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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 14 February 2019

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Rolling Stock

1. **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): What progress he has made on the (a) removal of old and (b) delivery and deployment of new rolling stock. [909215]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): With permission, I will answer this question together with Question 16.

A total of 7,800 new carriages have been ordered since 2010. More than 3,000 have been delivered, with more than 4,700 due by the end of 2022. Those trains will help to transform the passenger experience, offering greater capacity, more pleasant carriages, air-conditioning, and wi-fi, and they will enable operators to remove old and unpopular rolling stock from service.

Fiona Bruce: Middlewich is a growing town, with jobs being created and a positive future. The people of Middlewich appreciate the Government's recognition of that, with almost £50 million of funding being provided for a new bypass, but their aspiration does not stop there, and rail connectivity is poor. What support can the Government give on that?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend has campaigned continually over many years for the reopening of Middlewich railway station, and I know that she has very strong support within the town for this. I know as well that it is a top priority now that the Middlewich bypass has been delivered. We welcome the work being undertaken by the Cheshire and Warrington local economic partnership, including the proposals to reopen the freight line through Middlewich, in Cheshire, for passenger services and to reopen Middlewich station. Findings are due at the end of this month, and I look forward to hearing the recommendations from that work.

Mr Speaker: I call Tom Tugendhat. Not here—where is the fella? I hope that he is not indisposed, as he is the Chair of a very important Committee of the House. Perhaps he is preoccupied elsewhere; I know not. What I do know is that the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) is here. I call Mr David Davis.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): The Minister will be aware that he could replace and upgrade every piece of rolling stock in the country for less than half the price of High Speed 2. Why do we not just cancel this white elephant and give the public something that they want?

Andrew Jones: I say to my right hon. Friend that we are doing both. We are replacing the rolling stock in our country and delivering HS2, which is what we need to deliver more capacity in our rail market.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): If we believed Ministers' promises back in 2012, passengers on the midland main line would be travelling on new electric trains this year. Instead, they are on old British Rail stock, the toilets empty straight onto the track, and they have to lean out of the window to open the door when the train arrives in the station. That is not great for anyone, and it is certainly not disabled friendly. The Government's inclusive transport strategy, published last year, does not contain any commitment that all rolling stock on the rail network will meet the accessibility deadline of 1 January 2020—a deadline that this industry has known about for 20 years. The strategy does give that commitment for buses and coaches; why not rail?

Mr Speaker: If the hon. Lady experiences some of what she has described, I can say only that it must be a most undignified experience for the Chair of the Transport Committee of the House of Commons.

Andrew Jones: We are making sure that we are dealing with the disability issue. We want to make sure that the rail network offers smooth, easy journeys for people with disabilities. With regard to the rolling stock coming on to the midland main line, of course, we will deliver it as soon as possible.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I wish to follow the line of argument of the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis). I do not know whether the Minister has read the very authoritative transport study produced for the previous Government by the British Airways chief, Rod Eddington, which clearly made the case against grand projects and advocated widespread incremental improvement. Would we not be better served if the Government funded not only rolling stock but many other transport improvements by scrapping the ever more expensive, budget-busting HS2?

Andrew Jones: Again, I give the answer that I gave to my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis): we are doing both. It is not a question of one or the other. We are delivering HS2, which is required to add capacity into our rail network, and, at the same time, we are also delivering, in control period 6, maintenance and enhancements worth £48 billion across our classic rail network. So we are doing both, not one or the other.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Will my hon. Friend tell us what progress is being made on replacing the Pacer trains, which the previous Government continually failed to do? When will that train be off the tracks and replaced by new rolling stock?

Andrew Jones: My right hon. Friend has a very distinguished record in bringing new rolling stock forward into our rail network. The Pacers will be gone by the end of this year; they are being replaced by a new fleet of 281 air-conditioned carriages, which is more than double the minimum tender required by the Government. The first of those new trains are already in the UK and going through testing. The remainder of the Northern fleet are being refurbished to as good as new, and the first of them are already in service. That is a very positive piece of news, and I can confirm that the unpopular Pacers will be gone by the end of the year.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): New rolling stock will of course be welcome, but is the Minister aware that there will be no stock rolling at all north of Preston over the busy Easter weekend because Network Rail is closing the line for maintenance? Does he not know that the Lake district is Britain's biggest visitor destination outside London and that Easter weekend is our busiest time of year? Will he tell Network Rail to change its plans?

Andrew Jones: I am of course aware of the importance of the Lake district to our national tourist economy, and of tourism to the Lake district's economy. It is not possible to upgrade the lines without closing them on occasions, and the work clearly has to be done to minimise disruption for the travelling public. I will pass the hon. Gentleman's point through to Network Rail, but these things take a considerable amount of time and it is probably not possible to make changes at the very last minute.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I hope that the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) enjoyed either his breakfast or the rare benefit of a lie-in—I know not which. No doubt we will hear from him in due course.

A35 at Redbridge

2. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What plans he has to repair the A35 at Redbridge. [909216]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): As my right hon. Friend will know, the A35 is a local road. As such, it falls to Hampshire County Council as the local highway authority.

Sir Desmond Swayne: It is a strategic route and, at £25 million, this is too much to expect of a county council, isn't it?

Jesse Norman: I can only admire my right hon. Friend for the extreme brevity of his question. Hampshire County Council did receive an entirely unexpected £11.9 million as a result of the budget settlement of £420 million for local roads, but I take his point. The Government are allocating the council £168 million until 2021, and the council can use that as it sees fit. There is also the possibility for it to apply to other schemes, including the major roads network scheme, which, as my right hon. Friend will know, requires some national transport body agreement. If that is secured, we would be happy to look at the matter later in the year.

Road Safety

3. **Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): What recent steps his Department has taken to improve road safety. [909217]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): As the House will know, I issued a written statement to Parliament last June that reported very good progress on the actions from the road safety statement. Those actions included £100 million for our safer roads fund to improve 50 of the most dangerous stretches of A roads in England, a refreshed road safety statement and a two-year action plan to address priority groups including young people, rural road users, cyclists and older vulnerable users.

Mr Cunningham: Yesterday, I had the privilege to support my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) in his application to bring in a Bill to limit working hours for bus drivers, in response to the tragic bus crash in my constituency in October 2015. Will the Minister commit to backing that Bill and allocating proper parliamentary time for us to discuss the issue?

Jesse Norman: I absolutely recognise the hon. Gentleman's point. The incident in his constituency was indeed a tragic one. We look closely at the issue and will continue to do so.

20. [909235] **Derek Thomas** (St Ives) (Con): The A30, which runs down to Penzance, is a main route in and out of Cornwall. It is not a safe stretch of road, as countless accidents and incidents have been happening along it for some time. Will the Minister commit to improving this road and dualling it, as local people want?

Jesse Norman: As my hon. Friend will know, the Government are already transforming connectivity through the south-west by creating a continuous dual carriageway along the A30, from the M5 through to Camborne. In due course, we aim to extend this to Penzance. My hon. Friend has been a strong campaigner on this issue and I recognise his concerns, particularly for his constituents in Crowlas.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): My constituent Frances Molloy lost her 19-year-old son Michael in a coach crash caused by a 20-year-old tyre bursting on the coach that he was travelling on. Two other people lost their lives and others suffered life-changing injuries. Will the Minister now commit to allowing my Bill—the Tyres (Buses and Coaches) Bill—to pass through this House, instead of getting his Whip to shout "Object" at every opportunity?

Jesse Norman: I am very glad that the hon. Lady has raised this question because if she has paid close attention, she will know that we issued a written statement only a few days ago setting out a clear pattern of actions ever since Mrs Molloy raised these serious concerns with my predecessors. Those actions include guidance that has reduced the number of infractions to very low levels. We have also commissioned new research, on which my officials have met with and briefed Mrs Molloy and the

hon. Lady. There really can be no question but that we have to make policy based on evidence; when that evidence is in, we will make the policy.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): In the area I represent, Dover, Deal and east Kent, illegal lorry parking is a major road safety problem—[*Interruption*]—unsurprisingly. Does the Minister agree that councils should have more powers to tackle illegal lorry parking so that the police are more able to go and fight serious crime such as county lines drugs gangs?

Jesse Norman: I thank my hon. Friend for his question on an issue that we have met on and discussed on many occasions. He will know that the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency already has powers in Kent, on a trial basis, to take action on this. Those are proving effective, and we continue to look at whether such powers can or should be extended to local authorities.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): In the last debate on road safety, I raised with the Minister the concerns of many horse riders across my constituency, including the very large number of riders who are killed on the roads because of drivers' poor awareness of how to deal with horse riders. Will he set out what steps he has taken since that debate, perhaps saying that all the changes that I, and many other Members, asked for will be added to the highway code to protect horse riders and horses?

Jesse Norman: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the highway code already mentions horse riders in several of its provisions. At the end of last year, as he will recall, we published a safety review aimed at all vulnerable road users, including horse riders. It included, specifically, work on close passing, on which, as he will be aware, West Midlands police have taken a lead. That review contained 50 actions to be undertaken over a two-year period, and we are still in the middle of that, but I absolutely recognise the concern that he has.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Far too many road traffic collisions are caused by uninsured drivers, and there are far too many uninsured drivers on our roads. What is the Minister doing to tackle this issue?

Jesse Norman: Of course, that is a serious question. As my hon. Friend will be aware, we have very vigorous enforcement action being undertaken not only by the police but by the DVSA and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency to try to crack down on this problem.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Minister aware that only seven people were killed in the St Valentine's Day massacre? Yet in this country, we will shrug our shoulders when 1,700 people die on our roads this year, as they do most years. When is he going to do something about investigating every death on the roads thoroughly, with a good centrally directed and well funded unit, and when is he going to do something about the 1.4 million people a year who are being killed on the roads worldwide?

Jesse Norman: The hon. Gentleman regularly raises this issue, but I have rarely had a Valentine's Day present as generous as that one. As he will know, contrary to his

imputation, we take every road death and injury with great seriousness. As he also knows, since he will have done his homework, this country has the second-best record in the EU for road fatalities, and we stand by that record.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): In his statement last week, the Minister again delayed taking effective action on dangerous old tyres on public service vehicles. I pay tribute to Frances Molloy and Tyred, who have campaigned vigorously on this very important issue. The Government's record on road safety, I am afraid to say, has been disappointing. So will the Minister now do the right thing and support the private Member's Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), which is due back here on 15 March and which would rid our roads of dangerous tyres on buses?

Jesse Norman: I am afraid that my answer to the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) still stands. The fact remains that we will take action, and vigorous action, when we have evidence on this. Actions we have already taken have reduced rates of infraction to very, very low levels, although we take seriously everything that has happened. The hon. Gentleman does not seem to realise that action taken—[*Interruption.*] This may be a signal of the behaviour of a future Labour Government, or the previous one, but we act on the basis of evidence—and, if we did not, we would be subject to legal challenge from those who were adversely affected.

Karl Turner: Rubbish.

Mr Speaker: Order. I must say to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) that only last week I informed an audience, prospectively, of 30 million American radio listeners of his penchant for shouting noisily from a sedentary position most days of the week, so he may have a new fan base in the United States.

Repair of Local Roads

4. **James Cleverly** (Braintree) (Con): What funds he has made available for the repair of local roads. [909218]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): My hon. Friend is a great campaigner on this issue. He will be aware that the Department is spending more than £6.6 billion to improve local roads through local highway authority work, including £420 million most recently, much of which is available to be spent in his constituency.

James Cleverly: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. He knows, because I have lobbied him relentlessly, that we are bidding for funding from the second road investment strategy for the A120 in my constituency, but there are other roads in my constituency, including the A131 and a number of local roads. I welcome the announcement of the money. What advice can he give me on how to ensure that I grab some of it for my lovely constituency?

Jesse Norman: I am not sure that “relentless” begins to describe the energy and vigour with which my hon. Friend pursues his campaign. As he recognises, we have already provided £4 million to Essex County Council for the A120. I understand that the council is currently undertaking a series of phased improvements to both the A131 and the A130, to enhance network capacity, but we remain interested in whatever it does on those roads in future.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I am sure the Minister is aware that, because of other pressures, councils are increasingly unable to address priorities that they would have addressed many years ago. The National Audit Office has shown that spending on road safety and traffic management across the country has fallen by 60% since 2010. Will the Minister accept that one of the most important things he can do is argue for increased funding from the Treasury for local authorities in the next spending round?

Jesse Norman: I certainly accept that one of the most valuable things we can do is argue for increased funding for local roads in the next settlement, and as the hon. Gentleman will know, we plan to do so.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): If HS2 is built, the inevitable heavy traffic will add to the damage to our roads in Buckinghamshire, many of which are already congested and suffer from pollution, including popular routes such as the A413. What additional funds will the Minister make available to Buckinghamshire County Council to repair the inevitable extra damage to our rural roads, so that the cost does not fall disproportionately on Buckinghamshire taxpayers?

Jesse Norman: I am not sure I recognise that problem, but my right hon. Friend is welcome to write to me. There is every reason to think that HS2 might in fact relieve some of the traffic, because people will be making journeys that are not merely local.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I welcome the Minister’s comments. Is he basically saying that North Lincolnshire Council has no excuse for the potholes in the pavements and roads around our area?

Jesse Norman: It is hard for me to comment on whether the council has any excuse, since I do not know the circumstances it is under. All I can say is that it has a share in £420 million more than was expected at the end of last year.

Leaving the EU: Travel Disruption

5. **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What steps he is taking to reduce potential disruption to travel in the event of the UK leaving the EU without a deal. [909219]

6. **Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): What steps he is taking to reduce potential disruption to travel in the event of the UK leaving the EU without a deal. [909220]

18. **John Mc Nally** (Falkirk) (SNP): What steps he is taking to reduce potential disruption to travel in the event of the UK leaving the EU without a deal. [909233]

19. **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What steps he is taking to reduce potential disruption to travel in the event of the UK leaving the EU without a deal. [909234]

21. **Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): What steps he is taking to reduce potential disruption to travel in the event of the UK leaving the EU without a deal. [909236]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): My Department is undertaking a comprehensive and wide-ranging programme of work to ensure that we are prepared for a scenario in which the UK leaves without a deal. We continue to work to ensure that the UK does not leave without a deal.

Gavin Newlands: I am grateful for that answer, which I am not sure even those on the Government Benches will buy. The Secretary of State told the House on Monday that Arklow had confirmed its backing for Seaborne Freight “from the outset”. Yesterday the permanent secretary to the DFT told the Public Accounts Committee that the DFT had awarded Seaborne Freight the contract before Arklow confirmed its backing. Those two statements are entirely contradictory, so who is telling the truth—his permanent secretary or him?

Chris Grayling: It is very simple: the contract was conditional on Seaborne Freight producing a reference from Arklow, which it did.

Angela Crawley: The director general for the Department for Transport said yesterday that it was no longer possible to complete procurement and operation for any large amount of further capacity across the channel by either sea or rail before the end of March. The Secretary of State’s handling of this issue means that there are now no plans in place for an alternative and a 10% shortfall in capacity. How does he plan to resolve this latest disaster?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Lady clearly was not listening on Monday, when I indicated that we had options in contracts to provide additional capacity on longer sea routes to replace any that we might have had on the short sea routes.

John Mc Nally: I can assure the Secretary of State that I was absolutely listening intently on Monday. From that position over there, the Secretary of State said on Monday, in relation to Seaborne Freight, that “we have not spent any money on this contract.”—[*Official Report*, 11 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 619.]

We now know that that is not the case and that his Department spent approximately £800,000 on external consultants for Seaborne. Will he now take the opportunity to set the record straight and apologise to taxpayers for what has amounted to a monumental waste of taxpayers’ money?

Chris Grayling: I am afraid that, once again, SNP Members have their facts completely wrong. Interestingly, we have heard complaints from the other side that we did not do enough due diligence. Actually, as with all

major Government contracts—Mr Speaker, you will recall that £90 million of contracts are going to Brittany Ferries and DFDS—we contract professional support when we let contracts of that size.

Marion Fellows: The Secretary of State may wish to argue that he got his £800,000-worth since the consultancy did come back with concrete findings, including that Seaborne presented “significant execution risks” and that a “basic blush test” was the most that could be carried out on the company’s financials. Which of those two findings did the Secretary of State find most reassuring when deciding to proceed with the Seaborne ferry contract?

Chris Grayling: The bit I found reassuring is that we let a contract where there was absolutely no upfront commitment from the taxpayer at all, and we paid nothing until the service was delivered.

Carol Monaghan: The Secretary of State said on Monday, “I believe in competition”, so why, after realising back in September that a no-deal Brexit would require increased freight capacity, did he embark on what has been called a

“secretive and flawed procurement process”,

tipping off some companies in private while leaving established companies, such as Eurotunnel, out of the loop altogether?

Chris Grayling: We carried out a proper procurement process in discussion with all the leading ferry operators.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): A major contributor to travel disruption over many years has of course been Govia Thameslink Railway. Its incompetence was recently underlined when a disgruntled constituent wrote to GTR, asking whom he should complain to and whether he should write to Chris Grayling. He received the reply from GTR:

“Chris Grayling no longer works for the company”.

Can the Secretary of State tell us whether a no-deal Brexit will make it easier to withdraw the franchise from GTR at long last and end this nightmare?

Chris Grayling: Happily, I have never worked for GTR. I would say to my hon. Friend that, if there are specific concerns he wants to raise about the franchise, he is very welcome to write to me. However, I am sure he is pleased that, over the last few months, the performance on that network has become significantly better.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am sure the Secretary of State, like me, will reflect that it is always interesting to hear those who complain about the potential impact of a no deal then complaining about efforts to mitigate it. Will he confirm that he believes, the same as me, that the biggest potential for disruption to travel would be to put an international border across the east and west coast main lines, as the separatists opposite want to do?

Chris Grayling: Absolutely. Of course SNP Members fail to understand that their policies, if you follow European Union laws to the letter, require a hard border between Scotland and England. I have to say that I personally value the Union of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I value our friends

in Scotland, of whom we have many on the Government Benches, and I think SNP policies would be deeply damaging to Scotland.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): No matter what the outcome in terms of the delivery of the democratic decision of the British people, will my right hon. Friend confirm that the electrification project between Preston and Manchester, going through the heart of my constituency, will continue to deliver more electric coaches for my constituents?

Chris Grayling: I was very pleased to learn this week that the electric trains have now started running between Blackpool and Manchester through my hon. Friend’s constituency. Of course, it is worth remembering that that single electrification project represents a level of electrification many times greater than the Labour party managed across the entire country in its years in office—13 years: 10 miles, which is fewer, by far, than that single electrification project alone.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): If I understand this right, the Secretary of State is claiming a triumph for having signed a contract with a company that had no ferries to provide no ferries and, because it cost the taxpayer no money whatsoever, that is okay. Is that where the Secretary of State is? We are still facing the south-east of England being turned into a huge car park if we were to leave with no deal, and what has he done about it? Absolutely nothing.

Chris Grayling: As I set out, we have substantial contracts with two major operators to provide additional capacity, and we have put in place contingency measures in Kent, in case they are needed because of delays caused not in this country but on the French side. When I see what is happening in Calais and the preparations being made, I am increasingly confident that the flow of traffic through the channel ports will continue pretty normally. It is in everybody’s interest on both sides of the channel for that to happen, and it will certainly happen if we leave the European Union with a deal. It is disappointing, however, that the Labour party seems to want to stymie us leaving the EU with a deal.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Secretary of State’s handling of Seaborne Freight, and the way he is answering questions, proves that he lives in a parallel universe. The reality is that, with Eurotunnel taking the Government to court, his actions will cost the taxpayer at least £1.8 million and the costs are rising. Will he confirm how many representations have been made by other providers and whether there are likely to be further court challenges? Will he do the right thing and at least publish the legal evidence that the Government had, so that they can perhaps save some money in the long run?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman is trying hard, but the simple reality is that we approached the market and the market brought forward proposals. We have two substantial contracts to provide additional capacity. We took on a third smaller contract, where there was no upfront exposure to the taxpayer at all. Unfortunately

that was not delivered because even though the company had ships lined up and agreements lined up, its principal backer decided not to continue with the contract.

Alan Brown: The Secretary of State did not approach the market—it was all done in secret; that is not approaching the market. He is baffled by the criticism of his handling of this, which is incredible. Let us look at his handling of the mock exercise for lorries in a no-deal scenario, with 89 lorries mimicking 10,000. Under his watch, we have had the east coast main line bail-out, the Northern rail fiasco, the Thameslink fiasco, delays to High Speed 2, issues with drone legislation and contracts awarded to Carillion when it was obviously going bust. What does it take for him to do the right thing and go?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman continues to produce in the House statements that I am afraid are simply inaccurate. The trial in Kent, managed by Kent County Council, worked very smoothly to illustrate the nature of movements in and out of the port of Manston. He keeps talking about Carillion. Carillion had no contracts with HS2. It was part of a consortium that was jointly and severally liable and that work has continued.

Leaving the EU: Ports

7. **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with port operators on preparations for the UK leaving the EU. [909221]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Good morning, Mr Speaker. It is a pleasure to share the day of love with my colleagues under your watchful gaze this morning.

I have met port operators and their representatives on a number of occasions to discuss matters of current concern, including preparations for the UK leaving the EU.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Jessica Morden: Welsh ports, including Newport, have experienced strong growth and investment in recent years, contributing £1.4 billion to the UK economy. In a week in which we have witnessed Government mishandling and the Seaborne Freight fiasco, and just weeks away from the Brexit date, what confidence can we have that Transport Ministers are taking serious steps to avoid jeopardising our Welsh ports?

Ms Ghani: We are in constant communication with port operators, including Associated British Ports, which I believe has invested heavily in the port to prepare for Brexit and all the extra opportunities that will arise. We must not forget that our ports and maritime sector was great before we joined the EU and it will continue to be great after Brexit. Most of our ports are well used to dealing with traffic from both inside and outside the European Union and we will do everything we can to ensure that that continues.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The port of Immingham is open for business and looking to increase that business as a result of Brexit. Can the Minister confirm that she has had discussions with ABP about the further use of Immingham?

Ms Ghani: I can. My hon. Friend is a great champion of the port of Immingham and I know I have an open invitation from him to visit it. I have indeed discussed that port with ABP and it has confirmed that ports across the country are looking forward to the extra business and trade that will come their way post Brexit.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): On 8 January, the Secretary of State told the House that no public money was used in the Seaborne Freight contract, yet the National Audit Office says that £800,000 of taxpayers' money was spent on consultants. The Prime Minister says that things are hunky-dory, but it has been revealed that the Department bypassed its own procurement rules to award a high-risk contract to Seaborne. Will the Minister acknowledge that the Secretary of State has, however inadvertently, misled the House and has not followed his Department's procurement processes?

Ms Ghani: That is such a ridiculous statement to make. It is just inaccurate. There are complaints when due diligence is not done and complaints when due diligence is done. When funding is allocated and spent within the Department, due diligence is carried out for a variety of reasons. What is interesting is that the Labour party is against business, against us helping our port sector and against Brexit. It would be interesting to know what it actually stands for.

Andy McDonald: Poor, very poor. The Secretary of State is, presumably, simply never wrong, but what about the timetabling mess on the trains, the east coast bail out, multiple transport and justice contracts to Carillion, the book ban on prisoners, court fees that push the innocent to plead guilty, and the catastrophic privatisation of probation and prisons? His ongoing presence in the Government makes an international laughing stock of us all. Quite simply, the country cannot afford him. So I ask in all sincerity: will he please step down before he does any further damage?

Ms Ghani: I am not quite sure what show we are on, but this is Transport questions and the hon. Gentleman attacking an individual because he has nothing left to say is absolutely embarrassing. We have record investment in our infrastructure. I believe that under the Labour Government infrastructure investment in our country dropped from seventh to 33rd. Labour is not a party for our country. May I just reflect on ports? Our ports are doing a fantastic job trading, they do the majority of trade outside the EU and they will continue to do really good trade post Brexit.

West Anglia Main Line

8. **Joan Ryan** (Enfield North) (Lab): What progress has been made on four-tracking of the West Anglia main line. [909222]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): Work is nearing completion on the delivery of a third track on the West Anglia main line between Tottenham Hale and a new station at Meridian Water, enabling two additional trains per hour. Additional tracking is also being considered as part of proposals for Crossrail 2. I understand that the Greater London Authority has submitted a bid to the housing infrastructure fund for a fourth track from Tottenham Hale to Meridian Water.

Joan Ryan: On Saturday last, some 90 constituents turned up at my community meeting to complain, most loudly, about the cancellations, delays and poor service on the line. Frankly, they deserve better and have done for a very long time. Early delivery of four-tracking by 2026, in advance of Crossrail 2, would provide additional stopping services, up to 3,800 extra seats between Cambridge and Liverpool Street in the morning, faster journeys, improved reliability, accelerated delivery of up to 25,000 homes and 10,000 new job starts along the corridor. Why are the Secretary of State and the Government not getting on board with this proposal more quickly? I urge the Government to support it and to do so now.

Andrew Jones: To suggest that the Government are not investing in our rail network is clearly ridiculous. The Government are investing more than any other Government in British history. On the specifics of the scheme, on the West Anglia main line the right hon. Lady can look forward to seeing new trains and all the benefits that will flow from them. The investment work that has taken place, which I outlined in my earlier answer, is already starting to see benefits for the constituents she serves.

Rural Roads: HGV Traffic

9. **Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce HGV traffic on rural roads. [909223]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): I thank my hon. Friend for raising the very important issue of HGV traffic on rural roads, which has all kinds of negative effects, including congestion, air quality and noise. She will be aware that local authorities are best placed to address the issue. They have powers under the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 to make traffic regulation orders that prohibit the use of HGVs on any given local road.

Maria Caulfield: I thank the Minister for that answer, but will he look at introducing mandatory commercial sat-navs to all HGVs, so they avoid using rural roads and stick to the A roads they should be on? That would also help with the enforcement of existing restrictions in villages such as Ditchling in my constituency.

Jesse Norman: I understand the problem. Some existing sat-navs are configured specifically for HGVs. Mandating them would be a major step that would undoubtedly have negative as well as positive consequences. This is primarily and mainly a market function, but protections are in place for local authorities to enforce against abuse of roads by HGVs.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): HGV traffic can be dangerous, and the road safety charity Brake says that school crossing patrols are vital, so does the Minister have an estimate of the number of lollipop women and men who have been cut and whether or not that has led to an increase in accidents for children walking to school?

Jesse Norman: The hon. Gentleman is of course absolutely right about the concerns of children walking to school, which was a major theme in our recent work

on cycling and walking safety. Part of the work that we are doing over the next two years precisely addresses areas around schools.

Nick Smith: And the numbers?

Jesse Norman: I do not have the numbers to hand, but the hon. Gentleman is welcome to write to me if he has them and we can discuss them.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): There is an important industrial estate in my constituency called the Leyland, which is served from urban Wellingborough. Unfortunately, the road bridge has been demolished and HGVs are now having to travel on rural roads. I understand that instead of the bridge being replaced, it is going to be left down, and that is causing a great deal of concern. Will the Minister be able to look into the matter and perhaps meet me to discuss it?

Jesse Norman: I am very happy to look into the matter and also for my hon. Friend to write to me. If he does that, we can consider whether to meet.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): The A637 runs through the lovely village of Flockton in my constituency. It is a narrow road and is increasingly used by rat runners and HGVs, despite a prohibition order. There have been many instances of reckless driving and some near misses. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can make life safer for the people who live in Flockton?

Jesse Norman: If it is a purely local road, I am of course happy to look into the matter but it really falls to the local authority. If there is scope for the road to be part of the major roads network, which, as the hon. Lady will know, is precisely designed to relieve some of the pressures on local communities and the strategic road network, we can have that conversation as well.

Leaving the EU: Haulage Sector

10. **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential effect on the haulage sector of the UK leaving the EU. [909224]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): The Government continue to work towards a deal and we are confident of securing a relationship with the EU that maintains the current liberalised access we enjoy. Of all goods moved by UK-registered heavy goods vehicles in 2017, 1% were moved internationally. We do not expect that there will be significant impacts on international trade movements, or on the haulage sector overall. If we leave without a deal, there might be some short-term disruption, and we have undertaken extensive contingency plans to mitigate this.

Alex Cunningham: Short-term disruption—that's a good one.

Haulage companies such as Scott Bros. and Devereux in my Stockton North constituency are extremely anxious about their future when we leave the EU. They are not helped much by the road haulage permits legislation, which in effect highlights the potential damage that Brexit will do to the industry, and certainly does not show a Government standing up for the industry. What is the Secretary of State going to do about it?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman and, indeed, his constituents will welcome the fact that the European Union has been clear that the current arrangements will continue after April and is moving forward with plans to do that. In addition, we have bilateral agreements with other countries that will ensure that international trade continues to flow, and we are of course also continuing members of the common transit convention.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Seafood processing businesses in Banff and Buchan have expressed concerns to me about the possible requirement for European Conference of Ministers of Transport permits in the event that we leave the EU without a deal. Will my right hon. Friend meet me and representatives of the sector to discuss their concerns?

Chris Grayling: I am always happy to meet my hon. Friend, and I meet people from the sector quite regularly. His constituents will be assured—indeed, we have written to all applicants for the permits to indicate this to them—that the European Union’s position is that it intends to continue with the current arrangements. We put through measures to make sure that we had a contingency plan, which was supported across the House, but I do not expect it to be needed because, according to the EU itself, we will carry on with the current arrangements.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): We know that the contract with Seaborne was, in the words of the Secretary of State’s own permanent secretary, a “novel and exceptional” proposition, but she revealed yesterday to the Public Accounts Committee that the only confirmation that the Department had about the arrangements with Arklow were from Seaborne itself. There was no paper document and no contract was signed. The Secretary of State talks about due diligence, but we know it failed on due diligence, and we now know that there was no comfort document for the Department about the contract with Arklow, so will he tell us what due diligence he thinks did take place, because what we have seen shows that it did not?

Chris Grayling: At Christmastime, Arklow confirmed in writing, and we have copies of that—[HON. MEMBERS: “In January.”] At Christmastime, Arklow confirmed in writing that it was backing the proposition. *[Interruption.]* At Christmastime, Mr Speaker. I hear the sedentary comments but I am absolutely clear: at Christmastime.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady does not look satisfied, but I hope that she is nevertheless enjoying her birthday, upon which I congratulate her.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Despite Labour’s warnings throughout the passage of the Haulage Permits and Trailer Registration Bill, just 984 licences have been made available following 11,392 applications. Despite the short-term agreement with the EU, if companies cannot move their goods, they will have no choice but to move their businesses, so why is the Secretary of State running down British jobs and British business?

Chris Grayling: What a load of absolute hokum! We are working very carefully, on a bilateral basis, to make sure that there are contingency plans in place, but the European Union—we have to bear in mind that 80% of

the trucks that come through our ports delivering goods to the United Kingdom are run by continental hauliers—is being very clear that it wants that to continue, and it will.

Rachael Maskell: It gets worse: crashing out of the EU in just 43 days’ time will mean that we are a third country, like the Ukraine or China—as indeed, would Irish companies who use the UK as a bridge to the continent. Haulage firms would have to fill out a 38-point document for every single consignment—that is not for each lorry, but for each consignment on each lorry—just hours before each transit, causing catastrophic delays. So who now is the enemy of business? It is this Government, who are running down the clock to create real chaos at our borders. It is surely not this Opposition, who are insistent on a permanent customs union.

Chris Grayling: Of course, what the hon. Lady does not understand is that she talks about a permanent customs union, but a permanent customs union requires border checks. The Labour party simply does not understand the arguments that it is making. It is trying to disrupt Brexit. It is trying to put forward policy ideas that do not work. We are working to secure a deal that will work, and we will carry on doing it.

Horse Riders: Public Highways

11. **Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con):** What assessment he has made of the safety needs of horse riders on the public highway. [909225]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the question of the safety needs of horse riders. They were an important part, alongside other vulnerable road users, of the cycling and walking safety review. We are reviewing the highway code, and our work on that will be done in connection with a whole range of interested stakeholders, including the British Horse Society.

Simon Hoare: The rise of electric vehicles is, of course, environmentally welcome. However, their silence often presents a huge problem for riders, horses and, indeed, other road users as a result of the nervousness that is often caused in horses by these silent vehicles either going past or accelerating from a stop. Will my hon. Friend take this issue up with the car manufacturers to see what can be done to ensure that there is safety and environmentalism on our rural roads?

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend will recall that I have already discussed the recognition of horse riders within the highway code and the importance that we place on the avoidance of close passing. He will also be aware that electric cars make a noise above a certain speed because of vehicle tyre slap. At low speeds, vehicle type approval regulations will mandate sound generators on new electric and hybrid electric vehicles from July this year.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answer. Horses and HGV lorries do not mix, so what consideration has been given to enhanced regulations with reference to horse safety, particularly to providing adequate guidance and protection for horse riders?

Jesse Norman: I cannot really do more than expand on my previous comment, which is that we are reviewing the highway code in this area and are working closely on issues of close passing. They are discussed in some detail in our recent cycling and walking safety review.

Heathrow: Regional Connections

12. **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): What level of direct and indirect public funding will be required to support new regional connections with Heathrow airport. [909226]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): The airports national policy statement expects post-expansion Heathrow to deliver 14 domestic routes and to work with airlines to protect existing and develop new domestic connections. We expect these routes to be commercially viable with support from Heathrow.

Ruth Cadbury: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, but during the airports national policy statement, the Government said that the aviation Green Paper would address the level of public subsidy required to support certain regional connections into Heathrow, but the Green Paper, now published, says that when there is such a requirement for a public services obligation route,

“funding contributions should increasingly be provided locally.”

Will he therefore confirm that many local councils that were hoping to reap economic benefits from additional regional routes may in fact end up having to subsidise loss-making routes?

Chris Grayling: As the House will know, it is often custom and practice to share the cost of a public service obligation with a local authority. It is right and prudent for the Government to seek to share the load when we can.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): Next week, I will hold a public meeting in my constituency on Heathrow expansion. Many of my constituents are concerned that Heathrow is just like Seaborne. It is another case where the Department for Transport has fallen hook, line and sinker for impossible claims made by a company that has very little chance of ever delivering on them—“Not a single extra car going to the airport,” and, “Air pollution not a problem,” even though we know that it is a huge problem in that part of London. It is exactly the same. The difference, though, is that when the Heathrow proposals go utterly pear-shaped, taxpayers will pick up the bill, and this is not just a £14 million project, but an £18 billion project.

Chris Grayling: My right hon. Friend is very committed to her view on this matter, but this House voted by a majority of nearly 300 to pursue this project and give Heathrow the green light. It now has to go through detailed consent processes, but I believe that it is a project that is strategically important to the United Kingdom.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): A new Southern rail link connecting the south and south-west with Heathrow via Feltham was favourably assessed by Network Rail two years ago as having the

highest benefit-cost ratio of all the Southern rail options proposed. We are waiting on the edge of our seats for progress towards the next stage. When will the Secretary of State be able to announce funding and proposed plans to take the project to the next stage, so that we can start to move forward?

Chris Grayling: I regard Southern rail access as extremely important. We are now looking in detail at what we believe the specification of the scheme should be. It will clearly require some degree of public support, and that is the next stage, which I expect to pursue in the coming months, albeit relatively soon.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his support for the new Heathrow connection to Cornwall Airport Newquay, which is due to come into place on 1 April. However, with the proposed acquisition of Flybe by Virgin Atlantic, can he reassure the House that Government support for the new route will continue even if the operator changes?

Chris Grayling: Absolutely. My hon. Friend knows my commitment to making sure that we continue those links to Newquay. They are an extremely important part of Cornwall’s economy, and I will be working to ensure that nothing happens to interrupt those services.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: We are running late, but we have got to hear the sound of Shipley.

Shipley Eastern Bypass

13. **Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with Bradford Council on a Shipley eastern bypass. [909227]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): Art Garfunkel himself could not have asked for anything better, Mr Speaker. I can only thank my hon. Friend. He will know that we have contributed several hundred thousand pounds to the scheme, and discussions are continuing. Indeed, both sides will be meeting later this month.

Philip Davies: I am extremely grateful to the Government and in particular the Secretary of State for their commitment to the Shipley eastern bypass, which is much needed in my constituency. Can the Minister tell me when the feasibility study, which the Government have kindly paid for, will be finalised and therefore when the next step forward for this project can be taken?

Jesse Norman: I can only congratulate my hon. Friend on his astonishing timing, because the Department will be discussing this matter—both the timetable and the scope of the study—with council officials on 21 February.

Bus Journeys

14. **Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the number of journeys taken by bus in England. [909228]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Buses remain the most commonly used mode of public transport, with local bus travel accounting for around 59% of all public transport journeys. The number of local bus passenger journeys has been falling since the 1950s. By contrast, the number of people owning their own cars has obviously been increasing.

Helen Goodman: It is now cheaper to fly to Alicante than to take a bus from Barnard Castle to Spennymoor in my constituency. Many of my constituents say that the buses are just far too expensive. Does the Minister not understand that her cuts to the bus grant are the problem?

Ms Ghani: I would not want anybody not to be flying to Alicante, but it is important to note that, when Labour was in control, bus fares went up three times as fast every year than under the Conservative Government. Anybody who wants to be out of pocket should vote in a Labour Government, because they will put up bus fares three times as fast.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is clear that buses are a lifeline for many elderly people, particularly those living in rural areas, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) has hinted at. They are also the main means of travel for commuters, yet as we have heard, this vital public service is in crisis. I should correct the Minister: bus passenger numbers have been falling every year since 2014, under her watch. The cross-party Local Government Association now says that half of all bus routes are in danger of closing due to a lack of Government funding. Surely it is now time for the Government to admit that they have made a serious mistake and for them finally to agree to properly fund our bus services.

Ms Ghani: Buses are indeed incredibly important. Not only do they help people to get to work, but they tackle wider issues such as loneliness. The Government provide more than £1 billion for concessionary fares, and a substantial amount of that—including the bus service operating grant—goes directly to local authorities to fund bus journeys.

It concerns me that Labour Members are desperately trying to turn buses into a political football. It is important to note that Wales, where Labour is in charge, has seen a bigger drop in bus miles than anywhere else in the United Kingdom.

Topical Questions

Mr Speaker: I remind colleagues that questions should be short and should preferably consist of a single sentence.

T1. [909239] **Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): A moment ago, I talked about the importance of the Union—the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—and we also talked about regional air links. I am pleased to announce that I have agreed to

extend the current public service obligation on flights from Londonderry to Stansted for a further two years from May. I believe that that will provide a boost for business in Northern Ireland and, rather importantly, allow spectators to attend the 148th open championship at Royal Portrush this summer.

Andrea Jenkyns: The fantastic pupils at Outwood Primary Academy Ledger Lane in my constituency have organised a petition calling for Wakefield Metropolitan District Council to improve road safety and have persuaded 430 parents and teachers to sign it. The signatories want to see a speed indication device, or other speed restrictions, outside the school. What is the Secretary of State doing to improve road safety outside schools?

Chris Grayling: The Government are combining a range of measures including our cycling and walking safety two-year action plan, which addresses that issue specifically. However, I hope that Wakefield Council, which holds the power to install speed indication devices, will look carefully at the petition, and will respond positively to my hon. Friend's young constituents.

T2. [909240] **Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP):** Scotland's premier food and drink exports could deteriorate while stuck in traffic jams in the south-east of England. If the Secretary of State is so keen on new routes to Europe, would it not make sense for him to support ferry links in areas much farther north, such as Rosyth?

Chris Grayling: We have, of course, supported ferry links farther north, but I think that the additional capacity from east coast ports may, in many circumstances, provide a realistic alternative—indeed, a real alternative—for manufacturers and producers in Scotland.

T3. [909241] **Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con):** Cornwall Council has made the Camelford bypass its No. 1 priority in the context of the major road network. Will the Minister update us on the progress of the network?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): I can confirm that the A39 meets the necessary criteria for the scheme. As far as I am aware, it has not yet been approved and prioritised by the sub-national transport body, but we expect that to happen by the middle of the year, and once it has happened, we will be happy to look at it.

T4. [909242] **Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab):** May I invite the Secretary of State to visit Croydon? More trains pass through Croydon than pass through King's Cross, Euston and Paddington combined. The Secretary of State is aware that just outside east Croydon there is a bottleneck that threatens to bring the whole thing to a grinding halt as passenger numbers increase. I wonder whether he would like to come and have a look.

Chris Grayling: I do not need to come and have a look, because I travel through Croydon, via the west Croydon route, quite regularly. I know that there is a need for significant improvement in the area of the Windmill Bridge junction. My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) has been vociferous in

telling me that that needs to happen, and the Department and Network Rail have already started work on what we believe will be an important project for the future.

T6. [909244] **Mary Robison** (Cheadle) (Con): The expansion of the Metrolink network is a key part of Greater Manchester's transport strategy. In the light of proposals to increase the amount of housing stock in Gatley, Cheadle Hulme and Heald Green as part of the Greater Manchester spatial framework, improvements in our local transport capacity are a priority for my constituents. What steps has the Department taken to support tram-train technology, with a view to expanding the tram-train Metrolink to my constituency?

Chris Grayling: As my hon. Friend will know, the Mayor of Manchester and I recently agreed to work together on the potential expansion of the Metrolink network with the use of tram-train technology. The Government have already funded a tram-train system in Sheffield, which is making a difference there, and I am keen to see how we can extend that to Greater Manchester.

T5. [909243] **Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the Minister agree that one of the best ways to improve air quality in urban areas is through the use of tram schemes? May I commend to him the Sutton tram scheme and encourage him to work closely with the Mayor of London to try to ensure that such schemes are viable and are rolled out?

Jesse Norman: Not only do I agree with the right hon. Gentleman, but we published a light rail call for evidence only last week, specifically highlighting all the concerns he mentions of air quality, congestion relief and so on.

T7. [909245] **Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): Motorists in Harlow driving down Edinburgh Way have faced shocking congestion since 2017, because of delays from the utility companies, costing Essex County Council about £2 million. Will my hon. Friend urge these utility companies to get their acts together and free traffic in Harlow for motorists?

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising the issue. He will be aware that the local authority has the capacity to charge up to £10,000 a day for works overruns. We are working on a new programme called Street Manager to enable local authorities to track these works more effectively.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): Leigh has recently been ranked one of the worst constituencies for social mobility. We are also the fifth largest town in the country without a rail station. Connectivity matters: to connect constituencies and constituents with more opportunities to succeed, will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can help to bring rail connectivity back to the people of Leigh?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The hon. Lady raises the important point that transport is not just about a single journey but is also about social mobility. I am proud that this Department supports our economy and communities

and society in a way that enhances mobility. We have invested over £61 billion in transport infrastructure in the five years to 2020-21, and I am more than happy to meet the hon. Lady.

T8. [909246] **Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): When will we see the end of short formation trains on the Southern rail network? On the Lewes to Eastbourne stretch, we are on four-carriage trains every day. When will this misery end?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): Officials in my Department monitor the number of short formations on Govia Thameslink Railway services as one of its performance benchmarks. There are a number of actions we can take when performance falls below agreed levels, and I am pleased that we are now seeing the lowest number of short formations on GTR since the start of the franchise. I hope that this positive trajectory continues, and I will continue to monitor it.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): People in Stockton cannot get a bus back home after an afternoon doctor appointment, while the Tees Valley Mayor has spent £15,000 on Facebook advertising after almost two years but still has not come up with a plan to improve buses. When will my constituents get better bus services?

Ms Ghani: Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council receives almost £89,000 of bus service operators grant to support local bus services, and £75.5 million from the Government's transforming cities fund has also been secured to improve local connectivity to Tees valley. We have not heard from Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council or the Tees Valley Combined Authority about using the extra powers available to them under the Bus Services Act 2017 to improve services and work more closely with local bus companies. If they were to get in touch, we could also let them know about the world of improvements they could deliver for the hon. Gentleman's constituents.

T9. [909247] **Dame Cheryl Gillan** (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Who is controlling the money in the Department for Transport? In a written answer this week, the Minister tells me that in the last six months of 2018, HS2 spent £5,663,422 on 89 agency staff per month. That equates to just in excess of £120,000 in an annual salary. What on earth is going on in HS2? Who is making the taxpayer pay these amazingly overpaid prices for personnel on HS2? It is a waste of money; cancel it.

Ms Ghani: I am well aware that my right hon. Friend has been a doughty and particularly inquisitive Member of Parliament on behalf of her constituents on HS2. She knows that there is a set budget to deliver HS2, and we must not forget the benefits it will bring across our country, demolishing the north-south divide and building a fairer country. This is more than a transport project; it is a transformative project linking eight of our 10 cities and investing in the midlands and the north of our country.

Margaret Beckett (Derby South) (Lab): Does the Minister recognise that while all that she has just said gives some reassurance, these continued rumours about HS2 raise concerns for companies like Bombardier in

my constituency, which has a joint bid with Hitachi for the rolling stock? Can she say anything further to reassure such companies?

Ms Ghani: The right hon. Lady makes a valid point. So often, we lament that parliamentarians do not deliver long-term projects and that we do not invest in our country or our skills base, but that is what HS2 is doing. I ask Members to desist from undermining one of the largest European infrastructure projects, which will transform our country, and to think about the extra benefits this will bring to the midlands and the north. We are continuing to work with the HS2 programme. That was in our manifesto and that of the Labour party, and it is important to note that every time the Bill has come to the Floor of the House it has gone through.

T10. [909248] **Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Minister of State for our meeting this week allowing me to reiterate the case for much-needed improvements to the A5 in my constituency that would significantly improve the commute for thousands of my constituents every day. Does he agree that effective partnerships between stakeholders such as Highways England, local authorities and the Government are key to delivering these transformative projects?

Jesse Norman: Yes.

Mr Speaker: Splendid.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): At the last Transport questions, I asked the Minister for help in persuading First Group to lend Hull Trains a new train six months early. Does he agree that the fact that I have not had a direct response is disrespectful and indicates First Group's dismissive attitude to Hull? Instead, I had to read the response in the *Hull Daily Mail*. Will he press on First Group the need to meet urgently to secure the continuing success of Hull Trains?

Andrew Jones: Following the last Transport questions, I asked First Group to take the issue forward. I am sorry if it has not actually contacted the hon. Lady, and I will pick this up with it, but I have already taken action as we discussed at the last Transport questions.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): May we have consideration of the Oyster ticketing system being extended south to Crawley stations such as Three Bridges?

Andrew Jones: We have launched a consultation on extending the very popular pay-as-you-go Oyster system to other parts of the south-east, and we are looking at the underlying principles for the rest of the country, too. As the public consultation document sets out, we are considering different options, and I would encourage anyone who believes their local station should be included in a pay-as-you-go zone to respond to the consultation, saying what they want and why. I will make sure that my hon. Friend's views are part of that consultation.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I do not mind taking a few more questions if people will guarantee that it will be a short sentence each.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Heathrow logistics hub process is coming to a conclusion, and there are a number of bids from Northern

Ireland, including one from my constituency. Without prejudicing the outcome, will the Minister ensure that he co-operates closely to ensure that there are regional variations to benefit thousands of jobs in Northern Ireland?

Chris Grayling: I have already told Heathrow airport that, while the detail of the decisions is a matter for them, I would certainly want to see a proper spread across all parts of the United Kingdom.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con) *rose*—

Hon. Members: Ah!

Tom Tugendhat: While we are thinking about unfortunate absences, will you join me, Mr Speaker, in thanking the Tonbridge line's commuters for highlighting the problem of ghost trains on the Tonbridge to Redhill line? On 30 December, 36 trains were advertised but only 12 ran. Could the Minister possibly do something to ensure that the train operating companies actually run the trains that they advertise?

