what I thought was a magnificent performance, Attorney General, you used a very striking description of the backstop. You described the backstop as an “instrument of pain”—

Mr Speaker: I did not.

Lady Hermon: You are quite right, Mr Speaker. The Attorney General described the backstop as an instrument of pain. He said it was

“as much an instrument of pain to the European Union as...to the United Kingdom.”—[*Official Report*, 3 December 2018; Vol. 650, c. 555.]

That is very strong language indeed—an “instrument of pain” for the European Union. Will the Attorney General take some time to explain that in detail? I think that would be very helpful.

The Attorney General: I am immensely obliged to the hon. Lady because that is precisely what I want to move on to.

If we accept, and I urge this House to accept, that effectively 90% of this withdrawal agreement—some 450 of the 585 pages—in fact settles these crucial outstanding matters, which no sensible person could doubt require to be settled in order to effect our departure, that leaves

the two grounds of objection that have been advanced—I listen with great care to speeches from Members on the Opposition side of the House—to this agreement and declaration, so may I come to those two grounds? Before I do, I simply say that there are some typical misconceptions about the withdrawal agreement. For example, it is said that the Court of Justice of the European Union retains jurisdiction over our courts once the time-limited obligations have wound down that the withdrawal agreement settles. It does not. It does not. It does not. It does not. How many times do I have to say it to my hon. Friends? [HON. MEMBERS: “More.”] It does not! The fact of the matter is that once—once—these obligations have wound down, the CJEU will have no jurisdiction over the resolution of disputes between individuals, citizens, businesses in our country. This is what our people voted for and we, by adopting this withdrawal agreement, can give it to them.

Secondly, it is said that we will be permanently bound by EU rules. But we will not. The fact of the matter is that the withdrawal agreement’s obligations are inherently time-limited. Once they have wound out, the EU rules will no longer have effect in this country.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend is making his case with his usual eloquence, but on that specific point and his point about airlocks, airlocks need exit mechanisms. In the absence of legal certainty that we could unilaterally leave the backstop—my amendment (f) addresses this and I will be pressing it—what certainty is there that the EU does not drag negotiations on, so that we could still, with an extension to the transition period, be discussing these issues in four or five years’ time?

The Attorney General: Herein lies the critical question that we all have to confront in connection to the backstop. Before I answer it, however, I will take my hon. Friend’s intervention.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I thank the Attorney General for giving way. While he pauses for breath, may I too take him to the airlock? In travelling through an airlock, it helps to have a supply of air. In this particular case, I would urge conditionality—that we do not agree to write out a cheque for £39 billion of hard-earned taxpayers’ money unless or until a future relationship agreement is agreed that is legally binding. That would give us greater leverage in the negotiation and enable us to deliver serious value for the British taxpayer.

The Attorney General: You cannot say to somebody to whom you owe money, “I am not going to pay you my debt unless you give me something else.” It is not attractive, it is not consistent with the honour of this country and it is not consistent with the rule of law. The fact of the matter is that the withdrawal agreement settles those historic obligations.

May I come to the critical question and the challenge that was—

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Will the Attorney General give way?

The Attorney General: I will do in a moment. Let me get on because time is short and I need to move on.

[*The Attorney General*]

On the backstop, there is, I would suggest to the House, an inconsistency. There are those who say in this House that the EU will do what is in its interests and that it will, cynically, entrap us in the backstop. They have said—can anybody doubt that this is true?—that the only real thing that is in the best interests of any nation or any organisation of nations is to have cordial relations of good will and co-operation with one's neighbours. History has taught us that over the centuries. To entrap us in the backstop against the overwhelming political will of this nation would have precisely the opposite effect of cultivating those cordial relations of good will between ourselves and the European Union. Any future relationship will depend on good faith and good will. These assurances, which I accept do not have effect on the legal equation, in my view represent solemn statements of the President, the Council and the Commission, which to breach would be incompatible with the European Union's continued standing in international relations and forums. But even if—

Mr Bone: Will the Attorney General give way on that point?

The Attorney General: I must make some progress.

But even if I am wrong about that, let us examine what the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) asked me to look at. What is the position in the backstop? First, the European Union. No Belgian lawyer—there's a Freudian slip, Mr Speaker. No Belgian fisherman, no French fisherman, no Danish fisherman, no Dutch fisherman will be allowed to point the prow of their trawlers one metre into British waters under the backstop. They will have no access to the rich hunting grounds that for decades they have exploited perfectly lawfully, because the backstop provides them with no legal basis to do so.

I ask the House to reflect. Why does the House think that the rumblings and hollow thunderings of concern are emanating from the counsels of the Quai d'Orsay? They have 10,000 gilets jaunes on the streets of Paris and elsewhere, but if their fishermen are told that they cannot catch a single cod or plaice in the waters of the United Kingdom they will place intense pressure upon the European Union. So I say to the hon. Lady that that fact alone affords a real issue for the member states. But on agriculture, we do not have any further participation in the common agricultural policy under the backstop, and we pay, though we get tariff-free access to the single market, not one penny for that system.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con) *rose—*

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con) *rose—*

The Attorney General: I must make progress.

I say to my hon. Friends, as I say to Opposition Members, the EU will have to set up entirely different legal and administrative systems in order to set up the customs union that is enshrined within the backstop, yet Britain will pay not one penny of contribution to those complex administrative and technical systems which the EU will, on their side alone, have to finance. How long does the House really think that the EU would wish to go on paying for a bespoke arrangement

in which they are paying tens of millions of euros to sustain a customs union that is simply on their own admission a temporary arrangement?

But even if that was wrong, there are the regulatory provisions under the backstop. They are standard non-regression clauses. They exist in free trade agreements all around the world. They provide us with the ability, if we wish to take it, of being flexible about the means by which we achieve the outcomes because all they do is require us to maintain parity of standards with the position we had when we left the European Union. Therefore, it does give us regulatory flexibility if we wish to avail ourselves of it and the European Union is faced with not a penny being paid, with tariff-free access to the customs union, with not having to obey the regulatory law—

Mr Speaker: Order. I have been tolerant thus far and I enjoy enormously the performances of the right hon. and learned Gentleman, but this perambulation is very uncommon and irregular. The right hon. and learned Gentleman must face the House. We want to see him and to get directly the benefit of his mellifluous tones.

The Attorney General: You upbraid me entirely justly, Mr Speaker, and I apologise.

Sir Edward Leigh: Everything the Attorney General says about the backstop may be true, but he knows that many of our hon. Friends are deeply concerned about this and we want an end date. I am not asking him for an answer now, but I see the Prime Minister and the Chief Whip on the Treasury Bench. There is an amendment on the Order Paper that has been selected by Mr Speaker, which could unite the party, or most of it. It is a compromise. If we can have an end date to the backstop, then we can move forward. I do not ask for an answer now, but I beg the Government to consider, over the next six hours, whether they should not accept these amendments because they would try to unlock this process and get it through Parliament.

The Attorney General: The amendment that my right hon. Friend has tabled would, in my judgment, not be compatible with our international law obligations. He may know and accept that, but it is certainly my view that it would not be compatible and therefore would be likely not to be seen by the European Union as ratification. It would certainly raise serious question marks over the amendment.

We need to examine the matter without the indulgence of believing that there is any other easy solution. It is sometimes said that the problem with the backstop is that it will not enable us to walk away. That is true, except in this regard: the question is what we would be walking away from. Would the other side regard it as something they would not wish to walk away from, or would it be an embrace that they would like to escape as well? If my hon. and right hon. Friends and Members of the House on both sides come to the conclusion, as I would urge them to do and as I have done after many hours of reflection, that it would be, as the hon. Member for North Down said, an instrument as painful to the European Union as it would be to us, it is a risk, weighed against the other risks, that we should take, if the consequence of not doing so is something worse.

Mr Bone: May I take the Attorney General back to some time ago, when he was saying that there was a legal obligation to give £39 billion to the EU, despite the fact that we have been a net contributor of more than £210 billion since the EU started? Will he explain to me on what legal advice he says that, because the House of Lords said there was absolutely no legal obligation?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend is wrong. The House of Lords did not say that. The House of Lords Committee said that there was no obligation in EU law, but that there may well be public international law obligations. The basis of the argument that there are no public international law obligations is in my judgment—I have tested it, as I always do on matters of law, with some very distinguished lawyers with expertise in the field—flimsy at best. The House of Lords Committee did not say there are no public international law obligations.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Will the Attorney General give way?

The Attorney General: I must move on, because the next thing I must deal with is the alternatives.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): What about giving way to a woman?

The Attorney General: I will give way to my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), but first I need to make some progress.

Orderly exit from the European Union would always require a withdrawal agreement along these lines. No alternative option now being canvassed in the House would not require the withdrawal agreement and now the backstop. Let us be clear: whatever solution may be fashioned if this motion and deal are defeated, this withdrawal agreement will have to return in much the same form and with much the same content. Therefore, there is no serious or credible objection that has been advanced by any party to the withdrawal agreement.

It was said last week by the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) that we should have negotiated a full customs union with a say within the political declaration and then there would have been no need for a backstop, because the agreement could then have been concluded within the transition period. However, he knows, and it is clear, that the European Union is unwilling to and regards itself as bound by its own law not to enter into detailed negotiations on the permanent relationship treaties. The EU was never going to do it, and its own negotiating guidelines said it would not, so there was always going to be this withdrawal agreement, a political declaration setting out a framework and months, if not years, thereafter of detailed negotiation on any final resting place that any political declaration might have.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): Will the Attorney General give way?

The Attorney General: I will come to the hon. Gentleman in time. Let us examine the point. The question is what is the basis for the objection to the withdrawal agreement?

Anna Soubry: The Attorney General and I are both members of the criminal Bar, although I was never in his league. We both understand the art of negotiation.

Someone cannot be a criminal barrister or, indeed, any kind of lawyer unless they understand negotiation. He advances the case for the withdrawal agreement on the basis that it has reached some pragmatic consensus, but I suggest to him that a good negotiation is something that settles things and that a majority can positively support. The problem with this agreement is that it does not settle anything and it does not satisfy the vast majority. In fact, it probably satisfies no one in this House.

The Attorney General: I respectfully suggest to my right hon. Friend that that is because the expectations of the withdrawal agreement have been far too unrealistic. *[Interruption.]* This is a serious issue, and I ask for the indulgence of the House in making what I hope is a serious point, although I have to give way to the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves). If the House does not accept the point, that is fine, but let me at least make it.

The withdrawal agreement and a backstop are the first and necessary precondition of any solution. Members on the Opposition Benches have real concerns about the content of the political declaration and the safeguarding of rights. I listened to Members speak last night about the enshrinement of environmental rights and environmental laws and so on, but the political declaration would never have been able to secure detailed, legally binding text on those matters, which will be discussed and negotiated in the next stage of negotiation. It makes no sense to reject the opportunity of order and certainty now because Members are unhappy that they do not have guarantees about what will be in a future treaty.

What will be in that treaty, governed by the parameters set out by the political declaration that I need to come to in a moment, will be negotiated over the next 21 months. This Government have made a pledge to the House that we will take fully the opinion of the House in all the departmental areas over which the negotiations will take place.

Stephen Doughty: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I hope it is a point of order and not a point of frustration. I await it with bated breath.

Stephen Doughty: It is a point of inquiry, Mr Speaker. You will be aware that the Attorney General has now spoken for 49 minutes. I understand that a substantial number of colleagues wish to speak today. Can you tell us how many colleagues are waiting to speak and the approximate time people will get?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is, as always, trying to be helpful, although it was really a point of frustration. The fact is, as I have previously advised the House, that no fewer than 71 hon. and right hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye. There are notable constraints to which I do not wish to add, but of which I feel sure the Attorney General will take account.

The Attorney General: I set myself a clear time limit, but I am anxious—*[Interruption.]* You really cannot win. I am trying to take as many interventions as I can, and I will take that of the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna).

Chuka Umunna: The Attorney General talks about the danger of setting unrealistic expectations, but it was the Prime Minister sitting next to him who promised in her Lancaster House speech that we would have agreed the future relationship before exit day. Secondly, he makes great play of this implementation period, but it is of no use in some respects if we do not know to what we are transitioning. He knows that we will have a different European Parliament, a different European Council and a different European President, and two other presidents, who will all have changed by the time that the future relationship is due to be settled.

The Attorney General: We must start from where we are now. It is easy to say, “We shouldn’t have started from here.” The political declaration sets out clear parameters about the future treaty. First, written into the DNA of the political declaration are two cardinal principles—

Chuka Umunna: But it is not a legal document.

The Attorney General: It is not a legal document, but no political declaration would ever be a legal document, by definition. Under EU law, we cannot have a finally negotiated text with all the legal detail.

Let me come to the two clear conditions in the political declaration—*[Interruption.]* I will complete in a few minutes. First, no free movement—

Rachel Reeves: Will the Attorney General give way?

The Attorney General: Will the hon. Lady forgive me, but I really cannot? Her own colleagues say that I am taking too long, and I must wind up.

The position is that the political declaration includes two clear conditions. First, there will be no free movement. One cannot belong to the single market without participating in the four freedoms, therefore we will have a deal that admits of a spectrum of landing places where we will not belong to the single market.

Rachel Reeves: Will the Attorney General give way?

The Attorney General: No, I must now make progress.

Secondly, there will be an independent trade policy. One cannot have a customs union—certainly one that is not bespoke—while having an independent trade policy. The Labour Front-Bench team say that they want a customs union with a say. That would be the first time—if it were ever negotiable—that the European Union had allowed a third country to have any say over commercial policy. Therefore, it is a fantasy, a complete fiction.

The Labour Front-Bench team also say that they want a strong single market deal, forming the exact same benefits—

Rachel Reeves: Will the Attorney General give way?

The Attorney General: No. The same benefits but with no free movement—that is exactly what the Government want. They want a clear, strong, deep relationship with the European Union with no free movement, so I say to Labour hon. Gentlemen and Ladies and—

Rachel Reeves: But the Attorney General will not hear this hon. Lady.

The Attorney General: All right.

Rachel Reeves: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way. He has been speaking for almost an hour, and for almost that entire time he has been addressing the concerns of a wing of his party, rather than the concerns of this House. In the past week, two amendments have been passed, neither with the support of the Government—to the Finance Bill and to the business motion—and both those amendments made it clear that the view of this House is to avoid a no-deal Brexit. That is the priority of this House—not the issue of the backstop, which he seems to have been addressing for the past hour. Instead of trying to unite his party, as the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) has urged him to do, will the Attorney General try to unite the country, and to do the right thing by it, by ruling out leaving the European Union on 29 March without a deal?

The Attorney General: The hon. Lady can eliminate a no deal today; all she has to do is to vote for this one. In reality, it is the height of irresponsibility for the Labour party, which claims to be a party of Government, to plunge millions of our citizens into legal uncertainty of that type because of a factitious, trumped-up basis of opposition, whereas the real strategy is to drive this Government and this House on to the rocks, and to create the maximum chaos and the conditions for a general election—*[Interruption.]* We know the game, I say—*[Interruption.]* It is as clear as day—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Zen—the House must calm itself. It is an early stage of our proceedings.

The Attorney General: I say to the House with the greatest respect, we must seize this opportunity now. This is the key—the first of two—by which we unlock our future outside the European Union. I believe that it is an exciting future. I believe that the opportunity for this House to hold the pen on 40% of our laws, from the environment through to agriculture and fishing, should excite us as an opportunity to do good in this country.

Let us not forget, however, that many outside this House as well as in it wish to frustrate the great end to which the people of this country committed us on 23 June 2016—17.4 million of them in hundreds of constituencies, regardless of party, voted to part company with a political structure that no longer commanded their assent. We should be deeply grateful, because in other ages and other places, such a moment could only have been achieved by means that all of us present would deplore—but we should not underestimate the significance of the moment because it was expressed peacefully by the ballot.

If we approve this agreement, we know that we shall leave the EU on 29 March in an orderly way, and can commence negotiation of the permanent treaties. This agreement and the accompanying political declaration are the two keys that unlock the demand of the electorate that we should repatriate control over vast areas of our laws that hitherto have been in the exclusive legislative competence of the EU. If we do not take that first step, history will judge us harshly, because we will be plunged into uncertainty.

If this vote fails today, those who wish to prevent our departure will seek to promote the conclusion that it is all too difficult and that the Government should ask the electorate to think again. That is why former Prime Ministers and their spin doctors, and all their great panjandrums of the past, are joining the chorus to condemn this deal, for they know that this deal is the key. There is no other. Destroy it—in some form or other, the only practicable deal—and the path to Brexit becomes shrouded in obscurity. If we should be so deceived as to permit that, when historians come to write of this moment, future ages would marvel that the huge repatriation of powers that this agreement entails—over immigration, fisheries, agriculture, the supremacy of our laws and courts—was rejected because somehow it did not seem enough and because of the Northern Ireland backstop.

1.58 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am happy to open today's debate for the Opposition and to follow the Attorney General—I am, of course, grateful for his remarks over the past hour. I was also pleased to see his letter to the Prime Minister yesterday, which gave advice on the backstop protocol and the latest exchange of letters, and to receive it without the need for a contempt motion on this occasion.

On 3 December, I was sitting at this Dispatch Box when the Attorney General made his statement on the legal position. He said of Members:

"It is time that they grew up and got real."

He had even said to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman):

"There is nothing to see here."—[*Official Report*, 3 December 2018; Vol. 650, c. 557-563.]

After the Government were found to be in contempt of Parliament, however, and he had published his advice the next day, it turned out that there was everything to see here, and that it was the Government who needed to get real.

Let us be clear about what the Attorney General advised. What did he say about the backstop protocol? He said:

"Therefore, despite statements in the Protocol that it is not intended to be permanent, and the clear intention of the parties that it should be replaced by alternative, permanent arrangements, in international law the Protocol would endure indefinitely until a superseding agreement took its place, in whole or in part, as set out therein."

Which parts of the backstop are more likely than others to remain, even in the event of a trade deal being agreed, he has never actually told us. He added:

"There are numerous references in the Protocol to its temporary nature but there is no indication of how long such temporary arrangements could last."

On Northern Ireland, incidentally, the Attorney General said:

"GB is essentially treated as a third country by NI for goods passing from GB into NI"—

those are his own words. The Attorney General even said:

"The Protocol appears to assume that the negotiations will result in an agreement."

Are we in the House to assume, given the conduct of the negotiations, that this Government will be able to negotiate a full future trade deal in time for the protocol not to come into effect?

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): Yes.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Nick Macpherson, the former permanent secretary to the Treasury, disagrees with the Secretary of State. I know that the right hon. Gentleman is not a fan of experts, but perhaps he will listen to this one for a moment. Mr Macpherson said:

"There is no way the UK will negotiate a trade deal with the EU by December 2020. Even 2022 is optimistic. Mid-2020s more likely."

As a matter of law, as a shadow Law Officer, I ask myself whether there is anything to prevent the backstop from becoming permanent:

"As a matter of international law, no there is not—it would endure indefinitely, pending a future agreement being arranged".—[*Official Report*, 3 December 2018; Vol. 650, c. 553.]

They are not my words, but those of the Attorney General in this House.

I have to state, clearly, for the House that, as the Opposition, the Labour party is committed to the Good Friday agreement—an agreement that my constituency predecessor, Lord Murphy of Torfaen, helped to negotiate when he chaired the peace talks. That was one of the greatest achievements of any Government since 1945. Labour Members are committed to the long-lasting peace that has been achieved since 1998 and care deeply about the livelihoods and communities of the people who live on the Northern Ireland-Ireland border.

Our position is that a permanent customs union, with a say in external trade deals, a strong single market relationship and guarantees on rights and protections, would have rendered a backstop unnecessary.

Michael Gove: Name me a single other country that is in a customs union with the EU that has a say over trade deals. Is not this an unprecedented legal and political novelty of the kind that is rightly called a unicorn?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Let me be clear that I would want our own arrangements. The Secretary of State asks me to give an example of that particular theoretical possibility. It is not one that I wish to emulate, but Turkey is one of them, if he actually looks at it. Secondly—[*Interruption.*] No, let me respond to the Secretary of State on this. He will vote this evening for a backstop that itself contains a bespoke customs arrangement—[*Interruption.*] It has a say, and that is the difference, as the Secretary of State should admit.

Michael Gove: You're wrong.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: No, I am not.

Let me be clear: this backstop provides only a bare bones customs union, and that is why we cannot support it.

Lady Hermon: May I inform the hon. Gentleman—I am sure he already knows—that the vast majority of farmers, businesses, fishermen and community leaders in Northern Ireland strongly support this deal negotiated by the Government? I heard his warm words about his support for the Good Friday agreement, but actions speak louder than words. Voting down the Brexit deal tonight will be a clear signal that the Labour party does not care about the consequences for the Good Friday agreement.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I have great respect for the hon. Lady, but I fundamentally disagree with her final remark. There is a commitment to the Good Friday agreement among Labour Members. My constituency has great pride in the agreement because the peace talks were chaired by my predecessor—we have great respect for it and want to protect it.

Let me be clear why we cannot support the bespoke customs union within the backstop: it would have no proper governance; firms based in Britain, rather than Northern Ireland, would be outside the single market facing barriers to trade; and the protections for workers and the environment would be unenforceable non-regression clauses that would see the UK fall behind over time. The arrangement falls far short of what Labour has argued for.

What other routes are there to an exit from the backstop? I asked the Attorney General about international treaties that the UK has no unilateral right to terminate. His response was to direct me to the Vienna convention on the law of treaties. Even if it applied—and it only applies between states—the Attorney General knows this is clutching at straws. First, it is said, we could argue that the EU was not using “best endeavours” to complete our future trade agreement and that that constituted a “material breach” under article 60 of the convention. The Attorney General has said, in relation to article 2.1 of the backstop protocol, that

“it is the duty of the parties to negotiate a superseding agreement. That must be done using best endeavours, pursuant to Article 184 of the Withdrawal agreement. This is subject also to the duty of good faith, which is both implied by international law, and expressly created by Article 5 of the Withdrawal Agreement”.

But he has also said:

“The duty of good faith and to use best endeavours is a legally enforceable duty. There is no doubt that it is difficult to prove.”

Again, those are the words of the Attorney General. He knows that that is the case.

Secondly, we could try to argue that there had been a “fundamental change of circumstances” under article 62 of the Vienna convention, but we could not credibly argue that entering the backstop was such a change in circumstances when the situation is clearly set out in the withdrawal agreement in such a way. To say that a scenario we are all aware of and debating now represents a fundamental departure would not wash with anyone, as the Attorney General knows. It is not so much an airlock as a padlock, and it is a padlock with two key holders, of which we are only one.

What changed over Christmas? What has been achieved by delaying the vote? The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs told us on the morning of the vote that it was

“definitely, 100%, going to happen”.

We all know what happened after that—it is one of many incidents during this process that has led many of us to disbelieve so much that the Government say. The Prime Minister said in her statement later that day:

“I have heard those concerns and I will now do everything I possibly can to secure further assurances”.

The Leader of the House said:

“The Prime Minister has been clear that the vote will take place when she believes she has the legal assurances that Parliament needs that the backstop will not be permanent.”—[*Official Report*, 10 December 2018; Vol. 651, c. 25-84.]

The International Trade Secretary, went even further, saying that it would be

“very difficult to support the deal without changes to the backstop”. He was not sure that the Cabinet would agree for it to be put to the House of Commons.

What actually happened? The Prime Minister went to the European Council but could not persuade leaders to give her the conclusions she wanted. The Christmas break came and went. We got a document on commitments to Northern Ireland that did nothing to change the legal text and then, yesterday, letters appeared between the Prime Minister on the one hand, and the President of the European Council and the President of the Commission on the other.

Anna Soubry: The hon. Gentleman is making a case about trust, and that is what the country is being asked to do—make this great leap of faith. We do not know what our future trading and security relationships will be. The sorry story is that all the way through the past two and a half years we have had a series of promises that have not been delivered. He will remember, for example, the then Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), saying at the Dispatch Box that we would have a deal before we left that would convey the “exact same benefits” of our current membership of the single market and the customs union. That is what is troubling people. This is a blindfold Brexit and that is why people will not vote for it.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The right hon. Lady is right and I am sure that she has noted the inconsistency. The Attorney General said only a few moments ago that we could not expect to have anything detailed negotiated at this stage, but that is precisely what the Government had previously promised. How are we supposed to believe those conflicting statements?

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): That point is exactly at the heart of this question of trust. The Attorney General just committed the EU to not agreeing to future trade deals, in response to our request for a customs union, but he refused to say—the Government still refuse to do so—whether the Government will commit to a customs union in that future trade agreement. If they were to do so, there would be no need for this discussion about the backstop or about the matter of trust that the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) talked about.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend highlights the really vague nature of the political declaration, which I will come back to in a moment.

Several hon. Members rose—

Nick Thomas-Symonds: They are queueing up! I will give way to the hon. Member for Ribbles Valley (Mr Evans), but then I need to make some progress.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribbles Valley) (Con): We have talked about trust and promises, which are vital. We promised to deliver on the outcome of the referendum. It was this House that gave the people the referendum in the first place. We passed our sovereignty to the people and promised that we would deliver on their verdict. That verdict

was to leave the European Union. Does not the hon. Gentleman believe that if we failed to deliver on that verdict, it would be seen as one of the greatest betrayals of trust in this country?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My constituents, like those of the hon. Gentleman, voted to leave the EU, and I voted to trigger article 50 in good faith and in line with their wishes. I sincerely hoped that there would by now be something significantly better before this House that we could all have supported and got around.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con) *rose—*

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am going to make some progress, but I will give way again in a moment.

I want to move on to the letter that has been sent by President Juncker and President Tusk, page 2 of which states:

“The European Council also said that, if the backstop were nevertheless to be triggered, it would only apply temporarily, unless and until it is superseded by a subsequent agreement”.

They again spoke about “best endeavours” and about the backstop being in place only for as long as “strictly necessary”, but we all know that that represents no difference at all to the position on which the Attorney General advised in December. Have there been any changes to the withdrawal agreement text? None. Changes to the possible interpretations of it? None. Changes to the reassurances available? None. What did the Attorney General himself say in his latest letter to the Prime Minister about the Council’s conclusions and their impact on the Northern Ireland protocol? He said that

“they do not alter the fundamental meaning of its provisions as I advised them to be on 13 November 2018.”

To coin a phrase, nothing has changed.

Daniel Kawczynski *rose—*

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con) *rose—*

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I want to make some progress.

I made it clear in response to an intervention that my constituency of Torfaen voted to leave. I respect everyone who voted. In good faith, and in line with their wishes, I voted to trigger article 50 to start the process of our withdrawal. I wish there were a withdrawal agreement worthy of wide support across this House. I wish there were a political declaration that actually did point a way to a future that secured our economy, our jobs and our futures, and that it was not the meaningless text—the leap in the dark—that it actually is. Now, more than ever, we need to unite the country away from fractious debate and towards a shared vision of our future.

The Prime Minister says she wants to unite, but all she has done is divide. She failed to unilaterally guarantee the rights of EU citizens at the outset, which would have been the right thing to do, creating good will on both sides. Her red lines created more problems than they solved, and she has negotiated issues in an order and a way that made a backstop inevitable. The Prime Minister has had two years to reach out across the House for consensus, but she has failed to do so. Instead of speaking to others, she has stayed in her bunker. Now she only speaks at the concrete walls, unable to deliver the changes needed.

This country deserves so much better than this totally inadequate agreement. We hoped for more in the 916 days since the Prime Minister first stood on the steps of No. 10 with what have proved to be completely empty promises. I stand here today, nearly four years after I was first elected, knowing that we can and must do better at this key moment in our history. For that reason, the Prime Minister’s deal should be voted down by this House.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. The first of the approximately 70 Members wishing to speak from the Back Benches is the Father of the House, Mr Kenneth Clarke.

2.14 pm

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I shall try to compete with the Opposition spokesman on brevity by being briefer than he was.

This is a chaotic debate in every conceivable way. Future generations will look back and be unable to imagine how we reduced ourselves to this disorderly exchange on a whole range of views, cutting across the parties, at a time when we were taking such a historic decision. That was summed up to me yesterday when I drove through the gates into New Palace Yard and was flanked on either side by lobbyists waving things at me. To my right, I had people waving yellow placards with the words “Leave means leave.” To my left, I had people waving European Union flags and demanding my support. In so far as anyone was shouting any clear message to me, it seemed that both sides were shouting the same thing. Both sides were demanding that I vote against the withdrawal agreement. That summed up the confusion, because both were pursuing objectives, neither of which I agreed with and which took us a million miles away from the national interest, which the House of Commons should surely turn itself to in the end.

We all know where we are coming from, and I am not going to labour my well-known views, because I have been here so long. Yesterday I slightly offended one of my very good friends in the House when I referred to hard-line remainers as well as hard-line Brexiteers. I confess that I am undoubtedly a hard-line remainer. I do not think that there is anyone more hard-line on the subject in the House. When I was a Cabinet Minister, I refused to vote for the referendum being held. The Prime Minister and the Chief Whip chose not to notice my attempts ostentatiously to abstain on the vote. I am the only person on the Government side of the House who voted against invoking article 50. I am a lifelong believer in the European project, and no opinion poll is ever going to change my mind at this stage.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con) *rose—*

Mr Clarke: I apologise to my hon. Friend, but I have no time.

I believe that Britain’s role in the world now is as one of the three leading members of the European Union, and one that has particular links with the United States—when it has a normal President—that the others do not. That enables us to defend our interests and put forward our values in a very dangerous world. We have influential membership—we lead on liberal economic policy—

[*Mr Kenneth Clarke*]

of the biggest and most developed free trade area in the world, which is always going to be where our major trading partners are, because in the end geography determines that they matter to us more than anyone else.

I will not go on, but just in case there is any doubt about where I am coming from, let me say that I am being pragmatic, as we all have to be. The Attorney General was quite correct to raise the need for the House to achieve some kind of consensus and to accept some kind of compromise to minimise the damage, which I regard as my duty. The vote on invoking article 50 revealed to me that there was not the slightest chance of persuading the present House of Commons to give up leaving the EU, because it is terrified of denying the result of the EU referendum. To be fair to my friends who are hard-line Brexiteers and always have been, none of them ever had the slightest intention of taking any notice of the referendum, but there is now a kind of religiously binding commitment among the majority in the House that we must leave. So we are leaving.

Why, therefore, am I supporting the withdrawal agreement? It is a natural preliminary to the proper negotiations, which we have not yet started. Frankly, it should have taken about two months to negotiate, because the conclusions we have come to on the rights of citizens, on our legal historical debts and on the Irish border being permanently open were perfectly clear. They are essential preconditions, to which the Attorney General rightly drew our attention, to the legal chaos that would be caused if we just left without the other detailed provisions in that 500-page document.

The withdrawal agreement itself is harmless, and the Irish backstop is not the real reason why a large number of Members are going to vote against it. One would have to be suffering from some sort of paranoia to think that the Irish backstop is some carefully contrived plot to keep the British locked into a European relationship from which they are dying to escape. The Attorney General addressed that matter with great eloquence, which I admired. It is obviously as unattractive to the other EU member states as it is to the United Kingdom to settle down into some semi-permanent relationship on the basis of the Irish backstop.

In my opinion, we do not need to invoke the Irish backstop at all. We can almost certainly avoid it. It seems quite obvious that the transition period should go on for as long as is necessary until a full withdrawal agreement, in all its details on our political relationships, regulatory relationships, trade relationships, security and policing, has been settled. I do not think that will be completed in a couple of years, however. I actually think it will be four or five years, if we make very good progress, before we have completed all that, and I think that is the view of people with more expertise than me who will be saddled with the responsibility of negotiating it if we ever get that far. I have actually been involved in trade agreements, unlike most of the people in this House.

If we extend the transition period as is necessary, we will never need to go into the backstop. Putting an end date on the transition period is pretty futile, because we cannot actually begin to change our relationship until we have agreed in some detail what we are actually

changing to. If this House persists in taking us out of the European Union, that is eventually where we have to get to.

Anna Soubry: Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr Clarke: If I give way to my right hon. Friend, who is a good friend, I shall suddenly find that everyone is leaping up, and I will not keep my word if I start giving way.

The outcome that I wish to see is, as it happens, the same as the Government's declared outcome. Keeping to the narrower matters of trade and investment, we should keep open borders between the United Kingdom and the rest of the European Union and have trade relationships that are as free and frictionless as we have at the moment. I shall listen to people arguing that that is not in the best interests of the United Kingdom and future generations, but that is an impossible case to make. It is self-evident that we should stay in our present free trade agreement. We cannot have free trade with the rest of the world while becoming protectionist towards continental Europe by erecting new barriers. Nobody said to the electorate at the time of the referendum that the purpose of the whole thing was to raise new barriers to two-way trade and investment.

It seems quite obvious, and factually correct in my opinion, that if we wish to keep open borders—the land border, which happens to be in Ireland, and the sea border around the rest of the British Isles—we will have to be in a customs union and in regulatory alignment with the EU, which would greatly resemble what we call the single market. All this stuff about new technology may come one day when every closed border in the world will vanish, but under WTO rules we have to man the border if there are different tariffs and regulatory requirements on either side. That is where we have got to go, and we will have to tighten things up sooner or later.

The Government keep repeating their red lines, some of which were set out at an early stage long before the people drafting the speeches had the first idea about the process they were about to enter into. Most of the red lines now need to be dropped. The standard line is that we cannot be in a customs union because that would prevent us from having trade agreements with the rest of the world, which is true. We cannot have a common customs barrier enforced around the outside of a zone if one member is punching holes through it and letting things in under different arrangements from other countries. For some, that is meant to be the global future—the bright and shining prospect of our being outside the European Union, which nobody proposed in the referendum. As far as I can see, such things stemmed from a brilliant speech made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), who was praised for putting an optimistic tone on it all. He held out this vision of great countries throughout the world throwing open their markets to us in relief when we left the European Union and offering us better terms than we have spent the last few years obtaining when taking a leading role in negotiating together with the European Union.

Of course, the key agreement that is always cited is the trade agreement that we are going to have with Donald Trump's America, which is a symbol of the

prospects that await us, and China apparently comes next. I have tried in both places. I have been involved in trade discussions with those two countries on and off for the best part of 20 years. They are very protectionist countries, and America was protectionist before President Trump. I led for the Government on negotiating the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. The reason why the EU-US deal had the funny title of TTIP was that we could not call it a free trade agreement, because the Americans said that Congress was so hostile to the idea of free trade that we could not talk about such an agreement, so we had to give it another title.

We got nowhere, even under the Obama Administration, because we wanted to open up public procurement and access to services, including financial services, in the United States, and I can tell you that it was completely hopeless trying to open up their markets. We are told that things are different with President Trump, that the hopes for President Trump are a sign of the new golden future that is before us. However, President Trump has no time for WTO rules. He has been breaking them with some considerable vigour, and he will walk out of the WTO sooner or later. His view of trade deals is that he confronts allied partner countries and says that the United States should be allowed to export more to them and that they should stop exporting so much to the United States. He has enforced that on Canada and Mexico, and he is having a good go at enforcing it on China.

President Trump's only expressed interest in a trade deal with Britain is that we should throw open our markets to American food, which is produced on an almost industrial scale very competitively and in great quantities. That trade deal would require one thing: the abandonment of European food and animal welfare standards that the British actually played a leading part in getting to their present position in the rest of the EU, and the adoption of standards laid down by Congress—the House of Representatives and the Senate—in response to the food lobby. There is no sovereignty in that. Nobody is going to take any notice of the UK lobbying the American Congress on food standards. It is an illusion.

If we had enforced freedom of movement properly before all this, we would not be in this trouble. All the anti-immigrant element of the leave vote was not really about EU workers working here. We were already permitted to make it a condition that people could only come here for a prearranged job, and we were permitted to say that someone would have to leave if they did not find a new job within three months of losing one. Everybody in this House and outside falls over themselves with praise for the EU workers in the national health service and elsewhere, but it is another illusion.

Given the present bizarre position, my view is that we must get on with the real negotiations, because we have not even started them yet. It is not possible to start to map out the closest possible relationship with the EU if we are going to be forced to leave. We are in no position to move on from this bad debate and then sort everything out by 29 March. It is factually impossible not only to get the legislation through but to sort out an alternative to the withdrawal agreement if it is rejected today.

We should extend article 50, but that involves applying to the EU and it implies getting the EU's consent, which would be quite difficult for any length of time. I advocate

revoking article 50, because it is a means of delay. We should revoke it—no one can stop us revoking it—and then invoke it again when we have some consensus and a majority for something. I will vote against it again, but there is a massive majority in this House in favour of invoking article 50.

The Attorney General: Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr Clarke: I will annoy everyone else by giving way this once.

The Attorney General: I am admiring my right hon. and learned Friend's speech minute by minute, but there is one point on which he is wrong. We cannot revoke article 50 unless we provide satisfactory evidence to the European Union that we are cancelling our departure—not suspending it, not pausing it, but cancelling it.

Mr Clarke: I have not been in legal practice for 40 years so, if that is the case, I will examine it and look at what authority my right hon. and learned Friend gives me. Would we be prevented permanently thereafter from ever invoking article 50 again? I would like to examine that proposition. If that is the case, we have to extend article 50, but we cannot carry on having this chaotic debate and, in the next 70 days, coming to conclusions that commit this country to a destiny that will have a huge effect on the next generation or two, because we are heading towards leaving with no deal at all, which would be just as catastrophic as he described.

The vast majority of Members of Parliament are flatly against leaving without a deal. For that reason, pragmatism and common sense require us to vote for this withdrawal agreement to try to get back to some sort of orderly progress.

2.32 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is always a considerable pleasure to follow the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). We live in a strange world because, as on so many occasions, I find myself pretty well agreeing with much of what he says. Of course, on many occasions, I find him in the Division Lobby with us, and I say to him with respect and friendliness that his analysis is spot on. He has demonstrated the futility of those who believe that a UK outwith the European Union could somehow quickly put together trade deals around the world. It is a fantasy; it is for the birds.

It is an absolute travesty that a binary choice between the Government's deal and no deal is being put to the House today. That is not the case. Other options are open to the House, and the right hon. and learned Gentleman has talked about either revoking or staving off the article 50 process, which would give the House time to come to its senses, based on what we now know of the risks of Brexit.

Let us be absolutely clear that there is no such thing as a good Brexit. The Scottish Government's analysis demonstrates that, in any Brexit scenario, the countries of Scotland, England, Northern Ireland and Wales will all be poorer than they would be under the status quo. It is the responsibility of any Government to provide security for their citizens. A Government who wish to

[*Ian Blackford*]

make a proposition that imperils the employment opportunities and living standards of their citizens are abrogating their responsibility.

It is on that basis that I plead with the right hon. and learned Gentleman to vote against, or at least abstain on, the Government's motion today, because this House, to use the often-used phrase, must take back control. We must talk to the people of the United Kingdom, however they voted, based on our knowledge of the facts. Last week Jaguar Land Rover announced that it will be making an additional 4,500 workers redundant, following the 1,500 redundancies already announced. We know the reasons for that are complex, and they include diesel cars and China, but Brexit is a significant contributory factor.

This Government stand accused of putting workers on the dole, and doing so as a function of ideology, because that is what it is. Look at the circumstances of where we are today. The Prime Minister called a general election because she thought she would come back with a thumping majority, but she came back as a minority Prime Minister. She should have seized the moment and recognised that this is a Parliament of minorities, a Parliament in which she has to reach across the House to try to achieve consensus, but she has failed to do so.

All that has happened since the 2017 general election is that we have had an internal battle in the Tory party. The Brexiteers want to drive us off a cliff, and there is no way that the Scottish National party and the people of Scotland will be sitting on that bus as the Prime Minister drives it off a cliff. There is no way that the people of Scotland will be dragged out of the European Union against their will.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. The Government's own analysis shows that, no matter the outcome, with Brexit we will all be poorer, but does he agree that it is the most vulnerable in society who will pay the price? I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on disability, and people with disabilities have been writing to me in their hundreds because they are terrified that Brexit will happen and they will be thrown into further despair.

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend is correct that it is the most vulnerable in our society—those who are disabled and those who rely on our public services—who will pay the biggest price for Brexit, because there is no question but that our public services will be poorer. We know that economic growth in the United Kingdom will be reduced by Brexit. Why are we punishing people to that extent? The Government have a responsibility to be honest with people and to reflect on what happened in 2016.

An economist, Dr Samuelson, said, "When events change, I change my mind." Why has the Prime Minister not reflected on the situation we are in? I am grateful for my hon. Friend's intervention, and I am delighted to announce to the House that all 35 SNP Members have spoken out in this debate about the risks we see to our constituents and to our industries across Scotland. Of course, we are particularly alarmed by the issue of freedom of movement. We have benefited enormously from those who have come to work and live in our

country, to add to the diversity of our communities and to make a contribution to our economic growth. EU citizens who have chosen to make their lives here are now being told that they will have to register to sustain the rights they have.

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): Disgusting.

Ian Blackford: It is, as my hon. Friend says, disgusting. This is about people who are a part of us: our friends, our neighbours and our relatives. We are now saying to them that they are going to have a different status as a consequence of what we have done. But it is not just about EU citizens who have chosen to come to live and work in this country; it is about our rights as EU citizens as well. If the Government get their way and Brexit takes place on 29 March, whereas today each and every one of us has the right to work in 28 member states, we will be automatically restricted to the right to live and work only in the UK. I was lucky enough to work in the Netherlands. My son worked in the Netherlands. Why should my grandchildren not have the same rights that my generation had? It is abhorrent that we are treating the people of these islands like that.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): My right hon. Friend is making a powerful point about people who have come to live and work and be our friends and neighbours in our communities. Does he agree that it is an absolute disgrace that these people, who are so vital to us, are being told they must make an application to pay to stay in their own homes, even though many of them have been here for decades? It is an absolute outrage.

Ian Blackford: I absolutely agree, but of course it fits with the hostile environment that many on the Government Benches have prosecuted over the last few years. We have an expression in Scotland: "We're all Jock Tamson's Bairns". If we look back at Scottish history over the last 100 years, we see that our population has barely grown—we have gone from 4.8 million to 5.5 million people. We face a ticking time bomb: an ageing population. The last thing we need is to be cut off from the supply of labour and people who want to come and contribute to sustainable economic growth in Scotland. How will we afford to invest in our public services if we cannot generate economic growth? That is what leaving Europe will do to us. It will restrain our ability to deliver growth and look after the vulnerable in our society.

This is the defining moment in the Brexit process and in the future of relationships. Members of Parliament must recognise their responsibilities, and for many I know that demands they make difficult decisions. I would say to each and every Member of Parliament that their primary responsibility is not to party but to their constituents. They ought to think about the risks consequent on this deal. It is the height of irresponsibility for the Government to suggest that this is a binary choice. The SNP's amendment gives the House the opportunity to support extending article 50 and to give the people of the United Kingdom the choice to make that determination themselves on the basis of the facts and in the knowledge of what Brexit will do. It is only right and proper, according to the democratic principle, that we allow the people of the United Kingdom to make that choice.

I appeal to Members across the House. We in the SNP have many friends across this place, including on the Labour Benches. I appeal to the Labour party for goodness' sake to get off the fence. The young people who voted for Labour in England in 2017 will never forgive the Leader of the Opposition and his colleagues unless they recognise that this is the opportunity to unite the House, vote down the Government's deal, support a people's vote and allow the people to have their say. Will you do it? *[Interruption.]* I can see the shadow International Trade Secretary chuntering. If he wishes to intervene and accept his responsibilities—*[Interruption.]* Well, he can blow a kiss, but what he is doing is blowing a raspberry at the people of the United Kingdom. That is the reality. If hon. Members are serious about politics and responsibility, it is about time some of them grew up. Grow up and accept responsibility; do not dodge this.

The people of Scotland have a choice. The SNP has been in government in Scotland since 2007. *[Interruption.]* I can hear Government Members say, "Too long", but the fact is we have won three elections on the trot to the Scottish Parliament and the last two elections to Westminster. The party sitting in third place in Scotland is the Labour party, and that is because it is out of touch and out of step with the people of Scotland.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): It comes as no surprise that, when challenged to do so by the leader of the SNP, nobody got up to defend the position of the Labour party. Does that not tell us that there is no such thing as a jobs-first Brexit? It is a myth.

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that is why I am appealing to every Member in the House to think about the people—about the people who have already lost their jobs, about the thousand people in the European Medicines Agency, about the thousand people in the European Banking Authority, about the workers at Jaguar Land Rover, who know that the Labour party today is not going to lift a finger to protect their economic interests. That is the reality: a party that was once of the people but is now sitting back and failing to accept its responsibilities. Thank goodness in Scotland we have an alternative.

The people of Scotland have watched everything that has gone on over the last two and half years. "Taking back control", the Conservatives say. My goodness, they have taken back control from the Parliament of Scotland. When this House pushed through the withdrawal Act, it took back responsibility for fisheries, agriculture and the environment, which were laid down in the Scotland Act 1998 when the Parliament was established as devolved matters, and which were supposed to be protected by the Sewel convention. Nevertheless, the Government said, "These are not normal times", and they grabbed back powers not so much from the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament, but from the people of Scotland, who had voted for it in the referendum 1997. That is the reality of the Conservatives, who have always been hostile to devolution.

Of course, we are told, "The people voted in 2016 and we should accept it", but the people of Scotland were told in our referendum in 2014 that if we stayed in the UK our rights within the EU would be respected. The fact that 62% of the people of Scotland voted to

stay in the EU is ignored by this Government. The fact that the Scottish Parliament has said we wish to stay, as a very minimum, in the single market and the customs union has been ignored by this Government. They have shown contempt for the institutions in Scotland and for the cross-party unity that existed on these matters in Scotland.

The time is coming when the people of Scotland will have to reflect on how we are being treated and ignored. The Scottish Parliament has a mandate for an independence referendum, and if and when the First Minister and the Scottish Government choose to enforce that mandate, this House will have to respect the wishes of the Scottish people. I hope tonight that this House votes down the Government's deal and has the confidence to extend article 50 and to give the responsibility back to the people, but if the House is determined to push ahead with Brexit, the day will come when the people of Scotland will have to determine their own future—do we wish to be tied to a United Kingdom that is going to damage our economic interests, or will we accept our responsibilities as a historic, independent European nation? That day is coming and it is coming soon.

2.49 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): For me, this has been a very long journey towards leaving the European Union. The European question has always been about who governs this country and how. The national interest is served by our democratic system of parliamentary government, which has evolved over centuries of our history. We make our laws in this Parliament, in line with the consent of the voters in general elections, on the basis of the party manifestos. The Government are chosen by virtue of those who win the most seats. It is also fundamental that our proceedings are both accountable and transparent. We have *Hansard*, and all votes are recorded. Any voter can see the transcripts and can see how their laws are made and voted on in this Parliament.

We must fully repeal the European Communities Act 1972 on 29 March, as the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 legislatively requires. I agreed with the Prime Minister when she said in her Lancaster House speech:

"we will not have truly left the European Union if we are not in control of our own laws."

However, the withdrawal agreement does not achieve that, despite breathtaking assertions to the contrary. This situation may even be indefinite through the backstop, and through the undemocratic procedures of the Council of Ministers. We could be indefinitely shackled, as article 132 of the agreement affirms, even up to 31 December "20XX". The decisions in the Council on which laws we obey, and changes to the rules creating great uncertainty for business, will be made through qualified majority voting or consensus by the other 27, behind closed doors. We will not be there. There will be no transcript, and no explanations will be given of how or why the laws imposed on us will be arrived at.

That alone is a reason why I shall vote against the withdrawal agreement. It is a denial of our democracy, and therefore of the national interest. It defies the referendum vote and the withdrawal Act itself, which repeals the European Communities Act and all the treaties and laws, including the single market and the customs union, which have been heaped on us since we joined the European Community in 1972-73.

[Sir William Cash]

It is outrageous to suggest that what we are doing in rejecting the withdrawal agreement is undemocratic. This is pure Alice in Wonderland. It turns the very notion of democracy and the national interest on its head, but that is not all. The agreement is not compromise, as the Attorney General suggested; it is capitulation. Nor is it pragmatism. We are not purists. We are defending our democracy against servitude.

Apart from control over our laws, there is the question of money. We will be paying not merely £39 billion but far more for nothing. We will lose the rebate. Then there is the role of the European Court of Justice. There is the issue of our not being able to trade independently outside the clutches of the European Commission. We have prodigious opportunities to create prosperity and to provide the revenue for the payment of our public services by trading on our own terms with other countries in the world throughout the Anglosphere and the Commonwealth. There is also the question of the constitutional status of Northern Ireland.

The state aid proposals in the agreement would give a power of veto to the European Union over our incentives in relation to ports and industrial development, which would be one of our primary means of attracting foreign direct investment. It should also be borne in mind that, in the European Union, we run a deficit in the single market in goods of about £95 billion a year, whereas Germany hides behind the euro with a surplus of £140 billion with the EU27. Sir Paul Lever, our former British ambassador to Germany, said recently in his book “Berlin Rules”:

“the EU is geared principally to the defence of German national interest.”

He explains, as I did in my own book “Against a Federal Europe” in the early 1990s, that there will be a German Europe. He shows that no decisions, including those related to the negotiations for the withdrawal agreement, were made by the Commission or by other member states without the prior agreement of Germany itself.

Why on earth would anyone want to remain? The EU does not work for the UK or, indeed, for the EU itself. Youth unemployment in countries such as Italy, Greece and France is running at between 20% and 50%. Those countries are utterly disillusioned with the austerity imposed by the German-led fiscal compact. Hungary, Poland and other countries in central Europe are in revolt, and even Sweden and Denmark have moved to the right. So what is it that makes the reversers in the House believe that we should remain in this imploding, undemocratic European Union, whose economic foundations are in tatters as the euro stagnates? Why on earth do they believe that a new “people’s vote” is needed, when one was enacted in the House of Commons and voted for by most of those who are now trying to unravel the withdrawal Act, and despite the fact that every Conservative endorsed the referendum vote in our manifesto?

As I argued some months ago, our system is one of parliamentary government, not government by Parliament. Government by Parliament would be anarchic. So we are faced with not only a constitutional crisis but a massive breach of public trust, as a party and as a Parliament. Until the time of the Chequers proposals,

I was fully prepared to support the Government, but on 6 July my trust in the Government and the Prime Minister was completely lost.

On 9 July I asked the Prime Minister how she could reconcile Chequers with the repeal of the European Communities Act, and received no reply. During the debate that took place the following week, I stressed that the 80-page White Paper which set out those proposals, and which is now intrinsic to the withdrawal agreement, had been pre-planned for probably up to a year. I explained that it would unravel the European Communities Act, and that this was a gross misleading of Parliament. Indeed, the Chequers meeting itself had bounced the Cabinet, in breach of collective responsibility and in breach of the ministerial code. All those factors amount to a monstrous breach of constitutional and public trust.

That brings me to what happens next, when I believe the withdrawal agreement will be consigned to the grave of history. Far from Members of Parliament—as the Prime Minister has asserted—voting for the agreement, it is our duty to vote against it. We will not have effectively left the European Union if we do not. We will also be undermining our Westminster system of government, and depriving ourselves of the monumental opportunities of global trading on our own terms and with our friends in the United States who are so disillusioned with this agreement—and the same applies to other members of the Commonwealth.

As Churchill once said, and as I was reminded at the time of Maastricht by my constituents, we should put our country first, our constituency second, and our party third. Tragically, our Prime Minister became leader of our party by coronation and not by the will of the party members—all the recent evidence suggests that they are profoundly against the withdrawal agreement—and we then had the deeply unsatisfactory outcome of the last general election.

I simply say, therefore, that now is the time to walk away from this European Union. The expression “no deal” is a misnomer. It is not a default position; it is what the Act of Parliament endorsing the Lisbon treaty specifies. There must be no extension of time indicated by the so-called European Union (No. 2) Bill presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles). I am glad that the Prime Minister reaffirmed that to me yesterday. It will achieve nothing.

I strongly urge the Government to conclude, after the vote is cast tonight, that enough is enough, and that we have reached journey’s end. Now is the time to walk away from the intransigence of the European Union and our failed policy of seeking to supplicate its guidelines, its terms and its paymasters. We witnessed similar events in May 1940 when the then Prime Minister actually won the vote after the Norway debate, but, on reflection, concluded that he had to resign because he had lost the confidence of Parliament as a whole. I believe that there are lessons in that for the Prime Minister. She should consider her position, and should do so with dignity and without rancour.

2.58 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I want to address what happens next, if, as seems likely, the Prime Minister’s deal is defeated this evening. The first question is “What will the Prime Minister do in that event?” Until yesterday,

I thought that she might say “I am going back to Brussels to secure some more assurances”, but that route now appears to be blocked in the light of the letter that she brought to the House’s attention yesterday. I would like to think that she would take a bold step—that she would reach out across the House to look for a consensus, would say that she was prepared to consider a completely different approach, or would even announce that because she still believed in her deal, she would take it to the British people and ask them what they thought. That really would be political leadership. But if she does not do any of those things, the House of Commons will have to move swiftly to enable us to decide what we can agree on because, as the Prime Minister rightly said, the House of Commons can say what it is against, but in the end it will have to be for something. So we need to decide what a different policy might look like and how we get there.

One option is undoubtedly to leave without a deal. Some Members favour that, as we have just heard, but many of us think it would be a disaster—by the way, so do the Government. So let’s give the House of Commons a chance once and for all to make it clear what it thinks of that.

Then there are the alternative deals. There is Canada with a variety of pluses attached. There is the EEA and a customs union—which is what I have been arguing for—or a variation on that. And then there is the question of process: how do we enable any of the different approaches, if we can agree on them, to be negotiated with the European Union, and how can we do that when we are running out of time?

I think it is now inevitable that article 50 will need to be extended, whichever option the House of Commons chooses, assuming we can reach agreement on something. I support a series of indicative votes and I support the Bill that the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) and others have tabled, which, if approved, would give the House the legal means to give effect to what we decide, including on whether to extend article 50. If this House cannot agree, apart from deciding that we do not want to leave with no deal—in other words, if this House remains deadlocked, which is a possibility—someone else will have to decide. In all fairness, I have to say that I can see no other way of doing that in those circumstances than by resolving to go back to the British people and asking them what they think.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Hilary Benn: I would give way, but time is very short and many other Members want to speak.