Andrew Jones: The Department monitors performance on a daily basis, and there is a range of actions that we can take when performance falls below agreed levels. I understand that performance on the Redhill to Tonbridge line has been impacted by various things, including speed restrictions, but I am able to tell my hon. Friend that performance on the line has been much improved since the start of the year, with 90% of services now arriving within five minutes of schedule.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): After awarding the contract to Seaborne Freight, the Secretary of State boasted to the House that he was backing a British start-up. I tabled a written question to his Department asking whether it was his working assumption that any ships operated by Seaborne would operate under the British flag. Why were his Ministers, in the answer I received on 14 January, unable to give a straight yes or no answer?

Chris Grayling: Because these are matters for a commercial company. I think that it is still the right thing for a British Government to do to support British start-up businesses, but these are commercial matters for those businesses.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: A sentence without subordinate clauses: I call Anna Soubry.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): You'll be lucky, Mr Speaker. [*Laughter.*] And—blatant creeping—happy Valentine's day.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): Hashtag Speakerdate!

Anna Soubry: Speakerdate—hashtag! I should like to thank the Minister for her excellent visit to my constituency last week and for the HS2 meeting that she convened. On Sunday, I attended the AGM of the Toton, Chilwell Meadows and Chetwynd neighbourhood forum and saw its bold, realistic and exciting plans for the area,

based in part on HS2 coming to Toton sidings. Do she and the Secretary of State agree that it is vital that, when the development body is formed for HS2 at Toton, the neighbourhood forum is fully involved in all its workings?

Ms Ghani: Absolutely. I was delighted to visit Nottingham and to have a meeting with all the east midlands business and council representatives. It is absolutely right to say that HS2 is a local and national project, and community groups such as the one my right hon. Friend has mentioned are indeed involved. I am also delighted to have visited her station.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): As well as announcing funding for the resilience work at Dawlish, will the Government also secure Dawlish-proof trains by moving the HSTs on to the CrossCountry franchise?

Andrew Jones: We are currently working to add more capacity into the CrossCountry franchise, and Network Rail is looking at how to tackle some of the engineering challenges posed by the impact of salt water on trains. That is work in progress.

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): My constituents and I have been campaigning for many years to secure a flyover on the A1 by Wittering. Will the Minister agree to meet me and my constituents with a view to progressing matters?

Jesse Norman: That sounds like a local transport matter, but I am of course happy to meet my hon. Friend and any local councillors whom he may wish to bring.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): On Monday, the Secretary of State justified the non-competitive tendering process for Seaborne Freight by referring to a “change in the assumptions”. Would he care to elaborate on exactly what he meant by that? Does he think that that defence will stand up in court?

Chris Grayling: I recall explaining on Monday precisely what the circumstances were, and I do not want to detain the House any longer by repeating an answer that I gave to the hon. and learned Lady three days ago.

Business of the House

10.41 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for next week is as follows:

MONDAY 18 FEBRUARY—A motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Armed Forces Act (Continuation) Order 2019, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Public Record, Disclosure of Information and Co-Operation (Financial Services) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Money Market Funds (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Cross-Border Mediation (EU Directive) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, followed by a general debate on serious violence.

TUESDAY 19 FEBRUARY—A motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft European Structural and Investment Funds Common Provisions and Common Provision Rules etc. (Amendment) (EU exit) Regulations 2019, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft National Minimum Wage (Amendment) Regulations 2019, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Medicines for Human Use (Clinical Trials) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, followed by a general debate on the NHS 10-year plan.

WEDNESDAY 20 FEBRUARY—A motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Motor Vehicles (Compulsory Insurance) (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Aquatic Animal Health and Alien Species in Aquaculture (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Fertilisers and Ammonium Nitrate Material (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, followed by a general debate on antisemitism in modern society.

THURSDAY 21 FEBRUARY—A general debate on potential future free trade agreements—Australia, New Zealand and US—and on a comprehensive and progressive agreement for a trans-Pacific partnership.

FRIDAY 22 FEBRUARY—The House will not be sitting.

It has been a great week for British artistic talent, with “The Favourite” taking home seven BAFTA—British Academy of Film and Television Arts—awards, and recognition for the excellent work of the cast and crew who support our thriving British film industry. At the Grammys, Dua Lipa won best new artist and Ella Mai won best R&B song. We congratulate all the nominees and winners, and look forward to more success as awards season continues.

It is Valentine’s day, so I thought a little poem might be order:

Labour is red, the Tories are blue,
Our future is bright,
With a good deal in sight,
For the UK and our friends in the EU.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for next week’s business, but I am afraid that I do not find any of it very funny—this is really serious.

Last week, I asked for an Opposition day debate, and the Leader of the House did not respond. Can we have an Opposition day debate? The last one was on 13 November, which is as long ago as when we were first promised the meaningful vote.

The Leader of the House read out a list of statutory instruments for debate next week; perhaps she will consider a debate on the Non-Contentious Probate (Fees) Order 2018. There is a possibility that the order may be ultra vires:

“The government can call it a service charge or a graduated fee but asking those who have larger estates to pay more is in effect a tax hike through the back door.”

Those are the words of the vice-president of the Law Society, Simon Davis. [*Interruption.*] I will, but I am just waiting for some silence. Will the Government say whether they are inappropriately introducing a tax through a statutory instrument? It cannot be a service charge, because it is graduated, depending on the size of the estate. The Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments has raised concerns, so can we have a debate on the Floor of the House to give the measure proper scrutiny?

The Leader of the House has allocated time for a debate on serious violence. My hon. Friends the Members for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) and for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) both welcome the debate, particularly the latter. He passionately asked the Leader of the House for the debate, but unfortunately he will be away in the Falklands, so I hope he gets another opportunity to debate this important issue.

Can we have a debate on due diligence, or perhaps a written statement setting out the tests for awarding contracts? We also need a statement on the definition of taxpayers’ money. The Secretary of State for Transport said that no taxpayers’ money was used in the Seaborne Freight contract, yet the National Audit Office said it was. Can we have clarification?

Every week there is chaos, which is an appalling way to govern a country. Employment and support allowance assessors said Jeff Hayward was fit to work. He then won an appeal—seven months after he died. When that happens, something has to change. I have already raised the matter of delays to appeals. What are the Government going to do to stop these assessments that do not work?

Students are having to pay off their loans at 6.3% interest, while vice-chancellors earn up to half a million pounds. Is the Leader of the House aware of the joint letter from the House of Commons Treasury Committee and the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee calling on the UK Statistics Authority to seek consent from the Chancellor to fix the retail prices index? The lower-rate consumer prices index applies to incomes, but the higher-rate RPI applies to outgoings such as student loans and rail fares. The UK Statistics Authority says that the Treasury will say no to fixing RPI, so it has not asked; and the Treasury says that it has not even been asked. Lord Forsyth called it a “ridiculous merry-go-round.” Can we please have a statement on when this will be fixed?

This week, the Leader of the House told the media—not the House—about when we will have a meaningful vote. There would not be loose talk in a Brussels bar from

any civil servant of the stature of the one reported to have made the remarks unless they wanted the information out there, so he was clearly kite-flying. It is upsetting for the House that the Leader of the House has not come here to announce the date of the meaningful vote, instead announcing it on the radio. The vote is clearly not today. We have a vote, but all we get is a meaningless motion. How can the motion be passed? It states that the House notes that the discussions between the UK and the EU on the Northern Ireland backstop are ongoing, but Donald Tusk, the president of the European Council, said yesterday:

“No news is not always good news. EU27 still waiting for concrete, realistic proposals from London on how to break Brexit impasse.”

More than 40 former ambassadors and high commissioners have written to the Prime Minister warning about this national crisis, so who is she actually talking to? When will the Leader of the House announce the timetable for the meaningful vote? She could do it today.

I was going to mention my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner).

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Don't.

Valerie Vaz: My hon. Friend is doing a lot of chuntering, but I want to wish him well. He had an important day earlier this week, and my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, also hits a milestone today.

We paid tribute to the Clerk of the House of Commons yesterday, but bizarrely he was not in his place. While he is sitting here, I want to say that he will be missed. I hope he read the important tributes to him.

Finally, Eve Griffith-Okai has been in the Speaker's Office for 33 years, and we wish her a happy retirement.

Mr Speaker: I thank the shadow Leader of the House for what she has just said. Many Members from across the House will know Eve Griffith-Okai. I think I am right in saying that she has served under, with and in support of no fewer than four Speakers; she served Speaker Weatherill, Speaker Boothroyd and Speaker Martin, and she has brilliantly served me. She is much loved across the House and has an outstanding track record of public service, which I am glad to say has not gone unnoticed or unappreciated in the Chamber.

Andrea Leadsom: As Jane Austen said,

“Is not general incivility the very essence of love?”

I shall therefore take the slightly unhumorous remarks of the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) to be the beginning of a real friendship between us. I am grateful to her for asking some important questions. She asks about Opposition days. I hope she will accept that I have been able to find time for some of the important business that she has requested of me in recent weeks. I was pleased that, as she requested, we were able to debate the Securitisation Regulations 2018 yesterday. I hope that she will also welcome my announcement today that we will have a general debate on the NHS 10-year plan next week, which she requested on 31 January. I am seeking to deliver on requests that she is making. She asks about the probate statutory instrument, and I absolutely heard her request. I ask

that she also makes it through the usual channels, as is the convention. The Government will of course respond, as we have done in the past, taking her requests very seriously and delivering on almost all of them.

The hon. Lady asks again about the awarding of contracts by the Department for Transport. She will be aware that we have just had DFT oral questions, where this issue was very much dealt with by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. He also answered an urgent question earlier in the week on the same subject. Just to be clear—all hon. Members who have been involved in any kind of business procurement will understand this—a process is undertaken that seeks to assess who is suitable for a contract. That does have a cost associated with it, but as my right hon. Friend made very clear, no taxpayers' money was actually awarded to the supplier involved, because it failed to meet the requirements of the contract.

The hon. Lady asks for a statement on a call for changes to use of the consumer prices index and the retail prices index. I will of course take that away and consider what can be done. She asks when we will bring back a meaningful vote. As the Prime Minister explained to this House just this week in a statement lasting two hours and 18 minutes, in which she answered questions from Members from right across the House, she is currently negotiating a revised deal. Members will be aware that there is a debate all day today on this topic.

The Prime Minister has explained that when we achieve the progress we need, we will bring forward another meaningful vote, but if the Government do not secure a majority in this House in favour of a withdrawal agreement and a political declaration, they will make a statement on Tuesday 26 February, and will table an amendable motion relating to the statement. A Minister will move that motion on Wednesday 27 February, thereby enabling the House to vote on it, and on any amendments to it, on that day.

Obviously, I will make a business statement in the usual way next week, setting out the details of the business for the week commencing 25 February. The hon. Member for Walsall South asks, “Where is the negotiation?”. She will appreciate that there is a negotiation; it is on the final element—resolving the issues associated with the backstop—that the Prime Minister, the Attorney General, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union are firmly committed to achieving in order to bring a motion to this House that it can support, thereby giving certainty to businesses, and citizens across this country and the EU.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the falling number of children being vaccinated against preventable illnesses? For whatever reason, there seems to be a loss of confidence among parents in some of these vaccinations. It is certainly a matter that needs addressing.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a very important point, as he always does. After clean water, vaccination is the most effective public health measure, protecting children and adults against diseases that can cause serious harm. Confidence in the vaccine programme remains high, and parents routinely have their children vaccinated. However, my hon. Friend is right that there

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

has been a small decline, and we are working to address that, as outlined in the NHS long-term plan. There is absolutely no complacency, and we will continue to work to ensure that children get the vaccinations they need.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the very curious business for next week. This is what we have cancelled the mid-term recess for: statutory instruments and general debates. Members will be missing their skiing holidays and time in their villas for that! In the past few weeks, this House has regularly been rising early because there has not been enough to do. It is not as though we do not have any big decisions to make; there are only 43 days until we are supposed to leave the EU, yet there is nothing in this business statement that indicates when we will have the meaningful vote to determine on what basis we will leave—if we leave on a basis at all.

This is getting beyond a joke, and this Government are taking us all for mugs. We know that it is their intention to run down the clock, and to present the binary choice of their appalling deal or no deal at all, and they are doing everything possible to string this House along. We must stop them. Thank goodness we have you, Mr Speaker, in the Chair to ensure that this House will have its say, as it will.

When is a neutral motion not a neutral motion? When the European Research Group tells you that it is not. All we had to do today was have a form of words on which everybody could hang their favourite amendments, and the Government could not even do that. That has infuriated ERG members, and given that they are the de facto leadership of the Tory party, you would not want to do that. Here is a question for my colleagues: at what time today do the Government cravenly cave in to the ERG and amend their motion? We should have a sweepstake. I will have first go: 2.30 pm. That is when I say that the Government will cave in.

Finally, can we have a debate on what happens in Brussels bars? The first rule of Brussels bars is that what happens in Brussels bars stays in Brussels bars—unless you are Olly Robbins. Even with all the Stella Artois, we would not need Hercule Poirot to figure out what was going on. If this House wants to find out what is going on in this chaotic, clueless Brexit, perhaps we should all up sticks and head off to the “Voulez-vous Parlez Avec Moi?” bar in Brussels.

Given that it is Valentine’s Day, I shall say:

Labour is red,
Tories are blue,
The message from Scotland is
We’re staying in the EU.

Andrea Leadsom: I think the hon. Gentleman means the UK, according to the people of Scotland—but that does not rhyme; I grant him that. I am grateful to him for his contribution today; there were no surprises there. I say to him, in the immortal words of Shakespeare, that

“his unkindness may defeat my life, but never taint my love.”

I remain very fond of the hon. Gentleman. I will seek to answer one very important question that I think he asked: why is the motion for today’s debate not a neutral motion? I want to be very clear that today’s motion is amendable. Members will be aware that neutral motions are not usually amendable under the rules of this House, specifically under Standing Order No. 24B. The current exception to that is neutral motions tabled under the terms of section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. Such neutral motions are amendable, but under the Order of the House of 4 December. Today’s debate is not a motion under section 13, but a debate that the Government committed to outside the statutory framework of the 2018 Act, and they note that

“discussions between the UK and the EU on the Northern Ireland backstop are ongoing.”

For the motion to be amendable, it needed not to be a neutral motion. I hope that that clarifies the matter for all hon. Members, and I do hope that they will take this in the spirit in which it is intended—as an opportunity to give the Prime Minister, the Attorney General, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster more time to negotiate an answer on the backstop, which is what this House requested of us in the last debate.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): Can we have a debate on residential properties managers? Residents in Clyde House in my constituency have had to put up with floods, heating and ventilation systems that do not work, and inaction from A2Dominion, the company that is meant to be getting the repairs done quickly. Can we have a debate so that residents know where they can get redress and, most of all, urgent action?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is right to raise an issue about which many Members are concerned—that is, the way in which some tenants and leaseholders are treated badly by housing associations and freeholders. She will be aware that we have introduced legislation to protect tenants from rip-off fees, but there is more to do to ensure the right balance between protecting the interests of those who live in houses and those who own them.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): May I express some disappointment that the Leader of the House has forgone the opportunity to have a debate on the 20th anniversary of the Macpherson report next Thursday in favour of a general debate on free trade agreements? I remind her that we also have heavily subscribed applications for debates on 20 February on the topic of St David’s Day and Welsh affairs, and on 7 March to celebrate International Women’s Day, which is the following day. The deadline for estimates day debates is tomorrow. The estimates were only published earlier this week and debate applications must be with the Clerk of the Backbench Business Committee by early tomorrow afternoon; we would very much welcome that. We will try to find another slot for the 20th anniversary of the Macpherson report, when we are given time by the Government.

Andrea Leadsom: I did try hard to meet the hon. Gentleman’s request, but he will appreciate that there will be a very important general debate on the future trade relationships that the Government have committed to for some time. I share his enthusiasm regarding the

need for a debate 20 years after the death of Stephen Lawrence, which is the subject of the Macpherson report, and I will continue to seek Government time for that debate.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): May we have a debate in Government time to establish the roles and rights of Parliament versus the courts in a policy on returning foreign fighters and so-called jihadi brides, the threats that they pose to national security and the economic consequences to the British taxpayer? And while we are at it, now that 10% of the prison population in the United Kingdom is made up of foreign national offenders, will the Government keep the House updated on how the process of returning these offenders to their countries of origin is going?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises a vital issue. I am sure that many right hon. and hon. Members will have seen the news today of a jihadi fighter looking to return to the United Kingdom. It is a very serious issue indeed, and it is vital that we continue to do everything possible to keep UK citizens safe. My right hon. Friend will be aware that Home Office questions are on Monday 25 February, and I encourage him to raise the matter directly with Ministers then.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Some of us did not get the chance to say anything about the Clerk of the House yesterday. May I just say that the staff in my constituency were amazed and pleased when he took the trouble to visit my constituency and see how they worked? I thank him for that.

On a different note, I am wearing my Looney Tunes tie today because it seemed very appropriate for the Brexit debate. The whole of our debate in this country seems to be dominated by older people.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Sit down! [*Laughter.*]

Mr Sheerman: Would *Hansard* record that I said “Ouch”? Is not it time that we had a series of debates about young people, their opportunities, their futures, the loss of youth services and the fact that children are dying unnecessarily in our country? Let us concentrate on youth in this Parliament in the coming year.

Andrea Leadsom: As ever, the hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. I think he is hearing across the Chamber that there is support for his view that we need a debate on the issues for young people. He will be aware that there are very often opportunities to raise particular issues for young people. He will also be aware that I have the great privilege of chairing a cross-departmental committee on behalf of the Prime Minister looking at how we can provide more support at the very earliest start for all babies and their families. These are very important issues. I would encourage him perhaps to go to the Backbench Business Committee on this, because I am sure that he will get a lot of support from right across the House.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): As we approach the agony of yet another Brexit debate with nothing new to say and nothing new to hear, can I distract the Leader of the House on to something that is really very important—

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Hear, hear!

Mr Walker: I have always thought the hon. Gentleman was a very great and observant man. That thing that is really important is private Members’ Bills continuing to bring this House into disrepute. I know that this concerns the Leader of the House, the shadow Leader of the House, and all Members. Will the Leader of the House meet the Chairman of the Procedure Committee—namely myself—so that we can discuss how we can ensure that Fridays sell this place, not bring it down?

Andrea Leadsom: As Jane Austen said,

“There is nothing I would not do for those who are really my friends”,

so of course I will be delighted to meet my hon. Friend. He raises a very important point. I know that all of us were incredibly disappointed and enraged by the decision of one Member to block a very important private Member’s Bill on female genital mutilation. I am delighted to tell the House that I have tabled a motion to allow the Bill to be debated in a Second Reading Committee in order that it can make progress. But of course I will be happy to meet my hon. Friend.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): New Ferry in my constituency is not the only town in the country that needs regeneration, so can I implore the Leader of the House to allow a debate in Government time about town centres? New Ferry suffered the most devastating explosion and has still not recovered. We need to talk more about towns and how we rebuild them.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that our town centres are vital to the sense of community and to all the issues that we worry about, such as loneliness, isolation, keeping a thriving economy and so on. I would suggest that she might like to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can discuss the particular issues for her town. Britain’s retailers, from high street shops to independent traders, are a crucial part of our economy, supporting over 3 million jobs and contributing over £90 billion to our economy. This Government are determined to continue supporting that.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): In our infancies at our mothers’ knees, we were told that little boys were made of slugs and snails and puppy-dogs’ tails, but the fantasy of the nursery is a world away from the modern reality of puppy smuggling. Earlier this week, many Members met the Dogs Trust, which told us that wicked traders from foreign climes, oblivious to the cruelty that they impose on small dogs brought into this country, are facing woefully inadequate penalties for doing so. So will the Leader of the House bring a Minister here—perhaps our splendid Secretary of State for the Environment—to say what plans the Government have to increase those penalties, perhaps by some punitive fixed penalty notice? This heartless trade in tiny creatures that brings despair, disease and death must be brought to an end.

Andrea Leadsom: I am sure that all hon. and right hon. Members would agree with my right hon. Friend that puppy smuggling is an appalling trade. The UK is rightly proud of our high animal welfare standards. We

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

are, in fact, among the best in the world for the treatment that we show towards animals. He will be aware that we have DEFRA oral questions on Thursday 21 February, when I encourage him to ask my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State about his plans to bring forward higher sentencing for cruelty to animals—in the environment Bill, if I recall rightly, but my right hon. Friend will be able to give him further detail on that.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Government funding for free TV licences runs out in 2020. More than 4,000 pensioners could lose out in Barnsley East. Can we have a debate in Government time about how they intend to deliver on their manifesto promise to protect free TV licences for the over-75s?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is right that many over-75s rely on their free TV licence to keep in touch with what is going on in the world and to seek the comfort that good TV programmes offer. She is right to raise that issue. She will be aware that the Prime Minister has made clear her view that the BBC needs to continue to make those free TV licences available, but I urge the hon. Lady to raise that through a written parliamentary question to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): After the tragic fire in Stafford last week in which four children lost their lives, will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the fire and rescue service of Staffordshire, Staffordshire police and West Midlands ambulance service, as well as the local schools, churches and community groups that handled this situation incredibly sensitively and with great regard for the feelings of the family and the community?

Andrea Leadsom: All our hearts go out. My hon. Friend is right to raise the appalling harm done to the family and friends and all those who had to deal with the consequences of this awful house fire in Staffordshire in which four people died. I echo his condolences to the family and his appreciation for all the support and help given to them.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Will the Leader of the House join me in welcoming the first cohort of parliamentarians to begin the Prison Service parliamentary scheme, who are Lord Attlee, the hon. Members for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) and for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), and myself? A number of us visited the college at Newbold Revel last week to see prison officer entry-level training. This important scheme will be an opportunity to gain a full appreciation of life and work in the prisons of England and Wales, and we encourage other parliamentarians to take part in it.

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate the hon. Lady and her colleagues who are taking part in the trial of this new scheme, which will enhance the information available to the Chamber. She will be aware that we have over 4,300 more prison officers than two years ago and are investing an extra £30 million to improve facilities in prisons with the most pressing problems. I look forward to hearing more about what she learns.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): Can we have a debate on house building companies? Recently, based on inside information on a route going from Taunton down to Ilminster, Persimmon paid £16 million for a speculative development. That has been in conjunction, I suspect, with the local council and a well-known estate agent who was caught price-fixing. We need to ensure that when organisations have privileged information, it is not used for other means. The Secretary of State for Transport is being dragged into this tomorrow. It is not a happy situation. Can we have time to debate it?

Andrea Leadsom: I have chatted to our hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), who has been pleased to tell me about some of the excellent infrastructure projects that she has campaigned for in her wonderful constituency, including the upgrade of the Toneyway at Creech Castle, the upgrade of the A358, the Staplegrove spine road and the upgrade of Taunton rail station, on which work is beginning now. Our hon. Friend is delighted with the efforts that she and others are making to improve Taunton Deane. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) has given you, Mr Speaker, and my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane prior notice of his intention to raise her constituency in this place.

Mr Speaker: Well, I am not aware that that is so today, though I speak with care. The Leader of the House is quite right to say that if a Member intends to refer to another Member's constituency, especially if he or she intends to do so in what might be called disobliging terms, it is a courtesy so to notify. The hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) has, on a number of occasions, notified me of his intention to refer to the Taunton Deane constituency, but—I express myself with care—I am not aware that he did so on this occasion, and that should have happened. [*Interruption.*] He is signalling that he either has written or will write; I think it is the latter—could do better.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): The Government have supported the concept of an international fund for Israel-Palestine to promote the values of co-existence, reconciliation and peace. The evidence is robust that these projects bring together people, build resilience and build constituencies for peace. May we have an early debate on how the Government can make progress on the support they have given to this idea so far?

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Lady raises the very valuable work that is being done to try to resolve some of the issues on the ground between Israel and Palestine, and it is absolutely vital that we continue to do all we in the UK can to promote peace and justice in that area. She will be aware that we have Foreign Office questions on Tuesday 26 February, when I would encourage her to discuss it with Ministers.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Given the comments of Sir Terry Morgan, the former chairman of HS2, to the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee last month—he said, “Nobody knows” the number, when asked what he thought the final cost of the HS2 project would be—and reports in the media that senior Government sources have said that the “costs are spiralling so much that we’ve been actively considering other scenarios, including scrapping the entire project”,

may we please have a debate on the value for money of HS2 and on alternative proposals that would deliver more benefits to more people at less cost?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an issue that is of interest to a number of right hon. and hon. Members right across the country, including you, Mr Speaker, and me. Certainly, if my hon. Friend wants to seek a Backbench debate or a Westminster Hall debate, I am sure many on all sides of the argument would want to take part in it.

Mr Speaker: I cannot speak for the Backbench Business Committee, but I can assure the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) that if he wants a debate on the matter in Westminster Hall, he will get it all right.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Tomorrow, thousands of young people will show their deep concern about the growing climate crisis by taking part in a climate strike. Since, shockingly, there was only one debate on climate change in this place last year, will the Leader of the House urgently find time for us to debate this, the greatest threat we face, so that we can demonstrate to young people that we are listening and that we take their concerns very seriously?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an incredibly important point. I think the UK can be proud of our contribution to securing the first truly global, legally binding agreement to tackle climate change, which was the Paris agreement. She will be aware that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth is fully committed to doing everything possible to tackle the threat of climate change. She may be aware that our climate change record at home speaks for itself. Between 2010 and 2017, we reduced the UK's domestic greenhouse gas emissions by 23%, and according to PwC, the UK leads the G20 for decarbonising its economy since 2000. There is a lot more to be done, but the UK Government remain committed to doing it.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): A week ago today, my constituent Geoff Whaley—a very brave man—travelled to Switzerland to end his life before the ravages of motor neurone disease made his suffering, and that of his family, unbearable. He wrote to all MPs to impress on us that a change needs to be considered after his fantastically loving and loyal wife was reported to the police, in an anonymous phone call, as a person potentially assisting someone to end their life. She and Geoff had to suffer the added mental anguish of facing a criminal investigation at a time when the family, and most of all Geoff, wanted to prepare his goodbyes and fulfil his last wish in peace. May I ask the Leader of the House if we can have a debate in Government time so that we can re-examine this area of law, particularly in the light of this amazing man's efforts to give terminally ill people a choice over the way they leave this world, and to afford protection to their loved ones?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises a truly heartbreaking case, and I commend her for doing so. I am sure the thoughts of the whole House are with the family of Geoff Whaley at this very difficult time. I can

say to her that it remains the Government's view that any change to the law in this area is an issue of individual conscience and a matter for Parliament to decide, rather than one for Government policy. Parliament has debated this issue on several occasions, the most recent being a debate in the House of Commons on 11 September 2015, when the Assisted Dying (No. 2) Bill had its Second Reading. As things stand, the will of Parliament is that there should be no change to the law, but it is a thought-provoking matter, and I encourage her to raise it directly with Justice Ministers.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): May we have a debate in Government time on how long is an acceptable length of time for a Department to respond to a Member's inquiry? I wrote to the Minister for Employment 225 days ago on behalf of my constituent, Mr Scott, who received conflicting and incorrect advice from the Department for Work and Pensions. To date, he and I are still in the dark about the Department's answer.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that Departments have guidelines for the length of time they should take to respond to inquiries, and in the case she raises it sounds as if something has gone wrong or a letter has gone astray. I encourage her to write again to the Department, or if she would like to write to me I will take up the matter on her behalf.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Last Friday, four private Member's Bills were debated and made progress, but unfortunately three of my Bills, including one that would have stopped people voting more than once in a general election, one that would have abolished car parking charges at hospitals, and another that would have placed restrictions on drones at airports and protected aircraft, were objected to by one person sitting in front of me. I think that the Leader of the House referred to that person in her previous remarks, so why are the Government not making time for my Bills, as they are doing for others?

Andrea Leadsom: The Government have an excellent record of supporting private Member's Bills to get into statute, and since 2010 more than 50 have received Royal Assent. The Government maintain the view that they provide an invaluable opportunity for Members to promote legislation on the causes they support. Changes to the law are possible through private Members' Bills, but it is an important principle that they should make progress only when Members are able to win sufficient support from across the House. The default position remains, in accordance with the rules of the House, that private Members' Bills ought to make progress on Fridays. I am sure hon. Members will understand that the Children Act 1989 (Amendment) (Female Genital Mutilation) Bill is an exceptional case, and that they will welcome the Government's decision to bring it forward.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I know we had a debate on sport fairly recently, but may we have another one very soon to allow me to pay tribute to Newport County, who for the first time in 70 years have reached the fifth round of the FA cup and will play

[*Jessica Morden*]

Manchester City this weekend? That has generated huge pride in our city and proved that the magic of the FA cup is alive and well.

Andrea Leadsom: I am glad that the hon. Lady got the chance to mention Newport County's achievements in the Chamber, and I commend her for doing so. She is right to say that the debate on sport was well subscribed, and I gather that the time limit on speeches went down to three minutes by the end of the debate. It was right that we had the opportunity to speak about some of the amazing sporting achievements across the United Kingdom, and I will certainly bear in mind her request for a further debate.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I, too, pay tribute to Newport County, although I note that when they travelled to Cleethorpes a few weeks ago they suffered a heavy defeat to Grimsby Town. Let us hope they are more successful in the FA cup, and I wish them well.

Like many other villages, Goxhill in my constituency has suffered the closure of its local post office. In many villages, convenience stores have taken over the role of the Post Office, which insists that they provide a full service throughout their opening hours, which can be 15 or 16 hours a day. In actual fact, just four, six or eight hours a day, five days a week, would provide for the needs of customers. May we have a debate on post offices in rural areas, and allow Ministers to explain why they insist on such arrangements?

Andrea Leadsom: I know just how valuable local post offices are, particularly in rural or isolated areas, so I am genuinely sorry to hear about the closure of Goxhill post office. They are a crucial part of our communities and help to improve the lives of all our residents, particularly the elderly. My hon. Friend will be aware that the Government have invested over £2 billion in the Post Office in recent years, which includes the continuation of subsidy payments to support community post offices. I encourage my hon. Friend to raise his particular case with Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Ministers and to perhaps seek an Adjournment debate so that he can do so.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I am keen to accommodate colleagues, but I want to be moving on by midday because the debate on the European Union is heavily subscribed. What is needed is brevity from all colleagues.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): May I start by thanking the Leader of the House, the shadow Leader of the House and you, Mr Speaker, for finding time for a debate on serious violence? It proves that business questions work.

On another matter, may we have an urgent debate on provision for families with children who have disabilities? Conservative-controlled Nottinghamshire County Council has just cut £176,000 of funding that, for example, enables children with disabilities to go to nurseries. This cut will affect 46 families, who on average will each lose £4,300. That cannot be acceptable, and I do not believe

it conforms to the Government's own guidelines. We need an urgent debate to protect those children in Nottinghamshire.

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman, who was persistent in requesting a Government debate on serious violence. I am pleased that we have been able to provide that. He raises a very serious issue about the provision of support to families who have children with disabilities. He may be aware that spending on the most vulnerable children has increased by over £1.5 billion since 2010. In the Budget, we announced an extra £410 million for social care, including for children, alongside £84 million over the next five years to keep more children safely at home with their families. He is absolutely right, however, that the decisions taken by local councils must take into account the needs of their local communities. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise this particular point about Nottinghamshire's children.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing next week's business. I, for one, am very pleased with its contents. Last year saw a record number of antisemitic allegations, which the chief executive of the Community Security Trust has blamed on antisemitic politics and the deliberate exclusion of Jews from anti-racist norms. May I therefore thank the Leader of the House for granting a debate in Government time, so that we can see what the Government are doing to address the problem of antisemitism and how we can remove this scourge from our party politics?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to have been able to announce a debate on antisemitism for next week. It is incredibly distressing to see cases of antisemitism on the rise in this country, and it must stop. Antisemitism is despicable and it has no place in society. What I can say to my hon. Friend is that the Leader of the Opposition's own MPs tabled and unanimously passed a motion last week calling on the party leadership to adequately tackle cases of antisemitism, as a failure to do so seriously risks antisemitism in the Labour party appearing normalised and the party seeming to be institutionally antisemitic.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): This week, Bradford starts to celebrate its 10th anniversary as the world's first UNESCO city of film. In those 10 years, numerous films and TV shows have been shot in Bradford, including: "Victoria", "The ABC Murders", "Peaky Blinders", "Miss You Already", "The Limehouse Golem" and "God's Own Country". Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating all those involved in Bradford City of Film? May we have a debate on what the Government are doing to support the creative sector and in particular Bradford's pioneering film industry?

Andrea Leadsom: That is a fantastic line-up. I certainly join the hon. Lady in congratulating Bradford on its excellent work on some very well known films and programmes. I wish it every success in the future. I know that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is always keen to consider, with Members across the House, what more can be done. I will take that point away and see whether Government time can be found for such a debate.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): May we have a statement on the achievements of the former MP for Harlow and Epping between 1924 and 1945? Far from being a villain, Winston Churchill was not only our greatest Prime Minister but a wonderful social reformer and the man who defeated Nazi tyranny.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out that someone calling Sir Winston Churchill a “villain” is, in effect, denigrating the achievements of a man who led this country to potentially its greatest ever contribution to global peace. It is a great shame that he was described in that way.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I have spoken before about the almost nine-year and counting review of the redundancy modification order, which affects my constituents and many others across the UK. This Government’s dilatory—indeed, atrocious—handling of the review may cost current and former local authority employees thousands of pounds. May we have a debate in Government time to hold this failing Government to account?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very specific issue, and she is absolutely right to do so. It is of course important that we do everything we can to ensure fairness in the area of redundancy. I am not familiar with the exact concerns that she has. She may wish to seek an Adjournment debate, or if she wants to write to me more fully, I can take the issue up with the relevant Department on her behalf.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Last week, I held a packed meeting for residents in my constituency to question the police about the spike in aggravated burglaries. No less a newspaper than *The Times* carried the story yesterday of a tragic case of a young married couple who were killed in a head-on car crash—except that that young married couple, together with another passenger, were fleeing the scene of an aggravated burglary, where they had attempted to break in. Could we have a statement in Government time on what action is being taken to combat aggravated burglaries across this country?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has raised this issue a number of times in business questions, and he is absolutely right to do so. He will be aware that the Government are taking strong action to try to clamp down on the recent increase in some violent crimes. The Government have published our serious violence strategy and established a serious violence taskforce. In addition, our funding for the police includes an increase for next year of up to £970 million compared with 2018-19. However, my hon. Friend may wish to raise this question directly with Home Office Ministers on Monday 25 February.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. In reiterating my plea for brevity, I gently point out to colleagues that if they now ask long questions, they do so in the full knowledge that they will be stopping other colleagues taking part.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Will the Home Secretary be there for the debate on serious violence?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will realise that that is way above my pay grade. I do not determine which Ministers come to the House, but of course the appropriate Minister will be here to answer that debate.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): It is curious that, given how much debate there has been outside this place on the issue of non-disclosure agreements this week—agreements that silence people who have been bullied or even assaulted at work—there has not been an opportunity here for MPs to scrutinise the Government on their response to the court decision on the Philip Green case. Will the Leader of the House ensure that time is given for the Government to set out their plan on how they are going to regulate non-disclosure agreements?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises a very serious issue, and I commend her for all the work she has done in this area. It is very concerning that non-disclosure agreements are clearly being used to hide workplace harassment and to intimidate victims into silence. It is clearly unacceptable. NDAs cannot stop a worker whistleblowing. It is very important that people are aware of that, especially some of the most vulnerable people in our workplaces. I can assure her that we will shortly be consulting on measures to improve the regulation of NDAs.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): On Monday, the Secretary of State for Defence made a number of announcements to the press. They included first, a proposal to have large squadrons of highly skilled killer drones, and secondly—and more oddly—the proposal to convert a number of old car ferries into frontline warships, including, according to *The Times*, the Empress of Margate. Is it not the case that the Secretary of State should come to the House to make a statement regarding these proposals, and that we should also have a wider debate on them?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we have Defence questions on Monday 18 February, which will be a good opportunity for him to ask the Secretary of State directly.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): The Oxfordshire Cotswolds Garden Village will be a major development for West Oxfordshire and particularly for the neighbouring village of Eynsham. Will the Government make a statement on the ways in which local communities can be assured that the necessary infrastructure—schools, hospitals, and Cotswold line and A40 upgrades—can come before and not after developments, and that such developments can bring benefits and not detriment to their local areas?

Andrea Leadsom: All of us want to see proper infrastructure in our constituencies before there is new housing. The Government have committed to ensuring that that is the case. My hon. Friend may wish to take up his specific issues directly with Ministers in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, perhaps through an Adjournment debate.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Five wasted years after the launch of the northern powerhouse, Whitehall this week killed off Yorkshire

[Diana Johnson]

devolution. Is it not now time for plan B, and for the Humber docklands to be given the same priority as the London docklands have been given the last 40 years, for devolution to the Humber area to be real, for the regeneration of the Humber region to be allowed to continue, and for transport devolution?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is a powerful voice for her constituency and her area, and she is absolutely right to be so. She will be aware that the Government remain fully committed to the northern powerhouse and to the devolution projects that we have implemented in recent years. She will also be aware that we have seen over a quarter of a trillion pounds of infrastructure investments since 2010 and that public investment as a percentage of GDP has been 14% higher on average since 2010 than under Labour. The Government remain fully committed to doing everything we can to improve investment, but I would encourage her to seek answers on her area directly, perhaps through an Adjournment debate.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Cheap synthetic drugs such as Spice and Mamba are increasingly becoming a problem in our towns, especially among the homeless and the vulnerable. With users posing a perceived threat to the public and putting immense stress on our public services, will my right hon. Friend consider granting a debate in Government time to discuss the effects of these destructive substances on our communities and what more can be done to ensure that the dealers and users face the full force of the law?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a very serious issue. She will be aware that the Government have put in place strong measures to consult on a new legal duty to underpin a public health approach to tackling serious violence, which would of course look at the problem of drug misuse. The Government want to see law enforcement agencies and policy targeting and preventing the drug-related causes of violent crime effectively. I would encourage her to contribute to the debate on serious violence that I have announced for next week.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): We heard this morning in the news that there is a study that suggests that street cannabis may be linked to depression in young people. If the study is correct, it emphasises how important it is that we protect young people from harm, which is why we should legalise and regulate the cannabis supply, in the same way as we do for that much more harmful drug, alcohol. May we have a debate on how we can protect young people by putting in place a proper regulatory regime for cannabis supply and consumption?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman, like my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), is talking about a very considerable problem, which is drug misuse by young people, with the appalling impact that it can have on their mental health, as well as the links to crime that are so often associated with drug misuse. The Government are looking carefully at measures to get young people away from a life of drugs and crime before it even begins. We have announced a new £200 million

youth endowment fund over 10 years, which will build the evidence, as well as interventions to stop young people from 10 to 14 getting involved in these sorts of activities.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): Poor mobile phone reception and the lack of 4G coverage has a huge impact on rural communities and is restricting the productivity of rural businesses. May we have a debate on how operators and the Government can work together to end this digital divide?

Andrea Leadsom: As an MP who represents a semi-rural constituency, I am extremely sympathetic to my hon. Friend. As he will know, we have committed more than £1 billion to next-generation digital infrastructure, and we are committed to full-fibre connections for the majority of homes and businesses by 2025, with a nationwide full-fibre network by 2033. There is a huge amount more to be done and I am sure that, if my hon. Friend sought a Westminster Hall debate, many Members would be interested in taking part.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Betty Higgins, the former leader of Nottingham City Council, died this week aged 92. She will be remembered as one of the great Nottinghamians: our publicly owned bus company, our council houses that she built and our schools that she refreshed provide a lasting memory. She was tough but kind, idealistic but pragmatic. She was also my friend and had a profound influence on my career from university to where I am today. May we have a debate in Government time about the impact of our great local government leaders and how to celebrate them?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman has paid a touching tribute to the former leader of his local council. I join him in paying tribute to her for her lifetime of commitment to the area. So many people in public life contribute to their areas but go largely unnoticed and unrewarded. It is right that we pay tribute to them from time to time, and I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can do just that.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Earlier this week my mere mention of Bolton FM brought delight to some Members. May we have a debate about how the Government can support local radio stations through, for instance, the relocation of masts, so that my constituents—especially those in Hunger Hill and Chew Moor—can benefit from better reception for Bolton FM?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a keen advocate for his constituency, and I am sure that we would all love access to Bolton FM. He is right to raise the issue of local radio stations, which are often valuable sources of information as well as entertainment for local communities, and I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Tomorrow I will visit the Angel of the North in my constituency as it celebrates its 21st birthday. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Gateshead Council on its vision in

commissioning this magnificent work, and may we have a debate in Government time on the importance of culture to local economies?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady has joined a number of Members in calling for a debate to celebrate culture and she is absolutely right to do so. I am delighted to join her in celebrating the 21st birthday of the Angel of the North, which is an iconic sight for those who travel from the south to the north of the United Kingdom.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con) *rose*—

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Ah! The Cornish competitors. Scott Mann.

Scott Mann: Will the Leader of the House congratulate the Polzeath marine conservation group on the installation of two water fountains on two of our most prolific beaches in north Cornwall? Given the increased use of reusable bottles, would it be possible to have a debate about the need for more water fountains around the UK?

Andrea Leadsom: I commend my hon. Friend for raising such an important matter on behalf of his constituents. It is vital to make drinking water more readily available if we are to reduce the use of single-use plastic bottles. The water industry supports the Refill campaign, and Refill points will be installed in every major city and town in England, but Water UK is also exploring options for rural communities, and the Government continue to work closely with it. My hon. Friend might like to seek an Adjournment debate to raise the matter further and allow other Members to contribute.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): More than 50,000 British-born children whose parents are legally in the UK are being denied any help under the Home Office's pernicious "no recourse to public funds" rules. That is forcing councils to provide what are supposed to be emergency social services at very high cost. When will the Government provide time for a debate on this extension of the hostile environment, the damage that it does to communities such as mine, and the additional costs that councils suffer as a result?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that Home Office questions will take place on Monday 25 February. If he has specific concerns about a particular issue, he will be able to raise them directly with Ministers then.

Steve Double: Last week I had the privilege of attending the Plastic Free Cornwall summit, which brought organisations from across Cornwall together to discuss how to rid Cornwall of plastic pollution. Many of them raised the issue of released balloons which end up littering our beaches and polluting our seas. Under current legislation, balloon releases are not classed as littering. That position was last reviewed five years ago. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a Minister from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to make a statement about a further review of whether balloon releases should be classed as littering?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is to be commended for his campaigning against plastics getting into marine areas. He will be aware that the Government have a strong track record on this. For example, we have introduced a world-leading ban on microbeads, taking 13 billion plastic bags out of circulation in the last two years, and consulted on banning the sale and supply of plastic straws and stirrers and plastic-stemmed cotton buds. We have many more plans to reduce the use of plastics and I encourage him to write to our right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to raise his particular concerns about the release of balloons.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): On 9 March, robot day will take place at Coventry transport museum as part of British science week. This major science and technology event, which is free to enter, aims to entertain and inspire people of all generations. Given the skills shortage in the STEM field, does the Leader of the House agree that robot day is a creative way to inspire young people to consider a STEM career path, and will she arrange for a debate in Government time on how we can bring STEM careers to life for people of all ages?

Andrea Leadsom: I totally agree that robot day will be a fantastic way to engage with young people and perhaps get them more interested in taking up STEM subjects. I read just yesterday that maths is now one of the most popular A-level subjects to study in this country. A significant rise in the selection of STEM subjects for young people to study is brilliant news for our future as we move into our new modern industrial strategy, seeking the jobs of the future, which will include a lot of the ideas the hon. Lady advocates.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): At lunchtime today the Battersea and Wandsworth trade union group will be calling on Wandsworth Council to end its two-tier pay and conditions system, under which outsourced workers are paid poverty wages and have worse terms and conditions than directly employed staff. So may we have a debate in which we can discuss the meaning of a real living wage for people and the workers of Wandsworth?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an issue that sounds very concerning; if there is a two-tier system, she is right to raise that in this place. She will be aware that it was this Government who introduced the national living wage and we will be increasing it again in April. That will mean a significant real-terms increase for people on some of the lowest incomes in our country. There is more to do and I encourage her to raise her particular concerns directly with Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Ministers.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Will we be able to have a debate on the cycle to work scheme, to respond to calls to raise the threshold of the scheme in order to benefit more people, particularly those with disabilities and those on low incomes?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that we are always keen to do more for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and young people with disabilities. It is important that we always seek to do

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

everything we can, and if she has some good ideas I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate so she can share them with Ministers.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Given the concern expressed this week by two leading charities and the anxiety being expressed to me by my constituents in Edinburgh West who are affected by the lack of clarity about the availability of vital medicines such as insulin if Britain leaves the EU, will the Government set aside as a priority some time to discuss and clarify this important issue?

Andrea Leadsom: We are working very closely with pharmaceutical companies to make sure that patients will all continue to receive the medicines they need. This involves asking many of them to ensure a minimum of six weeks' additional supply of medicine over and above the usual buffer stocks by 29 March. Patients, doctors and community pharmacists should not stockpile medicines—obviously, that then in itself presents a problem—but we are confident that, if everyone does as they are being asked to do, the supply of medicines will be uninterrupted in the event of a no-deal Brexit.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Can we have single-sentence questions? I call Daniel Zeichner.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The Government responded positively this week to Professor Abdel-Haq's report on taxi and private hire licensing. Will the Leader of the House look at reintroducing my private Member's Bill, which would do exactly what the Government want to do but was chopped by one Member of this House?

Andrea Leadsom: I am aware of the hon. Gentleman's private Member's Bill, and that was a shame. He will be aware that the Government have launched a consultation this week on robust new rules for licensing authorities, outlining how they should use their powers to protect vulnerable passengers from harm. These rules would ensure that drivers were fit to carry passengers, keeping people safe while preventing those with bad intentions from getting behind the wheel of a taxi or a minicab.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Will the Leader of the House get a grip on the Government Whips Office and put a rocket right up them? They are playing games with an important private Member's Bill on refugee children. We need a motion for Committee, a money resolution and notification of which Minister will be on the Committee. Being messed about with false promises, inaction and avoided phone calls is not good enough. This has to be sorted today, and I call on Members more widely, the public, celebrities and whoever else is interested in this to get on to the Government Whips Office so that we can get this shifted.

Andrea Leadsom: The Government have an excellent record of supporting private Members' Bills on to the statute book. I can say to the hon. Gentleman that we support the principle of family unity and that we have

helped to reunite 24,700 family members in the past five years. The policy allows a partner and children under the age of 18 to join refugees here if they were part of the family unit before their sponsor fled the country. There are already provisions allowing extended family members to sponsor children where there are serious and compelling circumstances, and the policy caters for extended family members where necessary.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Given that the Department for Work and Pensions is currently contacting older residents in my constituency and asking them to consider having their pensions paid into a bank account, without giving them the option to obtain them at the post office, may we have a statement or a debate on why the DWP is not promoting the post office, which is a vital lifeline to people in isolated communities?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a specific concern in his constituency, and I am very sympathetic to his problem. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can discuss this directly with DWP Ministers.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): A total of €160 million in European regional funding is due to be lost to the highlands and islands between 2021 and 2027 due to Brexit. May we have a debate in Government time on that, and on the Government's failure to bring forward any details of the so-called shared prosperity fund, which was meant to replace that funding?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the next EU multi-annual financial framework has not been settled yet, so it is not possible to say what the UK's share of that might be in return for the UK's significant contributions. The UK will not be in the EU, and we are replacing that funding with a shared prosperity fund, which will seek to promote growth and opportunity right across the whole of the United Kingdom.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): There have been no trains through my constituency all this week due to a landslide. This is two years after I tabled questions in the House asking for the infrastructure to be checked following a previous landslide. My constituents put up with constant failures by the rail operator and by Network Rail. May we have a statement on their performance on the Southeastern suburban rail services?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear about problems in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, and I am very sympathetic to commuters whose journey to work each day is being ruined by problems with the rail network. I do hope that he was present for Transport oral questions earlier and that he raised his question directly with Ministers then, because I think they would have been able to answer it for him.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Endometriosis is a condition that affects one in 10 women, and it is incredibly painful. It involves cells that should be growing inside the womb growing outside it. Please may we have a debate about endometriosis and its surrounding issues?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an important issue. I also know people who have suffered from endometriosis, and it is a very painful condition, as she rightly says. I think she could raise the issue in the debate on the NHS long-term plan, which we have organised for next week.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Can we have a statement on the UK Government breaking yet another manifesto promise about maintaining pensioner benefits? Will the Leader of the House explain why the UK Government have completely abrogated their responsibility to the over-75s, putting it on to the BBC's shoulders, by withdrawing their support for free TV licences? The change will potentially leave 9,000 pensioners in my constituency alone much poorer and more socially isolated.

Andrea Leadsom: As I said in response to an earlier question about BBC licences, the Prime Minister made it clear that she expects that these licences continue to be made available. They are vital for older people wanting to get information and to alleviate loneliness, which is so often a problem for people in isolated communities. The hon. Lady is right to raise the matter, but it is for the BBC to ensure that licences continue to be made available.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): As business looks quite light next week, can legislation be brought to the House regarding tougher sentences for causing death by dangerous driving, as promised by this Government in October 2017?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady refers to an important issue that has been raised in the Chamber several times. Dangerous driving causes too many deaths. We had a debate on road safety quite recently, for which I was able to offer Government time, but I will take her request into consideration against all the other competing requests for time in the Chamber.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): An MP hiring an intern is supposed to provide a valuable opportunity, but nearly three months after I made an offer to a London School of Economics undergraduate—paying the living wage, of course—he is still waiting on security clearance and is therefore in complete limbo. Security is important, but can we have a process for expediting security clearance?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear that. I have recently recruited people and did not have the same problem. It may be an isolated case, but if the hon. Gentleman wants to write to me, I will take the matter up on his behalf.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The SNP Scottish Government have imposed nearly £200 million of cuts on the City of Edinburgh Council over the past decade, with another £41 million to come. May we have an urgent debate on how the Scottish Government are quadrupling Tory austerity through savage cuts in my local council area?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that there was absolutely no need for further SNP tax rises or cuts, thanks to this Government delivering a further £950 million funding boost in the Budget. The

SNP Government have sought to raise taxes and cut services entirely unnecessarily because the UK Government have supported their budgets. We have Scotland questions on Wednesday 20 February, so I encourage the hon. Gentleman to raise his concerns then.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Attacks on shop workers are up, and shoplifting is up. In the unlikely event that I do not get my Westminster Hall debate on retail crime at the fourth attempt, can we have a debate in Government time?

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman should keep pursuing that debate. I am sure that Mr Speaker is listening carefully. He is right that retail crime is a blight on businesses across our high streets, and we need to do everything we can to resolve the matter. He may like to seize the opportunity to contribute his thoughts during the debate on serious violence next week.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It has been evident for some time that properties located next to whisky maturation sites are being affected by a stubborn black material. That is happening not only in West Dunbartonshire, but across the United Kingdom. In a recent survey conducted by my office, 85% of respondents in Clydebank, Dumbarton and the Vale of Leven highlighted the negative impact of “whisky black”. The issue has an impact on all our communities, so will the Leader of the House make time for all Members to discuss it?

Andrea Leadsom: I was unaware of that issue before the hon. Gentleman raised it, but he is right to do so. He may like to raise the matter with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on Thursday 21 February so that he can look into it on the hon. Gentleman's behalf.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): This Government must surely seek a new mandate for their proposed massive cuts to low-income pensioner households, given that they were approved seven years, two Governments and two Parliaments ago. Why is the Leader of the House denying this House the opportunity to vote on the Government's cuts to pension credit?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that it was this Government, in 2010, who introduced the triple lock to ensure that pensioners on fixed incomes will always have the reassurance of a secure basic income. He raises a specific issue, and he might like to raise it directly with Ministers in an Adjournment debate.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Last month, Pakistan's supreme court appointed Dr Muhammad Suddle to lead a commission on equal rights for minority religious groups in Pakistan. That will ensure the implementation of a supreme court order requiring the Pakistani Government to establish a national council for minority rights and requiring the police force to protect their places of worship. It is important that this House not only points out human rights violations but praises positive actions to help suffering communities. Will the Leader of the House join me in welcoming this appointment and urge hon. and right hon. Members to sign early-day motion 2050?

[Jim Shannon]

[That this House welcomes the Supreme Court of Pakistan's decision to appoint a commission chaired by Dr Shoaib Suddle; notes that the intention of the commission is to ensure implementation of the decision PLD 2014 SC 699 of June 2014 to safeguard the rights of religious minorities in Pakistan; affirms its confidence in Dr Suddle as a man of integrity and impartiality and capable of carrying out this critically important task; and assures him of its cooperation and assistance in matters of religious freedom.]

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about the need to protect the rights of religious and racial minorities. I join him in welcoming this new move and encourage him to raise this point at Foreign Office questions the week after next.

Points of Order

12.1 pm

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance on a certain matter. You know how much I respect your running of the Chamber, so I wanted to ask you this question. What recourse does a Member have when a colleague uses business questions to make serious, damaging and unfounded allegations about another Member's constituency that cause real distress outside this House?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her characteristic courtesy in giving me advance notice of her intention to raise this matter, which could affect any right hon. or hon. Member here present. She asks very specifically what recourse she, or any Member, has when a colleague makes damaging and unfounded allegations about her constituency. She knows how seriously I take this issue, which we have discussed.

I expect an hon. Member to give notice to the colleague whose constituency he proposes to refer to, to give notice to my office and to ensure that he is properly careful in what he says. Members take responsibility for what they say in the House and for its impact outside this House. The privilege of free speech must be used maturely and with sensitivity. It is no part of a right hon. or hon. Member's role to be merely abusive or insulting. I hope that an hon. Member causing offence in this way will reflect very carefully on such conduct. This matter, as I said, has been discussed by the hon. Lady and me, and it has been the subject of wider discussion—including, from time to time, with the Leader of the House, who referred very sensitively to it earlier in our proceedings.

Let me just say tactfully, but in terms that are not ambiguous, that I hope that I do not have to return to this issue again. The message should be clear, and the hon. Lady's concern, which is very real and, I think, widely shared, should be respected. We will leave it there for now, and I hope it will be able to be left there.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Minister for small businesses, the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), claimed in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) during Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions on Tuesday that:

“Every piece of no-deal legislation that we have brought through the House has had an impact assessment”. —[*Official Report*, 12 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 714.]

The truth is that only two of the 20 BEIS statutory instruments that have been in Committee since Christmas have had an impact assessment available for them. The lack of this vital information has been a bone of contention during each Committee; it hinders our ability to scrutinise legislation; and it adds to uncertainty for businesses and consumers, who do not know how a no-deal will impact on them. What advice can you give me to set the record straight?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for giving me advance notice that she wished to raise this matter. The provision of impact assessments is of course the

responsibility of Ministers. There is no statutory or procedural requirement for the Government to provide impact assessments on SIs, but I believe that I am right in saying that Government guidance requires Departments to do so at least in respect of instruments with significant impacts. I appreciate the current pressures on Departments, but it is clearly unsatisfactory if the House is being asked to approve instruments without access to full information about their impact. I know that a number of Select Committees have been pursuing these issues with Ministers. Meanwhile, the shadow Minister has made her concerns on the matter very clear.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I just get some clarification on what you have just said? Did you say that Members ought to give you notice when they wish to raise something about somebody's else's constituency? I do not want to comment on the case you have just ruled on, but I think that I heard you say that they should give your Office notice. I would be pleased to have greater clarification on that.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman is entirely justified in seeking further clarification, and I am happy to provide it. The answer is, yes, I do expect that if the intended reference—I thought that I had conveyed the flavour of this, but if I had not, it was my fault—is pejorative. It is not unknown in the course of debate for a Member to refer to another Member's constituency, for example, to its level of prosperity or joblessness, to a reduction in joblessness or to start-up businesses there—whatever it may be—but if a Member intends to refer pejoratively or disobligingly to another Member's constituency, raising serious issues, potentially of order and certainly of House reputation, I think that it is reasonable, and I am so advised, not only for the Member affected to be told in advance, but for the Chair to be notified in advance. I hope, therefore, that the relatively narrow application of what I am talking about is reassuring to the right hon. Gentleman.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I seek your guidance about a trend that seems to be becoming more and more prevalent? When reading newspapers and listening to the reporting in anticipation of the motion that we will be discussing today in the forthcoming debate and all the amendments, I have come across a phrase, which has clearly come from the Government, being used a lot, which is that this motion is “non-binding” on the Government. When I came into this House, it was a point of honour and the unwritten rule that if the Government lost motions and motions were passed through this House, they would then respect those motions. We now suddenly see this distinction being made by Government spokespeople, not always named, who say that some motions are more equal than others. I seek your guidance on the appearance of a distinction that I deplore and that certainly was never present when I first came into the House.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con)
rose—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is a noted proceduralist, or at the very least has aspirations to become so, and I think that we should hear from him.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. May I just draw your attention and that of the House to the report produced by the Select Committee on Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs on exactly this question—the status of motions of the House of Commons—because I think the House would find it instructive?

Mr Speaker: That is a public information notice from the hon. Gentleman and we are grateful for it—genuinely so—and I thank him for what he said. In response to the hon. Lady, I am conscious of a concern on that front, and it is a concern that has been articulated not least by the Father of the House, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), who is able to look at these matters with the benefit of a 48-year—approaching 49—perspective, so he knows how things used to be done. In some respects, they are now done rather differently—I have noted that.

The essential point is this: some votes in this House are simply expressions of opinion, and others, depending on the terms of the motion, are genuinely binding. They can be construed, and would be construed, as orders or instructions and are therefore, in the literal sense of the term, effective. Others are not automatically effective, and they do depend on the way in which the Government choose to view them—I use those words carefully and advisedly. We have the opportunity to debate the hugely important matter of Brexit today and we know that there are plans for subsequent debate, but I can assure the hon. Lady that, if there is an appetite in the House for further debate, that appetite will be met. I can say that without the slightest fear of contradiction by anyone. If the House wants to debate a matter, no amount of circumlocutory activity to seek to avoid it will work—it simply will not happen.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. You are ruling on what is binding. This probably has to be resolved, but I do not want to take up too much more time on this matter now, because you gave an indication on it.

Plainly, certain things—legislation—change the law; they are binding. The question comes when a majority of the House, by a motion, expresses an opinion on a subject of policy. I still believe that our constitutional convention in our parliamentary democracy is that the Government are bound to follow and give respect to a declaration of policy that has been declared by the House. It is no good saying that it does not change the law, so it is just a matter of opinion and we will proceed guided by newspapers and pressure groups instead.

Mr Speaker: I entirely understand what the right hon. and learned Gentleman is getting at. I can say only for my own part that I do not want to give a flippant response to the Father of the House. I have never been much preoccupied with the opinions of newspapers. I really do not attach any weight to their views. I am sure that they think their views are important, and if that brings happiness into their lives, good luck to them, but the blatherings of a particular media outlet are a matter of absolutely no interest or concern whatever to me; they are simply not consequential at all.

Decisions that this House makes, resolutions that this House passes and motions that are supported matter and should be respected. Some motions, however,

[Mr Speaker]

do specifically instruct, and if they instruct, there can be not the slightest doubt or uncertainty at all but that they must be followed, just as if, for example, the House were to pass a motion instructing the Speaker. The Speaker is the servant of the House. If the House passed a motion or an amendment instructing the Speaker, the Speaker would do as instructed; that is the way it is.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would like your guidance because the Home Secretary is actively ignoring a written question that I tabled back on 18 October 2018, the best part of four months ago. I have since tabled two named-day questions to chase it up and both have been ignored. The Chair of the Procedure Committee wrote to the Home Secretary over a week ago, and still I have had no response. Is there any further mechanism to stop the Home Secretary ignoring the democratic processes that are in place to hold him to account?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving me notice of this point of order. Clearly, it is unsatisfactory that she has not had a ministerial response to her question, though, of course, the content of the response is for Ministers. The Chair of the Procedure Committee has recently written to the Home Secretary. I hope that a response will now swiftly be forthcoming. If it is not and she needs to return to the House to raise this matter, that will be extremely unfortunate, but if she has to raise it again, she will, and if she does, I will respond as appropriate.

I hope more widely that the distinction between opinion and an effective order is clear to, accepted by and commands the assent of, the House.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In substance, just to be clear, you are absolutely right that a motion of this House is an expression of opinion. Ultimately, if this House has an opinion to which it is sufficiently attached and which the Government refuse to adopt, this House can remove the Government, but recently this House expressed confidence in the Government. Unless this House changes its mind on that, the Government should respect what the House says and respond to it respectfully, but they are not bound to implement an instruction that is expressed in the form of an opinion in a motion passed by the House of Commons.

Mr Speaker: Where a motion is declared to be effective and binding, it is effective and binding, or, if it suits the palate of the hon. Gentleman and he prefers the words the other way round, binding and effective.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Brexit means Brexit.

Mr Speaker: Well, the hon. Gentleman offers his political opinion from a sedentary position and he is perfectly entitled to his political opinion, but I am answering questions about procedural propriety. Although I much value the camaraderie of the hon. Gentleman and his occasionally proffered advice, I do have other sources of advice and I do feel that I can manage with the advice that I am offered. I am quite capable, after nine and a half years, of discharging the obligations of the Chair, which I do, on the basis not of political opinion, but of what is right in parliamentary terms—not what somebody thinks about a political subject, but what is right in parliamentary terms. The Clerk and I regularly discuss these matters, and I will always do what I think is right by the House of Commons whether or not a particular person likes it. I also observe the Standing Orders of the House, which, I am sure, is something with which the hon. Gentleman, most of the time, is familiar.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You described the debate today as hugely important to Parliament and the country, as indeed it is. Would there not be an expectation, under Standing Orders, that, if the motion today is in the name of the Prime Minister, the Prime Minister is here either to open or to close the debate? Would that not be what the House might expect?

Mr Speaker: No. It may well be desired by the hon. Lady, and it is clear that that is what she desires, but it is not to be expected, and there are very large numbers of cases in which it is not so. Perhaps she is trying to establish a new standard, but it is not yet there.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I am not sure that the House particularly wants another point of order at this time.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting, the Speaker shall put the questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the motion in the name of the Prime Minister relating to the UK's withdrawal from the EU not later than 5.00pm; such questions shall include the questions on any amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; the questions may be put after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—
(*Jo Churchill.*)

UK's Withdrawal from the EU

Mr Speaker: I have provisionally selected the following amendments in the following order: (a) in the name of the Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn); (i) in the name of the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford); and (e) in the name of the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry).

I remind the House that, under the terms of the business motion just agreed to, the debate may continue until 5 pm, at which time the question shall be put on any amendments that may then be moved. To open the debate, I call the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union.

12.19 pm

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): I beg to move,

That this House welcomes the Prime Minister's statement of 12 February 2019; reiterates its support for the approach to leaving the EU expressed by this House on 29 January 2019 and notes that discussions between the UK and the EU on the Northern Ireland backstop are ongoing.

On 29 January, a majority of right hon. and hon. Members told this House and our country that they would support a deal, but that this support was conditional. Members were prepared to compromise on issues, but not on the overriding issue of the backstop. The Government's motion today references and confirms this House's support for the motion passed on 29 January, as amended by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady). His amendment in effect gave this Government an instruction, which we have taken to our European partners.

This Parliament's mandate must now be the given the opportunity to achieve its end, and the Prime Minister must be given the chance to ensure that. It is clear that the Government's priority is to address the indefinite nature of the backstop, which, under article 50, is legally required to be temporary. Today I will address issues raised by a certain number of my hon. and right hon. Friends who are concerned about whether this motion gives credence to the idea that the Government are taking no deal off the table.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): Given the debate and dispute about the meaning of the Government's motion, will my right hon. Friend be clear with the House that if the European Union does not agree to a deal that is acceptable to this House and the Government, we will still be leaving on 29 March?

Stephen Barclay: I am very happy to give my right hon. Friend and predecessor in this role that assurance. The Cabinet's position on no deal has been agreed; it was agreed in response to the Cabinet paper that I presented on 18 December. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has repeated her commitment to the timescale on numerous occasions, including again in her statement this week.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Secretary of State has set out why he is observing what the House said on alternative arrangements, so why is he not also observing and acting on what the House has said on the Government ruling out no deal?

Stephen Barclay: The short answer is that the House has said two different things. It passed by a big majority legislation on article 50, which many Members on both sides of the House voted for. It passed by a large margin legislation to say we are leaving the EU on 29 March, and put that date on the face of the withdrawal Bill. The House also voted by a large margin to give the people the decision through the referendum. Frankly, the legislation takes precedence over the motion to which the right hon. Gentleman refers. In essence, this issue was raised earlier in a point of order. I appreciate that he is making this point as an intervention, but it is the same point.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I encourage the Government to keep their nerve during these negotiations. I accept that the vast majority in this place would favour a good deal over no deal, but will the Government confirm for absolute clarity that if we are not able to secure a good deal—probably courtesy of intransigence by the EU—we will not only leave on 29 March, but will leave on no-deal/World Trade Organisation terms?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend, as a former member of the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, knows all about holding his nerve. He is correct that Parliament needs to hold its nerve. We need to send a clear signal to those in the European Union with whom we are discussing these issues, who share our desire to have a deal and to deliver on our shared values, and who respect the fact that we are trading partners, and wish to get on with the future economic partnership and work together.

Mr Baron: I think we all agree about the importance of keeping our nerve, and keeping no deal on the table actually makes a good deal more likely, but will the Secretary of State answer my specific question and confirm that if we do not achieve a good deal on 29 March, we will not just leave the EU, but will leave on no-deal terms?

Stephen Barclay: For the avoidance of doubt, I am happy to confirm that, because that is what the legislation says. The only way to avoid no deal—as the Prime Minister has repeatedly said, and as is backed up in legislation—is either to secure a deal on the terms that the Prime Minister has set out, with the mandate that the House gave her in response to the earlier motion, or to revoke article 50. The court case says that the only alternative would be to revoke, and revoking would be unconditional and unequivocal.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): My right hon. Friend was just moving on to an alternative, but it seems to me that he has just given the starkest expression of policy that I have heard the Government give so far on what will happen if the present negotiations fail; these are alarming possibilities. He says that we are bound by the legislation relating to article 50, which indeed we are, but when the House agreed to use article 50, it was on the assumption that a negotiated deal would be arrived at. *[Interruption.]* Well, of course it was. Indeed, at one point the Prime Minister presented to this House what she said was the ideal deal with which to go on to the full negotiations towards meeting the Government's declared aim of having a proper, permanent relationship with the EU in due course.

[Mr Kenneth Clarke]

The idea of going for the catastrophe of no deal on the arbitrary date of 29 March, simply because the Prime Minister will probably fail to persuade the other member states to put a time limit on a permanent open border in Europe, is ridiculous. The Government could have a policy of coming back here to defer or revoke article 50 to put the situation in some order.

Stephen Barclay: Although I obviously respect the considerable experience of the Father of the House, I frankly do not accept that merely restating the legislative position is presenting issues in a stark way; nor do I accept that the Prime Minister will fail. The Prime Minister is working in the national interest, is seeking to bring our country together, and is seeking a deal for our country. A short extension of article 50 does not take no deal off the table. It simply prolongs that uncertainty; it leaves in place the risk of no deal in a few months' time.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The Prime Minister met hon. Members in the Boothroyd Room before the first vote, which she lost by 230, and said that if her deal was not accepted, it was either no deal or no Brexit. An amendment could have been moved to revoke article 50 today, but should not the Government be moving towards that point? We should put it to the House: we either have the Brexit that is going to crash the economy, or, with one letter from the Prime Minister to the European Union, we forget this silly game and revoke this nonsense. It could be over in an afternoon. Get on with it.

Stephen Barclay: Given the propensity of the Scottish National party to have referendums and not respect the result, the one thing that we can always be sure of with the SNP is that it will not be over in an afternoon.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): I very much want to see a deal done. It is in the interests of the country, and it is definitely in the interests of industry. The European Union has a wide history of changing its mind and coming through with fresh negotiations, perhaps at the very last minute. Will my right hon. Friend tell me how his talks have been going, and does he think that we should allow the Government to do exactly what they are doing?

Stephen Barclay: As is so often the case, my right hon. Friend reflects a sentiment that one hears expressed in the country at large, which is the desire for a deal. As he says, that desire is shared by many people we have been speaking to in the European Union. They recognise that no deal is in the interest of neither side, and that it is disruptive. Later, I will come to what Chancellor Merkel said about seeking a constructive solution. The political situation in many European countries, and the coalition that is in place, again shows that this is in the interests of both sides.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Of course we want to get a deal with the European Union, but is not taking no deal off the table the surest way of ensuring that the other side dig in on their current position? That is just a fact of life. Those who call for no deal to be

taken off the table are playing into the hands of the possibility of no deal. Will the Secretary of State update the House on his discussions with his Irish counterparts, given that they play a crucial role? They cannot hide behind Brussels; likewise, Brussels cannot hide behind Dublin on these issues.

Stephen Barclay: The right hon. Gentleman is right on both points. First, it is important that we have no deal on the table. Indeed, the only way to take it off the table is either to have a deal or to revoke Brexit entirely.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Stephen Barclay: If I can make some progress, I will come on to the discussions the right hon. Gentleman mentioned, which include the discussion that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister had with the Taoiseach last week, and also her visit to Northern Ireland, where there is a shared desire on this, as the right hon. Gentleman well knows. Indeed, in the House yesterday, in his evidence to the Exiting the European Union Committee, the highly respected former Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, talked about the impact of no deal from an Irish perspective, and the common desire to seek agreement.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Stephen Barclay: I will make some progress, and then will happily take further interventions. A number of interventions have sought to represent the position of the Prime Minister, so it is worth reminding the House of what the Prime Minister said:

“the Government’s position remains the same: the House voted to trigger article 50; that had a two-year timeline that ends on 29 March; we want to leave with a deal, and that is what we are working for.”—[*Official Report*, 13 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 881.]

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Stephen Barclay: I am going to make a little progress, and then I will happily take further interventions.

This is also an important issue for European leaders’ positions on whether, if the EU were to make changes to the backstop, that would enable a deal to pass. That is why it is important to the negotiations that a clear message be sent from this House. Colleagues should be in no doubt that the EU will be watching our votes tonight carefully for any sign that our resolve is weakening. We shall not give it that excuse not to engage. Indeed, in the discussions we have been having with European leaders, there is recognition, as reflected by the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), of the shared desire to secure a deal, because the impact of no deal is asymmetric within the EU27. Indeed, that is a part of the discussions that member states are having with the European Commission.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Given that the European Union is saying that it will not entertain any legal changes to the withdrawal agreement—I share the Secretary of State’s desire to get a deal and have made it very clear that if it came to it I would consider supporting the Government in a future vote—what I need to know from the Secretary of State is what compromise he is going to give to this House that better

reflects the will of this House rather than simply putting a deal back to us that has already been comprehensively rejected.

Stephen Barclay: I am going to come on to that exact issue. The hon. Gentleman cited at the start of his intervention the premise that the European position, as stated, is that there will be no movement. Well, actually, the European Union has also stated that it wants to avoid no deal, which is hugely damaging. The European Union has also stated that it wants to be clear what the will of this House is and what is required in order to secure a deal. It is self-evident that there is a degree of ambiguity between those positions. Indeed—I will come on to this—the discussions we have been having with European leaders are absolutely on that issue. That is why we need some time, in terms of the vote this evening, to continue with those discussions.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Further to the Secretary of State's answer to the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), is he really saying that if the Government have no deal in place by the end of March—if they have run out of time—then they would go ahead with no deal on 29 March even when top police chiefs are saying that it will make the country less safe and NHS leaders are saying that there will be shortages of medicines? Is he 100% committed to no deal on 29 March in those circumstances, or are there any circumstances in which he would extend article 50?

Stephen Barclay: Again, what I set out was that we are 100% committed to the position set out and agreed by the Cabinet. That position was agreed on 18 December. I was drawing the House's attention to the fact that the motion today does not change that position, and that position is that it is our priority to secure a deal. I have stated at the Dispatch Box previously that the best way to mitigate the risk of no deal is to secure a deal. I will come on to some of the issues in respect of the consequences of no deal. I have been quite clear with some of my colleagues on my own Benches that I do view no deal as disruptive—much more so than some of my hon. and right hon. Friends. Our priority is to secure a deal, but the principal operational focus if not is to prepare for what is the legal position.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): The reality is that the vote against no deal in this House was more convincingly passed, including with cross-party support, than the vote to have the Prime Minister go back and negotiate on alternative arrangements. The Government cannot simply just pick and choose which votes they will support. That is fundamentally wrong and anti-democratic, and it is the totally wrong way to handle such an important issue for this country as Brexit. Does the Secretary of State not see that? Can he not listen to the representatives of communities around this country who are deeply concerned about a no-deal exit and want this House's will to be respected?

Stephen Barclay: Again, I very much respect the position of my right hon. Friend. I suspect that, on this, we will agree to disagree. I have set out, first, the position as agreed by the Cabinet; secondly, what is the legislative position; and thirdly, what is the interplay in

terms of the motion before the House this evening. I absolutely respect her in terms of how she cast her vote in that Division, but the point is that it does not change the stated position of the Government, and that is what I was setting out.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I support the Prime Minister's deal. I want us to get a deal. But I am looking very closely at this motion, which includes the words:

“support for the approach to leaving the EU expressed by this House on 29 January”.

Two motions were carried that night, both of which I supported. I would like to hear from my right hon. Friend that he gives equal respect to the opinions expressed by the House, for if he fails to do that, it is contemptuous of this House.

Stephen Barclay: First, I absolutely respect votes of this House. Indeed, when we had, for example, the Humble Address on the Attorney General's legal advice—

Hon. Members: We can't hear you.

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I just appeal to the Secretary of State? He is, in my experience, a most courteous individual, and I understand the natural temptation to look in the direction of the person questioning him, but the House wants to be hearing what he says. Please face the House.

Stephen Barclay: I absolutely accept your direction on that point, Mr Speaker. I was seeking to engage with my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) on the point she is making about respecting the House. Of course we do. That also applied, for example, in votes such as that on the Attorney General's legal advice, which was disclosed following a Humble Address, notwithstanding the precedent that creates for a future Government.

The point I was merely stating, which I thought was a point of fact, is that the legislative position as it currently stands is as set out following the vote to trigger article 50. That is the position.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Stephen Barclay: I have taken quite a few interventions and I will make a bit of progress, not least because I am conscious that many others will wish to speak.

One part of the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West was to explore whether technology offered a solution to the backstop. I am grateful to my hon. and right hon. Friends who have engaged with this work. Following the support of the House for the amendment, including that approach, the Prime Minister gave a commitment to engage seriously with the ideas put forward, and I have held a series of detailed meetings doing just that. The political declaration makes it explicit that both the EU and the UK agree to exploring alternative arrangements. I am happy to commit to my hon. and right hon. Friends that the Government will take that forward, including both investing civil service resource in exploring its viability and considering its acceptability to the community as a whole.

[Stephen Barclay]

The possibility of alternative arrangements, as envisaged by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West, has been reflected in the wording of the political declaration. The document notes that the UK and the EU

“envisage making use of all available facilitative arrangements and technologies”.

It goes further, noting that such technology should

“be considered in developing any alternative arrangements for ensuring the absence of a hard border on the island of Ireland on a permanent footing.”

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that using techniques and technology that already exist at the border in Northern Ireland is a good foundation for the alternative arrangements?

Stephen Barclay: I agree. That is already agreed by the European Union and the United Kingdom in its reflection in the political declaration. I have been discussing that issue with hon. and right hon. Friends in the alternative arrangements working group. I also raised it in my discussions earlier in the week with Monsieur Barnier, as I committed to do. I must be frank with the House that he was sceptical about the timescale, but we are actively discussing it. I simply point out that that is already accepted in the political declaration, and following the working group, we are exploring what can be done in terms of the timescale of that work.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Is it now Government policy to take forward the Malthouse compromise that we have all read about? Will the Secretary of State take a fully worked-up proposal to the European Union as part of the negotiations?

Stephen Barclay: I can confirm that we have taken it forward to the European Union, in that I have raised it with Monsieur Barnier. I will be discussing it again with him. He has raised some initial concerns, but we are making that case and discussing it with him. It is already accepted by the European Union in terms of the political declaration and the workstream that will flow from that.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State just told the House that he has put proposals to Michel Barnier. Can he therefore explain why Donald Tusk said yesterday that the EU27 are

“still waiting for concrete, realistic proposals from London on how to break #Brexit impasse”?

Stephen Barclay: One should always be slightly cautious about what is said on Twitter, and that applies even to someone as esteemed as President Tusk. I was simply updating the House on the discussions I have had with Michel Barnier, my opposite number in the European Commission, to follow up on what this House agreed, which was that we should explore that. We have engaged seriously with colleagues on it and raised it with the European Commission.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The task that the Secretary of State has set out in terms of the alternatives is large, and the window to deliver it is getting smaller. I

appreciate that we are not going to extend article 50 for no purpose, but in the interests of pragmatism, if all it requires is another three or four weeks' work just to dot the i's and cross the t's, surely to goodness we are not going to bite off our nose to spite our face.

Stephen Barclay: I respect my hon. Friend's point, but what I hear from many, particularly in the business community, is that they do not want more uncertainty. They want to see this move forward, and they want to see a deal secured.

In terms of the next steps, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will meet President Juncker next week, and today she is holding conversations with other European leaders. In parallel, my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General is pursuing other avenues for a possible legal challenge to the agreement. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made the wider Government position clear to many in the EU, as I have to the leader of the European People's party, the European Parliament's Brexit co-ordinator and the EU's chief negotiator. In addition, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and I have met a wide range of key European stakeholders.

While the EU's public statements have said that there will be no reopening of the withdrawal agreement, it has also said, as I pointed out to the right hon. Member for Belfast North, that it wants to avoid no deal and wants to reach an agreement that will be supported by this House. Members will have seen the comments from leading European figures such as the German Chancellor, who spoke of her desire for a “constructive solution”. The House needs to give the Prime Minister time to explore that.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way, although he may not be so grateful for this intervention. Will he confirm that the British Government have absolutely no intention of replacing the backstop, which is essential for maintaining peace on the island of Ireland—a hard-won peace that we value in Northern Ireland?

Stephen Barclay: I looked with interest at the hon. Lady's reference in the Brexit Select Committee to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, and in particular her point about mutual consent and bringing the community with her. That point is particularly well made, and it is at the forefront of the discussions that the Prime Minister is having with the Taoiseach and European leaders in the context of the backstop.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): The amendment that the House passed, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West, clearly stated that the intention was to replace the backstop with alternative arrangements to avoid a hard border. We have had constructive meetings with the Secretary of State. Can he confirm that the Malthouse compromise is stated Government policy, has been put to Monsieur Barnier and now has the full force of the civil service to work it up into legally binding text?

Stephen Barclay: I have already confirmed to the House that this issue has been raised with Michel Barnier. I have given a commitment that it will be raised

again in our next exchange. I have given a commitment that civil servants are engaging on this issue. I have also communicated the fact that the initial response from Michel Barnier was to raise concerns about the extent of concessions that would be required, but that is part of the discussion we are having.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Stephen Barclay: I have taken a lot of interventions. I am conscious that many other Members wish to speak, including the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), so I will make some progress.

It is clear that a workable compromise with the EU on the backstop can secure a substantial and sustainable majority in this House and give the Prime Minister a clear and irrefutable mandate to get her deal over the line. In supporting the Government's motion today, this House can do exactly that. Getting to a compromise is a challenge, but it is not an insurmountable one. It requires the EU and the UK to come together and find a solution, and it calls for both sides of the House to continue to work hard to find and grow the common ground, which is in the interests of many watching these proceedings.

As we prepare to exit the European Union, this Government are focused on their most pressing task—to deliver a legally binding change to the backstop—and committed to delivering on that key demand. I am meeting European ambassadors tomorrow to continue making that case, and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is speaking today with a series of European leaders. We are also engaging widely across the House, be that with the alternative arrangements working group, yesterday with the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras or in the 30 January meeting between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition.

We have a clear outcome: a programme of engagement with European leaders and engagement across this House. Tonight Members need to give the Government time to make good on this work and, as a House, to hold our nerve, to deliver a deal that addresses the twin risks of no deal or no Brexit and to respect the biggest vote in our democratic history and deliver what people voted for.

12.49 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I rise to support amendment (a) in my name and that of the Leader of the Opposition. The Secretary of State ended by saying that we have to “hold our nerve”, but he was all over the place this afternoon on all the important issues.

It is obvious—obvious—what the Prime Minister is up to. She is pretending to make progress while running down the clock: a non-update every other week to buy another two weeks of process, and inching ever closer to the 29 March deadline in 43 days' time. We should not be fooled. Let us look at the history of recent months and set it against the exchanges today. The Prime Minister pulled the meaningful vote on 10 December, promising to seek further reassurances on the backstop. She feared a significant defeat, and it was obvious that

the backstop was the problem way back then, as it had been through the autumn. That was 66 days ago, and there were then 109 days until 29 March.

Mr Baron: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer: I will in a minute.

And the Prime Minister returned with nothing—warm words in the margins of the EU summit in December, and a letter, coupled with a statement about Northern Ireland, that simply repeated already existing commitments. That is what she came back with. The meaningful vote was then put on 15 January, and it was lost heavily. That evening, the Prime Minister stood at the Dispatch Box and promised to explore ideas with the European Union, following cross-party talks on how to proceed. That was 30 days ago, and there were then 75 days until 29 March.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer: I will in just a minute.

Two weeks after that, on 29 January, the Prime Minister voted for the so-called Brady amendment.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer: I will give way in just a minute.

The amendment called for the backstop to be replaced with alternative arrangements. It was extraordinary: a Prime Minister voting to support her own deal only on condition that it is changed—conditional support for her own deal. Nobody prepared the business community for that, and nobody prepared Northern Ireland or EU leaders for that. Anybody who has spoken to businesses, been to Northern Ireland or spoken to political leaders in the EU in recent days knows that, by three-line whipping her own MPs to vote against the deal she negotiated, the Prime Minister has lost a good deal of trust in the process.

James Cleverly: Can the right hon. and learned Gentleman not understand the nonsense of his own argument? He suggests on the one hand that the Prime Minister is trying to run down the clock, and then he lists the various occasions when she has attempted to stop the clock, get a deal and exit the European Union.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention: I think the hon. Gentleman has missed the point. The Prime Minister has spent weeks—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Gentleman wants an answer and then interrupts while I am trying to speak. The Prime Minister has spent weeks and weeks trying to negotiate changes to the backstop—it started way before the vote was pulled on 10 December, and it has gone on ever since—and she has got absolutely nowhere.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

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

[Keir Starmer]

The idea that the vote on 29 January for the Brady amendment gave clarity is for the birds. The Government united around a proposition that they want an alternative to the backstop, but uniting around an alternative that means different things to different people does not get anybody anywhere, and that is the central problem.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer: I will in just one minute.

On Tuesday, in another non-update from the Prime Minister, she said what she wanted on the backstop and listed three things: a time-limited backstop; an ability unilaterally to end the backstop; or alternative arrangements. That is how she put it. The first two of those have been repeatedly ruled out by the EU for months, and there is no sign of any movement. The Secretary of State, from his discussions in Brussels in recent days, knows that very well—there is no room for a move on those two fronts.

Stephen Gethins: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer: I will in just a second.

The third option—alternative arrangements—remains undefined, and when the Prime Minister is pressed, either here or in Brussels, about exactly what she means, she does not say. The Malthouse compromise and the answer the Secretary of State gave about it give the game away. If that was a serious proposition and the Government were engaging with it, they would adopt it as policy and put resource into it, but they are not doing so. What signal does that send to Brussels about what the Government really think about the Malthouse compromise?

Mark Pritchard: May I commend the right hon. and learned Gentleman for his courage and bravery in standing up for his own alternative arrangements, which of course include a second referendum? I just wonder how he is getting on with that in his own party. More importantly, does he believe a second referendum would increase or decrease investor and business confidence in the United Kingdom?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for the concern, and I am getting on fine, thanks very much. I will tell the hon. Gentleman and the House one thing on business certainty. I have been talking to hundreds of businesses across the country. Even in the last 10 days, I have been in Belfast, Cardiff, Birmingham and Dublin talking to businesses. What they are most concerned about is the uncertainty of the situation that we are in now, and all of them would welcome anything that prevents a no-deal Brexit.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Are not all these meetings and activity that my right hon. and learned Friend is outlining, when it comes to these alternative arrangements, really just a repetition of the Brexit unicorns on no hard border that we have heard time and again? The reality is that the Government's strategy on this is the same as it has always been, which

is the desperate hope that Chancellor Merkel will come to the rescue and the European Union will throw Ireland under the bus.

Keir Starmer: I completely agree with that intervention and that observation.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. and learned Friend has been talking to businesses, as I have. Does he agree that the issue of no deal is a matter not simply for 28 March, but for now? Exports can take six weeks and companies need to make decisions now about how they are planning to trade.

Keir Starmer: I do agree with that. One of the things that saddens me most from the discussions I have had in the last two or three weeks—the Secretary of State and others who have had such discussions know exactly what is being said—is that decisions are having to be made because of the fear of no deal. Such decisions are being triggered, but the chilling bit from the discussions I have had is that some of those steps are now irreversible. This is the first time we have come to that point.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer: I promised I would give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Is not the thing this House has to understand that the backstop is there in case the Malthouse compromise turns into the Malthouse fantasy—if all the technologies are technological fantasies—and that Europe cannot give up on the backstop just because of all the wishy-washy promises from the UK Government? The EU has to stick with it, and Conservative Members just do not understand that.

Keir Starmer: The EU has been very clear about the backstop. It is to be observed that there are hon. Members working on the Malthouse compromise, but it is equally to be observed that the Government have not adopted it as their policy position.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I will just make a bit of progress on this point.

So it goes on, and so it will go on. The simple and painful truth is this: if there had been a viable alternative to the backstop, there would never have been a backstop. The negotiating parties, as everybody knows, searched for months for that elusive alternative. If there had been an alternative, the Prime Minister would never have signed up to the backstop and neither would the EU. They searched and they searched, and they did not find it, and everybody who has observed the negotiations knows that. The chances of a breakthrough now, in 43 days, seem to me to be slim.

Stephen Gethins: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is making a powerful point, as always, about the ineptitude of this Government. We know that there is not a whole lot of love, even on St Valentine's Day, for the Government's deal—we know that—and we know that we are in

danger of crashing off the cliff edge, with the damage that that will cause, and he is right to highlight it. Will he back our amendment (i), which very simply asks for an extension of no less than three months to ensure that we can avoid such a no-deal Brexit?

Keir Starmer: I have sympathy with the point that we will need an extension to article 50 sooner or later, whether a deal goes through or not, and that the question is what is the right binding mechanism for doing that. We will support measures proposed by others on that issue in due course, and I will return to that point.

Mr Baron: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is being generous with his time. In contrast to what he just claimed, the Secretary of State's point was admirably clear. A good deal is preferable to no deal, but if there is no deal we will leave the EU on 29 March on those terms. Labour Members have an unfortunate habit of taking everything that the EU says as gospel, which is clearly not the case, and they ignore the fact that the EU could write the textbook on 11th-hour deals. Have some optimism in the ability to achieve a deal.

Keir Starmer: As for the Prime Minister taking us out of the EU on 29 March this year without a deal—we'll see about that. I do not think that the majority in this House will countenance that; I think the majority in this House will do everything they can to prevent it. Having worked with the Prime Minister when she was Home Secretary and I was Director of Public Prosecutions, I know that she has a deep sense of duty. Deep down, I do not think that this Prime Minister will take us out of the EU without a deal on 29 March, and that is the basis on which we should be having this discussion.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): My right hon. and learned Friend is right in what he says about business and the need for clarity, and it is clear for all to see that the Government will need to apply for an extension to article 50 to avoid no deal, or even if there is a deal. The reason they are not doing so, and the reason why the Brexit Secretary is not saying what he should to give certainty to business, is that the Conservative party will not face down the party within a party that is the European Research Group. Face those people down!

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention, and my right hon. Friend puts his finger on it.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Is my right hon. and learned Friend as astonished as I am that we have a Prime Minister and Government who are willing to take this reckless gamble with the future prosperity of our country, just to keep their rotten party together?

Keir Starmer: It is a gamble—

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I will make some progress. I have taken a lot of interventions, and I will take some more in a minute. My simple point, which I stand by, is that both sides have been searching for this alternative for most of the negotiations, and certainly since the phase 1 agreement in December a year ago. People have been searching for an alternative and they have not found it. If they had

found it, we would not have a backstop. The likelihood of them finding that alternative in the next few weeks seems to me very slim, and even if they do, the chances of the deal getting through, with everything that has to follow by 29 March, are even slimmer. So many pieces of legislation and statutory instruments still need to be resolved.

That exposes what is really going on—this has come out in comments from across the House—which is a Prime Minister who is running down the clock and hoping to get to March, or even the end of March. The House should remember that the next EU summit is on 21 March, and if we get real changes to the deal, that is when they are likely to be signed off. At that late stage, the plan is essentially to send the same deal back to this House as a binary choice: my deal or no deal. There might be additional words that the Attorney General can say have real significance, but it will essentially be the same deal. That is not holding our nerve; that is playing recklessly, and we must say no.

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): The right hon. and learned Gentleman is being extraordinarily generous in giving way. No self-respecting businessman or woman would walk into negotiations on a deal and take no deal off the table. The United Kingdom is negotiating the biggest business deal in its history. It therefore makes sense to keep no deal on the table, because we know from the history of the EU that it makes concessions at the last minute. We need to hold our nerve. If we do, then at the wire we will get a good deal in the interests of both the EU and the United Kingdom.

Keir Starmer: I do not know how to let the hon. Gentleman down gently, but let me try this: we are so patently unprepared for no deal that it is not credible. Let me give an example. There are very serious allegations against people in custody across the EU under the European arrest warrant, which goes between our country and the EU27, and vice versa. If we leave without a deal, no arrangements are in place to deal with that. The idea that we will leave in such a way is simply not credible.

I have heard the argument that if we face the truth and say that no deal is not credible, that somehow plays into the EU's hands. We have heard that for the past two years. I stood here and said that the Government needed to publish a plan of their objectives—remember the days when they said that they could not even do that because it would give the game away and the negotiations would be over? Then they published a plan. I stood here and argued that we needed an impact assessment. What was the response? They said, "If we publish impact assessments, the show will be over. Nobody in a negotiation would do that." I stood here and said that we needed legal advice, and we got the same argument: "If we do that, the show will be over. We will give into the EU." Now we have the same thing with a no-deal scenario. It is not credible, and it is not going to work.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I will give way to the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main).

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman so much for giving way—I was beginning to think I had an invisibility cloak on. Just over a week ago there was a debate on a petition about extending article 50, which was signed by more than 100,000 members of the public. I spoke in that debate, which was sparsely attended, but I did not hear from the shadow Front Bencher that Labour policy is to extend article 50. Indeed, some speakers made it sound as if Labour policy was to have a people's vote. Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman confirm what Labour is arguing for?

Keir Starmer: I am sure the question of policy is important, but I am facing the practical reality. We are 43 days away from 29 March, and no credible alternative is in sight. Either we accept that or we do not. The Prime Minister keeps coming back and giving a non-update: "I'm meeting people"—she does not say she has agreed anything—"can I have another two weeks?" We have been going on like that for weeks, and it must stop.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I am going to make some progress. Labour's amendment is intended to put a hard stop to running down the clock. It states that on 27 February the Government must put a deal to the House for its approval, or table an amendable motion so that the House can take control of what happens next. It is essential that we do so. Businesses are saying that they cannot wait any longer. They are putting off investment decisions, and they cannot tolerate the threat of no deal. They are making and implementing contingency plans, some of which are irreversible.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The right hon. and learned Gentleman is making a strong point about the perils of no deal. Does he agree that the Government's position on no deal is not just criminally reckless, it is also plain stupid? The EU knows as well as we do that a no-deal scenario would hurt us an awful lot more than it would hurt it. Threatening to put a gun to our own head is not a clever negotiating strategy.

Keir Starmer: I agree and I am grateful for that intervention. That is really the point. If it is not credible that we can leave on 29 March without a deal, and it is not, it is actually not a negotiating stance at all. It has never been seen in that way and it does not work. It is just farcical to suggest that we have to keep up the pretence that we are ready because then the EU will back down. It is ridiculous.

Let us put some detail on this. We have heard the warnings from Airbus and Nissan about future jobs and investment in the UK. Yesterday, Ford, another huge UK employer, said that no deal would be "catastrophic for the UK auto industry and Ford's manufacturing operations in the country", and that it will "take whatever action is necessary to preserve the competitiveness of our European business."

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The right hon. and learned Gentleman is right to say that business wants certainty—he has made big play of that—but it was the CBI, the Federation of Small Businesses and GE Aviation in my constituency that said, "For goodness' sake, back

the Prime Minister's deal." He did not do that. He must understand that in failing to do so he and the Labour party become complicit in a crash-out.

Keir Starmer: Well, I am not going to take that lying down for this reason: on the Government Benches, did they vote for the deal on 29 January? *[Interruption.]* Hang on, hear me out. The answer to that is no. Anybody who voted for the Brady amendment was saying that it is conditional on change, so do not lecture anybody else about voting for the deal. Even the Prime Minister says, "On reflection, I'm not voting for my deal unless there are changes." The hon. Gentleman really cannot throw the challenge across the House and say that the Opposition have to support the unchanged deal but the Prime Minister wants it changed.

Some on the Government Benches will casually dismiss the threat of job losses as "Project Fear." It is not "Project Fear"—it is "Project Reality." It is the jobs and livelihoods of those we represent that are at stake.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I am going to make some progress and then I will give way again.

Therefore, we need to take whatever steps are necessary to prevent a no-deal exit. Two weeks ago, this House voted to approve the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) and the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman). That was hugely welcome and it is just as binding on the Government as what else was passed that evening—you can't choose one part and not the other. It showed what the Opposition have always said: there is no majority in this House for a no deal.

Dr Phillip Lee (Bracknell) (Con): I have listened carefully today. In defence of the Secretary of State, he has made it quite clear that the Government's policy, if it comes to it and the deal does not pass in the week beginning 25 March, is to leave with no deal. Is the right hon. and learned Gentleman clear in his mind what his party's position will be in the same circumstances?

Keir Starmer: I am. Happily, we discussed that at our party conference and agreed unanimously—something I do not think happened at the hon. Gentleman's party conference—*[Interruption.]* He knows very well what it is. It is to vote on the deal; if the deal does not go through, to call for a general election; and if that does not happen, there are two options: a close economic relationship and a public vote. We committed at our party conference to ensure we take whatever steps are necessary to avoid a no-deal exit and we will do so.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Excuse me, I have a bit of a head cold. The amount of white flags being thrown would give anyone a head cold. Can the shadow Brexit Secretary confirm that the Labour party's position is that there must be legally binding changes to the withdrawal agreement on the backstop? That is the same position as that of DUP Members.

Keir Starmer: The position of the Labour party is that we have concerns about the backstop. *[Interruption.]* This is a very serious point and I intend to answer it. I

have not yet met anybody who does not have concerns about the backstop, both here and in Brussels, but we also recognise that, at this stage, with the article 50 window all but closed, we need a backstop, and it is inevitable that we need a backstop. That is our position.