The reason the Prime Minister has got into such difficulty is that, as we will discover tonight, the House of Commons will not agree a deal because of fear, uncertainty and doubt: fear that we will be locked permanently into a backstop; uncertainty about entering into a process where we will be in an even weaker position than we have been in over the past two and a half years; and doubt about where this will all end up, in an age, as the Father of the House, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), so eloquently put it, when it is the quality of the alliances you have that determines the ability to influence what happens in the world in the interests of the people we represent.

Faced with this set of circumstances, what would be the rational thing to do? It would be to seek to remove that fear, that uncertainty and that doubt, and to say to the European Union “Look, the only way we are going to get a deal is not by another exchange of letters or asking for another assurance, but by moving on to negotiate the future relationship now, so that everyone can see at the end of the process what it would involve before we formally leave.” I understand the legal position that in law the European Union cannot sign such an agreement, as the Attorney General pointed out, until the United Kingdom has ceased to be a member state, but it has a choice about its negotiating mandate and we all understand why the EU chose to structure the negotiations in the way that it did: because far from holding all the cards, we have, as the last two and a half years have demonstrated, held hardly any cards at all. But if we were able to negotiate more detail on the future relationship, which I recognise would be very challenging for the EU—and also for the Government, because they would finally have to confront the choices they have been steadfastly avoiding for the last two and a half years—at the end of that process we would know where we stood on the backstop and on the nature of the future relationship.

To do that we would have to extend article 50. If we want to reassure people—we may confront this choice at some point—that extending, or maybe revoking, article 50 is not a device for the House of Commons to overturn the referendum result in 2016, the House of Commons could say to the people, “Don’t worry, whatever the result is of this process we will put it back to you, so you take the final decision.” If we could undertake those negotiations while still a member, from the EU’s point of view, it would not really make any difference at all: we would still be paying the money—we are going to do that under the transition; we would still be accepting the rules of the ECJ—we are going to do that under the transition; we would still be a member of the single market and the customs union—we are going to be under the transition; and we would still be accepting free movement, which we are going to do under the transition.

I acknowledge that that would be difficult, but it would be the sensible thing to do and who knows where the EU will be in two or three years’ time, which we all know is how long these negotiations will take to complete. Indeed, if the EU were to say to other countries, not just to the UK, “You’re not going to get what you want if you leave, but if you remain then there is the possibility of reform,” that would be the kind of leadership that the EU could potentially offer. I do not know whether there is the strategic vision in the EU to do that, but it should provide it because the forces present in Britain are present in all of its member states and reform, including on free movement, would be in their interests as well as in ours.

If this is not possible, and if the Government will not reach out, then we as Parliament must take responsibility. That would not be us subverting democracy in any way; it would be us doing our job—it would be taking back control. The draft Bill I referred to earlier, and which I support, will give us the means to do so. It proposes to ask the Liaison Committee to take a role. It could be amended to give that responsibility elsewhere—

Frank Field: Will my right hon. Friend give way on that issue?

Hilary Benn: No, as I am going to conclude my remarks.

And the House of Commons will in the end have a chance to vote on that.

The referendum result came as a shock to many in this House, but it did not come as a shock to those who voted to leave. It was a cry of anguish as the EU became the lightning conductor for the feelings of 17.4 million people about the change they have seen in their communities, the disappearance of well-paid jobs, the shrinking of opportunities and—let's be honest—above all about our collective failure to share with all of our citizens the prosperity of this, the sixth richest economy in the world. But that will not be solved by a damaging Brexit. It will not be remedied by the convulsion, the argument, the lack of direction and purpose, and the refusal to be honest about choices we face that have consumed almost all our energy, effort, attention and time.

We cannot let this carry on for the next five years. We owe it to our constituents to tell the truth. We owe it to ourselves to do the right thing and, in rejecting the deal today, as we should, we must show, as parliamentarians of all parties and all views, that we are, after the vote tonight, capable of coming together—to listen, to compromise, in the interests of the people we come here to serve.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: On account of the level of demand I am afraid there has to be now a five-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches with immediate effect.

3.7 pm

Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): For my part in this debate, I have always understood the case for compromise, but compromise cannot come at any price, and the deal before us involves the most severe and enduring risks to our economy and our democracy while stifling the opportunities of Brexit that fired up over 17 million people with the optimism and the hope to vote in June 2016.

My reasons for my decision are straightforward. First, the Northern Ireland backstop and the scale of separate “regulation without representation” is undemocratic and a threat to our precious Union. Secondly, the UK-wide customs backstop has morphed into a hybrid customs union and single market arrangement, where the combination of alignment and non-regression requirements prevent this House from determining the right laws in the best interests of this country.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the backstop is, as the Attorney General said, taking a risk with the Good Friday agreement and the Union of this country, and that is a risk that many of us are not prepared to take?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and on top of that powerful point the effect of this deal is to give up control, and it would precipitate a democratic cliff edge. That is compounded by the lack of an exit mechanism we can control. It gives the EU a veto over any UK exit from the backstop, even if negotiations on the future relationship languish for years or break

down entirely. It is clear that none of the subsequent assurances alter the legal position as set out in the withdrawal agreement.

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that if more assurances were there, many more Members of this House would potentially support that agreement?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is right on that, and I will come back to what I think the Prime Minister and the Government should do in the event that the deal is voted down.

My third reason for opposing this deal is that paragraph 23 of the political declaration means that the upcoming negotiations on our future relationship would take the backstop as the starting point, to be built on. The future relationship would not be a free trade agreement, nor would it even be the Chequers model, which was set out back in the summer. It would be a hybrid arrangement somewhere even further along the spectrum of legislative alignment with the EU, between the customs union and the single market, without our having any say over the rules to be imposed.

Given the EU veto over our exiting the backstop, we will spend the second phase of negotiations, from March, under massive pressure from the EU to accept additional single market rules, free movement—potentially—and access to UK fisheries as the price for exiting the backstop. The EU will inevitably press us right up until the next election, if not well beyond, and it would wield all the negotiating leverage. So I say to all hon. Members weary of Brexit that I share your desire to move on from Brexit, but be under no illusions: the deal before us cannot end this grinding process—it can only prolong it. This deal is so demeaning to our country that it would inevitably invite—no, demand—reversal by the British people from the moment the ink was dry. It would torment us and, as a result, our EU neighbours, for the foreseeable future.

So what next? If this deal is voted down, we should make our best final offer to the EU on the current deal, including, as hon. Members on all sides have said, an ability to exit the backstop and a transition to a best-in-class free trade agreement. At the same time, we must accelerate our preparations for leaving on World Trade Organisation terms, in case all our reasonable offers are rebuffed in Brussels, so that we can manage and mitigate the undoubted risks of leaving on WTO terms while leaving the arm of friendship extended to continue negotiations with the EU, whether it is right up until the end of March or even beyond.

That is what my head tells me about this deal, but this decision touches the hearts of so many of us in this House, on all sides, and indeed the very soul of who we are as a country. Like many of us, I think about what this deal means for our children. My two sons are four and six. I want them to grow up in a country that is even better than it is today, one that is more prosperous, more ambitious, more confident, and, yes, more conscientious in the world, too. I want them to know that we fearlessly chose the right path for their future, that we did not duck the challenge, weary of Brexit, and that we did not avoid the undeniable but manageable short-term risks at the long-term expense of the economic health and democratic foundations of the country that I know we all love.

But what I fear most in the terms of this deal is the drain on our economy, the loss of our competitive advantage and the enfeeblement of our democracy that it would inevitably inflict over time. I say that because it is the embodiment of a distinct view of the United Kingdom, one that acquiesces in defeatism and makes its peace with managed decline. I will not sign up for that, not for my country, not for our people, not for my children and not for theirs, because I believe in this United Kingdom of ours. I believe in our entrepreneurs and our innovators. I am proud of our culture, just as I love those across Europe—and well beyond. I believe that we in this place, the mother of parliamentary democracy, accountable to the people, must determine the vital, sensitive and controversial issues of the day, and not meekly abdicate such precious decisions to Brussels. So, I will vote against the motion and the deal, because it is racked with self-doubt, defeatism and fear. Equally, many of us who vote against this deal vote for and aspire to something better and something brighter. With my heart and soul, I vote for the promise of Brexit, which must be fulfilled. I vote for the temerity to regain mastery of our own destiny. I vote for the ability to reach our full, global potential. Above all, I vote for hope not fear, and for the renaissance of the democracy in this country and the people I love.

3.15 pm

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), and I fully agreed with most of what he said. It is with sadness that I am going to have to vote against this withdrawal agreement, because I had hoped that I would be able to support it, because I am one of the few Labour MPs who genuinely wants to leave the EU and one of a somewhat larger group of Labour MPs who genuinely wants to honour the referendum result—I include the leader of my party in that.

I am very conscious that this Parliament is full of remain MPs—it is a remain Parliament. Most of them were very upset when the referendum result came through, as they could not believe that people had not listened to their dire warnings. It is absolutely true, and the public know this, that some in this Chamber have spent their whole time from day one after that referendum trying to think of ways to stop this. They have been trying to think of ways of preventing us from leaving. Tonight, we have the culmination and we will have another opportunity for people who will be trying to stop this after tonight.

For me, today is about something very simple. I do not understand why we need to vote on any of these amendments, because if they go through they will have no bearing whatsoever on the legal agreement—they are not going to be “legal”. We have seen, and we realise now, that the assurances given are not going to mean anything, because they are not put in a legal, prescribed way. I remind people who think these assurances might be able to be fulfilled that we are going to have a new European Parliament in May and new EU Commissioners. The Prime Minister may have built a relationship with some of the current ones, but they will not be there then. We can reject the idea that somehow they would even think—some of them—of honouring those assurances.

What happened to the mantra of, “Nothing agreed until everything is agreed”? Why are we giving the £39 billion, even if we owe it—I do not think we do owe

as much as that? Why are we giving that up front, before we have had anything in return? The withdrawal agreement will mean more uncertainty for the next few years, with the EU holding the trump cards, especially on the backstop. I can never support a situation in which Northern Ireland will end up being treated separately from the rest of the United Kingdom and in which the only people who will speak for it will be representatives of the Irish Government. That is just not tenable.

I have heard some people say, “It was only 52% to 48%, after all; why don’t we just give a little bit of compromise to those who voted to remain?” Had the result been 52% to remain and 48% to leave, does the House think that we, and all the lawyers, QCs and solicitors here, would have been beavering around trying to find a way to get a little bit of Canada or Norway into the remain decision? Let us be honest: there are people here who would do anything to stop us leaving the EU. We voted to take back control to, I believe, the people. The people made their decision. Parliament gave the decision to the people to decide whether they wanted to leave. We gave it up—we said, “People, you decide”—and they voted to leave. The idea that Parliament will spend the next week or so trying to find other ways to stop us leaving on 29 March is shocking.

The Attorney General said that we must vote for the withdrawal agreement “for wholly pragmatic reasons”. With respect to him, the vote did not ask the people of the United Kingdom whether they wanted a pragmatic leave or a pragmatic remain. It was very simple, and they wanted to leave. Whatever happens after tonight, one thing cannot be evaded, overruled or wrecked: the United Kingdom must leave the EU at the end of March to implement and honour the will of the British people.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): My hon. Friend has listed a series of arguments and reasons that might undermine the 2016 decision. Does she agree that a second referendum would have no credibility if the result of the first referendum was not implemented thoroughly and properly?

Kate Hoey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The people, many of whom voted remain, will just not understand why we should even think of a second referendum when we have not implemented the result of the first.

As I was saying, whatever happens after tonight, the UK must leave the EU at the end of March to implement and honour the will of the British people. I trust our Prime Minister on this. I have heard her say over and over again that we will not revoke article 50. I have heard her say over and over again that we will be leaving on 29 March. Yes, that may mean some difficulties, but those difficulties are nothing compared with what this country has had to go through in the past. We are a strong, proud and determined country, with a people who believe and have confidence in our country, so let us go forward to 29 March, leave the European Union and have that bright future that we know is ahead of us.

3.21 pm

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): How is it possible for the right hon. and hon. Members who speak today to capture the past two and a half years in

[*Nicky Morgan*]

five minutes? How is it possible to capture the 45 years of our membership in five minutes? The good news for those who like to debate Europe is that we do not have to do that, because there will be many, many more debates to come—

Chris Bryant: What joy!

Nicky Morgan: I can hear the joy on the Opposition Benches.

As the Attorney General said, this is only the end of phase 1. I think that the point he was trying to make in his speech was that today's debate should be about the 625 pages of the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration. I will support the agreement tonight—as with my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), people perhaps might not have expected that, given some of the statements I have made. I do not want to go into the detail, because it is easy to get stuck in the weeds of the EU debate and to talk about this appendix or that clause of the withdrawal agreement that we do not like. This House is in danger of getting so bogged down in the detail that we forget that the country is looking at us—not just at the detailed debate, but at the tone of the debate and the way that we conduct ourselves and disagree—and that we can do it well and in a way that, as the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said, will hopefully, eventually, lead us to a place where there can be broader consensus and a majority can be found. Unfortunately, that ability to find a consensus has been somewhat lacking.

A previous Prime Minister talked about “general wellbeing”; there has not been nearly enough talk about flourishing. I have heard some contributors begin to say what people want—what is a positive way forward—and that is where we need to be, as a House, if the House does not approve the agreement tonight. The country is deeply divided, our constituencies are divided and this House is divided, but it is up to us as Members of Parliament to change the tone and start to heal the divisions if we are ever to get to talking about other issues. That is one of the lessons I have learned in the past two and half years. That is not to say that I have always practised it, but it is certainly something for which we should all aim.

Whatever is said today—whatever right hon. and hon. Members on all sides say—a substantial number of those watching and of our constituents will disagree with us. As we know, some will disagree more vehemently and violently than others, but there is a vast silent majority out in the country who are watching today and hoping against hope that the House does approve the agreement. On the basis of what I am hearing, I do not think they will be satisfied, but I have never before had so many members of the public coming up to me as a Member of Parliament and wishing us well for this vote. The country is watching what we do today and beyond.

I wrote an open letter to my constituents. I do not hear enough Members of Parliament talking about their constituencies in this debate today. We are their representatives. It is not about us; it is not about how we feel; it is not about our heads and our hearts: it is about who we are representing and what is best for them.

I have come to a conclusion after wrestling with this greatly over the last two and a half years. Of course I would have been happy to see the referendum result go differently. I would be happy to see an even closer relationship with the EU going forward. But that is not what people voted for—the majority who voted in 2016. They did vote for change and it is up to us to deliver that change.

I have always been very clear that Brexit should not undermine our constitution, and we have put our representative democracy under massive strain through having one referendum. It should not be about undermining our economy, although that is not all about numbers. In order for people to flourish in this country, it is not just about the size of our economy—it is about other issues, too, that have not been tackled by Brexit, nor by the Government over the last two years as our UK politics have stalled. It should be about our values and not undermining our values as a country. One of those, undoubtedly, is that the British people are very independently minded, and I can understand why it is that people took the decision they did in June 2016.

Let me, in the time available, briefly take one issue from what the Attorney General said. If the deal goes down tonight, there are other deals—other models—on the table where I believe this House can find consensus and compromise. Carrying on with this deal cannot be an option, and I would be disappointed if the Prime Minister did that.

3.26 pm

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I am delighted to take part in this debate. My constituency voted by a majority to leave the European Union, but I recognise that there are many voices in opposition to that in Northern Ireland. I have no doubt that the Prime Minister has worked very hard to try to address the concerns that have been raised on both sides of this debate, and I commend her for that, but when I hear Members speaking about the danger that Brexit poses to the peace process in Northern Ireland, I have to refute that notion. I believe strongly in the peace process. I am delighted that in the past 20 years we have seen a reduction in violence—our streets in Northern Ireland have become more peaceful. That is something I want to maintain, and we do not want the clock turned back, but the British people voted to leave the European Union and we must respect their decision.

When we talk about the threat that a hard border could pose to the peace process, I look at what the Irish Government say. I hear the Irish Prime Minister saying very clearly that even in the event of a no-deal outcome, there will not be a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. That is the stated position of the Irish Government, and it is the stated position of the Government of the United Kingdom, so where is this hard border coming from?

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): We need to be clear that when people say that the Union customs code must be applied and WTO rules must be applied, yes, they are right, but that is in order to provide confidence that checks are being made. They do not have to be made at the frontier—they can be made away from it—so there is no need for a hard border in Northern Ireland.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: And it is worth noting that even at the moment, with both the UK and the Irish Republic being members of the European Union, we have checks between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. If someone travels by bus from Belfast to Dublin, they can be stopped on the main road and their identity will be checked. With the movement of animals, there are checks across the border. The idea that there is no border and there are no checks at the moment just is not true. It does not reflect the reality. These things can be approached sensibly, as they have been in the past. There is no reason why they cannot be dealt with sensibly in the future.

My party does not advocate a no-deal outcome. We want a deal between the United Kingdom and the European Union. We want the Prime Minister to deliver a deal for this country, but we do not believe that what is on the table at the moment is the best deal, and nor is it in the best interests of the United Kingdom.

We have heard a lot of talk today about the backstop. My concern about the backstop is not only its implications for Northern Ireland. I echo the point that if we enter the backstop, it hands a massive negotiating advantage to the European Union, which weakens our negotiating position in the next critical phase of obtaining a free trade agreement with the European Union. That is why I do not believe it is in the interests of the United Kingdom.

Mr Nigel Evans: We hear it said a lot that neither the EU nor the UK wants to implement the backstop and that it would be temporary. If that is the case, why does the right hon. Gentleman believe that the European Union will not budge on at least making the backstop time-limited?

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I believe the reason is that it gives a negotiating advantage to the European Union, and the EU does not want to give up that advantage in favour of the United Kingdom.

What offends me about the backstop and its potential is, as the Attorney General described in his advice to the Government, that Northern Ireland would have to treat Great Britain as a third country for trading purposes. The Attorney General told us today that that already happens, and he gave the example of the Canary Islands, but the Canary Islands are not leaving the European Union—they will still have representation and will still be able to influence the way in which regulations are drawn up by the EU. That is not so for Northern Ireland. Under the backstop arrangement, we will have to accept regulations with no say in how they are drawn up—not at Stormont, if we have an Assembly back; not here at Westminster; and most certainly not because the Irish Government will advocate on our behalf. Indeed, the Irish Government have shown in the past that they will look after their own interests first, and rightly so—it is a sovereign state, in so far as it is possible to be a sovereign state in the European Union.

The backstop is not in the best interests of Northern Ireland or the United Kingdom, and that is why we need real change—change that the Prime Minister describes as legally binding. What is on offer from the European Union at the moment does not have legal effect. That is our concern, and it is why we cannot support the amendments that have been tabled. We need a clear

commitment from the European Union that the backstop arrangement will be altered so that the UK has the unilateral right to leave the backstop at the time of its choosing and in circumstances that would be beneficial to the relationship.

We are not trying to create difficulties, but we do not want to hand to the EU a significant negotiating advantage, and nor do we want regulatory barriers between Northern Ireland and Great Britain, which would damage our economy in Northern Ireland. I respect the views expressed by business leaders and others in Northern Ireland who support the current withdrawal agreement, but I do not agree with their opinion that the proposed arrangements will be good for the Northern Ireland economy. They are not the so-called best of both worlds. They create a regulatory barrier between Northern Ireland and our biggest market—Great Britain—so that we can avoid regulatory differences between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, even though we do far less trade with the Irish Republic and the EU than with Great Britain. Although I am no expert in business, I believe that it cannot be in the best interests of Northern Ireland to have regulatory barriers with our biggest market in order to continue having free trade arrangements with the EU, which is a smaller market for us in trading terms.

We therefore urge the Prime Minister to look again at this withdrawal agreement. She said that she would seek to secure legally binding changes. That is what we need, and what we have on the table does not achieve that. For those reasons, the Democratic Unionist party will be voting against the withdrawal agreement this evening, and we will also be voting against the amendments, because they do not change the fundamental reality that until we get the assurances we need on the backstop, we cannot support what is on the table.

3.34 pm

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): Entertaining as it was to watch the theatricality of my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General, I have to say to the House that it filled me with a slight sense of gloom that the Government have got to such a pass that they had to rely on the skills of a criminal defence advocate to get them out of their difficulties.

We have had everything. We had the appeal to patriotism and the bright fields beyond. We had the analogy of the airlock, in which we were assured that if we placed ourselves for a period of time in an uncomfortable position, we would find that the door opened to the fields of ambrosia beyond. I am afraid that my own view is that we will either choke to death in the airlock as a nation or, when the door finally opens, find the landscape little to our liking.

At appropriate moments, we also had those delicious moments of confession and avoidance from the Attorney General. He gently pointed out that he thought the suggestion that we could have a negotiated deal without a transition had been overblown. Who overblew it? The truth is that for two and a half years, and during the period of the referendum, we have been living in a fool's paradise in relation to expectations. When during the referendum was there mention of the backstop and its constitutional implications that worry so much Members representing Northern Ireland constituencies? Where was

[*Mr Dominic Grieve*]

the 20-month transition, now potentially extended for two years, and where was the complete lack of concrete terms for a future relationship?

That is the reason why we now have the problem that only about 20% of the public appear to think that this is a good deal, and it should come as no surprise that so few Members of Parliament are also willing to support it. The difficulty—this is where I do agree with what the Attorney General said—is that we are where we are: we cannot turn the clock back. I know that some hon. Members talk of alternatives, and we can consider them, but I have to say that my view about where we are is that alternatives will be very hard to come by. In any case, I raise an anxiety about whether they can be justified.

One of the things I have found most curious in this debate is that I keep on being told that I must sign up to this deal because it would be a betrayal of the United Kingdom electorate not to do so. Yet there are hon. Members who are prepared to consider, for example, going for a Norway-style option. I have to say that that seems to me to be an example of the elites picking up the carpet and brushing the broken glass under it to try to avoid the difficulties that have been created.

That is why I am respectful of what the Prime Minister has tried to achieve. I accept that it is probably the only deal on offer, realistically, and might be willing to support it, if it had the support of the public. Yet we have spent months trying every possible device in this House to prevent Members from expressing any view saying that the public ought to be consulted. On that, I am afraid I will not budge.

It pains me to see how the discourse has developed. It pains me, Mr Speaker, to see you and me accused of being in a sinister conspiracy, all of which is utter and complete fantasy. It pained me to discover the No. 10 press office briefing against me last Friday for involvement in an initiative of my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) in which I had not the slightest degree of involvement. Such is the level of madness that pervades us at present, and that makes me all the more determined—as the death threats come in and the rhetoric heats up—that we must stay sensible, be willing to have a dialogue across the House and try to resolve this. The question now is whether the Government are prepared to listen. For the present, I very much regret that I cannot support the Government this evening.

3.39 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is an absolute pleasure to follow the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve). I agreed wholeheartedly with the vast majority of his remarks.

I am in the House first and foremost as a representative of my constituents, the people of Cardiff South and Penarth. Their views are absolutely clear: they voted to remain in 2016 and that view has increased in intensity. I have received nearly 2,000 messages—in emails, phone calls and conversations—and 86% of them now tell me that my constituents want to stay in the EU. The vast majority of them want to see the question put back to

them so that they can make the choice. Of those who still want to leave, there is a split between those who want to support the Prime Minister's deal and those who want to leave with no deal. There is no consensus on what leaving even means.

Let me be clear to everybody in the House: the people who voted leave did so in good faith. They are my friends, my family, my constituents and my neighbours. Indeed, I have very strong and good relationships with many people across the House who fundamentally disagree with me on Brexit. We must listen to their concerns and we must hear them. Those concerns were made loud and clear, and we have to respond to them. We have to offer hope and a positive vision for the future, but I will not vote for a deal that will, by all measures and on all analysis, leave my constituents poorer and less safe, and actually lead to more uncertainty, not less, with this process going on and on and on. It is simply not acceptable when we are told by leading manufacturing organisations, trade unions and businesses about the jobs that are being lost or put at risk, and the livelihoods that are put at risk as a result.

I wholeheartedly support the Labour Front-Bench policy of opposing the deal. It is absolutely clear that it does not meet the six tests that the Labour party set out. I, of course, want a general election. I would like this Government to be removed, for many reasons, but it is clear that we are unlikely to reach that objective, so we must try hard. We would like a no-confidence motion to be tabled if the Prime Minister loses tonight, but if we are not able to resolve this matter in the House, we must put it back to the people.

I do not think that there is a majority in this House for other variations of the deal. I do not think, as a previous proponent of it in this House, that there is a majority for the Norway option. I also do not think that there is now time to engage in fantasy negotiations with the EU. It was very, very clear from the beginning what the possibilities were and the constraints that were put on those possibilities by the Prime Minister's red lines. A problem exposed by many people—the failure to reach out across the House to find consensus at the start of the process—has led us to the situation we are in today.

I want to address two particular concerns that the Prime Minister and others have raised against those of us who advocate putting the issue back to the people. The first is that it is somehow anti-democratic. No, it is not. It is a continuation of democracy. I understand very much why the Prime Minister feels that she is duty bound to deliver on a result that happened in 2016, but what about the will of the people today? As the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield said, if there was clear consent among the people of this country—among my constituents and all the constituents represented in this House—we would not face the situation we are in today with the Prime Minister facing defeat from every angle and our needing to find a new way forward.

Secondly, I hear the concern that this will stir up far right or right-wing rhetoric, violence on the streets and civil disturbances. We simply must not indulge that terrible, terrible attitude. Those people do not represent leave voters. We must not give into them. Our colleague who was murdered would not have given into them; she would have stood up against them. That is what we all must be doing in this House. I see this as part of a much

wider challenge that worries me deeply. We have talked much about the economic and business implications of the deal, but when the people rubbing their hands in glee at this chaos are Vladimir Putin, Donald Trump and the enemies of this country, we all ought to be asking ourselves some very serious questions.

Winston Churchill was quoted earlier by the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash). I would like to draw the House's attention to another quote by Winston Churchill, from the early 1930s. He warned about ignoring the warnings of our followers in the country and ignoring the signs of the times, saying:

"This was one of those awful periods which recur in our history, when the noble British nation seems to fall from its high estate, loses all trace of sense and purpose, and appears to cower...frothing pious platitudes".

I think, Mr Speaker, of "global Britain" and "Brexit means Brexit".

We are all patriots in this House. Let us find a way forward. Let us put this issue back to the people and let them decide.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. There will now be a four-minute limit on each Back-Bench speech.

3.44 pm

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty).

I have been a loyal Conservative Member of Parliament for nearly 14 years, but I do not believe that the withdrawal agreement before us is in the interests of my constituents or our country. That is why in November last year I resigned from my post as a Minister in the Northern Ireland Office, allowing me to speak up against the agreement and to vote against it later today.

The Government have repeatedly said that the United Kingdom's constitutional and economic integrity would not be compromised, but the legal advice given by the Attorney General to the Prime Minister on 13 November states in paragraph 8, on page 2, that

"for regulatory purposes GB is essentially treated as a third country by NI for goods passing from GB into NI."

I raised the issue earlier with the Attorney General. While his answer was eloquent and articulate, he somewhat fudged the issue. We entered the then European Economic Community as a United Kingdom, and it is important that we leave it as such at the end of March.

The withdrawal agreement sets out the terms on which we will negotiate a future free trade agreement, but it is extraordinary that we are required to pay £39 billion up front before we have negotiated the deal itself. It is also extraordinary that we are agreeing to enter an unending backstop that we will not be able to leave unilaterally. Effectively, we are agreeing to be handcuffed by the EU, and it will determine when the handcuffs come off.

The assurances and warm words are just that, and they are meaningless. We are told that the backstop will be temporary, but "temporary" has to be judged in context. Given that the agreement with Canada took seven years and the agreement with Singapore took eight years, we can rest assured that "temporary" means many years. France and Spain have already made it

clear that they will have conditions. In the case of France, that is access to our coastal waters for fishing, and for Spain, it is rights regarding Gibraltar. They have said that they will not agree to our departure from the backstop unless they have satisfaction on those matters. Not only will we be held hostage in the customs union in that way, but we will be heavily restricted in our ability to do favourable trade deals with the rest of the world.

I recognise the need for compromise in international agreements, but this deal is not a compromise, it is a cave-in by our country. It is an agreement that has been negotiated on the basis of fear of being outside the EU, rather than on confidence. It is important to remember—the facts make this clear—that in the decades ahead, economic progress in the countries outside the EU will far exceed progress within the EU. This debate is not only about today, tomorrow, next month or even next year; it is about the decades to come and the future of our children and our children's children. We need to get it right, and this agreement does not do that. That is why I will be voting against it this evening.

3.48 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I am sorry that the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) and the Attorney General are not in their places, because I would like to say to them and all Members of this House that I need no lectures on how to love my country. None of us do. We all care deeply for Britain, but the fact is that, as the members of the Treasury Committee found in our report published for this debate before it was aborted in December, there is no dividend for our country in Brexit. Economically, there is only loss.

There is no Brexit bonus. There is only the madness of doing something we know to be a bad idea because we allowed another bad idea—a referendum for which we were ill prepared—to take hold. I will not repeat the cliché that people did not vote to become poorer in the referendum, because it does not matter now. What matters is the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) made. The choice is ours: should we vote to make our constituents poorer?

I ask those who think that their constituents will be angry if they do not back the deal what they will say when they become accountable for a permanent downgrade of our economy. Can they do that without consequences either? I do not think so. Often in this House we talk about the real issue of how wages have fallen over the past 10 years. To properly understand the money in people's pockets, however, we have to understand that it matters what they are able to pay for, and what has happened to our currency since the Brexit vote has made us all poorer. There is only more to come, and there is no escaping it.

The reason that happened was the deep dishonesty at the heart of the leave campaign. It said we could have global Britain, a Britain open to the world and more globalisation, but also less immigration, more command and control over our economy, and less globalisation. That contradiction at the heart of what people were offered is at the root of the impasse we find ourselves in.

[*Alison McGovern*]

The truth is, because of that contradiction, we now do not really know what the public want. We have had a general election with an inconclusive result, because people were offered something that was never really on the table and they voted for it. Another referendum would be far from perfect, but I have come to the reluctant conclusion that offering people a choice—Brexit as we now know it to be versus the deal that they have now—is probably the only way forward.

Finally, I will mention the thing that has kept me going through this turgid Brexit discussion: the reason why we are in this place. We are here for our ageing population; to produce Treasury Committee reports about wages and nursing homes, not about Brexit; for our young people; and to talk about how to fund libraries and teaching assistants, not about Brexit. I ask myself a simple question: judged by those objectives, does Brexit help, or is it a hindrance? Will it help our country to have the money it needs, or will it hold us back? The answer is glaringly obvious: Brexit is bad for our country, and it is time that in this House we took the steps that we need to take to rectify it.

3.52 pm

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I will support the Prime Minister's deal today because, as the west midlands businesses that employ thousands of my constituents tell me, "It's good enough"—good enough for us to leave and thrive outside the EU. Not perfect, maybe, but those who flirt with plan Bs must examine their conscience when they hear the plight of industry. This is not the time to take a stand against the pragmatic reality of what is on the table. I credit my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) for recognising that.

Right now, what business needs is some certainty. With only 73 days to go before we leave the EU, firms are already having to take costly decisions to stockpile goods and parts and, in some cases, to mothball production capacity. The cost of that hits their bottom line and ultimately results in them having to let people go. The car industry, for which the EU is the principal market, is particularly hurt. Let us remember that its factories are drawing on workers from some of the most deprived parts of the UK. Colleagues might not yet have lost jobs in their constituencies, but in the west midlands we certainly have.

I call on the Government to find a way to help the UK car industry, which is such an important employer, exporter and life transformer, through the challenges that it faces. Those challenges grieve me deeply, as the renaissance of manufacturing had transformed the lives of my constituents. Take, for example, single mums on my council estate who have taken up well paid jobs through apprenticeships with companies such as Jaguar Land Rover. Next week, when Dawn—not her real name—shows up in my surgery to complain about losing her job, the thing she understands as "Project Fear" is not being able to keep up the mortgage payments on the home she has provided for her kids.

What can we do to stop that inescapable human cost? At the very least, as a Parliament, we must stop the UK crashing out of the EU without a deal. There is a majority for no to no deal in Parliament, and the letter I co-authored with the hon. Member for Birmingham,

Erdington (Jack Dromey) attracted 225 signatures. I and other hon. Members have tried to withdraw amendments tonight that could have wrecked the meaningful vote, but we remain determined to rule out no deal.

Businesses tell me they have roughly 14 days to decide whether to shut factories to weather the storm of disruption after we leave the EU or stockpile at huge expense. The least we can do is to provide a stable platform or foundation by ruling out no deal. The hit on business is taking place now: 90% of the CBI's members are stockpiling, along with the SMEs in their supply chains, spending billions on contingency that they would otherwise use to invest. Some 10,000 lorries pass through Dover every day. Just-in-time delivery will become not-in-time delivery with the slightest hold-up at the border. The path the country has chosen is fraught with risk, even if, in time, opportunity beckons, so let us at least manage the risk of a no-deal Brexit so that constituents like Dawn do not face losing their jobs, their homes and their livelihoods.

As Second Church Estates Commissioner, I might be expected to make reference to the profound comments by the Archbishop of Canterbury about Brexit in the debate in the other place, that leaving without a deal would be a political, practical and moral failure. I echo the words of the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) that we must come together, try to unite and bring unity to our country.

3.56 pm

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Given the time constraints, I will focus on what should happen later tonight when the motion is defeated, but I will start by saying that if the UK leaves the European Union under the terms that the Government propose, it will constitute one of the greatest acts of self-harm in our country's history. We would be poorer, we would have less sovereignty not more, and we would guarantee that the uncertainty and political wrangling that have so disfigured Britain for the last two and a half years will continue for years and years to come.

It is increasingly clear to everyone, except perhaps the Prime Minister, that she and the country will face a choice after tonight's vote, between reaching out, finally, across the House, to seek a majority for a less damaging, Norway-style Brexit, and putting her deal to the public in a people's vote. I am extremely doubtful that there is a majority in the House for Norway now. If, after the 2017 general election, when she lost her majority, the Prime Minister had sought consensus, she could probably have got Norway through. Many of us repeatedly pleaded with her to do so. But she stuck to her red lines, for fear of what the hard Brexiteers in her Cabinet and on her Back Benches would do to her. As recently as last spring, nearly 80 Labour Members defied our own party leadership and voted for a Norway-style solution. But we were rebuffed, as we have been repeatedly rebuffed, when we have tried to steer the Government in the direction of the least damaging Brexit.

We are now told that several Cabinet Ministers and others on the Government Benches—and some Members on the Opposition Benches—would like us to rescue this disintegrating Government by backing Norway now. I am sorry, but it is too late. The overwhelming majority of those of us on this side of the House who backed Norway a year ago would not do so now.

The rest of Europe, which has shown commendable patience with the British Government, has said we can have more time and we can extend article 50, but only for a general election or another referendum, not for a tortuous renegotiation of the withdrawal agreement with no certain end point. Labour's policy, unanimously agreed at our last conference, states that if the Government are confident in their Brexit deal, they

"should not be afraid to put that deal to the public."

The Prime Minister could, at this late stage, save her deal, by seeking parliamentary support for it conditional on ratification by the public in a referendum. But, if she will not do so, Labour must act. Britain is facing the most serious political, economic and constitutional crisis in our peacetime history. The time for dither, delay and constructive ambiguity is over. The country is crying out for decisive leadership.

So, let us have our motion of no confidence tomorrow. Let us test Parliament's appetite for an election. If we do not secure one, let us rule out no deal, test the Norway option if colleagues wish to do so, but then quickly pursue the only rational choice left for our country, which is to give the decision back to the people. I appeal to the Prime Minister for once—just this once—to put the national interest first. If she will not, Parliament must do it for her.

3.59 pm

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): Every Member of Parliament faces a difficult vote this evening, representing as we do very different communities up and down the country. The additional challenge is that Brexit is not about party politics. All of us are genuinely asking ourselves how we can represent our communities and do what is in the best interest of this country. Like many other MPs, I cannot support this deal. I represent many remainers in my constituency who think that if we are still following so many rules, we should be around the table setting them. I also represent the many Brexiteers in my community, and they simply do not believe that this is the Brexit they felt they were voting for. It does not give them a clean break from the European Union. In many respects, Brexit has been a failure of party politics at leadership level on both sides of the House. Far from thwarting democracy, I feel that I am representing those in my community today, because they have told me clearly what they think about this particular deal and how they would like me to vote on it.

The failure on the Government Front Bench comes from the fact that all this has been clear since the summer. It is not a surprise that the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration have not found favour with enough MPs; it has been blindingly obvious. For those on the Front Bench to turn round and somehow suggest that the rest of the House has got it wrong is a bit like a person steering the Titanic towards an iceberg and then blaming the iceberg for not getting out of the way. This is a real failure on the part of No. 10, and a bit of recognition of that fact would not go amiss. The wasting of time and delaying of the vote before Christmas also did no good whatsoever.

I also think that this is a failure on the part of the Labour Front Bench. The dither and delay that have just been described have really shown party politics at its worst, at the very time when our British public need us to step up to the plate. The election in 2017 simply

compounded the problem, with the Government unwilling to compromise after a close Brexit result that frankly required compromise if enough people were to be brought with it. I urge Members of Parliament not to think about party loyalty tonight. That is not what this vote is about. It is about the future of our country.

Whatever happens tonight and in the coming weeks, we as a House need to start finding better ways to work together on the long-term issues that British politics has failed to deliver on sufficiently for the British public, including housing, social mobility and opportunity—something I care about—the environment and social care. The only difference with Brexit is that it was a long-term issue that had a deadline, and sure enough, we have not been able to meet that deadline. It looks very much as though we will move from a fudged deal to a fudged delay, but if we have that delay, it should be one that has a plan in mind rather than nothing. Maybe the House will be unable to agree on any path forward, and if that is the case, surely we need to do the right thing and recognise that in a democracy we have big unanswered questions, and that the public have to be allowed a say on them.

4.3 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Brexit, and the way it is being handled, is a national embarrassment. Worse than that, it is a damaging international embarrassment. That great tactician, David Cameron, devised what he thought would be a cunning plan to staunch the decades-long Euro bloodletting in his party: a referendum. But the referendum, instead of acting as neat sutures to bind together the ideologically driven Brexiteers and their more rational colleagues, has taken a scalpel to the Tory party's jugular, and—critically, and far more significantly—to that of the country, too. Driving the country to the brink, and in some cases being willing to drive over it, is overwhelmingly the Tories' responsibility.

Of course, the Leader of the Opposition has a cameo in all this, demonstrating the same aptitude for leadership during the Brexit campaign as he has since. However, as a long-standing Member of Parliament, I share some of the blame for not tackling the conditions that led to a majority voting for Brexit. That blame must be shared by successive Governments—not this one, not the one before, not the one before and, indeed, probably not the one before that either. I regret not being active enough in promoting the benefits of being in the EU for students, research, common standards, medicines, and investment in, for example, the hospital where the PM launched the NHS 10-year plan, which received £50 million of EU financing, or the potteries factory where she gave her speech yesterday, which received £400,000.

I was not outspoken enough in rebutting the ludicrous, infantile and mendacious claims that Brussels-based British newspaper correspondents made about the threat to British pink sausages or standardised condom sizes. Most importantly, I regret the failure to tackle deep-seated concerns in some towns and cities over the failure to invest in infrastructure and underperforming schools and to rebuild proud communities devastated by the loss of heavy industry. I regret that devolution was not pushed hard and fast enough and that responsibility, funding and accountability for delivering jobs, skills training, bus and train services was not vested in politicians closer to those reliant on such services.

[Tom Brake]

Those challenges remain, and we owe it to those who voted for Brexit and, indeed, to those who voted remain to address them.

Does anyone in this Chamber believe that Brexit and the PM's so-called deal provide solutions? They do not. Nothing that leaves us poorer can. The PM's deal is nothing of the sort. It is a fiction, a chimera, a mirage. The political declaration comes in at a measly 26 pages. Compare that with 1,598 pages in the Canada-EU trade deal. According to the PM's statement yesterday, the real deal—our future relationship with the EU—may not be struck until as late as December 2022, and some consider that wildly optimistic. That is one of the reasons why her deal will be defeated today.

With the red lines that the Prime Minister chose for herself, I do not doubt that this is the best deal that she could secure. Unfortunately, it is a bad deal, so where next? We expect the PM's deal to be defeated later, no deal has been rejected by Parliament, and a fresh round of negotiations with the EU is unlikely to be sanctioned by the EU. The Prime Minister is left with one option: put the deal to the people in a people's vote and offer them the choice to stay in the EU.

4.7 pm

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake). He touched upon the fact that David Cameron introduced the referendum, but he forgot to mention that it was a Liberal Democrat idea to have an in/out referendum when the Conservatives opposed the Lisbon treaty.

We are facing a constitutional conundrum. The right hon. Gentleman quite rightly said that the Conservatives promised an in/out referendum if we won the 2015 election, and we then had a long parliamentary process to guarantee that we would give the people the power to decide. We then had the referendum, and the people decided overwhelmingly to leave—17.4 million people in the biggest vote in British history and the biggest majority on any one subject. Everyone then said, "What does leave mean?" and the Conservative party helpfully interpreted leave to mean leaving the single market, the customs union and the remit of the European Court of Justice. Sadly, however, what we have come up with here does not deliver that. The withdrawal agreement is a betrayal of what the people voted for.

In my previous speech, I touched on the impact on our laws. It is ludicrous that laws will be made by the 27 nations and then imposed upon us so that we cannot query them. On agriculture, an area which is totally dominated by the EU, it is extraordinary that our agricultural sector will be held back to 2019 levels of support throughout the whole transition period. Our competitors on the continent will be better funded and will have free access to our market, so agriculture will be a particularly badly penalised sector. We have to consider state aid; Sir Richard Dearlove and Lord Guthrie's letter this week showed the horrors of the impact upon defence; and there will be no exit from the deal, which has been confirmed by the Attorney General.

All that will cost us £39 billion with nothing promised in return. We will be paying £39 billion to have the right to keep talking and talking. There is no incentive for the

EU to end the talks. They have us trapped. They will be imposing laws upon us, they will have access to our market, they could clobber us through the ECJ when we do not obey those laws and we will be paying. What is not to like? We saw it from Herr Selmayr, who unwisely blurted out to *Passauer Neue Presse* that he had got everything, including the cost of losing Northern Ireland. That is the real horror for me in this withdrawal agreement, which carves out something called "UK(NI)", a new political entity in which not a single elected representative from Northern Ireland will have any impact on the law, which is shameful. It is a complete breach of the principle of consent, which is embedded in the Belfast agreement. As Lord Trimble has said, it is a breach of the demand for the Assembly to be consulted.

I will not be voting for this withdrawal agreement. Thankfully, a very large number of other Members also will not be voting for it. What should we do? I went to see Monsieur Barnier with Lord Trimble to discuss the problem of the Irish border, which can be solved with current techniques and processes. We had an incredibly instructive and constructive discussion. What we need to do is to go back to President Tusk's free trade offer of 7 March 2018. We should go back on Thursday morning and say, "Yes, we will engage in very serious discussions on your free trade agreement. In parallel, we will immediately go on to World Trade Organisation terms." WTO terms have come under the most ludicrous caricatured attack, because they are synonymous with leaving. WTO terms are not as good as a free trade agreement, but they do mean that we are leaving. That will galvanise the European Union into coming back to us.

Only today Heiko Maas, the German Foreign Minister, has said that he would come back to the talks. We will do the country a service tonight if we overwhelmingly vote down this completely unacceptable agreement, which will push the EU to go back to its generous offer of a free trade agreement. We will not get it through in time, so we should trigger article 24 of the general agreement on tariffs and trade, which means zero tariffs and zero quotas can continue during the discussions, possibly for up to five years.

4.11 pm

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): For all the division in this House, I have not met a single Member, privately or publicly, who believes this motion has a chance of being passed tonight. For many Opposition Members, that is not because of the withdrawal agreement itself but because of the complete absence of clarity about what is to come next. Almost three years after one of the most divisive episodes in British history, it beggars belief that the Government are asking for our votes while being unable to tell us even the broad direction of travel.

I represent a constituency with a huge number of food manufacturing jobs, which are at stake. Two visions of the future are on offer, one in which we retain close economic ties with the EU, with the rights, working protections and living standards that go with them, and another in which we follow the US and China in a race-to-the-bottom, zero-hours, no-hope economy, which would have profound implications for my constituency and many others. I have discussed it with the Prime Minister, and I am grateful for her time but, with hours to go until the vote, there is no clarity about what comes next.

I have also been honest with the Prime Minister about the fact that Members of Parliament like me, who from the beginning have sought a way through this and who have looked for reasons to vote for the withdrawal agreement, need confidence that there is a role for Parliament in what comes next. We are a deeply divided country, and we represent a range of views in this House. All parts must be heard, but I say to my friends and colleagues that we, collectively, have not risen to the challenge. I have heard Members on both sides of the House pretend that no deal is a political hoax, not a legal reality. I have heard Members pretend that we can resolve no deal and avoid that catastrophic scenario simply by wishing or voting it so, but we cannot. We cannot continue to grandstand, to remain in our entrenched positions and to call one another “traitor,” as I have heard again in today’s debate, despite death threats, abuse and the murder of one of my colleagues in recent years. It will not do.

I say to both the Government Front Bench and the Labour Front Bench that none of us will hang on to power, or the prospect of power, by a sleight of hand. We are here to lead, and to lead in the country’s interest, not in our own interest. I have not seen this level of anger directed towards MPs since I was first elected nearly 10 years ago during the expenses scandal.

We are playing with fire, we are breaking our democracy, but there is the hope: the public are better than we are. For all that the extremes have tried to drown it out, there is a decent, sensible, pragmatic majority in this country that wants a way through. We cannot go on arguing about the will of the people or dividing people with our binary choices. Let’s ask them to help us to resolve it, as they did in Ireland, Canada, Australia and this week in France with President Macron responding to widespread unrest. In just seven weeks, a citizens’ assembly could make recommendations to this Parliament to help us to break the deadlock.

That said, a citizens’ assembly would not offer us an escape from hard choices, or respite from them. Choices have to be made. Every option facing the country has costs. There is a clear trade-off between democratic harm and economic harm and we have to be honest with people. Nearly three years after the referendum, we cannot continue to lie to the people. When this deal is voted down, it will be time to begin to work together and tell the truth.

4.15 pm

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I agree with the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) that it is imperative, as we face this the most important decision the House has made in generations, that we be honest with our constituents, tell them the truth and act in the national interest, not just for our constituents but for the generations to come.

In that spirit, I do not hesitate to say that our great nation has made a terrible mistake in deciding to leave the EU. Notwithstanding that, I voted to honour the referendum result and to trigger article 50. Then I reached out to my Government across these Benches to find a consensus that would deliver on the referendum result while doing the least possible damage to our economy and avoiding a hard border in Northern Ireland. As you know, Mr Speaker, and as others know who follow this debate, it was all in vain, and so it was with a heavy heart that I and many others came to the conclusion

that the only way out of the impasse was to take it back to the British people. As we have thought about it and talked to people, it has become absolutely clear that that is the right thing to do: it is right for those who are entitled, now they know what Brexit looks like, to change their minds; it is right for older leave voters, as they consider their children and grandchildren, to put their interests first and change their minds; of course, it is also right, two and a half years on, for the young people who did not have the opportunity to vote, because of their age, to have a say in their future, because they will bear the burden of it all.

I agree with so much of what has been said by so many right hon. and hon. Members. If anybody in the Conservative party is still not sure how to vote tonight, I do not ask them to agree with me and my analysis. I come at this from a very different perspective from my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Mr Vara), who beautifully unpicked the whole deal and explained, in good, solid, careful terms, why it is such a bad deal and must be voted against. I would not for one moment say to him or anyone else in the Conservative party with whom I am in such huge disagreement that anybody is being undemocratic in voting against the deal. I do not agree with many of their reasons, but they are voting that way because they believe it to be right and in the national interest. That must be right.

It must also be wrong for anybody to vote in favour of this deal because they have in effect been blackmailed into thinking that the alternative is no deal; that is simply not the case. We have heard the alternatives available, whether a people’s vote or the Bill that has been proposed. I gently say to dear friends in the Conservative party that it also cannot be right to vote for this deal on the basis that it is a terrible deal. How on earth does that make sense? How does one explain that to one’s constituents? It cannot be right to vote for this deal on the basis that it is so bad that one has a cunning plan to put forward an alternative when it fails. I gently say to dear friends in the Conservative party that it cannot be right either to vote for the deal on the basis that, as one said to me, “My association would tear me to pieces if I didn’t”.

This is a bad deal and we must vote against it. Nobody voted to be poorer. It is also a terrible leap in the dark. I say with great respect to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) that it absolutely does not provide the certainty that British business is crying out for. The deal must be rejected. We are meant to be the party of business, and it is bad for business, and we are meant to be the party of the future, and it is bad for young people. Let’s all come together and vote against the deal.

4.19 pm

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): Over last weekend, as the way in which the political traffic was moving became clearer and clearer, I changed my mind about how to vote tonight. I had been going to vote against the Government’s motion; I will now vote for it, and I wish to explain that. For all the problems that we have had, the nastiness in the debate, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend—my very honourable friend—the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), has come because we indulged in a referendum. We thought that the people

[*Frank Field*]

would agree with us, and we found it impossible to incorporate in a representative system of government a delegate system of government operating from referendums. The idea that we want more of that poison by organising another vote is the last idea to which I would move.

I changed my mind because, for all the weaknesses of the agreement that the Government have presented to us, for all its failings, I believe that we now risk losing Brexit. That does not excuse the Government for their incredible incompetence. It does not mean that some of us, when this stage is over, will not push for a Dardanelles-type inquiry to find out why we landed in this desperate position at this late hour. I do not wish to live my time as Member of Parliament for Birkenhead aiding and abetting those whose real aim is to destroy Brexit.

The agreement gives us five advantages for which I campaigned in supporting Brexit. First, it fulfils the promise that we will control our borders. Secondly, after the transition zone we will be free from paying cash—any cash—to the European Union. Thirdly, it will give us British laws for British people. Fourthly, it will allow us to negotiate new trade agreements. Fifthly, as the Prime Minister has told me on three occasions when answering my questions in the House, it will offer us frictionless trade for our manufacturing industry. We have some manufacturing industry left in Birkenhead: we have Vauxhall's manufacturing down in the Wirral, towards what I call the mainland. I take heart from the statement by the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders that this was the best deal it could accept and that, as far as Brexit went, the car industry would be safeguarded.

Let me end on a similar note to my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan. It is not just one person who has been roughed up. We are all pushed and poked by enthusiasts, let us call them, on the outside, who wish to prevent the views that they do not want to hear from being heard. One of the things that representative government—as opposed to delegate, referendum government—has done is this: it has always given us a Chamber in which people can listen to views without being held to account, as we are, by a group outside who have given us instructions. We may not like that in the House. We may have misjudged our electorate. We may think that they were foolish to give us those instructions. But we asked for instructions, and they gave us instructions to leave.

4.23 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): You have selected amendment (b) to be voted on tonight, Mr Speaker. It is obvious that one of the problems with this agreement is the Northern Ireland backstop. We have no ability to end it unilaterally, and no end date has been set. My amendment addresses that problem by proposing that “if it becomes clear by the end of 2021 that the European Union will not agree to remove the Northern Ireland backstop, the United Kingdom will treat the indefinite continuation of the backstop as a fundamental change of circumstances”,

and will therefore abrogate those parts of the withdrawal agreement. This is a vital point because, under international law, if you sign a treaty saying that under the treaty something will be temporary and it turns out to be permanent, or semi-permanent, you surely have the right to abrogate those parts of the treaty. I ask those

who say that amendment (b) is defective in law to look at my amendment (r), which sets out international law in this regard and it would be perfectly possible, allowable and in accordance with precedent under international law for the Government when they sign this treaty to issue what is called a letter of reservation making it clear.

Joanna Cherry: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Edward Leigh: Will the hon. and learned Lady allow me to continue, as so many Members wish to speak? [*Interruption.*] Yes, fewer Members get in if there are interventions.

My amendment is trying to achieve a compromise. It tries to unite as many people as possible around a deal. I must say that having done my level best to help the Government to achieve this compromise I am somewhat disappointed that the Attorney General appears to have slapped it down, following my intervention on him, and therefore I reserve the right, if the Government are not prepared to support this amendment, to vote against the main motion. Why? Because I believe the fundamental problem with this withdrawal agreement is the fear that the Northern Ireland backstop will become permanent; I think I speak for many Conservative Members in saying that. Therefore, we have to find a way of solving this problem. I have no doubt that, if the main motion is lost tonight, the Government will go back to Brussels and try to get some movement on this issue. But, actually, you do not need to unpick the withdrawal agreement; you can do this unilaterally under international law. It is perfectly possible and feasible for the Government to go back to Brussels and inform the EU of their right to issue a letter of reservation making it clear that we cannot allow this backstop to be permanent, and I do not believe that that would destroy the whole deal.

I agree that we have to try to get a deal. I want there to be a deal with the EU. That is what I have been arguing for. I do not want to risk Brexit. I follow the words of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field). I am aware that this might be in many respects the best deal we are going to get. I do not want to walk through the same Lobby as Members of the Opposition. I do not want to please Tony Blair, who wants chaos so he can argue for a second referendum. I want to bind this party together and find a compromise, and the compromise is staring us in the face. This one last issue needs to be resolved. Then we can unite, get a deal and move things forward.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. After the hon. Member for Halton (Derek Twigg), who is the next speaker to be called, the time limit will have to be reduced to three minutes on account of the level of demand. It is a pleasure to welcome the hon. Gentleman back to the House: Mr Derek Twigg.

4.28 pm

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): Over 57% of voters in Halton voted to leave the EU, and it is condescending and disrespectful to say that they did not know what they were doing. It was very clear: the overriding message I had from my constituents who voted to come out of

the EU was that they wanted to end free movement of labour and take back control and have more control over our laws. Whether rightly or wrongly, people genuinely feel that is the right thing to do, and that to leave would lead to a better future for us out there. I also recognise that a large number of my constituents wanted to stay in, and like me, believe passionately that Brexit is not in the UK's best interests, and we must also listen to their concerns. However, I made it clear at the 2017 general election that we must get on with Brexit and come up with the best possible deal.