Lady Hermon: I thank the shadow Brexit Secretary for allowing me to intervene on that very important point. He is very knowledgeable about Northern Ireland and is a great friend to Northern Ireland. He will recognise the importance of the backstop to the people of Northern Ireland and indeed across the United Kingdom. There seems to be some confusion about what the leader of the Labour party says about the backstop and what he, the shadow Brexit Secretary, says. I think the people of Northern Ireland—indeed, this House—are entitled to clarification from the right hon. and learned Gentleman about what exactly the position of the Labour party is on the backstop.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention. As the hon. Lady knows, I worked in Northern Ireland for five years with the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I know how deeply this is felt in Northern Ireland across all communities. I was there for two days last week. I made the point there that, although we have concerns about the backstop, we do accept that there must be a backstop, it is inevitable and that, therefore, notwithstanding those concerns, we support a backstop. That is very important.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way because I actually find that I agree with a great deal of what he is saying. He is saying that leaving with no deal would bring huge consequences for our economy and we should not countenance it. He is also saying that within the withdrawal agreement he sees the need for a backstop. I have listened closely to what he said before: that he also agrees on the elements about needing a transition period and certainty on citizens' rights. Given that he now appears to agree with everything that is in the withdrawal agreement, why will he not vote for it and what more does he need?

Keir Starmer: I am not sure the hon. Lady carefully read the proposition we were voting for on the meaningful vote. It was the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration taken together. The statute requires them to be taken together, because we cannot read the withdrawal agreement without reference to the political declaration and vice versa. What I have said about the backstop is important and it is important I say it for the whole of the United Kingdom, but particularly for people in Northern Ireland, and I stand by it.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Is the right hon. and learned Gentleman able to clarify in plain English at what point the Leader of the Opposition will unequivocally back a people's vote?

Keir Starmer: The policy we have adopted is clear about what the options are. What we are trying to do today is to put a hard stop to the running down of the clock. That will enable options to be considered in due

course. I hope that will happen. When they are considered, we will take our position and we will see where the majority is in the House.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): The backstop is taking up a lot of the discussion today because it is incredibly important. May I remind my right hon. and learned Friend that, in the debates leading up to the meaningful vote, concerns about trade were mentioned three times more than the backstop? Can I encourage him to move on now from the backstop and talk about all the other problems that Members across the House have with the deal?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention. One of the central problems in all this is that the political declaration is 26 pages long, it is vague in the extreme and simply talks about a "spectrum" of outcomes. The main theme of the political declaration is that the extent of any checks at borders will depend on the degree of alignment; therefore, there is a spectrum of outcomes. I think that we all understood that within hours of the referendum. That is why there is all this pressure on the backstop—because the political declaration is so ill-defined.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Following my right hon. and learned Friend's replies to the hon. Members for Bracknell (Dr Lee) and for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), does he agree that the Government have clearly rejected Labour's offer of a less damaging Brexit, and that to wait until the end of March to activate our unanimously agreed conference policy in favour of a public vote would be far, far too late?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that point. What I will say is this—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Kwasi Kwarteng): What is it?

Keir Starmer: Just as I am about to give the answer I am asked from a sedentary position what the answer is. Perhaps those on the Government Front Bench should just listen. The position is this. As the House knows, we set out the Labour party's position in a letter to the Prime Minister. We set out in clear terms what a close economic relationship would look like. What was written in that letter has been well received, not only in the United Kingdom, by businesses and trade unions, but by the EU and EU leaders. It is a credible proposition.

Several hon. Members rose—

Keir Starmer: I just want to complete this point, because it is important. The Prime Minister has replied in non-committal terms—one could say that that was inevitable—and we are having discussions, as the Secretary of State says. I am not going to disclose at this stage what those discussions are about because they are, by their nature, confidential. They are ongoing, I think the Secretary of State would want them to be kept confidential—that is the only way in which they can properly be held—and there are plans for further meetings. To go back to the point raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), there must come a point at which the options are clarified, reduced and voted on—I agree with that proposition—and it needs to be done before the end of March.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. and learned Friend is making some important and good points about the Prime Minister's running down the clock, but he took that round of applause—that standing ovation—at the Labour party conference when he talked about a people's vote with a remain option, so I have been waiting patiently for the section of his remarks in which he will perhaps dissociate himself from the remarks of the general secretary of Unite, who said yesterday that it would not be in the country's interests to have remain on the ballot paper in a public vote. We are aware that sections in letters and remarks sometimes have a habit of being redacted by others, perhaps further up the pay chain. Will my right hon. and learned Friend assure us that at the next available opportunity we will be voting in favour of a people's vote?

Keir Starmer: I do not think I need to associate with or dissociate from anybody on what my views are. I think they are pretty clear. As for the timetable, I have set out the order of events.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I am going to make some progress and then I will take more interventions. I have taken a lot of interventions and I am conscious that a lot of people want to speak in this debate.

Let me go back to the amendment that was passed in respect of no deal, because it was passed by a majority in this House and is just as important as the other amendment that was passed. Let us make no mistake, though: on its own it is not enough. If Parliament wants to prevent no deal, it has to take further action. We cannot be bystanders; we have to act. The simple truth of it is that we cannot declare that we are against no deal and then do nothing. The Government are failing to act, so we must act. Hence, the next step is to ensure that there is a hard stop to running down the clock.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer: Not at the moment.

The hard stop would ensure that on 27 February the Prime Minister must either put her deal to a vote or allow Parliament to decide what happens next. Let us be clear, though: other steps need to be taken, beyond today's amendment. They will include the Bill introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), which would provide a further safeguard against no deal and allow the House to decide whether the Government should seek an extension of article 50 if no deal has been agreed by 13 March. I hope that anyone who genuinely opposes no deal would see that by that date, 13 March, an extension would be unavoidable.

Gareth Snell: Will my right hon. and learned Friend clarify something for me? I am sympathetic to and almost supportive of the efforts of my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and her Bill, which was introduced with good sincerity. What is the Labour party Front-Bench position, though? Were we to have an extension that went further than the three months, would my right

hon. and learned Friend intend that we would participate in European Union parliamentary elections? Those of us going on the knocker this weekend ought to know.

Keir Starmer: As I have said from this Dispatch Box, so far as the extension is concerned, it obviously depends on the period and the period the EU has indicated might be available is the period till 1 July, because that would avoid involvement in the parliamentary elections. It is not our policy to participate in the parliamentary elections—[*Interruption.*] For obvious reasons, we will not be—[*Interruption.*] This is a really serious point. There is this casualness about no deal—that we can somehow, in a macho way, march off the cliff and it will all be fine; it will be so good for the country. The point is that if, by 13 March—just over two weeks before the potential for no deal—there is no deal, we have to take action if we are serious about avoiding the calamity and catastrophe of no deal. I do not mind standing up here and saying that I will take whatever steps are necessary to avoid no deal, because I will never be persuaded—never—that it is a good negotiating tactic or could possibly be good for our country.

The House will then need to debate and vote on credible options to prevent no deal. We have been clear that those options are either the close economic relationship that includes a customs union and close alignment to the single market that we set out in the letter to the Prime Minister, or a public vote on a deal or proposition that can command the support of the House. There are no other credible options remaining, and those options are miles away from the approach that the Government are currently taking. First, though, we need to stop the Government further running down the clock, put in a hard stop and allow this House to take control of the process. That is what today is about and I urge all Members to support our amendment.

1.26 pm

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): We have moved to yet another of these almost weekly engagements, at which we are told that historic decisions are about to be taken, a meaningful vote is on the verge of emerging and all is going to be clear. Every time we do that, one immediately encounters an appalling shambles—that is the only way to describe the position of the Government and of this Parliament, and I am sure that is the way it is seen by an overwhelming majority of the citizens of this country, regardless of what side of the argument they are on. So far, the debate today is following precisely that pattern.

I have not been lucky enough to have my amendment (c) selected, which is also in the name of, and was tabled at the behest of, the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman). An amendment has been selected—the one in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry)—that addresses the same problem, which is that, so far as I can see, in these debates we have not yet identified, and certainly not demonstrated, a clear majority for any particular course. We are not being given many opportunities to do so, and we keep retreating when we get given them. We have to decide—cross-party, obviously, given the divisions—how a majority will be established to pass motions, which in my opinion, under our constitution, will bind a Government, so that we can move policy towards something that resolves this situation satisfactorily.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): I agree with everything that my right hon. and learned Friend has said. Does he agree that a very important discussion that preceded this business—and, indeed, questions and answers during the Secretary of State's speech—indicated that the only way that what he and I seek to achieve, namely consensus across the House if the Prime Minister's deal does not succeed, will be implementable is if we legislate for it, and thereby legally bind the Government? The Government have made it perfectly clear—I think the Speaker has ruled in this direction—that they will not be bound by anything short of legislation. That means that we have a rather elaborate process ahead of us as we come to a conclusion over the next few months.

Mr Clarke: I think I agree with that; I cannot give an off-the-cuff response to my right hon. Friend's detailed procedural point. Eventually, yes, we will have to legislate, first to gain time, and secondly, to get the necessary resolution of these problems in the long-term interests of this country.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend referred to legislation. Of course, he voted for the Third Reading of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, which expressly states that the European Communities Act 1972 will be repealed on exit day. Is that not sufficient proof of the need for the kind of legislation to which he referred? We do not need to have all these mysterious differences, because the anchor to the referendum is the repeal of that Act. Does my right hon. and learned Friend not agree? He voted for it.

Mr Clarke: Government and Parliament can at any time produce legislation to reform previous legislation because the circumstances have changed. The idea put forward by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State that the Government are now bound by what they passed on article 50 and by the withdrawal Act, and cannot possibly contemplate amending that Act or asking us to vote again on article 50, is, with great respect to him, one of the most preposterous propositions that I have ever heard anybody put before this House. The Government have every possible power in their hands to decide to avoid the calamity of leaving on 29 March with no deal whatever—leaving not with any long-term prospect of pursuing the national interest, but simply because nobody here is able to agree in sufficient numbers on what on earth they want to do. All we are doing is vetoing each other's propositions on what should go forward.

This all started when the Government's policy went completely off the rails after they were defeated by a record-breaking majority on an agreement that they had taken two years negotiating in pursuit of what was a clear strategy. It is obvious that we need a preliminary agreement—a withdrawal agreement—on three issues before we leave politically, if we are going to, on 29 March. On leaving, we will spend years negotiating long-term arrangements, not only on trade and investment, but in the many, many areas of activity in which we have based all our arrangements with the outside world on EU membership for almost half a century. It will take a very long time to sort out sensible arrangements.

We all know that the Government's agreement was rejected. I voted for it; I am in favour of the Government's withdrawal agreement. Nobody in this House wishes more than I do to see us remain in the united European Union; that would be in this Government's interests. However, in this House, the majority for leaving is overwhelming. Let us come face to face with reality: there is nothing wrong with the withdrawal agreement; it is perfectly harmless. It gets us into a transition period; then we can negotiate. I will not go on about my views; I have given them before. There is nothing wrong with the Irish backstop at all. To say otherwise is complete invention for the sake of finding things wrong with the deal.

That put us in a dilemma. The agreement was defeated by a variety of people with totally conflicting objectives. The biggest vote against it was from the Labour party, officially. As interventions have shown, it is rather puzzling to say quite what the Labour party had against the withdrawal agreement. I have just heard the Irish backstop accepted by its Front-Bench spokesman—quite rightly; it is necessary, unfortunately. The money has been settled, and nobody is arguing about EU citizens' rights. Labour voted against the agreement because it was a divided party, and it decided that the only thing on which it could keep itself together was on all voting against the Government. That was all.

Both the big parties are shattered now; there were large rebellions on both sides. The biggest group of people who joined in the defeat were ardent remainers who, unlike me, are firm believers in the people's vote. They are still facing difficulties, because they do not want us to leave on any terms, so they are going to keep—

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr Clarke: I will give way to my right hon. Friend—my best friend among all these arch-remainers, who are otherwise my political allies in the House, day in, day out, though they all voted against the agreement. They are still threatening to do so, because they do not want to leave. They think there should be a people's vote.

Then there was a faction of people who were not content to vote for the political agreement, because it will take years to negotiate and is rather general, and who wished to be reassured on the record, before we started negotiations, that we would establish basic and sensible points, such as our staying in a customs union and having some regulatory alignment. If that was established, all the arguments about the Irish border would go completely out of the window, because we would have an open border in Ireland and an open border in England. I would like to see that. I would vote for that—and I have, several times; I voted with the official Opposition once or twice on a customs union—but it is not necessary, because everything is up for grabs after we leave. There will be wide-ranging negotiation. I think the pressure from business interests, economies and people of common sense on both sides of the channel will drive us towards something like that in some years.

Meanwhile—this is where we are now—the Government have pursued one of the factions on the Conservative side of the House. We have a kind of breakaway party

[Mr Kenneth Clarke]

within a party—a bit like Momentum, really—with a leader and a chief whip. They are ardent right wingers. The Government have set off in pursuit of these bizarre—as some Government members say—negotiating tactics; some of them, though, seem positively to want to leave with no deal, because any agreement with foreigners from the continent is a threat to our sovereignty.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Clarke: I will not give way any more. I have great respect for my hon. Friend, so I hope that I will not be too disparaging of his views—he and I fundamentally disagree—but lots of people want to speak, and I cannot give way as if I were a Front-Bench spokesman. That is not possible.

That is the wrong group to pursue. The Brady amendment, which I voted against, is meaningless; it rejects the agreement that the Prime Minister has spent two years getting and has commended in warm terms to the House. We can see from interventions that a lot of the people in the European Research Group will reject anything she comes back with, because they want—some of them—to leave with no deal. That is where we and the House must start from, and we have very little time within which to do something.

We must get past these procedural obstacles that the Government keep putting in place about what we can and cannot do, and get some binding policy that the Government have to follow. In the end, some of us—even remainers, divided over referendums—will have to back down once a sensible majority is established, and will have to compromise. That was the aim of the amendment that the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland and I tabled. I hope that method will still be considered—a single transferrable vote, a ballot—because we will get nowhere until we have some idea of what can command a majority here.

I think there is a majority in favour of a customs union. I do not know whether there is a majority in favour of a referendum—there might be, I do not know. I am certain that there is an overwhelming majority flatly against allowing us to leave with no deal. My guess is that there are about 20 or 30 Members of this House who actually want to leave with no deal, and they should be rejected; I very much hope that they will be.

We will need more time to do this. I am quite happy to revoke article 50, and then invoke it again, if the House wants, when we have some idea of where we want to go. If we do get through this immediate crisis without a calamity, there will be four or five years of negotiations, on any sensible estimate, on what kind of arrangements we will have. That will be based on the political declaration. We cannot allow this kind of calamitous debate and constant crisis to continue throughout those five years.

Before we even start those negotiations—this is why I would revoke or extend article 50—we need a British consensus, a clear parliamentary majority, a path established that the British Government can go to Brussels with, knowing that it commands a majority. Our partners must see that we can command a majority

for it. We must get through these daft days and eventually have a debate that produces a majority for something sensible.

At the moment, I think Brussels has given up on us. It does not think that the British Government even agree with themselves on what they are trying to pursue, and they have no idea what the British Government are asking now. It requires great faith on Brussels' part to believe that the British Government can get a majority for anything that they will produce in the next two or three weeks, if they get some form of words amending what we have. It is time that this House found some method—I have advocated some approaches that we might take—of taking command of the situation. That would have the support of the vast majority of members of the Government; it would make their position easier. The vast majority of Members, I suspect on both sides of House, are looking for such an eventuality to emerge very soon indeed.

1.40 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I rise to speak to our amendment (i), standing in my name and that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) and other right hon. and hon. Members—I am grateful for the support that we have received from the Liberal Democrats today. It is a much shorter and simpler amendment than the one we tabled two weeks ago, because above all else we need to get the House, as I hope the whole House will agree, to halt, at least temporarily, the headlong rush towards the cliff edge of no deal. Indeed, I find the degree of consensus developing between the Secretary of State and the no-deal brigade on his own Back Benches to be extremely alarming. I hope that is not an indication of where the Government's thinking is leading.

Our amendment asks the Prime Minister to seek an extension of at least three months. That is important, because it takes us past the European Parliament elections, which could otherwise cause a significant difficulty, certainly for the European Union.

Gareth Snell: I want to ask the hon. Gentleman a similar question to the one I put to those on our Front Bench. If the SNP amendment is adopted today, is the intention for the United Kingdom to participate in the European elections at the end of May?

Peter Grant: I think that option has to be open, but it will be very difficult, because the Europeans have already carved up our democratic representation in Europe. I keep an open mind. I want us to continue to be part of the European Parliament and other European institutions. It looks as if, at least in the short term, Scotland will lose that benefit, but I look forward to us getting back in as quickly as possible.

The other amendments that have been selected have a lot of merit to them. I do not think there is anything in them that I would oppose or that is incompatible with our amendment. I would ask the supporters of those amendments to look at our amendment, because extending article 50 has become an urgent prerequisite for anything else. We do not have time to spend tabling motions, having debates or developing substantial legislation, whether on a customs union, a people's vote or anything else, unless we stop the clock. Contrary to what the

Secretary of State said, the Prime Minister has not been trying to stop the clock. She has been trying to let it keep ticking down, while nothing but nothing was happening to prepare us for Brexit.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the Speaker has ruled that all these motions are advisory, including the motion rejecting no deal, and that the referendum itself was also advisory? Why are we hurtling over the cliff on an advisory referendum and not accepting the will of this House that it would be calamitous?

Peter Grant: I do not accept the argument that says, “Because the vote was close,” or, “Because the legislation did not say it was binding.” I think we have to accept the results of the referendum in each of the four nations of the United Kingdom. That is why, although I sympathise with where my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) is coming from, I have some difficulty with his amendment, because I do not think we can permanently revoke article 50 unless we have a revised decision in another referendum.

When I say that we have to respect the result of the referendum, we have to respect the results in the four nations. It would be unacceptable for us to permanently revoke article 50 for England and Wales without asking the people of those nations what they thought. It is equally unacceptable and unconstitutional to ignore the express will of the people of Scotland or indeed Northern Ireland. We have the ridiculous situation where Northern Ireland cannot be made to stay in the United Kingdom against the will of its people and cannot be taken out of the United Kingdom against the will of its people, but can be taken out of the European Union against the will of its people. How does that work?

I cannot see any prospect of the Prime Minister's deal being accepted by Parliament either before or after 29 March. I cannot see any prospect of the European Union agreeing any significant changes in the next month to a deal that it has spent two years with the Government agreeing to, so we are not going to leave with a deal on 29 March. As the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), the Father of the House, has said, there are barely 25 people in this place who would countenance leaving with no deal on 29 March, so surely the only credible, tenable and defensible solution is not to leave on 29 March, but to put back the leaving day until we can sort things out and at least engage in some kind of damage limitation.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con) *rose*—

Peter Grant: I could not give a speech without giving way to the hon. Gentleman.

Stephen Kerr: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He is quite right that the vast majority of people in this House want a deal that we can leave the European Union with in an orderly way. On that basis, and given the urgency of the situation, why did the First Minister of Scotland, our country, refuse to turn up for a high-level meeting involving the Prime Minister, the Chancellor, the Home Secretary and the First Minister of Wales to avoid a no-deal Brexit?

Peter Grant: It really is a bit cheeky to criticise the First Minister of Scotland for missing one meeting when she has been available to meet every day since

the Brexit referendum. She and other Ministers of the devolved nations have attended meeting after meeting. They have been invited to express their views and then been told that their views counted for nothing.

Any Prime Minister who was putting the best interests of the people before the narrow, short-term interests of herself and her party would have asked for an extension by now. I want Parliament to say to the Prime Minister, bindingly or non-bindingly, “Ask for an extension.” I also want Parliament to be respected when it said, “Get no deal off the table.”

I do not know whether Members will recognise these words:

“We must reject the ideological templates provided by the socialist left and the libertarian right”.

Those words are from the Conservative party manifesto of 2017. Those were the promises on which every single Conservative Member of Parliament stood and was elected. If no-deal Brexit is not an ideological template provided by the libertarian right, I do not know what is. Those Members have been elected on a promise not to go with the disaster of no deal, so if the Government cannot prevent a no deal, they will have to go, because they will be in flagrant breach of one of the most fundamental promises of the Conservative manifesto.

Stephen Gethins: I thank my hon. Friend for making such a powerful case. Colleagues on the Government Benches have made the point about not wanting a no-deal Brexit. Regardless of what anybody wants—I would like a people's vote and for us to remain in the EU; others take a different view—all that our amendment does is give us an extension, so that we are not rushing this when time is fast running out. I therefore look forward to welcoming the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) in the Lobby with us later.

Peter Grant: I never give up on the possibility of anybody in this House or elsewhere finally seeing sense and recognising what is best for the people, so I, too, look forward to welcoming the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) in the Lobby later.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: The hon. Gentleman has reminded me of the party manifesto, on which I apparently stood at the last election, and which is binding on me, I have never seen this document. It was produced some time during the campaign, rather obscurely, and I read about it in the newspapers. No copy was ever sent to me and I have never met a constituent who bothered to get a copy or read it. It had one rather startling policy in it, which was abandoned within about a day and played no further role. There is another myth growing: a new constitutional convention that says that anyone who stands for a party and gets elected here is bound by some rubbishy document that somebody unknown in central office, not the Cabinet, has produced and that is meant to bind them for the next Parliament.

Peter Grant: That is certainly an interesting proposal. Let me say that each and every time I have stood for election I have read, and often contributed to, the manifesto on which I have stood, and I will always honour my manifesto commitments to the best of my ability. I would expect my party colleagues in the Scottish Government to honour the manifesto on which they were elected as well.

[Peter Grant]

The backstop is not the problem for me; in fact, I do not think it is really the problem for more than a tiny minority here. The reason I reject the deal—and the reason it is rejected by the Scottish National party and the overwhelming majority of Scotland's parliamentarians, both here and at Holyrood—is that it is a rotten deal for Scotland, and changing the backstop will not fix that. It will seriously damage our economy, it will place unsustainable strain on the public services that are so dear to our hearts, and it will cause wholly unacceptable pain to tens of thousands of citizens who have chosen to give Scotland the benefit of their talents.

Let me give just one example of what this means to real people. In November last year I had the privilege of visiting Glenrothes's twin town, Boeblingen in southern Germany. The occasion was the town's award of its highest civic honour to my good friend John Vaughan—a constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) across the border—in recognition of the decades of voluntary service that John and his wife Karen had given, and their contribution to the bonds of friendship between our two towns. I later submitted an early-day motion to mark John's achievement, and I am grateful to all who signed it.

On Tuesday, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife told the House that Karen Vaughan had been told that she must travel to Edinburgh and ask permission to register as a foreigner in her own country. Karen has lived in the United Kingdom for longer than the vast majority of people whom I can see in the Chamber. She has been here for 74 years. Someone whose contribution to these nations cannot be measured—someone who came here as a babe in arms three quarters of a century ago, after the defeat of Nazism in Europe—is now being told by this Parliament that she must make a round trip of nearly 100 miles to ask permission to be registered as a foreigner in the only land that she has ever known, and probably the only land that she will ever know. What have we become, Mr Speaker? And, much more frighteningly, if this is what we have become before Brexit, where in the name of God will we be heading after it if we have a Government who see that as an acceptable way to treat any human being?

Of course, the Government will do as they always do, and say that it is just an isolated case. Everything about Brexit involves “isolated cases”, such as Jaguar Land Rover, Nissan, Ford and Airbus. But those are not isolated cases. The heavy engineering manufacturing industry is not an isolated industry. There have been warnings for years from every sector of the economy and every area of our public and civic life that Brexit would not work, and every one of them has been ignored for years.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Given the hon. Gentleman's comments about Jaguar Land Rover, will he join me in welcoming its decision to invest additional funds in the new petrol engine plant in Wolverhampton?

Peter Grant: I welcome any investment, but unfortunately employees in other parts of the Jaguar Land Rover network, and their families, do not have so much to celebrate.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Peter Grant: I really must make progress, because other Members want to speak. [Interruption.] I am grateful to the hon. Member for Stirling for pointing out, from a sedentary position, that all those people have said that they will support the Prime Minister's deal. In fact, they were all approached by the Prime Minister and told, “It is my deal or no deal: ask your MPs to support my deal.”

I was contacted by a number of businesses in my constituency, and I also went to see a number of businesses and civic organisations that were brought over at the request of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Yes, they all wanted us to avoid no deal, but when they were asked what they really wanted, none of them said, “The Prime Minister's deal, as I read it in *Hansard*.” All of them—with one minor exception—said that if they could have what they wanted, we would not be leaving the European Union. If the Government were listening to the concerns of business, we would not be leaving the EU, and if we had to leave the EU, we would not be leaving the customs union and we would not be leaving the single market.

Let me make it clear, incidentally, that the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has explained to me why he has to leave. I accept that, and I take no offence from the fact that he is not able to stay until the end of my speech.

I want to refer briefly to the backstop, but only briefly. The backstop is there because the Government have not yet fulfilled the obligation to which they willingly signed up in December 2017 to come up with a solution to the border question that would honour the Belfast agreement while also meeting their own unilateral red lines. It is no surprise that the Government have not yet come up with that solution, because it does not exist. The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), admitted that from the Dispatch Box just over two weeks ago.

What everyone is calling the backstop would be better described, as it was yesterday by the former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, as a safety net. It is there to make sure that whatever else gets dropped in the chaos of Brexit, the Belfast agreement will not, in any circumstances, be allowed to fall and smash on the floor. It is not a backstop; it is a peace process guarantee. I defy anyone to say that they want the peace process guarantee to be time-limited, or to suggest that any party to the peace process would ever want to walk away from it unilaterally.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman has cited the Belfast agreement, and has talked of its falling and smashing on the floor. Will he at least do us the courtesy of reading it? There is no suggestion that, deal or no deal, the institutions contained in that agreement will be broken. There is no suggestion that the ability of Northern Ireland citizens also to have Irish citizenship will be taken away from them. If the hon. Gentleman is going to make claims, he should at least get them right.

Peter Grant: Yes, I have read the Belfast agreement, and with all due respect, if it comes to any arguments about interpretation I would sooner take the interpretation

of the former Taoiseach who helped to write it than that of someone who fought tooth and nail for it to be rejected.

I asked Mr Ahern a question that was designed to show the idiocy of some of the suggestions from Conservative Members about how Ireland should be responsible for sorting out Britain's mess. Many people in Ireland seemed to think I was being serious, which I think is an indication that our friends in Ireland, and even people in the United Kingdom, are so flummoxed by this shambles that they cannot tell the difference between the truth—the reality—and complete parody. It is no wonder, because the reality is that we have had a Brexit Secretary who did not know that lots of boats were going in and out of Dover, a Northern Ireland Secretary who did not know that people in Northern Ireland vote along traditional Unionist/Nationalist lines, a Trade Secretary who cannot name a single country that will give us a better trade deal outside the EU than we have inside it, a Transport Secretary who could not organise a traffic jam, and a Prime Minister who—well, where do we begin? We could begin with “a Prime Minister who ran away from Parliament on 10 December, and then came back and told us that we must hold our nerve.” Mr Speaker, Scotland is holding its nerve.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Peter Grant: I really must wind up my speech.

We are nowhere near ready to leave on 29 March without a deal, and we are nowhere near ready to get a deal before 29 March. The deal that is on offer does not give certainty; it gives another 18 months of fudge and uncertainty, and during that time we shall need to sort out all the hard bits that we have not even started to talk about. The withdrawal agreement was the easy bit; the future relationship is the difficult bit that we must still look forward to.

I welcome the fact that, two years too late, the Prime Minister and her colleagues have started talking to Opposition parties, although the Secretary of State has still not replied to the request that I sent, just after his appointment, to meet me in my capacity as Brexit spokesperson for the third party in the House. He has written to all the members of the Select Committee asking to meet us, but he has not replied to my specific request.

So the Government have started talking to other people, but they must start listening as well. Their disruptive and unworkable red lines must be taken off the table, because they are getting in the way of any kind of workable deal. We need to ask the European Union for more time so that everyone in this Parliament and the devolved Parliaments and Governments, with their collective skills and talents, can get around the table, without preconditions—and that means no preconditions for the Prime Minister either—to work out a solution and get us out of this mess before it is too late.

1.58 pm

Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): It is, as always, a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant).

I believe that the Prime Minister and the Government deserve the time and the space in which to meet the assurances that they gave the House on 29 January to deliver a legally binding change to the backstop, and to press the Malthouse compromise as an alternative in Brussels. I want the Prime Minister to be able to deliver Brexit, and I want the Government to be able to deliver and make a success of Brexit. I also want it to be crystal clear that the only way we will leave on WTO terms is by the choice of the EU through the intransigence of its approach.

I turn first to today's amendments. It is telling that all of them are process amendments. None of them stipulates a specific alternative strategic objective of their supporters; none say anything at all about the substance, notwithstanding their criticism of the Government. As a result none offers a credible alternative to the path set out by the Prime Minister, which of course is both written in UK law and reflects international law under the Lisbon treaty, namely that we will leave the EU on 29 March either with a deal, as is being negotiated and as I believe is still possible, or on WTO terms.

We need to make sure we leave the EU on 29 March. We need it for the certainty and clarity businesses require, and we need it for the finality that the public want: an end to the tortuous haggle with Brussels, an end to the distraction and the displacement of all the other activity in this place and in government at large that has inevitably followed Brexit. It seems to me that extending article 50 cannot make any of the problems or challenges that we face easier; it can only make them worse. It is also clear that the EU will not agree unless there is a clear alternative model on the table that is reasonably deliverable within a finite period of time. Of course, some of the objections that have been made—it requires legislation, or it requires the Norway model, or some other whizzy idea that is no doubt being conjured up by thoughtful minds on the Opposition side of the House, and indeed on mine—would require time both to legislate and negotiate. We do not have that time, and the EU would not accept it.

Alan Brown: The right hon. Gentleman says that a deal can still be negotiated. Given that one of the reasons for the backstop is the admission that at the moment there is no off-the-shelf technological solution that can provide a working mechanism to have no border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, how is a solution going to be found over the next 40-odd days that would allow the backstop to be removed? It is impossible, is it not?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman raises a perfectly respectable point, but the head of HMRC has said there would not need to be any extra infrastructure at the border under any circumstances, and on the hon. Gentleman's point about time, while I do not accept his point about the absence of technological solutions, we will have the implementation period to work closely with our partners in Dublin and the EU to make sure they can be put in place.

Of all the question-begging amendments, the one in the name of the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) is the most devoid of credibility for three reasons. On the one hand the leader of the Labour party wants to be a member of a customs union—the

[Dominic Raab]

customs union—but at the same time he boasts of his plans to nationalise half the country, which would immediately and directly conflict with those rules. On the one hand he personally is widely regarded, although he does not say so explicitly, as being a proponent of Brexit—he wants to leave the EU, along with many on his side and on his Benches, and of course it is a requirement of the 2017 Labour manifesto—but on the other hand he is willing to trade free movement to allow open access to our borders in order to get a deal, again despite the pledges to exit the single market made in the Labour party manifesto. Finally, while he pledged in his 2017 election manifesto to leave the EU and the single market, he is flirting with a second referendum, yet without any indication of what the question might be or indeed which side he would be on. His Members in this House, the members and supporters in the various Labour party associations and indeed the public at large are entitled to question that and come to the conclusion that it is nothing but a fraud or a con; it is not a serious position.

That was affirmed by the shadow Brexit Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer): he talked of the hundreds of businesses he has met that have raised uncertainty as the No. 1 issue. I can imagine that as we have all heard businesses talk about uncertainty, and the public want some finality too, but that is why, if he and his party were genuinely serious, they would rule out extending article 50 and holding a second referendum. But the shadow Brexit Secretary did neither; he said he was sympathetic to the extension of article 50. So he and the Labour party are fuelling precisely the uncertainty they then criticise. I am afraid it is the usual forked-tongue, flip-flopping nonsense from the Labour party, impossible to square with the clear promises it made in its manifesto.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Dominic Raab: No, as I have undertaken to proceed swiftly to the end so that other Members can speak.

I will support the Government on all this evening's amendments, but I have some concerns about the motion because it adopts as Government policy the amendment tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) and passed on 29 January, which risks implying that we cannot leave on WTO terms on 29 March. That would be the wrong message as a matter of policy to send to the EU at this crunch moment in the talks, not least given some of the unfortunate remarks reported by ITV by the leader of the civil service delegation in Brussels. It also begs the question of how that marries with the position under UK law, which is our default position: that we would leave on 29 March, which I had understood was specifically Government policy. I listened very carefully to the Secretary of State's assurances, but they in turn seem to conflict with the motion itself, which I am afraid is the problem we still need some clarity on.

The Government motion also makes no mention of the so-called Malthouse compromise proposal, and we have heard nothing about whether it has been formally tabled with our EU friends and partners. I understand that it has been raised and discussed with Michel Barnier,

but has a written version of it actually been shared? We are seven weeks on from 29 January. This was the basis on which the Brady amendment was adopted, and it is a legitimate question to ask.

On that basis I will vote against the amendments, but I am, at the moment at least, struggling with the idea of voting for the principal motion. However, I will listen very carefully to the further assurances Ministers will give in winding up, because I would rather be in the position of supporting the Government, as I think the Government need the time and space to go in to bat in Brussels and to deliver the best deal for this country. We have a reasonable, modest set of demands to get a deal over the line and we want the Government to go in with the strongest hand possible.

2.6 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): My fear is that we are just drifting—that we are stuck in limbo on something that is going to have consequences for our country for generations. We know not what the alternative arrangements are going to be, and we know not when the Government are going to bring anything back and what it will be, and there are only six weeks to go. Businesses have no idea what to do about their April orders, because they do not know what the terms of trade will be. It is not just that they do not know whether there will be a deal or no deal; they do not even know, if there is no deal, what the basic arrangements are going to be. The British Chambers of Commerce has put questions to the Government and still not had any answers about what tariffs would apply and in which circumstances, and when rules of origin checks need to be done. The police do not know whether European arrest warrants that they have out at the moment on wanted criminals are going to just be ripped up overnight. The NHS does not know what its supplies of medicines are going to be in just six weeks' time.

A local manufacturing business that exports about 80% of its products contacted me today saying that European suppliers are refusing to agree terms for continued supply; they are now establishing alternative suppliers. That is happening already, because there are only six weeks to go. The business says:

"We are rapidly becoming the laughing stock of the world."

The Secretary of State, faced with what is effectively this growing chaos, responded today by hardening his position, I thought, in response to the question from the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis). I assume that that was an arranged response as a result of the threats from the European Research Group again today. The position used to be that the Government were embracing the prospect of no deal if the Prime Minister's deal is not passed. I have heard people, including in this House, advocate no deal, and I would just say that they are not the people who are going to be overstretched if the prices of their food go up because of WTO tariffs and shortages at the border. They are not the people who will be hit if manufacturing jobs are lost, as so many manufacturers across the country have warned. But all of us will be affected if our border security is undermined because the Border Force cannot do basic criminal records checks on people coming into this country to see whether they are wanted criminals, having lost overnight the basic information from databases that they rely on.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): The right hon. Lady might recall that in November, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee warned that Brexit could actually cause a huge amount of cheap food imports to flood into the UK. Which particular scare story does she side with: the one that says there will be cheap food imports or the one that says that we are going to run out of fruit and veg?

Yvette Cooper: We should take very seriously the warnings about a reduction of up to 80% in the volume of goods passing through the border and the preparations that Border Force is making for that, as well as the warnings from major supermarkets including Lidl, Asda and Tesco about the potential restrictions on the food that they will be able to get into the shops and the warnings from the Environment Secretary—a strong leave campaigner himself—about tariffs on beef and lamb.

Tom Brake: Did the right hon. Lady hear a couple of days ago that the food industry is saying that it can no longer take part in Government consultations because no less than a third of its staff are now working on Brexit-related matters?

Yvette Cooper: That is really troubling, and it is now happening right across industry and across every sector. We heard this week from manufacturers in the car industry that they are putting tens of millions of pounds into preparations for no deal. It shows the scale of their concern about no deal that they are actually hoping that that money is going to be wasted. They hope that it will not be needed, but they are having to put that money in in the first place.

Some people have said that having no deal on the table is really important as part of a negotiating ploy, but that is just nonsense. The fact that no deal would hit us more than it would hit the other 27 means that this is not like negotiating a business deal, as one hon. Member has suggested. I am afraid that this is much more like negotiating a divorce. You do not just walk out and say goodbye to the home and all the assets without any clue of where you going to sleep that night, while at the same time thinking that this is going to persuade your ex to give you half their pension. It just does not work like that, yet we are taking all these risks.

I would like to believe that the Prime Minister is heading for a workable deal and that she can build a consensus. I have called many times for cross-party consensus and for a cross-party commission to oversee negotiations. I have called many times for a customs union to support Yorkshire manufacturing, for a security backstop—not just for Northern Ireland—and for clarity about the future arrangements. My biggest concern is that we are facing a blindfold Brexit with no idea of what kind of arrangements we face. I would like to see indicative votes on the kinds of approach that hon. Members have suggested.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is the Prime Minister's red lines, including not meeting our proposals on the customs union, that are holding us back and keeping us in this position?

Yvette Cooper: I agree with my hon. Friend that the Prime Minister has to change her red lines, particularly around the customs union but in other areas as well, because they are preventing any change and any proper debate on the way forward. Instead, she appears to be trying to create a sense of crisis and chaos in the final two weeks, during which Parliament and the EU will be locked in a game of chicken in which we will be forced to choose between the huge damage of no deal and a deal that has already been strongly rejected by this Parliament. That is not a responsible way to make decisions. It is not a responsible way for any Parliament to operate, and it is certainly not a responsible way for this Government to operate. They have a responsibility to keep us safe, to make sure that the sick can get their medicines and to make sure that the poorest people in this country can afford the price of food. The Government have a responsibility to do things in an effective way, not to create chaos because they cannot get a bad deal through.

We have put forward a revised Bill. Under the proposals, if we get to the middle of March and we still have no deal in place, the Prime Minister will have to choose whether she wants the default to be no deal or an extension of article 50 to give her more time to sort this out. That would have to be put to Parliament, giving Parliament the opportunity to avert no deal on 29 March and the chance to say that the Government's approach is just not working. It will not have worked if we reach that date without a deal in place. The problem is that if we do not do something sensible like this, we will be living in a fantasy world in which people talk about alternative arrangements and say that everything will be fine and someone will come along and sort it all out, even though none of that will happen.

Mrs Main: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Yvette Cooper: I will not; I need to conclude my remarks.

It is as though we are all just standing around admiring the finery of the emperor's new clothes when actually the emperor is running around stark naked, and everyone is laughing at us—or at least they would be if it were not so sad. So I really hope that the Government will show some responsibility and that they will end up supporting this Bill. Frankly, I hope that they will sort this out before we get to that point—before it is too late.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. An eight minute limit on each Back-Bench speech now applies.

2.16 pm

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I rise to support the amendment in my name and those of many hon. and right hon. Members from all parties across the House. In simple terms, it calls for the publishing of papers that I know have been placed before the Cabinet, that the Cabinet has looked at and debated, and that in stark terms identify the very real dangers to our economy, to trade and to business of a no-deal Brexit.

I had the great honour to serve in Cabinet and to attend Cabinet. You may call me old-fashioned, Mr Speaker, but I am firmly of the view that there are times when the

[Anna Soubry]

advice given to Ministers by their officials should remain confidential and should not be shared beyond the confines of that particular discussion. There are very good reasons for that, in my view. As a Minister, I made decisions not to share things. I take the firm view that advice given by, for example, the Attorney General to the Government should be subject to legal privilege. In those circumstances, it must be right that civil servants should be able to give advice without any fear that it might be made public. They should have no fear about giving such advice robustly and honestly.

The difference in this instance is that these papers that the Cabinet has debated contain important information that I believe my constituents and those of all other Members should have. It is also the view of a number of Cabinet members that those papers should be published. The fact—which nobody has denied—that members of the Cabinet take the view that those papers should be made public is the reason that I have tabled my amendment today and seek to persuade hon. and right hon. Members to support it.

These are not papers in the normal sense; they are papers of national importance. I am told that they make it very clear what the effects of a no-deal Brexit would be. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary has said that a no-deal Brexit would be “ruinous”, and he has no doubt come to that conclusion not only because he speaks to business, as he undoubtedly does, but because he has had sight of those papers and formed that sound opinion based on their contents.

Mrs Main: My right hon. Friend is being very informative. Is she prepared to tell us whether she has seen the papers or who is giving her this information? She is talking with great authority, so are we supposed to take her at her word that she is in the know?

Anna Soubry: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her intervention. I hope that she will take me at my word. Although the things I say in this place are often not agreed with, I do not make things up. I have asked both the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy about the papers, and it has never been denied that they exist, that they have been debated in Cabinet or that some Cabinet members believe that they should be published.

I gently suggest to my hon. Friend that the papers might assist her. I believe that she asked a question of a Minister about the need for us to get on with Brexit—I do not demur from her point on that—and get on with the trade deals so that businesses in her constituency can get on and trade with other countries. Perhaps if she saw the papers, she might know that businesses the length and breadth of our country already trade across the world. Businesses do not need a trade deal to do business and to trade. A deal enables us to do that business and that trade all the better. Perhaps it really is a very good idea that this place sees these papers, so that those hon. Members who are actually saying, as members of the Conservative party—the party of business—that it would be the right and responsible thing for this country to leave the European Union without a deal might be better informed as to the consequences.

Mark Pritchard: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Anna Soubry: I will take one short intervention.

Mark Pritchard: My right hon. Friend is being generous with her time. I do not agree with her, although I do respect her opinion, but does she accept that she may be asking for another precedent to be set? She sat in Cabinet and will know that documents can be sensitive, official, secret or top secret. Might this amendment not open the Pandora's box for every Cabinet paper marked from sensitive to top secret to be leaked or let out?

Anna Soubry: I would not disagree with my hon. Friend at all. I have indeed seen those very same papers myself. When I was a Health Minister, I saw the risk assessment documents that took the firm view that it would not be in the public interest at all for some documents to be disclosed, for the very reasons that I have outlined. These papers are different, however, because members of the Cabinet who have seen them have unsuccessfully made arguments in Cabinet that they should be made public. That is the profound distinction in this case.

It really would be to the eternal shame of the Conservative party if it were to continue to support a no-deal Brexit. As ever, I make my views with perhaps too much robustness and sometimes with some passion, but I am one of the founding members of the people's vote movement—I am very proud of that—and I believe that the only way through this impasse and mess is for this matter to go back to the country. However, I have now taken the view that the bigger national interest—I say this without any fear—is that I am no longer prepared not to vote in the interests of my country and my constituents and in accordance with my conscience. I am now of the view that ensuring that we do not crash out without a deal is my absolute priority and that is why I tabled amendment (e). I make that clear to my right hon. and very dear learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). We disagree on the people's vote, but on this we are absolutely—probably as ever—as one.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Anna Soubry: I will not, just because I am running out of time and I want to make several important points.

The Conservative party is the party of business. This party is the party of competence when it comes to the economy—[*Interruption.*] Oh yes, and history shows that a Conservative Government always leave office with the economy in a better state than when they inherited it, because we always have to clear up the mess made by a Labour Government. That is the simple fact and reality of history. However, will this great party be so reckless and go against all that we value in our principles by actually suggesting that we should leave without a deal in the face of overwhelming evidence? How many more car manufacturers—Ford, Toyota, Nissan—have to make it clear that if we leave without a deal, that will seriously impact the way that they do business? In the real world, that means our constituents will risk losing their jobs. Over 800,000 people work in

just the automotive sector, never mind all the other millions who work in our manufacturing sector. Everybody with a scintilla of knowledge of the real world and of business and trade knows that the worst thing that could happen to our country is to leave without a deal. That is the view of the majority of Members of this place.

I gently say to the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, who is a thoroughly good and decent man, that his speech chilled me to the bone. He is a Conservative, yet he stood at that Dispatch Box ignoring the amendment that was passed that was tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman)—a former chairman of the Conservative Party—and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) for which 318 Members voted. The other amendment that was passed, which was tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady), was passed with 317 votes in favour. It is therefore shameful that the Secretary of State spent almost the entirety of his speech addressing the latter, not the former, even though the former had won cross-party support and the support of more hon. Members.

However, my party is in hock to the party within the party: the ERG. As others have said, it is funded by the taxpayer and others, with its own leader and its own Whip. The Secretary of State stood up and tossed out red meat to keep the ERG on board, instead of doing what each and every one of us must do, which is to do what is right for our country. The right thing for our country is to be as one in rejecting no deal and standing by, as this party once did, the people of this country, their jobs, their futures and the prosperity of business and trade.

2.26 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): What a mess. What a complete and utter mess our country is in. There are just 43 days to go before we leave the European Union and, as we currently do not have an agreement, we are staring down the barrel of leaving with no agreement at all. I urge the House to lift up its eyes from the Order Paper, the amendments, the whispered conversations, the scurrying of the Whips, and the scripted exchanges that we saw earlier, which I have to say reminded me at times of a badly written play in which some of the actors did not seem to know their lines, and actually look around at what we can see. We know that companies that export to Europe and companies that provide services to Europe are in a state of despair. Some of them are spending millions of pounds on preparing for the worst, including moving their operations across the channel. Official figures from the Netherlands Foreign Investment Agency showed this week that 42 companies relocated to the Netherlands last year citing Brexit as the reason.

Other firms have no idea what to prepare for. Last week, I was on a train and the man opposite me leaned over and said, "Can I ask you a question?" I said, "Of course." He runs a small firm that makes products, and he sends his fitters out across Europe to fit them for their suppliers. He told me that his largest customer had rung him up and said, "Can you promise me that if there is a no-deal Brexit, you will be able to continue to fulfil my orders?" He looked at me and said, "What am I meant to say to him, because I don't know the answer?"

I had to look at him and say, "Well, I don't know the answer either." I wonder whether the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), will be able to tell him what the answer is, because that man's fear—we heard this from my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper)—is that his big customers will say, "We're not taking the risk anymore. We're taking our business somewhere else."

Look at the companies that manufacture in Britain. We have heard about Airbus, Nissan, Jaguar Land Rover and, most recently, Ford. Look at those that export from Britain. We have spent much of this week debating the fact that the trade deals we were promised would be rolled over by now are not all going to be rolled over. The truth is that we are not ready and we are not prepared. Most Members know that no deal cannot possibly be allowed to happen, yet it remains—we heard it again from the Dispatch Box today—the official policy of Her Majesty's Government that they will allow it to happen.

I was genuinely puzzled when the Secretary of State said that he respects the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) and the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) two weeks ago, and which was passed, but that his hands are tied by legislation. Well, I have a message for him: untie your hands and change that legislation.

It is no wonder that the rest of the world looks at this country with utter astonishment and amazement at what we are doing to our economy, our country and our future, and it should not need to be said in this House that our economy, the investment that goes into it and the jobs we hope our children will get depend entirely on the decisions that thousands of businesses make about their future. What are we offering them? The Prime Minister said this week, "Hold your nerve." I am entitled to ask, hold our nerve for what?

It is now more than two weeks since the Brady amendment was passed, more than two weeks since the Malthouse compromise was seized upon like a thirsty man grabs at a drink in the desert, yet I fear it is a mirage. We all know that the search for alternative arrangements to keep an open border in Northern Ireland did not start two weeks ago; it has been going on for about two years. The best minds, the best negotiators and the best brains have searched, but they have not found. Those arrangements do not currently exist, a point made forcefully by the former Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, in his evidence to the Exiting the European Union Committee yesterday, and it is why Donald Tusk said yesterday that he is still waiting for proposals from the Government.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Further to the point my right hon. Friend is making, last year there was all this discussion of the so-called "max fac" option and the European Union rejected that option, which was based on technology that is now being put forward again.

Hilary Benn: My hon. Friend is, of course, entirely right. Nothing I heard from the Prime Minister on Tuesday and nothing I heard from the Secretary of

[Hilary Benn]

State at the Dispatch Box today persuades me, or anyone else, that those alternative arrangements will miraculously appear in the 43 days that remain.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Just a slight nuance on the earlier debate. The European Union is not so rude as to say that it has rejected this, but it is saying, “If your fantasies don’t come through, let us have the security policy of a backstop. We don’t say your fantasies are wrong, but we are taking our insurance policy just in case.”