It should surprise nobody to learn that this has proved difficult. The Prime Minister could have reached out to Parliament and the Opposition from an early stage but chose not to. She could also have reached out more to the country as a whole—to the public. She cannot command a majority, but acts as if she has one. She wanted to keep MPs at arm's length. The Prime Minister must take a great deal of responsibility for the mess we are now in. I should add that I have had constituents, including those who voted to remain, complain to me about the arrogance and behaviour of the EU in the negotiations, so it is not just the Prime Minister who has a share of the blame. However, it is only now that the deal is in trouble that the Prime Minister has wanted to have discussions with a wider set of MPs, including Opposition MPs. The idea that we should just accept the first deal she puts to this House and not challenge it just smacks of the arrogance I referred to earlier. She expects that Parliament should just roll over and accept it, and then to try to use the threat of a no-deal Brexit just insults our intelligence, as we know there is not a majority for that in this House. I might add that the leave campaign said it wanted to see a negotiated settlement, so I do not believe there is a majority in this country for leaving the EU without an agreement.

With this deal we are neither fully in, nor fully out. We would have to abide by rules but with no say in what others will be making decisions on; while we look on, we would be rule takers. We would be in a weaker position than we are now. There are too many unresolved issues of great importance to our national interest here; the Prime Minister is asking us to take a big leap into the dark. Some 90% of constituents who have written to me or whom I have spoken to in recent weeks believe this is a bad deal—that is coming from both leavers and remainers. If this deal is rejected, it will send a strong message back to Brussels that we must find a better way forward and a better agreement, and that this Parliament will not be deterred from demanding a better deal. I will be voting against this deal, because it is bad for my constituents in Halton and bad for the UK as a whole. We have got to find a way forward. We have got to co-operate and work together in the national interest to find a solution that the people want. That means talking more to people, and getting across the issues and difficulties that we envisage, but we must have that co-operation in order that we can move this forward. There may be a number of ways of doing that, and having indicative votes is one thing that has been talked about during this debate. The fact is that we have to listen, co-operate and find a better way of moving this forward, because it cannot continue the way it is.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much indeed. The three-minute limit now applies.

4.31 pm

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called in this important debate, Mr Speaker. We are being told that the defeat of the withdrawal agreement is a near certainty tonight as a result of the entirely predictable coming together of the no dealers and the no Brexiteers, and, crucially, the Government's failure to build a critical mass of centre ground support for the deal. Given the overwhelming numbers, voting against this deal almost feels like the easier thing to do. But what should someone who genuinely believes in respecting and implementing the outcome of the referendum result do? What happens if they also believe that Brexit was always going to be a process, rather than a one-off event? What happens if they believe that leaving the EU should be done in a way that is responsible and orderly, that certain vital economic and constituency interests should be taken into account, that squaring off Brexit against the Northern Ireland peace process was always going to require incredibly sensitive handling and that compromises were always going to be inevitable because the theory of a perfect Brexit was always just that—a theory? What is the right approach to be taken then? I am talking not about the easy approach, but the right approach. As someone who believes all those things, I am clear that voting for the deal tonight is the right thing to do.

We have a serious responsibility in this House today and it weighs most heavily on those on my side of the Chamber. We, as the party in government, made this referendum happen and we triggered article 50. We are responsible for the timetable and we helped to shape the Prime Minister's red lines in negotiation. So it is not the Prime Minister's deal on the table for discussion but our deal—it has all of our names already attached to it. The question for us tonight is whether we are responsible enough to come together to pragmatically support it in order to provide a way forward and direction for the country, or whether we abdicate our responsibility and disown the very deal that our party in government helped to shape. Let me say something respectfully to those colleagues of mine who for a long time have fought the battle for Brexit and were there at the very beginning. We have heard a number of good speeches from them this afternoon. The question I put to them is: is Brexit always going to be some sort of oppositional insurgency that is forever saying no to things—a vehicle for permanent discontent—or can Brexit be seriously implemented as a programme for government? I was serious when I promised my constituents that I would implement Brexit as a programme of government, which is why I am voting for the deal this evening. I do so because I believed what I said and took seriously the promises that I made to my constituents. It is too easy now to walk away, and the responsible thing to do is back this deal tonight.

4.35 pm

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): It is six long weeks since this process began on 4 December, and I would just like to start with a book recommendation that I hope you will find very good reading, Mr Speaker. Fintan O'Toole's "Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain" is a great read that explains the psychology behind Brexit and exactly why the colonialists in there got themselves in this situation—will we be a colony—and explores the juxtaposition of every emotion, but it is

[Angus Brendan MacNeil]

really the madness of Brexit that is well captured by the Irishman Fintan O'Toole. The book starts off with a great Turkish proverb:

"An Englishman will burn his bed to catch a flea".

That is exactly what Brexit feels like, so I appeal to you: please do not burn your beds; revoke article 50 for your own good. You probably will not listen, but anyway I have said it.

How did we get here? Well, the Prime Minister went and triggered article 50 on 29 March 2017, without much of a thought. I remember that I was fencing my potatoes a few weeks later when around came the news that she was now holding a general election. I was a bit surprised. I had thought maybe the Prime Minister had a plan, but from that moment on—when I was fencing my potatoes—it was very obvious that she did not have a plan.

Six months later, she went to Florence of all places—no idea why—to beg the European Union for two more years. The EU gave her 21 months, and this is what she is now fighting about. Her whole strategy was without any foresight whatever. It was only beaten by the Leader of the Opposition, who wanted to trigger article 50 immediately, meaning that the disaster would already have happened. The situation continued without any cognisance of the needs of the Falkland Islands or Gibraltar, which do not want any of this nonsense. This is damaging to them, and any hon. Member who speaks to their representatives will understand that.

When I spoke to the Prime Minister last week, when she eventually engaged with MPs, it was pretty clear that she was at sixes and sevens. She wanted frictionless trade, but seemed not to acknowledge that we would need to be in the customs union and the single market to achieve that. Today I saw the Attorney General being bamboozled by the idea of fish as a commodity. I do not blame him for being bamboozled; his own Prime Minister could not answer that point in July. She could not see the difference between fish quotas and the fish as a marketable commodity once they were landed. That is very important for my constituency. In the islands of Lewis, Harris, North Uist, Benbecula, South Uist and Barra, not to forget Vatersay, Eriskay, Scalpay, Berneray, Bernera and Grimsay, these are all very important matters. But the Prime Minister is not listening. She acknowledges the damage to GDP; she said so at the meeting. She only wants this deal to buy herself 21 months. She is again playing the Gloria Gaynor card—kicking it all down the road and hoping she will survive. She is running out of road now, and she knows that she is.

Earlier, this was all blamed on David Cameron, but it should be remembered that the Liberals were the ones who started this game in the beginning. Too many in the UK have played the game of Europe. This is why we want to get out of Europe—[*Interruption.*] I meant the United Kingdom; I was just checking that hon. Members were paying attention. We in Scotland want out of the UK to stay in Europe. We see what Ireland is doing; we will do the same.

4.37 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Because Brexit should mean Brexit and no deal is better than this bad deal, I shall vote no, no and no. Thank you.

4.38 pm

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis).

This is not about what happens this evening, because that is a foregone conclusion. This is now about how the Prime Minister responds to the defeat tonight, and where she and the Government take us next. My Select Committee, the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, took evidence on these issues back in November and December. I just want to give Members on all sides of the debate a sense of that evidence and of what businesses said to us.

Paul Everitt from ADS, the aerospace, defence, security and space business trade body, told us that the withdrawal agreement is "not as good" as the deal we have today and that it

"won't ever be as good as it is today."

Nestlé said that leaving the EU is

"like ripping all the wires out of the back of a huge mainframe, and then when you are standing there with all these wires, it will take an awful lot of time to rewire us into a different trading system."

The chair of the American Pharmaceutical Group said, "we are trying to rebuild what we may have taken apart."

Of course, we have also had the news from Jaguar Land Rover, which described a "perfect storm", of which Brexit is one fierce element, that is now resulting in 4,500 job losses.

We are in a position in which the Government say that the deal they have negotiated is not as good for our economy as the one we have today, and we have businesses telling us that the deal the Government have negotiated is not as good as the one we have today; yet tonight, we are in a place where the Government are asking us to vote for a deal that we know will make our constituents poorer, our economy weaker and our security arrangements less secure.

I cannot in good conscience vote for that deal. I did not come to this decision lightly. My constituents voted the way the country voted—to leave—but I do not think there is a single person in my constituency who voted for the deal before us this evening. I do not think that by voting for this deal we will heal the divisions in our country. Since the referendum, nearly 1,000 young people in my constituency have turned 18. They are probably the people who will be most affected by the decision that we will make this evening, yet they had no say in it.

I hope that in the days ahead the Prime Minister will start to listen, as she has not listened so far, to the voices in this House and to the people in this country. I hope that she will rule out no deal in the interests of our country, of our economy and of building a better future for us all, and then allow the people to have a say on the deal she has negotiated.

4.41 pm

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Let me begin by addressing the issue of our divided country, which is repeatedly emphasised by commentators. I disagree—people are totally united. They are united by a pride in their country and in a determination that their nation deserves the best. Regardless of which side

of the argument we are on, we all care passionately about the future of our country and our citizens. Although there is clearly disagreement, like in any family, about the path to get there, we are united in demanding nothing short of the best. I believe that this shared determination and sense of national dignity means that we will find a way to navigate these challenging times and come out stronger on the other side, but we have to find a way to unite this place and the people.

When I decided to become an MP, it was for one reason: I wanted to play an active role in assisting and serving our country. It was not for the job title or because I had a sudden urge for my friends and family to think me “honourable”—indeed, they are regularly quick to dispel that myth—and it was not because I wanted a job for life. It was because I wanted to play my part for as long or as short a time as my party and my electorate wanted me to. As a Member of Parliament, one is a custodian for a short time, with a responsibility to do the singular best for one’s constituency and country, and nothing else, so I have approached my role by applying analysis; through the consideration of facts, constant and changing; and by listening to and representing my constituents in South Cambridgeshire as best I can.

It angers me greatly when I hear MPs say that they will “reluctantly” or “with a heavy heart” vote for this compromise. That is not because I do not believe the Prime Minister has done her best—I have no doubt that she has—but none of us MPs should vote for something that might make the economy weaker and risk jobs. How on earth can we purport to be representing this country at a national level if we are prepared to advocate that? It is not good enough, I say—absolutely not good enough! If we are doing so to protect ourselves, our own jobs, our party, or our own reputation in our party, we should be ashamed.

If this sense of pride and unwillingness to compromise our nation’s future were to result in my losing my position, I am prepared for that, because I will look back at my time as a Member of Parliament in this country’s hour of need and say, “I did my bit.” Lest we forget, we are elected to consider carefully all the options and all the risks, to read these lengthy documents, and to make the tough decisions when required. I exercise those duties with the utmost seriousness. I recognise that, of course, I cannot please all the people all the time, but it appears from thousands of emails, letters and tweets from my constituents, and my conversations with them, that they are content with my approach.

Justine Greening: I am sure that many young people in my hon. Friend’s constituency who want to ensure that their views and concerns about Brexit are listened to will be particularly pleased to hear her talking about how she approaches this very important long-term decision, which affects them the most.

Heidi Allen: That is the most important point, because this is about the future, not today, and certainly not yesterday.

Here we are today with a non-binding political declaration that will inevitably—indeed, this is already the case—become a negotiating tool for leaders in other EU countries: France for access to fish; and Spain for game-playing with Gibraltar. The biggest risk for me is the possibility that our next Prime Minister may not

honour the negotiating principles in that declaration. With this Prime Minister’s position assured, I would perhaps have more confidence, but there is a very real danger that the Government may be led by someone who wants a hard, no-deal Brexit. In that instance, the political declaration, non-legally binding, would not be worth the paper it is written on.

I ask myself: will this deal definitely improve opportunities for my constituents, will it really safeguard jobs, and will it guarantee scientific and medical collaboration? No, no, no. Will it support our services industries, which make up 80% of our economy? No—they are not even part of the deal. So I have no regrets; I have no reluctance. For me, the decision is as clear as day. This is not good enough for my country. So let us harness what unites us in Great Britain and Northern Ireland—that pride and determination to demand the best for the future. Let the people be part of this serious decision. Let them vote on this deal. Let us ask them—is it good enough?

4.45 pm

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): We are coming to the end of a long process and today is the final day of the debate. Like the Prime Minister, I voted remain in the referendum. Like the Prime Minister, I voted to trigger article 50, because my constituents voted to leave in that referendum. Like the Prime Minister, I want a deal that meets the aspirations of our businesses and our community following the referendum, but that also brings our country together. Having reviewed the deal, I have to say that this deal is not it.

I speak as a former Justice and security Minister in this House under a Labour Government. I cannot see any proposals in this withdrawal agreement that give any comfort on the issues of Europol, Eurojust, the European arrest warrant or co-operation on SIS II, whereby we share information on criminals across Europe. There is no content at all on those issues for the future. I see nothing on trade in the deal before us today that will secure future employment across the United Kingdom or in my constituency.

I had the very great privilege of serving as a Northern Ireland Minister, and I can see no justification whatsoever for treating Northern Ireland as a different part of the United Kingdom, given the history of the difficulties in Northern Ireland. The Irish Republic and colleagues in the Chamber today share that view. I understand why that also means that this cannot be a deal. The Treasury’s own figures show that the Prime Minister’s deal will reduce the economy by at least 2.5%, so I cannot support it.

But I also cannot support no deal. I have Toyota in my constituency, which will face a cost of £10 million per day under a no-deal Brexit. Nearby I have Airbus, employing thousands of people who depend on the free and frictionless trade that no deal will destroy. I have farmers in my constituency who need to export their goods, and no deal will destroy that. I have Vauxhall near my constituency. Even the Prime Minister’s two-year transition period means that decisions about the next generation of vehicles at Vauxhall in Ellesmere Port will be taken with the shadow of no frictionless trade held over it, so I cannot support no deal.

[David Hanson]

But I say to the Prime Minister, to echo my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), that there is scope for a deal if she looks again at her red lines. If she looks again at what I stood on at my election 18 months ago regarding access to a single market, strong rights at work and strong environmental activity, there is scope for a deal.

I do not know what is going to happen in the next 48 hours. There may be a vote of confidence; it may be won, it may be lost. But whenever that dust settles, this Prime Minister and this Government, or another Prime Minister and the same Government, will need to contact the Opposition to find a way through this. It can be done; it should be done. I want to make sure that I defend the interests of my constituency. We will not be poorer because of a decision that we can work our way through.

4.48 pm

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): In June 2016, after 40 years—a generation—my constituents, along with the rest of the country, were given a voice on the European question. My constituency overwhelmingly voted to leave the European Union. Tonight I will honour their views and their voice, and—to paraphrase my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan)—represent them despite the fact that I voted to remain.

Setting aside the details of the legally binding withdrawal agreement, I want to address conversations I have had with my constituents rather than with distinguished colleagues and friends in the House. My constituents' vote to leave did not suggest any fear of foreigners or concerns about wage deflation and immigration. It reflected an understanding of the universal and overarching principles of freedom, sovereignty and independence, as was so ably put by my right hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab).

My constituents' support for Brexit is not inconsistent with a fond affection for Europe, shared European values, and a belief in the rule of law, high environmental and employment standards, freedom of speech and, dare I say it, democracy. Their decision is also not inconsistent with a recognition of EU citizens' huge contribution to the NHS, UK farming—particularly in Shropshire—and car, food and defence manufacturing. In all those sectors, EU citizens make, and will, I hope, continue to make, a highly valued contribution to our economy and society.

Brexit was not a vote against Europe, but it was a vote for Britain—a free and independent Britain. I will not be supporting the withdrawal agreement because it puts the United Kingdom in a weaker position than under our current status as a full member of the European Union. It makes us rule takers, not rule makers. It does not set Britain free to implement bilateral trade deals with countries around the world.

Much has been said in this place over many weeks about those who voted to leave the European Union. We have heard some low commentary from both sides of the House, but it was a higher principle that led my constituents to vote to leave the European Union: the freedom, independence and sovereignty of this country.

4.51 pm

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): This withdrawal deal keeps us as an annexe of the EU, not exiting from it. In the past two years, a narrative has developed within the Chamber and across the nation, and it is a completely and utterly false premise. The narrative is that the EU, as constituted, is a place of safety, security and certainty. Many people have portrayed the United Kingdom leaving the EU as a ship in a storm facing an unfortunate and untimely departure from a port or harbour.

That completely and utterly negates all that has been going on in the EU over the past couple of years and the seabed of that, whether it is national populism in Italy, Germany, Hungary, Sweden, France or Poland, or people's sense of frustration, of isolation and of political establishments not listening or paying heed to what they say and want. That is what I detect in this country—a sense of frustration and alienation. Allowing an expansionist empire to keep us embodied as an annexe to the EU will not be a good future. It will not give our children and grandchildren a future to look forward to and aspire to.

Assuming that the vote is lost, as most people think it will be, we need the Prime Minister to go back to Brussels and say, "This is not going to win. We need an agreement that I can get past the House of Commons." People in the United Kingdom will be not just aspiring to but demanding something above and beyond a good trade deal. They aspire to something greater, and that is an ultimate sense of freedom beyond the EU.

4.54 pm

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I, too, rise to speak against the withdrawal agreement, which I will not be voting for this evening. I believe the deal is not what people voted for in the referendum, and I believe it will leave us worse off and having less control in our relationship with the EU than we have today.

I believe there is a lack of good faith, which is why so many Members across the House have spoken against the deal. When the negotiations started, we were told that there would not be an agreement on anything until there was an agreement on everything. We were told that the future arrangement on trade would be part of the negotiations on the deal. We were then told that an agreement on the amount of money we would need to pay during the transition period would unlock the process of discussing the future trade agreement. We are now told that we must pay the money as part of the transition, with no obligation or requirement on the part of the EU that we should agree a trade deal. We will not get any of that money back if the negotiations fail.

My concern is not just that; it is the immediate future—what we are voting to happen now. To use the Attorney General's analogy of the key into his airlock room, which is really the backstop, he is right that we can turn the key and go into the backstop. However, what became clear from his remarks—he did not necessarily express this when he used the analogy—is that when we go into that room, our key is taken off us. We will neither have a key to go back to where we were, nor one to go through the door into the next space.

We are trapped in the backstop, and the EU has lots of good reasons to want to keep us there. It has us, by default, committed largely to the rules of the customs union.

It has us shadowing the rules of the European single market, with no say in how they are made. It can sit back and wait for something more favourable, and perhaps it would like something more punitive, too. The EU is left holding all the cards in any negotiation on our future relationship. That is not a situation this country should put itself in. It is not the basis on which to negotiate a good deal for the future that gives us a good trading relationship and protects the interests of this country, which we should not give away.

We are being asked to do something now that we were promised would never happen. We are being given a *fait accompli* and told that we have to accept this deal, otherwise there is no Brexit or there is no deal at all. I do not believe that. The German Foreign Minister has said today that, if the deal is voted down, talks can resume, and they must do. It would of course be a betrayal of the people of Northern Ireland to lock them into a different economic and political status, without even having asked them whether that is what they would accept and whether that is what they wanted.

We have to reject this deal today. We have to go back to the negotiating table. We have to make sure that whatever option we choose gives us the freedom to choose our future direction and does not lock us into arrangements we have no power to get out of. That would be a betrayal of the interests of this country, and something that I could not accept.

4.57 pm

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): Of paramount importance is the notion that democracy is a process, not an event. It is our duty to defend and deliver the will of the people. From Portsmouth to Pickering and from Penzance to Peterborough, it is essential that the referendum result is respected. However, it is clear that no one voted in the referendum for this half-baked deal put forward by the Prime Minister.

This deal is a galaxy of uncertainty. The Treasury Committee has highlighted that, explaining that the Government analysis did not assess the short-term impact of leaving the EU. When that fact was put to the Chancellor, he agreed. If the Chancellor himself agrees that the deal is uncertain, how can the Prime Minister expect MPs to gamble with the lives of their constituents?

What does this Government's deal mean for Portsmouth? For the Queen Alexandra Hospital, it means staff shortages induced by the Prime Minister's continuation of the hostile environment and a reduction in shared research and international co-operation, and it threatens the prosperity needed to fund our much-loved local NHS. It rules out a permanent customs union with a British say, which is vital to support Portsmouth's businesses, local jobs and the manufacturing supply chains they depend on. It also threatens Portsmouth's international port, which generates £7 million directly to council coffers to fund local services in an area where a third of children live in poverty and a city forgotten for too long by the Government.

Will that continue under the Prime Minister's deal? I have asked, but unanswered questions remain. It is inevitable that multifaceted challenges are posed by exiting the EU. In my constituency, we have seen a 12% swing towards remain from the leave vote. Uncertainty perpetuated by this Government's deal has left many

others with unanswered questions. That is why 70% of people in Portsmouth South want some kind of final say when it comes to Brexit. The people need clarity. The people need control. The people need a final say. A no-deal scenario would see the most vulnerable bearing the brunt of decisions made by the few. If no-deal Brexit was imposed there would be a 29% increase in average food import costs, affecting people on the lowest incomes disproportionately.

The Palace of Westminster is the birthplace of democracy, where so many decisions have been made to shape not only our great country but the world. We can all agree that Brexit is the most important decision this country has taken since the second world war. My grandparents grew up in Portsmouth. My parents grew up in Portsmouth. I grew up in Portsmouth. The importance of this deal is not just for us here today, but for the generations that will inherit the consequences of our actions. It is a privilege to stand here and represent a constituency that has contributed so greatly to our nation's success. I cannot jeopardise Portsmouth's future by voting for a deal that will make my home city poorer.

5 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I voted remain in 2016, because I felt it was better for Britain to belong to an alliance of democracies. However, in my heart I felt that the EU was both undemocratic and bureaucratic. I understood why people wanted to take back control and the pressures that ordinary people face in their daily lives, particularly with the cost of living. It was clear to me after the referendum that the public had had enough. My constituency voted 68% to leave and I made it very clear to the residents of Harlow that I would do all I could to ensure that their wishes on Brexit were followed through. That is why I am strongly opposed to a second referendum, which would divide the country once again and disenfranchise the 17 million people who voted to leave. It would potentially cause political unrest and extremism, as many who voted to leave would feel that their wishes had been ignored.

I do not for a moment believe that the people were not informed or were too stupid. Far from it. In fact, it was we politicians who were the foolish ones for not listening to the anguish of many working class communities over many years, with people struggling with the cost of living and the pressure on our public services, and doing the right thing by working hard yet facing obstacle after obstacle in their daily lives. My view is that any withdrawal agreement needs to follow the wishes of the British people.

The problem for me with the Prime Minister's deal is this: how do I go back to my community of Harlow and say we do not have money for our libraries, hospital and community groups, but we can give £39 billion of hard-earned taxpayers' money to the EU without even getting a trade deal at the end of it? When the House of Lords said there was no obligation to pay the £39 billion, should the Government not at least have published a cost-benefit analysis of the money we would have to give to the EU under the withdrawal agreement? We are tied to EU structures via the transition and the backstop, a spaghetti junction of EU bureaucracy that could potentially be infinite. I have never rebelled against this Prime Minister in this Parliament, but I will be voting against the deal tonight for those reasons. It would

[Robert Halfon]

create two different regimes for Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom, and that has the potential to weaken our Union.

We are in this spaghetti junction without a voice, a vote or a veto. That is why I am trying, with the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), to offer an alternative with a common market 2.0. A common market would take back control by removing us from the common fisheries policy and the common agricultural policy, taking back control of our fish and our farms. It would take us out of the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice and offer us a brake on freedom of movement, but safeguard jobs, communities, business and our economy.

5.3 pm

Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): The Prime Minister said this morning, in setting up today's vote, that we—that is to say Parliament—must not “let the country down”. The real tragedy is that ever since the Prime Minister assumed her position and began the process of implementing Brexit, her way of handling the process has done exactly that: it has let the country down. A vote won by 52% to 48% required the language of compromise from the Government and the Prime Minister at the outset, not the language of red lines.

We are a divided nation. That is not surprising given that we asked our citizens to answer a binary question in a highly polarising and toxic debate. No genuine attempt has been made to reach out to the 48%, to bring people together and to tell those who found themselves in a minority by a very small margin on the day of the referendum result that this is still their country, too. No attempt has been made to state unequivocally that all those citizens who have been exercising their British rights and freedoms to dissent, to hold an unpopular or minority position and to still argue for remain are not acting as saboteurs or traitors, but are as British as it gets.

Instead, we have allowed toxic language and rhetoric to take hold, poisoning not only our politics, but our wider society. Just as there has been no reaching out to the rest of the country by the Government, there has been no reaching out to the rest of the House either. At the outset of his speech, which feels a long time ago, the Attorney General said that we have reached this point reluctantly. That is not true. All the choices made along the way—choices made willingly and wilfully by the Prime Minister—have led us not reluctantly but inexorably to the place we are in today.

It is unforgivable that we have lost a whole month to a simple running down of the clock because the Prime Minister was afraid of losing the vote, as she will inevitably this evening anyway. I cannot support the withdrawal agreement or the political declaration for many of the reasons that Members have already set out, not least because they ignore 80% of our economy—the services sector on which so many thousands of jobs depend.

I will, however, support all and any measures that allow Parliament to do what the Executive have so demonstrably failed to do, which is to commence the

search for a consensus. We should hold some indicative votes to find what will command a majority in the House. We must take all and any steps to rule out a no-deal Brexit. The real tragedy is that Brexit on any terms will not solve many of the reasons why the Brexit vote took place in the first place. At the very least, we as a House must make the best of it and find a consensus to go forward.

5.6 pm

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): A constituent of mine who voted leave recently said:

“I am sick and tired of being told I didn't know what I was voting for. I knew exactly what I was voting for.”

Recently on Bloomberg, the former Governor of the Bank of England, Mervyn King, wrote:

“Britain is not facing an economic crisis. It is confronting a deep political crisis. Parliament has brought this on the country. It voted overwhelmingly to hold a referendum. The public were told they would decide.”

Indeed they were. On 10 November 2015, David Cameron said at Chatham House that

“ultimately it will be the judgment of the British people in the referendum... You will have to judge what is best... Your decision. Nobody else's. Not politicians'. Not Parliament's. Not lobby groups'. Not mine. Just you. You, the British people, will decide... It will be your decision whether to remain in the EU on the basis of the reforms we secure”—

I emphasise those words—

“or whether we leave.”

In February 2016, David Cameron secured his reforms at the EU Council. There was the so-called red card, whereby enough national Parliaments combining together might be able to block a Commission proposal. There were temporary limits on access to in-work benefits for newly arriving EU workers. There were some limits on child benefit and a vague commitment to reducing regulation. It was not very impressive, but that was the deal. People voted on whether to stay in the EU on that basis or to leave, and they voted to leave.

The question in the Scottish referendum was, “Should Scotland be an independent country?” If the vote had gone the other way and Unionists had then said: “Well, it depends what one means by ‘an independent country’”, or, “Did people really know what they were voting for? This will make Scotland poorer, I cannot possibly support it”, there would justifiably have been outrage, yet that is exactly what is happening here, where the question was straightforward. The question was, “Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?”, and the people voted to leave.

The problem is that some people have no interest in respecting the result of the referendum and they think they know better. The present situation recalls Bertolt Brecht's poem, “The Solution”:

“After the uprising of the 17th June
The Secretary of the Writers' Union
Had leaflets distributed in the Stalinallee
Stating that the people
Had forfeited the confidence of the government
And could win it back only
By redoubled efforts.”

As Brecht put it so devastatingly in the final stanza:

“Would it not be easier
In that case for the government
To dissolve the people
And elect another?”

I will be voting against the withdrawal agreement because it will not deliver Brexit. It gives the EU the right to impose laws on us indefinitely and a veto over whether that would ever change, while breaking up the country by requiring Northern Ireland to treat Great Britain as a third country and making us pay £39 billion, even though without a withdrawal agreement we are not legally obliged to pay a penny. The former Chief of the Defence Staff and the former chief of the Secret Intelligence Service both say that the withdrawal agreement will fundamentally affect our national security. People voted for change. What we want is a self-governing country where we rule ourselves. We do not need this deal; we just need to leave.

5.9 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): At the heart of this debate are opportunities and rights—the opportunities and rights of the next generation of young people across the UK, the 16 and 17-year-olds who did not get to vote in the referendum because the Government did not think that they were responsible enough.

It is hard to believe, I am sure, but it is some 13 years since I graduated from university. At the University of Stirling, I studied alongside Erasmus students from across the EU. They enriched our lives, our country and our education system. I also had colleagues and friends who went throughout the EU and had exactly the same experience. That we are going to deny such opportunities to the next generation is a human tragedy, and that we treat EU nationals in the UK with contempt is also a human tragedy.

In the first days after the referendum, when the Scottish Government and the First Minister of Scotland put out the hand of friendship, unfortunately the Labour party was calling for article 50 to be triggered. In recent months, when we put the hand of friendship out again, to say that we would pay the ridiculous fees that EU nationals were being asked to pay, this Government tried to block us. The Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights also set up a committee, which highlighted some of the concerns, such as those about EU funding and opportunities to work, study and travel abroad.

Much of what we hold dear about the EU has been about our rights. As a gay woman, I know that this Parliament and the Scottish Parliament have done a huge amount for LGBT people but, as Mark Townsend wrote in *The Guardian* last year:

“The Westminster parliament has played its part in making amends, but without the carrot and stick of European institutions would we enjoy the level of protection from discrimination that we now possess?”

That is a reasonable point to make—just look at the Government's record on trade union rights. What will happen when we do not have those protections anymore? Where will that leave us? In 2017, at the UK Supreme Court, John Walker had his pension rights instated so that his husband will have the same pension rights as others. That took an 11-year battle against the Government.

We must not forget the big boys who did this and ran away—those who got us into a mess and are now nowhere to be seen. We must remember that my constituents

and the people of Scotland voted to remain within the EU. When circumstances change and politics moves forwards, as it inevitably does, people should be allowed another choice.

5.12 pm

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I rise to speak to amendment (f) in my name and that of other right hon. and hon. Members. Briefly, it would give the UK Government the unilateral right to exit the backstop at a time of their choosing. It is very straightforward: the UK could not find itself suspended indefinitely in a backstop. If the amendment is passed, it would allow the UK to choose the time to exit, had we entered the backstop; the UK would not have to seek EU approval to do so.

I speak with some sadness. The negotiations to date have been approached as a problem to be solved, rather than as an opportunity to be seized. I, for one, do not like the transition period, but in any negotiation—in particular after 40 to 45 years of integration—there has to be an element of compromise, and I am willing to accept that. The backstop, however, is the real problem for many on the Conservative Benches.

At the moment, the Government cannot answer this very simple question, which directly addresses the indefinite nature of the backstop: without any legal certainty with regards to our ability to exit the backstop unilaterally, what certainty is there that the EU would not play a long game, dragging out the negotiations? By further extending the transition period, which it could do, we could still be having this discussion in three, four or five years to come. That is not honouring the result of the referendum. We need to leave the EU. We need to be definite about that, and the backstop is not the answer because it is indefinite. We could be there for a very long time—

Mr Kenneth Clarke: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Baron: I am sorry: others want to come in.

Passing amendment (f) would encourage both parties to negotiate constructively when it comes to the transition period and the trade deal, because if the EU knows that it cannot trap us in the backstop, it is more likely to constructively negotiate a trade deal for the benefit of both parties. The Prime Minister could then go back to the EU, which has a long track record of eleventh-hour deals. The amendment would go a long way to helping to unite our party, which is terribly, terribly important. If the amendment is not passed, unfortunately and reluctantly I will have to vote against the withdrawal agreement.

5.16 pm

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I first declare an interest: I chair the all-party motor group, which receives support from the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, the Motorsport Industry Association, and the RAC Foundation.

Yesterday, I attended the first meeting of the development partnership that has been established by the Business Secretary in response to the announcement that Jaguar Land Rover will cut 4,500 jobs this year. This is not a company in crisis. Indeed, in addition to the job loss announcement, the company also told us about its

[Richard Burden]

impressive forward investment plans. But this is still a time of great uncertainty for employees, and there will be a big role for the development partnership in standing by them.

I do not claim that the job losses at Jaguar Land Rover are to do only with Brexit. The downturn in the Chinese market is an important part of the picture, as has been the depression in sales of cleaner diesel engines. Shortage of time means that I cannot go into that today, but Brexit is also part of the picture. Yesterday's meeting reinforced my belief that the most important thing to do now is to rule out crashing out of the EU without a deal. That cannot be mitigated, whether by a ferry company with no ships or converting an airport runway into a lorry park. It is no answer for motor manufacturers or for companies in their supply chain to have somewhere to park their trucks when they cannot get those trucks to and from channel ports to deliver the parts needed every day to build 6,600 cars and 9,000 engines here in the UK. They need to be able to get the 1,100 trucks that carry those components across the channel every day to their plants not only on time, but in the right order, to keep their production lines going. It is the same for the £3.4 billion-worth of components from suppliers in the UK that go to the European Union to build vehicles over there. The only way to keep production going is not to make forlorn efforts to try to mitigate chaos—it is to stop the chaos happening in the first place.

Investment decisions are now on hold. If we want to guarantee and secure them, we have to rule out no deal. To do that, we have to decide what we will do after the Prime Minister's deal is defeated tonight, as it surely will be. We must buy ourselves some time to do that, because any other option will not be able to be completed by 29 March. If that means extending article 50, that is what we should do. We need to prevent a no-deal Brexit by default, and that is now the overriding priority.

5.19 pm

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): When this House gave the people a vote in 2016, the people had their say and the majority voted to leave. I did not vote to leave, but the majority did, and that must be respected.

There are many views on how we should leave the EU. I take the view that I want to stick as much as I can to our 2017 manifesto on which I was last elected, and that formed the basis of what we have in front of us today. Is the deal perfect? No. Does it get us out of the EU on 29 March? Yes. It also gives us the basis for taking back control of our laws, our money, our borders, our fishing and our agricultural policy, and the basis for a trade deal.

I totally accept the challenges that hon. Members across the House have raised in relation to the backstop. I have had to take a view on that, and balance that view against the wider imperative. I must admit that I am drawn to the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron), as well as to the one tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison). If the vote fails tonight, I hope that we will look at the situation in the context of those kinds of proposals and ask whether we could make further agreements with the EU.

I fear that if we do not work along those lines, we will have two distinct groups in Parliament: one that wants a no-deal Brexit and one that does not want Brexit at all. I fear that both groups want a race to 29 March, and that both think they are going to win. However, only one group can win. In racing terms, the favourite is probably no deal, because we already have the legislation in place to work towards that, but following last week's events, I would not rule out the people who want to prevent us from leaving the EU doing everything within their power between now and 29 March to achieve that.

I will back the deal—I am interested in supporting it because I think it is good for jobs and particularly for the manufacturing industry in my area—but I want to say to the House and to my constituents that I will not renege on the referendum, I will not support anything that would extend article 50 or stop Brexit and I will not support a second referendum. We must leave on 29 March. I am committed to that, and I hope that the House will also agree to that if we do not ratify this deal in the coming weeks.

5.22 pm

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Much of this debate has been dominated by questions about the Northern Irish backstop. While those questions are vital, we must not lose sight of the fundamental question we should be asking ourselves tonight. Is this agreement right for our country, and will it make us prosperous and stronger and help us to deal with challenges of the future? It will not. The agreement does not secure our future trading relationship with the EU, as people were promised in 2016. We have not even begun those negotiations, and despite what many businesses hope, they will face huge uncertainty for years to come.

The truth is that there is no free trade agreement that will deliver the same benefits as our current relationship with the EU. There will inevitably be barriers to trade that will make us poorer than we would otherwise have been. At the same time, during the transition period, we will be giving up our say over many of the rules that govern our lives—a say that, whatever the Brexiteers tell us, Britain has always exercised to powerful effect within the EU. How is that taking back control? Neither does the agreement provide answers to the reasons why people voted to leave in the first place. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) has said, in many parts of the country the Brexit vote was driven by a deep sense of loss—the loss of industrial jobs and the pride and purpose they brought, and a rejection of what has come in their place.

I know from my own constituency that many people are angry, and that above all they want change, but the EU and immigration have not caused the very real problems people face, and Brexit will not solve them. Britain is better able to cope with the problems created by globalisation when we are part of a strong group of like-minded countries, and most of the powers to transform people's lives lie within our hands. We should be offering people the chance to succeed, not offering them something or someone to blame. We should be making changes to our economy and public services so that people in every part of the country can thrive in an inevitably uncertain world, rather than pretending that we can somehow stop the clock and make the rest of the world go away.

I will be voting against the agreement tonight, but time is running out. We cannot wait any longer to provide the leadership we need to get us out of this hole. I will support moves to try to build consensus across the House and to rule out the threat of no deal and the chaos it would bring. However, the best way of breaking the logjam is to put the question of where we go next back to the public, because what is on offer now is so different from what was on offer in 2016 and because it is right in principle to say, “This is the reality of Brexit. Do you want to go ahead or stick with the deal we have?” There is no jobs-first or sensible Brexit and we, particularly Labour Members, should have the courage to tell it like it is.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. A two-minute limit now applies.

5.25 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): People had wanted to have their say on Europe for many years. When we gave them the referendum on the alternative vote, the main question in my constituency was, “Why aren’t you giving us a vote on our membership of the European Union?” Some 17.4 million voted to leave, including 58% of my constituents, and more people voted for Brexit than have voted for anything else. Importantly, 403 constituencies voted to leave. Those people were promised that their vote would be honoured, that it was the people’s decision, and that it would not be overturned by politicians or by this Parliament. It would be wrong to say to those people that we will have a second vote when we have not delivered on what they voted for the first time. It has become clear over the past month or so that there is a majority in this House against no deal. Therefore, if we vote down this deal, the remaining alternatives, including the Norway model or some version of it, are so far from what people voted for that we will have broken faith with the British people.

I say to my friends across the House—pragmatic Brexiteers and democratic remainers alike—that we must prevent an alliance of people who want to stop Brexit and people who want an even stronger Brexit from denying the people what they voted for. We know that business does not want a second referendum, which would lead to even more uncertainty. I heard today from trade unionists who want to leave the EU that it “will unleash an unprecedented level of disillusionment in British politics which will be unparalleled in our history” if we do not deliver Brexit.

5.27 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): To be honest, the withdrawal agreement is not a deal. It means we will pay £39 billion for the right to obey EU rules without the right to sit at the table when those rules are written. The political declaration is so woolly that it could mean whatever we want it to mean or, for that matter and more importantly, whatever the next Presidents of the European Council and European Commission want it to mean. We have no idea whether we shall have open trade with our closest neighbours or whether we shall continue to share information about dangerous international criminals or take part in Europol or be able to extradite criminals to face justice across European Union borders. The deal is bad for British jobs, and it puts our national security at risk.

I am angry that we have wasted so much money on Brexit—money that could have been spent on decent services in my constituency. However, what pains me most of all is that we British, who have always been proud to welcome strangers from other countries, who have travelled across Europe to build great British companies, who followed Churchill’s injunction to build a Europe of peaceful co-operation, and who prided ourselves on the rule of law and our robust parliamentary system, have utterly squandered two years on a massive distraction from the real subjects that matter: inequality, poverty wages, the state of our public services, and low productivity. In the process, we have become an international laughing stock—anxious, angry, uncertain, divided—and we have received death threats at our constituency offices. I have not heard a single Member say that this deal is better for Britain than our present deal—not even the Prime Minister—so how on earth can we vote for it? Consensus is a delusion. Party politics has failed. The PM must build a new coalition and the people must have the final say.

5.29 pm

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): It is no secret that I voted to leave the EU, as did 67% of my constituents and nearly 17.5 million people across the UK. The reasons for voting to leave varied across the country, but I spoke to thousands of my constituents before, during and after the referendum and they were clear about what they voted for. They want to see an end to free movement, they want control of our borders, they want sovereignty for our Parliament and they want the ability to trade freely around the world. I very much share those sentiments. I was keen to see an agreement delivered that I could support. Critically, the one on offer does not meet two of the criteria set out by my constituents: the return of our sovereignty and the ability to trade freely.

My personal concerns about the deal are similar to those of many in this House, mainly on the backstop and the future legal agreement. As it stands, the deal on the table potentially gives away our sovereignty and £39 billion of our money with absolutely nothing guaranteed in return.

Getting an agreement is the most favourable option, but not at any cost. I believe that, with the deal before us, we are giving too much away. It is not too late to change course. We can secure amendments that deliver wholly on the referendum result, and those changes need to include getting rid of the Northern Ireland backstop and having guarantees on our future relationship, both of which are likely to command a majority in this House and, importantly, deliver on the democratic will of the British people. It is important that that is delivered because people are so frustrated by the games of some politicians who seek to frustrate the result.

I implore the Prime Minister to go back to the EU—I know the EU has said the deal is final, but it has moved on other things and we have seen that it is able to move the goalposts when it suits it—and come back with a deal that we can get behind.

5.31 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Before I start my speech, I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Steffan Lewis, the Plaid Cymru Assembly

[Liz Saville Roberts]

Member, who very sadly passed away on Friday. At just 34, he still had so much to contribute. He was, without a shadow of a doubt, one of the party's best minds. His inspirational vision for lifting Wales's status in the world reached across the political divide. His influence and legacy will endure beyond our political lifetimes. We miss you, Steff.

The Prime Minister and her inner circle have reached endgame. They have run out of road in the project of misinformation, arm twisting and semantic chicanery, of "my way or no way" and of partnership proffered as the gateway to the future of her precious Union. She says she is reaching out across party boundaries, but it is just too little, too late. The spirit of acknowledging another vision, a vision of the respect implicit in the sweet moderation of compromise—sadly, such politics are beyond her. Her gaze has a way of swivelling back to the Brexiteers, fossilised in the strata of her own party. The rest of us, and especially the voices of Wales, have been invisible and unheeded. Here is a concept of parliamentary democracy in the age of devolution reduced to the absurd.

The Prime Minister claims that no solutions other than hers have been proffered or are, indeed, possible. This tired political gambit now looks desperate. It has neither credibility nor veracity. When we plead with her to give the people a final say on the biggest question of our generation, as many of us have, she commands us to honour the result of the Brexit referendum, yet in 1997 she voted against legislation to establish the National Assembly for Wales, and in 2005 she stood on a manifesto calling for another referendum, with the option to overturn the previous result.

History has shown that the Prime Minister is very much prepared to go back to the people of Wales, so why not Europe?

5.33 pm

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): We have heard time and again in the Chamber today that the people should have a final say. Well, the people did have a final say, and it was in 2016. Just because hon. Members cannot quite come to terms with the fact that the public were not sufficiently scared witless to vote to remain in the European Union, it is no excuse for us not to listen to what they had to say. Fifty-seven per cent. of the Ribble Valley voted to leave, 75% of Conservative seats voted to leave, 61% of Labour seats voted to leave and, at the last election, the Labour party and the Conservative party both stood on manifestos that said they would deliver leaving, which is therefore what we have to do. I know democracy can be difficult at times, but that is no reason to deny the democracy that this Parliament gave to the people. Sovereignty went back from this House to the people, who had their final say.

I have problems with the deal as it currently stands, particularly on the backstop. The European Union basically has an opportunity to chain us to it, but it does not have the handcuffs. We are deciding whether to offer it the handcuffs and the key. That would be hugely dangerous.

I look forward to the opportunities we will have once we have left to do trade deals throughout the whole world, including with the European Union. We buy

£341 billion of goods from them, and they buy £95 billion less from us, so it is in both our interests to do a trade deal. We will have a 20-month transition period—when it can start—but the important thing is to leave on 29 March. It is almost like Christmas day—it is 25 December; it is what people look forward to. If we deny them the opportunity to leave on 29 March, they will never forgive us.

5.35 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Yesterday, working in my emergency department as a doctor, I looked around the waiting room and saw it all on display: people's pain, their hopes, their fears, their courage. Whether it is a mother relying on food banks to feed her malnourished children or a father waiting too long for a cancer chemotherapy operation, this deal does nothing to improve lives. Just as the NHS is tasked with healing and prevention, so we are too in this House. Politicians and commentators continue to fuel the rhetoric and fan the flames of hatred. Parliament, once the symbol of hard-won rights through democratic discourse, is seeing voices forcefully suppressed by fear and intimidation. People are questioning the very character of our culture in order to tear apart the fabric of our society.

This deal, the language around it and the empty threats used to force us into supporting it are doing nothing to rebuild Britain. We can start the journey to rebuild Britain by looking at the rising use of food banks, the number of operations cancelled and the number of police on our streets. Now, more than ever in this place, we need to take a long hard look at ourselves and ask who we are. British people are tired of rhetoric, political games and uncertainty. In the absence of a Government who can lead—this Tory Government—it is imperative that the House set an agenda for repairing the deep wounds in our society. We need to dig deep in the coming days and ask what sort of leaders we want to be and how we are to heal our country once all is said and done.

5.37 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Thank you for calling me, Mr Speaker. I am amazed to make it into the top 50.

I want to make three points. First, I agree with the hon. Member for Halton (Derek Twigg) and my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr Bacon) about the attitude towards the leave vote. It was not some cry of anguish or expression of concern. It was a decision. We gave the people the decision and they took it.

The second point is about the preparation for no deal. I am obliged to the anonymous civil servant who concluded his piece in *The Telegraph* on 28 December as follows:

"An enormous effort by thousands of hardworking civil servants has been made to ensure that if we leave the EU without a deal, 'crashing out' over a 'cliff-edge' is simply not going to be an option, and it is purely a political decision not to make this clear to the public and nervous backbench MPs. But if the Government was frank with Parliament and the country"—

we have authorised £4.2 billion of expenditure on this, by the way—

“what justification would be left for its disastrous Withdrawal Agreement? What would Remainers do without a Project Fear? They would need to think up convincing positive arguments for staying in the EU, something that has so far proved beyond them.”

The final point is about defence and intelligence. I know that my right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) has taken an extremely dim view of Lord Guthrie and Sir Richard Dearlove and the letter they have written to Conservative association chairmen, and he is perhaps right to wear the expression of an outraged Bateman cartoon in response to their behaviour, but their letter contained a real concern. Even my right hon. and gallant Friend was not able to address—his remarks last Friday were not time-limited—the substance of what they are warning about and all the issues over the common security and defence policy and the rest contained in the European acquis. We would do well to pay attention.

5.39 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): When I first spoke in the meaningful vote debate, I spoke of the shambles of the Government’s handling of Brexit, of my alarm at the historic mess that was of their making, and of my anger at the contempt with which they had treated the House and the people whom we represent. I spoke of my constituents’ outrage at the turmoil that the Government were inflicting on the economy, and of the threat to workers’ rights and environmental standards that this Brexit deal represents. I spoke of the danger that the Government’s approach poses to EU citizens’ rights—rights that must be guaranteed; no ifs and no buts.

Now, five weeks later, what has changed? The Prime Minister said that she was going back to the EU to get “reassurances” to appease her disgruntled Back Benchers, but she has returned with nothing. Nothing has changed, as her saying goes. We are now being asked to accept the same botched deal as we were then. It is a deal that fails to protect jobs, rights or people’s livelihoods. It is a deal that the Government’s own analysis says would reduce GDP by 3.9% and make every region worse off. It is a deal that provides no guarantees on the maintaining of key rights such as those of disabled people, which are protected by the EU charter of fundamental rights. All that has changed since the Prime Minister pulled the vote is that there are now just 73 days left until 29 March.

It is clear that the Prime Minister is trying to run down the clock and hold the country to ransom. She is using the prospect of a catastrophic no deal to threaten the House into accepting her botched deal. That is unacceptable, and I know that the people of Battersea, and people across the country, are disgusted at this attempted blackmail. That is why I will be voting against the Prime Minister’s deal, and I encourage all Members on both sides of the House to do the same.

5.41 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I intend to change my mind. I am a Brexiteer through and through. It is in my DNA. We gave the British people the opportunity to vote in a referendum on 23 June in 2016, and I intend to vote to honour that in full. In return, however, I expect my colleagues on the Front Bench to pay very close attention to my concerns about this particular deal.

I happen to believe that we have a very bright future outside the EU. The current legal position is that we are leaving without a deal unless the House overturns the legislation. The ultimate irony is that all the people who vote against the deal tonight are more likely to end up with a no deal, and I do not want to see that happen. I want us to leave with an agreed deal, and an agreed deal that is acceptable to the British people.

I have two main reservations. First, I think that we need legal clarification about withdrawal from the Irish backstop within a specified time, preferably no longer than two years. My second major objection to the backstop is that it ties us into a customs union with the EU. I want us to get out of that customs union so that we can have an independent trade policy. I think that the best future for this country is to be outside the EU, trading with growing nations around the world, but we cannot do that while we are stuck in the backstop.

I therefore intend to vote for the deal tonight. I intend to sort this matter out for my constituents, as I promised, and I intend to give businesses certainty, but in return, I want the Government to come back with a better deal.

5.42 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): On the day of the 2016 referendum result, I called for a vote on the final deal. That did not instantly meet with wild approval. My motives may have been misunderstood, because I am used to losing elections. I have never called for one of those elections to be rerun. I am a very good loser: I have had bags of practice.

There is much talk about the legitimacy of our democracy, and about trust in Parliament being tarnished if we do not enact Brexit on 29 March, but what does it do for trust in politics if we force the people to accept a deal that most of them clearly do not want? Let us not fool ourselves: no one here speaks for the majority. There is no majority of the people any more. The Brexiteers in this place are voting both ways today. The Brexiteers out on the streets, peacefully protesting, are calling for votes in both directions. I had the joy of stopping for a few minutes of good-quality banter with many of them last week. We should do more of that, by the way. Some were asking me to vote for the deal, but most were asking me to vote against it. Of the minority of my constituents who favour Brexit, most are asking me to vote against the deal, although some are asking me to vote for it. The 17.4 million figure is now divided into at least two opposing camps.

Referendums are an awful means of sorting out any issue. They are divisive and they are dangerous—unless, of course, they concern an issue that no one cares about, such as the alternative vote. However, we have reached a point at which the only democratic, legitimate, peaceful and consensual way through this appalling mess is to give the people the final say. Let our future not be one that anyone can claim was foisted on Britain by politicians and by this Prime Minister’s Whitehall-Brexit stitch-up. Let our future be one that is owned by the British people, that was endorsed by the British people, and that has a legitimacy that brings a unity and a healing that only a final say can bring.

5.44 pm

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Westmorland

[Mr Ranil Jayawardena]

and Lonsdale (Tim Farron). He talks about winners and losers, but this is not about winners and losers; it is about what is right.

The Prime Minister has repeatedly said that no deal is better than a bad deal. I believe a deal is possible, but this is not it; this is a bad deal. I know that some, both in this place and beyond, have expressed their wish to agree it anyway: people who continued to campaign for remain after the referendum in order to guarantee we avoid no deal; or people who believed in leave but out of party loyalty or fear for Brexit seek to support the deal before us. I respect that others will vote as they see fit; it is important for every Member to act in good conscience, and it is for that very reason that I cannot support this so-called deal.

Trust in politics remains at an all-time low. To pretend that this deal delivers on the referendum only continues to foster the distrust we have seen out there. We must be honest with people: this deal does not deliver on the referendum. It retains the worst parts of the EU without the real benefits of Brexit. So I happen to agree with the vast majority of my constituents who have contacted me, both leave and remain voters, who have urged me to vote against this deal.

None the less, let me be clear: I do want to secure a deal with the EU, and I continue to believe that we can agree one. I believe that, sadly, the negotiation now potentially needs to continue even after a no-deal departure from the EU on 29 March. We must be bolder if we wish to strike the best deal for Britain, whether before D-day or beyond.

5.46 pm

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): This should be a historic day for the future of our country and Parliament. This was once the Chamber of Winston Churchill and Clement Attlee. Instead today is a day of high farce and self-delusion: the Government pressing ahead with a deal they have known for weeks is dead; the leadership of my former party offering the illusion of an election when it has no chance of winning a no-confidence vote; the no-deal camp who have no regard for the impact this would have on our constituents.

In the last chance saloon it is incumbent on us to seek a pragmatic compromise that can secure a majority in this House and in all political parties. I do not care whether this is presented by the Government or facilitated by this House. Putting Brexit back to the people would be an abdication of our responsibility; it has nothing to do with breaking a logjam and everything to do with seeking to reverse the result of the first referendum. It will further divide our country when we should be leading and healing.

I cannot support this worst of all worst deals, and genuinely believe the only option that can now secure a majority in this House is a common market 2. At its core that is a very simple idea: that we can be out of the political structures of the EU but maintain our economic and security partnership. This will require a radically reworked political declaration based on the EEA and the EFTA. After tonight this should form the basis of the Prime Minister's new negotiating position, or alternatively the House will have to take control and seek a pragmatic compromise. Common market 2 or something else: our duty is to lead and to heal this divided nation.

5.48 pm

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) and an honour to be taking part in this debate at a crossroads in our history.

In 2016 the British people voted to leave the European Union, and the Government and this Parliament need to respect their wishes. I accept that there are passionate views on both sides, and I have always treated those with differing views with respect, but it is wrong to suggest that most people did not know what they were voting for. Many who espouse those views really think that the people of this country should not have been given that decision in the first place. It is my belief that those who are calling for a second referendum are seeking to damage our democracy, as no decision by the British people would mean anything any longer because once a decision was reached those who were unhappy would try to undo it, and that might go on again and again. Division is healthy in a democracy and in our political process, but a second referendum would take our country to breaking point and undermine the dignity in our democracy.

The withdrawal agreement does allow for some control to be taken back, and I respect the endeavours of the Prime Minister. She has made a major commitment to this; her perseverance is commendable and her diligence unquestionable. There is only one point I wish to make on this agreement and it relates to the Northern Ireland backstop. The inclusion of the backstop is perhaps the most potent aspect of this agreement, given that it poses a real threat to the integrity of our United Kingdom. Although some have tried to allay fears with optimism, more concerning are those who have displayed a parochial indifference that fails to recognise our role as United Kingdom Members of Parliament, acting in the interests of the whole United Kingdom. The British people did not vote to have the foundations of our nation undermined in any way—

Mr Speaker: Order. I call Jack Dromey.

5.50 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I will never forget Warren, whom I first met as an apprentice who was moving into a little Victorian terraced house with his partner. He said that as a consequence of having got a good and well-paid job at the Jaguar plant he was moving into the house of his dreams with the woman of his dreams. The plant and the success of Jaguar Land Rover have transformed the lives of thousands, including in my constituency, which is rich in talent but one of the poorest in the country.

This is a company producing 108,000 cars a year and at the heart of the midlands economy, and the relationship with Europe is key. Half the company's market is in Europe and if it had to fall back on WTO terms, that would put up prices of the cars it sells by between £3,000 and £5,000. We are talking about millions of parts every day and thousands of lorries. The frictionless trade and that relationship have been key to the success of the automotive industry in our country. Ralf Speth, JLR's inspiring chief executive officer, together with the whole industry, has warned of the consequences of not getting this right. What was the response of some Government Members? The response of the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson)

was “f*** business”. The response of the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) was that Ralf Speth was “making it up”. The right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip also said that he was not sure that Ralf knows more about the automotive industry than he does. The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) said that

“not a single job will be lost”

as a consequence of Brexit. What planet do they live on?

That is why two things are key. First, this is not a good deal and we have to get to a good deal that works for Britain. We have to get to that, honouring the obligation that we gave to the people of Britain at the time of the referendum. Secondly, in the meantime, there can be no question of a no-deal Brexit. In the words of Ralf Speth, we should say no to no deal, because to go over the cliff on 29 March without a deal would be utterly catastrophic for our country.

5.52 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Some 57% of my constituents voted to leave and so did I. It may be unfashionable but I will be supporting the Government tonight, because after the sophistry, chicanery and obfuscation of last week, I genuinely feel that we may not have Brexit at all. The Attorney General is absolutely right to say that there is risk in the backstop, and we need to de-risk it. My amendment would have done that, had it been selected, as would the amendment tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire). Amendments (b) and (f) have pretty much the same effect, as they would introduce a time limit, and I commend them to the Government.

In 2016, people were not being thick or ignorant, and they were not overwrought. They were not racist and they were not prejudiced. They were not needing to be given a second chance, and they were not “anguished”, to use the word of the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn). They just wanted to leave. They are sovereign. We serve them. Let’s get on with it.

5.55 pm

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): The Attorney General opened this debate by saying that this situation was ineluctable. The fact is that it was not. It only became ineluctable when the Prime Minister, failing to recognise the need to build a consensus across the country and in Parliament, started to adopt inflammatory language about the EU, set out red lines that ruled out much-needed conditions for any settlement that would help our manufacturing industry and the situation with the Irish border, and opposed any parliamentary involvement in the process. By doing so, she alienated a body of people in this House and across the country who she needed to build the necessary consensus to get a deal that would be acceptable both to Parliament and to the country.

I represent a constituency that voted 70% Brexit, and I am a remainer. I do not pretend that that is a comfortable position to be in. I voted to trigger article 50 because I felt that I had to honour the referendum result, and I have been lobbied heavily to say that, as a representative, I should do what my constituency wanted. The problem is that I am also being lobbied by people who want a better health service and access to the doctor, who are

worried about their jobs at Jaguar Land Rover, and about policing and the rise of crime in the locality. I know that all these things, which I am equally obliged to deliver, will be jeopardised by voting for this settlement, because it does not give us what we have now. What we need is for this to be defeated, for the Prime Minister to extend article 50 and for a consensus to be reached in the ensuing months.

5.56 pm

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I would have liked to be able to support the Government’s motion. I voted remain and I certainly have deep concerns about this whole process. I have looked at the whole issue of the backstop, and I have been consistent in this respect, which was why I tabled an amendment, which was not selected. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison)—the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee—tabled a similar, rather better, amendment, building on mine, but that was not selected either.

I just cannot reconcile myself to the fact that, as an MP, I can vote this evening effectively to commit this country to a backstop from which it has no unilateral right to withdraw, so it is with a heavy heart that I shall not be supporting the Government this evening. I believe that there is still a fair deal to be done with the European Union—a good deal that respects all our peoples, all our industries and all our businesses. There is a deal to be done, but this is not that deal.

5.57 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I wish to set out why I will vote against the Prime Minister’s deal. I start from the position of respecting the result of the EU referendum in Scotland. The people of Scotland resoundingly rejected the idea of Brexit. According to the polls, they continue to reject Brexit and the Prime Minister’s deal in even greater numbers. And no wonder: it has all been about self-interest for this Prime Minister and the Tory party. She triggered article 50 without a plan. She held a snap general election for her own self-interest, but lost her majority. She ignored the Scottish Government’s offer of a compromise, which would have carried the House. She set herself red lines aimed at satisfying her extreme Brexiteer Back Benchers, but that boxed her into an impossible corner and left her facing a no-confidence vote anyway.

Failing to prepare is preparing to fail, which is why the biggest mistake was triggering article 50 when the Prime Minister had not done her homework. She tipped the hourglass with no plan, no idea and no backing. Today—two years on—as the sands start to run out, nothing has changed. She has no credible plan, no idea and no backing. Now she is trying to make it a Hobson’s choice in order to deflect from the politically inconvenient choices that do remain open to us. She should request an extension to article 50 to allow the people to have their say.

The Tory leadership is not the only one to have acted purely out of self-interest in this process. The Leader of the Opposition wants to renegotiate Brexit, but will not say what he would renegotiate. He wants a general election, but no plan to achieve one, and he will not say what his Brexit policy would be. He cannot decide whether to back another EU referendum, and does not know if he would campaign for leave or remain.

[Neil Gray]

It could have been so different. On BBC Radio Scotland this morning, the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) rightly encouraged the Prime Minister to ignore the extreme Brexiteers. Sadly, his very sensible advice was two years too late. The sands of time have moved on. Instead, the warnings of Brexit leading to a greater chance of independence are becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

5.59 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I voted to leave, my constituents voted to leave, the country voted to leave and leave we must, but I say to my fellow Brexiteers in the House that we must accept that we are a majority in the country, but not in Parliament. Let me give an analogy: we are 10 players on a pitch playing a team of 11, and the odds are now even further stacked against us, since the referee has demonstrated that he is prepared to change the rules.

This deal is not perfect, and I am particularly concerned about the indefinite nature of the backstop, but the risk of not supporting it is that, as was demonstrated last week, Members will seek to water down even this Brexit or to stop it altogether. I will support the deal because once the withdrawal agreement is signed, the door to remain will shut firmly, and we can all come back together and focus on delivering the best future for the UK outside the EU.

Mr Speaker: I have not changed any rules of the debate. What I have done is chaired the debate from start to finish, facilitating every right hon. and hon. Member of every conceivable hue of opinion to have every opportunity to put his or her view. It is a point so blindingly obvious and so transparently fair that all reasonable people would, I think, accept it.

6.1 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): My constituency of Bristol South voted to remain by 53% to 47%. I have since sought to represent that vote and understand its closeness, but the Prime Minister cannot say that my constituents will be better off. The best I have been told, even in private by Brexiteers, is that there will be a period of uncertainty for some 15 or so years and we will then perhaps know that we have made the right decision. I will not make that monumental leap into the unknown for my family or my constituency. It is a shocking dereliction of responsibility by the Prime Minister that she asks us to do so.

I wish to talk briefly about our precious Union. The word “precious” means not to be wasted or treated carelessly, but the Government have treated this Union carelessly. Not only have the past two and a half years done nothing to heal the 48-52 division, but they have done nothing to bring together the views and interests of people throughout this Union. They have only let the destructive nationalist and separatist genies out of the bottle and caused great uncertainty across our land. The Prime Minister has not even done what her predecessor said he would do and involved the devolved Executives, Governments and regional powerhouses properly in her negotiations.

There seems to be a glimmer of hope as of last week, when the latest Brexit Secretary started to talk about targeting regional Assemblies and Governments, but

that is not the sort of tone or approach that we need—it is more of the same. If the Government are to salvage anything from past two and a half years, they must recognise the mutual interests of all our people throughout the constituent parts of the United Kingdom, and they need to start to treat the English cities and regions with a modicum of respect. They have to start healing this country.

6.3 pm

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): I rise to support the deal—I do so as someone who voted to leave the European Union, like 58% of my constituents—because in my judgment it is the only sane and sensible path to an orderly Brexit that will allow us to reset our relations with the European Union, not as an unwilling member of the federal club, but as a close friend and ally. When we do this reset, we must bear in mind the positive vision laid out by Sir Winston Churchill in Zurich in 1946, when he implored a Europe that had been ravaged by war to unite for the sake of peace. He famously exclaimed that we should “Let Europe arise”. He said that the role of Great Britain should be as “the friends and sponsors of the new Europe”, and that we “must champion its right to live and shine.”

That positive vision still applies today and should guide our future relations with our European friends. More than that, it should guide our relations with countries beyond Europe and our role on the world stage. More than ever before, in the new era, we must be more confident, positive, international and global than ever before. We should be confident in the ability of British commerce, culture, diplomacy and law to have a far-reaching, highly positive impact around the world. To do that, we must take the first step of achieving the prize of Brexit. That first step is passing this withdrawal agreement, and I will be supporting it tonight.

6.4 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Yesterday the Prime Minister wondered what the history books will make of all this, and I would like to venture a few suggestions. She will be remembered as the Prime Minister who presided over the biggest failure of government and leadership in the United Kingdom in modern times. Instead of having the moral courage to face up to the fact that the EU referendum was won on the back of lies and fraud, she set out to achieve the unachievable—a deal better than the deal we currently enjoy.

In doing so, she has ignored the weight of expert evidence. She has ignored the economic assessments of her own Government and advisers, presided over a regime so incompetent and questionable that no-deal Government contracts are being awarded without competitive tendering to dubious entities without any legal justification whatsoever, and spent hundreds of thousands of pounds of taxpayers’ money trying to prevent us from knowing the answer to the question of whether article 50 could be unilaterally revoked. She barely has the confidence of her own party, and its Members only put up with her because none of them has the gumption to step up to the plate to sort out this mess.

It is likely that the Prime Minister soon will not have the confidence of this House. In Scotland, she has never had our confidence and never will. She should not take

the Scots for fools. The majority of us voted to remain, and the majority of Scots now realise that they were lied to during the 2014 independence referendum. Those lies were that Scotland was an equal partner and that the only way to guarantee staying in the EU was to vote to stay in the UK. The results of referendums won on the back of lies cannot stand. That is why I am voting down this deal. I want a second EU referendum and there should also be a second Scottish independence referendum.

6.6 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I had planned to support amendment (q) this evening, because the safeguards sought on the backstop are necessary and supported by a substantial number of Members. However, I shall now be voting for the similar amendment (f), which was tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron). I arrived in Westminster yesterday expecting to resign today as a PPS to vote against the motion. While there is much to support in the withdrawal agreement and future partnership, under a prolonged backstop we could not take back the control that I campaigned for in the referendum and 71% of my constituents in Dudley South voted for. That has not changed, and this still worries me.

I have concluded, however, that there is now a much greater threat to the Brexit that my constituents voted for. Events over the past week show that there are some in this House who will stop at little to frustrate Brexit, leaving no convention and no established practice of the House safe. I cannot risk those who have never accepted the referendum result stealing the Brexit that my constituents and people around the country voted for in record numbers. My constituents are not stupid; they were not misled. They knew that they were voting to take back control of our laws, our borders, our trade and our money. They knew it would not be plain sailing, but they knew it was a battle worth fighting. They expect us to deliver.

I do not expect the motion to pass tonight, so the Government must listen to genuine concerns across the House. The deal with which they come back to the House must genuinely take back the control that the people voted for in 2016. I will support that work, starting tonight with this evening's vote. It is the last chance and the best chance we have to deliver on the promise of Brexit, and our democracy desperately needs it to succeed.

6.8 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Today is the last day of my 20s, and as I reflect back on the last decade, I have to wonder: how did I end up here, and how did the country end up in this almighty fankle? It seems that the root cause of a lot of our problems in this country is economic alienation caused by a crisis of neo-liberalism that has failed the poorest people in our society. The root cause of a lot of the problems that erupted with so many people voting to leave the European Union and—I look back as a veteran of two referendum campaigns—to leave the United Kingdom can only be the failure of established structures in this country to deliver prosperity and security for so many people.

When I look at my constituency, where only 51% of people participated in the EU referendum, it seems that many people have disengaged from the political process entirely. Members have to be cognisant of that if we are

to repair the trust in our political system between those who vote for us as representatives and the body politic at large, who in many cases have disengaged from our political process. Simply talking about a deal or no deal will not heal that rift in our democracy. We must have a much greater and more thoughtful approach to how we heal the division in our society.

I do not think that the Prime Minister, who has just joined us in the Chamber, is equipped to do that. She has failed miserably in her efforts and through her partisan approach in delivering this deal. We must adapt and deliver for the young people of this country, including myself, who have to face the consequences of the actions of this House and this Prime Minister. She must rise to the occasion, and so far she has failed miserably to do so.

6.10 pm

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): The British people directed us to take the United Kingdom out of the European Union, and it is our duty to put that into effect. We must not tell them to vote again until they give a different answer or deliver a non-Brexit that keeps us in the EU in all but name. There are clear opportunities, and we must embrace them. No parliamentarian is 100% comfortable with what is in front of them. That was inevitable for a whole host of reasons, including the lack of clear direction for the outcome of a leave vote.

Too often, self-interest takes over the decision-making process. The SNP is determined to force a no-deal situation, in the hope that that would accelerate its case for independence. My fellow Scottish Conservative MPs and I have always been robust in our support for the fishing industry. No one can say that the industry has not been pragmatic when it comes to our departure from the EU. Whatever happens today, let me be clear that I will not accept any extension of the transition period beyond December 2020. We must embrace the sea of opportunity that Brexit presents.

I have concerns about the Northern Irish backstop, and it is deeply disappointing that we have not reached a technological solution. I would also have felt much more comfortable if there were an end date for the establishment of a future economic partnership. However, for me, this decision is about the businesses and constituents I represent. A deal is a negotiation with a large dose of pragmatism. I have spoken to many of my largest employers and my constituents on the doorstep or in the supermarket, and what they want is the uncertainty removed.

The withdrawal agreement may not be perfect, but does it deliver on the decision taken by the people of our United Kingdom in 2016? Yes. Does it return to us full control of our borders, as so many people wished? Yes. Does it provide long-term stability for our businesses, farmers and fishermen? Yes. Of all the options on the table, is this agreement the one that is most in the national interest? I believe that it is, and that is why I will be supporting this deal tonight.

6.13 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), who made a thoughtful speech, although I cannot agree with the thrust of it.

[Anneliese Dodds]

More than 2,000 of my constituents have contacted me about this deal. Only a handful say that they support it, and I agree with the majority. I cannot support it for four reasons. First, it gives inadequate protection for EU citizens who are our neighbours, friends and workmates. I see the Prime Minister looking at me. She will know that I have had repeated communication with her and the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union over many weeks to try to get confirmation about the exact criteria for settled status. We still do not have the clarity that we need. That is now coupled with an arbitrary salary level for those coming to our country from the EU, which will starve our hospitals, universities and many other employers of the staff they desperately need. I cannot support the deal because of that.

Secondly, I cannot support the deal because of its inadequate plans for research co-operation, which is so essential for the two universities in my constituency. Thirdly, I cannot support it because of insufficient certainty on customs. Huge firms and important manufacturers such as BMW in Cowley in my constituency do not only need certainty for two years; they need it for 20 years, and they certainly do not get it from this deal. Finally, there are no legally binding guarantees in this deal to stop a race to the bottom on environmental standards or working rights.

This deal has got to be voted down, and after such a failure of leadership, this Government must go. If they will not, then all options should be on the table, including a third public vote, to find a way forward for our country. Whatever the process, all parliamentarians here need to remember that we are the ones who have power, not those vulnerable people affected by the politics of hate out in our country. We have that responsibility, and we must always reject that hate. The onus is on us.

6.15 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): There is a peculiar irony, is there not, Mr Speaker, in the fact that today marks the anniversary of Henry VIII styling himself the Supreme Head of the English Church in 1535? Five hundred years on, here we are arguing over the same questions of who rules, on what authority—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Stop the clock. *[Interruption.]* Order. There is a very unseemly atmosphere. The hon. Gentleman must and will be heard.

Alex Burghart: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. Five hundred years on, we find ourselves still arguing about our relationship with Europe and about who rules. I have little confidence that, 500 years from now, we will have resolved these questions.

Tonight and in the weeks to come, the House has three choices it can make: there can be a deal; there can be no deal; or we can stay in the European Union. If it is not this deal, then it must be another deal. By all the rumours going around, that deal will be worse than the one on the table. It will keep us more closely aligned to the EU, and give us less say. In fact, it will be worse than staying in the EU.

Those people in the House who want to stay in the EU hide behind the idea of a second referendum. I say to hon. Members who think the first referendum was

divisive that, goodness me, they have not seen anything yet. If those Members who want us to stay in the EU believe it, they should call on this House to have a vote to revoke article 50, but they will not do that.

The deal before us is what we have. This is a deal that, treated right and taken in the right direction, will give us control of our borders, our laws, our waters and our trading opportunities. We have had time enough to go over these issues. It is time now for the House to make a decision. I will vote for the deal for tonight, and let us move on.

6.17 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I did not come into Parliament to spend my time working on the future of the European Union. It is not what my constituents, when they elected me first in 2010, intended me to spend my time on either. They wanted me to concentrate on their living standards, their security, the future for their children and grandchildren, and a better planet for the future of our world.

Actually, however, all these things are encompassed in the decision we make tonight about whether we accept the deal before us, and about our commitment to our ongoing relationship with our European Union neighbours. I will not vote for a deal that will make my constituents poorer, that will make them less secure, and that means we will have less influence in the decisions taken that will affect them and that will reduce our highly respected and highly regarded standing in the world.

I am distressed, as all hon. Members are, at the divisions that this Brexit story has revealed and opened up in our country, but our duty now is to concentrate on healing them. I do not believe it will ever be possible to do that if we deliberately make our country poorer, more unstable and less influential than it would otherwise have been. We need to concentrate on building a positive, prosperous, powerful future for this nation. Voting to leave the EU, and voting for the Prime Minister's way of leaving tonight, will not enable us to do so.

6.19 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Mine is the constituency that voted more than any other to leave the European Union in 2016. If we do not get back control of our laws, borders and money, it will be hard to say that this country is a democracy. The people heard in 2016 all the apocalyptic predictions that we now hear about WTO, and they made a choice. In part, the country did that because Parliament, rightly or wrongly, had come to be seen as out of touch with the people on a host of issues. If we do not deliver what the people voted for, we will prove them right. We will damage a democracy further in which people already lack faith.

So how do we get there? It is clear that this House does not want to back a no-deal departure. It has already been clear that people on both sides of the House will vote to stop it. So I say to those of my constituents who have called me a traitor and worse that when I vote tonight with the Prime Minister, I do so because I am committed to Brexit and voting against this deal would put wind in the sails of those who seek to stop it. Those people have had too much success already. Voting against this deal will not bring about a

harder Brexit; it will bolster this House's dangerous attempts to undermine it. To those who say that no deal is in law and will happen, I say that this House will rewrite the law.

I am voting tonight for the only way out of this conundrum: a necessary gateway, however painful it might be. There is a risk that we will get stuck in the backstop, but it is now smaller than the risk of not leaving at all. We in Parliament are better than letting the people down. We deserve to get on with it and deliver this Brexit. We should, like it or in many cases not, support this deal tonight.

6.21 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I am going to be incredibly parochial. In the 2017 general election, my personal manifesto to the voters of North Dorset said:

"I am working for a Brexit right for North Dorset that will support business, protect jobs and workers' rights, promote local farming, safeguard the environment and give opportunities for our young."

Having reviewed the deal, I am confident that it meets those commitments and the referendum decision to leave.

We live, as we know, in a representative democracy where the voters of North Dorset send me to Westminster to exercise my judgment and support the policies of the Conservative Government. I do not possess the judgment of Solomon. None of us does. All I can do is assure them that I am trying to do my best for them and for our country. I am conscious that in so doing I will not please everyone, but I do not think that that is the purpose of politics.

I am a democrat. I voted remain and my side lost. The referendum was not, as we know, our finest hour. The majority of the House made it clear that it would support the decision and that Parliament would deliver it. I maintain that view. A second referendum is fool's gold. Our country's use of referendums is on constitutional issues, and Brexit is now an issue of domestic policy.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has worked her fingers to the bone, if I may say so, to get this deal right. It has my full and unequivocal support. To deliver Brexit, and to maintain and build faith in our democracy, this House should stop the posturing and support my right hon. Friend in the Lobby tonight.

6.23 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The UK is to leave the EU. That decision was taken two years ago. The question is whether we crash out or support the withdrawal agreement, to be followed by a period of transition and the future arrangements on trade and relationships.

Assuming that we are not trying to reverse the referendum—I think there is no majority, either in the country or in the House, for that—the majority of us support the Prime Minister's deal. The majority of Conservative supporters support that, and I suspect that the majority of Labour supporters support that. Other parties, including from Northern Ireland, would as well, given the choice.

Our responsibility is to find where there is an overlap between what is possible and what is right. I believe that the negotiated agreement on withdrawal is that position.

The Opposition, to be reasonably polite, seem to resemble members of the scarabaeidae family who are upside down, pushing in the wrong direction and do not quite know where they are going. If the choice for the country is between chaos and compromise, I think this agreement is the right way of being sensible. I back the plan in the national interest.

6.24 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): This has been a vitally important debate for the future of our country and our future relationship with the European Union, following the decision of the people in the 2016 referendum. The debate today is the culmination of one of the most chaotic and extraordinary parliamentary processes I have ever experienced in my 35 years as a Member of this House. Parliament has held the Government in contempt for the first time ever for failing to publish their legal advice. Then, for the first time in a generation or more, on 10 December the Government failed to move their own business in the House. The Government have been defeated on a vote on their own Finance Bill for the first time since the 1970s.

The Prime Minister opened the debate on her deal more than one month ago. The debate was due to end on 11 December, but she pulled it in a panic. As she conceded, the deal would have been rejected by a significant margin. She has run down the clock in a cynical attempt to strong-arm Members into backing her deal. Despite her promises, she has failed to negotiate any changes to her deal with Europe. No wonder the Prime Minister has suddenly discovered the importance of trade unions. She voted to clip their wings in the Trade Union Act 2016, and she has utterly failed to convince them that she has anything to offer Britain's workforce. That is the heart of the matter: the Prime Minister has treated Brexit as a matter for the Conservative party, rather than for the good of the country.

But the Prime Minister has failed to win over even her own party. Many Conservative Members who voted remain are opposed to this deal, as are dozens of Conservative Members who voted leave. After losing her majority in the 2017 general election, the Prime Minister could have engaged with Members across the House. She could have listened to the voices of trade unions. If she had been listening, both businesses and trade unions would have told her that they wanted a comprehensive and permanent customs union to secure jobs and trade. The decision to rule out a new customs union with a British say and the lack of certainty in the deal risks business investment being deferred on an even greater scale, threatening jobs and threatening living standards. Even worse, it risks many companies relocating abroad, taking jobs and investment with them. Many workers know exactly that situation, because they face that reality now. Their jobs are at risk, and they know their jobs are at risk.

The First Ministers of Wales and Scotland have made clear to the Prime Minister their support for a customs union to protect jobs and the economy. This deal fails to provide any certainty about future trade. It fails to guarantee our participation in European agencies and initiatives. Losing that co-operation undermines our security, denies our citizens opportunity and damages our industries.

[Jeremy Corbyn]

The withdrawal agreement is, in short, a reckless leap in the dark. It takes this country no closer to understanding our post-Brexit future, and neither does the future partnership document. Under this deal, in December 2020 we will be faced with a choice: either pay more and extend the transition period or lock us into the backstop. At that point, the UK would be over a barrel. We would have left the EU, have lost the UK rebate and be forced to pay whatever was demanded. Alternatively, the backstop would come into force—an arrangement for which there is no time limit or end point—locking Britain into a deal from which it cannot leave without the agreement of the EU. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) has pointed out on so many occasions, that is unprecedented in British history.

The past two years have given us no confidence that this Government can do a deal in under two years, so at some point before December 2020 the focus would inevitably shift from negotiations on the future relationship to negotiations on an extension to the transition period, including negotiations on what further payments we should make to the European Union. The vague partnership document says that it

“can lead to a spectrum of different outcomes...as well as checks and controls”.

That does not show to me any clarity whatsoever in that document. There is not even any mention of the famed frictionless trade which was promised in the Chequers proposals. The former Brexit Secretary—that is, one of the former Brexit Secretaries—promised a “detailed”, “precise” and “substantive” document. The Government spectacularly failed to deliver it.

I can confirm this: Labour will vote against this deal tonight, and Labour will vote against it because it is a bad deal for this country. As we have heard over the past week, Members in all parties, including many in the Conservative party, will join us in rejecting this botched and damaging deal.

I welcome the fact that there is a clear majority to reject any no-deal outcome. The amendment to the Finance Bill last week demonstrated the will of the House on rejecting the danger—and it is a danger—of a no-deal outcome that would cause such chaos to so many people across this country.

But it is not enough for the House to vote against the deal before us, and against no deal; we also have to be for something. [HON. MEMBERS: “Ah!”] So, Mr Speaker—[*Interruption.*] So in the coming days, it is vital that this House has the opportunity to debate and vote on the way forward, to consider all the options available. The overwhelming majority of the House voted to respect the result of the referendum and therefore voted to trigger article 50. So I say this to our negotiating partners in the European Union: if Parliament votes down this deal, reopening negotiations should not and cannot be ruled out.

We understand why after two frustrating years of negotiations, the European Union might want this resolved, but this Parliament, our Parliament here, has only one duty, to represent the interests of the people of this country—and the deal negotiated by the Government does not meet the needs of the people of this country.

The people of Britain include many EU nationals who have made their lives here. These people have contributed to our country, to our economy and to our public services, including our national health service. They are now anxious, and have no faith in this Government to manage the process of settled status fairly or efficiently, and the early pilots of the scheme are very far from encouraging.

The Prime Minister claimed that this is a good deal, and so confident was she of that that she refused to publish the Government’s legal advice, but her Government’s own economic assessment clearly tells us that it is a bad deal. It is a product of two years of botched negotiations, in which the Government spent more time arguing with themselves, in their own Cabinet, than they did negotiating with the European Union.

It is not only on Brexit that the Government have failed. Under this Government, more people are living in poverty, including—[*Interruption.*] I am talking about the half a million more children who have fallen into poverty while this Government have been in office. I am also talking of those who have been forced into rough sleeping and homelessness, which have risen every year. Too many people are stuck in low-paid and insecure work. Too many people are struggling to make ends meet and falling deeper and deeper into personal debt on credit cards and with loan sharks. Nothing in this Brexit deal and nothing on offer from this Government will solve that. That is why Labour believes that a general election would be the best outcome for the country, if this deal is rejected tonight.

We need to keep in mind that the vast majority of the people of this country do not think of themselves as remainers or leavers. Whether they voted leave or remain two and a half years ago, they are all concerned about their future, and it is their concerns that the House must be able to answer and meet. I hope that tonight the House votes down this deal and we then move to a general election, so that the people—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Nobody is going to shout the right hon. Gentleman down, just as nobody will shout the Prime Minister down. All they are doing by causing me to intervene is taking time away. It is not necessary, rather foolish and thoroughly counter-productive.

Jeremy Corbyn: The people need to be able to take back control, and a general election would give them the opportunity to decide who their MPs were, who their Government were, and who would negotiate on their behalf. It would give a new Government the mandate that is needed to break the deadlock that has been brought to the House by this Government.

I ask this of the House: vote against this deal. We have had a very long and detailed debate. More hon. Members have spoken in this debate than almost any other debate I can remember, and they have given a heartfelt analysis of the deal. A very large number have explained why they will vote against this deal. Quite simply, this deal is bad for our economy, a bad deal for our democracy and a bad deal for this country. I ask the House to do the right thing tonight: reject this deal because of the harm it would do, and show that we as MPs are speaking up for the people we represent, who recognise that the deal is dangerous for this country, bad for them, their living standards and our collective future.

6.38 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): This debate has lasted some eight days, over 54 hours, with speeches of powerful sincerity from more than 200 right hon. and hon. Members. It has been historic for our Parliament and for our country. We have heard contributions from every perspective, looking at all aspects of this complex and vital question. We have seen the House at its most passionate and vigorous, and I thank everyone who has contributed. No one watching this debate can be in any doubt about the strength of this House of Commons as the fulcrum of our democracy.

This is a debate about our economy and security, the livelihoods of our constituents and the future for our children and the generations to come. It goes to the heart of our constitution, and no one should forget that it is a democratic process that has got us to where we are today. In 2015, my party stood on an election manifesto that had as a centrepiece the promise of an in/out referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union. The British people responded by electing a Conservative Government to follow through on that promise, and that is what we did when this House voted overwhelmingly to hold the referendum and put the choice in the hands of the British people. Indeed, 470 current Members voted in favour of it, and only 32 opposed it.

That campaign was keenly fought. It caught the public imagination like few campaigns before it. The turnout was 72%—higher than for any national poll for a quarter of a century—and while not overwhelming, the result was clear and it was decisive. That was something that this House accepted when we voted overwhelmingly to trigger article 50, with 436 current Members voting to do so and only 85 opposed. Parliament gave the people a choice. We set the clock ticking on our departure, and tonight we will determine whether we move forward with a withdrawal agreement that honours the vote and sets us on course for a better future. The responsibility of each and every one of us at this moment is profound, for this is an historic decision that will set the future of our country for generations.

So, what are the alternatives that present themselves? First, we could decide that it is all too difficult and give up, either by revoking article 50 or by passing the buck back to the British people in a second referendum. But I believe we have a duty to deliver on the democratic decision of the British people, and to do so in a way that brings our country together. A second referendum would lead instead to further division. There would be no agreement to the question, let alone the answer. It would say to the people we were elected to serve that we were unwilling to do what they had instructed.

The second possible outcome is that we leave on 29 March without a deal, but I do not believe that that is what the British people voted for, because they were told that, if they voted to leave, they could still expect a good trading relationship with the European Union. Neither would it be the best outcome. Our deal delivers certainty for businesses, with a time-limited implementation period to prepare for the new arrangements of the future relationship. No deal means no implementation period. Our deal protects the rights of EU citizens living in the UK, and of UK citizens living in the EU, so that they can carry on their lives as before. No deal means no reciprocal agreement to protect those citizens' rights. Our deal delivers the deepest security partnership

in the EU's history, so that our police and security services can continue to work together with their European partners to keep all our people safe. No deal means no such security partnership. Our deal delivers the foundations for an unprecedented economic relationship with the EU that is more ambitious—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I said earlier that this was becoming a rather noisy and unseemly atmosphere, and that has now resumed. It must stop. The Prime Minister must be heard.

The Prime Minister: Our deal delivers the foundations for an unprecedented economic relationship with the EU that is more ambitious than anything it has ever entered into with a third country. It will give us the benefits of trading with the European Union and the ability to forge new trade deals in our own right. No deal means those new trade deals come at the expense of a trade deal with Europe, not in addition to it. So, while it is categorically wrong to suggest that our country could not ultimately make a success of no deal, it is equally wrong to suggest that this is the best outcome.

Thirdly, there is the path advocated by the Leader of the Opposition of calling a general election, and we have heard it again tonight. But today's vote is not about what is best for the Leader of the Opposition; it is about what is best for the country. At the end of a general election, whatever the result, the choices facing us will not have changed. It will still be no Brexit, leaving with no deal, or leaving with a deal. There is no guarantee that an election would make the parliamentary arithmetic any easier. All it would gain is two more months of uncertainty and division. In 2017, the two main parties both stood on manifestos that pledged to deliver the result of the referendum, and they got over 80% of the vote. People had the opportunity to vote for a second referendum by supporting the Liberal Democrats, but just 7% of voters did so. It is the job of Parliament to deliver on the promises made at the last election, not to seek a new one.

Some suggest that there is a fourth option: to agree that we should leave with a deal on 29 March, but to vote this deal down in the hope of going back to Brussels and negotiating an alternative deal. However, no such alternative deal exists. The political declaration sets the framework for the future relationship, and the next phase of the negotiations will be our chance to shape that relationship, but we cannot begin those talks unless or until we agree the terms of our withdrawal. The European Union will not agree to any other deal for that withdrawal.

Having ruled out all those options, we are left with one: to vote for this deal tonight. It is one that delivers on the core tenets of Brexit—taking back control of our borders, laws, money, trade and fisheries—but in a way that protects jobs, ensures our security and honours the integrity of our United Kingdom. It strikes a fair balance between the hopes and desires of all our fellow citizens—those who voted to leave and those who voted to stay in—and if we leave with the deal that I am proposing, I believe that we can lay the foundations on which to build a better Britain.

As Prime Minister, I would not stand at this Dispatch Box and recommend a course of action that I do not believe is in the best interests of our country and

[*The Prime Minister*]

our future. There are differences in this House today, but I believe that we can come together as we go forwards. Let me reassure anyone who is in any doubt whatsoever that the Government will work harder at taking Parliament with us, and as we move on to the next phase of the negotiations we will be looking to work with Parliament to seek that consensus.

Sir Edward Leigh: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister knows that what concerns many of us is the possibility of the permanent nature of the Northern Ireland backstop. May I refer her to my amendment (b) on the Order Paper, which sets a deadline for that backstop? What is the attitude of the Government towards my amendment?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question and for the work he has been doing to try to find a way through on this issue. I know that he has spent a long time consulting with international lawyers. The Government are unable to accept my right hon. Friend's amendment, which has been selected, because we have a different opinion and a different interpretation of the Vienna convention. However, I note that he has put down alternative proposals relating to this issue, and the Government are willing to look at creative solutions and will be happy to carry on working with my right hon. Friend.

Turning to the Northern Ireland protocol—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The House must calm itself—zen, restraint, patience—and hear the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: I set out the Government's position in detail in my statement yesterday, so I am not going to go over it again. The key thing to remember is that this is not a commitment we are making to the European Union; it is a commitment to the people of Northern Ireland and Ireland that they will be able to carry on living their lives as they do today. It is about saying that, whatever happens when we leave the EU, we will honour the Belfast agreement.

The Belfast agreement's success has been built on allowing people from both communities in Northern Ireland to feel that their identities are respected under the principle of consent. For many people in Northern Ireland that means having a seamless land border between the UK and Ireland, which is also essential for their economy. For others, it means fully respecting the fact that Northern Ireland is an intrinsic part of the United Kingdom. No one wants to see the return of a hard border. As a proud Unionist, I share the concerns of Members who are determined that we do not undermine the strength of our United Kingdom, but it is not enough simply to make these assertions. We have to put in place arrangements that deliver those ends, and it is not as simple as some would like it to be.

As Prime Minister for the whole UK, it is my duty to provide a solution that works for the people of Northern Ireland. The answer lies in agreeing our future economic relationship, but we need an insurance policy to guarantee that there will be no hard border if that future relationship is not in place by the end of the implementation period.

Nigel Dodds: Does the Prime Minister agree that, whatever one's view of this withdrawal agreement and whatever arguments people deploy, we should not be using the peace or the political process in Northern Ireland as arguments for voting for this deal or for voting against it? Does she agree that that is completely and utterly out of order, and will she make that clear to all her Cabinet colleagues as well?

The Prime Minister: Everybody in this House is committed to ensuring that we maintain the arrangements of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement and that we maintain the many benefits that have come from the peace process in Northern Ireland. That should not be disrupted or affected in any sense.

Whatever future relationship is negotiated, or that people want to see negotiated, the insurance policy is essential. All of the other proposals—Canada, Norway or any number of variations on those models—require the insurance policy, which is the so-called backstop. No backstop simply means no deal, now and for the foreseeable future. I do not want to see anybody being able to exploit no deal, and bringing doubt about the future of our Union as a result.

Let us remember what the withdrawal agreement delivers for the people of Northern Ireland: an implementation period—certainty for businesses; protection of citizens' rights—certainty for thousands of families; no hard border—unfettered access to British and EU markets; protection of the single electricity market across the island of Ireland, securing energy supply in Northern Ireland; continued security co-operation with our European allies, which the Police Service of Northern Ireland says is essential; and, above all, the protection of the historic Belfast/Good Friday agreement. The deal we have puts our Union first.

The Leader of the Opposition's speech is characteristic of his whole approach to Brexit: long on criticism and short on coherence. He claims that he will be able to renegotiate the deal in a matter of weeks and get a drastically different outcome, despite the European Union making it clear that that is impossible. Everything he does is designed to avoid taking any difficult decisions. He says one thing to one group and another thing to another group. His general election manifesto said that freedom of movement will end; on Sunday he said:

"I am not against the free movement of people."

When asked about Brexit by a German newspaper, he said that we cannot stop it, that the referendum took place and that article 50 has been triggered; in his speech at Wakefield last week, and again this evening, he said that a second referendum is an option on the table. He says that Labour would run an independent trade policy, but he wants to join the customs union. He says he is opposed to no deal, but he also says he is opposed to the withdrawal agreement and the backstop, without which there is no deal. The question is: what is his position? He has failed in his responsibility to provide a credible alternative to the Government of the day. By pursuing from the start a cynical course designed to serve his own political interest, not the national interest, he has forfeited the right to command loyalty from those of his MPs who take a more pragmatic view. He does not care whether we leave or not, with a deal or not, as long as he can maximise disruption and uncertainty and the likelihood of a general election.

I hope that Labour Members who faithfully pledged to their constituents that they would respect the result of the referendum think carefully before voting against a deal that delivers Brexit, and I hope that those who fear leaving without a deal whose constituents rely on manufacturing jobs think very carefully before rejecting a deal that is the only guaranteed way to take no deal off the table.

This is the most significant vote that any of us will ever be part of in our political careers. After all the debate, all the disagreement and all the division, the time has come for all of us in the House to make a decision—a decision that will define our country for decades to come, a decision that will determine the future for our constituents, their children and their grandchildren, a decision that each of us will have to justify and live with for many years to come.

We know the consequences of voting for the deal—they are laid out in black and white in the pages of the withdrawal agreement—but no one who votes against the deal will be able to tell their constituents what real-world outcome they voted for, because a vote against the deal is a vote for nothing more than uncertainty, division and the very real risk of no deal.

Ian Blackford: On any of the analyses of Brexit, economic growth will be lower than if we stay in the EU. Will the Prime Minister not realise, on the basis of the knowledge and the fact that people will lose opportunities as a consequence of Brexit, that the alternative is to extend article 50, go back and give the people a say? Let's act in all our interests on the basis of the information we now have.

The Prime Minister: Parliament gave the British people a choice. The Government of the time, all parties and all those campaigning in the referendum were absolutely clear that, whatever the decision of the referendum, it would be respected by Government and Parliament. I believe we have a duty to deliver on that referendum vote and to do so in a way that protects people's jobs and our security and Union. A vote against the deal is a vote for nothing more than uncertainty, division and the very real risk of no deal or no Brexit at all.

It does not have to be that way. Tonight, we can choose certainty over uncertainty. We can choose unity over division. We can choose to deliver on our promise to the British people, not break that promise and endanger trust in politics for a generation. As Members of Parliament, we have a duty to serve not our own self-interest or that of our parties, but the people we were elected to represent. It is the people of this country we were sent here to serve—the people of this country who queued up at polling stations, cast their ballots and put their faith in us.

The people of this country entrusted us with the sacred right to build for them and their children and grandchildren the brighter future they expect and deserve. If we act in the national interest and back this deal tonight, tomorrow we can begin to build that future together. If we act in the national interest and back this deal tonight, we can build a country that works for everyone. Together, we can show the people whom we serve that their voices have been heard, that their trust was not misplaced, that our politics can and does deliver, and that politicians can rise above our differences

and come together to do what the people asked of us. That is the test that history has set for us today, and it will determine the future of our country for generations.

We each have a solemn responsibility to deliver Brexit and take this country forward, and, with my whole heart, I call on this House to charge that responsibility together. I commend the motion to the House.

7 pm

The Speaker put the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Orders, 4 December and 9 January).

Mr Speaker: As I explained the sequence earlier, it should now be familiar to colleagues. I begin by inviting the Leader of the Opposition to move amendment (a).

Jeremy Corbyn: Not moved, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I turn now to amendment (k), in the name of the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford).

Ian Blackford: Not moved, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I call on the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), to move, if he so wishes, amendment (b).

Sir Edward Leigh: In view of the positive response from the Prime Minister, Mr Speaker, not moved.

Mr Speaker: Finally, I invite the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) to move amendment (f).

Amendment proposed: (f): at end, add

“subject to changes being made in the Withdrawal Agreement and in the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol so that the UK has the right to terminate the Protocol without having to secure the agreement of the EU.”—(*Mr Baron.*)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 24, Noes 600.

Division No. 292]

[7.2 pm

AYES

Afriyie, Adam
Amess, Sir David
Baron, Mr John
Blackman, Bob
Brady, Sir Graham
Davies, Chris
Field, rh Frank
Hands, rh Greg
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Henderson, Gordon
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian

Metcalfe, Stephen
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Parish, Neil
Percy, Andrew
Rosindell, Andrew
Sturdy, Julian
Vickers, Martin
Watling, Giles
Wiggin, Bill
Wood, Mike

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Sir Mike Penning and
Mr Nigel Evans**

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Aldous, Peter
Ali, Rushanara

Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Andrew, Stuart
Antoniazzi, Tonia

Argar, Edward
 Ashworth, Jonathan
 Atkins, Victoria
 Austin, Ian
 Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
 Bailey, Mr Adrian
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Stephen
 Bardell, Hannah
 Bebb, Guto
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Bellingham, Sir Henry
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Benyon, rh Richard
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berger, Luciana
 Berry, Jake
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Black, Mhairi
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
 Blomfield, Paul
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Brabin, Tracy
 Bradley, Ben
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brake, rh Tom
 Braverman, Suella
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Brock, Deidre
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Buckland, Robert
 Burden, Richard
 Burghart, Alex
 Burgon, Richard
 Burns, Conor
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cable, rh Sir Vince
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Campbell, Mr Ronnie
 Carden, Dan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Champion, Sarah
 Chapman, Douglas
 Chapman, Jenny
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Cherry, Joanna
 Chishti, Rehman

Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, Colin
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
 Clarke, Mr Simon
 Cleverly, James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Clwyd, rh Ann
 Coaker, Vernon
 Coffey, Ann
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Cooper, Julie
 Cooper, Rosie
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
 Coyle, Neil
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crausby, Sir David
 Crawley, Angela
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Stella
 Crouch, Tracey
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Cunningham, Mr Jim
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Nic
 Davey, rh Sir Edward
 David, Wayne
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Geraint
 Davies, Glyn
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Day, Martyn
 De Cordova, Marsha
 De Piero, Gloria
 Debbonaire, Thangam
 Dent Coad, Emma
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Dodds, rh Nigel
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, Michelle
 Dorries, Ms Nadine
 Double, Steve
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Dowden, Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drew, Dr David
 Dromey, Jack
 Duddridge, James
 Duffield, Rosie
 Duguid, David
 Duncan, rh Sir Alan
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Dunne, rh Mr Philip

Eagle, Ms Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellman, Dame Louise
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elmore, Chris
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Esterson, Bill
 Eustice, George
 Evans, Chris
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, rh Sir Michael
 Farrelly, Paul
 Farron, Tim
 Fellows, Marion
 Field, rh Mark
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flint, rh Caroline
 Ford, Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freer, Mike
 Frith, James
 Furniss, Gill
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gaffney, Hugh
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Gapes, Mike
 Gardiner, Barry
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, rh Mr David
 George, Ruth
 Gethins, Stephen
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, John
 Glindon, Mary
 Godsiff, Mr Roger
 Goldsmith, Zac
 Goodman, Helen
 Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Grady, Patrick
 Graham, Luke
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Bill
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Grant, Peter
 Gray, James
 Gray, Neil
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Green, Kate
 Greening, rh Justine
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Griffith, Nia

Griffiths, Andrew
 Grogan, John
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Haigh, Louise
 Hair, Kirstene
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hammond, rh Mr Philip
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hanson, rh David
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Carolyn
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayman, Sue
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Healey, rh John
 Heapey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hermon, Lady
 Hill, Mike
 Hillier, Meg
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Hosie, Stewart
 Howarth, rh Mr George
 Howell, John
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurd, rh Mr Nick
 Hussain, Imran
 Jack, Mr Alister
 James, Margot
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, rh Boris
 Johnson, Diana
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham P.

Jones, Helen
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jones, Sarah
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Kane, Mike
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Keegan, Gillian
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kerr, Stephen
 Khan, Afzal
 Killen, Ged
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Kyle, Peter
 Laird, Lesley
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, rh Norman
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lamont, John
 Lancaster, rh Mark
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Lee, Karen
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leslie, Mr Chris
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, Clive
 Lewis, Mr Ivan
 Liddington, rh Mr David
 Linden, David
 Little Pengelly, Emma
 Lloyd, Tony
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lucas, Ian C.
 Lynch, Holly
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Maclean, Rachel
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mak, Alan
 Malhotra, Seema
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, John
 Mann, Scott
 Marsden, Gordon
 Martin, Sandy
 Maskell, Rachael
 Masterton, Paul
 Matheson, Christian
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Maynard, Paul
 Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve

McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McInnes, Liz
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McPartland, Stephen
 McVey, rh Ms Esther
 Mearns, Ian
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Moore, Damien
 Moran, Layla
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, James
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Nandy, Lisa
 Neill, Robert
 Newlands, Gavin
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 Norris, Alex
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 O'Hara, Brendan
 O'Mara, Jared
 Onasanya, Fiona
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opperman, Guy
 Osamor, Kate
 Owen, Albert
 Paisley, Ian
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Penrose, John
 Perkins, Toby
 Perry, rh Claire
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Philp, Chris
 Pidcock, Laura
 Pincher, rh Christopher

Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pound, Stephen
 Pow, Rebecca
 Powell, Lucy
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Rashid, Faisal
 Rayner, Angela
 Redwood, rh John
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Emma
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
 Robinson, Mary
 Rodda, Matt
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Danielle
 Rowley, Lee
 Ruane, Chris
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Rutley, David
 Ryan, rh Joan
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Saville Roberts, Liz
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Mr Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shah, Naz
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simpson, David
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Eleanor
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Laura
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Smith, Royston
 Smyth, Karin

Snell, Gareth
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Sobel, Alex
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spellar, rh John
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevens, Jo
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Rory
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Streeting, Wes
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, Graham
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Sweeney, Mr Paul
 Swinson, Jo
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Tami, rh Mark
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Derek
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thomson, Ross
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Throup, Maggie
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
 Trickett, Jon
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 Twist, Liz
 Umunna, Chuka
 Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vaz, rh Keith
 Vaz, Valerie
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Walker, Thelma
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watson, Tom
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitfield, Martin
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Williams, Hywel
 Williams, Dr Paul

Williamson, Chris
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Phil
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wishart, Pete
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Woodcock, John
Wragg, Mr William

Wright, rh Jeremy
Yasin, Mohammad
Zahawi, Nadhim
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Wendy Morton and
Iain Stewart

Question accordingly negated.

Main Question put forthwith.

The House divided: Ayes 202, Noes 432.

Division No. 293]

[7.24 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Aldous, Peter
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Austin, Ian
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Stephen
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Boles, Nick
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Karen
Brereton, Jack
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Cartlidge, James
Chalk, Alex
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Costa, Alberto
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donelan, Michelle
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Eustice, George
Field, rh Frank

Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffiths, Andrew
Hair, Kirstene
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heapey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Herbert, rh Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr Marcus
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema

Kerr, Stephen
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, rh Mark
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lloyd, Stephen
Lopresti, Jack
Maclean, Rachel
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, John
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
Menzies, Mark
Merriman, Huw
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Milton, rh Anne
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, David
Morris, James
Mundell, rh David
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Pawsey, Mark
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark

Quin, Jeremy
Robinson, Mary
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, rh Julian
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Throup, Maggie
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tredinnick, David
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Wendy Morton and
Iain Stewart

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Afriyie, Adam
Ali, Rushanara
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Amess, Sir David
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bacon, Mr Richard
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Baker, Mr Steve
Bardell, Hannah
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive

Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Bob
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Brabin, Tracy
Bradley, Ben
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brady, Sir Graham
Brake, rh Tom
Braverman, Suella
Brennan, Kevin
Bridgen, Andrew
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bruce, Fiona

Bryant, Chris	Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain	Hodge, rh Dame Margaret	Mann, Scott
Buck, Ms Karen	Eagle, Ms Angela	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Marsden, Gordon
Burden, Richard	Eagle, Maria	Hoey, Kate	Martin, Sandy
Burgon, Richard	Edwards, Jonathan	Hollern, Kate	Maskell, Rachael
Burns, Conor	Efford, Clive	Hollobone, Mr Philip	Matheson, Christian
Butler, Dawn	Elliott, Julie	Holloway, Adam	Mc Nally, John
Byrne, rh Liam	Ellman, Dame Louise	Hopkins, Kelvin	McCabe, Steve
Cable, rh Sir Vince	Elmore, Chris	Hosie, Stewart	McCarthy, Kerry
Cadbury, Ruth	Elphicke, Charlie	Howarth, rh Mr George	McDonagh, Siobhain
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Esterson, Bill	Hughes, Eddie	McDonald, Andy
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Evans, Chris	Huq, Dr Rupa	McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Evans, Mr Nigel	Hussain, Imran	McDonald, Stuart C.
Campbell, Mr Ronnie	Evennett, rh Sir David	Jardine, Christine	McDonnell, rh John
Carden, Dan	Fabricant, Michael	Jarvis, Dan	McFadden, rh Mr Pat
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Fallon, rh Sir Michael	Jayawardena, Mr Ranil	McGinn, Conor
Cash, Sir William	Farrelly, Paul	Jenkin, Sir Bernard	McGovern, Alison
Caulfield, Maria	Farron, Tim	Jenkyns, Andrea	McInnes, Liz
Champion, Sarah	Fellows, Marion	Johnson, rh Boris	McKinnell, Catherine
Chapman, Douglas	Fitzpatrick, Jim	Johnson, Diana	McMahon, Jim
Chapman, Jenny	Fletcher, Colleen	Johnson, Gareth	McMorris, Anna
Charalambous, Bambos	Flint, rh Caroline	Johnson, Joseph	McPartland, Stephen
Cherry, Joanna	Fovargue, Yvonne	Jones, Darren	McVey, rh Ms Esther
Chisht, Rehman	Francois, rh Mr Mark	Jones, rh Mr David	Mearns, Ian
Chope, Sir Christopher	Frith, James	Jones, Gerald	Mercer, Johnny
Clarke, Mr Simon	Furniss, Gill	Jones, Graham P.	Metcalfe, Stephen
Clwyd, rh Ann	Fysh, Mr Marcus	Jones, Helen	Miliband, rh Edward
Coaker, Vernon	Gaffney, Hugh	Jones, rh Mr Kevan	Mills, Nigel
Coffey, Ann	Gapes, Mike	Jones, Sarah	Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Collins, Damian	Gardiner, Barry	Jones, Susan Elan	Monaghan, Carol
Cooper, Julie	George, Ruth	Kane, Mike	Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Cooper, Rosie	Gethins, Stephen	Kawczynski, Daniel	Moore, Damien
Cooper, rh Yvette	Gibson, Patricia	Keeley, Barbara	Moran, Layla
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Gill, Preet Kaur	Kendall, Liz	Morden, Jessica
Courts, Robert	Girvan, Paul	Khan, Afzal	Morgan, Stephen
Cowan, Ronnie	Glindon, Mary	Killen, Ged	Morris, Anne Marie
Coyle, Neil	Godsiff, Mr Roger	Kinnock, Stephen	Morris, Grahame
Crausby, Sir David	Goldsmith, Zac	Knight, rh Sir Greg	Murray, Ian
Crawley, Angela	Goodman, Helen	Kyle, Peter	Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Creagh, Mary	Grady, Patrick	Laird, Lesley	Nandy, Lisa
Creasy, Stella	Grant, Peter	Lake, Ben	Newlands, Gavin
Crouch, Tracey	Gray, James	Lamb, rh Norman	Norris, Alex
Cruddas, Jon	Gray, Neil	Lammy, rh Mr David	Offord, Dr Matthew
Cryer, John	Green, Chris	Lamont, John	O'Hara, Brendan
Cummins, Judith	Green, Kate	Latham, Mrs Pauline	O'Mara, Jared
Cunningham, Alex	Greening, rh Justine	Lavery, Ian	Onasanya, Fiona
Cunningham, Mr Jim	Greenwood, Lilian	Law, Chris	Onn, Melanie
Daby, Janet	Greenwood, Margaret	Lee, Karen	Onwurah, Chi
Dakin, Nic	Grieve, rh Mr Dominic	Lee, Dr Phillip	Osamor, Kate
Davey, rh Sir Edward	Griffith, Nia	Leslie, Mr Chris	Owen, Albert
David, Wayne	Grogan, John	Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma	Paisley, Ian
Davies, Geraint	Gwynne, Andrew	Lewer, Andrew	Patel, rh Priti
Davies, Philip	Gyimah, Mr Sam	Lewis, Clive	Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Davis, rh Mr David	Haigh, Louise	Lewis, Mr Ivan	Peacock, Stephanie
Day, Martyn	Halfon, rh Robert	Lewis, rh Dr Julian	Pearce, Teresa
De Cordova, Marsha	Hamilton, Fabian	Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian	Penning, rh Sir Mike
De Piero, Gloria	Hands, rh Greg	Linden, David	Pennycook, Matthew
Debbonaire, Thangam	Hanson, rh David	Little Pengelly, Emma	Perkins, Toby
Dent Coad, Emma	Hardy, Emma	Lloyd, Tony	Phillips, Jess
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Harman, rh Ms Harriet	Long Bailey, Rebecca	Phillipson, Bridget
Docherty-Hughes, Martin	Harper, rh Mr Mark	Lopez, Julia	Pidcock, Laura
Dodds, Anneliese	Harris, Carolyn	Lord, Mr Jonathan	Platt, Jo
Dodds, rh Nigel	Hayes, Helen	Loughton, Tim	Pollard, Luke
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.	Hayes, rh Sir John	Lucas, Caroline	Pound, Stephen
Dorries, Ms Nadine	Hayman, Sue	Lucas, Ian C.	Powell, Lucy
Double, Steve	Healey, rh John	Lynch, Holly	Pritchard, Mark
Doughty, Stephen	Henderson, Gordon	Mackinlay, Craig	Pursglove, Tom
Dowd, Peter	Hendrick, Sir Mark	MacNeil, Angus Brendan	Quince, Will
Drax, Richard	Hendry, Drew	Madders, Justin	Qureshi, Yasmin
Drew, Dr David	Hepburn, Mr Stephen	Mahmood, Mr Khalid	Raab, rh Dominic
Dromey, Jack	Hill, Mike	Mahmood, Shabana	Rashid, Faisal
Duddridge, James	Hillier, Meg	Main, Mrs Anne	Rayner, Angela
Duffield, Rosie	Hobhouse, Wera	Malhotra, Seema	Redwood, rh John

Reed, Mr Steve	Sturdy, Julian
Rees, Christina	Sweeney, Mr Paul
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob	Swinson, Jo
Reeves, Ellie	Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Reeves, Rachel	Syms, Sir Robert
Reynolds, Emma	Tami, rh Mark
Reynolds, Jonathan	Thewliss, Alison
Rimmer, Ms Marie	Thomas, Derek
Robertson, Mr Laurence	Thomas, Gareth
Robinson, Gavin	Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey	Thomson, Ross
Rodda, Matt	Thornberry, rh Emily
Rosindell, Andrew	Timms, rh Stephen
Ross, Douglas	Tomlinson, Michael
Rowley, Danielle	Tracey, Craig
Rowley, Lee	Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
Ruane, Chris	Trickett, Jon
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd	Turley, Anna
Ryan, rh Joan	Turner, Karl
Saville Roberts, Liz	Twigg, Derek
Shah, Naz	Twigg, Stephen
Shannon, Jim	Twist, Liz
Shapps, rh Grant	Umunna, Chuka
Sharma, Mr Virendra	Vara, Mr Shailesh
Sheerman, Mr Barry	Vaz, rh Keith
Sheppard, Tommy	Vaz, Valerie
Sherriff, Paula	Vickers, Martin
Shuker, Mr Gavin	Villiers, rh Theresa
Siddiq, Tulip	Walker, Thelma
Simpson, David	Watling, Giles
Skinner, Mr Dennis	Watson, Tom
Slaughter, Andy	West, Catherine
Smeeth, Ruth	Western, Matt
Smith, Angela	Whitehead, Dr Alan
Smith, Cat	Whitfield, Martin
Smith, Eleanor	Whitford, Dr Philippa
Smith, Henry	Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Smith, Jeff	Wiggin, Bill
Smith, Laura	Williams, Hywel
Smith, Owen	Williams, Dr Paul
Smith, Royston	Williamson, Chris
Smyth, Karin	Wilson, Phil
Snell, Gareth	Wilson, rh Sammy
Sobel, Alex	Wishart, Pete
Soubry, rh Anna	Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Spellar, rh John	Woodcock, John
Starmer, rh Keir	Wragg, Mr William
Stephens, Chris	Yasin, Mohammad
Stevens, Jo	Zeichner, Daniel
Stewart, Bob	
Stone, Jamie	
Streeting, Wes	
Stringer, Graham	

Tellers for the Noes:
Vicky Foxcroft and
Nick Smith

Question accordingly negated.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The House has spoken and the Government will listen. It is clear that the House does not support this deal, but tonight's vote tells us nothing about what it does support; nothing about how, or even if, it intends to honour the decision the British people took in a referendum that Parliament decided to hold. People, particularly EU citizens who have made their home here and UK citizens living in the EU, deserve clarity on these questions as soon as possible. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. It is no good people shouting. There will be an opportunity for other points of order, but the Prime Minister must and will be heard.