Hilary Benn: The backstop is, indeed, an insurance policy, and we cannot put a time limit on it, because it would not be an insurance policy if it is not there when it is needed. We cannot allow one side to withdraw unilaterally. The tragedy that the backstop illustrates is that we are spending all this time on something that is necessary because the Prime Minister created the problem in the first place when she casually announced that we are leaving the single market and the customs union, probably not thinking through the consequences that have brought her to this point.

We have these debates every two weeks, but we are spending barely any time focusing on the real problem. As the Father of the House pointed out in his wonderfully eloquent speech, we have no idea what Brexit actually, finally, means, because the Government have refused to make the choices that confront them and have failed genuinely to reach out across the House.

Nothing illustrates that more clearly than the example of a customs union. In her heart, the Prime Minister knows that, if we want to keep an open border in Northern Ireland and if we want to keep friction-free trade, we will have to remain in a customs union with the European Union, yet she cannot bring herself to confirm that fact, not because it would be economically damaging—it would be quite the opposite—but because it would be politically damaging to the party she leads.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I suspect the Prime Minister knows that the advice from the Law Officers is that to create a hard border, which follows axiomatically from the policy wanted by my colleagues in the ERG, would be a breach of our international legal obligations under the Good Friday agreement. As we are a rule of law state, we do not do that sort of thing, which is why it is a complete fantasy to try to pursue it.

Hilary Benn: I can only bow in admiration to the clarity with which the right hon. and learned Gentleman makes that point.

We know that is where we will have to end up, and humouring those who refuse to recognise it is where we will end up, while the national interest is being threatened, is not what I regard as the leadership that we have a right to expect from any Government in this country.

If the Prime Minister were genuinely to reach out, even at this late stage, I would welcome it, but we are careering towards a cliff. She is at the wheel and the Cabinet are sitting on the back seat. At some point, they will have to decide to lean over and take the steering wheel off her. If that does not happen, a no-deal Brexit might come to pass.

We know that today is not the day when we will take that decision, but in two weeks’ time we will. Two weeks’ time will be decision day on whether Parliament is going to take for itself the means to prevent a no-deal exit from the European Union, so long as the Government continue to stand at the Dispatch Box and refuse to give the House the assurance it is entitled to receive, especially given the amendment passed two weeks ago.

I am one of the proud sponsors of the Bill, in its new and improved form, tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), and I will enthusiastically support it in the Division Lobby if the amendment is chosen. Whatever our different views about where we should go afterwards, I hope the one thing that will unite the House is that almost everyone—not everyone, but almost everyone—agrees that we cannot leave with no deal.

In most of my previous speeches I talked about where I would like to go, but the fundamental problem is that we have not debated what we want Brexit to look like. Future generations will look in puzzlement at the way in which the negotiations have been structured. One day I will see the Prime Minister stand at the Dispatch Box and say, “I am applying for an extension to article 50,” and at that moment the stranglehold of 29 March will be broken, the Members who have been humoured will discover that they were led a merry dance in their belief that we would, in fact, leave with no deal on 29 March and the question will then be asked: what do we use the extension for? At that moment, we will no longer be able to hide from the choices that need to be made, and I, for one, look forward to that happening.

Several hon. Members rose—

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

2.37 pm

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): It is traditional in this House to say it is a pleasure to follow the previous speaker; it really is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), with whose speech I thoroughly agree. I did not think that today’s event, unlike the one two weeks from now, would be of any real interest. I was wrong, but in a very bad way.

There was a fascinating, and rather horrifying, series of exchanges before this debate began and during its opening, and those exchanges have driven me, finally, to the conclusion that I admit I have gradually been forming over the last few weeks and months.

First, when the chips are down, this Government—my Government—and this Prime Minister, for whom I, unlike many colleagues, voted when she came for re-election, would prefer to do what some of my esteemed colleagues would prefer to do: head for the exit door without a deal. The Secretary of State informed us that that is the policy of Her Majesty’s Government if the Prime Minister’s deal does not succeed. That is a terrifying fact.

Secondly, I fear I have been driven to the final conclusion that it is only by legislation that we will resolve this problem, because it is only by legislation that the Government will feel compelled to act. They do not accept any motion in this House as binding on them—but they do accept orders that order you, Mr Speaker, to take certain actions, or that order the House to follow

certain procedures, the Standing Orders having been changed, as happened successfully in the past weeks and months. When it comes to governmental action, it is abundantly clear that only legislation will compel.

The third conclusion I am driven to is that the Bill that the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and I, and others, have put forward, which is a successor Bill to the previous Bill, is a necessary instrument. It commands the Prime Minister to take a series of actions that will enable her to find out what delay the House commands and what delay the EU is willing to accept, and then to follow that course if she has not achieved a deal by 13 March. Beyond that, I am driven to the conclusion—this came out in the brief conversation I had with the Father of the House—that we will then have to do what the Opposition shadow Secretary of State and many other hon. Members have suggested: find a consensus across this House for a positive alternative, also, alas, by legislation.

This is a remarkable condition for Parliament, the Government and this country to find themselves in. The structure of our affairs, almost throughout our history, since this House first established its rights over and against the Crown, has been that the Government—Her Majesty's Ministers—put forward policy and carry it out, subject only to the ability to maintain the confidence of the House, and to legislate in it. To my knowledge, it has never previously been the practice for this House to have to take control and direct Government policy by legislation. That is an astonishing turn of events.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Would the right hon. Gentleman like to reiterate that in a fortnight's time, it really will be high noon, and there will be no further opportunity to intervene to ensure that Parliament takes control of the process?

Sir Oliver Letwin: The right hon. Gentleman, who was a colleague of mine in the coalition Government, and to whom I pay tribute for his part in taking forward this Bill and other measures in which we are jointly engaged, is absolutely right about that. On 27 February, there is no place to hide. On that date, this House will make a decision that will lead either to this country leaving the EU without a deal, or to delaying the UK's exit, thereby giving us a chance, if many other things follow, to find an alternative deal that can be agreed by this House, that can be legislated through, that can be mandated for the Government, and that can give this country a secure and prosperous future outside the EU. It is on 27 February that we will have to make that decision.

My final point is that in these circumstances, being an ordinary Member of Parliament, as opposed to a member of the Cabinet—many of us have been in previous Cabinets—is no longer the kind of task that many of us have always assumed it would be. Mostly, our country has operated on the principle that its great work is done by Governments, and that we in this House have the extraordinary privilege of observing, informing, scrutinising and checking, but do not have to take the ultimate responsibility for those crucial decisions that those of us who have served in Cabinets and in National Security Councils have, from time to time, had to take about what this country does.

On 27 and 28 February, if we come to debate that Bill, and in succeeding weeks and months, as we have to legislate for the policy of this country in relation to the EU, all of us in this House will suddenly have to take the awesome responsibility of playing our part in trying to find a way through that enables our fellow citizens to have a secure and prosperous future.

Anna Soubry: As ever, my right hon. Friend is giving a passionate and brilliant speech and statement of the situation we are in. I wonder whether he could help us in one respect: does he believe that the papers I mentioned in my amendment (e) should be published? Would that assist?

Sir Oliver Letwin: I most fervently believe that they should be published; much more information on the no-deal exit should be available. I would vote for my right hon. Friend's amendment, were it not for the infelicity of the fact that it would knock out the Government's motion, which I am committed to voting for, having consistently maintained the position in this House that I will always back the Government in their endeavour to get their deal through until that is no longer possible. Perhaps I am a romantic, but I have always thought that my task was to try to assist a Conservative Government in coming to a solution. Although many of my hon. Friends do not find themselves able to do that, I will continue to do it. It is only for that reason that I shall not back her amendment; I shall abstain on the matter.

My right hon. Friend is of course right in substance: those papers should be out, because when this House comes to legislate, as I hope it will and fear it must, it will be, so to speak, a Cabinet. We will be making real-life decisions about what happens to our fellow countrymen—not just legislating in the hope that many years later, subject to further jots and tittles, the law, as administered by the system of justice, will work better. We will be making a decision about the future of this country. How can we possibly make those decisions unless we are properly informed? The process of which we are now at the start will require the fundamental realignment of the relationship between the civil service, Government and Parliament. There is no way we can continue to act as though we were merely a body to which the Government were accountable; for a period, for this purpose, we will have to take on the government of our country.

2.46 pm

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): I applaud the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) for seeking leadership and decisiveness at this moment. It makes me ask: who should be held responsible for the groundhog day moment we find ourselves in? It is no secret that I regard Brexit as an unmitigated disaster, particularly for the most vulnerable and least well-off of my constituents, whose jobs and livelihoods are threatened. I also hold the Prime Minister responsible for the conduct of the negotiations, accepting as she did this ridiculous arrangement whereby the divorce arrangements are separated from the future relationship. That should never have been allowed to happen. She then negotiated a deal that nobody really wanted, but which she is absolutely determined to prosecute at

[Mr Chris Leslie]

almost any cost. We are now in this ridiculous situation of the Prime Minister saying, “Back me or we all hold hands and jump off the cliff together.”

Brexit is not just a disaster; it is also a tragedy because of the economic consequences. We have been talking about the trade deals that we were promised would all be ready one second after midnight on 29 March. We discovered this week that only four or five of the 40 free trade agreements will be ready.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): We have got the Faroe Islands.

Mr Leslie: We do have the Faroe Islands, but the deals with Turkey, Japan, South Korea and Canada will not be ready. As well as the breach with our largest trading partner, the European Union, we must add a breach and fracture in our trade arrangements with all those other countries.

Brexit is not just an economic tragedy, because there are other tragedies. My heart breaks when I think about the history of our country leading up to this moment: working in alliances with our European allies; those citizens' rights that have accrued; and the ability not just of generations of people to come, work, live and study here, but of our children to do the same reciprocally.

We talk about the backstop as though that nomenclature somehow describes what we are talking about. Let us be plain about what we are hearing. Some hon. Members do not want a time limit to the backstop. Essentially, they are arguing for a time limit on open borders between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland—a time limit on the Good Friday agreement. When we put it in those terms, it is preposterous that we should be in this situation at all.

I hold the Government responsible for getting us into this run-the-clock-down strategy, but we should be completely honest about why we are in this situation. I wanted action today. Earlier this week, I said that we needed to snap out of this delusion now, because I worry about the time that we have in which to legislate on these things. I will have to cling to the hope of 27 February, but why are we waiting until then? It is because, in order to get the votes for a majority, we have to work cross-party. The truth is that an increasing number of Labour Members—even some on the Front Bench—are abstaining on votes, so we have to wait for Members on the payroll, Government Ministers, to do the brave thing and resign to counteract the loss of numbers on the Labour Benches. We should have a solid Labour move against this outrageous situation. The idea that the Labour party is not together in arguing against this tragedy—this disaster—is, for me, entirely heartbreaking.

In the amendment tabled by the Labour Front-Bench team, I no longer see the words, “option of a public vote”, which were in the Labour Front-Bench amendment of 29 January. I ask myself why are we regressing when it comes to our party's policy, as passed at the September conference. Other Members have tabled amendments; I applaud my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies), the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) and other hon. Members, who have tried to put this matter of Labour party policy on the Order Paper today.

We have this new euphemism of “options on the table.” How long is this table, and when will we ever get to those options? It is absolutely not acceptable. On this particular issue, we are being played for fools by the leadership of the Labour party. By now, we should have reached the stage of a public vote on the option of remaining in the European Union. Nobody can explain to me seriously, without being lawyered, why we are not at that stage right now.

The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) was correct when he talked about the underlying reasons for this mess. Why are we at this groundhog day right now? The truth is that our party political system is shattered. It is broken, and it is letting this country down at a crucial time. This is the moment when we need leadership, but tragically, party political calculations and advantage are being put ahead of the national interest.

2.51 pm

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I have been sounding the alarm for the car industry for some time. Of course, its challenges are not just about Brexit, but Brexit has made things worse. Many of my constituents have lost their jobs. The claimant count has shot up on my council estate, and, given the lag in statistics, I fear that things will only get worse. Unemployment is now at 7.4% compared with the national average of 2.3%.

As 29 March approaches, it is paramount that we leave the EU with a deal—I have voted for the Prime Minister's deal. Leaving without a deal would be catastrophic. This is not project fear; this is reality. These are real people's lives that I am talking about. On Tuesday evening, I co-chaired a meeting with my friend the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) of a wide range of organisations: Jaguar Land Rover, Ford, Airbus, Siemens, the CBI, the EEF, the NFU, the British Ceramic Confederation, the Association of British Insurers and so on. The damage of continued uncertainty and the lingering prospect of no deal was made perfectly clear. A total of 80% of CBI members have stopped investing in their businesses. The political uncertainty has damaged the UK's credibility as a safe place for investment. One of the large US investors now describes the UK as the “problem child” of Europe. Against that backdrop, companies of all sizes are finding it increasingly difficult to justify doing business here.

When I was growing up, this country was often described as the “sick man of Europe”, and I really do not want us to become that again. Manufacturers are now spending tens of millions on no-deal preparations, as we heard earlier. It is extraordinary to think that they hope that that money will be wasted.

The manufacturing industry is not in decline. It accounts for 10% of the UK's economic output. The UK is the ninth biggest manufacturer in the world, and manufacturing is not an industry that this country can afford to lose; it employs thousands of people and it pays well. However, for this success to continue, companies need to be certain that the UK is a reliable place to invest in and commit to. Unfortunately, as indicated by Ford's recent announcements, this is now in doubt.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The right hon. Lady and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) have done quite

a remarkable job in getting all the various organisations together. Like her, I am concerned because, as she knows, Jaguar Land Rover and a number of other companies are based in Coventry, and the local CBI has contacted me voicing concerns about the direction we are heading in with these negotiations. I hope that the right hon. Lady agrees with me.

Dame Caroline Spelman: West midlands MPs from across the political divide have sounded the alarm together for the jobs that are being put at risk.

Let me turn to a fresh example of what is at stake. We often speak about the economic cost, but there is a huge human cost. As Second Church Estates Commissioner, I was approached by the Bishop of Europe—yes, the Church of England has a diocese of Europe—on this subject. There are approximately 1 million European citizens living in the UK, many of whom are pensioners, and 250,000 are estimated to be receiving ongoing healthcare treatment. In addition, there are 50 million visitors from the UK annually to the continent, and they are covered by the European health insurance card. Indeed, 27 million UK citizens are registered as having one—maybe some of us do—but that provision is at stake in a no-deal Brexit. Permanent employees and residents are covered by an S1 certificate, which enables healthcare treatments to be reimbursed in the European economic area and Switzerland, but that too is at stake under a no-deal Brexit.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): The right hon. Lady is absolutely right that this uncertainty is causing huge problems for the British community and businesses. I voted against the Government's deal, but does the right hon. Lady agree that many businesses actually welcome the withdrawal agreement and say that it is indecision, rather than Brexit per se, that is stalling them now, and that we need to agree a deal without further delay?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I could not agree more. We need to heed businesses that say that the deal may not be perfect, but it is good enough. It is the jobs that are at stake as the uncertainty continues. But we are straying into economics again, and I want to return to the human cases.

Consider the 91-year-old man in an Italian nursing home. His son, who lives here, has just had a letter from the Italian authorities to say that they will no longer pay for his father's care from 30 March if there is no deal. Imagine the younger man, worried sick that he cannot afford those nursing home fees and that moving his father could be fatal.

Then consider the young man living and working in France who has HIV. He has just received a letter to say that he will have to pay for his own antiretroviral treatment on 30 March. And listen to the voices of two pensioners living in Spain, who said:

"I will have to return to Britain as without the healthcare paid for, I can't afford to live here. I wasn't allowed to vote in the referendum. If we don't get that healthcare lots of us will have to come home".

The Government tell them that they are negotiating reciprocal rights. London and Madrid have already signed a deal ensuring voting rights and working rights for respective migrants, but healthcare is not part of

this agreement. I wrote to the Health Secretary last week and have not yet had a reply. I stopped him in the Lobby to ask about this issue and he pointed out that the reciprocal healthcare Bill is being debated in the Lords, but will it have passed both Houses by 30 March?

Dr Wollaston: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I will not give way again.

More importantly, will other countries hosting UK citizens have legislated in their Parliaments to protect them? These are real people and real lives. Sick and vulnerable people have become caught up in the Brexit turmoil, and they need answers.

Until I heard the interpretation of the Prime Minister's motion today, I was going to welcome it, because it supported the amendments that were passed by a majority in this House. I am not entirely happy with the apparent demotion of my own amendment. I have consistently supported the Prime Minister's deal and I will continue to support her to get a deal agreed in this House. Businesses need to know what position they will be in after 29 March.

Our country had barely recovered from the 2008 financial crisis. Politicians in this place did not have a choice of avoiding that global slump. We are on the brink of a similar shock to our economy in the form of no deal, but this time it is in our power to avoid doing such damage. We must leave the EU to honour the result of the referendum, but we must ensure that we do it in a way that will not decimate the livelihoods of thousands across the nation.

I will be voting for the Prime Minister's motion tonight. I implore colleagues to get behind the deal and secure the jobs and livelihoods that are so precious to those we represent.

3 pm

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The Prime Minister's own personal approach to Brexit has created what 40 former ambassadors have today rightly called a "national crisis" that she is presiding over. In their serious and important speeches, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie), my right hon. Friends the Members for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), and the right hon. Members for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) and for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) have risen to the occasion of the crisis that is now facing us. I only wish that the Secretary of State could have risen to it as well.

The fact is that the Prime Minister, from the beginning, has chosen to put the interests of keeping the Conservative party together over the national interest. She chose, because she had decided to kow-tow to the Brextremists in her own party, a hard Brexit to get through her own party conference, without even discussing it with her own Cabinet. She set the hard red lines—out of the single market; out of the customs union—that created the problems with the Irish backstop. From the beginning, she made no attempt to forge a consensus across party lines or, indeed, across the country to define what Brexit would be so that it could be delivered in a consensual way rather than a way that has exacerbated disunity and

[Ms Angela Eagle]

further divided this nation. She has decided that she has to deliver Brexit with Conservative and DUP votes, and nothing else, to keep her party together and avoid a split.

This has pushed her to a harder and more damaging conclusion than she might have reached if she had reached out, and it will do our country more damage. By her choices, the Prime Minister has further divided the country. She has not sought unity, and we are all paying the price. Unity does not consist merely of being forced to agree with her dubious, partisan choices and her definition of what Brexit should be, which are reckless in the extreme.

Anna Soubry: Does the hon. Lady also take the view that given the result of the general election, which resulted in a hung Parliament and the Conservative party actually losing its majority, there is no argument that there is any mandate for a hard Brexit, and in fact, if there is any mandate, it is against a hard Brexit and against no deal?

Ms Eagle: Not to my surprise, I find myself agreeing with the observations of the right hon. Lady. The only national poll that the Prime Minister talks about these days is the referendum. Somehow she never refers to the 2017 election in which her party lost its mandate for a hard Brexit.

The Prime Minister's response to the result of that vote in 2017 and the loss of her majority surely ought to have been to go for a softer, more consensual Brexit that would have kept us in the customs union and avoided all these problems. But instead we have a Prime Minister who characterises disagreement with her own particular partisan choices on Brexit as if it is a betrayal of democracy. She has used those words, and that has further exacerbated the anger that we have in this country. In my view, it is actually beginning to bring democracy itself into disrepute. She flirts with authoritarianism and division, and invites the betrayal narratives that increase anger even more, so she is being reckless with our political stability.

The Prime Minister has ignored Parliament in the way in which she has gone about delivering Brexit. She allowed her attack dogs to attack judges who pointed out that in fact Parliament needed to have a say about the triggering of article 50 in the first place. Indeed, the Prime Minister has allowed her Government to be found in contempt of Parliament. Today's motion only exists because she was defeated in an attempt to shut down Parliament's say in Brexit, and yet the Government are fulfilling the terms of that vote by holding this debate according to the letter, not the spirit, of the defeat they suffered. They routinely ignore votes in Parliament. Opposition days have simply disappeared, and they do not deign to vote in Divisions that the Opposition secure anyway, much less take any notice of the result. We are seeing the phrase "non-binding on the Government" increasingly applied, which is why I made the point of order before the debate.

This development would have been unthinkable when I came into the House. The unwritten rules about our constitution are beginning to be ignored. Political gravity, which was always thought to be something that everybody

respected, is being ignored. It is the letter, not the spirit, of our constitution and our law that is now apparently more important. We will rue the day we went down this dangerous path.

All agreements are intra-Conservative ones. The Chequers agreement was with the Cabinet, and that did not last the weekend. The ludicrously named Malthouse compromise has already been ruled out by the EU. The alternative arrangements working group, funded by civil service support, is all about trying to get the rabble of the ERG to agree with the rest of the Conservative party, so that the Prime Minister can move forward. It is all to kick the can down the road and let her stay in office another week.

The Prime Minister is deeply reckless, and she has made a deeply reckless decision to play a hugely damaging game of brinkmanship with her own party by threatening the entire country with no deal. We have heard in the powerful speeches so far the real damage that that is doing to our country, trashing our international reputation abroad and doing irreparable damage to our standing in the world.

Going to the brink in pursuit of this tactic is reckless with our economic prosperity and reckless with our political stability. Jobs are being lost now. Investment opportunities are being lost now. Growth is being sacrificed now. The Prime Minister has allowed the Tory Eurosceptic virus to infect the entire body politic. We are all ill with it; we are being weakened with it. Her and her party will never be forgiven for the damage that she is causing.

3.7 pm

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this important EU withdrawal debate, particularly after so many impassioned speeches from those on the Front and Back Benches.

Almost exactly three years ago, it was confirmed that the EU membership referendum would take place in June 2016, and it is now more than two and a half years since the referendum took place. In my constituency, the vote to leave the European Union was 58%, and across the country it was 52%. Since then, as the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) said, there has been a general election in 2017, when 589 now elected Members of this House stood on a manifesto commitment to deliver the result of the referendum.

The message I get is as follows. Just the other day, I was walking down Tilgate shopping parade in my constituency, and as is typically the case, someone came up to me and wanted to know about the current Brexit debate in Parliament. They said, "Why aren't we getting on with the decision we made two and a half years ago?" That is a compelling argument.

We have heard this afternoon calls for a so-called people's vote. I would argue that we had a people's vote in 2016. We have also heard calls for an extension of article 50, to delay our departure from the European Union. We have heard from those Members concern about the uncertainty of Brexit. The one thing that will maintain uncertainty is questioning the democratic decision that was taken by holding a second referendum. That would certainly do a lot to damage our democracy and prolong uncertainty, as would a delay to article 50, and that is before we even get into the issues of whether the remaining 27 members of the EU would allow article 50 to be extended and, if article 50 were to be extended beyond July, of EU elections.

Mention has been made of how we should be taking no deal off the table. I have never known a negotiation where one party goes in and says that they are not willing to walk away from that negotiation. [*Interruption.*] I hear some jeering from Opposition Members, many of whom are sponsored by trade unions. I cannot imagine a trade union going into a negotiation with an employer and saying in those negotiations that it would not be willing to strike.

Mr McFadden: The problem with this “walk away” analogy is that in any other negotiation when someone walks away, the status quo applies. That is not the case here: when we walk away from this, a whole new and terribly damaging set of new things comes into force. That is why this analogy with a business deal is so fatuous, ridiculous and wrong.

Henry Smith: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for mentioning the status quo, because I do not think the status quo of remaining inside the European Union is good for this country. The European Union is increasingly a protectionist bloc. The European Union is not outward and global in its approach. This country, with its unique global links, can use them to have a much more positive future, instead of locking itself into the ever closer union that is producing a democratic deficit at the heart of the EU, not to mention things such as a European army.

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): My hon. Friend very clearly makes the point that we did not vote for the status quo. It is quite clear: 17.4 million people voted to leave. Does he agree with me that the inevitable outcome, if we do not have a deal, is no deal? That is not the status quo.

Henry Smith: I think people in this country have rejected the status quo, and I see Brexit as an opportunity for wider constitutional reform in relation to devolving power, fundamentally changing the way the other place works fundamentally and many other aspects. People wanted change. Actually, I think throughout Europe—throughout many EU member states—there is a real desire for change. If we do not respect the democratic decision, then some of the civil unrest we have seen on the streets of Paris, Lyon and Marseille, some of the economic contraction we see in Germany and the crisis in countries such as Italy will be visited on this country.

Charlie Elphicke: My hon. Friend is making a typically powerful speech. Can he think of anything more craven than for Members of this House to vote one day to trigger article 50 and then to say two years later, “Oh, we didn’t mean to do that. We need to carry on”? Is that not just craven and, frankly, pathetic?

Henry Smith: We have seen significant majorities both in favour of leaving the European Union, in that about 80% of Members of Parliament elected at the last general election said they would follow through on it—

Anna Soubry: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Henry Smith: I do not have any time; I do apologise.

Anna Soubry: Oh!

Henry Smith: Actually, yes, I will give way very briefly.

Anna Soubry: Can my hon. Friend remind us of the promises made by the leave campaign, which he supported? It repeatedly said that we would not leave the European Union until a trade deal securing our future trading relationship with the EU had been secured. Does he remember such broken promises?

Henry Smith: I never made that promise when I supported leaving the European Union. I believe that a deal is the best way forward, but let us not forget that the vast majority of right hon. and hon. Members voted in favour of the legislation to leave the European Union on 29 March, and if no deal is the result, that is the default position.

Vicky Ford: I thank my hon. Friend for reminding us of what was said in the past. The Conservative party manifesto that I stood on in 2017 stated clearly that we would seek a deep and special partnership with the EU, including a new free trade agreement and a customs agreement. Does my hon. Friend still stand by that promise?

Henry Smith: Yes, we absolutely should be seeking and honouring a deep and close relationship with our neighbours and allies in Europe, but the trouble with a customs union, which Labour Members advocate, is that it would prevent us from doing the global free trade deals that, in a world that is getting smaller, are key to our prosperity. The key to this country’s future prosperity is our unique global links, and being a conduit for that thanks to our proximity to Europe. We must be robust in the ongoing negotiations, and I support the Prime Minister in continuing them. I have never known an EU negotiation that did not go down to the last moment, and I therefore remain optimistic about our future. For goodness’ sake, we should be more optimistic as a House and country, because our best years are ahead.

3.16 pm

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): In just 43 days we are set to crash out with no deal, yet the Prime Minister and those on the Government Front Bench insist on running down the clock and presenting the completely false choice of no deal versus the Prime Minister’s bad deal. The motion under discussion today is non-binding, so why are we here to discuss the chaos that the Government have got us into? We are just days from the biggest disaster that we as a country have faced in a generation. Both before and after the votes two weeks ago, the House knew that the EU was not prepared to move on amending the withdrawal agreement, yet the Prime Minister still insists on going back to Brussels to ask again and again. She is running down the clock.

This House has been consistently clear that the majority of Members do not want the Prime Minister’s deal, and neither do they want a no-deal scenario. Why are those the options? Why are we facing no deal, just 43 days before we are set to crash out of the European Union? Why are we being blackmailed by the Prime Minister into voting for her deal to avoid a no-deal scenario? The Prime Minister is pursuing her policy of brinkmanship and trying to scare MPs into voting for her deal. Let me

[Anna McMorris]

tell you, Mr Speaker, that will not work. We will not be blackmailed. This issue should not be about the Tory party—not then, not now, and not ever. The referendum was called by the then Prime Minister to prevent a split in his party and settle things once and for all. Well that went well, didn't it?

This country is now an embarrassment. The Prime Minister is a laughing stock. All over the world we are being watched, and I am afraid that what people see is chaos. They see a weak Prime Minister who is unable to control her party, and a Government who are about to commit an act of such self-harm that it will take years, if not generations, for us to recover economically and socially in our communities and businesses. Far from being an outward-looking, confident and strong country, by leaving the European Union we are pursuing a policy of isolationism.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): On that point, have we not, as a member of the European Union, been at the forefront of combating climate change through the UN process? Leaving the EU will set us back. Should we not be looking at a Marshall plan for the environment across Europe, not just looking at the issue by ourselves?

Anna McMorris: I thank my hon. Friend for that excellent point. The Government, in tearing apart all the brilliant policies we have in partnership with the European Union, are tearing apart the fabric of this country bit by bit.

Dismissing the rights of people who have lived here for years and years is damaging our businesses, damaging our communities and damaging our public services. I was not elected to this place to make my constituents poorer or less safe. That is what we are set to do by voting for the Prime Minister's deal, any deal, or, even worse, crashing out with no deal. We are lacking the leadership, courage and commitment needed from our political leaders to demonstrate that they are putting the people of this country first, standing up for what is right and not risking security and peace in Northern Ireland. The backstop is essential to ensure peace in that part of the world. There is no such thing as "alternative arrangements". We all know that, and our EU friends are absolutely right to stay firm on that. Only an irresponsible Government would seek changes and run down the clock.

It is our communities, our constituencies and our constituents who will suffer. It is their jobs and their livelihoods that will suffer—hard-working families, small and large businesses. Many of those I speak to in Cardiff North are so worried about their future. I was in a deli in my constituency just last week that is run by Italians. They have been there for years. They are very worried not only about trade but about their own futures. A florist around the corner from my office is worried about her future and her family's future. Why are we doing this to the people of this country?

The Secretary of State tells us to "hold our nerve". For what? This is a sham of a negotiation. We are in this situation because of this Government. My constituents do not want this. Jobs are under threat. Ford and Airbus are threatening to leave, and small businesses are

worried about their future. My constituents are worried about their future and the future for their children. What is more, they are deeply, deeply saddened by the state of this country. They are saddened by the future that the Government are giving their children: a fantasy future based on nothing but lies and deception from the leave campaign.

I am saddened too, but more than that I am deeply, deeply worried. I am worried that the Prime Minister is playing recklessly with this country's future. We must take action urgently to reject and prevent no deal. We must immediately extend article 50 and put the deal, whatever deal it is, back to the people for a final say. That is the only proper, democratic solution. If the Prime Minister is so sure of her deal, then that is what she will do: put it back to the people for a final say.

3.23 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): The two previous motions, one in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady) and the other in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), are both incorporated in the Government motion.

With respect to the first motion, there has been no realistic suggestion for a credible replacement to the backstop since the motion was passed and the EU is still saying it will not renegotiate. There is no withdrawal agreement simply because it has not been signed. In that context, the Brady motion was meaningless. Furthermore, as I said to the Prime Minister on Tuesday, article 4 of the current draft withdrawal agreement undermines control over our own laws. That will create uncompetitive havoc for businesses, and for trade unionists and for workers, as the laws are passed by the other 27 member states, as they go through the Council of Ministers, and we will not even be there. The measure also contradicts the repeal of section 1 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 and the repeal of the European Communities Act 1972.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that, were we to make the mistake of saying that we rule out leaving without signing the withdrawal agreement, we would take away the Government's main bargaining card for getting improvements to the agreement?

Sir William Cash: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right.

On the amendment tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden, in reply to my question on Tuesday, which the Prime Minister agreed with, the Prime Minister said that Members from across the House voted to trigger article 50, which had a two-year timeline, ending on 29 March, and that every Conservative Member had voted for the withdrawal Act. She was right. However, the amendment tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden passed only because it was supported by Members from all parties who had already voted for the withdrawal Act, the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act 2017 and the European Union Referendum Act 2015, and were in effect, on the Prime Minister's own analysis, undermining their previous votes. Furthermore, we were whipped against the amendment tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden.

There was no consultation prior to the tabling of the Government motion now before the House. In any case, the Government's position that a so-called no deal remains on the table is clear, as the Secretary of State confirmed. The motion makes no sense, so why are we faced with it today? We are told that it is to keep traction with the EU, which has been, as I said to the Prime Minister on Tuesday, both undemocratic and totally intransigent. As I have said, the withdrawal agreement itself is inconsistent with the European Communities Act 1972. It is therefore also inconsistent with the referendum itself and our manifesto. The 2018 Act includes the repudiation in UK law of all EU laws and treaties, and article 4 of the withdrawal agreement is completely inconsistent with that. A vast number of voters see through this charade—they see through the smoke and mirrors—and in particular so too does the Conservative party membership—a recent “ConservativeHome” poll showed that 70% of them are against the withdrawal agreement.

The real problem goes back to what I said at the time of the first vote on the withdrawal agreement and my observations about the failure of public trust in respect of the Chequers deal and this withdrawal agreement. Those words stand as much today as they did when I spoke on 15 January. Today's motion further undermines public trust. We are now truly entering the world of George Orwell's Ministry of Truth. In his book “1984” Orwell wrote:

“Doublethink means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them.”

This double motion is doublethink in action, and I cannot possibly vote for it.

3.27 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): The Prime Minister asks us to hold our nerve and give her time. One has to ask: more time for what? The answer is unclear, other than the obvious one, which is that it is to run down the clock towards early March. Despite the furious denials, that seems increasingly clear, as we have heard this afternoon. It seems that the Prime Minister cannot move an inch without enraging one faction or other of her own party. Brexit is problematic, but currently the problem is not the Irish, it is certainly not the Scots, or, for that matter, the supine Welsh Government, and it is not the backstop; the problem is clearly in the Conservative party. It is unsupportable that we are being led to this disaster for that very reason.

We are encouraged to keep our nerve while the wrangling proceeds and while the obfuscation for party advantage proceeds—to keep our nerve to keep our seats, while outside the bubble people are losing their jobs. We keep our nerve, they lose their jobs. Let me give a practical example. A small castings company in my constituency is an exporting company with products of the very highest quality. It is committed to the community in which it was established and which it serves, and from which it gets its workforce. Last time I talked to it, it said it was now looking at establishing a distribution centre in the Netherlands because it cannot face the confusion that now oppresses it. Only four jobs are affected, but for that community and that company, four jobs is a huge loss. Four jobs repeated endlessly across all the countries of these islands is a huge, huge burden that we could avoid.

After many years of representing Caernarfon, then the Arfon constituency, I have come to recognise the signs of a Government in desperate straits. We now have some more signs to add to the list—major Government defeats, crucial votes delayed without reason and a recess cancelled for no more than a few statutory instruments and general debates. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) said yesterday, this is a broken Britain, with its democracy stumbling, its economy unbalanced towards the south-east of England and inequality continuously amplified.

From the outside, the bickering and jostling for position seems to be entirely unreasonable and irrelevant to people's everyday lives. It ignores a basic point that drives me and my party: any form of Brexit would leave Wales and the whole of the rest of the UK worse off economically. I concede that most well-to-do people who occupy the Benches in Parliament will probably be fine under Brexit, but my constituents—working people, factory workers, students, retired people, families and children—will not.

I want to confirm that my party will vote for the amendments and against the Government's motion. Forgive me for finishing on a familiar note by repeating what my party has said over and over again as Brexit day looms, but the reasonable solution for the Prime Minister is to reject no deal emphatically and then to put a vote on her deal, in whatever form that is, to the people to have a final say.

3.31 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams). While I agree with Wales in voting to leave the EU, I am afraid that I found little in his speech—though he put it powerfully and coherently—that I could agree with. I certainly cannot agree with a second referendum, or indeed, to taking no deal off the table.

I have always found that it is a good idea in the House to vote on what the motion says and not necessarily on what Ministers or other Members say in the House, so I thought I had better have a look at what it says today. It is very clear, actually:

“That this House...reiterates its support for the approach to leaving the EU expressed by this House on 29 January 2019”—

so I thought I had better look and see what the House had agreed to, and within the motion that it agreed to were the words

“rejects the United Kingdom leaving the European Union without a Withdrawal Agreement”.

In other words, the motion that we are voting on tonight takes no deal off the table. It does not matter what Ministers have said. It is what the motion says, so I would expect all Opposition Members who do not seem to want a no-deal option to support the Government's motion tonight, which is exactly the reason I will not be supporting it. It is a badly worded motion—well, no, it is not a badly worded motion; it is deliberately worded that way. I think the Government thought that they could slide it through and that it would not matter. I know that, if I supported this tonight, the Whips would point out to me, “You have supported taking no deal off the table.” That is not what I can do.

I want to go back to when I was a co-founder of the Grassroots Out movement. I travelled the length and breadth of the United Kingdom during the referendum

[Mr Peter Bone]

campaign discussing with people what they wanted if they were going to vote to leave. It came down, I think, to a few things. They wanted to end the free movement of people, to stop giving billions and billions of pounds each and every year to the EU and for us to make our own laws in our own country, judged by our own judges. I fear that the current withdrawal agreement proposed by the Government fails on all those tests. Maybe that is one of the reasons why it suffered the biggest defeat in Commons history. Anybody who had suffered the biggest defeat in Commons history might want to go away and think very carefully about what they put to the House, and not tinker around for a couple of weeks before coming back with more or less the same motion, because the same thing will happen. It will get rejected by this House.

Let us look at the tests. Does the withdrawal agreement end the free movement of people? It does not, because there is no future deal worked out, just some sort of political wish list—a political declaration—so it fails on that score. Does the agreement stop billions and billions of pounds being given to the EU each and every year? We know that £39 billion is going to be given whatever happens under the withdrawal agreement, and if the transition period is extended, even more money will be given. Clearly, our courts will not be able to be the final arbiters, because the European Court of Justice has a significant say over our future.

John Redwood: Will my hon. Friend confirm that, because the agreement is not about the future partnership, it sentences this House and the whole nation to 21 to 45 more months of the rows, disagreements, uncertainties and problems that we have presided over for the last two years and seven months?

Mr Bone: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's intervention. I will deal with that issue in a minute, but I want to finish the point that clearly the withdrawal agreement does not let us make our own laws in our own country, because we would still be tied to the European Union.

The one thing that people say—I hear it from leading remainers—is that they want certainty, but the one thing that the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration in particular give us is uncertainty, with months and months of squabbling and not delivering what the British people voted for in June 2016.

Ian Paisley: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it would be most useful before the conclusion of tonight's debate if we heard from the Government Front Bench whether the textual, legal changes that are binding have been drafted and whether they have been put to Europe?

Mr Bone: I am very grateful for that intervention from the very sound colleagues on the DUP Benches. Of course, it would help enormously to hear that.

Everyone talks about no-deal cliff edge and disaster, or says that people did not vote to make themselves poorer, but that is complete and utter nonsense.

Anna McMorrin: Rubbish.

Mr Bone: No, it is not rubbish, it is nonsense. But the hon. Lady can use the word “rubbish” as well—whichever one she likes: rubbish or nonsense. [Interruption.] Oh, she is saying that I am talking nonsense? I listened to hon. Lady, who made a powerful remain speech that was absolute—let us use one of those words—nonsense. The truth of the matter is that the British people had the Cameron-Osborne “Project Fear” thrown at them. They were told that it would be the end of the world if they voted leave. They would be poorer, house prices would go up or down, interest rates would go through the roof and there would be mass unemployment—even bubonic plague—and they still voted for it, so I am afraid that people in this remain Parliament are ignoring the wishes of the British people. With the exception of very few Members, none of the Members who has spoken mentioned the British people. They all mentioned themselves and what they wanted—[Interruption.] Sorry, did the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) say, “Shut up”? If the hon. Lady suggests that, I am going to shut up very shortly, and I am sure we will hear from her, but I will say this—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Let me say in the most affectionate possible terms to the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), who is an extremely cerebral Member of the House, that at this moment he is behaving like an incorrigible delinquent. I urge him to desist from this disorderly behaviour. He is fundamentally a very good man—some would even say a great man—but something has seized him today, and he is behaving in a mildly eccentric manner.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): He is very irritating.

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman says that the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) is “very irritating”. Well, this is a subjective matter. Some people might find the hon. Gentleman irritating, or even find the Chair irritating—but who cares?

Mr Bone: I can assure you, Mr Speaker, that I am not a snowflake, so I will not take offence from the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman).

The truth is that a no-deal Brexit—which is, of course, a deal that means leaving on the basis of WTO rules—is the answer. It gives clarity to business, and it delivers what the British people voted for in June 2016.

3.40 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Poverty drove my parents to emigrate from rural Ireland to this country. This country gave them everything. I never thought when I was a snotty kid in Kilburn that I would ever end up as a Member of Parliament. I am proud of our country—it is truly Great Britain—and it grieves me to see it facing the biggest crisis since 1945 as a consequence of a self-inflicted wound as we drift towards an abyss. If we plunge into that abyss without a deal to protect the British national interest, our country will be the poorer for a generation to come.

On 29 January, the House spoke. The truly honourable right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), whom I praise in the warmest possible terms for her outstanding integrity, and I tabled an amendment that

said “No to no deal”. The House spoke, and that led to the commencement of constructive all-party negotiations. Today we heard not one word from the Secretary of State about progress in those negotiations as he pandered unashamedly to the European Research Group, whose members are oblivious to the consequences of their actions.

When it was put to the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) that there would be difficulties for the automotive industry—including the Jaguar plant in my constituency—in relation to frictionless trade in particular, he said, “Frictionless trade? Fake news.” So he knows more about how to make cars than those who make cars. Conservative Members pretend that they know more about how to build ships and planes than those who build ships and planes, and that they somehow know more than the head of counter-terrorism, who warned of potentially serious consequences for the safety and security of our citizens if we crash out with no deal.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Does he remember the words of the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson)? He said, “Eff business”. Is that not the attitude that seems to be pervading this place when it comes to what will happen on the other side of Brexit? It is almost a “don’t care” attitude, but it will seriously damage our communities.

Jack Dromey: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. Jaguar Land Rover—the Jaguar plant in my constituency and the Land Rover plant in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Meriden—has transformed the lives of tens of thousands of workers locally, and the riposte from the ERG is “Eff business.” It is absolutely disgraceful.

We are determined to press on regardless with positive talks, with a view to trying to reach agreement. Why? Not least because of what we were told on Tuesday night at a meeting that we organised here with representatives of the five biggest manufacturing companies, and others with interests in food, finance and farming. All spoke with one voice: “We cannot crash out without a deal, and we want a good deal to protect the British national interest.” We were told that

“the effects of No Deal are happening now”,

and that American investors in manufacturing companies now see us as the “problem child of Europe”.

An investment that would have created 1,000 jobs in Northern Ireland has been shelved, and 80% of CBI members have stopped investing while the uncertainty continues. Inward investment in the automotive sector has halved. Automotive companies are planning shutdowns after 29 March. Businesses are being told by their contractors to build up three months’-worth of stock after that date, which is costing them a small fortune and using up valuable storage space. As the National Farmers Union has said, 90% of animal vaccines are imported, and in a no-deal scenario it cannot guarantee that necessary vaccines will be readily available.

Ian Paisley: The hon. Gentleman reads out those statistics about the problems, but the fact is that we have the lowest unemployment on record in the history of the state of Northern Ireland, and the highest numbers in Northern Ireland’s history for inward and direct investment.

The joint total of our export sales to the rest of the United Kingdom and the rest of the world is more than 73% of everything we produce; the fact is that that is where we make our money.

Jack Dromey: Come to Erdington, where we still have one in 10 out of work, with unemployment rising. When we turned around the Jaguar plant from closure in 2010, it doubled in size from 1,400 workers to 3,300, but it has lost 1,000 jobs in the last 12 months, and growing uncertainty is seeing more and more job losses. These are good, secure, well-paid jobs, now being put at risk by Brexit. It is nothing short of extraordinary that there continue to be too many Members in this House who are just oblivious to the consequences of their actions.

The week commencing 25 March will be crunch time for the Government, our country and businesses up and down the country. Notwithstanding some of the things said by Conservative Members, that “no to no deal” amendment that won on 29 January, on which parties from across this House united, stands; it is morally binding. It would be utterly contemptuous of the Government if they were to give two fingers to that clearly expressed wish of the House of Commons.

The extraordinary contributions we have heard today tell us that a safeguard is necessary at the next stages. We will engage positively, both formally and informally, with the negotiations under way, with a view to reaching agreement, because we believe we have a duty to put the British national interest first, but what we have heard today reinforces our view that we have to support that Cooper-Letwin amendment. It is an utterly essential measure that the right hon. Member for Meriden and I have signed and strongly support. It underpins things; it is a safeguard that prevents us from falling off a cliff on 29 March without a deal.

We have a sacred duty in this House to put the national interest first. When I get out of bed every morning, what drives me forward is those I represent, and the lives transformed because of successful companies, and I grieve at the thought of what is unfolding. We must come together across this House in the best interests and traditions of Britain to agree a deal that will protect it at the next stages. It would be utterly outrageous if we were to betray the trust of the British people, and we for one just will not do it.

3.48 pm

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey); I agreed entirely with the sentiments that he expressed about the depth of this crisis.

We still need to reflect a little to understand how we got here. After the referendum, I spent at least the first 12 months trying to persuade myself that there was some silver lining to the cloud, and that some of the arguments about us eventually finding a better destiny outside the EU, without so much interference, so much anger, and so much debate about our participation, might somehow prove right. Whereas a small minority in this House are absolutely fixated, and are persuaded that we can part company with our nearest neighbours entirely, the truth, not always uttered in this Chamber, but certainly spoken in the Tea Room, is that an overwhelming majority of Members of Parliament believe

[*Mr Dominic Grieve*]

that Brexit, whatever form it takes, will be damaging to this country. Norway, the palliative that Norway plus may be seen as representing, a Canada-style agreement, or indeed the agreement negotiated in good faith by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister—all are inferior to participation.

The result is that we are tying ourselves up in knots, and that is why we are paralysed. We end up with people like my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) trying to have their cake and eat it; or—I say this gently—with those on the Labour Front Bench buying a plastic cake and pretending it is edible, rather than coming to the correct conclusion that we will have to go back to the public with the options and, pointing out the limitations of what happened in 2016, ask them whether some of the options can, in fact, be delivered—otherwise, we should not be doing it. That is where we will have to end up, but meanwhile, the crisis deepens.

We are in the extraordinary position of being told that we have to continue negotiating and threatening to leave, when frankly, threatening to leave is the behaviour of a three-year-old who says that they are going to hold their breath if they do not get the toy that they want. That is where we are, and we will have to do something about it ourselves if we are to get ourselves out of this mess. I agree so much with my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) that we cannot allow this to happen. That is why I have signed the Bill that he has presented, will work with him to get it through Parliament, and believe it is the only way out of the current crisis.

I will sit down in a moment, Mr Speaker, because I want to conclude quickly, but I will just say this. What troubles me is that my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench should be doing this themselves, in their own motion. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister talks about her sacred duty over Brexit. I do not think Brexit is a sacred duty at all; I think it is a pretty profane matter, and if it is going to plunge us into a national crisis, we have a sacred duty to prevent it. I am really alarmed that she does not appear to understand that. I have to say to my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench that if that is the policy with which they will persist, we will obviously try to change it by implementing the necessary legislation, but that calls into question whether the Government—whom I do my best to support, despite the problems—are in fact acting in the national interest at all. I simply say to them that if they continue to behave in this absolutely crazy fashion, there will come a time when my ability to support this Government will run out completely. The national interest calls on us to face up to our responsibilities; that is what we have to do.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. After the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), the time limit will have to be reduced with immediate effect to four minutes, because I want to get in as many colleagues as possible.

3.52 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): It is truly an honour to follow the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve). I was in Belfast and Bangor

last week, where I met many people who felt that they had been forgotten by this House—not by their own Members of Parliament, but by the House at large. I want to say to them that they have not been, and will not be, forgotten. Members of the Irish community in Liverpool said similar things to me over the weekend, and I say to them that we will not forget the Good Friday agreement. We will do everything to protect it. That said, I agreed, perhaps surprisingly, with the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) when he said that he was against the deal because it offered absolutely no certainty for the future, and would simply continue this charade for years to come. He was absolutely correct.

I want to make some brief comments about the politics and the economics of the situation that we are facing. First, the politics. The behaviour of the European Research Group in the past 24 hours has been an absolute disgrace. It is interested only in its own power; it does not want a deal of any kind. It wants to lead the Government and our country on a dance, and until we all realise that, we will be kept going round and round this roundabout. The dealmakers in this House are over here on the Opposition Benches. It is unsurprising that people from the Labour movement know how to negotiate and do a deal. The Government should always have looked to us, but we have been ignored. We are simply pawns in a game in which the players are fighting not for our country but over the soul of the Tory party.

I have some sympathy with Labour Members who do want to find a deal, but that takes us back to the problem that was pointed out by the hon. Member for Wellingborough. Anything in the political declaration about the future framework is, frankly, pie in the sky, because it answers no questions. What is more, it is difficult to take the Prime Minister at her word, as she has demonstrated. It is incredibly difficult to trust the Tories.

That said, on the economics, the problems are even more profound. Economists talk about sunk costs—things that we spend money on that seem like a good idea but turn out to be a bad idea. In that sense, Brexit is now a sunk cost. We have been spending money hand over fist on no-deal preparations that we hope to never need. However, in economic terms, no deal is already happening. Disinvestment is already happening. Currency shifts are already costing us in terms of inflation, and growth is losing pace.

Things are worse than that, however. Some people will rightly tell me, “Well, the overall growth figure doesn’t really matter, because my constituents are poor enough already,” but the fact is that people in areas in the north of England that voted for Brexit will be hit worst by it. North-south inequalities will not be helped by Brexit; they will simply be made worse. That is why Brexit is a sunk cost. Sticking with a plan simply because we have already spent money on it is irrational. That is why we must ask ourselves the hardest of questions. Should we really keep going along with Brexit just because we said we would—despite the costs and whatever happens—because we have spent money on it, even if it turns out to be a really bad idea?

Matt Western: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. We are now in “Project Reality”, not “Project Fear”. As she says, we are beginning to see some of the

indicators of what is happening in our economy. Consumer confidence is at its lowest since 2012, and business confidence is also low, with four consecutive quarters of disinvestment. That is what is really eating away at the economy, and we should be tackling it.

Alison McGovern: I simply listen to the words of the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey). I find it hard to listen to them talk about the unemployment rates in their constituencies and to think that Brexit has anything to offer them. It will be a hindrance, not a help.

Some people who voted for Brexit who are not from the poorest parts of the country will say that, to be honest, they are not bothered about the cost. They want all the other things that people talk about, such as this notion of sovereignty, even though we have shared sovereignty as a nation for many years. They will say, "It doesn't matter what it costs; I just want it." Brexit is worth it to them. That is fine for those people. It is fine for someone to take an irrational decision for themselves. If that is what they really want, fine. However, the question for us is whether it is okay to take an irrational decision on the behalf of other people. Do not we owe our country something a bit better than that?

3.58 pm

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Over the past three years, those of us who voted for Brexit have been treated with scorn and contempt. We have been derided as a bunch of uneducated, bigoted tabloid readers living outside the M25. In an attempt to try to get us to change our minds, Members on both sides of the House—in and out—various banks and businesses and all sorts of remain-supporting groups have adopted a sort of "Project Fear" on steroids. We seem to get a more ludicrous scare story each week. We get told that there will be mass unemployment as a result of Brexit, but the next minute we are told that there will be a huge shortage of workers to fill all the jobs available.

We are told one minute that we will run out of food, and the next we are told that farmers will be ruined by all the cheap food imports. I was on the radio a few weeks ago with an academic, who said that 12,000 people will die due to a lack of fresh fruit and veg. Needless to say he is from London, because I could have shown him a few orchards in Monmouth where we grow plenty of fruit and vegetables.

These stories just get more and more silly. Last June the papers were saying that one of Britain's top private general practitioners had reported a huge increase in adultery and venereal disease due to Brexit. There was a headline in the paper the following month saying that we would have super-gonorrhoea raging out of control due to Brexit. It almost came as a relief in September when another newspaper, it might even have been *The Daily Telegraph*, reported that there will be a shortage of Viagra as a result of Brexit. In the space of just three or four months, Britain had been turned from Sodom and Gomorrah into Eden before the fall as a result of Brexit. Those stories are frankly ludicrous, and they are not fooling anyone. They certainly do not fool me.

Two weeks ago, I went with members of the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs to talk to some real experts at the port of Holyhead, one of the major crossing points to the Republic of Ireland.

Peter Grant: I assure the hon. Gentleman from direct personal knowledge that the story I told earlier, of Karen Vaughan being ordered to apply for permission to become a foreigner in her own country, is 100% true. Does he accept it is true, and does he think it is an acceptable consequence of his Brexit?

David T. C. Davies: I do not know the hon. Gentleman's constituent, but my wife is an EU national, although she would not call herself one. She is Hungarian, and no doubt she will have to apply, as will everyone else. That is perfectly fair, and it will all be done on a straightforward application. It will not cost any money. Why is it so unreasonable for the Government to want to make a few checks on those who have chosen to come and live in this country and take back control of our immigration process? I fully support the Government in doing that, and I believe they have gone about it in a perfectly reasonable fashion.

The real experts at the port of Holyhead told us very clearly that they are perfectly well prepared for a no-deal Brexit. They made it clear that it would cause some inconvenience and a bit of extra work, but they know what paperwork is required. They told our cross-party delegation that they want a message to go back to Members of Parliament to dampen down the fears of Armageddon, which simply is not going to happen. The real experts are prepared.

The 17.4 million people who voted for Brexit in the original and genuine people's vote did so because they know that this economy is the fifth biggest in the world and that Great Britain can stand on its own two feet, with or without a deal. I will vote for a deal, with its imperfections, because I believe in compromise. I can accept a bit of a compromise, which is why I back the Prime Minister. It is for Opposition Members, and some Conservative Members, also to accept that we all have to compromise if we want to sort this out. If they truly believed their own scare stories, they would be queuing up to back the Prime Minister's deal.

We should leave at the end of March. We can leave with a deal, but we should not be the least bit afraid to leave without a deal. The 17.4 million people who are confident and optimistic about this country's future expect Members of Parliament, their political leaders, to show that same optimism and confidence.

4.3 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The theme of my remarks is that we need to build consensus, although I must confess that the speech of the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) has not made that any easier.

Delay and uncertainty are now really damaging our economy. This is not simply a question of politicians holding their nerve while a macho arm-wrestling game is played either in Parliament or with Brussels, because this is having a real effect on the real economy, on our reputation and on the jobs of real people.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend may have seen that today's *Evening Standard* is reporting that Westfield's £1.4 billion investment in Croydon is going to be reviewed, in part due to Brexit and the structural changes on the high street. This is happening right now. The people of Croydon need Westfield, so we need to rule out no deal.

Helen Goodman: My hon. Friend has given yet another example. During February, the *Financial Times* has had headlines that read “Nissan reverses investment pledge”, “Trade deal with Japan won’t be completed”, “No deal will lead to two more years of austerity”, “The economy shrank in December”, and “Businesses are moving to Holland and Ireland”. In my constituency, as in hers, this is playing out badly: sheep farmers are terrified of a 45% tariff on exports; the pharmaceutical industry is spending millions on stockpiling medicines; and brick makers are worrying about unfair competition from China. I talked to a foreign-owned manufacturer about the prospect of no deal and was told, “No, it won’t be catastrophic for our business, but we will have to sack several hundred of your constituents.” Well, that will be a catastrophe for those people who lose their jobs, which is why I will be supporting amendments (a) and (e), and, if it is necessary, the Bill from my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin).

We also need to look beyond the short term and what we are going to do to prevent our crashing out, and on to how we come to a decision on where we go next. We need to acknowledge that not everyone is going to get their first choice; there will have to be compromise in this House, and we need institutional arrangements to facilitate this. Amendment (c), tabled by the Father of the House, is designed to do this. It has not been selected today, but I hope hon. Members will look at it seriously and consider whether we might need to come back to something like it in a fortnight’s time.

Thomas Cromwell invented the current Divisions system in 1529 in order to expose and intimidate those opposed to the King’s will. Binary choices are all right for some things, but the minute we have a complex problem with multiple options they do not serve well for good decision making. It has been and continues to be easy to make coalitions against propositions, but extremely difficult to build coalitions for anything. We saw that in respect not only of Brexit, but the House of Lords, where we all wanted reform but we could not get it, because in 2003 every option was voted down and in 2007 four options were voted through but no clear steer was given. House of Lords reform is not the biggest and most important issue in the world, but Brexit is really important. We cannot make the same mistake again. We must use a different approach, and we have suggested using one that we use for choosing our Select Committee Chairs.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: The hon. Lady is arguing articulately for the scheme she put forward and persuaded me to join her in recommending. Does she agree that one thing causing the chaos today is that the remain element in this House are not all pursuing the same end, because they all have their own preferred route, and the leave people in the House, on both sides, are divided in the same way? The system she has put together and is commending in this speech would bring them to coalesce on the most popular route, and it is highly likely that the remain side and the leave side would each come together, and would demonstrate that the remain side is in the majority.

Helen Goodman: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is absolutely correct, because a lot of gamesmanship is going on at the moment in this House. As he says, these

games are being played by Members on all sides, with everybody hoping to be the last man standing. That tactic would not be possible if we had paper ballots where every option was put simultaneously and we found out what the shared view and consensus was. We are not proposing anything in secret and we are not suggesting a hiding place for Members of Parliament; we are suggesting full transparency. Nor are we doing anything to undermine the Whips, because full transparency means they could whip this exactly as they do with deferred Divisions, which we use every week, with our pink sheets.

We want to urge hon. Members to look beyond this to where we want to be in a month’s time. If we really want the country to be less divided we need to show the way. Parliamentarians are constantly urging on their fellow citizens the need to be flexible and to embrace change. Well, perhaps, for once, we should lead by example.

4.9 pm

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman). While listening to this debate, it struck me that it is Valentine’s Day today—you would not know it the way that this place carries on, with everyone going at each other hammer and tongs. Perhaps we should go back a little bit and remember why we are in this situation. We are in this situation because people voted to leave the European Union. I backed remain, but I had a strong mandate from my constituency: two thirds said that they wanted to leave. I regard it as my job to make sure that we execute those instructions and leave the European Union.

It is important to remember why people voted in the way that they did: they believed in building a land of opportunity; they believed in building an independent sovereign nation; and they believed in taking back control of our borders, our trade policy, our money and our prospects across the world. Many Members of this House reject that view to this day, but that is what people wanted to do, and they are not wrong to have wanted that. They are not wrong because, in recent decades, Europe has been in relative decline. A few decades ago, it had a third of global GDP; today it has just 15%. Some 90% of future world growth is coming from outside, not inside, the European Union.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I just want to pull up the hon. Gentleman on that point. He said that Europe was in relative decline and produced a statistic. Europe is not in decline. It is just that other places in the world are coming up, which is great to see. It is great to see that other people outside Europe are becoming richer, but Europe is not in decline.

Charlie Elphicke: The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point. The fact is that Europe is becoming relatively less important in the world and the rest of the world is becoming relatively more important. Is our national destiny best served by more involvement in Europe or more involvement in the world and more globalisation? *[Interruption.]* I shall not take any lectures from a Member of Parliament who represents a party that wants to tear Scotland away from its biggest market. That is just crass, irresponsible and, frankly, reckless.

We need to bear it in mind that people want the kind of future that they can build, and we need to make that happen. The people whom I represent in Dover and Deal say to me, "What is going on? Why don't you just get on with it? Why are you still talking about it? Why is Parliament not just getting on with it?" Those are the right questions. We need to get on with it, end the uncertainty, leave the European Union and make the best of it.

Peter Grant: Will the hon. Gentleman tell us what his constituents think we should be getting on with? As things stand, we have no idea what our relationship with Europe will be like in two years' time. What exactly is it that people are telling him to get on with?

Charlie Elphicke: They are telling me very clearly that we should leave the European Union. Personally, I think that the Government should fully embrace the Malthouse compromise, which offers us a positive way forward, to make sure that we can have open and seamless trade without being stuck within the European orbit as a form of satellite state. That is why I take issue with Labour Members. They say that they are in favour of leaving Europe, but they want to remain in the customs union, and they want to continue to have freedom of movement. Then they say, "Well, it's all terribly complicated. Perhaps we should extend article 50 as a bridge." Anyone looking at extending article 50 as a bridge for three or nine months knows that that is a bridge to nowhere, but the Labour party does not want to build a bridge to nowhere; it wants to build a bridge back into the European Union. It is a bridge to remain. That is the wrong thing to do. We should all come together to make sure that we leave the European Union successfully by reworking the backstop, and by taking the strong and clear position to the European Union that we are prepared to leave, deal or no deal.

Everyone in this House knows that European Union business is really done at 5 minutes to midnight. That being the case, we should press the point strongly and have the courage to see through the demands, hopes and aspirations of our constituents to make sure that we successfully leave the European Union, move on, end these debates and chart our future onwards. We should be spending more time talking about the kind of Brexit Britain we can build after we leave Europe, rather than banging on endlessly with debates in which people are constantly trying to countermand the instructions of the British people because they really want to remain.

Mr Speaker: Interventions are of course part and parcel of debate, but I simply say for the purposes of advice to the House that, given the constraints on time, interventions now should be undertaken in the knowledge that Members are preventing others from speaking.

4.15 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): It has now been 67 days since the Prime Minister delayed the meaningful vote in December—67 utterly wasted days for our country. As the clock ticks down to 11pm on 29 March, the Prime Minister continues the pretence that she is seeking concessions from the EU, but she knows that she is not going to get them. We all know her reckless game: keep that clock ticking down and keep bullying MPs into backing her deal or get no deal. But we all know that this is a false choice, as our country is simply not prepared for a no-deal scenario.

The Government's failure to reach out and build cross-party consensus has left us in deadlock, so how do we unlock this logjam? Well, the answer has been hiding in plain sight and it is called common market 2.0. Common market 2.0 would mean joining Norway outside of the EU but inside the European Free Trade Association and the EEA; establishing a form of customs union with the EU; and maintaining a close economic relationship with the EU, but leaving the more political aspects of European integration. Common market 2.0 would involve leaving the withdrawal agreement precisely as it is while radically recasting the political declaration on the future relationship—something that the EU has repeatedly said it is open to doing. The Leader of the Opposition's letter to the Prime Minister on 7 February was certainly a step in the right direction, but it is vital that we put more flesh on the bones by making an explicit commitment to joining the EEA via the EFTA pillar.

The Prime Minister's political declaration is a bridge to nowhere. Common market 2.0 would transform the political declaration into a bridge to a clear, stable and exciting future for our country. It would mean safeguarding jobs; guaranteeing workers' rights; providing new controls over freedom of movement; allowing more money for public services, as our contributions to the budget would be significantly lower; taking the UK out of the common fisheries policy, the common agricultural policy and the jurisdiction of the ECJ; and eliminating the need for the Irish backstop. That last point is crucial given that it is dominating the debate, so let me explain why our proposals would remove the need ever to activate the backstop.

The fact is that a customs union alone will not solve the Irish border question because only 20% of the issues surrounding the border are customs issues. The remaining 80% are single market regulatory alignment issues. That is why we need both full participation in the single market and a strong customs union arrangement in place, at least until alternative arrangements can be agreed. But, as Brexiteers understandably ask, why would a form of comprehensive customs union be so infinitely preferable to the backstop? They say that it would not solve the problems around sovereignty and conducting trade deals. Well, here is what they are missing: article 127 of the EEA agreement means that we can leave the EEA unilaterally with a one-year notice period. Given that 80% of the Irish border issues are single market issues, common market 2.0 would completely change the dynamics of our relationship with the EU and give us far more leverage in the negotiations.

We desperately need a Brexit that begins to reunite our deeply divided country. Common market 2.0 is a strong compromise, and I believe that Parliament is ready to support this sensible, pragmatic, bridge-building approach. Brexit is a monster that is eating our politics, and it is time for us all to rediscover the lost art of compromise. It is time for common market 2.0.

4.19 pm

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): One thing that has struck me during this debate is the almost complete absence of taking into consideration how we got here today. In Dudley and Sandwell, part of which I represent, people voted in very, very large numbers for us to leave the European Union. It is

[James Morris]

incumbent on us, whatever the situation we now find ourselves in, to find a way through to delivering on Brexit for the British people, and doing it in a way that delivers on their aspirations.

There are two things that will not help in our endeavour to deliver on Brexit for the British people. The first is to countenance a second referendum. A second referendum would be highly divisive. It would not resolve the issues that we currently face; it may in fact make the situation a lot, lot worse. The second thing that would not help in delivering for the British people and for the people I represent is any idea that we are going to extend or revoke article 50. That just kicks things further along the road. It does not, in any way, get to the point of resolving the issues we face today.

I recognise some of the words, although they are often expressed in very strong language, about some of the threats of no deal. I have spoken to Jaguar Land Rover in the west midlands. But the reality is that the way to avoid no deal is for us to establish a deal with the European Union. I supported the deal because I thought it was the most practical way for us to get to exit day with an arrangement that would deliver on the aspirations of the British people as well as finding continuity for business, but I recognised that there were issues with the backstop. I believed that we should give the Prime Minister the room to respond to the vote that was held in this House two weeks ago and get changes to the backstop so that we could get a deal that everybody in this House can support and thereby get to 29 March in a condition where we can move forward.

You may think, Mr Speaker, that I am a very reasonable and calm individual, but in my previous life as a businessman I have been involved in some very robust business negotiations. I would appeal to the European Union, and to some Members of this House, to reduce the temperature of the rhetoric that is being used about these negotiations, and to leave robust exchanges in the negotiating room. When I was negotiating in business, we had a lot of passionate debate, and there were often strong disagreements with the people I was negotiating with, but we never went out of the room to brief the press and put things on Twitter and Facebook to undermine the other side, because it is in the interests of both parties to get a deal.

I would urge us to get back to the discipline of negotiating a resolution to this issue so that we do not face in this country something that I fear, which is a major democratic crisis because we have been proven unable to deliver a good negotiated exit deal and unable to deliver on the aspirations of the British people that were clearly articulated in the referendum. We must redouble our efforts to do that.

4.23 pm

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Well, 43 days to go and here we are—still pretty clueless in the House of Commons. When people ask what is going to happen, nobody really knows. I did hope to bring this to an end with my amendment (d). I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby), and my hon. Friends the Members

for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) and for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) for supporting it. I think it is going to gain some currency over time. In the end, we are going to come down between taking the crazy Brexit route wanted only by the militant tendency of the Tory party or else revoking article 50.

Brexit is bad. Even Brexiteers do not want Brexit on 29 March. There are no Brexiteers: it is only the utterly deluded who want Brexit on 29 March. The International Trade Secretary says that it is damaging to the economy. We have heard other Brexiteers describe Brexit on 29 March as “a catastrophe” and as “a disaster”—not something they wrote on the side of a bus when they were going round calling for Brexit. They were making all sorts of promises about Brexit. If people were convinced to vote for Christmas every week, or free chocolate on Thursdays, or slices of cheese from the moon on Fridays, we would have to tell them, “This is as undeliverable as the ERG militant tendency Tory Brexit.” It is impossible without damaging the economy, and those on the Government Front Bench should be straight about that. That is what is about to happen.

The Netherlands is preparing for damage to its small businesses, and Ireland is giving its small businesses advice about Brexit, but that is not happening in the UK. What are the Government doing to bridge the gap for small businesses in the UK when the damage of Brexit comes? If any Conservatives can sit there comfortably—[*Interruption.*] If the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) wants to intervene and tell us that no businesses will go to the wall because of Brexit on 29 March, I will give him the floor. Does he want to take that opportunity?

Stephen Kerr: The hon. Gentleman is making a valid point—he is giving strong reasons why we should have a deal. The way we get a deal is by supporting the Prime Minister's deal, which creates an orderly Brexit.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman should know that we have a deal at the moment with the European Union. It is a good deal, and any other deals we have with the European Union that involve us leaving the customs union and the single market will damage the economy. He should be straight about that. I notice that he will not give small businesses a guarantee—no Conservatives will, but none of them will go to the wall because of their political adventures. They should be aware, and the rest of the country should be aware, of what they are doing.

The chemical industry is very worried about exactly what regulation it will have. It describes itself as the “industry of industries”, underpinning pharmaceuticals and automotive in the UK, and aerospace. If it is outside the REACH regulation and cannot license chemicals, some chemicals might not be available in the United Kingdom.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I am happy to give way to the hon. Gentleman. Can he guarantee that all chemicals will be available after Brexit?

Bill Grant: I am concerned at the view that businesses in Scotland will go to the wall. Having spoken to businesses in Scotland, I know that they want to work within a deal. Can the hon. Gentleman explain why he will not support a deal for his businesses?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: They have been working within a deal, which is why I want us to revoke article 50. I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to say that.

I want to say a word or two about the trade continuity agreements. This nails a big lie of Brexit—that we can trade on WTO terms. The reason we want to roll over trade agreements instead of trading on WTO terms is that trading on WTO terms is an expensive way of conducting businesses. It involves tariffs, taxes and—*[Interruption.]* I hear laughter on the Government Benches. Clearly Tories do not know that that is the case. Other Governments will get in the way and tax business transactions. That is why we want to roll over these trade agreements. Without them, we will trade on WTO terms, which is an expensive way to conduct commerce, and businesses will go to the wall.

The Tories march blithely on, happy to rip up agreements and deals with our biggest customer—the 27-member trade bloc of the European Union. When I spoke recently to Alan Wolff, deputy director general of the WTO, he described the area between trading on WTO terms and within trade deals as the “Brexit gap”. There is an inevitable loss for the United Kingdom from following this crazy way.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the Faroe Islands, I am delighted to see that Poul Michelsen was down last week to sign their deal, which ensures a big slice of trade for them. But these trade deals with the Faroes, Chile and everywhere else are merely standing on the shoulders of what the European Union has already achieved—the European Union that Brexiteers decry so much, but whose trade deals they want to follow.

The Government find themselves in a very funny place indeed. They wanted at one stage to resist having any meaningful votes in Parliament, but they have ended up having so many that they have rendered them all meaningless. A number of people in business have told me that there is a danger in extending article 50 because it extends uncertainty and further postpones investment. It does, however, allow them to move assets more readily to the United Kingdom when nothing seems to be appearing down the line.

The UK is heading for an existential choice: it is either going to revoke article 50 or head for a no-deal catastrophe. We have to get our heads around that fairly quickly, because those will be the choices. The Brexit promises have been reduced by the Prime Minister to jam tomorrow—in fact, it is not even jam tomorrow; it is jam tomorrow if you scrape the mould off the top. It is a shame that that was not on the side of a bus.

4.28 pm

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): Let me concentrate, in the minutes I have, on some of the essential points. When I regretfully voted against the withdrawal agreement and political declaration in January, it was primarily because of the Northern Ireland backstop, which was the reason for many of my colleagues as well.

When we voted in favour of the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady) two weeks ago and the House specifically argued that we should replace the backstop, we demonstrated that if the Prime Minister can secure movement on the backstop, she can get her withdrawal agreement and political declaration through the House. I want the Prime Minister to have the opportunity to do that.

However, we have to face some facts. In negotiations, the other side often does not move until the end point. I listened carefully to what the shadow Brexit Secretary said. I think he chose 13 March as his line in the sand, but if there is going to be any movement on a deal, it will have to be signed off by the European leaders at a Council. There are only two opportunities in the diary: there is an informal summit of the EU and the Arab League at the end of February in Sharm el-Sheikh; and then there is the European Council on 21 and 22 March. I am afraid it is my judgment, particularly now that we have another set of debates in this House on 26 and 27 February—

Sir Oliver Letwin *rose*—

Mr Harper: I am not going to give way to my right hon. Friend because I think you are very keen, Mr Speaker, to get everybody in, or some more people in, before the wind-ups.

We are going to have to go to the European Council on 21 and 22 March. Because we have the debate on 27 February, I do not see any prospect of the EU now moving before that Council meeting. I know that is uncomfortable and difficult, but that is how negotiations work. We may wish that they worked differently, but that is how they work. Our job as Members of Parliament is to get the best possible agreement that we can get—not for ourselves, but for our constituents—so that we can leave the European Union in an orderly way. That is my preference, so I think we are going to have to give the Prime Minister a chance to do it. If we in this House choose to frustrate that, she is not going to come back with a meaningful change to that deal and we are not going to get it through this House. Then we are going to have to face a choice—a choice I do not want to face—between leaving without an agreement and not leaving at all. I think we should be honest about all this stuff about delay. Many people who back delay really mean not leaving ever, and some other people think we can avoid the choice. I do not think we can but I would prefer to have an agreement.

It is also worth saying in the debate about deal or no deal that the Prime Minister and the Cabinet's withdrawal agreement and political declaration is not really a deal in the normal sense of the word. All it does is give us a couple of years during which, admittedly, things stay the same. That might be welcome for business, but it gives business no certainty at all about what comes afterwards. What is to be recommended in the Malthouse compromise is that, if we can replace the backstop with a free trade agreement—a backstop that would be acceptable, even if it were a permanent solution—that would give business certainty from this spring about a baseline. They would know that in future, whatever happened, they would have a free trade agreement. I think that that would give business certainty to invest,

[Mr Harper]

create jobs and be successful in our country. That is what I urge the Prime Minister to do, and I urge my colleagues to give her the opportunity to do so and to reject all the amendments on the Order Paper today.

4.32 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): May I welcome the assurances that the Secretary of State gave in a very clear way from the Dispatch Box at the beginning of this debate? The first is that the Government will stick to the 29 March date for leaving the EU. It is important to do that from the point of view of giving the Prime Minister the leverage that she needs in the negotiations. I know many Members have pooh-poohed this today, but many ordinary people outside wonder what kind of idiots we are here in this House if we think that it is wise to send someone in to negotiate and, at the same time, say to them, "And by the way, you're not allowed to walk away from those negotiations". Ordinary people on the street understand the importance of that, and to give the Prime Minister the best chance, we have to stick to that particular date. That also removes the element of uncertainty. If we leave this open-ended, businesses will not get the certainty they require because they do not know what the future will be. Indeed, the shadow spokesman, when he talked about extending article 50, spoke about going to the beginning of July. That is another date. We either decide we have a date, or we do not.

I was also pleased that the Secretary of State said that the Government are seeking an alternative, especially an alternative to the backstop. I know that the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) said that the backstop is of no consequence, but it is of great consequence. As the EU confirmed this week, the backstop would lead to Northern Ireland having to be regulatory aligned with the rest of the EU and part of the customs union. It has spelt out the consequences of that. It would mean systematic checks on trade between Northern Ireland and Great Britain at ports and airports. For me, that rips up the Union, it hurts the Northern Ireland economy and it is certainly of consequence.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: That could all be solved if the whole UK stayed in the customs union and had the same regulatory alignment. Why does the right hon. Gentleman not accept that?

Sammy Wilson: The whole point is that Northern Ireland would be treated separately from the rest of the United Kingdom. That damages the Union.

The withdrawal agreement limits our ability to have a future trade arrangement that suits us because, as the EU has made clear, that agreement will become the basis of the future trade arrangement and that includes keeping us within a customs union and the single market. I do not believe that that is good for the United Kingdom.

People ask, "What is the alternative?" and they say that the EU will not move because there is no alternative. First, saying that the other side are not going to move so we have to give in to them, is the wrong way to approach negotiations. Secondly, there are alternatives; there are alternatives in place. We collect taxes every day

across the Irish border. Michel Barnier has promised us and the Irish Government that, in the event of no deal, he has alternatives. He has a study group working on it. He will have paperless checks and decentralised monitoring of trade—the very thing we have said is possible. Also, on the political declaration, the EU has said that there are particular alternatives along the Irish border that will be included in those discussions. My answer to the EU is that, if you have something in place at present, if there is something you will put in place in the event of no deal, and if there is something you have promised to discuss in future, put it in the deal now and then we can move on.

There is an alternative—a good alternative that will benefit everyone. It is the Malthouse compromise: a future trade arrangement that is tariff and quota free, which will suit business; a protocol that will guarantee there are no checks on the Irish border, which will suit the Irish Government; and trade facilitation measures, which are already in place and which the EU has already said it will consider and put in place. Regulatory equivalents for meat products and so on are already in current trade agreements and there are guarantees for citizens who are living in this country from the EU. All those good things should be included.

4.37 pm

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): The clock is ticking down, both in this debate and towards 29 March, and it is imperative for the House to focus on delivering a successful Brexit, which is successful for jobs, trade and the economy. Despite what we might hear from the other side of the House, I believe that we must deliver a successful Brexit for Scotland. Despite all that we may hear, many organisations in Scotland support the Prime Minister's deal, including the Federation of Small Businesses, the Scotch Whisky Association, the National Farmers Union, Scotland, and the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, and that is because they, like business, want certainty.

I supported the meaningful vote and the Prime Minister's deal. In my speech, I made it clear that I had reservations, particularly about the backstop; I would like an end date. In any business negotiation, if there is no end date on a suspensive condition, it is never dealt with: you always put that to one side and then deal with the things that are more important. I feel that an end date to the backstop is important, but as a Unionist and someone who does not want a second referendum, I could support the Prime Minister's deal. I add further that in business negotiations, one does not take things off the table. For that reason, although I do not want no deal, I equally understand that we must not weaken our hand.

In the spirit of being equal, I say to the purists in our party that the referendum result was close. It was 52% to 48%. There is a mood in this House which is against no deal and I implore them to proceed with caution. As has been said before, in trying to win the match seven-nil, they may well lose it four-three. As a nation, we need the debate to move on. No longer should it be about "Should we stay or should we go?" It is now about "How do we embrace the opportunities that freedom from the EU will give us?"

I say to all sides of the leave-remain argument that, for the good of the economy, which is the driver for all we hold dear in terms of public services, please let us

move forward. The Prime Minister said that we must hold our nerve. I say to my fellow leavers: if they definitely want to leave on 29 March, they have to not only hold their nerve, but hold their nose and vote for her deal.

4.40 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I came into the Chamber earlier today during business questions and the hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) was referring to robot day. I thought that was a reference to the Prime Minister and her Ministers on the subject of Brexit repeating the same mantra again and again. In fact, it is an event in Coventry on 9 March, which I of course welcome.

There are two things we need to do today. One is to rule out no deal. Many Members have given a large number of examples of why we should rule out no deal. I will add just one example. All of us, I suspect, have an EHIC card—the European health insurance card. People need to be aware that, if we crash out of the European Union on 29 March, the UK has to negotiate 27 bilateral agreements with each and every single EU country to ensure that our European healthcare continues. Members will probably not be surprised to know that the UK has so far not managed to negotiate a single one of those bilateral deals. If you have booked your holiday in the European Union after 29 March and we are in a no-deal scenario, you need to think very carefully about taking out travel insurance. The bad news is that, when we contacted seven of the largest travel insurance companies, only two were able to guarantee that their policies were valid in a no-deal scenario.

That is just one example of why we should not be pursuing no deal, but there are many, many others. Many Government Ministers have described, in the most colourful means possible, the impact of no deal, reinforcing the point. If any other evidence is needed, yesterday I met the CEO of one of the largest UK construction companies, who said that it has lifts and specialist cladding coming into the UK but that it has absolutely no idea what will happen to the tariff that applies to those goods at the point they get to the UK.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Tom Brake: I will not give way.

The second thing we need to do today is come out very strongly in favour of a people's vote. I am going to throw down the gauntlet to all parties and individual MPs to finally demonstrate their courage and commitment to a people's vote, and back the amendment we will table on 27 February so we can finally press this matter to a vote. I am very pleased that today, although our amendment was not selected, we secured support from both the SNP and Plaid. I welcome that but, if we are going to be doing this again on 27 February, I hope there will be a much, much greater level of support.

I am very pleased that the Leader of the Opposition arrived in his place in time for me to make that point, because on 27 February the overwhelming majority of his party members, the overwhelming majority of young people, the overwhelming majority of his supporters and I will want him to support that amendment, too. I very much look forward to that.

4.44 pm

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): It is a privilege to follow on from such excellent contributions; among the finest speeches were those from my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin), my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), my hon. Friends the Members for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) and for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), and my hon. Friends the Members for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) and for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman).

I encourage every Member present to heed the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey. She warned of the degradation of our national political debate. When loose talk of treachery and betrayal leads directly to threats against Members of this House, we must do better, and today I think we have. We do, though, need to be honest with ourselves: we are no closer to breaking an impasse that simply must be broken. We are about to vote on a Government motion that is divorced from reality and oblivious to the gravity of the situation that we find ourselves in.

There are just 43 days to go until 29 March, and as my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said, British exporters and importers do not know what tariffs and regulatory checks they will face in just 44 days' time. Those living on the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic have no idea whether that border will be maintained in 44 days' time without the symbol of division that is physical infrastructure. Businesses, local authorities and vital public services do not know whether, in 44 days' time, the disruption at ports will be so severe that it will become difficult for them to access the goods that we all rely on. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), the shadow Secretary of State, said, it is already affecting business behaviour and investment—sometimes irreversibly.

Some say that if no deal came to pass, it would create a state of national emergency, and that is true enough, but the reality is that there is already so much uncertainty, creating so much anxiety, that we are close to national crisis now. It is a crisis of the Tory party's making. How is Parliament asked to respond to this crisis? We are asked to note

“that discussions between the UK and the EU on the Northern Ireland backstop are ongoing.”

It might also be worth noting that those discussions have so far consisted of the EU stating that it is not prepared to reopen the backstop—a backstop that the Prime Minister had already agreed to, and which she told the House was an inevitable part of any withdrawal agreement. She told us that before she voted against it on 29 January to placate the extremists on her Back Benches.

That brings me to the next absurdity in the motion. We are asked to reiterate our support for the Brady amendment. Well, we on the Opposition Benches will never support a strategy that so clearly puts short-term Tory party unity over and above the national interest.

[Jenny Chapman]

The Secretary of State was once again unable to tell us what “alternative arrangements” the Government are actually seeking, and we understand that no legal proposals for alternative arrangements have even been put to the EU, so let us be clear what the Prime Minister’s real strategy is: she is running down the clock, playing for time and drifting towards no deal. She is hoping, in the face of all the evidence, that the passage of time and a few more reassurances will be enough to overturn a defeat of 230. That would be an irresponsible strategy even if it had any chance of working, relying as it does on creating a national crisis to strong-arm MPs, but what makes it worse is that it plainly will not work.

The extremists in the Prime Minister’s party want the backstop replaced—that, indeed, is what the Brady amendment calls for—or at the very least gutted of any force and effect through a short time limit or an easily used unilateral exit mechanism. The Prime Minister knows full well that neither of those things are going to happen. I will make a prediction: the extremists on the Government Back Benches will go against whatever she brings back. They will not be scared of no deal. They always have been and always will be prepared to plunge this country into chaos. We have a Prime Minister who prizes Conservative party unity above all else. She is putting party before country. Because she does not have a strategy that can work, this House will have to step in and prevent no deal.

Two weeks ago, the House approved a motion tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington and the right hon. Member for Meriden, and that was welcome. It showed that there is no majority in this House for no deal, but that is not enough on its own. If the House wants to prevent no deal, it has to take further action. The next step is to ensure that there is a hard stop to the Government’s “run down the clock and hope” approach, and to say that on 27 February, we must be able to debate further options to prevent no deal.

Other steps beyond today’s amendment will be needed. Those will include supporting the Bill tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford. [Interruption.] Anyone who genuinely opposes no deal can see that if no deal is in place, an extension by mid-March is in order. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Quite a lot of noisy men are wittering away to each other and are not listening to the hon. Lady, who is replying to the debate. Be quiet; remember your manners.

Jenny Chapman: Mr Speaker, I am grateful. An extension might buy more time, but ultimately this House needs to be able to debate and vote on the credible options to prevent no deal. We are clear what those options are: either a close economic relationship that includes a customs union and close alignment to the single market—this option was set out in the letter written by the Leader of the Opposition to the Prime Minister and welcomed by European leaders as a serious and credible way out of the impasse—or, if the Prime Minister digs her heels in and continues to pursue a failing and undeliverable strategy, a public vote.

I will finish with a reference to the right hon. Member for West Dorset. He said that if the Prime Minister and Government continued to fail to lead, this House would step in, fill the void and lead in their place.

4.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Chris Heaton-Harris): I thank the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman), for her comments about people’s speeches. She mainly chose people on her own side, but there were some excellent contributions from Government Members as well. A notable one was from the Father of the House, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), who pointed out the logic of the position of so many of the Labour Members who spoke. Based on the shadow Brexit Secretary’s argument today, they should all be supporting the Prime Minister’s deal. If the Father of the House will forgive me, I am very glad that his amendment was not selected, because it was one of the most lengthy amendments I have ever seen on an Order Paper, and it would have taken some doing to get through it.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab) correctly pointed out that those who asked for an extension of article 50 are just reinforcing uncertainty for businesses and people alike. I both understand and respect the position of my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman). She knows, and pointed out, that the best way to stop our country leaving the European Union without a deal is to do as she has always done, and work with and support the deal that the Prime Minister is trying to achieve for this country.

I was not quite sure about the story from my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) about a shortage of Viagra in a no-deal scenario. I am not sure that stands up at all. [Laughter.] We have had this debate a number of times; you have to try to liven it up. Hard Brexit, soft Brexit—who knows?

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) said when talking about her amendment, there is a long-standing convention of not publishing advice given by civil servants, quite properly and candidly, to members of the Cabinet. The Government, through the Chancellor the Duchy of Lancaster, are very happy to meet her to identify the information that she wants published, and then to commit to publishing that information. In the light of that offer, I kindly ask her to consider not pressing her amendment.

Anna Soubry: I am grateful for the Minister’s comments, and congratulate him on what I think is his first speech at the Dispatch Box. In any event, this seems like a very sensible resolution, because if those papers, which I believe must be published, as others do, are not forthcoming, I reserve the right to move an amendment on 27 February, or into the 28th, and I will do that unless we get those papers. However, I am confident that we will identify them in that meeting, that they will be published, and that people will then realise what a danger no deal is.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank my right hon. Friend for that clarification.

This afternoon continued the tradition of robust discussion on this subject, with a degree of deliberation that is only appropriate for an issue of such national significance. As you would expect, Mr Speaker, the Government are following the direction delivered by the House on 29 January to return to the European Union to seek legally binding changes to the backstop. This House has instructed the Government on how to proceed, and we are delivering on that instruction. As the Prime Minister set out on Tuesday, there are three ways in which that could be achieved. First, the backstop could be replaced with alternative arrangements to avoid a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. Secondly, the backstop could have a legally binding time limit. Thirdly, there could be a unilateral exit clause.

Ian Paisley: Will the Minister take this opportunity to confirm that the Government have started to draft textual, legally binding changes to the withdrawal agreement on that point?

Chris Heaton-Harris: As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has said, we have three options to deliver on the will of this House. Initial discussions with the European Union covered all these proposals. At this stage, there is not a specific legal text on the table. Notwithstanding that, we are firm that any change must be legally binding, but as has been said, it would not be prudent to start providing a running commentary on the detail. I hope that clarifies slightly for my hon. Friend where we are going.

On no deal, as the Minister with responsibility for co-ordinating our contingency planning, I see the day-to-day work that Whitehall is doing to prepare us for that scenario and I remain confident that we are en route to being ready for that eventuality.

Neil Gray *rose*—

Chris Heaton-Harris: Sorry, I am afraid I do not have time.

However, this Government do not want to have to utilise that work.

Helen Goodman *rose*—

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am afraid I am not going to give way.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has consistently made clear, the only way to avoid no deal is to support a deal, and unless this House votes for a deal, the legal default in both UK and EU law is that we leave without a deal.

Let me assure the House that our programme of wider readiness is moving forward in a way that means that there is no need to extend article 50; there is absolutely no desire to do so, either. Four-hundred and thirty EU exit statutory instruments have been laid before the House to date, which is over 60% of the SIs that we anticipate will be required by exit day. Over 210 have been made, and five pieces of primary legislation have already been passed in preparation for our exit from the European Union.

We have spent a long time discussing the backstop, and this House's concerns about it have been made clear, but it is important to note that there are wider

benefits offered by the withdrawal agreement. It provides citizens with the certainty they need about their rights going forward. It signals the end of sending vast payments to the European Union, meaning more money for our NHS and other key priorities at home, while honouring the obligations we signed up to while in the EU, and it delivers the time-limited implementation period that is so vital for business.

Today is not the end of the process, but a way point directing us to the finishing line. It is a mark in the road towards the end destination—one that this country overwhelmingly voted to see. As I am sure Members understand, now is not the time to add any new conditions or create any unnecessary processes. Now is the time to allow our Prime Minister to finish the job that she is so diligently doing, and get this deal over the line. I ask all Members to support the Government in that tonight.

5 pm

The Speaker put the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Order, this day).

Amendment proposed: (a), in line 1, leave out from “House” to end and add

“requires by 27 February 2019 a Minister of the Crown either (a) to move another motion under Section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 or (b) to make a written statement declaring that there is no longer an agreement in principle in the negotiations with the European Union and to move no later than that date an amendable motion on how the Government proposes to proceed.”—(*Jeremy Corbyn.*)

The House divided: Ayes 306, Noes 322.

Division No. 331]

[5 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane	Butler, Dawn
Abrahams, Debbie	Byrne, rh Liam
Ali, Rushanara	Cable, rh Sir Vince
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Cadbury, Ruth
Amesbury, Mike	Cameron, Dr Lisa
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Ashworth, Jonathan	Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Austin, Ian	Carden, Dan
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Bardell, Hannah	Champion, Sarah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin	Chapman, Douglas
Beckett, rh Margaret	Chapman, Jenny
Benn, rh Hilary	Charalambous, Bambos
Berger, Luciana	Cherry, Joanna
Betts, Mr Clive	Clwyd, rh Ann
Black, Mhairi	Coaker, Vernon
Blackford, rh Ian	Coffey, Ann
Blackman, Kirsty	Cooper, Julie
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta	Cooper, Rosie
Blomfield, Paul	Cooper, rh Yvette
Brabin, Tracy	Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Cowan, Ronnie
Brake, rh Tom	Coyle, Neil
Brennan, Kevin	Crausby, Sir David
Brock, Deidre	Crawley, Angela
Brown, Alan	Creagh, Mary
Brown, Lyn	Creasy, Stella
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Cruddas, Jon
Buck, Ms Karen	Cryer, John
Burden, Richard	Cummins, Judith
Burton, Richard	Cunningham, Alex

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

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

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

Adams, Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Allen, Heidi
 Amess, Sir David
 Andrew, Stuart
 Argar, Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Stephen
 Baron, Mr John

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

Tellers for the Ayes:
Thangam Debbonaire and
Jeff Smith

NOES

Bebb, Guto
 Bellingham, Sir Henry
 Benyon, rh Richard
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, Jake
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Boles, Nick
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Braverman, Suella
 Brereton, Jack

Bridgen, Andrew	Gauke, rh Mr David	Knight, Julian	Prentis, Victoria
Brine, Steve	Ghani, Ms Nusrat	Kwarteng, Kwasi	Prisk, Mr Mark
Brokenshire, rh James	Gibb, rh Nick	Lamont, John	Pritchard, Mark
Bruce, Fiona	Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl	Lancaster, rh Mark	Pursglove, Tom
Buckland, Robert	Girvan, Paul	Latham, Mrs Pauline	Quin, Jeremy
Burghart, Alex	Glen, John	Leadsom, rh Andrea	Quince, Will
Burns, Conor	Goldsmith, Zac	Lee, Dr Phillip	Raab, rh Dominic
Burt, rh Alistair	Goodwill, rh Mr Robert	Lefroy, Jeremy	Redwood, rh John
Cairns, rh Alun	Gove, rh Michael	Leigh, rh Sir Edward	Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Graham, Luke	Letwin, rh Sir Oliver	Robertson, Mr Laurence
Cartlidge, James	Graham, Richard	Lewer, Andrew	Robinson, Gavin
Cash, Sir William	Grant, Bill	Lewis, rh Brandon	Robinson, Mary
Caulfield, Maria	Grant, Mrs Helen	Lewis, rh Dr Julian	Rosindell, Andrew
Chalk, Alex	Gray, James	Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian	Rowley, Lee
Chishti, Rehman	Grayling, rh Chris	Lidington, rh Mr David	Rudd, rh Amber
Chope, Sir Christopher	Green, Chris	Little Pengelly, Emma	Rutley, David
Clark, Colin	Green, rh Damian	Lopez, Julia	Scully, Paul
Clark, rh Greg	Greening, rh Justine	Lopresti, Jack	Seely, Mr Bob
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth	Grieve, rh Mr Dominic	Lord, Mr Jonathan	Selous, Andrew
Clarke, Mr Simon	Griffiths, Andrew	Loughton, Tim	Shannon, Jim
Cleverly, James	Gyimah, Mr Sam	Mackinlay, Craig	Shapps, rh Grant
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Hair, Kirstene	Maclean, Rachel	Sharma, Alok
Coffey, Dr Thérèse	Halfon, rh Robert	Main, Mrs Anne	Shelbrooke, Alec
Collins, Damian	Hall, Luke	Mak, Alan	Simpson, David
Costa, Alberto	Hammond, rh Mr Philip	Malthouse, Kit	Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Courts, Robert	Hammond, Stephen	Mann, Scott	Skidmore, Chris
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey	Hancock, rh Matt	Masterton, Paul	Smith, Chloe
Crabb, rh Stephen	Hands, rh Greg	May, rh Mrs Theresa	Smith, Henry
Crouch, Tracey	Harper, rh Mr Mark	McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick	Smith, rh Julian
Davies, Chris	Harrington, Richard	McPartland, Stephen	Smith, Royston
Davies, David T. C.	Harris, Rebecca	McVey, rh Ms Esther	Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Davies, Glyn	Harrison, Trudy	Menzies, Mark	Soubry, rh Anna
Davies, Mims	Hart, Simon	Mercer, Johnny	Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Davies, Philip	Heald, rh Sir Oliver	Merriman, Huw	Spencer, Mark
Davis, rh Mr David	Heapey, James	Metcalfe, Stephen	Stephenson, Andrew
Dinenage, Caroline	Heaton-Harris, Chris	Miller, rh Mrs Maria	Stevenson, John
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan	Heaton-Jones, Peter	Milling, Amanda	Stewart, Bob
Docherty, Leo	Henderson, Gordon	Mills, Nigel	Stewart, Iain
Dodds, rh Nigel	Herbert, rh Nick	Milton, rh Anne	Stewart, Rory
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.	Hermon, Lady	Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew	Streeter, Sir Gary
Donelan, Michelle	Hinds, rh Damian	Moore, Damien	Stride, rh Mel
Dorries, Ms Nadine	Hoare, Simon	Mordaunt, rh Penny	Stuart, Graham
Double, Steve	Hollingbery, George	Morgan, rh Nicky	Sturdy, Julian
Dowden, Oliver	Hollinrake, Kevin	Morris, Anne Marie	Sunak, Rishi
Doyle-Price, Jackie	Hollobone, Mr Philip	Morris, David	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Drax, Richard	Holloway, Adam	Morris, James	Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Duddridge, James	Howell, John	Morton, Wendy	Syms, Sir Robert
Duguid, David	Huddleston, Nigel	Mundell, rh David	Thomas, Derek
Duncan, rh Sir Alan	Hughes, Eddie	Murray, Mrs Sheryll	Thomson, Ross
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain	Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy	Murrison, Dr Andrew	Throup, Maggie
Dunne, rh Mr Philip	Hurd, rh Mr Nick	Neill, Robert	Tolhurst, Kelly
Ellis, Michael	Jack, Mr Alister	Newton, Sarah	Tomlinson, Justin
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias	James, Margot	Nokes, rh Caroline	Tomlinson, Michael
Elphicke, Charlie	Javid, rh Sajid	Norman, Jesse	Tracey, Craig
Eustice, George	Jayawardena, Mr Ranil	O'Brien, Neil	Tredinnick, David
Evans, Mr Nigel	Jenkin, Sir Bernard	Offord, Dr Matthew	Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
Evennett, rh Sir David	Jenkyns, Andrea	Opperman, Guy	Truss, rh Elizabeth
Fabricant, Michael	Jenrick, Robert	Paisley, Ian	Tugendhat, Tom
Fallon, rh Sir Michael	Johnson, rh Boris	Parish, Neil	Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Field, rh Mark	Johnson, Dr Caroline	Patel, rh Priti	Vara, Mr Shailesh
Ford, Vicky	Johnson, Gareth	Paterson, rh Mr Owen	Vickers, Martin
Foster, Kevin	Johnson, Joseph	Pawsey, Mark	Villiers, rh Theresa
Fox, rh Dr Liam	Jones, Andrew	Penning, rh Sir Mike	Walker, Mr Charles
Francois, rh Mr Mark	Jones, rh Mr David	Penrose, John	Walker, Mr Robin
Frazer, Lucy	Jones, Mr Marcus	Percy, Andrew	Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Freeman, George	Kawczynski, Daniel	Perry, rh Claire	Warburton, David
Freer, Mike	Keegan, Gillian	Philp, Chris	Warman, Matt
Fysh, Mr Marcus	Kennedy, Seema	Pincher, rh Christopher	Watling, Giles
Gale, rh Sir Roger	Kerr, Stephen	Poulter, Dr Dan	Whately, Helen
Garnier, Mark	Knight, rh Sir Greg	Pow, Rebecca	Wheeler, Mrs Heather
			Whittaker, Craig
			Whittingdale, rh Mr John

Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William

Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Jo Churchill and
Paul Maynard

Question accordingly negatived.