The Prime Minister: Those whose jobs rely on our trade with the EU need that clarity. So with your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to set out briefly how the Government intend to proceed.

First, we need to confirm whether the Government still enjoy the confidence of the House. I believe that they do, but given the scale and importance of tonight's vote it is right that others have the chance to test that question if they wish to do so. I can therefore confirm that if the official Opposition table a confidence motion this evening in the form required by the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, the Government will make time to debate that motion tomorrow. If, as happened before Christmas, the official Opposition decline to do so, we will on this occasion consider making time tomorrow to debate any motion in the form required from the other Opposition parties should they put one forward.

Secondly, if the House confirms its confidence in this Government, I will then hold meetings with my colleagues, our confidence and supply partner the Democratic Unionist party, and senior parliamentarians from across the House to identify what would be required to secure the backing of the House. The Government will approach those meetings in a constructive spirit, but given the urgent need to make progress we must focus on ideas that are genuinely negotiable and have sufficient support in this House.

Thirdly, if those meetings yield such ideas the Government will then explore them with the European Union.

Mr Speaker, I want to end by offering two reassurances. The first is to those who fear that the Government's strategy is to run down the clock to 29 March. That is not our strategy. I have always believed that the best way forward is to leave in an orderly way with a good deal, and I have devoted much of the past two years to negotiating such a deal. As you confirmed, Mr Speaker, the amendment to the business motion tabled last week by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) is not legally binding, but the Government respect the will of the House. We will therefore make a statement about the way forward and table an amendable motion by Monday.

The second reassurance is to the British people who voted to leave the European Union in the referendum two and a half years ago. I became Prime Minister immediately after that referendum. I believe it is my duty to deliver on their instruction and I intend to do so.

Every day that passes without this issue being resolved means more uncertainty, more bitterness and more rancour. The Government have heard what the House has said tonight, but I ask Members on all sides of the House to listen to the British people who want this issue settled, and to work with the Government to do just that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I will come to other colleagues, but first of all a point of order from the Leader of the Opposition, Jeremy Corbyn.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. The result of tonight's vote is the greatest defeat for a Government in this House since the 1920s. This is a catastrophic defeat for

this Government. After two years of failed negotiations, the House of Commons has delivered its verdict on the Prime Minister's Brexit deal and that verdict is absolutely decisive.

I hear the words of the Prime Minister, but the actions of her Government over the past two years speak equally clearly. She is only attempting to reach out now to try to keep her failed process and deal alive after it has been so roundly rejected by Parliament on behalf of the people of this country. Labour has laid out its priorities consistently: no deal must be taken off the table; a permanent customs union must be secured; and people's rights and protections must be guaranteed so they do not fall behind.

At every turn, the Prime Minister has closed the door on dialogue. Businesses begged her to negotiate a comprehensive customs union. Trade union leaders pressed her for the same thing. They were ignored. In the last two years, she has had only one priority: the Conservative party.

The Prime Minister's governing principle of delay and denial has reached the end of the line. She cannot seriously believe that after two years of failure, she is capable of negotiating a good deal for the people of this country. The most important issue facing us is that the Government have lost the confidence of this House and this country. I therefore inform you, Mr Speaker, that I have now tabled a motion of no confidence in this Government, and I am pleased that that motion will be debated tomorrow so that this House can give its verdict on the sheer incompetence of this Government and pass that motion of no confidence in the Government.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I will come to the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), but first, a point of order from the Leader of the House.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a short business statement regarding the business for tomorrow and the remainder of this week—

Mr Speaker: I am extraordinarily grateful to the right hon. Lady. I accept that she cannot be psychic as to what I am thinking, and I cannot be psychic as to what she is thinking. The smooth and orderly way to proceed with this matter is to deal with points of order first and then to come to her statement, which would be entirely proper and doubtless helpful to the House.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Further to the Prime Minister's point of order, Mr Speaker. We should be aware of the situation we are in. The clock is ticking and we have little time to resolve this. The fact that it has taken us so long to get to this point is frankly shameful. This is a humiliating defeat for the Government. When I listen to the Prime Minister, it sounds like everyone else is at fault rather than her. She has to accept responsibility for what has happened this evening.

I am delighted that the Leader of the Opposition has come round to a motion of no confidence. That should have happened before, but we will support it. As I mentioned, it is clear that the clock is ticking.

The Government need to secure the safety of all our nations, and they should immediately postpone the article 50 process and immediately have talks with all the leaders of the Opposition parties. Let us work together in all our interests, but let us listen to the voices of the parliamentarians who have been sent here. There is no support for the deal. It must not come back again. The obvious and right thing to do is to suspend article 50 and put the matter to the people in a people's vote.

Mr Speaker: I know the right hon. Gentleman will not take offence when I say that he was using the device of a point of order, as is entirely understandable in these circumstances, to say what he wanted to say, but he was more interested in what he had to say to the House than in anything I might have to say to him. It is not a matter for the Chair. He has registered his view, and these sorts of issues can be quite properly aired in debate and quite conceivably in discussions that take place with the Prime Minister and other party leaders. He has made his point with force and alacrity, and it is on the record for colleagues to study.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. This result is of a scale that is unprecedented in recent times, and it is clear that neither this deal, nor any tweaks to it, will get through the House of Commons. May I ask for your guidance on how Parliament can assert its authority to ensure that we can give the people of this country a say on the deal to resolve this matter? It is a mess that needs to be resolved by the people in a people's vote.

Mr Speaker: My response to the hon. Lady is as follows. First, there may well be an opportunity for her to air her own thoughts on the situation we face and the suggested way forward in the course of debate. As the Prime Minister referred to in her point of order, that prospect is potentially unfolding. That is one opportunity for the hon. Lady.

The second would be the discussions to take place in coming days. I dare say that the hon. Lady will want to take the chance to participate in them. More widely, where there is discussion about Parliament's role, what it might do and what options it might have, I think I can predict with complete confidence that the hon. Lady will have a view about that, and that view, which is important, will be heard.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Prime Minister spoke about the will of Parliament, and we have to investigate that further. When can we test the will of this House on the choices that are now left—no deal versus revoking article 50? Can we test those in the House, bearing in mind that in Scotland the European Union is more popular in the polls than the United Kingdom, as the Prime Minister should know?

Mr Speaker: There will be plenty of opportunity for testing in the days ahead.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This is not a political point of order. Yesterday, the issue of the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) was raised. She should have been undergoing a caesarean section today

[*Dr Philippa Whitford*]

for a high-risk pregnancy—she is comfortable with me saying that she has gestational diabetes—and she was asked by her medical team to undergo it as an early possibility. She has had to defer it, Mr Speaker, despite your advice and comments from the Chair yesterday, which apparently were given no comfort from the Government Benches. That is shocking. I have to say, as a doctor, that to put our colleague and her baby at risk because we cannot have a method to allow for those who are sick or pregnant to vote is disgraceful.

Mr Speaker: I note what the hon. Lady says, and I do not cavil at it at all. I made the point yesterday that I thought the situation was lamentable—I used that word several times—[*Interruption.*] I am not interested in people chuntering from a sedentary position to no obvious benefit or purpose. I am ruling on a matter, and I require no assistance in the process of doing so.

The situation was lamentable. I thought that it would be better for the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) to have the opportunity of a proxy vote—that was my view, and it was a view widely shared. The matter was debated in February last year and in September, and I had indicated my strong support. It would have been necessary for a resolution to be tabled by the Leader of the House, but for reasons that others can explain—it is not my job to do their explaining for them—that has not happened. It is regrettable, but it cannot be sorted tonight.

Nevertheless, the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) has registered her concern, and it is one that I share—with a sense of very deep disappointment, to put it mildly. It will doubtless be dealt with in the days or weeks to come. My great sympathies go to the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn, who in my judgment should not have been put in this position.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Prime Minister has now said that she will listen to voices from right across this House. She has obviously had 30 months

in which to do that, and it has led to this defeat for the Government tonight, which is the greatest for more than 100 years. We must all hope that she will indeed listen to voices from across the House, but we also all recognise that that will take time, and people, businesses, Government organisations and institutions will now be worried that only just over 70 days are left. The Prime Minister did not mention article 50—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. People talk about respect in this House, but there is a Minister of the Crown shouting at the right hon. Lady. I say in the kindest way, he is normally a very genial fellow—stop it, you are capable of much better than that.

Yvette Cooper: Given the scale of the challenge, with the clock now really ticking down, the Prime Minister did not mention what will happen to article 50. Mr Speaker, will you advise the House on what we might be able to do to urge the Prime Minister, for the sake of businesses, jobs and people throughout the country, to seek an immediate extension of article 50 so that this can be sorted out?

Mr Speaker: The answer in the first instance is that those are matters that can be aired in debate tomorrow. It is not right for me, tonight, to give a ruling on what the right hon. Lady or others should or should not do. She will be aware of the presentation of a Bill that took place in the name of another Member, who I believe also has views on these matters. Those matters will, I am sure, be discussed in the days ahead, not merely in private meetings but, I feel certain, on the Floor of the House. Of one thing I am sure: that which Members wish to debate and which they determine shall be subject to a vote will be debated and voted upon. That seems to me to be so blindingly obvious that no sensible person would disagree with the proposition. If MPs want to debate and vote on a matter, that opportunity will, I am sure, unfold in the period ahead.

If there are no further points of order, and I do not think that we need any, it is right for us to hear the supplementary business statement by the Leader of the House.

Business of the House

7.54 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): I am extraordinarily grateful, Mr Speaker—[*Laughter.*]

Mr Speaker: To be honest, I do not really mind whether the Leader of the House is grateful or not, but she has the chance.

Andrea Leadsom: Thank you for that clarification, Mr Speaker.

With permission, I should like to make a short business statement regarding the business for tomorrow and the remainder of this week.

WEDNESDAY 16 JANUARY—The House will be asked to consider a motion of no confidence in Her Majesty's Government under section 2(4) of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, in the name of the Leader of the Opposition.

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

I shall make a further business statement in the usual way on Thursday.

Mr Speaker: I remind the House that the supplementary business statement is subject to questioning, but its terms are comparatively narrow, and I implore Members to recognise the implication and spirit of that fact.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the statement. In the circumstances of the vote, the Opposition concur with the scheduling of the debate tomorrow.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I wonder whether we can confirm that the whole day's business tomorrow will be given to the vote of no confidence. According to the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, there is only a requirement for an hour and a half—[*Interruption.*] The Government Chief Whip is nodding his head, so I am sufficiently persuaded that that will be the case.

Andrea Leadsom: Yes, subject to the agreement of the House.

Mr Speaker: It would be useful to know the timings. Ordinarily, the Chair is approached about these matters, which is the sensible way to deal with them. We need to know the timings, and I hope that the right hon. Lady will either be able to advise now or confer with colleagues later in the evening, so that there is clarity on that matter and we will all be very satisfied.

Andrea Leadsom: I can confirm that your office, Mr Speaker, has the proposal for a business motion tomorrow that proposes that the debate take place over the whole day, until 7 pm.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I am not sure whether we are asking questions on the business statement or making points of order.

Given the scale of defeat, the Government must surely have seen the inevitable coming. The issues for debate on Thursday are important, but every day wasted is another day closer to exit, particularly without a deal. Are we really to debate two motions with no consequence on Thursday rather than deciding how we will move forward on a crucial issue facing our country?

Mr Speaker: The Leader of the House can add to what she has said in the supplementary business statement if she likes. If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for saying so, that seemed to me a curious hybrid between an attempted point of order and a question on the supplementary business motion. If he had to plump for one or the other, I am not sure which it would be.

These matters can be aired in debate tomorrow, in the business question on Thursday and on subsequent days. I completely understand that the hon. Gentleman is seized of the importance of early progress, but that opportunity will unfold in days to come, and I can predict with confidence that he will be in his place, ready to leap to his feet to share his point of view with the House.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Is this really going to be necessary? I call Simon Hoare.

Simon Hoare: Can you confirm, Mr Speaker, that the timetable set out by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House perfectly accords with the amended programme motion that the House voted on last week, which I guess the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) voted for, that the Prime Minister would have three sitting days—

Mr Speaker: Order. It would not have been agreed if that were not the case. I do not mean to be unkind to the hon. Gentleman, but he is frankly not adding anything by making that point of order. Although I am sure it was perfectly well intended, no additional public service has been provided. If there are further questions to the Leader of the House, I am sure that she will be happy to take them within the confines of the supplementary business motion. If not, I suggest to the House that we proceed to subsequent motions.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

ENERGY CONSERVATION

That the draft Energy Efficiency (Private Rented Property) (England and Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 27 November 2018, be approved.—(*Mark Spencer.*)

The Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 16 January (Standing Order No. 41A).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (NUCLEAR SAFEGUARDS)

That the draft Nuclear Safeguards (Fissionable Material and Relevant International Agreements) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 29 November 2018, be approved.—(*Mark Spencer.*)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

RATING AND VALUATION

That the draft Local Government Finance Act 1988 (Non-Domestic Rating Multipliers) (England) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 4 December 2018, be approved.—(*Mark Spencer.*)

Question agreed to.

EUROPEAN UNION DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 119(11)),

UK PARTICIPATION IN THE EU AGENCY FOR CRIMINAL JUSTICE COOPERATION (EUROJUST): POST-ADOPTION OPT-IN DECISION

That this House takes note of Regulation 2018/1727 of the European Parliament and of the Council on the European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation (Eurojust), and replacing and repealing Council Decision 2002/187/JHA; endorses the Government's decision to request to opt in under Protocol 21 on the Position of the United Kingdom and Ireland in respect of the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice annexed to the EU Treaties; and supports the Government's assessment that Eurojust provides a valuable service to the UK and that opting in would enable us to maintain operational continuity and minimise disruption for UK law enforcement and prosecution authorities during the proposed Implementation Period.—(*Mark Spencer.*)

The Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 16 January (Standing Order No. 41A).

Chester-le-Street: Rail Services

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mark Spencer.)

8.1 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): On this historic night, I am sorry that Members are now leaving the Chamber and will not be listening to the problems that my constituents are facing at Chester-le-Street railway station. However, I am pleased to have secured this debate to highlight the problems in Chester-le-Street and the surrounding area for people who use the station. Tonight we have been consumed by the debate on Brexit, but it is worth reminding ourselves that other issues are important to our constituents and that, despite our serious deliberations today, many of our constituents are just getting on with their lives.

Chester-le-Street railway station serves not only the town of Chester-le-Street but the surrounding villages and communities of North Durham. As Members might know, my constituency borders the Tyneside conurbation. Over the years, traditional industries in Chester-le-Street and large parts of my constituency have moved and closed, and the area has now become a commuter town for the area north of the Tyne and for parts of Durham and Teesside. Good transport links are therefore important for the economic viability of my constituency. In Durham County Council's new economic plan, the transport links for the north of the county are highlighted as an important part of County Durham's economic future. The journey time to Newcastle from Chester-le-Street and the south of Durham is less than 10 minutes, so in many ways it is an attractive option for people to live in my constituency and commute to work on Tyneside, down in Teesside or in Durham. That is why many people have located themselves in Chester-le-Street and the surrounding areas.

The main rail morning and evening services are provided by three operators—TransPennine Express, Northern and CrossCountry—but, since May last year, the main problem has been the reliability of services, particularly those run by TransPennine Express. Not only have trains been late, but they have often been cancelled altogether. Those two things are particularly difficult for people at the two main commuter times: first thing in the morning, when people are keen to get to work at 9 o'clock, and in the evening, when people want to get home. Commuters often find themselves either late for work because trains have been cancelled, or stuck in Newcastle or other stations further south in the evening with no ability to get home. In some cases, people have not made it home until 7 o'clock or later.

Due to the concern of many of my constituents who rely on Chester-le-Street station for their main commute, I called a public meeting in November, and it will be useful to highlight some of comments that were made not only at that meeting, but in the numerous emails and other correspondence that I have received from worried constituents. The first reads:

"In summary this week the Chester-le-Street to Darlington commuter trains have been cancelled on 7 out of 10 journeys."

Another constituent said:

"The service continues to go from bad to worse with the morning service having been totally cancelled on 3 out of 4 days in the last week."

One constituent, a working mother, said that she was finding it difficult to hold down a senior executive job in Newcastle as it had become untenable for her to regularly miss prearranged times to pick up her children from school because she was stuck in Newcastle station due to evening train cancellations. Another constituent wrote that the

"08:24 commuter train from Chester-le-Street to Durham has been cancelled again. We are all late for work again."

Another said:

"How can the region be taken seriously if our trains aren't on time 50% of the time?"

A further constituent said:

"While financial compensation does indeed help, it does not compensate for the trouble that working parents have to cause to others to get their children home."

Another constituent mentioned not only childcare, but the fact that those who look after elderly relatives in the evening find it difficult to get home from Newcastle.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. He is always generous with his time, and I am here to support him, as I support others when it comes to Adjournment debates. From my research, I have found that the idea with trains is that they take people away from cars and buses. Unfortunately, in this instance—I think he mentioned this earlier—people are unable to get on to trains when they come into the station. Does he agree that one way of addressing overcrowding is to run longer trains? Is that an option?

Mr Jones: It is. The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. This should be a way of getting people out of their cars and off other forms of transport into Tyneside, Durham and Teesside. I accept that longer trains are an option, but if the trains do not turn up in the first place, that is a problem.

Delays and cancellations are causing real hardship to many of my constituents. I even had one resident contact me a few weeks ago to say that he had turned down a promotion at work because he could not guarantee to his employer that he was able to get in on time. These are real-life situations that are causing my constituents a lot of hardship.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): My right hon. Friend and near constituency neighbour is outlining the fact that the Northern franchise has failed. The service that it provides to the people of the north-east, the north-west, Yorkshire and Humberside is disastrous. Everyone knows that, yet the franchise is allowed to get away with this nonsense and put the jobs of the constituents of my right hon. Friend and many others in jeopardy due to its shoddy service.

Mr Jones: I do not disagree with my hon. Friend. This is the economic case. People are losing the ability to access the jobs in Tyneside, Teesside and Durham. Many constituents feel hopeless because what can Government do about it? He raises an interesting point about the franchise and how it is operating. Whatever we do about the franchise, the penalties need to be tightened.

The other issue facing my constituents is that, when trains are cancelled, the trains that do turn up are overcrowded. It is only a short-distance commute, but

we have had situations where people have been unable to get on later trains. One of my constituents was travelling further afield for a day out in York and had booked his seat some three months in advance because he was suffering from a bad back and was travelling with a friend with cancer, and they had to stand all the way from Chester-le-Street to York, which cannot be acceptable.

Some of the issues affecting the regularity of services to Chester-le-Street are directly related to the timetable. There has rightly been a lot of publicity on the issues in Manchester and Leeds, but a lot of that congestion has been having a knock-on effect further north, because the companies are then cancelling trains. The trains might go to York but they go no further north and other services are cancelled altogether.

The chaos in the Manchester and Leeds areas has been well publicised, but I remind the Minister, and certainly the operators, that the north is further north than Leeds and Manchester. The people who rely on this service in my constituency should not be sacrificed to ensure that the operators get their times right in Manchester and Leeds.

My constituents' other frustration has been with the appalling way in which TransPennine Express deals with customers. No information is given to stranded commuters when trains travelling south from Newcastle to Chester-le-Street are cancelled in the evening, and no alternatives are offered for getting them home. People are just left to make their own way or make alternative provision. When that happens regularly to people with childcare responsibilities, it is not acceptable, and I know of one constituent in particular who has to care for her elderly mother. When a person is expected home at quarter past 5, it is not acceptable for them to arrive after 7 o'clock. I have raised the lack of information with TransPennine Express. There are not even staff at Newcastle to give information or to provide alternative forms of transport, be it replacement buses or alternative train options.

There is a compensation scheme but, again, TransPennine Express is not good at advertising the fact that people are entitled to compensation. As a one-off goodwill gesture, I think TransPennine Express should offer all regular travellers a month's free travel, because people have had to put up with this for far too long. I would be interested to know whether the Minister has any powers to intercede in making sure that TransPennine Express pays reasonable compensation to people.

I come back to the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) about the franchise. It is clearly not working. Either TransPennine Express needs to up its game and start acting like an organisation that cares about its customers, or the franchise should be taken off it. If we are going to rebrand, we should look in detail at how appallingly it has operated it so far.

Given the location of Chester-le-Street, travel by train should be an ideal opportunity for people to access jobs around our region, but an inconsistent service is not going to endear train travel to people. It certainly will not attract people to live in Chester-le-Street. It is not a selling point if people cannot rely on what should be an easy commute.

I have been raising for many years now the issue of why later in the day the service goes to a two-hourly service. In any future franchise, we should be looking at

[Mr Kevan Jones]

a more regular service. There is the capacity to grow the usage of Chester-le-Street station and—to reinforce the point made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—to take people off the roads and on to the railways.

I would like to raise an issue about the CrossCountry service that stops at Chester-le-Street railway station. There is a consultation about reducing the number of stops that CrossCountry does, and one of the proposals is to remove the service stopping at Chester-le-Street to increase the connectivity between major cities and towns on the CrossCountry route. If that happens—I have made representations on this, as has the county council—it will be important that those lost stopping services be replaced. Will the Minister ensure that that is taken into account in the consultation? If those stopping services are taken away, it is important that we have a replacement service, especially in the evenings.

Ian Mearns: There is speculation in the industry that CrossCountry is proposing that some if not all the services from the south coast of England terminate at York, not serving Chester-le-Street, which is obviously between York and Newcastle.

Mr Jones: If that happened, it would be a detrimental step for the north-east. It reinforces my point that many people look at the north and perhaps think it goes as far as York, Manchester and Leeds and no further.

I want to raise the issue of investment in Chester-le-Street. I have raised this with Network Rail. The footbridge over the station is in an appalling state of repair, but I have been told it will not be painted until 2020. Anything the Minister can do to get Network Rail to address that would be very important because, again, if we are going to encourage more people to use the station, the facilities need to be improved. Network Rail leaving it until 2020 to paint a bridge is not acceptable.

My constituents have had an appalling experience and rail service through no fault of their own. The purpose of this debate is to raise their concerns and the terrible way they have been treated, but there is also an important point about the economy and future of my constituency and how viable it is to attract people to come and live in what is a pleasant part of County Durham.

8.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) on securing the debate. He has raised a number of important issues relating to his constituency and to County Durham more broadly, and I will address them all.

I entirely recognise the importance of Chester-le-Street station as a vital local link for the right hon. Gentleman's constituents. I know how much they rely on it. The right hon. Gentleman said that the service was growing, and I can confirm that. The number of passengers has increased by about 30,000 a year over the past six years, and an average of just over 600 a day use the station. Those people play a vital role in the local economy: for instance, as the right hon. Gentleman said, they provide access to employment in both Newcastle and Durham. Nearly all

the services are provided by TransPennine Express, with a handful of additional peak services provided by Northern and CrossCountry.

The right hon. Gentleman rightly focused on the central issue of performance—about which the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) also expressed concern—and how bad it became, particularly after the May timetable change. Let me stress that I entirely agree: the services that were offered to several parts of the country, including those offered by franchises in the north of England, were unacceptable. I must also stress, however, that important lessons have been learnt, some of which have already been implemented by the industry and have led to a significant improvement in performance.

The planned December 2018 timetable changes in the north were deliberately scaled back in favour of a phased approach. Risks were mitigated to the extent that this was largely a rollover of the May timetable, but with a focus on some performance “fixes” to improve the resilience and reliability of the network. They included changes to local TransPennine services between Leeds and Manchester, although I fully recognise that “the north” extends further than Leeds and Manchester. Indeed, I represent a constituency that is north of Leeds and Manchester. Those changes have already delivered significant improvements and the provision of standby trains at key locations to help recovery should things go wrong.

I observe performance daily, and I know that many Members on both sides of the House do the same. Performance on Northern and TPE has improved significantly since December. On TPE, according to the public performance measure—which can be found online—the number of trains that are on time has increased to about 83%. That figure still presents a significant amount of room for manoeuvre, and it is below target, but it is also 18% higher than the figure during the last period before the December changes. Although there has been an improvement in punctuality and a reduction in the number of cancellations, I agree with colleagues throughout the House that that is still not good enough.

As for Northern, the January figures so far show that about 89% of trains are on time, which is an improvement of about 10% on the figure for December. I am pleased to report that the number of trains that are late, very late or cancelled has substantially declined. This month fewer than 1 in 10 have been late, and just 1.3% have been very late or cancelled. However, I am aware of the base from which they are starting; I also know that the recovery of passenger trust is critical, and will only be delivered by a relentless focus on reliability and punctuality.

Mr Kevan Jones: I agree with the Minister, but what concerns me about TransPennine is that it does not care. A company that should be focusing on what is good for customers has no customer ethos at all. I would love to know how we can change that.

Andrew Jones: The right hon. Gentleman has made a significant point. I have to say that that has not been my experience when I have been dealing with the train operating companies, but it is nevertheless clear that the communication to which he referred in his speech has not been good enough. I shall say more about that shortly.

As part of the wider drive to improve performance in the north, the Government commissioned Richard George, a respected industry figure, to review the performance of the region's rail network. He will recommend operational improvements to increase reliability in the short and medium term. Richard will co-ordinate and lead the efforts of Network Rail and the operators. His remit is to help industry reach the right conclusions so that passenger impact is central to every planning decision; the passenger must be at the centre of all of our decisions. He has already helped highlight problem areas and will provide his conclusions later this year.

In addition, since the May timetabling issues Network Rail has established a programme management office. This will also help to ensure future timetable changes can be better planned and managed. There will be no repeat of the processes that led to the failure of May 2018 and that timetable change.

I thank the right hon. Member for North Durham for raising the issue of communication and poor information about cancellations and delays. I hear it in other parts of our network too, and it is simply not good enough. There are customer information screens at Chester-le-Street station, and both TPE and Northern publish updated information on their websites and social media channels, but we continue to stress to these operators and the whole industry the absolute importance of giving passengers the information they need when things go wrong. I have raised this with the train operating companies and will continue to do so. It has not been good enough. Obviously I want to get to a place where we do not have to make these comments, but until then a focus on communication is important.

Ian Mearns: In my experience trains that serve Chester-le-Street moving both north and south can suffer from cancellations, because if a train is coming from the south to the north and is late it is the habit of the operator to terminate the train at Darlington, and therefore not to allow it to travel on through to Durham, Chester-le-Street and Newcastle and then make the return journey. Can we ask the franchises to stop that practice, please?

Andrew Jones: The hon. Gentleman's point is important, but there is also a point that the operators must consider in the operation of a timetable: how do they recover? If something goes wrong, how is that timetable recovered?

Ian Mearns: Additional rolling stock, Minister.

Andrew Jones: That is exactly what is happening, and I will come on to rolling stock in a moment. I understand the hon. Gentleman's point and also where train operating companies are coming from, but regularly disadvantaging the same customers is not acceptable. I want to get to the place where we do not have to have these questions in the first place.

If things do go wrong, I also want to make sure we have compensation schemes. There have been delay-repay schemes and after May the Government asked Northern and TPE to implement special compensation schemes that quickly and fairly reimburse those passengers most adversely affected, and that included regular service users from Chester-le-Street. To date, over £1 million has been paid in compensation for the summer disruption.

Passengers will see the benefit of the new huge investment in rail in the north of England when the new rolling stock enters service this year. As part of the investment in TPE three new fleets of Nova trains will be introduced, starting from May this year until the end of 2020. For Chester-le-Street longer brand new trains will be in service, while on Northern the outdated and unpopular Pacers will be removed by the franchise by the end of this year. Passengers using the Northern services in County Durham will see refurbished trains offering increased capacity.

What does that actually mean? Nova trains are faster and have more capacity, and we are moving from three to five carriage trains; that means over 150 extra seats. The Pacers will in some cases be replaced by refurbished stock cascaded down from Scotland. These are class 170 trains which are longer than those they replace; they are increasing in size from 18 metres to 23 metres per carriage, again increasing capacity. The vast majority of the 500 brand new carriages from Northern and TransPennine will be delivered in less than a year from now, and every other train that is not brand new will be refurbished to be as-new.

The CrossCountry consultation was a concern. It ended on 30 August and we are conducting a thorough review of its findings. No decisions have been made about the CrossCountry timetable. The east coast main line timetable will be rewritten for all operators in 2020-21 and that will be an opportunity to review the current train services at Chester-le-Street, alongside wider long-distance service changes. The only decision that has been taken so far is to cancel the franchise competition because of the rail review. The current franchise ends in October, with the option to extend by one year. We are looking at options for the franchise and we are aware of severe overcrowding on that network, so we are looking to bring in additional trains as soon as the appropriate carriages are available within the existing rolling stock market. But the importance of Chester-le-Street and the north-east to the CrossCountry franchise is noted. Colleagues here asked me to note it and I have done so, and I give them my assurance that it will be considered.

Let me turn to the services at Chester-le-Street station. It is managed by Northern, which is conducting improvements throughout the life of its franchise to ensure that the station is well maintained. I understand of course how inconvenient it has been for passengers in the interim, but the waiting room and toilets are due to be refurbished very soon. As for the bridge, we are painting a structure that spans the east coast main line, so it is not as simple as a regular painting job. It is one that needs to be planned such that it minimises disruption. However, the point made by the right hon. Member for North Durham has been heard and I will ensure that Network Rail is aware of his concerns.

Our railways have to be fit for the future. This requires investment, vision, innovation and ambitious thinking, so that our rail network meets the needs of the people who rely on it. That is the point of our rail review. The service that we have and the structures we have had have served us well, taking us from 700 million passenger journeys a year to 1.7 billion. But times are changing and we are seeing huge investment. We are on the cusp of experiencing the benefits of the billions of pounds of investment. Our railways are undergoing much-needed transformation that, as a country, we have never

[Andrew Jones]

Question put and agreed to.

experienced before. That will improve rail services in the north of England for good and it will see rail play its part in driving economic growth right across the north.

8.32 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 15 January 2019

[MR ADRIAN BAILEY *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Recognition of Fibromyalgia as a Disability

9.30 am

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the recognition of fibromyalgia as a disability.

It is a pleasure to open the debate and to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I am delighted that so many hon. Members have come to support the raising of awareness of a crucial issue. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for selecting the topic for debate, and particularly the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), for his support in obtaining and promoting the debate.

I want to pay tribute to two of my constituents, Adrienne and Leann Lakin of Chesterfield, and all the fibromyalgia campaigners who bang the drum relentlessly to ensure that sufferers' voices are heard. Many intend to come to witness the debate. Their campaigning has been instrumental in persuading other hon. Members to attend or to speak out about fibromyalgia. I was proud to present a petition in Parliament, which reached more than 100,000 signatures on change.org, calling for fibromyalgia to be recognised as a disability and for greater awareness of and investment in treatment. I recognise that the context of the debate spans the responsibilities of both the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department of Health and Social Care, and I hope that the Minister will be able to pass on to her counterpart the topics raised in the debate that do not fall within her purview.

Many in this country are ignorant about what fibromyalgia is, but it is a condition that many people suffer from. It is one of a group of conditions often referred to as invisible illnesses, but sufferers live with its consequences every day of their lives.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. His use of the word "invisible" was telling. Besides raising awareness, is not the debate about getting to the stage where fibromyalgia is diagnosed more easily?

Toby Perkins: That is an excellent point, to which I shall return. One of the major problems that fibromyalgia sufferers experience is that it takes so long for their condition to be diagnosed. I shall talk more about what we can do to get earlier diagnosis and better understanding throughout general practice.

Fibromyalgia sufferers experience many different kinds of symptoms. Often there is a heightened sensitivity to pain and extreme muscle stiffness. They often struggle to sleep, which exacerbates their muscular difficulties, and experience extreme fatigue. Sufferers also experience cognitive difficulties—not just headaches but problems

with mental processes, known as fibro-fog, and an inability to process things as they did previously. As if those things were not enough, fibromyalgia sufferers can be struck down with irritable bowel syndrome too. A panoply of symptoms means that people have a terrible time. However, often, when those symptoms are dealt with in general practice they are masked as other conditions. Many time-consuming treatments are undergone, but they do not get to the root of things.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Sara, a young mother in my constituency, has fibromyalgia, triggered by the birth of the youngest of her three children. She describes a pain so severe that she cannot even hug her kids. She says the personal independence payment assessment process stripped her of her dignity, because of a lack of understanding. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a need to address unintentional ignorance and a lack of knowledge about what a debilitating illness fibromyalgia is?

Toby Perkins: I absolutely agree. My hon. Friend has given a powerful example. Meeting someone with fibromyalgia—this is even more true of those who live with a sufferer—we get to understand what it is like to walk a mile in their shoes. One reason why we asked the DWP to respond to the debate is that, on the face of it, sufferers do not appear to be very ill, but when we hear testimony such as that of my hon. Friend's constituent we may understand what it is really like.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Like other hon. Members, I have met constituents at my advice surgery who have complained that their fibromyalgia has not been taken seriously. All too often, not only GPs and clinicians but the Department for Work and Pensions among others see it simply as aches and pains. It is important that, as my hon. Friend has been doing, we develop the argument that it is not something to be dismissed easily. It is far more than that.

Toby Perkins: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. I think that there are many hon. Members here for the debate, on such an important day in Parliament when there are many alternative demands on our time, because we have had a powerful experience of what our constituents go through.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that the fluctuating nature of fibromyalgia means that the DWP system is not sensitive enough to respond to the challenges faced by those who experience the condition?

Toby Perkins: I agree, and I think that that hints at a wider problem in the benefits system assessment regime, which finds it difficult to deal with fluctuating conditions, whether mental health conditions or muscular problems along the lines of fibromyalgia, that are better on some days, or manageable with a huge amount of medication, so that people can get out of the house and may appear better than usual on the assessment day.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. My constituent Susan says that the pain she suffers is so bad that the

[Paul Masterton]

only time she does not feel it is when she is asleep. She mentions that it is not just that the condition itself is not picked up properly within disability assessment, but that it exacerbates other conditions she has, making them even more extreme. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with that point about wider understanding of the effects of the illness within the disability system?

Toby Perkins: I entirely agree. The impact on the rest of the family includes caring responsibilities that fall on them, restricting their ability to develop their earning potential. The consequence is that the entire family of a fibromyalgia sufferer will suffer too. It is a powerful point.

Estimates suggest that as many as one in 20 people suffer from fibromyalgia. Since I secured the debate I have been contacted by many MPs—there have been many interventions in the debate—and by constituents and other members of the public. People say that at last someone is talking about the condition, which they or their partner have suffered with for so long, feeling that no one understood. The feeling of being misunderstood is familiar to many fibromyalgia sufferers. Often employers are baffled as to why on some days an apparently healthy member of staff is the life and soul of the party, but on others cannot turn up for work because they are crippled by their condition. By the same token, those employees often feel tremendous guilt that a condition that decimates their ability to contribute keeps striking them down. That often leads them to conclude that they must go into work even though they are in extreme pain, frequently making themselves even more ill in the process. It truly is a vicious circle.

Fibromyalgia sufferers are also misunderstood, as we have already heard, by those who assess them for benefits such as PIP and employment and support allowance, as their conditions are variable and can often be managed in the very short term. Many fibromyalgia sufferers have taken pills to help to manage the pain and support them through an ESA assessment, only to discover that the assessment outcome bears little relationship to their daily experience of living with fibromyalgia.

I have had constituents speak to me about the fact that the tablets they took to enable them to get in a taxi to travel to their assessment and get through that assessment for an hour meant that, when they got home, they were in bed for days afterwards. I think they thought to themselves, “If only the assessor could see me now, half an hour or an hour after the assessment, they would see why I’m unable to work. I’ve been able to get myself through that assessment, trying to comply with the system, but to my own disadvantage.”

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The hon. Gentleman is making an extremely powerful speech. As I will say in my contribution, my wife is a fibromyalgia sufferer. Is it not the case that stressful experiences actually exacerbate the condition, leading to hugely damaging flare-ups?

Toby Perkins: That point is spot on, and made from the powerful perspective of someone who knows what it is like to live with someone experiencing fibromyalgia. I will come on in a moment to some of the other things

that are believed to be triggers for fibromyalgia, but the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We all know—it is one of our worries about the assessment regime within benefits—the stress of that process: the stress of going through the assessment, of believing that benefits will be taken away or of wondering how they will feel the next day. It is an incredibly unhelpful situation where people’s income is tied to their being ill, so they wake up almost hoping to be ill to justify the income, while simultaneously wishing they were better because they want to be able to contribute. That is something that is known much more widely in our benefits system, but fibromyalgia sufferers are very familiar with it.

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and on the awareness day that he hosted last year, which was a very informative and moving event. Given all that has been said about sufferers, does he agree that, without the help of support groups such as the one in Newcastle, people with fibromyalgia would perhaps not have any outside support to help them with benefit queries or managing their condition? Those are voluntary groups that have been set up, but should we have more statutory groups to help people with the condition?

Toby Perkins: I pay tribute to the voluntary group that my hon. Friend speaks of. We all recognise the incredibly important role that voluntary groups of that sort play, and it is true that, when someone has a condition that is so misunderstood, speaking to other people who have experienced it and to families supporting people who have experienced it is important. I think we are also all conscious that, in an era where local government funding has been cut, often charitable and voluntary groups are the ones seeing their funding cut. Those groups often do not require a lot of funding, but a small amount of core funding enables them to function. That is something that many of us are concerned about.

I am conscious that there are a number of people who have put in to speak. I am very happy to take interventions, but I also do not want to cut into other people’s time, so I will crack on a little bit. Obviously, if there are other pressing issues, hon. Members are free to raise them.

It is hardly surprising that so many employers and assessment staff misunderstand fibromyalgia when, as has been reflected on already, it is so often misdiagnosed by the medical profession. Most fibromyalgia sufferers will live with the condition for over a year before it is diagnosed, and it is often the diagnosis of last resort, which means that sufferers will often have gone through many painful months of ruling out various other explanations and taking other kinds of drugs not relevant to their circumstances before the true cause of their pain is articulated.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree with my constituent, Karen Mitchell, who has fibromyalgia, that medical help and support is very variable, that there is great variation in how well fibromyalgia is recognised and that we need to ensure that consistent and helpful treatment is available?

Toby Perkins: I do. My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that I will be hot-footing it from this debate to health questions, where I have tabled a question about

diagnosis of fibromyalgia in general practice. Other hon. Members might wish to leap on the back of that question and make their own contributions, and the one that my hon. Friend has just made is powerful. There is variability of diagnosis, and I have met a number of different sufferers who have had different kinds of treatment and, as a result of the treatment they have had, present very differently now. That is something I have seen with my own eyes.

Even with all the medical advancements that have been made, fibromyalgia is a condition without a known cause or a known cure. There are many factors thought to contribute to the condition, including abnormal processing of pain due to chemical changes in the nervous system or imbalances in chemicals in the brain such as serotonin, dopamine and noradrenaline. The condition often appears to run in families, suggesting that there is a genetic predisposition to it and, as we have just heard from the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards), stressful events can be a trigger.

Many people who are concerned that general practice training, which by its very nature is general, is inadequate on fibromyalgia and that that is a cause of the delays in diagnosis. The petition also calls for greater research into fibromyalgia. With over 70,000 diagnosed patients having made claims for PIP, it is clear that this is a widespread problem, but that number is estimated to understate the number of fibromyalgia sufferers by at least 90%.

Rachael Maskell: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is vital that there is a clinical specialist in fibromyalgia within each health economy, whether that is led by a general practitioner or a specialist practitioner, to support people with fibromyalgia right through the pathway in accessing services and in managing their own healthcare?

Toby Perkins: I recognise that, and I also recognise how stretched our national health service is more generally and the need for us to have that specialist help as early as possible. One thing that is becoming clear is that the delay in diagnosis allows the condition to get worse, which adds to the cost of treating it further down the line. Anything that can be done to speed up the diagnosis will have many economic benefits, as well as medical ones, down the line.

While the suffering and economic cost of treating and supporting fibromyalgia sufferers is so large and the knowledge base on what causes it and how to treat it is so small, this is an area that is ripe for further research. In the Library note we received before the debate, we were told that in the past five years, funding applications for around £1.8 million worth of research were approved. In a single year—I appreciate why this is a false comparison, but it provides some context none the less—the UK spends over £400 million on cancer research. Of course, I do not for a second underestimate the value of research into cancer, but given the problems that fibromyalgia causes and how long patients will live with it, surely we should be spending more than 0.5% of the investment into cancer research on researching the grave and widespread menace that is fibromyalgia.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Toby Perkins: What can we do to raise awareness of fibromyalgia? I think we will hear from the hon. Gentleman particularly on that subject.

Scott Mann: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate to the Chamber; as the number of people here shows, many of us have been written to by our constituents. I did a little bit of research, and it seems to me that the USA and Sweden both have good research teams looking at this condition and how it might be helped. Does he think the UK Government should look at what Sweden and America are doing on this particular disease to see how we might be able to help out?

Toby Perkins: I do. While Sweden and America have very different kinds of healthcare system, the hon. Gentleman is right that they both have world-leading research capabilities. Clearly, there is a big question for future UK medical research about our leaving the European Union; a great deal of medical research is much easier to do when we have 28 countries paying into it, rather than just one. However, whether collectively with other countries or individually, we have absolutely world-class medical research capabilities in this country and we should contribute towards the global knowledge base on fibromyalgia. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point in saying that.

What can we do to raise awareness of fibromyalgia? Today's debate is the latest step towards doing just that. We have already had the presentation of the petition, and the fibro campaigners also held a reception in Portcullis House. Around 25 MPs came along to hear more about what life with fibromyalgia is like, and I was delighted that Adrienne Lakin and Billy Mansell were able to present at that reception and to get across to Members a little bit about the impact that it has had. The debate is another important step, and we look forward to hearing more about the Government's strategy on recognising the effects of fibromyalgia on sufferers and what more they will do to raise awareness.

The petition was also specific about recognising fibromyalgia as a disability under the Equality Act 2010, which is an important and contentious issue. Providers of public services are required to make accommodations for people with disabilities. Many fibromyalgia sufferers would qualify as disabled in their own right, but each sufferer has to prove their own disability. Given that, as we have heard, the condition can take more than a year to diagnose in the first place, it is often quite a bit after that before sufferers are actually recognised as disabled. While many people manage their symptoms and go on to enjoy productive lives, the invisibility of fibromyalgia and the difficulty of diagnosis means that many patients are not recognised as disabled and are often invisible sufferers. As we have heard, that has a knock-on impact on their families, who often attempt to manage caring responsibilities alongside their responsibilities as breadwinners, trying to keep food on the table.

Once diagnosed, fibromyalgia sufferers would like the Government and the Department for Work and Pensions to recognise them as disabled under the Equality Act, ensuring that they get any support that they need to lead productive lives. Of course different patients will have different attributes and needs, but it is a chronic

[Toby Perkins]

condition that will not get better. Ensuring that they do not have to fight to be taken seriously would be of real value. We heard previously that fibromyalgia may affect as many as 5% of the population, yet less than 0.2% receive PIP due to having it.

I am delighted to set the ball rolling on this important debate and look forward to hearing the perspectives of other hon. Members. Fibromyalgia sufferers need greater certainty, greater research and greater awareness. Collectively, we as a country need to do more to ensure that we not only understand but support them in their illness and in their desire to lead productive lives.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Before I call the next speaker, I make it quite clear that I will call the Front-Bench spokespeople at 10.30 am. A lot of Back Benchers want to contribute—I am told 10—so I suggest an advisory time limit of four minutes at this stage. However, I will probably drop that to a hard time limit if the earlier speakers take up an excessive amount of time.

9.53 am

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) on raising this subject. Frankly, until he became interested, we had not spent too much time on it. Over the years there have been battles to hear voices on autism, dyslexia and ME, but it has taken the hon. Gentleman's raising the subject to get so many colleagues here this morning.

We all know people who, when asked how they are, go into great detail about having this and that wrong with them. We call them hypochondriacs. However, there is a great danger that people with fibromyalgia are somehow not recognised. It is a rotten illness. Some 2.1 million people suffer from it—one in 20 people—and women are seven times more likely than men to experience it. It is awful.

I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that the hon. Member for Chesterfield should be declared the fibromyalgia champion, on a non-party basis. Now that he has started the ball rolling, he should lead on this subject and we should follow. I will not repeat many of the things he said, but I absolutely agree on the importance of recognising fibromyalgia as a disability under the Equality Act and understanding the debilitating and long-term effects on sufferers' lives. For those living with this painful chronic disease, lack of awareness leads not only to many suffering in silence, but to their often receiving inadequate support and treatment.

I also say to my hon. Friend the Minister that I found out what we are doing in Southend, with regard to fibromyalgia provision, and it is not brilliant. We have a chronic fatigue syndrome service across Essex, which also takes referrals from GPs for other forms of fatigue, not only CFS or ME. There is not a single streamlined resource in the Southend area, although three departments provide a service to fibromyalgia patients, meaning that they have different routes to access services. However, it is not really a niche service. I am sure that other hon. Members have had similar experiences.

We have heard about the waiting time for diagnoses and the lack of understanding of GPs. It is also important to ensure that patients themselves have a better understanding of the condition. As the hon. Member for Chesterfield said, we are unfortunately struggling to find a cure and to understand how this happens. I highlight the importance of research in improving the lives of fibromyalgia patients. So much about the condition is still unknown. We do not even have a clear understanding of its cause and, more critically, there is no known cure. We should certainly invest in research. With the right understanding, investment and attention, we can do more to ensure that fibromyalgia gets the treatment it deserves.

I have the highest regard for my hon. Friend the Minister. She will not perform any miracles today. She will agree with all colleagues who speak. However, I am getting a little frustrated about action. That is what I am really asking for. The Health and Social Care Secretary spoke about the 10-year plan. Will my hon. Friend say something in that regard, and cheer us all up by saying that the Government take this illness seriously and have a plan on which they intend to deliver?

9.57 am

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. Under the Equality Act 2010, only cancer, HIV and multiple sclerosis are automatically recognised as disabilities. For all other debilitating conditions—including visual and hearing impairments, motor neurone disease, epilepsy, dementia and cardiovascular disease—in order to be defined as a disability under the Act, they must be proven to be a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on the sufferer's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. No doubt many campaigners for the conditions I have named, as well as many others, would like those conditions to be automatically recognised as disabilities, but as the debate is on fibromyalgia I will concentrate on that.

Before I was elected to this place, I worked as a clinical scientist for the NHS and was also a workplace rep for Unite the union. As a rep I represented a colleague with fibromyalgia when the Pennine Acute Hospitals NHS Trust was formed by a merger of four hospitals: North Manchester Hospital, where we worked; the Royal Oldham Hospital; Fairfield General Hospital in Bury; and Rochdale Infirmary. Inevitably, as happens in a merger of that kind, services were rationalised across the four sites, with the main pathology lab where we worked relocated to the Royal Oldham Hospital.

My colleague had a great deal of difficulty with the relocation because of the extra traveling time and because she would no longer be working near her home. She was in constant pain and was just about managing to hold down a job working close to her home, without the added stress and pain of traveling an extra 14 miles every day. Sadly, her manager was unsympathetic and seemed to have difficulty in recognising that she suffered from an extremely debilitating condition. No concessions at all were made for her condition, and she was forced to make the move, which caused her additional pain.

Had fibromyalgia been recognised as a disability, the NHS, as my colleague's employer, would have been obliged by law, under the Equality Act, to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate her condition and keep

her in work. That could have involved allowing her to work shorter hours, allowing for extra rest breaks or even finding her alternative work on the North Manchester Hospital site so that she did not have to travel. Her case emphasises why it is so important that fibromyalgia is recognised as a disability; so that it becomes legally incumbent on employers to make reasonable adjustments.

Sadly, that person is not alone. I have had at least one constituent who has had to leave her job because of this condition. Louise-Ann Wilshaw contacted me last week and asked me to attend this debate. She told me that she had had a very tough year being off sick from work and eventually having to resign because of the debilitating effects of the condition. At just 45 years old, she says that her future seems very bleak. She is uncertain whether she will ever work again. She is also struggling with accepting and learning to cope with her illness and having to support herself financially. Illustrating the effects of her illness on memory and concentration—the fibro-fog, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) referred—she finished her email to me by apologising for any spelling mistakes that she might have made.

Many of those who have to leave work because of their experience of fibromyalgia often have trouble accessing the relevant benefits. Assessment for ESA and PIP depends not on a person being diagnosed with a particular health condition or disability, but on how their health condition or disability affects what they can and cannot do, as determined by a work capability assessment or PIP assessment. We need to do more to support those affected by fibromyalgia. For many, acknowledging their disability as a disability would be a great start.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. I call Andrea Jenkyns, who has a four-minute advisory time limit. After her speech I will impose a three-minute time limit.

10.1 am

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey.

I cannot remember a day without pain in more than 15 years. When I was first diagnosed with fibromyalgia, it was less understood than it is today. We have come on in leaps and bounds. Fifteen years ago, it was felt to be very much a condition in someone's head, but it is much more widely understood today, so we are moving in the right direction. I thank the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) for securing the debate, which is important not only to raise awareness but to ensure that we get more research in this area.

I shall speak briefly about what it is like, on a daily basis, to live with this condition and then say a little about the current legislation and what I think could be done to help sufferers a lot more. The hon. Gentleman discussed some of the symptoms. The widespread pain is one of the worst things. I am talking about waking up in the morning and being bent over with pain. You feel like you are 80 because every muscle in your body is in pain, and that continues throughout the day. I have found that the medication provided really zonks me out. It causes me to have even more memory lapses, which in our profession is not good. You do not want to be feeling sleepy all the time.

It is a good job that I have kept my sense of humour about this. I remember one occasion back in 2015, when I was newly elected and a guest on one of the political programmes. Even to this day—three years on from being elected—I get very nervous when I know that I have to speak in a debate or do a media appearance, because I never know when the fibro-fog is going to come on. I remember that during that political programme, I could not think of a word as basic as “economy”, and what other word is there for economy? I do not know whether anybody else can think of one. So I was there, with the cameras on me, and I just wanted the ground to open up and swallow me, but I just laughed it off and dealt with it.

On another occasion, I was at a supermarket, unloading everything at the till—I had a whole week's worth of shopping and baby stuff—and I completely forgot my PIN. The way I have dealt with that problem since is that, just as in “Who Wants to be a Millionaire?” you can phone a friend, I phone my mum, when I have that memory lapse, to remind me of my PINs.

Joking aside, the lack of sleep is an issue as well. Last night I had three hours' sleep, and that is a regular occurrence. But I feel very lucky. My sister has multiple sclerosis. She is only 10 years older than me and is blind in one eye and losing the sight in her other eye, but she is a real trooper and runs her own business. I do think that the way we approach things in life can help. I am very lucky, in that I do not suffer with the depression side of fibromyalgia, and I think that is a real crux of it, so I would like to ask for more support for the depression elements of it. What I find is that each day is a struggle. I just keep focused and keep busy; I am probably living off adrenaline. When you get home in the evening, you collapse into bed and then, when you stop blocking it out, you realise what pain you were in. Then there is that vicious circle of lack of sleep and the cycle begins again. The fibro-fog, extreme tiredness, extreme pain and trouble remembering things are the big things for me.