Amendment proposed: (i), in line 1, leave out from “House” to end and add

“requires that a Minister of the Crown immediately begin negotiations with the European Council to extend the period specified under Article 50(3) of the Treaty on European Union by no fewer than three months from 29 March 2019, and bring forward an appropriate amendment to section 20 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 to facilitate this change.”—(*Ian Blackford.*)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 93, Noes 315.

Division No. 332]

[5.15 pm

AYES

Abrahams, Debbie
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Bardell, Hannah
Berger, Luciana
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Buck, Ms Karen
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chapman, Douglas
Cherry, Joanna
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coffey, Ann
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Daby, Janet
Davey, rh Sir Edward
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Duffield, Rosie
Edwards, Jonathan
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Gapes, Mike
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Hayes, Helen
Hendry, Drew
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hosie, Stewart
Jardine, Christine

Jones, Susan Elan
Killen, Ged
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Law, Chris
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lucas, Caroline
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Mc Nally, John
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McMorrin, Anna
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Murray, Ian
Newlands, Gavin
O'Hara, Brendan
Owen, Albert
Saville Roberts, Liz
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Angela
Smith, Owen
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Swinson, Jo
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
West, Catherine
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Wishart, Pete
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Woodcock, John
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Marion Fellows and
David Linden

NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartledge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heapey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hoey, Kate
Hollingbery, George

Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Howell, John
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Hurd, rh Mr Nick
 Jack, Mr Alister
 James, Margot
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, rh Boris
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Keegan, Gillian
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kerr, Stephen
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Lancaster, rh Mark
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Little Pengelly, Emma
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Maclean, Rachel
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Masterton, Paul
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
 McPartland, Stephen
 McVey, rh Ms Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Moore, Damien
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James

Morton, Wendy
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Paisley, Ian
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Perry, rh Claire
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rowley, Lee
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Mr Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, David
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Thomson, Ross
 Throup, Maggie

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

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

Tellers for the Noes:
Jo Churchill and
Paul Maynard

Question accordingly negated.

Mr Speaker: I understood from the exchange the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) had with the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), that she was not minded, on this occasion, to move her amendment (e). Is my understanding correct?

Anna Soubry: It is, Mr Speaker, on this occasion; I am sure we can sort it all out.

Main Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 258, Noes 303.

Division No. 333]

[5.29 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Andrew, Stuart
 Argar, Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Austin, Ian
 Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Stephen
 Baron, Mr John
 Barron, rh Sir Kevin
 Bellingham, Sir Henry
 Benyon, rh Richard
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, Jake
 Blackman, Bob
 Boles, Nick
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Brereton, Jack
 Brine, Steve
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buckland, Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cartlidge, James
 Caulfield, Maria

Chalk, Alex
 Clark, Colin
 Clark, rh Greg
 Cleverly, James
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Glyn
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Dodds, rh Nigel
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Duguid, David
 Duncan, rh Sir Alan
 Dunne, rh Mr Philip
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Eustice, George
 Evans, Mr Nigel
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Fallon, rh Sir Michael
 Field, rh Frank
 Field, rh Mark

Fitzpatrick, Jim
 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
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, John
 Goldsmith, Zac
 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
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, rh Mr Philip
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Henderson, Gordon
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Howell, John
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Hurd, rh Mr Nick
 Jack, Mr Alister
 James, Margot
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Keegan, Gillian
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kerr, Stephen
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Lancaster, rh Mark
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward

Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Little Pengelly, Emma
 Lloyd, Stephen
 Lopresti, Jack
 Maclean, Rachel
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, John
 Mann, Scott
 Masterton, Paul
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
 McPartland, Stephen
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Moore, Damien
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morton, Wendy
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Opperman, Guy
 Paisley, Ian
 Parish, Neil
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Perry, rh Claire
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Mr Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, David
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, rh Julian

Smith, Royston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David

Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
 Vickers, Martin
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jo Churchill and
Paul Maynard

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ali, Rushanara
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Amesbury, Mike
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Ashworth, Jonathan
 Bailey, Mr Adrian
 Bardell, Hannah
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berger, Luciana
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Black, Mhairi
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Brabin, Tracy
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brake, rh Tom
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burden, Richard
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cable, rh Sir Vince
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Mr Ronnie
 Carden, Dan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Champion, Sarah
 Chapman, Douglas
 Chapman, Jenny
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Cherry, Joanna
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Clwyd, rh Ann

Coaker, Vernon
 Coffey, Ann
 Cooper, Julie
 Cooper, Rosie
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Coyle, Neil
 Crausby, Sir David
 Crawley, Angela
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Cunningham, Mr Jim
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Nic
 Davey, rh Sir Edward
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Geraint
 Day, Martyn
 De Cordova, Marsha
 De Piero, Gloria
 Dent Coad, Emma
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Drew, Dr David
 Dromey, Jack
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eagle, Ms Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Ellman, Dame Louise
 Elmore, Chris
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farrelly, Paul
 Farron, Tim
 Fellows, Marion

Fletcher, Colleen
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Frith, James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gaffney, Hugh
 Gapes, Mike
 Gardiner, Barry
 George, Ruth
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Godsiff, Mr Roger
 Goodman, Helen
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Gray, Neil
 Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Grogan, John
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hanson, rh David
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayman, Sue
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
 Hermon, Lady
 Hill, Mike
 Hillier, Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Hosie, Stewart
 Howarth, rh Mr George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, Diana
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham P.
 Jones, Helen
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Sarah
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Killen, Ged
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Laird, Lesley
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, rh Norman
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Lee, Karen

Leslie, Mr Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Linden, David
 Lloyd, Tony
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lucas, Ian C.
 Lynch, Holly (*Proxy vote caste*
by Mark Tami)
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Marsden, Gordon
 Martin, Sandy
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McInnes, Liz
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 O'Mara, Jared
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Owen, Albert
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pidcock, Laura
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Lucy
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rashid, Faisal
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Emma

Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
 Rodda, Matt
 Rowley, Danielle
 Ruane, Chris
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Ryan, rh Joan
 Saville Roberts, Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip (*Proxy vote caste*
by Vicky Foxcroft)
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Eleanor
 Smith, Laura
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sweeney, Mr Paul
 Swinson, Jo
 Tami, rh Mark
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 Twist, Liz
 Umunna, Chuka
 Vaz, rh Keith
 Vaz, Valerie
 Walker, Thelma
 Watson, Tom
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitfield, Martin
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Williams, Hywel
 Williams, Dr Paul
 Williamson, Chris
 Wilson, Phil
 Wishart, Pete
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Woodcock, John
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel
Tellers for the Noes:
Thangam Debonnaire and
Jeff Smith

Question accordingly negated.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Tonight's vote shows that there is no majority for the Prime Minister's course of action in dealing with Brexit. Yet again, her Government have been defeated. The Government cannot keep on ignoring Parliament or ploughing on towards 29 March without a coherent plan. She cannot keep on just running down the clock and hoping that something will turn up that will save the day and save her face.

It is surprising that the Prime Minister is not even here to hear the result of this vote. I was going to ask her to come to the Dispatch Box now to admit that her strategy has failed and bring forward to the House a coherent plan that can deal with the stresses and anxieties that so many people all over this country are feeling, so that we can make some progress together, bring people together and prevent the catastrophe of a no-deal exit on 29 March. It is surprising that the Prime Minister is not here. Is there some way by which you could encourage her to return to the Dispatch Box and tell us what her plan is?

Mr Speaker: It is not obligatory for the Prime Minister to be present on this occasion. Other representatives of the Treasury Bench are here, and if the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union wants to take to the Dispatch Box, it is open to him to do so, but he is not obliged to do so.

Stephen Barclay *indicated dissent.*

Mr Speaker: Or if the Government Chief Whip, who is chuntering from a sedentary position for no obvious benefit or purpose, wants to beetle along to the Box, he is welcome to do so, but he has declined to do so. *[Interruption.]* No, it is not incumbent upon them. They have been invited, but they are not obliged to do so. The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) has made his own point in his own way with force and alacrity, and it is on the record for others to study.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This is a significant defeat for the Government. This is a bourach, and at the end of the day, the Prime Minister should be here to accept her responsibilities on the back of this Government defeat. Where is she? Given the significance of this defeat, what powers are open to us to force the Government to bring forward their meaningful vote to next week? People in the United Kingdom want certainty. Finally, I thank those Members—Members of all parties—who had the courage to vote with us tonight to extend article 50, but where was the Front Bench of the Labour party on extending article 50?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. In responding to him, I am seeking to be helpful to people interested in our proceedings who are not Members of the House, and therefore I will, as I hope he would expect, treat of the factual inquiry that the leader of the Scottish National party in this House put to me—what can be done to bring forward or expedite the meaningful vote? The short answer is that it is not within the gift of the Chair to do so, and it is not for Members of this House who are not part of the Executive branch to do so. The meaningful vote is brought about as a result of and in accordance with statute, and the statute decrees that it be done by a Minister. It will happen when a Minister is ready to bring forward that vote. However, the right hon. Gentleman knows that there are at various times other opportunities for debates and votes, and he is not an innocent in these matters. He is well versed in parliamentary procedure, and he will know the opportunities open to him, and other Members in other parts of the House will similarly be so conscious.

Tom Brake: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I suspect that if the Secretary of State, in opening the debate, had said that he was going to honour what Parliament voted for on 29 January—ruling out no deal—the Government may well have won the vote this evening, but he did not. In what way can we, as Members of Parliament who have already voted to rule out no deal, ensure that the Government listen to that and respond appropriately? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: A Member from Ealing who will be well known to colleagues—the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound)—has just chuntered in the background that that is beyond even the Speaker's power. Well, it is certainly beyond the Speaker's power.

What the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) has raised is an extremely important matter, but it is a matter of politics. The politics will play out—I use that term in a non-pejorative and neutral sense—in the days and weeks ahead, and we shall have to see where we get to. I think the right hon. Gentleman was mainly concerned, if I understand him correctly, to put his point on the record. I do not think there was really a question mark there, but if there was, I am not able to provide a definitive answer now. However, we will return to these matters ere long.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. What we do know tonight is that there is a majority in this House for replacing the backstop with alternative arrangements and that that majority rests on what is known as the Malthouse compromise. Is there any way to put on the record that the Government should adopt that compromise and enjoy a majority for it?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is a county colleague of mine, but that is a truly monstrous abuse of the point of order procedure, as the puckish grin on the face of the hon. Gentleman demonstrates he is perfectly well aware. He has made his own point and he has found his own salvation. The point was also made by colleagues of like mind to him in the course of the debate, but he has now given it a prominence with which I rather suspect he is satisfied. We will leave it there for now.

I hope there are no further points of order because there is an Arsenal match on television very soon—*[Interruption.]* But the Chair will always attend to his duties. Hon. Members need be in no doubt on that score.

Business without Debate

CHILDREN ACT 1989 (AMENDMENT) (FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION) BILL [LORDS]: (BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE)

Ordered,

That the Children Act 1989 (Amendment) (Female Genital Mutilation) Bill [*Lords*] be referred to a Second Reading Committee as if it had been so referred under the provisions of Standing Order No. 90(2).—(*Wendy Morton.*)

Mineworkers' Pension Scheme

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Wendy Morton.*)

Mr Speaker: In the interests of the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), who has secured the Adjournment debate—I am playing for time here—*[Interruption.]* Yes, the Arsenal game starts in three minutes' time. I appeal to colleagues who are leaving the Chamber to do so quickly and quietly, so that the Adjournment debate can be properly conducted.

5.52 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I also place on the record my thanks to you for selecting this debate, which I am pleased to have secured for one simple reason: to give the Government a chance to do right by retired miners and their families in my constituency and coalfield communities across the country.

I understand the significance of the mineworkers' pension scheme to other hon. Members here today, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero), who has brought so many of those involved together; my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith), who led the recent Westminster Hall debate; hon. Members who are themselves former miners; and the many other coalfield MPs who join me here today.

This debate specifically seeks to address the injustices of the surplus sharing arrangement agreed in the mineworkers' pension scheme back in 1994, but I want to start by explaining just why it matters so much to people in areas such as Barnsley. Our community is one built on the coal industry. It once helped sustain some 30,000 jobs in the area, many of which were directly involved in mining itself, where the work was tough, difficult and dangerous. Aside from the economy that depended on it, the industry also fostered an identity and a sense of community spirit that lives on to this day.

In the same way that mining powered our community, our community powered a nation, so I firmly believe that those who did so deserve nothing less than a fair arrangement that properly looks after them in later life. Unfortunately, the current scheme, agreed with the Government on the privatisation of British Coal in 1994, no longer does so. Back then, the Government offered to act as a guarantor to the scheme, ensuring that the pensions hard earned by miners would not decrease in value.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. She is doing a great job here this evening. Does she agree that we are not disputing the importance of the Government guarantee? It is giving retired miners like my uncles peace of mind that their pensions are secure, and that is really important. The question is whether the Government still need to take a 50% share, more than £3 billion over 25 years, out of the scheme, when they have not made any—any—direct payment into it. Finding the best way of giving former colliers and their families a fairer share of the pension is what has earned our focus tonight, and that is what she is leading on.

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I want to make it clear at this stage that my complaint is not with the deal at large. There are some concerns over the details of the bonus element of the pension, whereby disappointing investment returns could see bonuses lost over time and members' pensions worse off by around 30% in real terms—I intend to press the Minister on that issue later—but like the trustees I acknowledge that elements of the deal are beneficial.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I compliment my hon. Friend on securing this really important debate. Just to echo her comments, the nation owes a debt of honour to the miners and mining communities for providing the fuel that powered a nation. Many miners died prematurely, including my own father in his 50s and my grandfather in his early 50s. What will happen to the surplus when the last of the miners and their beneficiaries have passed away? Where will that surplus go, and is that driving the Government's actions?

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. I am sure the Minister has heard it and will respond in due course.

The guarantee has provided a safeguard that has allowed the trustees to follow higher-risk, and subsequently higher-value, investments that have proved lucrative.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her fine speech. Picking up on a point from the previous intervention, the very reason there has to be action soon is that if there is not, the miners themselves will not get benefit from it while they are alive.

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend is right, and I will come on to speak about that in a moment.

The guarantee is not without its merits, but what the debate seeks to address is the specific surplus sharing arrangement, which, as hon. Members have said, has seen the Government profit so disproportionately at the expense of miners.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Many people in Doncaster share the same concerns as those in her constituency in Barnsley. Does she agree that when the scheme was first set up the balance of risk was different? What we know now, all these years further on from 1994, requires at the very least a revision to look at the balance of risk being fairer in the future.

Stephanie Peacock: I thank my right hon. Friend for her comments. She is absolutely right, and I will come on to talk about that in a moment. She talks about when the agreement was set up. The Minister admitted to me, in response to a written question asking what actuarial advice was taken, that “no such advice was obtained”.

Can we consider that for a moment, Madam Deputy Speaker? This arrangement was put in place with no expert advice. It is little wonder that the initial prediction proved woefully inaccurate and the surplus has been substantially more than anticipated—and it shows.

[Stephanie Peacock]

The sheer amount of money that has been taken out by the Government since 1994 without returning a single penny is staggering. The Treasury has pocketed £4.4 billion since 1994.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, and I am sure many ex-miners in Coventry—we used to have two collieries—will be very grateful to her for securing this debate and for trying to put some wrongs right. I am sure they will appreciate that very much, because a lot of them suffer from silicosis and other diseases. She is doing a great service to the miners.

Stephanie Peacock: I thank my hon. Friend. He is absolutely right that a lot of former miners are taking a great interest in this debate, not least because the Government have taken £617 million this year alone, on top of £102 million over the past two years. As if that was not already enough, they plan to take another £427 million over the next three years.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a really powerful speech. Does she agree that pensioner miners in areas such as mine in Durham should be getting an enhanced set of benefits from the scheme, rather than the Government creaming off this money? It is an absolute outrage.

Stephanie Peacock: I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution. I know that her constituency hosts the Durham miners' gala, which celebrates the coalfield communities. She is absolutely right about the money that the Government have taken out. I repeat that they have not contributed a single penny from their own funds. These are huge sums of money.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. The miners have had to fight every inch of the way, including for pneumoconiosis compensation and everything else. In my constituency in the Cynon Valley there is real anger and a feeling that the miners have been cheated by the refusal to share out this surplus money in a fair and proper way.

Stephanie Peacock: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The sums of money involved are huge, but for the individuals and families affected, it is striking how small the numbers are.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her speech. She is championing miners right across the UK, including in my seat in Ogmore. Does she agree that we are running out of time? Lots of widows now receive the miners' pension, based on a reduction. Unless the Government take action now, we will be in a position where the money will simply be taken up by the Treasury. That cannot be right for the thousands of miners left and their families.

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The average pension is just £84 a week, but it is a lot less for widows in receipt of a pension. Some are forced to get by on much less. For instance, I have read of one who receives as little as £59 a week, after spending the best part of three decades down the pit.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Of course, the north Staffordshire coalfields were some of the most prosperous and efficient coalfields in the country. Does my hon. Friend agree that if the money that the Government are taking into the Treasury was spent directly on pensioners, the economic impact on their local communities, which have been starved of funds, would be immense, and in some cases transformative?

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is just totally unfair. How can £59 for a retired miner and £4.4 billion for the Government possibly be justified? How is that fair? These are people who toiled for years in dangerous, gruelling conditions to help to keep the lights on and our country running.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. So many people are present to register their support for what she is saying, and I am here to do the same. I have seen the surplus sharing arrangement referred to as a

“legalised but grossly immoral raid on the funds.”—[*Official Report*, 10 June 2003; Vol. 406, c. 171WH.]

Is it not now time for this Government to right a wrong?

Stephanie Peacock: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and that is the purpose of this debate. It is time that action was taken. We should consider what a difference it would make to pensioners' lives if we diverted more money into their pockets, rather than into the Government's coffers.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is speaking compellingly, despite the many interruptions. She certainly speaks to the sense of injustice around this issue in my constituency. Has she had any discussions with the trustees of the mineworkers' pension scheme to find out their views on what a fair way forward would be?

Stephanie Peacock: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. I know he has championed this issue over many years. I have indeed spoken to the trustees, and they are in agreement that we need to look at this again.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I would simply like to say, first, that I hope the hon. Lady gets a review out of this debate, at the very least; and secondly, that I have always supported the mineworkers, since the closing of the pits by Michael Heseltine. It was a long time ago, but the bottom line is that the miners deserve to be looked after properly.

Stephanie Peacock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that contribution. I am pleased that we have cross-party support today. It is very welcome.

The risk undertaken by the Government in guaranteeing the pensions no longer justifies the price paid by the miners for that assurance. The membership of the scheme alone has decreased substantially over the decades since the deal was struck. In 2006, there were 280,000 members; now, there are 160,000. The Government's financial risk in their role as guarantor of the pensions is in permanent decline, yet in essence they are still charging miners the same price that they charged 25 years ago.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): My hon. Friend is completely right and is making a really powerful case on behalf of mineworkers all over the country. Does she agree that we need to know whether the Government are seeing the mineworkers' pension as a source of income generation? If they are, that would be utterly morally wrong, given the contribution that the mineworkers have made to our economy over so many years.

Stephanie Peacock: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am sure that the Minister has heard her question and will address it in good time.

Never mind whether this is fair. From a financial perspective, the scheme fundamentally does not provide value for money for its members. I implore the Minister not to respond with platitudes about the benefits of the Government's guarantee for the scheme. We know that it has been beneficial, and as many a former miner from Barnsley will tell us, they know there is no such thing as a free lunch.

Mr Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley) (Lab): I speak as a serving miner at one time, who had two broken legs. I wonder about this sometimes when I see in the newspapers about this Sir Philip Green and how he stole all the pensions, yet here we are, sitting here and the Government are stealing pensions. They should have their knighthoods taken off them as well.

Stephanie Peacock: I thank my hon. Friend. As a former miner, he speaks with passion and has done over many decades, and he is absolutely right. It is blatantly unfair that those who have spent a life working literally at the coalface will be left to struggle in retirement, when the Government can instead help the near 160,000 former miners still affected. This is their money, and I appeal now to the Minister to do right by them.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend, and as the grandson of a coal miner, I know that the speech she is making is so important for the communities that we represent. When the Prime Minister took over, she stood on the steps of Downing Street and said that there are "burning injustices" affecting our nation. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is one of those burning injustices? If the promises that the Prime Minister made are to mean anything at all, this wrong must be righted immediately.

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: it is totally unfair. That is why I ask the Minister to dispel the concerns that I briefly touched on earlier and protect the bonus element of the members' pensions, which will prevent real-terms losses to pension value in times of poor investment return. Most importantly, is she prepared to amend the surplus sharing scheme and meet the coalfield MPs, the scheme trustees, members and the National Union of Mineworkers to discuss a revision, including consideration of the recent NUM-commissioned report that suggested a 90:10 split in favour of the miners?

Miners and their families in this country had their way of life ripped apart. They were branded "the enemy within". Men were imprisoned because they were fighting for their jobs. Women ran soup kitchens because they

were fighting for their community. Spirits were bruised but never broken. Tragically, too often our miners were let down. The unfairness of the scheme must not—cannot—be allowed to stand as the final chapter in that dismal history. Retired miners have waited long enough for the only thing they ever wanted: their fair share.

6.8 pm

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) for securing the debate, for her excellent speech and for the opportunity to speak very briefly on an issue that I am extremely passionate about. Many of us are now familiar with the shocking headline figures behind the mineworkers' pension scheme story. The Government have received nearly £4.5 billion from the MPS since 1994. They have never had to pay a penny into the scheme in their role as guarantor and they are still pocketing in the region of £142 million a year. Those figures do not even include any moneys that they have received from the other coal pension scheme—the British Coal staff superannuation scheme, from which they have also made billions of pounds.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that what is absolutely fundamental is that at the time of privatisation, any surplus was envisaged as a safety net, not a cash cow for the Government?

Gloria De Piero: My hon. Friend absolutely hits the nail on the head.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Just to confirm what my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) said, I served on the Labour side on the Bill that privatised the coal industry in 1994, and those guarantees were given at that stage.

Gloria De Piero: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to make that point. What the headline figures that I have quoted do not tell us are the personal stories of hardship that our ex-miners and their widows are facing. The average weekly pension is not much more than £80 a week. It is hardly a sum that someone could live a luxury lifestyle on. MPS pensioners rightly feel aggrieved at seeing the profits from their pension investments being used to boost the Treasury's coffers. An MPS pensioner from my constituency called into my office recently to show me his recent pension statement. He had received the news that, thanks to a 3.4% increase to his guaranteed pension and a 4.2% bonus, his pension was going up to the grand total of £74.71.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend remind the Government that we are talking about deferred income earned by miners, not a gift that we are blessing them with? It is the miners' money, not anyone else's.

Gloria De Piero: That is why it is clear that the 50:50 surplus sharing arrangement put in place when the Government became guarantor needs to be renegotiated.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Ashfield and for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) for making such powerful speeches.

[Mary Creagh]

Does my hon. Friend agree that, at a time when we have had 40,000 excess deaths, many of them old people—the highest level for 40 years in this country—and when we see pensioners' income under attack from higher inflation and risks to their benefits, such as free TV licences, this is a wrong that must be righted by the Minister? These communities were devastated when their pits closed. These people lost income during their lifetime and are now being denied it in retirement.

Gloria De Piero: Absolutely, and the Government have made far more money than was ever forecast.

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friends the Members for Ashfield and for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) for raising this matter. The calculation made in the privatisation in 1993-94 was done on the basis that a lot of coal mines were still open at that time. Clearly that is not the case now. This is a milk cow for Government. I do not know how many years the Government are going to keep looking at this to try to get some sense for it, but what is happening is wholly wrong. People can quote the increases in miners' pensions, but often a lot has been lost because these people are on means-tested benefits to start with. We should recognise that.

Gloria De Piero: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point from a wealth of experience of campaigning on this issue.

I, Labour colleagues from other coalfield constituencies, the National Union of Mineworkers, other campaigners and, crucially, the trustees of the mineworkers' pension scheme—the Minister shook her head when my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East raised that point, but I and other colleagues have met them and they have told me to my face, "This is not right"—know that this is unfair and that the schemes need to be renegotiated. Approaches have been made to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, but no meaningful efforts to engage have been made by the Government. That has to change and quickly, because the number of MPS pensioners is decreasing every year. Action needs to be taken now, so I ask the Minister to commit to giving ex-miners a fairer share of their pension fund surpluses now.

6.12 pm

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): May I sincerely congratulate the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) on securing this debate and on a superb, passionate speech? It was brilliant to hear.

I need to declare a strong interest in this matter. There is a reason why I take my stewardship of the scheme incredibly seriously, and that is that my mother-in-law is a beneficiary. She is a widow and her husband, Bill O'Neill, who was a leading light in the coke workers union, died very young as a result of his many years of service underground. Indeed, my husband turned down a job in the Keresley pit at the age of 16, but got into trouble at university for helping to organise the blockade of ports on the east coast to stop the imports of Polish coal, so I will not take any lessons from anybody in this

Chamber about the impact of the scheme or the feelings that have been raised over the years, which were so powerfully expressed by the hon. Lady. I completely share her view that one thing that we always need to focus on is the sheer blood, sweat, tears and toil that went into building our industrial revolution. One of the marvellous things about my current portfolio is the opportunity perhaps to repurpose some of that work, through things such as geothermal energy projects, to basically create energy for the next generation, based on the effort that went in.

I want to pick up some of the hon. Lady's points about how the scheme is working and touch on some of the issues around cash flow. It is a little unfair of the hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) to say that there has been no engagement. There has been a lot of engagement on this process. I continue to be interested in what the trustees are bringing forward; indeed, I was discussing this with the Chancellor only today.

Nick Smith: I understand that the mineworkers' pension scheme trustees tried to meet the Department before Christmas to talk about the guarantee but have still not heard from the Department about a meeting. Will the Minister pledge this evening to meet the mineworkers' pension scheme trustees within the next fortnight?

Claire Perry: I will, but I met the trustees last year. I think that they have done an exceptionally good job, and I shall say more about that later. We have discussed their proposals with them, and I am shocked to hear that they were told that a meeting was not available to them. A meeting will be available whenever they want it.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Was a review process written into the 50:50 split when the decision was made? If it was not, would not agreeing to a review now be the honourable thing for the Government to do, not least because the decision was made more than 20 years ago?

Claire Perry: This is a factual point with which I intend to deal shortly. The split has already been reviewed. It was last reviewed in 2002 by a Labour Energy Minister, who said:

"the trustees have been advised that the Government does not feel it would be right to adjust the current 50/50 surplus sharing arrangements."

He also pointed out that markets could go up or down. In fact, in 2002, the scheme was in deficit, as it was again in 2008 and 2009. The then Labour Government decided that, given the future unpredictability of the scheme, it would not be correct to review the pension surpluses. So it is not correct to say that the decision has not been reviewed. Indeed, a Labour Government made the decision not to change the surplus sharing arrangements.

Stephanie Peacock: The Minister will acknowledge that that review took place quite a few years ago, when the scheme was in a very different state. Given that there are now more than 150,000 fewer former miners and their widows, the risk for the Government is substantially less than it was then.

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady has made a valid point but, as she has also said, if the scheme had been reviewed at that point, many more thousands of people

would have received a higher pension. The decision not to conduct a review was made partly because of the volatility that is inherent in a scheme for which the Government act as guarantor, and partly because, notwithstanding the idea that this is cash that sits in the Government's coffers, the Government have no money of their own. In many instances, the money that has come into the scheme has been spent directly in the coalfield communities. We have spent more than £1 billion—*[Interruption.]* Hang on. We have spent more than £1 billion of Government money in the coalfield communities over the last 20 years, and we have committed an additional £70 million since 2010. The point is that, if money comes to the Government, it is part of the Government's general receipts and can then be recycled. That money has contributed to the benefits that many other pensioners have received.

Grahame Morris: Will the Minister give way?

Claire Perry: Let me make some progress. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Some important questions have been asked, and I am sure that Members want to hear the answers from the Minister.

Claire Perry: I am afraid that there is a fundamental fallacy in some of the arguments that have been advanced. I suspect that the Labour Government made the decision not to review the surplus sharing for the same reason, which is that the money that comes to the Government is then being spent to support pensioners in many ways, providing them with, for instance, free prescriptions and bus passes. It is not correct to say that the money is just sitting there.

Sir William Cash *rose—*

Claire Perry: No, I will not give way. Some important questions have been answered. I think that I was generous in allowing two speeches to be made before my response.

As the hon. Member for Barnsley East rightly said, the scheme continues to function and the numbers are falling. The only scheme that resembles this one is the one that was set up for rail workers. Again, the Government are the guarantor, which means that any liabilities incurred by the scheme will come back to them. For that reason, the trustees, who include ex-miners, have done an amazing investment job. Because of that guarantee—it is basically a Government-backed scheme—the returns are at least a third higher than they would otherwise have been, so it has generated a lot of value.

Nick Smith *rose—*

Claire Perry: Does the hon. Gentleman want answers, or does he want to keep asking questions? Because I love the hon. Gentleman, I will take a question from him.

Nick Smith: I have listened to what the Minister has said. We argue that the Government have received at least £3.5 billion in surplus in recent years. The Minister says that they have spent £1 billion in coalfield communities in the last 20 years. Labour Members feel that our communities have been short-changed by £2 billion. Given that the last review took place nearly 20 years ago, why will the Minister not do the right thing now and agree to another review?

Claire Perry: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will be the first to acknowledge—the point has already been made—that, sadly, one of the results has been that many people who are in receipt of this pension scheme, including the hon. Member for Blyth Valley (Mr Campbell), who was in his place, no longer live in those coalfield communities, but they have benefited as pensioners from many of the other pension benefits that that income has gone towards providing.

I met, and was incredibly impressed with the trustees. Relative to other schemes, the results they have provided and the compassion and generosity with which they administer the scheme are second to none, and we should pay tribute to them for that. I point out again that the returns from the Government underwriting of the scheme are about a third higher in real terms than they would have been.

I want to turn to something that has been suggested by the trustees. When I met them—and perhaps the hon. Member for Barnsley East and I should meet them together to have the same conversation; I will be happy to do that—they indicated to me that they understood that changing the surplus sharing arrangements, as was considered by the last Labour Government and rejected, was not the biggest priority. The biggest priority was protecting the accrued bonuses and making sure that the scheme could proceed on that basis. They have come forward with some excellent proposals and I commend them for that. I had a brief discussion this evening with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor about my interest and the Treasury's interest in properly reviewing those proposals and taking them forward. I am very happy to have those conversations face to face, as I have committed to do.

I genuinely admire the hon. Lady's speech. It is brilliant to see her and so many colleagues standing up for a group of people who many may argue gave more to the system than they received from it. As a family member, I am proud to acknowledge that and to stand up as the steward of the scheme and pledge to her that I will do my best to ensure that it continues to deliver.

I do want to say that the trustees' proposals are excellent, albeit we need to look at the cash flow implications. We will continue to explore options and I am very happy to do that on a cross-party basis with all Members who would be interested in doing so.

Question put and agreed to.

6.22 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 14 February 2019

[PHILIP DAVIES *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Santander Closures and Local Communities

1.30 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of Santander branch closures on local communities.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Davies. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for providing time for the debate and express my sincere gratitude to the hon. Members for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon), for Angus (Kirstene Hair) and for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) and to my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who all joined me as co-sponsors of the application. Like many other hon. Members, they face the closure of Santander branches in their constituencies. It is a testament to the widespread anger in the House that we have come together on a cross-party basis to campaign against those closures.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way so early in his speech, and I am delighted that he has secured the debate. He mentioned the anger, and I want to emphasise that the anger in my constituency has been exponentially increased. When Santander closed its Linlithgow branch last year, it encouraged customers to move to Bathgate—the very branch it is closing this year. That is farcical, and a true betrayal of elderly pensioners, who are less likely to use online banking.

David Linden: Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. Many of us share the concern that the present round of closures may not be the last, and he makes the point eloquently.

I acknowledge the fact that senior Santander staff have joined us in the Public Gallery today, and I hope they will take to heart the serious concerns we express on our constituents' behalf. I should also declare an interest because not only is the Parkhead branch in my constituency earmarked for closure, but I am a Santander customer and it is my local branch.

I am sure there will be some interventions, and I shall be happy to accommodate them to allow colleagues to put their concerns on record. My speech covers four main areas. First, I am concerned for the almost 1,300 Santander staff whose branches are due to be closed, and who face a deeply uncertain future. Secondly, I shall consider the local impact the proposals will have in the east end of Glasgow, where the branch at Parkhead Forge is due to close. Thirdly, I shall address some of the issues about reliance on the post office network. Fourthly, I shall focus on access to cash. Finally, I shall seek support from the Minister in making direct representations to the bank.

As I mentioned, when the closures were announced, my immediate concern was for the almost 1,300 Santander staff in the 140 branches in these islands. I know from speaking to staff at the branch at Parkhead Forge that the announcement on 23 January came as something of a bolt from the blue. When I met Santander executives the following week, I was disappointed to learn that although about a third of the staff may be redeployed, a deeply uncertain future remains for the other two thirds. Given that there are almost 6,000 fewer bank branches and building societies in the UK compared with 2010, those staff cannot exactly just move their skills to another local bank. That is obviously a key problem. Other banks have abandoned high streets and shopping centres, closing thousands of branches and abandoning the customers who stood by them during the financial crash. Abandonment is exactly what Santander proposes in the east end of Glasgow.

Unashamedly, as a constituency MP, I want to use some of my time today to make the case for keeping the Parkhead Forge branch open. I cannot fathom why it was selected for closure, given the widely known demographic issues in the east end of Glasgow. When I met Santander senior staff, I made the point that the Parkhead branch, situated in the busy Forge shopping centre, appears to have a heavy footfall, with customers like me often having to queue before seeing a teller. Frustratingly, I have still not received the transaction and footfall data I asked for from the bank, which makes me question whether Santander has looked at it at all. Surely if the branch were not being used enough, Santander would be content to demonstrate that by releasing the data.

In its initial impact assessment, and somewhat to my surprise, Santander suggests that east end customers should go to their next nearest branch, Rutherglen, which is not actually in Glasgow. The journey could perhaps be done by train. Of course, if Santander had bothered to do more than a mere desktop exercise, it would have realised that Parkhead does not have a train station and that the journey would take well over an hour and mean travelling through Partick, in Glasgow's west end, which is simply ludicrous.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman makes a good point about the insensitivity of the one-size-fits-all letter that everyone was sent. We are losing two branches in my seat—not only in Acton High Street, which recently lost NatWest and HSBC, but in west Ealing, where we have lost Halifax and Lloyds. Our streets are being turned into ghost towns. The recommendation in Acton was to go to the post office. That has closed too. Where are people meant to go?

David Linden: Absolutely. The hon. Lady makes a powerful point. I intend to come on to the recommendation that people go to the post office, because the argument is weak and does not stand up to scrutiny. She is right to point out the mass exodus of banks from high streets. Banks are a major part of the local economy, and it does not do them any good if they abandon the high street.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The closure of the branch in Helensburgh in my constituency means that the nearest Santander branch will be 25 miles away

[*Brendan O'Hara*]

in the west end of Glasgow. I have serious concerns about the so-called impact assessment, which has been carried out only after the announcement. Does my hon. Friend share my fear that it will be little more than an exercise in justifying a decision that has already been made?

David Linden: Absolutely. My hon. Friend does a power of work in his capacity as chair of the all-party group on rural poverty. He speaks powerfully about the impact the closure will have in his rural constituency. In my constituency, customers are not quite being asked to go 25 miles, but the point is well made, and I hope the Minister has taken it on board.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): As I outlined in my Adjournment debate on this very subject last week, the impact on rural Lanark will be devastating for the local economy and the high street. Does my hon. Friend agree that banks should do more to consider the economic impact?

David Linden: Absolutely. That is one reason why I am delighted to see the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) here for the debate. His private Member's Bill looks specifically at the impact of such closures, particularly on rural communities. My hon. Friend's point is well made.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is being extraordinarily generous in taking interventions. Does he agree that if local impact assessments are done, they are ignored, and not just by Santander? Banks want to force people into online banking, and the real threat of that is that they will move towards allowing algorithms, not human beings, to take decisions. It is not just the high street that goes, but the personal interaction and the ability to appeal to a human being if things go wrong.

David Linden: Absolutely. That fits nicely with the next point I want to make, which is about impact assessments. The bank concedes that only half of the customers who use the Parkhead branch use online, mobile or telephone banking services. The data concerning digital exclusion in the east end is widely available, so it beggars belief that Santander has overlooked it and still plans to pull down the shutters on a branch that serves some of the most vulnerable and isolated people in the country.

I want to turn now to the issue of reliance on the post office network to deliver banking services. Having asked the Minister about it during Treasury questions a couple of weeks ago, I can almost anticipate his response: that Santander customers can just do their banking at the post office. I think my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) felt frustration about that during her Adjournment debate last week.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I have a background in the Post Office. All we see is closure after closure, and now that WHSmith—the worst retailer on the high street—is taking the contract, it could also close post offices. The excuse given by the banks—that if they close down, people can use the post office—needs to be looked at seriously.

David Linden: Absolutely. The hon. Gentleman, my constituency neighbour, hits the nail on the head. There are flaws in the argument that the post office network can just replace local banking services.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a great speech. The branch on Renfrew High Street in my constituency is also earmarked for closure, and Santander suggested that customers use the post office network or the branch in Paisley. However, as many people will know, given the representations we have made, the fees the banking industry and Post Office Ltd pay postmasters to carry out this function are ridiculously low and unsustainable. The contracts are currently being renegotiated with the banks. Does my hon. Friend agree that the banks need to step up to the mark and pay post offices fairly for carrying out their banking functions?

David Linden: That is an excellent point, and one I intend to come on to later. My hon. Friend has been a doughty campaigner on this issue, not only in terms of post offices, but in fighting a good campaign against the Royal Bank of Scotland closures in Renfrew, and we should pay tribute to that.

Brendan O'Hara: My hon. Friend is being incredibly generous in giving way. Before we move on from the role of the Post Office, I would like to share some information I received this morning. In a letter to me on 24 January, Santander assured me that it was working closely with post offices near closing branches to keep them informed and supported. This morning, the Post Office wrote to me saying that, due to commercial sensitivities, Santander does not share customer numbers with it, and therefore that it

“is exceptionally difficult to model the impact...on any given branch without having information on numbers and amount of cash withdrawals”.

Does my hon. Friend share my concerns about the veracity of an impact assessment that encourages customers to use the Post Office's services, when Santander does not even share basic information with it?

David Linden: Herein lies the issue that hon. Members on both sides of the House want to raise today. The Government's line so far has been, “Oh, well, it's fine—we'll just shunt this issue on to the Post Office.” I am grateful that a number of hon. Members are homing in on the question of the Post Office, because that is the key weakness in Santander's argument. First, there is a capacity issue because, given the rate at which banks are closing, we are expecting post offices to adapt to a significantly higher number of counter transactions within the same constraints as previously.

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman yet again. I completely understand why the focus of this debate is on Santander, but from the point of view of the Government's response, is Santander not taking the hit for a whole range of other brands that have been gradually leaving the high street over the past few years? Santander is almost the last man standing, so it is getting more adverse attention than it perhaps

deserves. The blame the hon. Gentleman rightly attributes should be spread across all major banking brands and not just attached to this one.

David Linden: The hon. Gentleman is right that other banks have been complicit in abandoning our local communities. I do not know whether he is due to lose a branch in his constituency, but the vast majority of hon. Members here are. As constituency MPs we have the right to come here to challenge not only the UK Government but Santander, which is planning to abandon our communities. I think we are spot on to be tackling Santander.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Gentleman for being so generous in giving way. On the point he made about abandoning communities, there are two former bank branches currently lying empty in my constituency, and there is about to be a third. Does he not think that banks leaving high streets owe it to their customers to invest in the community again in some form, whether by helping to get a new tenant into the closed branches or by providing some other investment in return for the loyalty they have been shown?

David Linden: I am grateful to another constituency neighbour for making a powerful point. It is great that the hon. Gentleman is here, because, with the planned closure of the Santander branch in my constituency, people have been moved to the one in his. The point that my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) made was that, even if certain branches—such as the one in the hon. Gentleman's constituency—have been saved this time, that does not mean they will not be at risk in future, so I am glad he is here to make his point.

Angela Crawley: My hon. Friend has been an absolute champion for his constituency in this campaign. Does he agree that post offices simply cannot provide the same level of service as a bank branch, and that it is insufficient for the Government to use post offices as some sort of response? If it is not Santander, it is every other bank abandoning the high street, and post offices simply cannot provide the same service.

David Linden: That is spot on, because there is a question of sustainability for postmasters. We know that a huge number of previous Crown post offices have been transitioned to franchise partners, and we are seeing evidence that those partners may no longer find the offering attractive. Interestingly, Martin Kearsley, the banking director of Post Office Ltd, gave evidence to the Treasury Committee. When questioned on whether the Post Office makes a profit by offering basic banking services on behalf of providers, he answered:

“It does not currently. We are in discussions with the banks to change that position...What we do is charge the banks for the provision of the network and the transactions their customers do with us. We then share that model with our postmasters.”

We know that profitability is an issue for postmasters, but it is not the only one. When questioned about the fairness of postmasters having to offer banking services, Mr Kearsley said:

“we have seen a huge increase in the amount of cash coming into our branches. That is challenging, we recognise that and we are working hard to address it. That means postmasters spend a lot of

time counting cash. We have provided new equipment to try to help. We have modernised and streamlined the processes, so that that can be done more effectively and rapidly, but we recognise that that is a challenge for them right now and we continue to innovate to fix those problems.”

The question is how on earth we can reasonably expect the post office network to pick up the slack from banks that have abandoned their customers, when the current model is demonstrably not sustainable.

That leads on to the question of the level of service provided. Although many everyday banking transactions can be completed at post offices, there are restrictions on what can and cannot be done. There are limits on deposits and withdrawals, for example. Currently, only 5% of consumers withdraw cash, and 2% deposit cash, primarily at a post office, and there is anecdotal evidence from Citizens Advice to suggest that level of service may be a major factor in that.

The lack of regulation is also concerning. While banks are regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority, the Post Office is not. Banking customers are not necessarily Post Office customers, so the same duty of care simply does not exist. Let us face it: franchise holders are in this to make a living, and banking is not profitable for them. When staffing and training costs are factored in, banking can be loss-making for post offices. All things considered, while I am sure that some postmasters will go above and beyond, they are certainly not compelled or incentivised to do so.

When all is considered, it is little surprise, then, that post offices suddenly close. There are 35 fewer permanent post offices in Scotland today than there were in 2011. On top of that, communities continue to be plagued by temporary closures. In my own constituency, Tollcross post office closed in December 2017. Although the Post Office calls it a temporary closure, in reality it has still not found someone willing to take the service on, 14 months later. That is just one community suddenly left without service.

In the neighbouring constituency of Rutherglen and Hamilton West, I gather that the post office in Rutherglen closed suddenly without explanation last June, leaving thousands of people without service in what is a highly populated area with a busy high street. In the Glasgow North West constituency, the Dumbarton Road post office closed suddenly in November last year, with local residents left in the lurch ever since. When these offices shut, there is no replacement service. The Post Office does not offer a mobile service in the interim. There is no universal service obligation in place to ensure that an alternative service is offered on a temporary basis while the problem is fixed. In reality, communities are simply left without.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. He makes the good point that when branches close, there are often no alternative sources for people to access cash and banking services. My hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) fully supports the hon. Gentleman's endeavours, but unfortunately he is engaged in the debate in the main Chamber. My hon. Friend has seen, just as I have in Ceredigion, that when branches close, the post office network is often simply not there, and communities are left in the lurch.

David Linden: I know the hon. Gentleman has had experience of banks fleeing his constituency, where the local economy was already quite fragile, so he is right to put that on record. It is great to hear that input from him and from his colleague the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards), because Wales is also seeing this happen.

While banks will point to the post office as a convenient replacement when they bail on communities, post offices certainly cannot be relied on to bail out the banks. I understand that banks need to look at economic viability when deciding whether to keep branches open, but they cannot fully replace a critical service with something that does not provide the same level of service and that cannot guarantee that it will even be able to keep its own doors open.

Brendan O'Hara: My hon. Friend is making a powerful case, and he is right to point out the lazy assumption that the post office will always be there to pick up the slack. I know for a fact that that is not true: in my constituency, in the village of Tighnabruaich, the post office ran out of money, and pensioners could not pick up their pensions last month. The postmistress did everything she possibly could to mitigate the circumstances, but while they were unusual, they were not unique, and they will be repeated time and again if we allow banks to assume that post offices will be there at all times to pick up the slack.

David Linden: Absolutely. Such is my friendship with my hon. Friend that we share a psychic bond. He probably knows that I will come on to speak about access to cash.

The Access to Cash Review's interim report from a couple of months ago makes quite stark reading. Despite more and more services becoming cashless, approximately 8 million people—around 17% of the UK population—say that cash is an economic necessity for them. However, that 17% is not evenly spread. Scotland is much more open to economic damage from the transition to a cashless society than other parts of the UK. The statistics show that cash use in London declined by around 8.5% in the 2017-18 financial year, compared with only 3.3% in Scotland. Scotland is still much more reliant on cash, and it is therefore vital that we are not pushed to become cashless at the same pace as other parts of the UK. Quite frankly, that cannot and should not be forced on people, particularly some of our older, disabled or more vulnerable people.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): As a London MP, I would like to see the figures broken down by ward. I am sure we would find that everyone uses a card in central London, for example, whereas many people in my constituency still rely on cash.

David Linden: That is a powerful point. I suspect that if we broke those figures down, we would see a different situation in Kensington and Chelsea from that in Hornsey and Wood Green. That point was well made.

Research published this week by the consumer champion Which? found that 339 Scottish bank branches have closed their doors since 2015. However, we need to remember that this is not only about branches closing. When banks leave, they all too often take cash machines

with them, and at this stage I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen), who I know has done a lot of work on the situation around ATMs.

The rate of loss of cash machines across the UK should alarm us all, with LINK reporting that the UK lost more than 2,500 free-to-use cash machines last year. Financial exclusion is soaring and is fuelled by the transition from cash, hitting certain sections of society harder than others. For example, I regularly make home visits to constituents with physical disabilities, who tell me they rely on taxis for their freedom. I do not know what it is like elsewhere in the UK, but few taxi companies in Glasgow accept card payments. I also still encounter many constituents who have had a struggle even to open a bank account in the first place, so we really cannot assume that everyone has a debit card. Some of these people will quite simply lose quite a big element of their freedom if they lose easy access to their cash. Others might even be driven to high-interest credit cards or pre-pay debit cards that charge people a fee simply for accessing their own money.