Trauma can bring the condition on. I think that when I lost my dad, that made the situation worse. As the hon. Member for Chesterfield rightly said, stress can make things much worse. I had a constituent who lost two young babies to cancer. That is how her condition was brought on, and she has struggled since.

I shall wrap up by saying this. There is provision under the Equality Act 2010, but it is on a case-by-basis. I think that is right, because everybody is different, but we need to ensure that fibromyalgia is more recognised and that there is greater support, better medication, which does not zone people out, and better support for depression. Also, the physical treatment is not just about physiotherapy; deep tissue massage is brilliant, but people cannot get that on the NHS. Could my hon. Friend the Minister look at such things, please?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. I will now impose a three-minute time limit.

10.6 am

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): This condition, as we all agree, is not widely known about or understood. Often those living with it feel that

[Patricia Gibson]

they are drowning in despair and their loved ones are at a loss as to how best to support them. It is believed that up to 2 million people in the UK live with the condition. The true causes of it have not been established, but it is thought to be related to abnormal levels of certain chemicals in the brain and changes in the way the central nervous system processes pain messages carried around the body. It is also thought that there may be a genetic predisposition. In many cases the condition appears to be triggered by a physically or emotionally stressful event. There is no cure, although there are some treatments that can ease the effects.

I pay tribute at this juncture to the very important self-help groups in my constituency that help sufferers with this condition. There is no denying that it is a complex condition and there is a genuine lack of societal recognition of it. It is a truly disabling condition and must be treated and recognised as such for those seeking support from our welfare system.

Consultations undertaken by the Scottish Government show that current PIP assessments are simply not fit for purpose for those with fluctuating conditions such as fibromyalgia. Where conditions involve symptoms that fluctuate and vary, an effective assessment of illness must be flexible to take account of that. The problem is that disability assessments in the current UK welfare system are tick-box exercises, so the answers need to be yes or no even when complex, fluctuating and distressing conditions are being assessed. How can the assessment of such a condition truly be conducted in that way and still be meaningful? Clearly, simply ticking boxes cannot capture the distress, trauma and debilitation of such a complex condition. However, those living with this disease must subject themselves to that process in order to access essential support.

We need a welfare system that fully understands what those with this condition endure every single day as they struggle with everyday tasks that the rest of us take for granted. We need to ensure that the lives that they are living are reflected in the support they receive. That is the right thing to do, so I urge the Minister to put those laudable aims in motion without any further delay. Any further delay will mean greater suffering for those affected and their families, which ought to shame us all.

10.9 am

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) on securing this debate.

I have an interest to declare: my wife is a fibromyalgia sufferer. I want to talk primarily about her experience of the condition. Perhaps the hardest symptoms to understand are the ones that we cannot see. The fatigue literally wipes her out for days at a time. There is also the pain: to the outside world she looks okay, but underneath she is suffering. In her own words, she said:

"I do experience various aches and pains. These can differ from aching muscles to painful joints, especially knees and ankles; tenderness all over my skin like I'm covered in a thousand small but painful bruises; and sometimes it feels as if every bone in my body is burning."

Of course, I just want to give her a hug, but doing that makes her wince. It is so frustrating knowing that I cannot help.

My wife considers the cognitive challenges—the "brain fog", as she calls it—the most irritating symptom. She also said:

"Sleeping does not come easily. It is very difficult to get to sleep and when I fall asleep, I wake up within minutes."

There is not enough time to go through all the symptoms, but we have heard about many of them today. The biggest thing I would like the Government to take away from today is the experience we had in getting diagnosis and treatment. My wife said:

"When I was first diagnosed with fibromyalgia, three years ago, I was actually quite relieved...I knew things were getting worse. Despite numerous tests, there seemed to be nothing wrong with me."

I recall multiple visits to my doctors where I would tell them how exhausted I felt and they told me that I was probably depressed—that being a working mum with three kids was tiring and difficult."

Hearing that just made her despair.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): On that point, my constituent James wrote to me saying that a lot of medical professionals look at him as if the condition does not exist, and that the worst part is that nobody understands it and it is not recognised. He got zero support. He suffers from physical depression. The antidepressants do not work and he cannot get the support or the treatment that he needs from the NHS.

Justin Madders: That is exactly the experience that we have had and so many other hon. Members' constituents have had. Speaking about how she felt before she got her diagnosis, my wife said:

"Sometimes, just having a bath would wear me out. I spent most weekends in bed or on the sofa...I just had no energy to move. I couldn't do stuff with my children or even cook dinner. And I couldn't understand why I felt like this. I knew other people got tired, but they still managed to live their lives. And so I thought I must just be lazy or completely lacking in any self-control...So when I was finally given my diagnosis, I was pleased that it wasn't just me making it all up. It was not all in my head or character flaws leading to laziness and ill-discipline. I was and am actually ill. This is something beyond my control. And although it might be unfortunate, at least I now knew what it was."

I was relieved as well. I knew that something was wrong, but I did not know what. On reflection, I think we both realised that she probably had the condition for years and all the time it was getting worse. We knew something was wrong, but we felt that nobody was listening.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): The most shocking thing about fibromyalgia is that it mostly affects women—seven women to one man. My constituent came to visit me on Sunday at a surgery and she has just emailed me now to say that after that five-minute meeting it has taken her until today to recover. Does my hon. Friend agree that we cannot continue to ignore this?

Justin Madders: That is certainly something I recognise. My wife tries to live by pacing herself. That is the only way she can manage her condition. She knows it is a lot worse in winter than in summer and it will flare up if she over-exerts herself. She can save energy for specific

occasions, for example a conference, work or an evening out, but no matter how much she plans, it can catch her out. She will be too exhausted or in too much pain to meet a deadline or go to a meeting. She ends up giving her apologies and feels that she is unreliable. She has practically given up trying to plan social things in advance. It is incredibly frustrating.

Unless more research can be done into this condition and more awareness raised among the medical profession and employers, fibromyalgia sufferers will continue to be disadvantaged by more than just their symptoms. For us, this is not just about how fibromyalgia is classified under the Equality Act 2010, but, in common with many recurring and fluctuating conditions, about how people with these conditions are treated and supported. There needs to be much more research into the condition alongside consistent treatment pathways, with better training for medical professionals to recognise and then treat the symptoms.

Services should be in place to support fibromyalgia sufferers to enable them to live their lives as fully as possible. It has taken my wife two years, at her insistence, to be referred to a pain management clinic. A year on, she is still waiting to be seen. All the time she is suffering and her condition is deteriorating. I hate what this condition has done to my wife and our family. It is so frustrating not being able to help her make the pain go away, not being able to help her find a way for her to live her life as she should. It is so frustrating that there appears to be no hope on the horizon that things will get any better soon.

10.14 am

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Diolch yn fawr, Mr Bailey. My wife is also a sufferer of fibromyalgia. I asked her if she wanted me to make a speech publicly declaring her condition and she was eager for me to do so, because one of the biggest feelings felt by fibromyalgia sufferers is helplessness.

My wife was recently diagnosed, but she has been suffering from the symptoms for five years. The trigger event was the birth of our second child—giving birth is of course a very physical, traumatic experience—and she has suffered since that day. It is a terrible, life-long condition, once it catches hold of an individual. Chronic pain is the main characteristic of the condition, as we heard from an actual sufferer, the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns). The pain is constant, but the condition flares. The flares can last for weeks. The symptoms then are extremely severe—there is no reprieve.

Chronic pain is always associated with chronic fatigue, because sufferers cannot sleep and find themselves in a vicious cycle. The other main condition is hypervigilance, and sensitivity to noise and sound. My wife has gone from living a very active lifestyle to now living minute by minute, which has a huge impact on her social life and our ability to enjoy a family life. It is life-changing.

The medical pathway is extremely convoluted. There is a lack of awareness at not only primary care, but secondary care. My wife has been fortunate to be referred to the Royal National Hospital for Rheumatic Diseases in Bath, but she is at the start of a very long waiting list, five years after being diagnosed. There is a huge amount

of work to do in Wales, where health is devolved, for us to improve pathways for people who suffer from this condition.

Before special care is provided, treatment is based on the painkiller continuum—different painkillers of different strengths—and then also different antidepressants, which have their own very serious side effects. The major symptoms are fatigue, widespread pain, joint aches, migraines, carpal tunnel, drug resistance, sweating hands and feet, slurred speech, light sensitivity, noise sensitivity, memory loss, food intolerances, irritable bowel syndrome, lower tolerance of physical activity, non-restorative sleep, confusion, anxiety, depression, hearing problems, menstrual issues and chemical sensitivity.

I wanted to say far more about the process of us helping these people, but there is insufficient time. These are very sick people. The health systems and the social security system that we have within the British state at the moment offer little support.

10.17 am

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) on securing the debate.

I am here today because Julie Britten, my constituent from the Bath fibro group, came to see me a couple of weeks ago with her partner and very movingly described what fibromyalgia is. We have heard today from two hon. Members whose wives are suffering from the condition. We need to listen to the carers, too, because they feel as helpless, if not more, to see a loved one suffering. They also suffer from the fact that a lot of people, because they do not understand what fibromyalgia is, suggest that it is made up. Suddenly something has changed in their family member and they do not really understand why. That helplessness is one of the most painful things that the sufferers themselves and the carers who live with loved ones have to put up with.

We have already heard a number of points about the condition. As was mentioned, in Bath we have an excellent facility, the Royal National Hospital for Rheumatic Disease, previously known as the Royal Mineral Water Hospital. It is a very old hospital, locally known as “the Min”. Again, because it is not a rheumatic condition, but far more complicated, we need to find facilities where we can directly address fibromyalgia as a disease, rather than tiptoeing around what it is. The main difficulty is that the pain that people with fibromyalgia feel is not directly caused by damage or injury to the area that hurts. Instead, as I understand it, the problem lies in how the brain and the nervous system process pain from that area, so it is complicated.

Fibromyalgia is recognised in the Equality Act 2010 as a disability and an invisible illness, but again, because of the uncertainty, the most important thing that we in this place can do is push for more research and funding for research into the condition. That is at the heart of ending the uncertainty.

Hon. Members may know that I am working on eating disorders, and a similar picture has emerged on a couple of occasions. People do not understand fibromyalgia, which leads to stigma, and our rules and regulations do not fit with it. We need more funding to get to the bottom of what fibromyalgia really is and understand

[Wera Hobhouse]

it, so we can end the suffering not just of the people who feel that incredibly debilitating pain, but of their loved ones who also live with it and are affected by it. I ask the Minister to make sure that there is more funding for understanding fibromyalgia.

10.21 am

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): In three minutes, I cannot possibly do justice to the many emails I received from constituents; suffice it to say that I thank Lorraine Deacons, Ellie Woodburn, Caroline McGarvey, Geraldine Kennedy and Marie Christie, who all live in Glasgow East and are affected by fibromyalgia. I deeply regret that such a pathetic time limit means that I cannot read out their testimony—I am actually quite upset about that.

I will touch on a number of issues that were raised by charities. On training and education, there is clearly inconsistency among GPs and they need to come into alignment. We cannot have what seems to be a postcode lottery for some of our constituents. If they have a sympathetic GP, that makes all the difference.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

David Linden: No I will not, because of the time limit.

Work capability assessments are also a major issue. I understand that one charity worked up guidance with Maximus. I would be grateful if the Minister clarified whether that guidance has been cascaded through the Department for Work and Pensions for decision makers.

The issue of reasonable adjustments has been well covered, but there is a role for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to play. I hope the Minister can have conversations with her colleagues about that.

On alternative medicines, we all accept that patients know their bodies best, so it is important that we respect their wishes. That is a message to health practitioners.

Finally—because I want to show courtesy to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—a major concern that was raised with me was that social media platforms are hosting groups where misinformation is being perpetuated and where people are talking about suicide. Social media platforms have a real responsibility to get a grip on that.

As I say, I am conscious that many hon. Members want to speak in the debate and had the courtesy to put their names down. On that basis, I will stop talking and allow other hon. Members, who were here at the beginning of the debate, to contribute.

10.23 am

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) who has become a real hero for many people with fibromyalgia, because he has given them a voice. Ahead of the debate, I posted on Facebook to ask people to share their feelings and experiences with the people of Plymouth, because there

are many fibromyalgia sufferers there. The number of people who have got in touch is extraordinary. Among those people, the common view is that they want to be believed and supported. My hon. Friend's work has done much towards that. The suggestion of the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) about a fibromyalgia champion is a good one that has cross-party support.

It is important to say, and to say clearly, that fibromyalgia is real, that the pain is real, and that the people who suffer from it should be believed. That should not be controversial, but I am afraid it still is. The campaign to have it recognised as a disability is good and important. It would make such a difference to many people's lives to have that recognition.

Sarah wrote to me to say that,

"the pain is chronic and never goes away...Physically it started with the horrendous pain, constant viral infections, walking along and suddenly my legs would give way and I would end up lying in the road, being unable to change the gears in my car suddenly as I didn't have any feeling and being unable to function due to feeling so fatigued and having zero energy."

Among the people who got in touch, it was common to talk about how fibromyalgia rips away the ability to do things that many of us take for granted and how, in many cases, they did not understand why that happened and could not explain it clearly to people. The delays in diagnosis contribute to that suffering.

Fibromyalgia should be classified as a disability. That is a necessary step to dealing with the horrendous stigma around the disease and to directing the attention that people with fibromyalgia need to get the support they deserve.

The real-life stories I have heard from people in Plymouth were about not just their diagnosis and the health system, but how the DWP treated them, especially in their healthcare assessments. Our assessment system does not adequately understand the real-life experiences of many people with hidden illnesses, in particular fibromyalgia and ME, but also many more besides. It really needs to, because they are precisely the people who need support from our welfare system, but are not getting it.

One thing that all hon. Members can do is tackle the stigma around fibromyalgia, as we have done for ME and many other hidden illnesses. To do that, we need to talk about it, give a platform to those people who suffer from it, and recognise that we will not receive mass lobbies in Parliament about it, simply because coming to London—especially from Plymouth and further away—takes a lot of energy and knocks people out for weeks afterwards. We need to recognise that it is real and do something about it.

10.25 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) on securing the debate and other hon. Members who have made contributions in a restricted time. Without a doubt, the subject is worthy of a three-hour debate, as the number of hon. Members present indicates.

My introduction to fibromyalgia has come through my constituents in my position as a local representative, a councillor, a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly and now a Member of Parliament. My constituents

have told me about the sensation of being in pain and feeling ill. One lady said that her day-to-day life was having her sight affected and having no energy.

Clearly, my heart went out to that constituent, not simply because she has a difficult life, with days where she cannot get out of bed, eat or even really drink, or simply because she is young, but because I want her to get so much more out of life than a daily battle to do the things that most of us can do, such as showering and basic hygiene care, but that she cannot. The diagnosis of fibromyalgia will not automatically entitle her to the help that she needs, which is why the debate is so important. She will have to fight another battle to have her illness and needs recognised and accepted. We all know what the issues are.

The specific treatment for fibromyalgia syndrome is a multidisciplinary approach that includes physical rehabilitation, access to hydrotherapy, psychological support, behavioural therapy and education sessions. Alongside that, the European League Against Rheumatism's guidelines on the condition say that treatment should incorporate collaboration with a range of professionals, including pain specialists, psychologists, physiotherapists and occupational therapists. All that tells me how complex fibromyalgia is, with a lot of different departments managing a lot of different facets. It is little wonder, with respect to the Department and the Minister, of whom I am very fond, as she knows, that some people feel abandoned and alone in the middle of all of those people and departments. It is for them that we stand here today.

We want research and legislation. We need protection under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. I conclude with a comment from a lady, who says:

"I know a lady who is an absolute whirlwind when she is well. She could be in my office cheering everyone up with a winning smile and charming personality and literally an hour later, she is wiped out and can't move for days at a time. To expect this lady to be able to attend job centres weekly for hour-long job interviews without understanding that she physically cannot do this is absolutely absurd and yet she is not automatically entitled to ESA and other helps. To believe that she will"—

by some miracle—

"be able to attend her PIP assessment on a certain day is a nonsense and yet she faces losing PIP if she doesn't present herself to be assessed."

It is because of people like her, and all those people who live a life of darkness and pain, who battle to live, to eat and to turn their lights on, that this debate is important.

10.29 am

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) on securing the debate and on his efforts to ensure greater recognition, research and understanding of fibromyalgia through the mechanisms of the House. I am only sorry that the debate is in Westminster Hall, where the amount of time is so compressed, and that, because of the structures of this place, most hon. Members have had less than three minutes to say what they wanted.

I will try my best to say as much as I can in the limited time I have, but many constituents who have written to me will not be given a fair hearing, which is unfortunate. I know Brexit is going on today and that is important in its own right, but this is equally important to my

constituents and it impacts on their lives. I do not think that we are doing them any justice with the limited platform that we have.

As we have heard, fibromyalgia is a chronic condition with symptoms that can be constant or intermittent for years, or even a lifetime. Hon. Members of all parties have said that fibromyalgia can be difficult to diagnose, because the nature of the conditions fluctuates and symptoms often vary. As various Members have said, it has a huge impact on loved ones. The personal contributions of the hon. Members for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) and for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), and the personal experience of the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns)—who called for the Government to recognise and support people, especially those experiencing depression—are really important.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) rightly called on the Government to recognise the condition as a disability and to look at the way that the Department for Work and Pensions system assesses it. The tick-box exercise is not flexible and does not recognise the impact of the condition. I share the frustration of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) that this platform does not do justice to the subject at all. It is unfortunate that limited speaking times have taken over the debate and a lot of people have not been able to say as much as they would have liked.

Many of those suffering from the condition continue to work. Many constituents who have contacted me are not solely reliant on the social security and welfare system of this Government. They continue to work and want to contribute. There is nothing more soul destroying than having a debilitating condition when all they want to do is go out and provide for their families.

When people are unable to work because of fibromyalgia, it is right that the social security system should help them. For many people, additional support from personal independence payments and other forms of support allows them to reduce their hours and manage their condition. Yet many people find, when it comes to reassessing and reapplying for support, that being seen to be self-managing or trying to manage their condition goes against them. The current process goes completely against trying to manage a condition and continue working. That is exactly what anyone would want to do, and hopefully any self-respecting member of this Government appreciates that these people are trying their best to hold jobs as well as manage their condition. The DWP system should not hold that against them.

I will take the limited time I have to give voice to my constituents. Vivian says:

"The problem is, I look okay on the outside. I can string sentences together. I also make eye contact in social situations, but the process itself is so degrading. Stress makes my fibromyalgia worse, meaning more pain for me and I can hardly move. I take as many painkillers and diazepam as I can to lower my pain to a point where I can move without looking sore. What makes me mad is the appeal board know how fibro affects people, yet still have these processes in place. Surely our system of benefits must shake-up if this is how people with genuine illnesses are treated?"

I hope that the Minister will take that on board.

The reality is that for someone to sit there with a form and tick boxes, and fit people into a condition that says they can make eye contact, do their make-up, walk a distance, is a degrading process. I do not think that is

[Angela Crawley]

something that we would want to go through ourselves, so why would we administer a process that puts other people through that, especially when we have the ability to change it? I do not think it is that hard to devise a process that fits the condition. Alter it slightly, vary it, create flexibility, but for God's sake do not have a system that degrades people further when many are already at their lowest point.

I do not believe that the Government are doing enough to support people who wish to return to work or self-manage their condition. Another constituent, Donna from Carlisle, recently decided to return to work on a part-time basis. She has had to adapt to her illness and, after two years of treatment, agreed to return to work. She works only mornings because she needs the afternoons to sleep, in order to manage her condition and look after her children in the evenings. She was claiming personal independence payment to allow her to work part-time and to supplement her earnings. However, Donna is currently in the process of challenging a refusal to be granted personal independence payment; the process assessor thought she did not need that additional support, because the tick-box exercise does not recognise her condition. The cut in the support that she receives from the disability element of the working tax credit and a council tax reduction means that her household budget is cut by £750 per month, which is more than she earns for working part-time. She still wants to continue to work. She feels she would be better off not working, but she continues to maintain her part-time job and to manage her condition because she has two young boys and she wants to set them an example. That is nothing short of admirable. This woman has gone through years and years of trying to get a diagnosis and a lot of personal stress and trauma in her life, yet she continues to work and give a prime example to her sons. I do not think anyone should be penalised for that.

William from Netherburn was forced to give up work because of the dramatic changes to his lifestyle. He has many other conditions on top of fibromyalgia. He is in constant pain, goes numb and has acute memory problems, yet he was awarded the lowest rate of care when moving from disability living allowance to personal independence payment. This is a flaw in part of the process of transitioning people from their legacy benefits. It is something that could have been altered. There have been countless debates about that in the House. Obviously, it is easy for the Opposition to criticise the Government, but we have given ample opportunity and made many suggestions about how to review, change and adapt the system. It cannot be that hard to adapt a system, even slightly, to recognise that it is not user-friendly for anyone with a condition.

A close friend, Emma Richmond, who I have known since I was 17, was one of the most lively, vivacious, bubbly people I have ever met, but in the last two years I have seen a huge change in her because of this condition. I want to use her words, not mine. She said:

"At the age of 30 I'm using a cane and find I'm losing my social life to pain. Every day I'm in pain and it has never let up. There are days when I can't get off the sofa due to the pain and fatigue. It's a debilitating condition. It's a humiliating condition. I get to the stage where I don't see why I'm here anymore. I fight to be normal every day. It's not like me to feel like giving up."

Emma, like others I have spoken about today, has a full-time job. She works for Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, of all Departments. They have been an understanding employer, which prompts the question that if a person who works for a Government Department can have that level of understanding and flexibility, why cannot an individual in society, who engages with other services and other Departments, have exactly the same flexibility and understanding? It seems highly hypocritical, but it shows it can be done—I believe it can be. The Government only have to make minor modifications and changes to the system to deliver the best services they can. With respect to the Minister, I know she always wants to do that.

I ask the Minister to discuss this with her colleagues in the Department and look at the many ways in which the initial assessments can be made fair for people with fibromyalgia and mental health issues to avoid them needing to go through the taxing and arduous appeals process. An appeals process that consistently overturns decisions is clearly flawed. I ask her to get to the root cause, and make the process fairer and more flexible, for my constituents and for my friend. I want to be able to ensure that they enjoy their lives as much as we all can.

10.38 am

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I am afraid that my stop clock has just died, so do help me with the time and bear with me as I will not be able to see a clock.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) on securing the debate. I think that all of us across the Chamber would agree that he has done an excellent job of raising the matter on behalf of his constituents and fibromyalgia sufferers across the UK. He made some powerful points. He talked about the desperate need for more research, stressing the point that although this debate is about the work of the Department for Work and Pensions, the subject crosses over into the work of the Department of Health and Social Care. I am sure that the Minister will take that forward and work with her colleagues in that Department on the issue.

My hon. Friend spoke about the impact that fibromyalgia has on sufferers, and how it affects all aspects of their everyday lives. We are focusing on social security matters, but there are also issues with work, as many colleagues have expressed today. Obviously, the huge challenges with access to social security should not go unnoticed. Many Members have made that point today, and I am sure that the Minister will address it when she responds.

Many hon. Members—some are no longer in the Chamber—made some really valid contributions and interventions. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) intervened to highlight the lack of understanding of the effect of fibromyalgia on day-to-day living and, in particular, on accessing social security. Members highlighted the challenges that fibromyalgia presents and the problems it brings, including in being assessed and qualifying for personal independence payment. My hon. Friend spoke about fibromyalgia being a fluctuating condition, which it is.

I agree with the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) that my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield is a champion for people with fibromyalgia; he has certainly brought it to my attention. My hon.

Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) shared her experience of cases of fibromyalgia and recognised the impact that the condition can have in the area of work.

I thank the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) for sharing her personal experiences, particularly in relation to memory and fibro-fog, as well as the fatigue that fibromyalgia causes. I commend her for being so open about the condition and for the way she is just getting on with life, as many people with a long-term disability do, including me.

I congratulate Adrienne, the constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield, as well as Fibromyalgia Action UK and Versus Arthritis, on all the work they are doing to raise awareness of the condition. Fibromyalgia was first recognised by the World Health Organisation back in the 1970s, and we know that in the UK up to 2 million people are affected by it and that as many as one in 20 people suffer from it. Yet it remains a condition that is still often unrecognised, under-diagnosed and, in many cases, totally invisible.

As we have heard, the symptoms associated with fibromyalgia include widespread pain across the entire body. In the words of one sufferer, it is a

“generalised pain that can be anything from a shooting pain in my arms, hands, fingers, legs, feet, toes, back and shoulders.”

It can also cause headaches. Another sufferer has said:

“Sometimes it feels like I’m hitting a brick wall...I get irritated easily and am quick to get frustrated and angry”.

The symptoms include an increased sensitivity to pain, fatigue and difficulties in sleeping. There are often also problems with memory and concentration, which is sometimes known as fibro-fog. Many Members mentioned those problems today.

For those who suffer from fibromyalgia, the symptoms are life-altering and the pain they experience is very real, but to the rest of the world—including the general population—the condition can sometimes seem invisible. We also know that many healthcare professionals find it extremely difficult to diagnose fibromyalgia, which helps explain why it is only on a case-by-case basis that the condition is recognised under the Equality Act. Many people face constantly having to go back to get diagnosed, making visit after visit to their GP practice, and the fact that the condition has many different symptoms relating to different areas of the body makes it even more challenging for sufferers.

There is no specific diagnostic test for fibromyalgia. Instead, there have been many accounts of sufferers facing years of referrals, MRI scans and so forth. Even if people are diagnosed with the condition, they are forced to wait for months, if not years, to receive treatment. Many hon. Members spoke about the urgent need for more research. One hon. Member—I am not sure whether they are still here—mentioned the research taking place in Sweden and the US, and called on the Minister to look again at how we can commit to more research into fibromyalgia, because we know that the condition affects so many people.

We know that there are many difficulties in diagnosing fibromyalgia. In response to the petition that my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield presented last April, the Government pointed towards the National Institute for Health Research. However, we know that fibromyalgia affects all aspects of life, so I will now turn to the

impact it can have on employment. Fibromyalgia sufferers face difficulties in being able to stay in work and in getting the right support while they are in work. We know that the disability employment gap has remained at 30% over the last year. However, one of the best employment support programmes is the Access to Work programme. It ensures that those who suffer from fibromyalgia are actually aware of the programme, but it also raises awareness of its work among employers, because it can be a valuable resource for employers making reasonable adjustments for employees and for sufferers. Many sufferers want to stay in work and can stay in work. I will continue to press the Minister to ensure that the Access to Work programme is adequately funded, so that more funding is available for those suffering from fibromyalgia.

We have heard many accounts from many Members today that show that it is not only employment but social security that is a huge problem for people suffering from fibromyalgia. We know that 3% of PIP claimants have fibromyalgia, of whom the vast majority are women. Assessments for PIP are carried out by private companies, and in some cases they have insufficient knowledge of fibromyalgia and the impact it has on daily life, because it is one of the “invisible” conditions. That is really important.

We know that the framework for the current assessment process, not only for PIP but for employment and support allowance, is flawed. Fibromyalgia, because it is a fluctuating condition, is not being picked up in PIP assessments, and we know that the assessment framework is failing far too many people. That presents challenges for sufferers when it comes to accessing that essential additional payment, which contributes towards meeting the extra costs of living with fibromyalgia. I say to the Minister again that we must listen to all the testimonies about how PIP affects people and we must recognise that the assessment framework is not fit for purpose. She must commit to reviewing it.

Finally, I will talk briefly about the Equality Act. Because of my own disability, I come under it, and there is no reason why fibromyalgia cannot also be seen as a disability under it. We know that fibromyalgia is assessed on a case-by-case basis, but in the future it is fundamental that the Act begins to recognise the impact that fibromyalgia has on people’s daily lives.

10.48 am

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Bailey. I begin by paying tribute to Adrienne, who I believe is with us today in the Public Gallery. It is through her persistence and determination to use the mechanism of petitioning Parliament that we are here in Westminster Hall today. It is a really good example of how people all around our country can ensure that their voices are heard in this place, so I congratulate her on that.

I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins), because he picked up on that opportunity and worked with his constituent. I am very pleased to say, as my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) and everybody else has done, that the hon. Member for Chesterfield is a champion. It is great that he has championed this cause, raised awareness

[Sarah Newton]

of the issue and made sure that all of our public services are doing everything they can to help people with fibromyalgia, because we have heard today how absolutely debilitating the condition can be and how many people it affects.

Today has been a really good opportunity to build on the work that has been done with the petition and have this debate. I share the frustration that so many people have mentioned that we do not have time to address all the issues that have been raised and hear from the many people who have written to Members across the House because they want their individual voice to be heard.

Before this debate, I extended an invitation to the hon. Member for Chesterfield to bring his constituent into the Department. What we are discussing is a cross-Government issue; it affects the Equalities Office, which is the custodian of the Equality Act 2010. There has been much discussion about what more we can do about health services and research, so I will ensure that, along with me as Minister responsible for the main disability benefits, we have Ministers from the relevant Departments at a roundtable and summit, so that we can properly work with the information that has been provided today and with the great organisations that are undertaking research and standing up for those with fibromyalgia.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns), and to the wonderful husbands who have spoken about wives who are suffering. It is brave of Members of Parliament to stand up and talk so personally about situations that have such a detrimental impact on them. It is difficult for MPs to admit to any sort of weakness; we live in fear of our constituents thinking less of us for expressing that we have a condition or disability that might be perceived as a weakness. However, it is vital that people with disabilities and health conditions are in this place, because they have an important role to play in society. I am absolutely determined to ensure that we have a society in which we focus on what people can do rather than on what they cannot, and in which they are supported to reach their full potential.

I will now draw on some of the points I have been asked to raise. On the support in the health service, we have heard that it is clearly too intermittent. I know that there are good examples; colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care have told me that there are bespoke services for people with fibromyalgia, but we have heard from colleagues today that it is too much of a postcode lottery and that the services are not consistent. That stems from the fact, which has been recognised today, that it is a difficult condition to diagnose. Because the way in which fibromyalgia manifests is unique to each person, general practitioners want to ensure that they rule out the possibility of other conditions. We have heard so powerfully today that no two people are the same, so GPs, in the absence of a diagnostic tool, need to explore many different avenues before they can get to a diagnosis of fibromyalgia.

Justin Madders It is not just about the postcode lottery. Many GPs do not really know about the condition, and we need to get more understanding out there. My wife saw a number of doctors before she got a diagnosis.

Also, her experience of gaining specialist help to access the pain clinic, which hopefully she will do later this year, was that she had to be referred to a rheumatologist to get a diagnosis and then was referred back to the GP, to refer her on to the clinic. That is a pretty inefficient way of doing things.

Sarah Newton: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point, but I understand that to help GPs the Royal College of General Practitioners and Arthritis Research UK have developed an e-learning course on musculoskeletal care, which includes fibromyalgia and is free to all healthcare professionals. It aims to improve core skills in diagnosing and managing any musculoskeletal condition. A medical guide on diagnosis and treatment has also been developed by the Fibromyalgia Association UK, and a mandatory core component of all GPs' training is an applied knowledge test. This AKT is a summative assessment of the knowledge base that underpins independent general practice in the UK, within the context of the NHS. The content guide for the Royal College of General Practitioners, which serves to prepare trainees for the test, includes specific reference to a required knowledge of fibromyalgia. Clearly, therefore, there is now a consistent attempt to ensure that GPs going through training and coming into general practice have a much better understanding of how to diagnose and treat fibromyalgia than we have seen hitherto.

Sandy Martin: Fibromyalgia affects one in 20 women, so it seems bizarre that so many GPs still do not know about it. Training for incoming GPs is clearly effective, and needs to be so, but an awful lot of GPs still possibly need retraining. Fibromyalgia is not the only such condition. An awful lot of GPs have never heard of endometriosis, for instance, which affects one in 10 women. Ought we not to have a system in which GPs are regularly trained in these additional diseases and conditions that affect so many?

Sarah Newton: The hon. Gentleman is right. There are so many conditions that we are beginning to understand, as more research and information comes forward, and continuous education for GPs is vital. I understand from the Department of Health and Social Care that such education is ongoing and that there is free learning material for GPs on fibromyalgia.

Wera Hobhouse: Will the Minister give way?

Sarah Newton: I am really tempted to give way to lots of colleagues, but the more I do the less time I have to address the issues that have already been raised. I have taken a number of interventions, but as the clock is against me I will now press on and try to address as many of those issues as possible, bearing in mind that there will be a follow-up meeting and, as always, I will write to those Members whose particular concerns I do not address in my few remaining minutes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West invited me to invest. We clearly have long-term investment in the NHS, and plans for significant extra investment over the next 10 years have recently been communicated, with a disproportionate amount going into primary care and community services. Since each person is affected in such different ways, the pathway and range of care that people need will largely be co-ordinated in the

community, with GPs. The new investment gives us hope, but alongside it we need to ensure that there is both education and training, and improved pathways. The one message I have heard clearly today—I know this from cases in my own constituency, of working with women affected by fibromyalgia—is that people are ping-ponged around the system, between physical and mental health services, with no joined-up care pathway. With so many other chronic conditions, the NHS has got so much better at having evidence-based pathways, so that once people have their diagnosis they understand the pathway they are on, and those who are able to support them know what support is available.

We need to take away and work on so much more from this debate. As many Members have said, it is about getting the ball rolling, ensuring that voices are heard loud and clear, and that we work across Government and the House to improve the quality of life of people with fibromyalgia.

On the benefits system, I want to assure people that fibromyalgia is recognised as a disability under the 2010 Act. It is really important for people to understand that. We have heard today that no two people are affected in the same way, so it is important that we have a person-centred approach to providing support, whether that is encouraging employers to be more aware of fibromyalgia and of the reasonable adjustments they need to make to enable people to stay in work, or looking at how the benefit system supports people.

The benefits system uses a person-centred approach, and I can absolutely reassure Members that the healthcare professionals who undertake the work capability assessments for the employment and support allowance, which is the income replacement benefit for people who cannot work, and the assessment providers for the personal independence payment, or PIP, which is a non-means-tested benefit for people both in work and out of work, have had training in fibromyalgia. A lot of that has been done in the past year, in association with voluntary sector organisations that have provided support. Members will know, because we are often in debates about improving PIP, that I am absolutely determined to ensure that we make the improvements to which we have already committed, so that everyone has access to the support they deserve.

10.59 am

Toby Perkins: When Members secure a debate, they always worry about whether they will fill the time, so it is great that this has been one of those debates that could have filled twice as much time. It is hard to pick out any particular contributions, but what the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) said was particularly compelling and, as the Minister said, the contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) and the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) about the impact on families were also powerful. We will take the Minister up on her generous offer. Thank you.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the recognition of fibromyalgia as a disability.

Pubs: Business Rates

11 am

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of business rates on pubs.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey, and I am happy to have secured this important debate. Pubs, particularly our historic, independent pubs, add vibrancy and attractiveness to our high streets. They support tourism, help to encourage footfall and add hugely to our local economy. They are the lifeblood of my constituency and, I am sure, of many others. Pubs in St Albans generate over £40 million a year for our local economy; the industry employs 1,600 local people and pays around £20 million a year in wages. In St Albans and Herefordshire, we are net contributors to the Chancellor's coffers. My constituents, particularly businesses in my constituency, are the Chancellor's golden goose, and he therefore needs to listen carefully to ensure that that golden goose thrives.

I have been contacted by many local pub owners since this debate was announced, who have all shared with me their frustrations and concerns about the impact that business rates have had on their businesses. They are under huge pressure. The Government were absolutely right to target business rates as a way of helping small businesses, pubs and the high street as a whole, and the cut of 33% in rates for businesses with a rateable value of under £51,000 is a major step in the right direction. However, in some areas such as St Albans, that rate reform is not having the positive impact that the Chancellor was aiming for. Many landlords expressed the view that the new business rate formula, designed to help pubs, has had a perverse result, with a hike in business rates for their pubs. That hike could mean that they have to cut staff numbers, or even worse, close their businesses altogether.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I fully understand the point that my hon. Friend is making about business rates. I wonder whether she has calculated how much of the problem that pubs have is due to a change in drinking habits and why we go to pubs, and how much of it is actually due to business rates.

Mrs Main: I have not calculated that, but if my hon. Friend waits for the rest of my speech, he will hear how the huge hikes in business rates mean that pubs would have to sell so many extra drinks that they cannot possibly make up for those hikes. The fact that some people are declining to go to our pubs is one issue, but I am talking about successful, thriving pubs.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing this issue to Westminster Hall for consideration, and I support her entirely. With some small pubs experiencing a rate increase of some 80%, does she agree that we are at risk of losing the independent retailer—the one who takes the keys off the customer and will ring somebody to come and get them, and says when enough is enough? Does she further agree that this is something that is not provided by the off-licence or the supermarket chain, and that society will lose out if we lose the restraining hand of those small local pubs?

Mrs Main: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. Indeed yesterday, I took some representatives of pubs to meet the Minister with specific responsibility for this issue, and interestingly they were all from small independent pubs. The big pub chains can cross-subsidise in other areas if they are hit in this way; it is the small independent pubs, often run by one or two people who have put their lifeblood into those pubs, that are suffering. Those people are the ones whose voices need to be heard today. This cannot be the message that we are sending out as a Government. We must ensure that we are supporting small businesses, such as our smaller pubs, which drive our economy and play an important role in communities.

In high-value property areas such as St Albans, there is not a standard Government model that fits. The average house price stands at over £600,000: if a struggling business closes, it will quickly be snapped up by a property developer who sees it as a lucrative brownfield site ripe for housing, and often turned into an individual house or a pair of houses. That practice of turning commercial space into residential space is affecting businesses across St Albans with, for example, a staggering loss of office space over the past few years since the planning laws were changed. That is a double whammy for pubs. Businesses, particularly pubs, are struggling under the current system, and the new rate simply provides a cliff edge that penalises successful businesses in areas plagued by high property values. We must devise a system that helps all small businesses and pubs to thrive, not just the ones with low retail value.

The 2017 business rate formula for pubs uses a methodology for setting the rateable value based on a fair maintainable trade, which is a difficult phrase to interpret. The rateable value is driven mainly by the pub's turnover. The calculation also takes into account property valuations in the area, which means that even small pubs, such as many of the pubs in St Albans that have been hit the hardest, can have a high rateable value because the area they are in has high property values. Sadly, the current formula does not take into account the many models of pub ownership that are often used by landlords and owners. That formula effectively penalises small business operators through an arbitrary taxation system that significantly reduces any profits a pub landlord can make while trying to pay staff wages and other costs.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the hon. Lady for bringing this important debate before the House. We are at risk of losing our Glassford Inn, the only pub in its village, because of the issue that she has spoken about: the high rateable value of property in the area. It is the last business in the area, yet the rateable amount cannot be varied. Does the hon. Lady agree that this situation has to be changed to sustain these businesses over the long term?

Mrs Main: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady, because I do not believe that what she has described was the Government's intention. As I have said, the formula does not take into account the current models: some of these pubs are leasehold, and some are owned; there can be no bigger incentive to sell a pub than knowing it could be worth a heck of a lot more as a house than as a pub.

John Howell: Does my hon. Friend agree that there should be some business rate relief when a pub has been bought under the asset of community value scheme?

Mrs Main: Actually, we have tried to save pubs under the asset of community value scheme, and we have not been successful in St Albans, because the developer wins every time. I can see the point that my hon. Friend is making, but I am not going to take a diversion down too many tracks about the price of beer and community assets. Pubs and businesses in my constituency want a fair system that does not, as the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) has said, discriminate against a business because it is located in a high-value area.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): I completely agree with my hon. Friend regarding high-value areas. The Old Griffin Head pub in Gildersome in my constituency has business rates of over £21,000—that is in a little village. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is an extortionate amount of money, and that it is no wonder that 21 pubs are closing every week in the UK?

Mrs Main: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, and that is why I think the Government need to hear why their best intentions have not hit the mark. As I was saying, and as the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow has described, pubs want a system that does not discriminate against businesses because they are in high-value areas. That is especially the case when they see a neighbouring, lacklustre pub—and by “neighbouring”, I mean literally three doors down in my constituency—that seems to have either had poor management or low investment, but perversely has benefited from a rate cut. How is that for a trading market? Hard-working landlords of successful pubs are penalised for their strong personal investment; they are enduring eye-watering rate hikes for their trouble.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow mentioned high rates in her area; I suspect that anyone who comes to St Albans will take a deep gulp. This is not what they expect from a Conservative Government, or any Government, especially one that has recognised the pressures our pubs are under and tried to help. I accept that, as I was told yesterday, the formula potentially has helped up to 90% of pubs nationwide, but it only benefits 60% of pubs in St Albans, and for some of them, the benefit is only marginal. That leaves many of the small, independent pubs that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) referred to facing massive hikes. The formula must be revised. The current methodology for pubs and the high tax-rate multiplier are barriers to new investment in small businesses and pubs, and we have to tackle that issue and find a fairer formula.

In November, I visited several pubs in St Albans—I think it was 10; that is how easy it is to walk around the pubs in St Albans—that are being hit the hardest by these rate increases. The campaign group, Save St Albans Pubs, took me on a tour of the pubs that face huge increases because of the system.

One of the pubs I visited recently, The Boot, is a tiny heritage pub that, as has been pointed out, will have to sell an additional 22,000 pints to cover the additional £51,000 in business rates that it now has to pay. That is a 280% rate increase, which is unsustainable and unfair.

Mr Christo Tofalli of Ye Olde Fighting Cocks told me that unless we have proper reform and relevant taxes, licensing laws and duty costs, his pub is finished. He speaks from experience because he has already come in and pulled the Fighting Cocks back from being closed under a former owner and not trading. He has invested considerable money and effort in the pub since then and has turned a closed, failed business that was an eyesore in St Albans into a successful pub that is an asset. However, under the new model, his taxes and rates have gone up to such an extent that he is now personally funding his pub to keep it open. Who would run a business like that?

Ye Olde Fighting Cocks has seen an increase in its rates of 66%, or £33,000. I hope the Minister will appreciate that that is an enormous increase for any pub owner to cope with and it does not show the level of support that the Government said was needed for small businesses.

The Six Bells, another great pub in my constituency that I visited on my tour, had an increase of 87% in its business rates: £31,000 a year. It has 1,000 square feet of operational space, which is smaller than many people's homes. It exists in a neighbourhood where the average residential property is valued at more than £1 million. It is vulnerable to property developers wanting to move in, as they did recently with The Blue Anchor, which was located in a similar area and has now turned into a house. As Alan Oliver of The Six Bells said in his letter to me, he simply wants a level playing field for his business. It could take up to three years for Mr Oliver to appeal the unfair rate revaluation system. Meanwhile, he faces enormous penalties. He told me:

"If we put our prices up our customers will go to the pub next door which has the same size and offering but which has not had a rate increase."

How unfair is that in the trading environment that we tried to achieve? No wonder he feels hung out to dry.

The landlord of the White Hart Tap also wrote to me and said that he risked losing customers if he put his prices up. He, too, has invested significantly in his business, a small heritage pub. When all costs are taken into account, his annual pre-tax profits are £24,000, which results in £12,000 each for him and his partner. They take no other salary. Many pubs operate with a business model that pays about £12,000 to £15,000. It is not sustainable. Those are just two examples. I have all their details and will send them to the Minister.

In fact, 30 of the 50 pubs in St Albans have seen a rate increase. Astonishingly, they need to sell around 180,000 more pints per year to cover those increases. The Blacksmiths Arms has had an 82% increase and The Beech House a 59% increase, meaning they pay £74,000. I invite the Minister to come and see those pubs, which are less than half the size of this room. Pubs in St Albans saw an average increase in rateable value of more than £27,000. That is a 56% increase in rateable value since the business rate reform. So far, 10% of pubs in St Albans have closed because of such pressures. Sadly, further closures are expected. I know the Minister talks to representatives from the industry, but I am concerned, as has been indicated, that he is not hearing the voice of small independent pubs such as The Boot.

CAMRA, which is based in my constituency, recently provided a comprehensive submission to the Chancellor ahead of the Budget in September. It has called for a

full review of the business rate system with regard to pubs. It maintains that the current system is not fit for purpose and a review is needed to tackle the unfair penalisation of property-based businesses like pubs, especially given the vastly reduced levels of taxation paid by online retailers. I hope CAMRA will engage with all the pubs I have mentioned today to ensure that everyone is singing from the same hymn sheet and that their voices are heard.

The British Beer and Pub Association has rightly pointed out that pubs pay 2.8% of the total rates bill, yet contribute only 0.5% of rate-paying business turnover. That is an overpayment potentially of £500 million. Not only are pubs hit hard by business rates, but many other shops on our high streets face similar rate hikes. Save St Albans Pubs, the campaigning group in my constituency, is calling for the 33% cut to apply to all pubs for the first £51,000 to prevent the cliff edge that I talked about. If there is an ambition to help all pubs—the Government believe 90% have been helped—why not help the other 10%? I seem to have a lot of them in my constituency and they are also in the constituency of the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow. Why not ensure that all pubs get the help that they need for a favourable trading environment?

I welcome the freeze on beer duty that was announced by the Chancellor. It will help pubs across the country, and it will certainly help many pubs where the margin is narrow, but it does not help to make up for the major hit on business rates that pubs in St Albans have to endure. As I have said, small pubs, particularly ones with 1,000 square feet of space, cannot possibly have enough people coming through their doors when they are already busy and trading to make up for the huge hike in rates. In the long term, Save St Albans Pubs is calling for a fundamental review of the business rates formula for small businesses, particularly pubs. It rightly points out that pubs are complex with various business models. It is not a one-size-fits-all tax. There are many examples, particularly in high-value areas, where property values drive up the rates, meaning pubs risk being closed.

The Government have rightly identified business rate cuts as a method to support our high streets and pubs. Now we must alter the system to make sure it works for all of them. I hope the Minister will take that on board. Time is running out for pubs. Three years to challenge a business rate is far too long. The whole idea of demonstrating a sustainable trading market is obviously not working. I hope the Minister will come to St Albans. I invite him—in fact, I demand he comes to do the same pub crawl that I did. Pub owners in my constituency would be delighted to welcome the Minister to their pubs so that they could show him their premises and tell him why the model has got to be altered in line with a fairer system that respects the heritage pubs that are the lifeblood of constituencies such as mine.

11.16 am

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) for securing the debate, and I do so for two reasons. First, this is an important matter; pubs lie at the heart of our local communities and the Government's view is that we should do whatever we

[*Mel Stride*]

can to assist and support them, although, as my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) pointed out, there are issues other than rates at play when one looks at the pressures that pubs are under. Secondly, I know that my hon. Friend is a strong campaigner on these matters, and this debate is yet another reflection upon the assiduous approach she takes to her duties as a Member of Parliament.

Undoubtedly there are great pressures on pubs, as we have heard. At the same time we should recognise that there are some rays of light in the overall story. The Office for National Statistics has published data showing that the number of larger pubs—those that employ 10 or more—has grown since 2011. In fact, we now have the largest number since 2011. If we look at the pub and bar sector in total, we see that employment has grown by some 6% since 2008, to 450,000 employees. That does not mean that pubs are not under pressure, as my hon. Friend set out at length and in detail, so the Government have taken action, and she has recognised the things that we have done.

For example, in the Budget last year we introduced a discount of one third to the business rates for retailers, including pubs and bars that have a rateable value below £51,000. I know that my hon. Friend's constituency is in a relatively high-value property area and that the discount will not have had the same impact as it has had on the estimated 90% of all pubs and bars across the country. The figure for her constituency is 63%, so it is certainly the case that the majority of the pubs in her constituency are at least entitled to the discount of one third that we announced.

Mrs Main: I encourage the Minister to come and see my pubs. Many of them are in historic listed buildings within a conservation area. They have small square footage and it is difficult to grow a business beyond the growth it has already seen. They are in areas where the house prices drive up their rates to an unsustainable level. I appreciate that some of the bigger ones—not the independent ones—have been helped, but I want to help all the pubs, and particularly the ones I have referred to.

Mel Stride: As I said, 63% of pubs and bars in my hon. Friend's constituency—typically those with lower rateable values, which probably correlates to the kind of pub she describes—will benefit from the one-third reduction that we announced in the Budget. That reduction will be worth about £900 million to the sector over the next two years. She also rightly referred to what we have done in freezing beer duty and spirit duty. In 2013 we withdrew the beer duty escalator, so the price of a pint is now some 14p less than it would have been otherwise, and we froze beer duty yet again in the last Budget. Across the country, around half of the income of pubs is driven by beer sales alone, so those are important measures. The further reliefs that we have been introducing come on the back of a great deal of activity, particularly since 2016. We have introduced a total of about £13 billion-worth of reliefs across the business rates terrain. That includes making 100% small business rates relief permanent, and doubling the threshold for small business rates relief in 2017.

My hon. Friend asked what we are doing for all the pubs in her constituency. That is a valid point. We have changed the uprating from the retail prices index to the consumer prices index. We initially announced that that would come in from 2020, but in the recent Budget it was brought forward by two years. That will lower the level of business rates right across the pub sector, irrespective of the size of the particular establishment. That is worth about £5 billion in additional relief over the next five years. We have doubled the level of rural rate relief to 100% from 2017.

My hon. Friend referred to specific examples of where there have been very large increases in rateable value—I think she quoted a figure in excess of 60% in one case. In 2017, at the time of the revaluation, we introduced the transitional relief scheme, which was worth some £3.6 billion of relief, to ensure that we smoothed out some of those increases. I would be happy to meet her at some point to look in detail at one or two of the examples she raised, which might be useful for us both. An increase in one year of more than 60%, given the transitional relief that would be available, would be on the high side, but I would be very interested to look at that with her in detail.

Dr Cameron: I thank the Minister for all the work that he is doing for the sector, which needs as much support as possible. Does he agree that it cannot be right that the rateable value of our Glassford Inn, for instance, is so high that even if it sold beer every night of the week to every single person in the village, it still could not pay the rates that have been set? Will he agree to look at that issue for me?

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. Of course, I am not familiar with that particular establishment—although I would probably like to be—or with its current trading conditions. My point is that a pub, or any business for that matter, will be under pressure for a variety of reasons—my hon. Friend the Member for Henley raised, for example, the change in drinking habits as one factor. Importantly, the Government have a responsibility on the tax front to ensure that we ease those pressures to the greatest extent that we can, while taking a balanced and responsible approach to the economy.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I want to raise the plight of some of the Gower pubs. Owing to the rural nature on the peninsula, many are closing and have great challenges ahead. As the Minister mentioned, those challenges are for a range of reasons, but several members of the community and I have set up a working party to address that. I look forward to informing the Minister of the good work that we will do.

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. I would be very interested in hearing from her and her working group when she is ready.

It is important to say that pubs are typically central to high streets. It is an issue not only of providing whatever support we can in terms of reliefs, many of which I have outlined, but of assisting high streets, and pubs as part of high streets, to evolve and transition. The high street is under a huge amount of pressure, not least through the online retail marketplace, which takes around 18% of all retail sales. A decade ago, it would have been a fraction of that.

The high street, and pubs at the heart of it, will therefore have to transition. That is why we made an important announcement in the Budget about the future high streets fund—£675 million to assist local areas to develop plans to ensure that they transition their high streets into a format that works more effectively. That includes the review being conducted at the moment into the change-of-use regime, and how it operates to allow certain businesses to change to different businesses, or to retail premises.

Mrs Main: May I ask the Minister in the few minutes that are left specifically to discuss anomalies such as fair maintainable trade—where the rates of one pub are hugely increased and those of another, which is not making so much investment and effort in the community, are cut? It cannot be right that businesses that are trying their best are penalised. Fair maintainable trade is an undeliverable anomaly, as is the fact that it takes three years to challenge the rates.

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend has astutely pre-empted my very next set of remarks, which relate to the fair maintainable trade approach to valuations. The British Beer and Pub Association has looked at that approach with us and is broadly comfortable with it. We recognised the importance of revaluations in the Budget. We have talked about bringing forward the next revaluation, and having more frequent revaluations so that we have fewer changes of a more dramatic nature.

On the way in which the system works, I think it is broadly a fair approach, because it does not take into account the actual value of the property; it recognises, however, the turnover that a pub can achieve if run appropriately. If a pub is extremely well run and is a very successful business, the Valuation Office Agency is not out to penalise the owners or tenants of that particular establishment in its valuations. There is an established check challenge appeal process through the VOA that can ultimately lead to an independent assessment of the VOA's decision.

I would like to discuss the three-year point that my hon. Friend raised with her after the debate. If there are cases where it is the fault of the VOA that we are not responding across that period of time—of course, there

are many reasons for delays that may come from either party—that would be of concern to me. With the VOA, we are in a position where the backlog of valuations, from when we had speculative valuations, before we changed the process, should all be cleared by September this year—and 1 million had to be gone through.

Mrs Main: I thank the Minister for making various offers to talk outside the debate. Of course, the debate is being watched hotly by people in my constituency and outside it. I ask that the Minister commits to coming to St Albans, because those conversations need to take place with the people who are running the businesses. They are beginning to think that whatever they say is not listened to. I would like him to come and put to them the same arguments that he might put to me. I am not that closely involved, and would be unable to reply in the way that they could, so please will he come to St Albans?

Mel Stride: The commitment that I will give my hon. Friend is that I would certainly be very happy to meet with publicans from her constituency, if she would like to arrange such a meeting. I have some very fond memories from many years ago of having many a very satisfying pint in Ye Olde Fighting Cocks. Perhaps we could discuss it afterwards. Whether I go on a pub crawl with her in her constituency is another matter, but I am certainly happy to meet her and the constituents to whom she refers.

Once again, I thank my hon. Friend for introducing this extremely important debate. She has once again ensured that it is very much at the forefront of the Government's agenda. I hope that she will accept that we have done a great deal in this area to do what we can. Of course, we keep all taxes under constant review, and I will certainly bear in mind her representations at future fiscal events.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Local Government Funding

[MR CHARLES WALKER *in the Chair*]

2.33 pm

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Colleagues, I am extremely sorry for disrespecting your very precious time. You can admonish me afterwards, one after the other—it is unforgivable. I hope that you accept my apology, but I will understand if you cannot.

2.34 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered local government funding.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I declare an interest as a vice-president of the Local Government Association, a superb organisation that fights for the interests of local government on many levels, delivering services, empowering communities and investing in our future.

The Government's obsession with austerity has targeted many areas of people's lives in the UK, but the largest proportion of cuts has fallen on local government. I applied for this debate in order to ask the Government to recognise the folly of that approach and truly end austerity. As a councillor and council cabinet member, I have experienced the cuts at first hand. I have taken part in extremely difficult budget discussions and decisions in the face of increasing demand, which itself has been brought about by other Government policies that have made life harder for my constituents. I have also worked with local communities to try to offset and alleviate the most damaging impacts of Government policies.

To achieve real co-operative change in transport, housing and economic growth, however, councils and local communities need to be given sufficient resources and power. Under this Government, the opposite has happened: local authorities have had to cut staff levels, scale back many non-statutory services and try to save money in other ways. After nine years of cuts, first from the coalition Government and then from the Conservative Government, I am glad to see that the Government have now managed to find more money: an extra £1.6 billion has been found for 2019-20 in comparison with the initial funding plans set in 2016.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Does she agree that on a day on which the House is debating Brexit, it is particularly galling that £4 billion is going into some sort of no-deal black hole while our children's centres, libraries and important council services are all desperately at risk?

Preet Kaur Gill: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Government can do it when they try—instead of wasting that money, which is the kind of money that local government absolutely needs right now.

I am sure the Minister will tell us that the extra £1.6 billion is a great success that shows that the Government are listening, but can he tell us why has it taken them so long to acknowledge the failure of their own funding plans? Before he says that everything is

going to be okay, let us look at some of the facts: 361 of Birmingham's 364 schools are facing cuts, almost a quarter of West Midlands police funding has been cut and, as a result of scything cuts since 2010, Birmingham City Council has lost £642 million from its annual budget and is expected to be forced to make further savings of £123 million per annum.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. Lewisham Council has had to make cuts of £165 million since 2010. Despite its best efforts, it now has to make difficult decisions about things like grants to the voluntary sector, libraries, street sweeping and lollipop people. Does she agree that central Government need to fund our councils properly so that they can serve the community properly?

Preet Kaur Gill: My hon. Friend rightly describes the plight of her council, and it is the same for many councils up and down the country. I hope that the Minister will really take stock of hon. Members' contributions today; it is great to see so many Members present to debate local government finance, which is such an important topic.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this significant debate. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) rightly says, Lewisham Council has experienced significant cuts since 2010. Those cuts have had an effect on our Lewisham population; social workers' caseloads have increased and we are seeing difficulties in securing beds for people with mental health problems. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) agree that the Government need to stop making these silly cuts and start investing in local government?

Preet Kaur Gill: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I hope that the Government really listen to what Members say today about the devastating impact of cuts to councils in their constituencies.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that the problem is not just the direct cuts to councils, but the extra services that councils are expected to take on? In my area, the NHS has stopped funding the low vision clinic, so Labour-led Brighton and Hove City Council has had to pick it up—whereas my other local council, Conservative-led East Sussex County Council, is refusing to do so, leaving partially sighted people with nowhere to go for the vital adaptations that they need.

Preet Kaur Gill: My hon. Friend's important intervention tells us about the plight of councils as a result of non-statutory services not getting the investment that they need. We will end up with councils delivering only statutory services, which will by no means meet the needs of our diverse communities.

In the context of Birmingham's projected population growth of 121,000 by 2031, the cuts will mean even less money in real terms per person. Nor is the situation unique to Birmingham, as we have heard from many hon. Members across the country. The Institute for Fiscal Studies reports that

“funding from government grants, business rates and council tax is still set to be 1.4% (£0.6 billion) lower in real-terms than in 2015–16, which is equivalent to 4.2% per person after accounting for forecast population growth.”

Whatever the Minister and the Secretary of State may say, that means that councils will have less money to deliver services. This is not about the need to find minor efficiencies following a period of high spending; it follows a period of dramatic and coalition Government-enforced reduction of 22% per person, in real terms, in council spending on services between 2009–10 and 2015–16.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very strong case about the damage that is being done to local services by cuts in the Government grant. Does she agree that there is no resilience in local government’s tax base, which is strangling local democracy, and that there needs to be a reversal of the changes that were made in the late ’80s and early ’90s to councils’ abilities to raise their own money?

Preet Kaur Gill: My hon. Friend raises an important point, which I will touch on later.

Not only was that devastatingly large amount taken across the country, but the spending cuts hit more deprived areas far harder than other areas, a point which I will come back to later. The Government often mock Members asking for more money for a particular cause, but that misses the point. These cuts are not just about money; they are about what the money allows local government to do, or not to do—it is about the services and support that local government can provide to empower communities and support individuals to fulfil their potential.

New research by Unison shows that 66% of local councillors do not think that local residents are receiving the help and support they need at the right time. Does the Minister understand that that is not because councillors and council workers are not working hard enough? Does he agree that the reductions of £16 billion to core Government funding between 2010 and 2020 have led to that situation? Will he make public all the data and analysis his Department have put together on the scale and variation of local responses to cuts, as well as on the impact of almost a decade of austerity on local government, and the inequalities it has reinforced and perpetuated?

What does the Minister say to Lord Porter, the Conservative chair of the Local Government Association? In the most recent copy of *First*, the magazine for local government—I have a copy that I am happy to share with the Minister—he said:

“Next year will continue to be hugely challenging for all councils, which still face an overall funding gap of £3.1 billion in 2019/20.”

That figure is not what is needed to make progress or to invest further in the future of our families and communities—that is just to stand still. Does the Minister agree with Lord Porter?

I know that universal credit is not the Minister’s brief, but I hope he will take the opportunity to discuss his understanding of the problems that universal credit is causing for citizens and therefore for local government. What analysis has the Department done of the impact on local government of rent arrears from council tenants on universal credit? Residential Landlords Association

research reveals that the number of private landlords with tenants receiving universal credit and going into rent arrears rocketed from 27% in 2016 to 61% in 2018, with the average amount owed in rent arrears by the universal credit tenant rising 49% between 2017 and 2018. If there are similar findings for council tenants—there is no reason to think universal credit impacts differently on council tenants from those in private accommodation—local authorities will be put under further pressure by a failed Government initiative.

This is not party political. This is not about Labour councils wasting money, or Conservative councils being frivolous. Lord Porter said:

“Councils can no longer be expected to run our local services on a shoestring.”

Does the Minister think that those Conservative councils that have gone bust or reduced services to the legal minimum have received enough funding? Will they receive enough funding through the latest funding settlement? If so, does he think that they went bust because of their own failures—and will he outline those failures?

When the Prime Minister took office, she promised that the mission of her Government would be to tackle injustices. Since 2015–16, the most deprived councils have seen a cut of 2.8%, while the least deprived have seen a small real-terms increase of 0.3%. That is not tackling an injustice—that is embedding and reinforcing one.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech. In Central ward in Hull, more than 47% of children live in poverty. That is one of the highest rates of poverty in this whole country. More people in Hull claim jobseeker’s allowance than the national average. At the same time, there have been £120 million of cuts. Does my hon. Friend agree that that could never be justified by any Government that are serious about giving every child equality of opportunity?

Preet Kaur Gill: My hon. Friend makes a really important intervention. The figures are harrowing. I hope the Minister is listening carefully and will respond to Members’ interventions at the end of the debate.

Local government is not homogenous. The service needs of their populations, ability to raise revenue locally and reliance on central grants all differ substantially. Proposed and existing policies such as business rates retention and council tax limits will mean different councils can raise significant amounts, which may not match the spending pressures those councils face.

As academics from Cambridge pointed out in October 2018, the Government’s austerity politics have led to

“a shrinking capacity of the local state to address inequality...increasing inequality between local governments themselves and...intensifying issues of territorial injustice.”

Local authorities vary in the needs of their population for services, their reliance on central grants and their ability to raise local revenue. With the Department planning to introduce 75% business rates retention for all local authorities, and access to public services for citizens increasingly reliant on the local tax base—whereby poorer areas are not as able to provide as many public services or the same quality of infrastructure as areas with healthier, more wealthy tax bases—without a strong

[Preet Kaur Gill]

redistributive element, the under-investment, or even lack of investment, in communities and the people who live there will see them unable to prosper.

Will the Minister ensure that no council has its funding reduced as a result of a new distribution system? What actions will he take to that end? The National Audit Office has highlighted the dangers of bringing in a business rates retention model that has not been fully tested. Will the Minister commit to making public a full and thorough evaluation of the pilot schemes before committing to any further roll-out?

I could raise any number of areas where Government cuts to local government are causing immeasurable immediate and long-term damage—from homelessness to fire safety, from crime prevention to children's services and public health. Reductions in any of those areas are not impact-neutral, as they influence and prohibit the capacity to prevent and support. As I was cabinet member for public health at Sandwell Council, I will focus on public health, and I hope my colleagues will pick up on other areas.

Councils' public health budgets are being cut by £531 million between 2015-16 and 2019-20. The Government are taking with one hand, while, at the same time, putting more money into the NHS. Preventing illness and catching problems early so they do not develop further down the line will save the NHS and social care money, so the short-sightedness of cutting public health funding must be due either to ignorance, or to a political choice to undermine councils' abilities to improve the health of the public. Which is it?

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. The underfunding of social care is a travesty in itself, but it also has consequences for our hospitals, including avoidable hospital admissions and delayed transfers of care. Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the cuts to local government funding are far-reaching and could have a profound impact on our NHS?

Preet Kaur Gill: My hon. Friend raises an important point. The NHS spends only about 5% of its funding on preventive measures. That just cannot be right. As she rightly says, social care costs will soar, and that makes no sense at all.

The Government have announced that they will phase out the public health grant after 2020-21. Instead, they expect business rates retention to entirely fund public health spending. Health inequalities will increase. While they have proposed some kind of top-up system, as with many areas concerning local government, it is unclear how that would work and to what extent that top-up would support the local authorities that need it.

Catherine West: Does my hon. Friend agree that one area of particular concern is sexual health services, which are being particularly hard hit?

Preet Kaur Gill: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. We need to invest more money in public health and not siphon it away from councils, for issues such as sexual health, drug and alcohol strategies, mental health—there are a number of issues, and I could go on.

Does the Minister agree that preventive services and approaches are the most efficient and effective way to improve outcomes for our residents and tackle many of the issues that they face? If so, does he agree that local government needs appropriate and sufficient funding to achieve that goal by providing frontline services and working with civil society to develop and sustain multi-organisation and agency approaches? If he agrees on those two points, does he believe that, as things stand, our local authorities have the resources necessary to deliver those services and approaches now and in the future?

I thank all Members who have attended this debate and who are waiting to contribute. The turnout reveals the depth and strength of feeling about this important issue. We all work with our local councils and know the vital services they provide and the work they put into care for our multitude of residents and citizens, particularly support for families, protection of children and care for older and disabled people. We all know that the Government's current attitude and approach are not sustainable, and we need this Administration to wake up to that fact and address it properly.

I have waited until now to mention Brexit, which we must discuss and examine, if only briefly. The Government have committed billions to many Departments in preparing for Brexit. With the Treasury giving the Department only £35 million for preparations, will the Minister allay the fears of councils around the country by promising that any additional financial commitments and burdens that are placed on councils as a result of Brexit are fully funded by central Government? We need fully funded local government to drive many of the things that make Britain a great country in which to live and work. With councils already facing a funding gap of £7.8 billion by 2025, the Government must take the opportunity of the final settlement and the 2019 spending review to deliver truly sustainable funding to local government. Are they up to the challenge?

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): I apologise again to colleagues for my unforgivable lateness. We will start winding up at 3.40 pm, so everybody should keep their speeches quite short, because there are about 13 speakers.

2.51 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate and to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) on securing this debate, and I thank her for her remarks. It is fair to say that she has covered a full gamut of aspects of local government. Like her, I pay tribute to the many thousands of councillors up and down the country who work tirelessly in their community as public servants, delivering some very difficult portfolios and in some very challenging parts of the country. At this time of year, councils across the country are in the process of finalising their budgets for the next financial year, which is why the hon. Lady's debate is so timely.

My constituency covers three lower-tier authorities—Braintree District Council, Colchester Borough Council and Maldon District Council—as well as an upper-tier authority, which is Essex County Council. I pay tribute to all my colleagues at all the authorities, particularly

Essex County Council, who are faced with a number of pressures, including growing demand on services—it is a theme that no doubt we will hear throughout the debate—and the overall impact of the Government's financial settlements on them and on councils across the country. My colleagues at Essex County Council work very well with the Local Government Association, which has campaigned clearly and robustly on areas where more needs to be done. There is always scope for innovation, efficiency and transformation. Naturally, these local councils look to central Government to provide more certainty on the future of their finances and the level of support they receive from the Government.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon. Lady accept that one way central Government give certainty is by letting authorities that had the benefit of the retention of business rates know what the Government's plans for the future are? At the moment, it is very uncertain.

Priti Patel: I will touch on business rates later. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and councils need to be getting on with their own plans.

With the comprehensive spending review taking place later this year, rate reform and the fair funding review—I know the Minister is well aware of this—the Government have the opportunity to consider carefully the various submissions and representations from local authorities. Compared with other local areas, we are underfunded in Essex not just through local government, but through our police and health services. I very much hope that the Minister and the Government will be sympathetic and understanding, and that they will use this as an opportunity to rebalance resources towards our county, particularly our county council, which has the responsibility for adults and children. Essex County Council is experiencing considerable budgetary pressures, which the Government will know about from the various representations that my colleagues across the county and I have constantly made to the Department.

Essex faces significant financial challenges in adult social care, which accounted for 45% of the council's total spend, with a budget of £646 million in 2017-18. The council is collecting over £82 million in fees and charges from residents, but budgets are being squeezed and it already faces demographic pressures and challenges. The number of people aged over 80 is set to grow over the next decade by 61%, and those over 90 by 100%. The council is facing rising costs as it seeks to provide support to around 4,000 residents with learning disabilities, including cases that are very complex to resolve. Its objective is to provide those residents and all citizens with a good quality of life.

On top of those pressures, provider costs for care packages are increasing while the supply of beds and residential accommodation by providers is falling. Some 362 beds were lost to the market in 2018 as seven care homes closed, and contracts from domiciliary providers have been handed back. These are continuous pressures on funding social care. We know that money has been put aside for social care, which is of course welcome, but it is not meeting the growing pressures and demands in Essex and around the country, too.

I hope to work with the Government and my councils to look at how we can constructively address these pressures and constraints. The council faces pressures

on education and special needs in addition to social care. I appreciate that this issue rests primarily with the Department for Education, but resources are being squeezed and I have many concerns. I have a vast number of constituents coming to me, and it is pretty clear that their needs, challenges and concerns are not being met in the way that we as a Government would like. The council has been proactive in its own representations to Ministers, and I very much look forward to the Government working with it.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston made a strong and important point on public health. Across the country—I see this in Essex—we are seeing pressures on public health. We can do much more to prevent many of the pressures on A&E, our hospitals and GP surgeries. One of the greatest challenges that we face, which relates directly to planning, is that the population of my constituency, and the number of houses, is growing. We have to meet those challenges by ensuring that the right kind of support goes into public health and infrastructure provision, so that we can get a new health centre for primary care in Witham and invest in our roads and in other aspects of local amenities and public services, too.

I come back to the point on education. When the provisional settlement was announced last month, Essex County Council was very keen to ensure that it was part of the pilot round for local business rates. It was pretty disappointed not to be, and I make a plea to the Minister for some kind of reconsideration or to ensure that Essex features in future schemes.

Essex is a county that constantly innovates. We want to strive for excellence while delivering value for money and meeting our service requirements to deliver to the public. There are endless pressures. Across the county of Essex, there are some big challenges that we want to work on with central Government to look for innovative solutions and ideas about how we can address many of those concerns.

2.59 pm

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) for securing this important debate. It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel).

We have heard many worrying examples today of how eight years of Government-imposed austerity and cuts to local government funding have damaged communities up and down our country. Sadly, and not surprisingly, that is also the case for our community in Enfield. Since 2010, Enfield Council's central Government funding has been slashed by £178 million—a cut of £800 per household in the borough. If we had known that in 2010, we would have dismissed it as completely unsustainable.

Enfield's adult social care budget has been gutted by £30 million since 2010, and there was a loss of £3.2 million from Enfield's youth services budget between 2011 and 2016—a reduction of more than 57%. Almost every school in Enfield faces further cuts to their already stretched budgets. By 2020 they will have lost £12.5 million due to central Government cuts—a reduction of £273 per pupil. The Government's willingness to cut those services

[Joan Ryan]

is denying a generation of young people the best opportunities in life, and making it much harder for them to realise their potential and achieve their aspirations.

On top of that, Enfield Council is being forced to find another £18 million of savings next year. To put that in context, £18 million is more than the council's current combined net spend on housing services, parks and open spaces, leisure, culture and library facilities. Our Labour Council is doing all it can to protect our local public services, and squeezing every penny to make ends meet, while having to cope with increasing need and the demands of a growing and ageing population. Some 34,000 young people in Enfield are now living below the poverty line, food bank usage has rocketed by 13% in the past three years, and the borough now has the highest eviction rate in London. That is the background to the cuts.

When the Government make cuts to Enfield Council's budget, they are making a clear choice: they do not see the needs of local people as a priority. That is also reflected in their position on community safety. The cuts have had no greater impact than on our police service and the safety of our communities. Whenever I talk to people on the doorstep about crime in Enfield, as I did this Saturday morning—nobody in north London is unaware of the situation—many residents tell me how concerned they are about rising crime in Enfield. They have good reason to be concerned, as violent crime has soared by more than 90% since 2010—the figures sound unreal. In the year to November 2018, there was a 20% spike in knife crime offences in Enfield, compared with a 1.1% rise across London. We are at the top of that league table, where nobody wants to be. In the same period, our borough saw the highest serious youth violence rate in London—up almost 9%, in contrast to a decrease of 5.2% across the capital. I think we can make a special case for Enfield, alongside the case for London and the rest of the country.

Neighbourhood policing should be at the heart of our communities, but the Government have cut the Metropolitan police's budget by £850 million since 2010, resulting in the loss of 3,000 police officers and 3,000 police community support officers across London. The Met is expected to make a further £263 million cut by 2022-23. That has led to the loss of 241 uniformed officers from Enfield's streets over the past eight years.

Enfield's Labour council has funded 16 police officers from its own budget to ameliorate that loss and tackle crime and antisocial behaviour. By working with the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, the council has secured a second dedicated police officer patrolling the streets in every ward of Enfield. We cannot blame the people of Enfield for thinking that Ministers are reducing the priority they place on keeping our young people and our communities safe, given the Government's staggering cuts to the police budget.

To tackle the rise in violent crime, we need a fully-funded, multi-agency approach. That means properly and adequately funding the police and local government, which has an important role to play. As I have set out, those agencies and our public services are being put under severe financial pressure. The Government should be ashamed. The effects of eight years of austerity have been laid bare. They must end the cuts to Enfield's

public services and invest in our communities and in our children's futures. Until that happens, I fear that the safety and aspirations of people in Enfield will continue to be put at risk. We will continue to see rising crime, youth violence, knife attacks, loss of life, serious injury, robberies and muggings.

No matter what Enfield Council and the Mayor of London do to address the situation, the ultimate responsibility and solution rests with the Government. Only they have the resources to provide our communities and our public services with the financial support they desperately require. I hope that the Minister will address those issues, and that the Government will prioritise properly funding our councils and public services.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): There are still plenty of Members who want to speak, and the winding-up speeches will start in 35 minutes. I will let the debate run for an extra two minutes—I will not deprive Members of two minutes—but we need to manage time a bit better.

3.5 pm

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker, and to speak in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) on securing it. She made some excellent points, particularly about the challenges that local government faces in prioritising public health spending. In respect of any contributions relating to health, I draw hon. Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests: I am a practising NHS doctor and a member of the Royal College of Psychiatrists.

It is undoubtedly the case that when austerity began almost a decade ago there was a need, in view of the economic situation that the country faced, for some belt-tightening and efficiency savings in local government and elsewhere in the public sector. We all have to accept that that was inevitable at the time, but nobody envisaged that the period of belt-tightening would last almost a decade. During that period we have seen an unprecedented squeeze on NHS and local government finances.

The Government talk about devolving powers to local authorities, but it is very difficult to give local authorities the responsibility to deliver more services without adequately funding those services and those that local authorities are already delivering. There is talk of improved integration between health and social care, and between the NHS and local authorities, but in fact we have seen a retrenchment of the delivery of services by many local authorities. As their budgets are squeezed, they have not had the money available to better join up and integrate services with the NHS. Patients have suffered as a result, particularly those with long-term conditions and disabilities, at both ends of the age spectrum.

I will talk briefly about some issues that are important to all Members, including the challenges that local authorities face in delivering improved care for people who are homeless or street homeless, which is a growing problem throughout the country, including in Suffolk

and Ipswich; the challenges faced by addiction services; and the challenges faced by social care. The Government are rightly talking a good game on homelessness—they want to do more—but street homelessness is continuing to rise. The failure to tackle it is a result of both a lack of joined-up thinking and a lack of funding in the right places.

In particular, funding for addiction services has been squeezed. Many people who are street homeless have challenges with drug and alcohol dependence, but the funding to help them address those problems is simply not there. In addiction services, access to and funding for certain medications is being severely squeezed. Housing pressures, particularly in urban areas, mean that long-term solutions to tackle street homelessness are not there. The welcome changes that the Government put into place have failed to manifest in any meaningful change, and street homelessness continues to rise.

At the same time we see addiction services cut off completely from NHS care and working in a silo. There is a complete failure of joined-up thinking. I know that the Minister is scrolling through his iPad, but he would do well to listen to this point, because there is a failure and a lack of integration between what is happening in the NHS and mental healthcare and addiction services. There is a silo mentality in commissioning; local authorities commission addiction services and mental healthcare is commissioned by the NHS. That was a failure of the Health and Social Care Act 2012, and I urge the Minister to look at that if he wants to meaningfully improve care for people with addiction problems and begin to tackle the problems that a lot of street homeless people face.

Finally, on the issue of social care, we have an ageing population with multiple medical comorbidities—some 3 million people in England now have three or more medical comorbidities. That is a huge financial challenge not only for the NHS, but for social care. In spite of that growing challenge, at the other end of the age spectrum, thanks to improvements in modern healthcare, children with what would have been considered terminal illnesses often now live into their teenage years and sometimes into adulthood. Because of those twin challenges, the social care system faces unprecedented financial demands in delivering better care, yet funding for social care has been reduced by billions of pounds over the past few years.

Without that funding, the integration that the Government speak about will simply not happen. There will not be integration of health and social care. Money will continue to be diverted into acute services. One-off spending on winter pressures is all very well, but it does very little to address the chronic financial and human challenge that this country faces in improving and joining up better care for people with long-term conditions.

Welcome soundbites from the Government are all very well, but we need to see delivery on the ground. We need legislative levers to help drive better integration and we need the funding to back it up. Without the money, local government will be unable to deliver improved care, let alone continue to deliver the care that it does at the moment. I urge the Minister to look at the local government funding settlement, at the legislative levers and at what more can be done to support local authorities to raise additional money at a local level to help fund important local services.

3.12 pm

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) on securing this important debate. Local government services are integral to building the vibrant, inclusive communities that our constituents deserve. They are also vital for safeguarding the most vulnerable in our communities and ensuring that no one is left behind. It is for precisely those reasons that I am sure many Members will share my frustration at seeing their communities' potential sapped by wave after wave of Tory austerity. As a former councillor in my constituency, I know only too well the scandal of local government underfunding. Warrington Borough Council has faced budget cuts of £122 million since 2010, and by 2020 it will have to save at least another £38 million.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): In Scotland the situation is exactly the same with Tory austerity cuts, and the Scottish National party simply follows the Tory line in Scotland. I hear exactly the same stories all over Britain. It is time to give the councils money and get poverty off the streets.

Faisal Rashid: I agree totally with my hon. Friend.

Warrington is one of the lowest funded of the 91 unitary and metropolitan authorities outside London, and it is the second lowest funded in the north-west. Cuts have been imposed on the local authority while pressure on services is growing. People are living longer and the borough's population continues to rise. I commend Labour councillors from my constituency who, despite having to make difficult decisions in such challenging circumstances, have always tried to put fairness and the need to protect vulnerable people ahead of politics. Sadly, that is not enough to stem the tide of disastrous Tory cuts. Critical services such as adult social care and children's services are coming under severe strain. Preventive measures that seek to reduce the long-term overall cost to the council have to be cut. The Government must surely recognise that that is not the way to provide services to an ageing population with increasingly long-term needs.

The Government have also tried to offload blame for their cuts on to local councils by shifting the burden on to the taxpayer. My constituents face council tax rises of 6% to mitigate the impact of the cuts. However, in order for services to run effectively, the council would still require an additional £30 million because of cuts in central Government funding. Warrington taxpayers are paying more and getting less because of the Government's austerity agenda. In October last year the Prime Minister declared that austerity was over, but I cannot see that it is over. How does the Minister justify that statement to my constituents, who face yet another round of spending cuts and tax increases in the new year?

While the Prime Minister was announcing the end of austerity last October, more than 5,000 councillors signed the Breaking Point petition, calling on the Government to cancel their planned cuts for the new year and immediately invest £2 billion in children's services and £2 billion in adult social care to stop those vital services collapsing. The Government must heed the advice of local representatives from all over the country by investing properly in our communities.

[Faisal Rashid]

At the general election, Labour pledged £8 billion extra to fund social care, alongside an additional £500 million a year for Sure Start and early intervention services. If the Government are serious about ending austerity, that is the kind of investment that local government requires to rejuvenate our communities after eight years of crippling austerity.

3.17 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): We have an east of England flavour on the Government side of the Chamber. It is a great pleasure to be the second Essex woman to speak in the debate and a great pleasure to be an Essex MP. I am constantly impressed by the exceptionally good work in my parish councils, and in Chelmsford City Council and Essex County Council. The county council has been ranked in the top 10 of the most productive councils in the country and is celebrating a huge achievement in getting an outstanding rating for children's services. The Ofsted report for children's services talks about the inspiration provided by senior leaders and the importance of the political support given to them. It discussed their tenacious ambition for our children and how social workers are passionate about improving outcomes for them. Such tireless work is absolutely vital to focus on the most vulnerable. The outstanding ranking is for preventive services and the focus on getting early help to those who need it. In Essex, we know that top-class services are not just about pouring more money into the system. It is also about being really focused on the outcomes.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): I agree with the hon. Lady that the issue is not just about pouring money into services, although I wish we had the money to do that. It is also about having the funding to employ and skill up a workforce. Does she agree that we face not only the loss of frontline services, but the skills and knowledge of local government officers, many of whom have been made redundant in many of our local authorities, such as Colne Valley, my authority? The skills and knowledge are not there to advise local communities because all the local knowledge has been lost.

Vicky Ford: I agree about the importance of local services, but the lesson from the restructuring of children's services in Essex was that they became an outstanding service through a focus on the most vulnerable, who most needed support. When they were focused more broadly, and were not necessarily so targeted on the vulnerable, they did not achieve the same outcomes for the young people who really needed them.

I shall not say that there is not a challenge in Essex County Council. Indeed there is. There is huge pressure from population growth, inflation growth and increasing demand for services. The county council is announcing today that it will increase council tax by just under 4%. It would dearly have liked to be in the pilot scheme for business rate retentions, and is disappointed not to be. There has been some more money from the Government, which is welcome, for winter pressures, social care and highways, but those have been short-term amounts. They are not for the long-term planning that is needed.

As my colleague and neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), pointed out, the impact on adult social services is severe. About 45% of the county council's budget is spent on adult social services. We are expecting a nearly two-thirds increase in the number of over-80s in the next decade, and a doubling in the number of over-90s. Seven care homes have been closed and while the county council has tried to minimise the impact of that, and to support those who are affected, the impact on residents is necessarily huge. We need a longer-term solution for the funding of adult social services. The council is making quite sensible, radical changes in its thinking on insurance schemes, lifetime individual savings accounts, possibly more of a local sales tax, and other ways to take the business rate retention scheme to the next level. We need to focus on that.

We are a rapidly growing part of the country. In Chelmsford, it is planned to build about 18,000 homes. We need those new homes. People want to come and live in the county, and we need to help young people on to the housing ladder, but we need the infrastructure to go with it. The county council is spending about a quarter of a billion pounds this year on roads, and primary and secondary school places, but there are some long-term projects, such as our second railway station and the north-east bypass. Those are infrastructure projects for which people have waited decades, and they are vital to go with the housing. I wanted to pick up on the point about homelessness raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter).

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order. Will the hon. Lady begin to wind up, just to be generous to other Members?

Vicky Ford: Yes, I will, Mr Walker; thank you.

There are huge pressures in tackling homelessness. Local charities work hard, but they need more support from Chelmsford City Council. It is the only city that has not had extra support for homelessness. We have projects to secure more social lettings and supported housing, and more help for those at risk of becoming homeless. I hope that the Minister will see that those funding bids are granted.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): We have seven speakers in 16 minutes, so I shall let colleagues divide that among themselves.

3.23 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I declare an interest as I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) on securing the debate. I have the enormous pleasure of co-chairing Labour Friends of Local Government with my hon. Friend. I hope that the group will use opportunities such as this debate to shed light on the funding realities that councils face.

As a former councillor, I know at first hand the enormous pressures that councils face. I became a councillor in 2012, just as the austerity measures were about to be implemented. In 2014, I was appointed to the cabinet

with the children and young people portfolio. It was not an easy time. Owing to the cuts, some difficult decisions had to be made. One included Sure Start. I was adamant that we were not going to lose our much-valued Labour policy, but I knew that changes were needed to ensure its survival. Those difficult decisions are made every day by councils, but they do not often receive the same publicity and attention as the decisions we make here, despite the enormous consequences for our constituents' lives.

The coalition Government of 2010 knew that. They knew that if they heaped responsibility on to local authorities without the funding to deliver, councils would take the blame for cuts. There have been budget cuts of £160 million to the budget of our local council alone. That means that every year, £160 million has been taken. It would have provided services that we rely on. The £160 million has been found from libraries, roads, bin collections, social care and children's services. Those are the stark decisions that councils are forced to make, and they all have far-reaching consequences. To put the challenge into perspective, by the end of the year, local authorities will have lost 60p in every pound from the funding that Government used to provide.

There is no light at the end of the tunnel. The Government want councils to be more and more self-sufficient, which means there will be less in grants from Government. Under the Tory proposals, areas less able to raise council revenue will have less to spend. Areas with the highest demands and council pressures will not have the budgets to cope. It is likely that in areas with the least pressures there will be council tax reductions. The Government tell us to trust them on the funding formula that we have yet to see, but with their record how can we possibly trust them?

Such pressing challenges are the reason why my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston and I established the Labour friends of local government group last year. It brings together councillors, MPs and stakeholders to call out the Government for their recklessness, and so that we can support one another and share ideas on how hard-working Labour councils can continue to deliver quality services despite Tory austerity. Most of all, we came together with one united message: hard-working Labour councils are not to blame for austerity and we have a duty as Labour MPs to make that crystal clear.

Councils are critical to our constituents' social mobility, and to boosting young people's life chances, but the Government's contempt for local government, which is shown in their underfunding and under-resourcing, is restricting the economic and social transformation that town economies such as Leigh desperately need. I welcome the debate as an opportunity to highlight the damage caused from Westminster by Tory handling of local government, and the enormous challenges that the next few years will present to councils. We desperately need a fair funding settlement for councils that will not just give them the bare essentials to cope, but will utilise our incredible councils to get the best out of their areas.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Will everyone do three minutes each? The Opposition Front Bench has given me back six. Clive Lewis, three minutes—please.

3.27 pm

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) for securing this debate on an issue that affects communities and constituencies across the country. The latest stark example of what we are talking about is the plan by Conservative-led Norfolk County Council to close 38 out of 53 children's centres, including three out of five in my constituency. At the same time, without a hint of irony, the Government have designated Norwich an opportunity area, to increase social mobility. I politely advise the Minister that trying to improve social mobility while targeting early years provision for such cuts is a bit like trying to fill a bath without a plug—an impossible, Sisyphean task.

There is no doubt that the proposals will hurt some of the most vulnerable people in the city. At a Norwich children's centre I heard from a mum how, following a difficult and traumatic birth, support from the centre protected her mental health. Another parent who had fled domestic violence told me that her centre was a safe place to go when she needed it most. No one judged her and she was able to get specialist help safely and quickly to protect her children. I also spoke with a mother who had a learning disability and epilepsy. She told me how the outreach provided by her centre before her child's birth gave her the skills and confidence to join the ante-natal class. She said, "It made me feel normal, like the other mums, like I fitted in. I made friends". Where are they expected to go if their local centres close? What is the future for their children if the centres are shut?

A long, complex path has led to where we are today. Between 2011 and 2019 Norfolk County Council made £364 million of cuts. Over the same period, the council had to absorb additional costs of £386 million. Despite facing huge cuts under the previous coalition Government, between 2013 and 2016 the Labour-led administration at County Hall managed to keep every children's centre open and protect the budget of £10 million a year. Tories at Norfolk County Council now want to halve the budget for children's centres to £5 million a year.

Local Conservatives are trying to con us by stating that they can make such a cut and close most of our children's centres but still provide a good service, and they justify the closures by saying that replacement services will get to the people who need them via outreach. Given that those centres already provide outreach, as well as helping people who come into the centre, how can we expect them to provide the same level of support when funding has been decimated?

It is well known that for every £1 invested in early intervention and in places such as children's centres, the state saves £13 further down the line. Children's centres plug the gaps left by other services that have already been cut. People in my city do not want their children's centres to be shut. It is beyond doubt that closing so many centres will cause great harm to parents and children in Norfolk, and there was a bitter irony in Tory county councillors citing cuts by their own Government as the reason for those closures. They may try to pass the buck, but the blame rests with them both.

Let us consider the challenges that this country and our children will face in the coming century, such as climate change, the loss of biodiversity, rampant inequality, threats to our democracy, and undreamed of technological

[Clive Lewis]

changes. Surely it is nothing less than criminal to pursue policies that will cut the social and educational tools that people will need to navigate their way through those coming challenges.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Fantastic. There are five speakers left, which means about two minutes and 25 seconds each. Let's go.

3.31 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for chairing this debate, Mr Walker. Although £44 million has already been wiped from York's budget, another £4.1 million will go this year—hardly austerity coming to an end. Local authorities are the game changer for introducing early intervention and prevention into a system. Thanks to a perverse decision by my local authority, the budget to tackle substance misuse was slashed by 25%—a £2 million budget lost £500,000—even though we have the highest level of deaths due to substance misuse in the country. We see the consequences of such cuts across York, and I can give many such examples.

York also has the worst funded education in the country. Schools are on tight budgets, and that is matched with the highest level of attainment inequality in the country. Such a diminution in funding has consequences that are harming my community, and I implore the Minister to put his money where his mouth is and end austerity by ensuring that local authorities have the resources they need to transform our communities.

Labour councillors across York are ready to transform our city, with incredible ideas about early intervention and prevention. Without those resources, however, they will be constrained, and if we are to see a game changer in the way our society works, we must make the right choices. In particular, I reflect on housing investment in our city. Hardly any social housing has been built in York since 2015, and that has had serious consequences for many other factors. We need only turn to the work of Michael Marmot to know the impact of such policies on public health. We need not only resources but the right leadership to make real changes in our community. This debate is just a start, and it is important to follow it up. I would welcome a meeting with the Minister to talk about the difficult issues and challenges our city faces, because the funding formula is not working across the board.

Finally, the business rates system has failed our community. It is driving people away from the high street, which has a perverse effect on the income received by local authorities. We urgently need the review that was promised two years ago, and I implore the Minister to speak to Treasury colleagues so that that comes to fruition.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Outstanding timekeeping.

3.34 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Last year's bankruptcy of Northamptonshire County Council was the first of many, and although the Government's answer to it may have been well meaning,

it involved a totally pointless reorganisation that was a little like shuffling the deckchairs on the Titanic. A crisis in local government is also coming to my local authority. East Sussex County Council, which covers just over a third of my constituency, is following a similar path. It has declared that it can make only a core offer to meet its basic statutory duties to the very vulnerable, thereby undermining the principle of universality and its social contract with residents. The most vulnerable people will still be affected by cuts in East Sussex, with cuts to meals on wheels, which have gone in many places, the end to the locally supported bus service, and the closure of libraries and many residential centres—we have about heard that in other areas as well.

It is shocking and shameful that the most vulnerable and lonely in our society are being forced into further isolation, and it has been reported that the cash shortfall at East Sussex will leave the county bankrupt in under three years. We will see the human consequences of that dire situation for many years to come. Recent cuts to services for disabled children have led to the charity Embrace East Sussex being forced to pick up the pieces, and parents now have to crowdfund for clubs and support for their children. Local parish councils have to provide the medical support for disabled children that would otherwise have been provided by the local authority. How have we arrived at a situation where our communities rely on voluntary groups and crowdfunding donations to support our children?

East Sussex County Council has planned to cut £854,000 from safeguarding services such as training programmes, and numbers of social workers are to be slashed, leaving families vulnerable. We are literally putting our children in harm's way. The council acknowledges that more children will now be subject to child protection plans and stay longer in care because of those cuts, which in the end will cost both us and our children's future more.

Both in Westminster Hall and the main Chamber I have spoken regularly about the £1 billion cuts to youth services nationally, which is a real problem. In Brighton and Hove the local authority spends all its council tax budget on adult social care. We need a new funding formula. Funding for adult social care needs to come directly from the Government or the NHS. We must transform the way it is funded.

3.37 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Since 2013, Nottingham City Council's main Government funding has been cut by three quarters, from £127 million to £25 million. Even worse, at the same time as the Government have been handing out extra cash to some Tory shires, cities such as Nottingham that cope with high levels of deprivation have been disproportionately hit. For example, in 10 years Surrey gained £19 per household while Nottingham lost £529.

The cuts come at a time when the council faces rising demand for its services, especially adult social care and child protection, and that inevitably means cuts to vital frontline services. Last year the city was forced to cut public health programmes to help people lose weight or stop smoking. It cut youth and play services, and there have been new restrictions on bus passes for disabled people. Fares on supportive buses have increased, and there are higher fees for leisure centres and other services.

It is all short-term and self-defeating in the long run, as it will place extra burdens on our NHS, police, and other local services.

One of the most visible changes is the increase in rough sleeping. In 2010, when Labour left government, Nottingham city had an estimated three rough sleepers per night. This year that number has risen to 43. Despite the fantastic work done by the council, it faces an incredible challenge. That is just the most visible element and affects only 5% of the total number of people who need help with housing. In Nottingham, 15 families a week present as homeless. Is that any wonder, when the local government's housing allowance cap has been frozen since 2016 and will not rise until at least 2020?

The Government say that properties can be found for £42 or £54 per week, but recent research by Advice Nottingham found that the cheapest house was £63 a week—£20 more than the Government claim. For a family of four who need a two-bedroom house, Advice Nottingham found only two homes in the entire city that fell within local housing association rates. Social housing is an ever-rising demand to add to that list.

The cuts keep coming. Nottingham City Council is currently undertaking its budget consultation for this year—I wonder whether the Minister can advise us which vital services he would cut next. I hope that he is listening and will consider the damage that cuts to local government funding have already done and will continue to do to my constituents and my city. It is time for that to change. It cannot go on.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): I call Jamie Stone, who has three minutes, before Emma Hardy, who will also have three minutes.

3.40 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Thank you, Mr Walker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) on what was a very eloquent speech indeed. Much of what I am about to say has been summed up in a characteristically pithy intervention from the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney). As a Scottish Member, the question for me is: "Where are the Scottish Government in this debate?" It perhaps speaks volumes that we do not have any Scottish National party Members with us today—enough said.

It would not be normal if I did not talk about the remote far north of Scotland, so I will do so again. We face enormous problems in the Highland Council, of which I was a member until I was elected to Parliament: a sparse population, huge distances, inclement weather and the sheer cost of services and goods. Those elements militate against running the council cheaply. Over the last four years that I was a councillor, I found the cycle of going through budget cuts year after year a sickening process, because we felt that we were cutting right into the flesh, blood and bone of what we were trying to do for the good of constituents.

Of course, this is a devolved matter—I take heed of that—but I want to make two points arising from that. First, the settlement that the Scottish Government give councils such as the Highland Council is questionable,

but they are not here to answer that point. Does the settlement from the Treasury to the Scottish Government accurately reflect the needs of Scottish local government? Would the Minister consider an audit of the money that goes to the Scottish Government and how much is actually delivered to councils to become council services?

As I want to leave some time, my second and final point is simply this: I recognise that local government is the foundation stone and building block of proper democracy. If the public's faith in local government is damaged, we damage something that is so important to the way the country works: our democracy. Even on tempestuous days such as today, that democracy is hugely important and, I believe, an example to the world.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Thank you. Last but not least, I call Emma Hardy.

3.42 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Walker. I stand here to represent an incredibly proud city. I hope that the Minister bears that in mind, because I am asking not for the Government's pity about the poverty faced by people in my city, but for fairness and justice, and for the Government to acknowledge that not everybody lives in the leafy shires. I am sorry, but the suggestion that one solution could be greater investment in ISAs is so breathtakingly out of touch that it shocked me.

In my city of Hull we have the lowest average weekly wage in the country, at only £376 a week. The cuts to local government are devastating my city and creating a huge problem for the children living there. The Government talk a lot about the importance of social mobility, but those are meaningless words if people are not given equality of opportunity. My point about fairness is that there is deeply entrenched regional inequality, which is shameful to the country.

In an earlier intervention I mentioned that in one of my wards—Central ward—over 47% of people live in poverty. In my constituency there is an average life expectancy difference of nearly 10 years—the number of years that someone is expected to live a healthy life is lower in Hull than in other areas of the country. That should shame the Government into action.

Another problem is that we have £1,300 less per pupil spending on schools than in the rest of the country. We cannot rely on increasing local council tax to plug that gap. Hull City Council is 81% reliant on Government funding grants, and when that money is taken away it has a greater impact in Hull than it does in other areas of the country. Some 86% of people in Hull live in a band B or band A property, so a 1% rise in council tax would bring in only £2.90 per person in Hull, compared with £7.08 in the City of London, or £6.33 in the wonderful South Hampshire. For a city such as Hull, with highly significant deprivation, a very low tax base and limited ability to generate its own income, it is essential that the Government's future financial settlement calculations recognise and make allowances for that. I ask the Minister not for his pity, but to give Hull its fair share of money and the money it needs. I ask him to reverse the cuts.

[Emma Hardy]

We heard today that Marks and Spencer is leaving the city of Hull. Our high streets are being decimated, so will the Government take action quickly and do something about business rates as well? To pull the funding from Hull—and from under the feet of the people of Hull—without making proper and necessary investment was always going to be a disaster. The Minister has the opportunity to own the Government's past mistakes, recognise the failings of his predecessors, and do something about them.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order. I call the shadow Minister, whom I thank for his generosity with his time.

3.45 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Walker; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) for securing this absolutely critical debate at such a critical time, as local authorities enter their budget-setting cycle. The council meetings will take place over the coming months, and councils will be forced again, for another year, to make absolutely devastating cuts to their local communities.

That is what this is about. When we talk about council cuts, it does not gain a lot of interest, but when we talk about people and communities, the impact on the future life chances of our young people and the way older people are cared for, it absolutely matters and is crucial to our communities. In truth, the fabric of our communities—the very foundation on which the Government are trying to rest future English devolution—is fragile and near breaking point.

There has been passion in the room today: 16 speakers on the Opposition Benches and four speakers on the Government Benches, including the Minister, who will speak shortly. That shows the real interest in the issue. None of us comes to Parliament to make our communities worse off. We have heard the desperate pleas from hon. Members who really care about the impact of the cuts on their communities, not for political advantage or to try to embarrass the Government, but because we live in our communities and see the impact on our neighbourhoods: the lack of funding in our schools, the effect on all those who cannot get the social care that they need, and the young people who have been denied the best possible start in life because children's centres are taking cuts or being closed entirely.

One of the Minister's colleagues has said that the way to revive our high streets is to open libraries on them, when hundreds of libraries are closing every year because the money is just not in the system. We need radical change and radical reform, because quite frankly, we have seen tinkering around the edges far too often, and that does not get to the crux of the issue. The crux of the issue is this: council tax and business rates have a role to play—they are important property taxes—but both have limitations and will be pushed to breaking point if the Government do not do something.

Council tax is a hugely regressive tax. It takes 7% of low-income families' incomes, compared with just over 1% of higher-income families' incomes. The more pressure

that is applied to council tax, the greater the pressure that is applied to low-income families. Time and again, the Government duck their responsibilities to provide central Government funding to support local communities, and the burden falls on council tax payers. Council tax will again be increased this year to the maximum level of 6%. On top of that, more money is required to go to the police, and in the case of combined authorities or mayors, even more money is applied to that precept as well, because the Government are walking away, saying, "Well, it's not our problem," when it is a problem absolutely of the Government's making. Those are political choices.

It was absolutely right that austerity meant that every Department had to take its fair share of cuts, but the evidence says that local government has lost 800,000 members of its workforce—it is at its lowest level since comparable records began—while the central Government workforce figure is at its highest level since comparable records began. That is not a fair distribution of cuts or austerity. Local government continues to take the pain and the burden.

Many important points have been made today and I would love to go through the list of hon. Members who spoke. One thing that inspires me about Parliament is just how rooted in community our parliamentarians are—particularly Labour parliamentarians. I congratulate my hon. Friends on giving their communities a voice. The Minister, who is respected in local government—I am not trying to make a ding-dong match out of this, some real questions need real answers—has an opportunity to set out his stall, to say what he stands for and what he believes in, and to stand up for the pressures that local governments face. Any Minister at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government who presided over a local government family that can barely afford to make ends meet would not be fulfilling their responsibilities.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Thank you. I will call Ms Gill to make her final remarks at fifteen seconds past four. I call the Minister.

3.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) on securing this incredibly important debate. The range of topics covered by Members' speeches illustrates the breadth and importance of what local government does, and I thank all Members for their very valuable contributions. I pay tribute to the work of local government and local councillors up and down the country.

I join the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), in paying tribute to parliamentarians' faith in their communities and their interaction with local government. I gently chide him and say that not just Labour parliamentarians have pride in their communities; Conservative Members have considerable pride. Conservative councillors up and down the country represent communities with great passion and dedication, as we have seen in every local election in recent times.

My vision is for local government and a set of councils that drive economic growth, help the most vulnerable in our society and build strong communities. If Members allow, I will take those areas in turn, and deal with as many of the points raised as possible. I apologise in advance if I cannot cover every single question, but I will be more than happy to follow up in person or by letter to anyone whose point was not answered.

We heard a lot about cuts and funding. I agree with the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston that local government has faced a challenging set of circumstances over the past few years. We do not need to replay all the arguments for why, but the task that this Government faced in bringing public finances back under control was considerable. Local government played a very large part in doing that. It has done a commendable job in those circumstances and I pay tribute to the work of local government, parties and councillors of all stripes in delivering high-quality public services in a difficult financial climate.

As we turn to the future, I believe things are looking up. In the settlement just published for local government for the next financial year, core spending power—the overall metric that looks at all the different income streams and grants available to local government—is forecast to increase almost 3% in cash terms. That represents a real-terms increase for local government and the highest year-on-year cash increase in some time. I know that is welcomed as a step in the right direction.

Beyond cash, local governments play a key role, as we heard, in supporting local economic growth. In the long term, that is the only way to ensure the vibrancy of our local communities and to raise the vital funds we need to fund our public services. The hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) said that local government should have the ability to raise its own funds; business rates retention is one such opportunity.

I am delighted that Birmingham in particular is in the fortunate position of keeping 100% of business rates growth that it generates; many local councils up and down the country want that. The hon. Lady asked whether we would and should pilot new forms of business rates retention; I am pleased to say that is exactly what this Government are doing. In the next year, 15 pilot areas covering 122 local authorities will benefit from being a 75% business rate retention area, generating in aggregate for the country £2.5 billion in incremental funds for local councils, to reward their effort to drive growth.

The hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) asked about the future of the system. I am pleased to say that the whole country should enjoy 75% business rates retention for 2021. That system is being designed—not in secret, as seemed to be alleged, but transparently with the sector—through a system design working group. The consultation is out and I urge anyone with an interest to contribute to the design of that new system.

One of the most undeniably crucial roles that local government continues to play is helping the most vulnerable in our society. Local authorities support the elderly, the disabled and our children in need. We owe councils an enormous debt of gratitude for the incredible work they do in this area. We heard many passionate speeches about their role. This Government are backing local

authorities to carry out those vital duties. As we heard last year, the Budget provided an additional £2 billion for social care and committed a further £1 billion of extra funding for local services.

The integration between social care and the NHS was raised by the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) and my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter). They are absolutely right to do that. I am pleased to say that we are taking very positive steps in that direction. The better care fund, which pulls together funds from the NHS, local government and social care, is working. Ninety three per cent. of local areas believe that the better care fund has improved integrated working between the NHS and social care. We are seeing that in the numbers: social care has freed up more than 1,000 beds a day since the February 2017—a 43% reduction in social care-related delayed transfers of care. I hope hon. Members agree that we are making progress in this vital area.

We heard about the changing demographics in places such as Essex from my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) and my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford). It is absolutely right that in the long term, as we look to a new funding mechanism for local government, capturing those kinds of rapidly changing demographics is something we must get right. We heard from many Members about the pressures on social care. I am determined to work with the sector to find a formula that reflects accurately and transparently what local councils face on the ground, so that all local councils of all stripes can ensure they are funded fairly.

On children's social care, I want particularly to point out the incredible work that Essex has done. My hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford put it excellently: we should focus on outcomes, not just the amount of money we pour in. Her council is a shining example of one that does that in children's social care, displaying innovation, as we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham. I am pleased to have spent time with Essex County Council. Many councils can and do learn a lot from how Essex has brought down the number of children in need, through a focus on early intervention and prevention.

The hon. Members for Birmingham, Edgbaston, for York Central (Rachael Maskell), for Leigh (Jo Platt) and for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) and others talked about the importance of prevention. I could not agree more with that sentiment. I am a passionate believer that councils can play a valuable role in ensuring that children do not end up in care, and that we can get to problems before they happen. My focus since getting this job has been on the troubled families programme. I am pleased to tell hon. Members that we have been working very hard to robustly understand the value that that programme brings and delivers on the ground in Members' communities. We will shortly make more announcements about that, and I want to work with all colleagues across the House.

Dr Poulter: On delayed discharges from care, the Minister is right to say that progress has been made, but the challenge is that many local authorities can no longer co-operate with the NHS in the way they could before, by having embedded social workers in NHS organisations to prevent hospital admissions in the first

[Dr Poulter]

place. That is a very big challenge, and it is driving up hospital admissions. Although the money may go to the acute sector, it will not prevent people from getting there in the first place. The Minister needs to look at that.

Rishi Sunak: Obviously, I defer to my hon. Friend's knowledge of the NHS, but I thank him for raising the point and I will make sure we discuss that with colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care as we design the iterations of the better care fund and related joint working practices.

Prevention is incredibly important. The troubled families programme is back with almost £1 billion of money over this cycle; it works with families facing very difficult circumstances, doing all the work we heard about from hon. Members. I hope they will join me in Parliament to make a strong case for investment in this type of programme for this type of service as we approach the spending review, to demonstrate to everybody what a valuable role those kinds of services and local government can play.

Local authorities build strong communities by being cohesive. They have been backed with a £100 million fund to ease local pressures resulting from migration. They do that by being connected, and they are being backed with a £420 million fund to ensure that the roads that our constituents use will transport them safely and quickly to where they need to go. They also need houses for all their constituents, as we have heard. That is why we have lifted the housing revenue account borrowing cap and are investing almost £1 billion in tackling rough sleeping.

It is a pleasure to champion local government here in Westminster. It is a role that I relish, and I look forward to working with all hon. Members as we approach the spending review, to make a compelling case for why local government deserves funding to making such valuable change on the ground, whether that is driving local growth, caring for the most vulnerable in our society or building strong communities. Local authorities up and down the country do an amazing job and they deserve our support.

3.59 pm

Preet Kaur Gill: I thank the Minister for his response and for paying tribute to councils up and down the country. I also thank him for acknowledging the real challenges local government faces. Although I welcome the £1 billion for the troubled families programme, there is still so much more to be done.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), who reminded us about the people and communities these cuts impact, and I thank all other hon. Members for their contributions. The right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel) touched on social care and the funding settlement. My right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) spoke about knife crime and youth violence in her constituency, and the decimation of neighbourhood policing up and down the country.

I thank the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter), my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) and the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), who talked about the outstanding social work practice in Essex despite the pressures on social workers on the frontline. As an ex-social work manager, I know those pressures only too well, but I commend Essex for its work in that respect.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Jo Platt) co-chairs Labour Friends of Local Government, ensuring that the voice of local government is heard loud and clear in the House. My hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) mentioned the plight of some of his constituents and funding cuts to early years services. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) made the excellent point that local authorities are the game changers, and my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) talked about his council facing bankruptcy within three years, which is shocking.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) made the point that cuts to preventive services mean paying more in the long term. We also heard from the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) and my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), who made a passionate speech about fairness. I thank all hon. Members and I thank you, Mr Walker.

Motion lapsed (Standing order No. 10(6)).

Coventry City Football Club

4.1 pm

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Coventry City football club and football stadium ownership.

I think this is the first time I have introduced a Westminster Hall debate with you in the Chair, Mr Walker. I may be wrong—if I am, you have my apologies. I thank Mr Speaker for granting the debate, which is very important to the people of Coventry, and to the people of Warwickshire in general. This is the fourth debate in recent years about the future of Coventry City football club. The previous debate took place last February, and the threat to the club's future has only worsened since. Its immediate future is now at risk, and urgent action must be taken.

I thank the Sky Blue Trust, which has worked tirelessly for the sake of the club and the city, and all the other Coventry City supporters both in the city and outside it. I also thank the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) for the hard work she put in to help our club when she was Sports Minister. I am very sorry that she had to resign because of Brexit, but that is another matter. That is no reflection on the new Minister, who will be judged on her record.

The background to this issue is the club's 12-year ownership by Sisu, during which time it has faced many difficulties. Under Sisu's stewardship, the club has fallen from the championship to league two, faced administration and received repeated points deductions. Despite its promotion to league one last season, instability off the pitch overshadows any success. The worst moment in the club's recent history was its year-long exile in Northampton in 2013-14. Although an agreement was eventually struck by the English Football League, the club's issues have only deepened since.

Since moving back to the Ricoh arena, the club has become a tenant of Wasps rugby football club. Wasps' decision to buy the Ricoh arena from Coventry City Council was a success for it, and it has become a welcome and growing part of sporting life in the city. However, relations between Wasps and Coventry City have become increasingly sour. Sisu's decision to challenge the sale of the Ricoh arena led to years of legal disputes, which culminated in the rejection of its case by the Court of Appeal last October. However, we must now wait to see whether the Supreme Court will hear a fresh appeal.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing a debate about this proud club, which, as he says, is important not just for the people of Coventry but for many people in and around Warwickshire. Although I agree with him and welcome the work of Wasps in the city, does he agree, in looking at all this and at the court case, that there is also a role for the Football League and the Football Association? This is not just about Coventry City, because other clubs face similar situations.

Mr Cunningham: My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) and I have both written to the Football League to ask for a meeting,

and that is pending. Obviously this matter is sub judice, so I do not want to go too far into the court case. Suffice it to say that, in the interest of progress, Sisu perhaps should set aside its application to go to the courts until we have tried to resolve the issue in another way. That would show a lot of good will on both sides.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the role that Sisu has played over the past five years. The hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) and I actually voted for the financial restructuring that stopped it bankrupting the company that then operated the stadium. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the blame for where the club is must fall four-square with Sisu, and that continuing to mess around in the courts is not going to move the club forward in any way, shape or form?

Mr Cunningham: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, who has contributed to our debates on this issue since coming to the House—I might disagree with him on other matters, but I give credit where credit is due. Sisu should sit back and reflect. It certainly has to get away from trying to distance itself from the club and saying that the club is a separate entity. We all know that it is not, and that must be made clear. I am certainly doing so in this debate.

While Sisu has spent huge sums on legal action, the real consequences have been felt by the club. There are huge doubts about Coventry City's future at the Ricoh arena. Wasps is refusing to keep the tenancy going, while Sisu continues its legal action. Regardless of the validity of Sisu's claim, it has again left the fans suffering as a result. As I said, the club's short-term future must be the priority. Coventry City must stay at the Ricoh arena next season. No other option is acceptable. To achieve that, all parties need to get back around the negotiating table.

There are currently too many red lines preventing talks. I understand the concerns of Wasps, but I ask it to reconsider for the sake of the city. For its part, Sisu must consider what it might gain from continued legal action. All fans agree that no judicial win would outweigh the risks the club faces. At some point the legal battle will end, either in the Supreme Court or before that stage, but that could still take many months—time the club simply does not have.

I have long argued that a mediator from outside football should adjudicate the dispute. Mediation has been attempted, with an apparent lack of success, but if the parties will not get back around the table, a mediator must bring them back. I want to talk to the Secretary of State about exactly how we take that forward, but that is another matter. I hope that the Minister will indicate whether the Secretary of State will meet us, along with the other local Members, to discuss the matter.

Too many football clubs have faced similar problems. In the Football League, those include Charlton, Portsmouth, Blackpool, Bolton and many others. In Scotland, of course, the famous Glasgow Rangers suffered a massive fall from grace due to liquidation. All those clubs have faced slightly different issues, but the common factor is poor stewardship by owners. Football club owners own something far more important than just a business. They owe it to the local community to run the club carefully and responsibly.

[Mr Jim Cunningham]

The fit and proper persons test is failing. It simply allows too many football clubs to fall into the hands of inappropriate people. I back Labour's pledge to empower fans. A perfect fit and proper persons test is impossible, so we must limit the damage that owners can cause. We could learn from the protection that football stadiums receive through the Localism Act 2011. If grounds can be protected as assets of community value, then clubs should be as well. Owners who mistreat their community clubs cannot be allowed to get away with it. The Government must consider ways to definitely give power back to the fans. Along with other MPs, I will now look to meet the Government and the English Football League as soon as possible. I have already indicated that and the Minister is aware.

Coventry City has enjoyed some notable successes on the pitch in recent seasons. However, with huge questions over the future of the club, the city has been left in the lurch. It is a terrible irony that this is happening in the year in which Coventry is the European City of Sport. A continuation of the tenancy at the Ricoh must now be agreed immediately. Discussions over the club's long-term ownership are needed, but the focus at the moment must be on the club's survival.

4.10 pm

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): There is a strong sense of déjà vu surrounding these proceedings. Around this time last year we stood in this Chamber and debated exactly the same subject: Coventry City football club's long-term future in its home city. At that time, the club's deal to play its home games at the Ricoh arena had been due to expire at the end of the 2017-18 season. Negotiations to extend the deal had long since stalled, due to Sisu's "batter them in the courts" approach, but ultimately an agreement to extend the deal until May 2019 was reached between the club, its owners and the landlords, Wasps.

That extension ensured that the club remained in its home city for another season. However, as I warned during last year's debate, the club was still likely to face the prospect of homelessness after May 2019, unless Sisu changed the way it did business. Wasps issued a similar warning to Sisu, stating that its pursuit of protracted litigation was a barrier to extending the deal further. With those warnings ringing in its ears, Sisu should have used the next 12 months to rebuild relationships, demonstrate a clear commitment to the club and its supporters, and overcome the barriers that could prevent the team playing at the Ricoh during the 2019-20 season and beyond. Instead, its actions over that period were just as divisive and toxic as they had been throughout the rest of its time in charge of the club. For Sisu, it was business as usual.

Consequently, here we are again, a year on, and the club is once more on the countdown to homelessness. That has left many fans again fearful that the club may leave Coventry or, worse still, cease to exist. Both scenarios would be disastrous for our city and for the club's loyal supporters; neither must be allowed to happen under any circumstances. Time and again, Sisu's actions have called into question its suitability, capability and fitness to own and run a football club. It has repeatedly acted contrary to the best interests of the club and has shown,

at best, indifference and, at worst, disdain for the loyal fans, the wider local community and the city of Coventry as a whole.

Our football club has a proud history and fantastic supporters, and we deserve—no, we demand—better. We want long-term stability, a permanent home in Coventry and owners we can trust. Sisu seems incapable of delivering this, and on that basis it should sell up and go. In the meantime, I would encourage all parties to get around the negotiating table and thrash out a deal that will see Coventry City football club playing in Coventry next season. Achieving such a deal is in everyone's best interests.

4.14 pm

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) on securing the debate. It is disappointing, to say the least, that we are here yet again. I say that because thousands and thousands of loyal fans, including myself, are now starting to think the unthinkable, which is that in just a few months, at the end of this season, a football club with 136 years of proud history could cease to exist, if it cannot extend its deal with Wasps at the Ricoh arena.

There are alternatives, but that would require the English Football League. I do not advocate the alternatives. Coventry City should be playing in Coventry. I certainly do not support the rumours I have heard that Coventry City might try to play at the Nuneaton Borough ground. Nuneaton is clearly not Coventry. Coventry City is a big club and Nuneaton does not have the infrastructure to support it, in terms of the roads or the policing, because Warwickshire Police is not set up to deal with such large crowds. We are not set up for it.

I will ask a few simple questions today. The Minister will be able to respond to some of them and other organisations can answer the others. We need clarity on what the English Football League is willing or unwilling to accept, and what pressure it can put on Coventry City. We need the owners to look at their moral obligations to a city, a community and fans who have supported this proud club, with its 136 year history, for decades; they have not done that, as Members have said. We also need to ask questions of Wasps. I do not blame Wasps for its view—I would possibly take the same view myself—but we need to ask if it is willing to allow what has been the biggest sporting club in Coventry to be in a situation where it might cease to exist.

We need to look at the roles of my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and my hon. Friend the Minister. We need to be realistic, because they, like organisations such as the Football League, do not have any direct levers in the dispute, but they can play a valuable part in bringing all parties together around a table, to discuss what can be brokered between them. I do not think it will be a utopian situation, where my right hon. and learned Friend will be able to direct anybody, but I think it will focus minds. It will be an opportunity for us, as Members of Parliament representing Coventry and Warwickshire, and for my right hon. and learned Friend, as the Secretary of State responsible for sport in this country, to make it clear to these organisations that Coventry City must stay in Coventry and must stay playing at the Ricoh arena.

4.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) for securing the debate and for the important, insightful and passionate contributions from Members from Coventry and Warwickshire. I commend the hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) for her passionate speech, in which she implored that communication and negotiation on behalf of the fans should be at the heart of the discussion. I am afraid that we are in an ongoing Catch-22 situation and time is running out. It seems to be appropriate on this Brexit negotiation day that nothing seems to be changing and there is something of an impasse.

It is hugely satisfying to hear why football clubs up and down the country rightly mean so much to local communities. I could not agree more with the impassioned pleas about the care that should be taken with our local football clubs by stakeholders and owners, and that that should be focused on their long-term futures. Football clubs do not belong to anybody. They are not pawns to be used in property disputes, across the boardroom table or in legal disputes. Football clubs should be fuelled and supported by their local communities, achieving a special place in towns and cities. Their existence and continual purpose is to bring fans together to support the game that they love, which is vital in good and bad times.

I am afraid that in this situation, we are in a bad time. The sorry saga of Coventry City and the Ricoh arena is familiar to us all, but it remains disappointing that, just as my predecessors have done, I find myself debating this very subject as we see the clock running down. We must look at who is responsible for the club and has the best interests of the community and fans at heart. I am afraid it feels as if nobody can currently put that to the fore.

The hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), who is no longer in his place, rightly asked about football authorities and the need to look at the broader issue of leadership and the protection of clubs. We await a review finding, but it is fundamentally right that the FA look at this. It is vital that we provide clarity for fans and local communities. The processes must be in place to protect our local clubs and see them as community assets and, as I said, not pawns in a broader scheme.

I am not taking sides in any dispute, but it is a monumental shame that we continue to find ourselves in this situation, especially with a club of this size that means so much across Warwickshire and the city of Coventry. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) about the proud history of the club, so it is right that we focus on the fact that in nine months' time an important football club could be homeless and sadly might end up out of the league altogether. That is the reality of the situation.

In terms of immediate action for Coventry City, I will work with the Secretary of State to convene an urgent meeting with the various parties to see if a solution can be found to ensure that the club has a stadium to call home for next season. That is an imperative for loyal fans, who want answers. As my hon. Friend said, I can give no guarantees, but I hope that that meeting can

bring about a meeting of minds, press together those interested parties beyond the courtroom, and emphasise the importance that Coventry as a whole places on its football club. No club should be forced to leave its historical home and local fan base. We have seen that in the past in football, and it is wrong that that might be the case.

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who has a history of fighting for the city of Coventry in his previous incumbency, that we need to stand ready to act as the clock ticks down. I will try not to do any more Brexit notes here, but the long-term plans must be put to the fore. I would be delighted for all hon. Members in this room to come and meet me to ensure that the football club, its future and what should be happening are put forward.

There must be a demonstration that people are ready to set aside their differences and act to ensure that the ongoing legal arguments can be pushed away, so that the football club can get a clear direction for what will happen in the future. I reiterate that it is not the Government's direct responsibility to be the custodians of one particular football club, but it is our responsibility to hold to account those club owners who sign up to be custodians of a club but do not show that to be in their hearts.

It is right that we work with the FA and local community; while there has been no better time to be involved in football club ownership, we must do it right. The administration of the game and what is around it matter. As broadcasters continue to be interested in our wonderful game, there are side issues that we must look at. Attendances throughout the English game are at their highest, but people must not go on losing their local connections. Those revenues are vital and we must keep the link between fans and revenues.

Mr Jim Cunningham: I welcome the fact that the Minister and the Secretary of State are going to get together not only the MPs, but all interested parties. We would not expect the Secretary of State, or the Minister for that matter, to resolve this, but they can act as a catalyst to remind the parties of their responsibilities to the broader community in Coventry as well as to the fans.

Mims Davies: I absolutely agree; it is a chance to remind the parties of the broader responsibilities that our owners have in football, and to hold them to account. It is also a broader lesson for football as a whole. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton, there are particular questions from across the realm here, but it is valuable to have a meeting of minds and show that, as I say, football clubs are not pawns to be bought and used while neglecting local links and forgetting where the fan base, the revenue and the local pride and heart come from.

My Department has a responsibility, which the Secretary of State in particular sees absolutely clearly, to ensure the sustainability of our clubs. We must ensure that our club owners who come in bring the positives and leave the clubs in a better state than they found them, rather than decimating them and disconnecting them from local communities. As I have already said, responsibility also lies with the football authorities. They govern the sport and set the rules and regulations that club owners

[Mims Davies]

should comply with. It is vital that those who are fans of their local club feel that that process is in place and that people cannot ride roughshod over it.

Our football authorities simply must look again at ways to protect their clubs in the long term. It is vital to ensure that owners go beyond merely abiding by the rules and that there are long-term business plans and proper assurances about the protection of the club and, for this football club in particular, a permanent home where it plays its matches. We must provide clarity to the fans and ensure that lessons are learned from the situation we are in. If football's current rules are not good enough, new rules may need to be brought in. If that is not sufficient, we need to look at the case for Government to help football and remind it of this situation. I stand ready to act.

I will meet the Football Association next week to discuss the many challenges in football at present, and I will continue to work closely with it and the professional leagues to drive through changes that are needed in the sport. I will remind them of the crucial responsibility they have to supporters, to the fortunes of football and to their clubs. It is imperative that those clubs continue to engage openly with and listen to their fans on all the important issues. Without question, in Coventry City's case, that should include prioritising an open dialogue and making plans for its future home stadium.

To sum up, it is my belief that the Government should not involve themselves directly in the fortunes of any individual club, but more and more we are being dragged into these types of disputes. This cannot become the norm. It suggests that perhaps football is not able to govern itself—something we need to be ready to tackle. I believe in this case we can take steps to disprove that suggestion, but we are on a precipice in terms of timescales. The Government are prepared to champion the game, but the authorities that govern it must ensure that we all get the outcomes that fans, above all, want and expect. In the case of Coventry, I remain hopeful that interventions locally by Members of Parliament and the Government, with local assistance, can help to find a suitable future for the club. It rests in the hands of the club and the stadium owner, but if I, this Department or the Secretary of State can help them to realise that sooner, all the better. We stand ready.

Question put and agreed to.

Long-term Capital for Business

4.28 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered provision of long-term capital for business.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker, and it is truly a privilege once again to lead a debate in Westminster Hall. Long-term capital for business is critical to the future of our economic wellbeing. Business knows business best, and in many ways the industry panel patient capital review was the genesis of the debate. That review, published in October 2017, was written by experienced and successful business leaders, and I commend it to hon. Members.

I recognise that the debate is somewhat overshadowed by what is happening in the main Chamber and what will transpire later this evening. That said, I cannot think of a better time to hold a debate on this subject. These are critical days for the future of our country, and we will be making critical decisions. It is incumbent on us to put the long-term interests of our country at the heart of the decisions we make. Our country, its people and those who come after us will not thank us if we make decisions based solely on narrow, short-term or selfish interests.

What is true for our country in our current predicament is also true when it pertains to the fortunes of business. Although there are undoubtedly risks in making strategic decisions for the long term, there are greater perils in considering the tactical only here and now, in looking for immediate returns and being unprepared to consider the bigger picture in a way that a long-term view necessitates. I am afraid that one life lesson that we must sadly keep learning is connected to what is often described as the law of the harvest: we can reap only what we are prepared to sow in the first place. The harvest comes in due season, but we must be prepared to be patient. I want us to reflect on the pitfalls of short-termism, and the missed opportunities and failures of a lack of a long-term vision.

As every colleague who ever worked with me in my previous business career would attest to, I am no accountant. However, it is insightful that, in accountancy terminology, a long-term investment is defined as an investment that is to be held for more than a single year, which hardly seems long term to me.

We have quite rightly heard a great deal about the UK productivity gap. Productivity is defined by the Office for National Statistics as the output per worker, output per job and output per hour, and it is ordinarily calculated by dividing the annualised GDP per capita by the average annual hours worked per employee. Countries with a track record of rising productivity tend to benefit from higher rates of growth and low inflation. It is the golden fleece of national economics, if I may describe it as such.

Productivity in the UK over the past few years has not been our best feature, and we rank poorly compared with other developed economies. We are currently at No. 17 in the world rankings, with our average hourly productivity across the economy being £17.37, compared with the Germans, who produce £23.30 per hour, the Americans, who produce £25.74 per hour, and the Danes, who produce £28.87 per hour.

Imagine for a moment that we were as productive as the most productive of the developed economies. It would transform our fortunes. We could pay ourselves more, and as a result of paying more in taxation we could invest many billions more in our NHS and other public services. The increased profitability in the private sector would also yield increased dividends, which in turn would be good news for our pension funds.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Has my hon. Friend looked at how many countries have a means of producing long-term capital, and at what sort of competitive advantage our having one would give us as a result?

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that timely intervention. That is the very point I will come on to. Let us examine the critical reason for our lack of national productivity, again comparing investment in our economy with that of the world's leading economies. A good indicator is the level of gross fixed capital formation as percentage of GDP, which is the value of the acquisitions of new or existing fixed assets in the economy less the disposal of fixed assets. It is just a single measure.

In 2017—the most up-to-date World Bank figures are for 2017—we invested 16.8p for every £1 of GDP. The Chinese invested 41.8p for every £1 of their wealth. We also lag significantly behind developed western economies. For every £1 of GDP, Italy invests 17.5p, Poland 18p, Germany 20.3p, Denmark 20.4p, Spain 20.5p, France 22.5p, Finland 22.6p, Canada 23p, and Belgium 23.3p. That is but one measurement of investment, but it says something about future business activity and also about our confidence in the future. It is my firm belief that much of our productivity gap in this country is due to that indicative investment gap. We are simply not investing enough, and I contend that that is because there is an insufficiency of quality patient capital in our economy.

It is a much-worn anecdote that, while we come up with great ideas, breakthrough technologies and transformative product concepts, all of that good stuff ends up being commercialised somewhere else by someone else. As a young Scot, my pride in being a Scot was spurred by the great stories of our inventors, scientists and engineers. I believe it is a valid contention—one I am prepared to stand by—that the modern world was largely designed by the Scots. The litany of great Scottish contributors include James Watt, Alexander Graham Bell, John Logie Baird, James Chalmers and John Dunlop. I am delighted to give way at this point to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The world may have been designed by the Scots, but it was built by the Irish, especially the Ulstermen.

Stephen Kerr: A timely intervention, as ever, from the hon. Gentleman. These British Isles are a crucible for invention. The genius of the people of these islands, their creative free thinking and their imagining of the unimaginable has created whole new branches of sciences and technology and whole new categories of product. That native, creative, entrepreneurial spirit is alive and kicking.

Entrepreneurs are among us in abundance. The number of start-ups in this country is at an all-time high. Entrepreneurs are launching themselves and their ideas on to the high seas of enterprise in greater numbers

than at any time in our past. Our universities and other research institutes are brimming with exceptional people having very bright ideas. Some of those ideas, if carefully nurtured through the commercialisation process, will not only continue to change the modern world for the better but will be the source of the wealth of this nation for generations to come. However, they must be nurtured, and that nurturing relies, in substantial part, on the availability of long-term patient capital.

All too often at present these small to medium-sized businesses fall prey to predators, who invest in them for the short term and then sell on without having made the necessary long-term commitment to bring the businesses to their full potential. I am not arguing against the importance of short-term investment or venture capitalism, but I argue that it is wrong to surrender our whole economy to that model of capital. Some 650,000 new companies were formed in Britain last year, but the number that scale up is relatively small. Some of those are lifestyle businesses that suit the people running them, but many business owners are driven by a sense of purpose—to build a growing, successful business—and they very often come up against the obstacle of the limited availability of patient capital.

John Howell: My hon. Friend is being very generous with his time. He may be about to come on to the digital industry. It is a major industry and such a fundamental part of our economy, and it needs investment, as I know from my own costs when I ran a company involved in that area.

Stephen Kerr: Anyone would think that my hon. Friend and I were working in some form of symbiosis, because the very next thing I wanted to say was that the need for investment is never more pertinent than in the technology sector, in which large American corporations invest speculatively and then buy companies when they reach a sufficient level of development. One reason that so many British businesses go that way is that they reach a stage where their access to affordable long-term capital dries up. This is not just about start-ups but about how a business accesses capital to be able to invest in new assets or capabilities.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): My hon. Friend makes a valid point about access to capital for companies going into their mid-stage development. He makes the point about size, but is it not also about geography? Many companies that are further away from the capital bases in London and Edinburgh, especially across Scotland and in northern England, do not get that same access to capital. It is incumbent on us to make sure that our companies can be connected with capital, so that they can grow in the way we should all want them to.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for that very valuable intervention. I will return to that idea shortly.

As I said, this is not just about start-ups; it is about how businesses access capital to be able to invest in new assets or capabilities. There is an abundance of evidence to suggest that our capital investment system is addicted to short-termism and is risk-averse. Risk is built into the capitalist system. Investment, by definition, includes a

[Stephen Kerr]

calculation of exposure to risk. The more risk-averse we become, the less inclined we are to invest in new ideas or ventures, because they might fail; the returns might not materialise. It is implicit in—I would argue essential to—the free enterprise economic system that there is acceptance of the inherent risk of failure. However, anecdotally, we have become less willing to accept that risk.

The banks obviously were badly burnt because of their recklessness in respect of risk. They then set about recapitalising their businesses, at the expense of small and medium-sized businesses. That led to some of the gross abuses and alleged criminality that is still the subject of ongoing inquiry. That is an outstanding injustice; it has still to be remedied. I do not want to spend too long on the past misdemeanours of the banks—we have had many debates on that subject in Westminster Hall and the main Chamber, and I am sure that we will have plenty more—but restoring confidence to the small and medium-sized businesses of this country necessitates that something be done about the scandals of the past decade. Banks will not take a long-term view, and if we entrust our productivity to them we will have no long-term economic future.

That said, I certainly do not want to be guilty of using this debate as a platform to spread doom and gloom—that is not in my nature—because there are very many good examples of private sector long-term investment. CityFibre is a good example. It is investing £10 million in Stirling. That will make fibre-to-the-premises ultrafast broadband available to every household and business in the city. Stirling will soon become one of the top digital cities in the United Kingdom—something that I am proud of. When we look at the bigger picture, we see that CityFibre is investing £2.5 billion across the UK. The investment will take many years to recoup, but the investors have faith in the product and are willing to be patient while the company makes the money back. Their planning horizon is measured in decades. Now, that is something akin to my definition of long-term investment.

Around the world, many countries, although they do not have this particular set of problems and although they have not cracked things entirely, have a different system of capital deployment. I would like to pause on the German example—I have used this before in Westminster Hall. I have already explained the successful indicators of productivity and capital investment in the German economy. KfW is the German national development bank. It came about as a result of the Marshall plan; it was set up for the purposes of post-war reconstruction. It supports infrastructure investment, lending some €47 billion, it acts as a lender to local authorities and, most importantly, it supports small and medium-sized enterprises. In 2017 it lent some €8.2 billion to small and medium-sized enterprises for start-ups and scale-ups. It lends money, provides equity funding and provides mezzanine financing to cover all aspects of capital investment. Some 90% of the bank's funding is from the private sector, in the form of debt that is backed by bonds. It is owned in partnership between the federal Government and the individual states. It does not appear on the national balance sheet of the Federal Republic of Germany.

As the United Kingdom leaves the European Union, we will no longer have access to the European Investment Bank. That bank invested more than £2.5 billion in the UK in 2018. That was our money that was invested—it was gleaned from borrowing on the back of the British taxpayer—but we will need to find a way to replace that level of financing, because there will be a hole in the capital provision landscape. We need to look at the investment bank model in detail. It would fulfil the need for a patient capital investment vehicle, as outlined in the industry panel review. The case for a major intervention in this way is, in my opinion, justified. The lagging productivity in our economy is a major risk to our economic prosperity, and we need action now. This cannot wait any longer. It especially cannot wait until after we have resolved the issue of Brexit. Our thinking in this area is a vital part of our preparations for our economic wellbeing after we have left the European Union.

We have the British Business Bank, which has some of the functionality of a national investment bank, so there is tacit acceptance by Government of the problem that I have been attempting to describe. The big issue with the British Business Bank, as I understand it, is that it does not seem to have equal coverage across all parts of the United Kingdom.

Luke Graham: As my hon. Friend is talking about the British Business Bank, will he join me in welcoming the expansion of the bank announced in the Budget, which places people on the ground in Scotland? He and I have been asking for that since we came to this place.

Stephen Kerr: Yes. I am grateful for that very important point of information. It is important that the British Business Bank has representation in all parts of the United Kingdom, but currently it is still limited in its mission because of its limited scope of operation and it does not really behave like a bank, even though that word is in the title. Its model of supplying finance via existing investment funds means that its base of operations is quite limited and seems to favour, if you will forgive me, Mr Walker, the south-east. I am happy to be corrected, but the British Business Bank does not seem to have the kind of extensive operation on the ground that it needs in Scotland, even with the announcement in the Budget.

I would like to see the British Business Bank operating across the breadth of the United Kingdom, interacting with the economy on the basis of a clearly defined mission, including small and medium-sized businesses, operating at arm's length from the UK Government, and raising its own capital rather than simply being a channel through which public funds are disbursed.

I am not being critical of the British Business Bank as it stands, because I am a fan, but I am advocating that it evolve into something more. That something more is what the industry panel patient capital review advocated—namely, an investment vehicle to support the scaling up of British businesses and capital-intensive start-ups. By investing in equity directly through such a vehicle, we can harness the wealth of our nation to deliver on the promise of the industrial strategy and to make our economy fit for the future.

The UK economy is dominated by the service sector, and there is nothing amiss about services, but we need to rebalance our economy and we need the availability

of long-term capital in order to become the best country in the world in which to build a business. In the post-war era, too few British businesses have grown to become multibillion-pound global corporations.

There is more that we can do. We should look at other ways of releasing under-productive cash for equity funding. We need to take a healthier approach to our risk appetite as a country. Changing the culture is essential. We need to harness our savings and pensions. With some innovative mechanisms, we can unlock that money and put it to use in our economy. Using the tax system and the savings guarantee system in innovative ways, we could revolutionise the way companies get finance and the ultimate source of that finance. Helping people to acquire equity stakes through shareholder co-operatives, saving schemes and direct micro investment could all work towards a new culture of investment.

To that end, we need the Treasury to be as innovative as the entrepreneurs who fuel our economy. We need to see ideas being tried and tested and the apparatus of Government swinging behind the idea of long-term investment and rewarding those who make such investments. A starting point would be to increase the thresholds for the tax on dividends and seek to band it to allow smaller-scale investors to pay no tax whatsoever on dividends, especially if they can be incentivised to maintain their investment over a longer period.

The industry panel review on patient capital made a number of recommendations that need to be addressed. It identified the need to provide patient capital to help entrepreneurs to be successful; I have already mentioned its idea for a patient capital investment vehicle. It also proposes a licensed scheme to allow patient capital investment companies to be founded that would be venture capital funds licensed to raise money from the markets, guaranteed by Government. Although I agree with that recommendation, it needs to be a truly national venture, with specific guidance about the development of capital funds outside London and the south-east.

The review also proposes a change in the way taxation hits investors when they seek to invest in developing a company past its start-up phase. Ensuring that tax incentives for equity and venture capital funding are there when companies are seeking capital to expand, rather than simply during the start-up phase, will allow investment to flow more freely into medium-size companies.

I have a few straightforward asks of the Government. First, I would like to see a formal response to the industry panel review, alongside an action plan for the implementation of its recommendations. If I have missed it, I am happy to be corrected. Secondly, we need a full analysis of the possibility of a national investment bank or development bank, as I outlined earlier. Thirdly, we need a statement about the replacement vehicle for the investments made by the European Investment Bank, which we will no longer have access to.

Finally, I would like some reassurance from the Minister that the Treasury is ready to innovate to improve the availability and quality of long-term capital. We need to encourage a positive investment culture and we need a creative response from the Treasury to unlock and harness the wealth of this nation in the delivery of a modern industrial economy that is fit for the future.

My hope, in bringing this debate to Westminster Hall, was to focus the House on the substance of how we can improve the environment for entrepreneurial

success and wealth creation. It is perfectly understandable that we have become distracted by the politics of Brexit. One day soon, I hope and pray, we will turn the page on Brexit, and this House will fully turn its attention to the vitally important agenda of ensuring the long-term productivity of our economy. It is timely, because it is about our future.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): We have 18 minutes before the wind-ups. I call Jim Shannon. Jim, please do not be more than six minutes.

4.51 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Walker, for calling me. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) on securing the debate. In the short time in which he has been a Member of Parliament, he has made a name for himself on the issues that he brings to this Chamber. Well done to him. It is also good to see him back to health after the illness he had just before Christmas.

This issue is very important to me. The banking and financial conduct industry is increasingly interesting to me. Many of the debates today reflect that. What began with constituents highlighting cases that concern the individual have, after many hours, left me increasingly concerned about the entire sector. I believe it is entirely right and proper that we bring this to the Minister's attention, so that he can act. I look forward to the Minister's response at the end of the debate.

I read the "Patient Capital Review: Industry Response". I completely agree that there is an urgent need for a mechanism to realise three aims: first, unlocking institutional and retail investors' capital; secondly, increasing the number of venture capital funds that can deploy patient capital at scale; and, thirdly, increasing returns to scale up investments.

I wholeheartedly agree that the United Kingdom is, in many respects, a great place to start and grow a business. In recent years, successful Government policy interventions such as the enterprise investment scheme and the venture capital trusts have helped to develop a thriving start-up community. Northern Ireland has become the world capital for cyber-security, due to investment in skill provision and adjustments for businesses to invest in the Province. We welcome that, and we are pleased and proud to say that.

Only in December, US cyber-security firm Imperva announced that it would create 220 jobs within its new Belfast base—job improvements and opportunities are coming all the time—which is expected to bring the total number of cyber-security jobs to over 1,500 for the first time. That is a 15-fold increase in the past 10 years, so it is really good news, which I am pleased to report to the House.

That investment is due to the concerted effort to find space in the market and to provide all that is needed. We have businesses that seek to make the most of that, but are prevented from doing so by the lack of affordable capital investment. I believe Government must invest in the long game and make provision. We all know the phrase, "speculate to accumulate"—how real and true that is.

[*Jim Shannon*]

Mr Walker, I am no man's fool, as you and other hon. Members know. I well understand that funding capital should ideally come through the private sector, but to build in a post-Brexit age, it is imperative that we put our money where our mouths are and invest in ourselves, in order to establish and encourage international confidence in the United Kingdom outside Europe.

I support the panel's suggestions for addressing those issues, such as the creation of the patient capital investment vehicle, to enable the aggregation and deployment of both retail and institutional capital for investment in UK scale-up businesses and capital-intensive research and development-based businesses. We have to invest, so that those sectors do better. The vehicle would invest £1 billion annually, primarily in UK venture capital funds and other investors in high-growth businesses, and catalyse an additional £2 billion of private investment by providing up to only 30% of the equity capital. Perhaps that is a bit technical. None the less, it explains how the system works.

The vehicle would be a new entity, independent of the UK Government, but with a Government-defined mandate, including some Government investment to signal strategic intent to build this. I ask the Minister, what are the Government's intentions on that? If they can help—I think if they can, they will—it will be a step in the right direction. We will all benefit across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. In order to attract institutional capital, investments in the PCIV might receive favourable capital treatment, similar to the Prudential Regulation Authority's treatment of bank investments in the Business Growth Fund—the BGF. The phrase “go big or go home” seems to be in operation here, but the gains are as necessary as oxygen. The message is clear: this nation believes in its worth and ability, and this nation backs itself as a global leader.

I use the phrase again: we must speculate to accumulate. Businesses are ready and waiting. We have proved in Belfast and Northern Ireland that if we plan ahead and fill the skills pool, investment, jobs and a boost to the economy will most certainly follow. I believe in this wonderful United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We are better together. That is a fact. I ask the Minister, do the Government believe that, too? If they do, show it and sow it, so we can all reap the harvest.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): I am going to call Luke Graham, who will speak for five and a half minutes, because he is a really good guy.

4.56 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I will try to be even briefer than that, if possible. I want to make some quick points on, first, the regional nature and importance of capital spreading out around the United Kingdom, and, secondly, innovation. Finally, I will ask the Minister always to think about the British interest and not to let devolution become a barrier to investment across the United Kingdom.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) made some fantastic points about the importance of long-term patient capital across the United Kingdom.

We always talk about the regions of England and Scotland as a whole, but it is the regions of Scotland, and beyond that, the counties and towns in Scotland, that we should consider.

My constituency is particularly rural, and my county of Clackmannanshire is post-industrial. We have been starved of investment for a very long time. It is important that both public and private investment is connected, and funnelled here as easily and simply as it is to many of the incubators in London, and around the universities of Edinburgh, Oxford and Cambridge. There are some great models out there—we just need to expand them to other parts of our countries.

Innovation is really important. We have a fantastic opportunity ahead of us to capitalise on the financial centres we have in Edinburgh, Belfast and London, and to look at innovative solutions, not only in company models or ways and types of financing, but in the infrastructure that can be used across the country. I have written about reintroducing regional stock exchanges as a way to try to raise more local capital. That was used a lot in the 19th century to help pay for some of the railways that now connect our country and it could be used again to help fund infrastructure, from broadband to additional road infrastructure and company infrastructure. Especially when trying to encourage more rural investment, it could help some of the communities raise funds locally as well.

It is important that the Government play a full part in creating a real ecosystem. They are not there to make every decision. It is not for our constituents and companies to live on the Government's shilling. The Government should put their money into infrastructure, to ensure that they are developing the framework that enables private enterprise to flourish, and ensuring that any public investment is there to stimulate research and innovation, and to back the entrepreneurs who do so much for our country and individual communities. As I say, the Government can be more innovative. Brexit need not apply. They can look at things such as regional stock exchanges, rural enterprise zones and expanding the powers of the British Business Bank, as my hon. Friend said, to make it a true investment bank.

To reiterate my point and the frustration that I have felt since I have been in this place, sometimes—I know it does not come from my hon. Friend the Minister—it appears that the Treasury is not so much a British Treasury but an English Treasury, which becomes incredibly frustrating for people trying to fight for projects in Scottish constituencies. That holds for hon. Members in other parts of England and in Wales too, although Northern Irish Members seem to make quite a good job of it. I encourage the Minister to remember that we are still one country and that we need British investment decisions from British Ministers.

Even where areas are devolved, there is no law—we have checked in the Library—to stop Westminster investing in devolved areas. That artificial barrier has been set up through a cultural shift in the civil service, and it has not been helped by the current Administration in Edinburgh, but it does not need to be there.

In future, we as British parliamentarians should not see devolution as a barrier, but should work across every level of Government to make sure that investment comes from the centre and reaches our frontline communities, so when we increase the block grant to

Scotland, as the Minister has, that money will go to our local council services, which it does not at the moment. That will also make sure that when we as individual MPs lobby for projects in our constituencies, the money will come to our constituencies directly from Westminster.

Infrastructure needs more, and our governmental frameworks need more. The Government have it within their power to create an ecosystem that takes all the innovation and energy of the United Kingdom and really increases the prosperity of all our constituents. I hope the Minister will outline some of his vision for that today.

5.1 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) on securing this important debate. I was not aware that he was unwell over Christmas, but I am delighted to see him in the pink of health.

It is a rare treat to be in a debate with two Tories and a Democratic Unionist party Member where I have to pick my differences in their speeches; they made many points that I agree with. In particular, the hon. Member for Stirling discussed productivity. It has long been an issue that I have talked about. It has been holding back business and people for far too long, and I agree with his sentiment. As a result of paying more in taxation, we can invest more in our services—that is the consequence of getting that kind of result in productivity.

I also agree about the lack of focus across the nations of the UK. It does feel like an English Treasury; we make that point regularly. It is also a fact that the south-east gains far more traction than any other part of the UK, including the regions of England, Northern Ireland and Wales. There was a lot to agree with in that regard as well.

It is particularly poignant to have this debate today, as the biggest threat to business access to finance comes from Brexit. Government Members, particularly those in favour of Brexit, would like that to be ignored in this debate, but I do not think it can be. Brexit is already reducing the number of customers, the size of workforces, and the level of confidence. Instead of building our economy, investors are voting with their wallets by pulling nearly £20.6 billion from UK equity funds since the vote in 2016, according to EPFR.

Luke Graham: The hon. Gentleman makes a point about Brexit being a threat. Does he agree with a developer in Alloa in my constituency that the biggest threat to raising finances is not Brexit but the threat of a second independence referendum?

Drew Hendry: It will come as no surprise to the hon. Gentleman that I do not agree with that. He has gone from making a sterling point about the English Treasury to saying that independence is somehow a threat. I do not think so; I think it is a marvellous opportunity. As he has raised the issue, I will say that it has been brought into sharp focus in this place over recent months.

As Marian Bell of Alpha Economics pointed out, businesses that were told to prepare for a no-deal Brexit have relocated their operations and those decisions may not be reversed, even in the event of the best possible economic outcome—even if that is remaining in the EU. As Brexit inches closer, the UK services sector has

recorded the slowest sales growth in two years, according to the British Chambers of Commerce, whose survey of 6,000 British firms shows that labour shortages and price pressures persist.

Scotland is a world leader in patient long-term capital, but Brexit risks lenders following the example of a well-known hon. Member, the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), in moving business to Dublin or the continent. We are being Mogged over Brexit.

In the face of austerity, we have to make different decisions to support business. The Scottish Government are introducing the Scottish national investment bank, which will provide patient long-term capital to support Scotland's firms. In contrast, as we have heard, the UK Green Investment Bank, which was privatised by the Government, is now bereft of its UK focus.

The aim is for the Scottish national investment bank to invest in businesses and communities by 2020, subject to regulatory approval. It is backed by our commitment of at least £2 billion of investment in the first 10 years, which paves the way for a step change in innovative and inclusive growth.

We also welcome the plan for a Scottish stock exchange in the second quarter of 2019, with a focus firmly on social and environmental companies that are worth between £50 million and £100 million. The plan has now secured a partnership agreement with the major European stock market operator Euronext, meaning that the first Scottish stock exchange will operate since the closure of the trading floor in Glasgow in 1973.

That is all being done in the shadow of Brexit, which was a vehicle aroused solely to calm Tory infighting. As chaos reigns on the Conservative Benches, there is as much chance of success for business as for the economy of our people, who will ultimately pay the price in the long term.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): I call Marion Fellows to speak for the Scottish National party for up to five minutes.

5.6 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship yet again, Mr Walker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) on securing this important, and sometimes quite consensual, debate. The hon. Gentleman spoke fully and passionately, and with a great deal of knowledge and expertise, about how we can best provide businesses across the UK with ongoing patient long-term funding. When I learned accountancy, however, long-term funding was generally for between seven and 10 years, and even longer, rather than just over a year—that is a blast from the past; it is many years since I did accountancy.

I was interested to hear the hon. Gentleman talk about productivity and refer to Denmark, which is a small, independent nation leading the charge on productivity. Long may Scotland follow. He also talked briefly about the reasons for national productivity being linked to levels of investment and how, especially in Scotland, companies have been innovative but they start to slow down and fail because they cannot get the correct long-term investment. That is a real ongoing issue.

[*Marion Fellows*]

My hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) talked about the Scottish national investment bank, which we hope to see become fully functional in the early 2020s. That will be a huge boost to small industries in Scotland.

The hon. Member for Stirling also talked about the lack of money that will now come from Europe, and he looked quite favourably on small German companies. For many years, this country has looked enviously at Germany and we need to take on board what it does to help businesses. He also called for tax incentives and talked about needing a full analysis of a national development bank to look at what it could do post Brexit.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) gave us his usual full and frank views on where things are going in Northern Ireland. He talked about the cyber-security industry and how it is helping, and how the United Kingdom, of which he is a great proponent, should invest in itself post Brexit. He wants the Government to help with that. In fact, I think the Minister has a lot of explaining to do as to how he will move things forward.

The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) said that devolution should not be a barrier to development, and I totally agree with that. On many occasions, colleagues of mine have stood in the main Chamber here and asked about city deals, whereas the Scottish Government have invested increasing amounts in various city deals without getting the same amount of money from the Treasury.

Luke Graham: I have been in negotiations about two city deals that impact on my constituency. Does the hon. Lady recognise that the obstacles do not just come from central Government for the devolved Administrations, but from the devolved Administrations for the central Government as well? So if there is to be a little bit of give, does she appreciate that it has to come from both sides of the argument?

Marion Fellows: I agree that in any negotiations there has to be give on both sides but the Scottish Government are giving more in a practical sense, and that is really what the people involved in the city deals on Tayside, in Stirling and in other areas of Scotland are really concerned about.

It is also very important that, when we talk about innovation and moving small businesses forward, we consider regional stock exchanges, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned. I was very interested that my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey talked about the Scottish stock exchange in Glasgow closing in 1973. The square that it was in has been renamed Nelson Mandela Square, but I remember it being Stock Exchange Square for many years.

We will all be very interested to hear how the Minister responds to this debate, because none of us in this place disagrees that there is a need for long-term and patient funding for businesses to thrive and grow, to increase prosperity for all our citizens, and to increase the economy in Scotland and the rest of the UK.

5.11 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): It is a delight to see you in the Chair, Mr Walker.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), who I am glad to see is back in his rightful place after his illness before Christmas, on securing this debate, and I thank the hon. Members for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham), for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), which are all beautiful places, and for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), who has just spoken, for their contributions to the debate.

Patient capital must be set in the context of a wider economic perspective and not just seen on its own. The structure of our economy has fundamentally changed over the past four decades. In the early 1980s, 26% of UK jobs were in manufacturing compared with only 8.1% now; in 1948, 46% of GDP came from the service sector and now it is 80%. That is largely due to the decisions of successive Governments, which effectively said that as long as headline growth was strong and the welfare state redistributed resources sufficiently, it did not matter where growth came from.

However, the financial crash and its aftermath have clearly demonstrated that that theory was wrong, and that reliance on an unfettered and highly volatile financial sector has not worked for the vast majority of people and businesses. Headline growth may have recovered, but it is still pretty sluggish, and nothing exemplifies that better than the way that banks have actually shifted their activities away from lending to businesses.

The Institute for Public Policy Research's Commission on Economic Justice said:

"Across a whole range of economic indicators, the UK economy exhibits serious underlying weaknesses. On investment, research and development, trade and productivity, we perform worse than most of our European neighbours—and have done so not merely over the last ten years, but for much of the last 40."

As the hon. Member for Stirling has said, productivity and investment are stagnant. That seems to be the way of the economy at the moment and it has got to change. A 2017 report by the ScaleUp Institute highlighted significant capital barriers to the growth of business, beyond the start-up phase, in the UK. And of course there is Brexit, but I will leave that to other people to talk about; I will not do so now.

Other countries use state direction of innovation and investment to carve out vital areas of expertise in robotics, electronic cars, clean-tech and the smart city. Labour has a plan for a national transformation fund and £250 billion of lending by our new national investment bank and a network of regional development banks, which will enable us to transform our economy over the first two terms of a Labour Government. Reconnecting the financial sector to the economy of research and development and production will transform our financial system.

We will establish a strategic investment bank, which is the sort of bank that the hon. Member for Stirling thinks is good, and he is absolutely right in that regard. It will comprise people from various agencies and organisations, and of course Members of this House. We will use the power of Government to unlock the lending power of the private sector, and we will deliver lending to small and medium-sized enterprises across the UK through new regional development banks. Our

investment strategy will no longer accept the disparities across the regions that have been identified here today. It is a crucial element of any Government policy to make sure there is equity right across our nations.

Labour wants to invest in people and show that businesses can access a highly skilled workforce, which is why we will set up our national education service, allowing everyone to upskill and retrain at any point in life. That comes back to the point that it is not just a case of having patient capital investment; the ecosystem and infrastructure around that investment also matter. We want patient capital investment and we hope that we will be able to set the scene and the environment for that to develop. We will ensure that all our regions, nations, cities and towns are able to get access to that patient capital investment over the next few decades.

5.16 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) for raising this important issue and for exhorting the United Kingdom Treasury to look to all parts of our Union. If my history of the Treasury serves me correctly, I think the last Treasurer of Scotland was in 1708; he was sent to the Tower and then to the House of Lords, as happened in those days. But since then, the Treasury has firmly been an institution of the whole of the United Kingdom and long may it continue to be.

My hon. Friend made some very important points this afternoon, encouraging us above all to look to the long term and to ensure that both Government and the private sector are constantly trying to ensure the free flow of long-term capital, which will grow the economy and drive the country forward.

Since we came to power in 2010, we have made it easier for people in this country to found a business and grow it, scaling up British businesses so that the UK is one of the best places in the world to be an entrepreneur. A new business is created in this country every 75 seconds and there are now 1.2 million more businesses in the UK than in 2010, creating jobs and prosperity.

However, we are not complacent. We understand the need to increase access to long-term capital, to address the structural challenges facing the British economy, including our productivity gap, and to make the UK more globally competitive. So I thank my hon. Friend for his comments today, particularly his thoughts on a national investment bank, to which I will return shortly.

It is important to remember that in the UK we already have a strong equity finance market. It is one of the engines of the economy, and a national and indeed international asset for the UK. We continue to be the top destination for venture capital investment in Europe, attracting around a third of total European VC investment in 2018.

There was the patient capital review of 2017, which my hon. Friend referenced and which we commissioned and reported back on in 2017, and the Budget in 2017. We updated it again in the most recent Budget with a one-year-on update. They provided the response that he has referred to, with the panel and the experts at the Treasury who we commissioned to investigate this issue. That review concluded that there is more for the UK to do to close the funding gap and help our most innovative firms to reach their true potential.

At the Budget in 2017, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor unveiled a plan to unlock over £20 billion of additional finance for those innovative firms over the next 10 years. Since then, we have launched British Patient Capital, the vehicle that my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling referred to, and seeded it with £2.5 billion of public money. We have expanded the investment limits for venture capital trusts and for the Enterprise Investment Scheme, doubling the amount of money that the UK's most innovative businesses can raise. And we have announced the creation of a knowledge-intensive EIS fund structure, to help stimulate further investment in research and development-intensive firms, and to concentrate our incentives on those firms that we think will be of the greatest benefit to the British economy.

We have worked with representatives across the industry to unlock pensions investment in patient capital, through our pensions investment taskforce. With total assets under management in the UK expected to exceed £1 trillion by 2025, we know that defined contribution, DC, pension schemes are set to be one of our most important institutional investors, which is why, in this year's Budget, the Chancellor announced a pensions investment package to enable DC pension providers to invest in long-term innovative UK companies, as part, of course, of a balanced portfolio. We do not believe that it is the Government's role to instruct independent pension trustees on how to invest on behalf of the pension holder, but we do believe that encouraging them and breaking down barriers will ensure a greater flow of capital for venture capital and for long-term and somewhat higher-risk investments that will drive the economy forward.

We have done a number of things to take forward that agenda. First, we announced that the Financial Conduct Authority would carry out a consultation on small tweaks to its permitted links rules, which was published in December 2018. We also announced that the Department for Work and Pensions would consult this year on making the pension charge cap flexible enough to accommodate the performance fees that are often associated with patient capital investment. Finally, we announced that some of the largest DC pension providers in the UK would now work with the British Business Bank to develop a blueprint for pooled investment in patient capital. That will enable those who are perhaps too small, or do not yet have the appetite required, to take part in this important form of illiquid investment. We believe that those measures will have a great impact in the years ahead.

We are not limiting our efforts to equity funding, however. We are also committed to ensuring that businesses can seek the right finance for their growth needs, which is exactly why the British Business Bank, which we have heard about today, was launched some time ago. The bank is rolling out a UK network, including in Scotland, to resolve regional issues and increase its cut-through with businesspeople and entrepreneurs throughout the Union. It operates through partners, such as high street banks, business angels and venture capital, and it will be doing that, as it should, in all parts of the UK. To give hon. Members some of the most recent statistics, as of November 2018, in Scotland the bank had provided almost £900 million of finance to more than 9,000 small and medium-sized enterprises, in Northern Ireland the figure was £114 million to more than 2,200 SMEs, and

[Robert Jenrick]

in Wales almost £500 million was provided to more than 6,000 such businesses. We hope that that will continue and that the bank will take its responsibility to operate in all parts of the UK seriously. I encourage hon. Members to engage with the British Business Bank, if they have not done so already.

On infrastructure, which we have heard about today, as a Government we have made an important decision—one of the Chancellor's first decisions on taking up his position two and a half years ago—to significantly increase public investment in our economic infrastructure. Over this Parliament, such investment, including in digital and transport, will reach levels not seen in this country since the early 1970s. We want to ensure that that feeds through into the private sector, and if we want to deliver on those plans—we now have a £600 billion pipeline of infrastructure investment—there will need to be a partnership with the private sector, financed and delivered privately. So a thriving private sector is extremely important, and we need to consider that when taking into account some of the comments we heard earlier about political risk in this country, due to both a break-up of the Union and also the Opposition's policies of nationalising utilities.

The Government support investment using a range of tools, including stable, independent regulation, of which we have some of the best and most admired in the world—there are, of course, ways in which we can improve it. In the Budget, we commissioned the National Infrastructure Commission to consider how we can make our independent regulators more innovative, and improve the regulatory model without throwing it aside. We use contracts for difference in renewable energy, and the £40 billion Treasury UK guarantee scheme plays an important role. As we announced in the Budget, we are now reviewing our existing support for infrastructure finance, to ensure that as we leave the European Union we continue to guarantee that good projects in the UK receive the finance they deserve. We are also making a number of interventions to support new technologies, in which we believe the public and private sectors can work together, with the public investing to crowd in private sector investments. Two notable examples are a recent intervention on digital infrastructure, and also one on electric car charge points, in which the Government have invested £200 million. We believe that there is more scope for that in the future.

On the European Investment Bank, the EIB, it is important to remember that a significant funding gap has not emerged since the referendum. We have very mature markets in the UK for infrastructure investment, for privatised utilities for example, but the Chancellor has made it clear, and we noted this again in the political declaration, that we are actively exploring options for a future relationship with the EIB, just as the bank does with other third countries. One cannot be a member of the bank if one is not a member state. We are interested in the proposal to create a UK infrastructure investment bank, for which my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling laid out some of the arguments. We think that there are important arguments there, and we will consider the proposal as part of the review of infrastructure finance announced in the Budget, about which we will give more details shortly. We think that that can play an important role and, although I would not overstate the

EIB's impact on the British economy or our infrastructure finance, there are reasons to believe that it played an important role. We believe that we can find our own way forward as we leave the European Union.

On smaller businesses, helping them to scale up is extremely important, as we have heard. The UK has a good record of creating start-up businesses, but not as good a record as we would like of ensuring that they scale up and create jobs and prosperity for all parts of the UK. That is a challenge that we have set the British Business Bank, of working to support investment such as creating regional pools of capital, which we have done with the midlands engine and the northern powerhouse, and there may be further scope for doing that in the future. We are very engaged with such questions. We are engaged also with the question of the geographical spread of venture capital and business angels, as was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham), to ensure that individuals and entrepreneurs have access to capital wherever they choose to set up their business and do not feel the need to come to London or the south-east.

Finally, through the tax system, we continue to make the UK the most competitive environment we can for entrepreneurs and investors. We are doing that through entrepreneurs' relief, the seed enterprise investment scheme, the enterprise investment scheme and venture capital trusts, which we are continually trying to improve, to ensure that in the UK we have the most competitive market we can, directly comparing ourselves, and renewing those comparisons, with the US, France and Germany.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling and to other Members who participated in the debate. I hope that they can recognise the Government's commitment to the agenda, and the intense work we have done over the past two years, and will continue to do in the months and years ahead. We will continue to welcome thoughts and contributions to inform those future decisions.

5.28 pm

Stephen Kerr: It was perhaps a portent that throughout the Minister's speech I could hear cheering. It was from outside, but it entered the Chamber, and I must confess that there were many points in the speech at which I would have joined in the cheering. I am greatly encouraged by what the Minister has said and by the positive and upbeat way in which he talked about the Government's approach to the concept of spreading this change of culture in relation to long-term capital. I thank all Members for their thoughtful speeches, including those who would normally be political opponents and could not resist banging on, again, about independence. We will overlook that. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who hits the right note when he talks about confidence in the future. I believe in our United Kingdom and in the genius of our people, and I believe that our future is bright and that we should have faith in it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered provision of long-term capital for business.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 15 January 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	991
Cannabis-based Products: Medicinal Use	998
Fibromyalgia: Diagnosis	997
Leaving the EU: Contingency Planning	994
Local Authority Public Health Budgets:	
Prevention Vision.....	1008
Mental Health Services	1004
Mental Health Support Teams	1003

	<i>Col. No.</i>
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE—continued	
NHS Facilities.....	998
NHS Workforce Shortages	991
Obesity	1002
People with Autism and Learning Disabilities.....	1007
Rare Diseases and Cancer	1006
Registered Nurses: Staffing Levels	1001
Topical Questions	1008

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CONTENTS

Tuesday 15 January 2019

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 991] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

European Union (Withdrawal) (No. 2) [Col. 1016]

Bill presented, and read the First time

Public Sector Supply Chains (Project Bank Accounts) [Col. 1017]

*Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Debbie Abrahams)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time*

European Union (Withdrawal) Act [Col. 1020]

*Amendment—(Mr Baron)—on a Division, negatived
Motion, on a Division, negatived*

Business of the House [Col. 1131]

Statement—(Andrea Leadsom)

Chester-le-Street: Rail Services [Col. 1134]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Recognition of Fibromyalgia as a Disability [Col. 293WH]

Pubs: Business Rates [Col. 318WH]

Local Government Funding [Col. 327WH]

Coventry City Football Club [Col. 353WH]

Long-term Capital for Business [Col. 360WH]

General Debates

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