Mental health is also all too often overlooked. The Money and Mental Health Policy Institute report "Seeing through the fog" contains startling testimonies from people with mental health problems. One says:

"I find doing things face to face much easier and better for me. I hate doing things over the phone and can get quite anxious when doing so...I don't trust online banking and will avoid this for as long as I can."

Another says:

"I can't handle the internet, I need human contact."

Another respondent says:

"I need to see a person. I can't cope with all this online banking stuff."

It is little wonder that the institute's evidence to the ongoing Treasury Committee inquiry into access to financial services concluded:

"Bank branch closures may particularly disadvantage people with mental health problems who struggle with remote methods of communication and rely on face-to-face support from firms to manage their finances."

We cannot ignore people like this as society moves away from cash, and we certainly cannot treat them as collateral damage in the march of progress.

We have heard time and again that the UK is sleepwalking into becoming a cashless society, but that is no longer the case, because the evidence is there. We are here to discuss the issue today, and Ministers should listen and react, because we cannot afford to sleepwalk.

Simon Hart: The closure in my community of one high street bank, and the removal of its cash machine, had a profound effect on the profitability of other businesses within just a couple of hundred metres, which rely on cash circulating. They noticed within a day the negative impact of that development.

David Linden: The hon. Gentleman is spot on and really hits the nail on the head. That point was made to me by the Federation of Small Businesses. The reality is that someone going out to buy a couple of rolls and a newspaper will probably not want to tap their debit card to pay; they will want to use cash. If millions of

people are left behind in the move away from cash, I am afraid that the blame will lie squarely at the feet of the Government.

That brings me to my final point, which is a direct appeal to the Minister. I do not think that the Government and Ministers can sit back and say that this is a commercial decision for the bank. Put simply, allowing banks to bail on our communities has a detrimental impact on the economy, which should concern the Government. When the Minister gets to his feet later, I want him to address some of the fundamental concerns I have raised, and which others will doubtless also raise, about how these planned closures will have such a detrimental impact on our economy.

Dr Huq: The hon. Gentleman talks about internet transactions and shrivelling high streets. Does he agree that another solution for the Government is to look at business rate reform? The transitional phasing system means that places like Stockport subsidise the City. Businesses tell me that re-evaluations should be more frequent than every five years. In fact, a consortium of 40 retailers, including WHSmith, which has been mentioned, and River Island, whose head office is in Hanger Lane in my seat, is campaigning for that reform. Does he agree that it would be a good idea for the Minister to meet those 40 retailers?

David Linden: Absolutely. As a Scottish National party politician, I am more than happy to talk about business rates, given that my party has lifted 100,000 small businesses in Scotland out of paying them. If the hon. Lady wants a debate on that, I am happy to talk about it.

Finally, my parting message goes to Santander itself. If it proceeds with these closures, Santander customers like myself will be forced to consider abandoning it. The message from all of us in this Chamber, I am sure, is crystal clear: save our Santander.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Order. I will call the Front-Bench spokespeople no later than 4 o'clock. I will not put a time limit on speeches at this stage, but to give Members a guide, it looks as if they will have roughly 10 minutes each.

1.56 pm

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing this important debate; we can see from the number of Members present the powerful cross-party consensus on the impact of bank branch closures on our local communities.

The most recent closures in my constituency and across the UK continue a worrying trend of declining public services. In Angus, 2015 saw the closure of the Royal Bank of Scotland in Brechin, 2016 saw the Edzell Bank of Scotland branch close and in 2017 it was TSB in Kirriemuir. In 2018, RBS in Montrose and the Bank of Scotland in Kirriemuir closed, and it has now been announced that there will be two further Santander closures by the end of the year.

From 2015 to 2019, my local authority saw a total of 12 bank branches close. Looking at the wider picture, from 2010 to 2018 the country as a whole saw a 35% decline in bank branches, but Scotland was above that national average, at 38%. Angus now has one Santander branch in the constituency catering for a population of 100,000 people, although obviously not all of them are its customers.

I was disappointed, as the local Member, to hear about the closures in my constituency through a local news outlet, as opposed to from the Santander public affairs team; I believe Members of the Scottish Parliament heard through that route. I got a letter through a few days afterwards. I have not been given the opportunity to meet Santander until a few weeks from now. I am very disappointed by the way in which it has treated this serious issue.

The closures have an important impact on communities across the UK, with rural communities affected slightly differently. Both customers and staff find themselves in incredibly difficult situations, as the hon. Member for Glasgow East pointed out. Of course, the solution to all this is digitisation, but that does not help everyone. I was quite surprised when I went to bank a cheque in my local branch the other day and was told that I did not need to do that in the branch because it can be done via phone. Even at 29, I was surprised by the level of technology that some banks have pushed forward. However, those options are not available to all.

People in rural communities increasingly feel that they are being penalised because of where they choose to stay, whether by bank closures or through other services being taken away from them. These bank branches are in the heart of communities and they cannot simply be replaced by the cited alternatives.

Let us look at the digitisation offering. In an area such as Angus, there is not fantastic mobile coverage or broadband across the whole constituency. In fact, my constituency was ranked 612 out of the 650 constituencies in the UK—one of the worst—for the roll-out of superfast broadband. People simply do not have access to it, so although yes, more people are using the internet for their personal needs—the figure went up from 63% to 83% between 2007 and 2016—that provision is not available to all. As much as banks are keen to highlight the digital offering, they have to recognise that that cannot be used by everyone. We also have problems with mobile coverage. I know that it can be suggested that people phone the bank on a landline to raise their issues, but between 2012 and 2017 landline minutes declined by about 50% because people are using their mobiles. But in Angus, we still have many notspots, where people simply cannot get through.

The other alternative that hon. Members have mentioned is the use of post offices. As much as I welcome Santander's provision to help the more vulnerable to understand how they can access post office services, Santander will not be able to do that with them every day. There are post offices in the towns where my closures are, in Brechin and Forfar, and I have been assured that they will be able to deal with all Santander customers wanting to deposit and withdraw cash, to pay in cheques and to check bank balances, but what if they need to print a statement or transfer money to another person's account? What if they have questions about their mortgage? Those are all issues that people need to deal with day to

[Kirstene Hair]

day. Santander needs to look into those specific issues and how it would expect people without connectivity and without a post office nearby to be able to carry out those tasks.

Ged Killen: The hon. Lady makes a powerful point about the things that people need to do in a bank branch. I recently met Bank of Scotland representatives in my constituency and they spoke at great length about how wonderful the banking protocol was and how they had used it to stop transactions by vulnerable customers who had been sent along there by rogue salesmen or whoever to lift money out of the bank. They were able to spot that because they knew the customers; they had a relationship with them. Shortly thereafter, the Bank of Scotland announced that it was closing a branch nearby. How can the provisions of the banking protocol possibly be being met if everything is done online?

Kirstene Hair: The hon. Gentleman makes a vital point. Many people want face-to-face interaction. For some people, the person they speak to when they go to the bank might be the only person they speak to all day, so it helps with combating loneliness, which we all know is so important. The hon. Gentleman makes the very valuable point that these staff get to know people; they create a relationship with their customers and look out for them on a personal basis.

As for the Post Office offering, one in three rural post offices closed between 2000 and 2009, and that decline has continued. We have to understand that post offices cannot always and will not always be able to accommodate all those who want to use them. It just seems to me that this is such a short-term approach, because if we have no post offices, if we have poor broadband and if we do not have mobile coverage, the digitisation method and post offices do not support all customers but support only a proportion of them. It is really important that Santander tries to explain to customers who do not have those points of access how it will still be a banking provider that those customers would want to deal with.

Protecting our high streets is also incredibly important. My high streets across Angus and in constituencies across the country are struggling very much. Post offices and banks are central to our high streets. They ensure that we have continued footfall day after day. When these sites are lost, the potential for these areas is hampered. Let us take the town of Kirriemuir in my constituency as an example. Kirriemuir was nominated in the Great British High Street Awards 2018; in my eyes, it was robbed, because it did not win. The area has a fantastic variety of high-quality local businesses that support numerous initiatives, for local residents and benefit the community. I am thinking of the efforts of the Kirriemuir and Local Business Association and Kirrie Connections. That is a high street shop, but in fact it is a dementia hub, which I visited only last week. People go there to spend time with those who are going through similar experiences to them.

I had the pleasure of being there when the judges were in Kirriemuir and looking round the town, which has so much pride in its offering. But now, it has lost its last bank. It will lose its ATMs. Businesses are forced to react because, as hon. Members have said, where will

customers get their cash? Will investors be put off from coming to the town? Where will local businesses deposit their takings? When I was going round as part of small business Saturday, businesses raised with me time and again the fact that there are more card transactions because less cash is available and the fee on those card transactions is absolutely hammering them at a time when things are very difficult on our high streets. In addition, what of those constituents who want to use only cash? I understand that elderly people do not want a bank card or credit card; they want to pay only with cash. Why should we suggest that they should not be able to do so, if a bank and ATM are removed?

At a time when we should be doing everything for our high streets, we should be encouraging more footfall and not increasing the pressures, difficulties and uncertainty. One suggestion has been put forward time and again by my constituents: why cannot banks operate out of one building? Why can we not have a banking hub whereby all banks are located in one building? That means we keep a set of premises going, we keep choice for constituents and they do not have to travel as far as they might have to if a bank closed down.

Ben Lake: The hon. Lady makes a very important point about banking hubs. Mine is just a point of information. It is ironic that some co-located branches used to exist in my constituency in the 1970s; two or three different banks would share the same location. Perhaps it could be a case of back to the future.

Kirstene Hair: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, which shows that banking hubs would work. They would work in many communities. They would keep that vital place on the high street. They would keep choice and keep accessibility. Those who cannot log on online or do not want to could of course come and have a face-to-face discussion with someone in the bank. That is a really important point that we should be putting across, and I would be keen to know what my hon. Friend the Minister thinks of that proposal.

My final point is about transport, which I know other hon. Members have already discussed. Those who do not want to or cannot use phones or computers to do their banking will of course need to travel to the nearest bank branch, but customers who were using the Brechin branch will now have to travel 15 miles—it is a 30-mile round trip—to Arbroath, and those in Forfar will have to make a similar journey to get to Dundee. What about those with mobility issues? What about the elderly? What about those who do not have their own car? What about those who rely heavily on public transport links, which are also in decline? Those people have to rely more heavily on family and friends. Indeed, vulnerable groups perhaps have no choice but not getting to the bank.

It is really important that we look into all the aspects that affect our constituents. An elderly lady who came into my constituency office the other day remarked that the whole situation was crazy. I agree with her: it is far from desirable. Although I have been in this place for just over 18 months, I have always felt that the most powerful debates here are those in which we have cross-party consensus. I look forward to the Minister's reaction on the impact that these closures will have on our high streets, on post office support—because we also see

post offices in decline—and on the idea of banking hubs. We all need to work together to ensure that we soften the blow of bank closures for each and every one of our communities.

2.8 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank the Backbench Business Committee and the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for securing this important and very relevant debate.

In my constituency of Heywood and Middleton, we have sadly been through all this before. The Heywood branch of Santander was closed in 2017 in a similar exercise to the one that we are seeing now, although at that time customers of the Heywood branch at least had the option of using the Middleton branch, and they were told that during the consultation. Now, it seems that that option is also about to go, leaving my constituency with no Santander branches whatever.

I look at Heywood town centre now and I can see how bank branch closures contribute to the decline of our town centres. In Heywood, NatWest closed its doors in 2015, Santander in 2017 and Lloyds Bank just recently, in January this year. The town centre is in decline, with many shops and small businesses closing. I am not laying the blame for that solely at the doors of Santander—obviously there are many other contributory factors—but I do think that the big banks need to acknowledge their community responsibilities. When they close a branch, they cut footfall, reduce access for elderly and disabled customers, and cause problems for small businesses in the area. Each branch closure chips away at our once thriving town centres.

In my constituency, the Rochdale Development Agency is currently making plans for Heywood town centre, deciding whether it should be residential, retail, or a mix, and it is in the council's capital programme for the next financial year. It is vital that we regenerate our town centre and I hope that we can achieve this. I do not want the same thing to happen in Middleton, but the closure in July this year of the Middleton branch of Santander has been announced.

The announcement was accompanied by helpful advice on nearby branches, all of them more than a three-mile bus ride away, plus the information that banking could be done at Middleton post office. The powers that be at Santander seem oblivious to the fact that Middleton post office, in its turn, is being franchised into WHSmith in the town, with an expected reduction in service, as well as problems with accessibility for elderly and disabled customers. One of my constituents, Karen Dicken, tells me that once the post office has moved, she will no longer have access to post office services, as she cannot get her mobility scooter into WHSmith. Yet Santander appears to think that offering banking services via a Crown post office that is soon to be relocated is adequate. Clearly there are failings here on the Government side, as highlighted by their refusal to perform an equality impact assessment on the franchising of the Crown post office, but I find it staggering that Santander is so blithely unaware of what else is going on in Middleton town centre that it honestly thinks that offering post office banking services in the town is a viable proposition.

Santander UK is a member of the British Bankers' Association and is a signatory to the access to banking protocol, which was introduced in May 2015. The protocol states that it is

“an industry-wide initiative, which aims to ensure that where banks close branches they do so responsibly and with consideration of the impact on customers and local communities.”

Santander says,

“we do not take the decision to close any branch lightly”,

yet it seems to me that this decision has been taken lightly, judging by the lack of attention to local issues, such as the impending closure and relocation of the Crown post office in my constituency.

I urge Santander to think again. I also urge my constituents to respond to the consultation. When the Heywood branch closure was announced, only six letters were submitted from constituents, with one more letter submitted from me. However, I have had a complaint from a constituent, who said that she has responded to the consultation and has simply been sent a repeat of what was already stated in the initial letter. She thinks it is a *fait accompli*. She says that she will move her account to a bank that does have a branch in the town.

Notwithstanding that, I urge all my Middleton constituents who want their town centre to continue to thrive to get their comments in now. I have also launched a petition to save Middleton's Crown post office from back-door privatisation, which has attracted over 1,000 signatures, and I will present it to Parliament in due course. I do not want to be here in another two years' time talking about the decline in Middleton town centre, and I urge Santander to fulfil its responsibilities under the access to banking protocol.

2.14 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I add my thanks to the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) and congratulate him on securing this debate. I am delighted to support him. As my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) said, bank branch closures affect the constituents of hon. Members on both sides of the House. It is important that we stick together to represent people and stand up for the most vulnerable in our society.

In 2016, not long after I was elected, I was faced with a couple of bank closures in my constituency, in Cheam. The high street there thrives on independent shops. First, Lloyds Bank came to the end of its lease. I would give the constituent of the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) the same counsel that I gave my constituents who were upset about losing Lloyds Bank: vote with their feet and go to HSBC up the road. Unfortunately, just a few months later, HSBC decided to close, too. Constituents can be pulled from pillar to post, continually having to move, to chase the exodus from the high streets. Banks do not want to be the last bank on the high street, because all the focus would be on them when they eventually respond to a changing market.

I retain a good relationship with my local Santander branch in Sutton, which looks after customers of the two that are now closing. I remember a tweet that I sent to a constituent on 19 May 2016, in which I said that I had had a chat to Santander, which was closing quite a

[Paul Scully]

small branch in North Cheam, but was committed to its main Cheam branch. Fast-forward only three years: that branch is now closing. The last bank in Cheam will have gone.

When Lloyds Bank and HSBC were closing, residents set up petitions, but petitions only have so much value. Yes, they can show the weight of opinion and ask the banks to please be considerate, but when a banking chain has made a corporate decision, a petition will generate heat but not a lot of light, so we need to look at other ways to respond. Can we encourage customers to move elsewhere? Can we work on the post office network, despite the restrictions on that, which we heard about from other hon. Members? Are we putting an unfair burden on the post office network and the Government in relation to decisions made by corporate organisations?

In the case of the Santander closure in Cheam, three local councillors, Elliot Colburn, Holly Ramsey and Eric Allen, have taken a different tack. Metro Bank is looking at expanding its network in other areas, so they have made a direct approach to Metro Bank, saying, "Here's a space. There are no banks. It is an area where there are a lot of independent shops. Metro Bank takes a different tack in its approach to attracting customers—it is a bit of a disruptor bank—so why don't you come in and consider Cheam as an option?"

What more can we do? We have talked about the pressure being put on to post offices. In Sutton, it looks as though our Crown post office will be moved to WHSmith, which will cause angst and concern to a number of people there. On the other hand, not far away in Belmont, a village to the south of my constituency, a post office has just been opened at the back of a pet shop, and it is one of the best-used post offices. It won an award from the network as one of the best new post offices in London, coming second only to one on Oxford Street. That is pretty impressive. If it is put in an imaginative place, it will be used.

What more can we do? Should we look at the banking hubs and a return to the '70s, or some form of technology to move banks from making corporate decisions to making marketing decisions, which can go a totally different way? If the bank takes a marketing decision to look at innovation, its corporate social responsibility will move the decision away from just being a box-ticking exercise for its shareholder report to being something that can actually add value to the high street and tackle the issues such as loneliness mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Angus. By making the high street a hub and a community centre and bringing in other businesses to work with the bank, the bank can become the centre of the high street, which has to be good for that bank.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point about hubs, as have other hon. Members. What role does he think the Government should play in that? We have heard about the closure of Crown post offices, which the Government own, but surely hubs could be there, because they are well located and owned by us. We are the taxpayers and our constituents need those services.

Paul Scully: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. We have talked about how moving Crown post offices into WHSmith branches across the country will limit their structure, because they have some big buildings at the moment. The massive floor space of the one in Sutton is well used, so I am not sure how it will cope if it is restricted at the back of somewhere. It might be a regressive move. There is a limit to how much the Government can direct the Post Office and banks, but they must have a significant influence. They should treat the issue holistically as they look at the future of the high street in general.

We have talked about the access to banking standard. At least Santander now has to go through the process of mitigating the results and looking at who the most vulnerable people are—I hope it would want to do that anyway. The people using bank branches these days tend to be older people, who do not necessarily have access to technology or are not as good at using technology as others, and retailers, especially the independent retailers that I was talking about that are still cash-heavy and need to bank their cash.

For the two branches that are closing in my constituency, the alternatives to Cheam are 1.3 miles and 3.3 miles away, and the alternatives to Worcester Park are 1.8 miles and 3 miles away. For a small business that wants to pay cash in at the end of the day, if there is no post office near enough, that is some distance to go with what might be quite a lot of cash, which is not very secure.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I support the hon. Gentleman's point about the distance for small businesses. We have that issue in my constituency with the post office closure, which relates to the bank closures. There is a village a mile away from Reading town centre, a separate entity, where three banks and a post office have closed. That is a considerable amount of travelling time for a small business trying to bank cash. We have lost other banks in locations near Reading University and we have lost further facilities in other areas too.

The hon. Gentleman makes a good point about the need to look holistically at the whole parade of shops, the needs of vulnerable local people, particularly the elderly, and the needs of local small businesses. I urge him to raise with his hon. Friends in Government the possibility of an area-based approach, whereby those different needs are taken into account as part of banking or post office regulation.

Paul Scully: In Reading, as in Sutton, the difference in mileage is relatively small, but congestion and extra traffic mean that it represents significant travel time. We cannot compete with the 15 miles that people have to travel in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Angus.

I will make a final point and then let other hon. Members speak. When banks decide to close, we have to make sure that there is still access to a cashpoint network, so people who rely on cash—although that is dying down a bit—have access to it. When I was a local councillor in the neighbouring constituency of Carshalton, I spoke to a baker who had been badly affected when Barclays and its cashpoint closed there. That village relied on its independent shops, but after the cashpoint closed, people tended to turn left, towards the larger supermarkets, rather than right, where the smaller

independent shops are. Previously, people had walked past the independent shops to get their cash and would spend money in the bakers and the other smaller shops on their way to do their main shop. Branch closures have a detrimental effect and we need to look at the issue holistically to make sure that we have a thriving, albeit changing, high street.

2.24 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): This is an important issue for me. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for securing the debate and thereby giving us a chance to contribute. Let me also put on the record my congratulations to Scottish National party Members for continually raising issues about bank closures. Every time they have brought such debates to Westminster Hall or the main Chamber, it has come from their constituents. I thank them for highlighting bank closures, because, in doing so, they illustrate how important the banks are, including in my constituency.

I have a real issue with banks closing branches and leaving the most vulnerable in our society without access to their cash and savings. It is all well and good to say that the number of transactions carried out at Santander branches fell by 23% over the past three years, while transactions online and on mobile phones soared by 99%, but that does not say that staff members have been pushing to get that figure up, as I am sure they have.

In the last few months, the Santander branch in Newtownards, which is the major town in my constituency, moved less than 100 yards from Conway Square in the centre of town to the High Street. It has a considerable customer base and very good connections and contacts with the commercial sector. At a Santander event at the branch before Christmas, I met a young lady who was there alongside Santander to state how well it had helped her to start her business from home. That is an example of how things can be done. I put that on the record, because Santander in Newtownards is obviously in touch with its customer base. It is not one of the three branches closing in Northern Ireland.

On bank closures, the fact that a large amount of people use internet banking tells a story, but does it say that they will cease to use their local branch? I do not believe it does. They will still use the branch for all the necessary things, but now they will have to go for miles to find new branches.

The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen), who has left, unfortunately, tabled early day motion 2057 on access to cash. I was more than happy to sign that early day motion, as I always am on important issues. As I have said in other debates here and in the main Chamber, I understand how important it is to have access to cash. I am one of those old-fashioned guys who likes to pay their bills by cash—perhaps that is the economy in Northern Ireland.

David Linden: The hon. Gentleman is doing himself down. It is not just an old person thing—not that he is old. Perhaps I should not be saying this from a security point of view, but for about 10 years, since I have been married, I have operated on a jam-jar basis where I take my money out at the beginning of the month and then I have my shopping budget and my fuel budget. I wanted to put that quaint point on the record.

Jim Shannon: I do not feel old, but perhaps I am of a different generation. As always, I thank the hon. Gentleman for reminding me that such things start young, as it did with my mum and dad as well. As an Ulster Scot, as I have said in the Chamber before, and perhaps in the main Chamber, “Every pound’s a prisoner.” Well, it is to me, and it probably is to the hon. Gentleman as well.

I thank the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West for tabling the early day motion on access to cash, because it is important to have it recorded. There are 23 signatures to it so far, which indicates the deep interest in the issue.

I remember when First Trust, a local bank, hired a special adviser to get people out the front of the bank au fait with online banking—the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) referred to the online banking issue. Within six months, the news was out that the branch was closing due to an uptake in specialist online banking. Hon. Members can draw their own conclusions about how and why that happened. That was the third bank to close in the main town of Newtownards and the sixth to close in my constituency of Strangford; I have had a lot of bank closures. That is why every time SNP Members have raised issues with bank closures, I have wanted to make sure that I was in there fighting for my constituency as well. As I say, over time we have had a number of banks close.

I am really quite intrigued by what the Library briefing information that we have received says, statistically and factually. Page 3 of the briefing says:

“The only region or country of the UK in which the number of bank and building society branches increased between 2010 and 2018 was Northern Ireland”.

There must have been a lot of other constituencies getting lots of banks, because I was losing them all while they were getting them all. I am not quite sure if the statistics are correct—no, I am sure they are. I am not saying they are not true; I would not say that for one second. The briefing continues on page 3:

“Northern Ireland has 405 branches, 21.6 per 100,000 residents—the highest rate of any region or country in the UK.”

That prompts the question of what is happening in my constituency in Newtownards? Why have seven bank branches closed over the past number of years, including Danske Bank, Bank of Ireland, First Trust, and Ulster Bank?

According to Which?, the consumer group, nearly two thirds of the UK’s bank branch network has been lost over the past 30 years. The number of bank and building society branches stood at 20,583 in 1988, according to our own parliamentary records, but an up-to-date analysis by Which? of current account providers suggests that that figure has dwindled to 7,586.

I understand, again from the Library information, that three Santander branches will close in Northern Ireland: in Antrim, in Ballymoney, and on Newtownards Road in Belfast. Those branches are not in my constituency, but this year Santander is due to close 140 branches in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the reason given is that there has been a marked decrease in the number of transactions. I must say that I do all my banking in the bank or on the phone, and by physical means—using banknotes—on most occasions. That is not simply to keep business in our local branches, although that plays a part. It is also

[Jim Shannon]

because—honestly—I do not fully trust online banking security. The hon. Member for Glasgow East referred to this issue at the very beginning of the debate and I agree with him, and some of my constituents do not trust it either.

Brendan O’Hara: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and no one can doubt how hard he fights for his Strangford constituents. To justify the closure of its branch in Helensburgh, Santander’s review said that 59% of its customers have used online banking, mobile banking or telephone banking, which means, by its own calculation, 41% of its customers have not. My constituents are predominantly elderly and they are being completely left in the lurch by this branch closure in our town. That is why on Saturday I will be outside the Santander branch in Helensburgh collecting names on a parliamentary petition asking Santander to reverse this deeply harmful decision.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I commend him for his industry and for the fact that he will be there on Saturday. He will have no bother getting the signatures for that petition; I have no doubt about that whatsoever. However, I hope that Santander is listening to what he says, because that situation clearly illustrates to me that his bank needs to be there and the customers want it to be there, and we are all here for the same purpose. That is the critical issue for me and for others who are here in Westminster Hall today.

I often think that if the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority can allow my staff members’ names and addresses to be released by accident, or whatever way it happened, what chance does our money have of withstanding banking attacks? That did happen—it was an oversight, it was a mistake, but it still happened. Honestly, that is why I just have this wee doubt about online banking and other things.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for giving way; I usually get his constituency the wrong way round. After some of the scandals that we have had with TSB and others locking their customers out of their online banking, is it not the case that for all this digital innovation we are nowhere close to it being reliable?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. In my first year and a half here in Parliament, there were a number of banking breakdowns—one would say—within the Ulster Bank. It happened not once, but twice, and perhaps even three times. Honestly, customers could not access their accounts by any means and it was absolutely ridiculous.

I am coming to an end, Mr Davies; I am very conscious of the time. Santander will retain a network of 614 UK branches, with its customers also having the option to bank using more than 11,000 post office sites across the UK. It is very important to have the post office. I have to say that the post offices in my constituency have been geared up to fill some of the gaps—in Ballynahinch, Killyleagh, Portaferry, Kircubbin and in Newtownards

town—where there are post offices. Credit unions have also filled some of the gaps; it has been incredibly important to have the credit unions, as well.

I still have a real fear that this consolidation of banks to cities further isolates rural communities and adds to people’s sense of being alone, with no one to talk to and no one to help, and I believe that we are further isolating an older generation, which cannot be acceptable. That is the critical fact for me. I look to the Minister, as I always do, for a comprehensive response to the issues that we are all bringing collectively to his attention today.

I conclude by saying that I believe we must put in place a minimum expectation of service provision for customers, and if we do not ask the financial institutions to step up and step in, the service provision will continue to dwindle, jobs will be lost and the only winners will be the shareholders and those who get the dividends. I believe that reform must take place and that banks must fulfil obligations to people, and not simply to profit margins.

2.35 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for securing the debate.

I want to speak first about Santander in particular and then I will have a general go at the banks, because I will feel much better when I have done that. Being a farmer, I have always had very mixed views about banks, one way or the other. They can offer someone an umbrella when the sun is shining, but they are very good at taking it away when it starts to rain.

On Santander in particular, I have had a letter from the Axminster branch—in fact, it is interesting, because I have not actually had it from the Axminster branch but from the “Head of Branch Interactions”, which is one of my points. The letter says that the Axminster branch will close on 2 May, which is a great shame for the staff, a great shame for people in Axminster and a great shame for the businesses there; naturally, Axminster is famous for its carpets, but there are also Axminster Tools and Machinery, and many other businesses. There are also lots of surrounding farms and businesses in lots of villages, with lots of people coming in to Axminster. There is no sort of local manager in Axminster; there is no local anything, is there, anymore? That is partly the trouble.

What I have been sent about the reasons why Santander is shutting the branch is quite interesting. First of all, the letter says that

“89% of customers transacting at Axminster branch already use a variety of ways to complete their banking”.

That is an interesting way to run a business, is it not? Santander is actually saying to people, “Well, because you haven’t done all your business with us, we’re going to close the branch down.” I mean, I do not think that supermarkets or anybody else would go in for that line of business.

The letter also says that

“38% of Axminster branch customers also use an additional Santander branch.”

I might occasionally visit Sainsbury’s, I might occasionally visit Tesco—I occasionally visit a number of supermarkets, in a number of towns and in a number of places, but I

would not necessarily expect to hear, “Well, because you’re a loyal customer to Sainsbury’s all over the country, I’m going to shut that branch down, because you’ve used another one.” Again, the logic is somewhat odd.

Then the letter goes on to say that

“54% of customers have transacted using our Online, Mobile or Telephone Banking services”.

That is great, but of course what banks have done—have they not?—is to make it more difficult for customers to get cheque books, or anything physical from them, and therefore they drive more and more people online. When people have gone online, they say, “Well, that’s great. You’ve all gone online now, so we’ll close the branch.” This is happening everywhere and although I am having a particular go at Santander today, it is a general malaise in the banking system.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The reasons that Santander gave the hon. Gentleman for the closure of its branch in Axminster are the same reasons it has given for the closure of branches in the market towns of Otley and Yeadon in my constituency. I would like Santander, and the other banks and building societies, to look at the Yorkshire Building Society model, whereby it has co-located with estate agents. Branches can co-locate with other businesses if there is not sufficient footfall. Before banks start closing branches, they need to look at all the options and not just close branches.

Neil Parish: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman, because I just do not think that enough thought is being given to this process. Naturally, it says in this letter I received from Santander that its customers in Axminster are able to go to the post office for cash, to put in cheques and to make withdrawals. Again, however, it is not like having a banking service. That is the other reason that I wanted to speak in this debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) made the point that we should not just highlight Santander. If I go back to the issues in Axminster, we have had branch closures there for Barclays and NatWest, and the one we have left is Lloyds. Let us hope that Lloyds stays in the town and indeed I hope that all the Santander customers pile along to Lloyds. As Members well know—putting my farming hat back on—it is not always easy to change banks. I used to have a very large overdraft with NatWest, and they did not always want me to transfer it. When a person has a business, they want some personal attention; they want to be able to see somebody; and they want to get some sort of decision on not only their everyday banking, but their business building or their business. That is just not there anymore.

I wonder, as the banks contract, whether there is one bank out there—they all advertise that they are going to listen to us more and have more local services, but they all close them—that will listen to this debate and think, “Perhaps we can work in the other direction. We will offer some sort of personal attention and look after people and businesses, and actually be there. We might open on a Saturday morning after 12.30.” Most of us work, but the banks close their branches at 12.30. Some of my Axminster constituents can go to Honiton, which is quite difficult to get to but is not that far away, but

that branch will be closed at 12.30. What is the point? If a bank is going to provide a service, why does it not open and provide it?

Hugh Gaffney: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point, because we did have a network: it was called the Crown post offices. They are closing them down. If the banks want to shut down, give us work in the post offices. Let us stop the closure of Crown post offices, get them reopened, and give the Communication Workers Union the work.

Neil Parish: The hon. Gentleman is attempting to entice me down a route that I do not quite want to go down, but I agree with him in many respects. Post offices provide a great service, and if we are to lose them as well, that is a real problem. However, at this moment in time I am in full flow about the banks, so I ask the hon. Gentleman not to put me off that particular subject.

Dr Whitford: I want to pick up on the comment that the hon. Gentleman made about people going to another town. If someone goes to another town on a Saturday morning to get their money, that is where they are going to shop. That is exactly the impact that bank closures have on our small towns and independent shop owners.

Neil Parish: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. There no longer seems to be any strategy among individual banks that would allow them to work out that closures affect not only their business, but many others. The more branches they close down, the more they will lose business, and other people will also lose business.

I am privileged to have quite an elderly population in my constituency, and that population is getting older all the time. Many country towns and rural towns in Devon are in the same interesting position, because people are getting older, and older people do not necessarily trust online banking. They like to be able to bank physically: going back to my previous comment, they like to see a person occasionally, not a machine. I am making light of these issues, but they are not really light, because so many of the older generation think that they can never see anybody or get an answer, and that everything is put in their way to stop them getting anything. We are working hard to get broadband and internet connection in rural areas—in particular, in the Blackdown hills in my area, around Axminster—but it is quite difficult. We will get there, but it is taking time.

I would like to see a strategy, not only from Santander but from all of the banks. Can we have a hub? Can we have something that actually works? Can we have a facility to which people can go? Banks might be prepared to let post offices do a certain number of transactions, but they do not like other banks doing them, yet they close their branches down. If they want to keep their competitiveness and—for want of a better way of putting it—their intellectual property rights, they should not close their branches and make it more difficult for the population to transact with them.

As I have said, I support this afternoon’s debate. It is quite difficult for the Minister, because he cannot say to banks, “You must put a branch there and keep it there.” However, what we must do as a Government, and what

[Neil Parish]

I ask the Minister to do, is ask the banks generally, “Do you have a policy that means that you look after people, get people into your branches, and create a business model that works and encourages people to bank at Santander, or any other bank that happens to be in a town?” I do not see anything at the moment that is proactive: everything is rather negative, and that is a great shame. It is our older population, in particular, that will suffer.

Businesses also suffer. I probably had too good a relationship with my local bank manager, because he probably lent me too much money, but a person should be able to actually see somebody and get a decision. If someone goes to a bank now, they will not see a manager: the decision will be passed up the line, and they may or may not get an answer. All of this is holding business back, not driving it forward. This is not just about customers, although it is very much about elderly customers: it is about business, and keeping the economy thriving. Those bank closures, and generally making it difficult to get answers about borrowing and other things that keep the economy stimulated, are real problems.

After that, Mr Davies, I feel much better. Thank you very much.

2.46 pm

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing this debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. The hon. Gentleman was right that the motion should be about not just bank closures but their effect on local communities. It has been interesting to listen to the contributions that Members have made, because bank closures rip the heart out of our communities.

I have been here long enough to see a trend develop over many years. Like the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), I received a letter from Santander saying that it is going to close down a branch, and that letter could have been cut and pasted from any other bank letter over the years. The bank says it is a very difficult decision, but, frankly, it is a corporate strategy now; it is a policy. It is part of their toolkit to say, “It is a difficult decision,” but they go ahead and do it anyway.

The letter that I got is, as the hon. Member for Glasgow East said, a desktop exercise. Mr Davies, as an expert on unitary authorities in Wales, you will know that I represent a constituency that is coterminous with the county of Ynys Môn, the Isle of Anglesey. However, the address given for Llangefni, the main market town, says it is in the county of Gwynedd, so there is an error there to begin with. Santander has not done due diligence in its exercise to close down these branches; it has done a central allocation of closures right across the country, and the brunt of that is felt by rural and periphery areas. This has an impact on the whole of my constituency.

Closures, as I have said, are done by stealth. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton, the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, is quite right: first, the hours are altered so that they do

not suit customers, and then, when those customers go in, they are encouraged to bank online. I have experienced that myself: whenever there is a temporary assistant in my local branch of Lloyds bank, they say to me, “Mr Owen, would you like to move to online banking?” and I say, “No, thank you.” Then they are told who I am, and they discreetly go to the back and say, “Oops, I’ve made a mistake.” I have been arguing for frontline services for many years, because people need that interaction. They need the privacy of speaking to somebody they know when dealing with sensitive financial issues.

Santander has shot itself in the foot with this exercise, and it is going to get no credit here for the way it has gone about it, but it is not alone. We do not have accurate figures about bank closures—there has not been a central source of data about them since 2014, and maybe the Minister can help me—but we all know they are real and they are in our communities. There should be a central source of data, because we should have facts and figures about financial exclusion. Which? is very good at helping us out and has said that there has been a decline of around 35% in banking since 2014. I did some research in my own periphery constituency, and more than 46% of banks have closed in the area—nearly half in two and a half years. That is the trend.

I am not a luddite. I can download an app and use an Apple phone, but like many of my constituents I choose not to. Broadband is not as great in my area as it is in central cities, for example, so it is difficult to use alternative banking methods. I do not want to make a bank transaction and then go offline and become stuck, or to do one draft and then another. It is a serious problem. I think the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) mentioned that the broadband distribution in her area is not suitable. There needs to be some joined-up thinking here.

The Government have played a role in the trend I mentioned. Colleagues have rightly mentioned the shrinkage of the post office network over many years. Yet the standard letters that Santander and other banks have issued say, “Go to your nearest post office,” without the banks’ having researched whether there is a threat of closure to the Crown or sub-post office in that area. That illustrates the lack of joined-up thinking.

The central negative element is the reduction of our town centres, with footfall seriously affected. I have seen it in the towns in my constituency. Llangefni is a market town. Farmers used to go there, although, unlike the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton, not to pump up their overdrafts. They used the banks regularly, as well as the shops, cafés and pubs.

Footfall is also being reduced in Amlwch, a town at the northern tip of my constituency that now has no bank at all. It has a sub-post office in a retail shop that is not as effective—no disrespect to the staff—as the post office that was closed. There is also a lack of cash machines. A lack of access to such machines has already been mentioned. I was given a letter by a very able councillor who pointed out that ATMs are often broken, and the ones that work make a charge. The surcharge is 95p on a transaction. The reason given for that is that banks now give less money to the LINK fund for ATM operators. Not only are banks closing branches, but they are cutting the money they put towards running ATMs. I am sure I am not the only one experiencing that.

Jim Shannon: I should have mentioned in my earlier contribution that ATMs in Northern Ireland have been targeted by criminals and thieves. We have the largest number of ATM break-ins and thefts across the whole of Northern Ireland, and the Police Service of Northern Ireland has set up a taskforce to take that on. It is happening with regularity. The people who run the ATMs then say to themselves, “Why should we bother putting an ATM there at all if it’s going to be broken or stolen from?”

Albert Owen: That is a very strong point, but I think the banks themselves are ripping people off if they are not giving money. Cashzone machines are charging 95p per transaction. Often they are in poorer communities. The Which? research I referred to earlier highlights that almost two thirds of bank closures have been in the poorest areas of our country—those with an average household income of less than £26,000—so the closures affect our poorer constituents.

We need to look for solutions. We have heard a few ideas about financial hubs, for example. I seriously put to the Government the proposition of using Crown post offices, because we need to look for solutions. They are closing down these buildings, which they often own and which often lie empty for some time, as in Holyhead in my constituency. Such buildings could be used as financial hubs.

I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) will be very happy that I agree with our Labour party policy to re-establish a Post Office bank—a people’s bank—and to have regional banks so that regional business can benefit. We need to go beyond just blaming the banks; we need to have a proper Government policy and framework.

Dr Whitford: We used to have the Girobank, and people’s “giro”, as their unemployment benefit or pension was called, used to be paid through it. The Government’s policy is that people receiving social security need to have a bank account. They then get sent back to the post office. Is that not Kafkaesque?

Albert Owen: I absolutely agree. The role of the Post Office is important, and the Government are the owner. We are the shareholders, and we need to look at this in the long term. Banks, whether Santander or any of the other major banks, think in the short term; they look at their shareholders and at cutting costs. If we had a people’s bank—a Post Office structure and network across the country that had the same rates—it would be fair and even for all our constituents across the country. They would have better access, and we could invest as a country in the infrastructure and the broadband. In the digital age, it could be as modern as any other bank.

That is the way we need to move. I am pleased that the Opposition Front Bench will agree with me, but I want the Minister, who is very diligent, and who looks for solutions—I am trying to help him in doing so—to stop closing the Crown post offices that we own. He should use them as major financial hubs across the United Kingdom, so that when banks are closed, we do not get bog-standard letters telling us to go to a nearby post office that is also closing down. We need a people’s bank. I say to my constituents who use Santander in

Llangefni: “Don’t travel 15 or 20 miles to your nearest post office. Change banks. If Santander won’t stand up for you, stand up for yourself.”

I pay tribute to the staff who work in banks across the country. They are the face of the banks. During the banking crisis, they took a lot of flak. It was nothing to do with them. They are diligent workers, but I am afraid that, when it comes to these large banks, these staff are just pawns in the game. They will lose their jobs, and people will lose their financial services. I want the Government and all of us to work together to stop that.

2.57 pm

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing a really important debate, as has been shown by today’s speeches. He opened it with a fantastic, detailed explanation of why it is so important to talk about how our communities will be affected by what is happening. The Backbench Business Committee must also be thanked for allowing the debate.

Last month, like everyone else, I was disappointed to receive a letter from Santander telling me that it had taken the difficult decision to close its branch in North Shields town centre on 9 May and that it was writing to all branch customers to let them know of the closure. Santander was keen to point out that it had reviewed the usage of the bank, quoting figures on the various other types of banking facilities of which customers who use the branch avail themselves. Sadly, it was clear from the letter that, without any prior customer consultation, Santander had decided that the North Shields branch did not fit in with its future plans for small digital branches or with the focus on larger community branches.

The letter went on to explain that, in accordance with the access to banking standard, the branch team, whose jobs we must remember are now under threat, will be advising branch customers about their options and, in particular, helping vulnerable customers to find alternative ways to bank locally. I am not sure that customers will be happy to learn that they have to change their banking habits. Many people do not trust online banking, as has been said, or telephone banking, because they do not see it as secure. Moreover, I do not think many people want to join the already long queues in our town centre post office, which is in the Co-op, to do their banking business over the counter. The case has already been made about the sensitivity of banking business.

The message in the letter is far from what is conveyed in Santander’s statement of vision and strategic priorities for 2016 to 2018, which remains on Santander’s website. Perhaps the bank changed that two-year vision at midnight on new year’s eve, but the statement, which I recommend that colleagues look at, is still there in black and white. It states:

“Our purpose is to help people and businesses prosper. Our aim is to be the best retail and commercial bank, earning the lasting loyalty of our people, customers, shareholders and communities. The Santander Way is how we do things in a Simple, Personal and Fair way.”

Importantly, its list of laudable strategic priorities includes communities. The bank states:

“We provide support to communities around the UK because we believe it helps us to build a successful business. By being

[Mary Glendon]

deeply engaged in the communities where our branches, banking centres and offices are located, we can better understand and serve our customers.”

The customers of the 140 branches earmarked for closure may take that with a pinch of salt. Given that the Government supported the access to banking standard, will the Minister comment on whether the bank has shown that it is merely a tick-box exercise that is of little help to the people who are about to lose personal access to their bank?

[ANDREW ROSINDELL *in the Chair*]

I accept that fewer people use banks and that many people trust them to operate their accounts online, which has affected banks' decisions to close branches in recent years. However, Office for National Statistics figures cited by the Library reveal that my area in the north-east has the lowest number of bank and building society branches in the UK and the second-lowest number of branches per 100,000 residents. That is of great concern to me, as I hope it is to the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), in his role as Minister for the northern powerhouse.

When I consulted the very proactive North Shields chamber of trade and commerce about the branch closure, it made the important point that the town has a fairly high percentage both of customers who do not use the internet and of elderly people. Those are not necessarily the same community, but in both cases they rely on being able to go into the branch to conduct their banking business. The closure will result in significant difficulties for them, especially if they want to continue using counter services at Santander. They will have to travel either three miles up the coast to Whitley Bay or eight miles west to Newcastle city centre—and that is as the crow flies. Access to transport may be another problem in terms of their ability to bank locally.

The chamber also points out that the many local businesses that have to deposit cash regularly will now have to move bank or travel to another branch. When Santander leaves North Shields, we will be left with only two banks in the town centre. The chamber, which represents a number of businesses in the town, makes the solid point that closing a branch of a national bank has a disproportionately adverse effect on town centres. Sadly, a small shop whose owner has no other resources may have no choice but to close, but banks are bigger. They should avoid sending the message that they have lost interest in a community and that they prefer to support other places.

Bank closures are affecting our already suffering high streets and town centres, which should be helped to remain the hub of our communities, as every speech in this debate has pointed out. We must stress to the Government the need for their support. My plea to Santander is to work to its own values in relation to the proposed closures of the branch in North Shields and the other 139 branches. I hope the Minister will do all he can to urge the bank to reconsider its decision. If Santander truly wants to be

“the best bank in the UK”,

as it says it does, it should deliver on its own “Simple, Personal and Fair” culture and keep those branches open.

3.4 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Rosindell. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for securing and organising this debate, which I was happy to support.

To strike a note that may be slightly discordant with the speeches of other hon. Members, I must say that I really value online banking. It has been transformative for me personally in terms of ease of access to finance, and we should not forget how many people's lives it makes easier. I am cautious about unduly amplifying people's fears about the security of transactions. Yes, there is clearly a big problem with online fraud—I myself was recently a victim to the tune of several thousand pounds—but it is a very small percentage of the overall number of transactions, and the risk lies squarely with the banks themselves. A genuine and proportionate look at the risks associated with online banking suggests that they are often outweighed by the level of convenience that it can bring if we increase people's online access and computer literacy and ensure that they have a proper understanding.

It is ultimately futile, although it may be gratifying, to rail against individual banks every time they pull out of a high street. I am deeply disappointed that Santander is pulling out of Ulverston, especially given the track record of other banking institutions that have said they foresee only one set of closures, but then, a couple of years down the track or even sooner, close other branches as well. I am waiting for the figures that Santander said it would try to get for me about the busyness of the Barrow-in-Furness branch that customers will be transferred to.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making a good case. Given the nature of his constituency, which in some ways is very similar to mine, does he agree that the branch network is particularly important to rural areas? In places such as St Andrews and Ulverston, having that rural network goes beyond the personal banking that people can do online; it connects small businesses.

John Woodcock: It absolutely does, and let me say a little more about that point before I go in what may be an unexpected direction and ask whether beating up the banks will really work. The banks on our high streets in communities such as the hon. Gentleman's and mine are so important for individual customers and businesses. Businesses need access to cash. At the meeting we had last week on the closure in Ulverston, I resolved to help the local business improvement district to survey its businesses about their priorities and needs.

Businesses report a loss of footfall every time a high street branch goes; the evidence is anecdotal at the moment, but we want to put more data behind it. There is also a community aspect. Every bank has a cohort of relatively vulnerable people who rely on it, not only for financial transactions but because it gets them out of the house and, basically, enables banking staff to check that they are okay. As those things are eroded, our communities themselves will bear the brunt.

We will not get anywhere if we do not properly acknowledge the drivers of change within our communities, where people increasingly go online. We have to see

what genuine levers we have to change things. That does not mean coming into the House of Commons and shouting at institutions; none the less, we do have levers if we are prepared to come together to demand that the Government use them. For private sector institutions, of course we can do our best to promote the business value of a high street presence. I said last week and I say it strongly again, let us be loyal to the banks that choose to be loyal to our areas.

At the meeting I mentioned, I was impressed to hear from individuals such as the mayor of Ulverston, Dave Webster, who says he has tracked his finances over the years as more and more banks have closed, and will do so again as a Santander customer moving to a branch of a bank that is prepared to have its roots in the town centre. It is good to have the Cumberland Building Society there, which prides itself on keeping footfall in the area. Let us vote with our feet and for institutions that are prepared to root themselves in our areas.

Ultimately, it will be down to the Government to respond. Some Members have rightly mentioned the Post Office. We were pleased and proud to be able to save Ulverston post office from the threat of closure. My goodness, how much more important it will be now as Santander becomes the latest branch to pull out of Ulverston. We require a loss-leading investment in communities and I suggest the Government should ultimately be the guarantor of financial services in an area through an expanded post office network.

I very much add my voice to those speaking out against further branch closures, but I want to add two more elements. First, we have the Post Office card account. I realise that primary responsibility for that lies with the Department for Work and Pensions, but I remember my time in the Department, where I was an adviser to the Secretary of State between 2005 and 2007. Back then, the civil servants, whom we generally worked with very effectively, made the tactics of “Yes, Minister” look timid as they tried to bounce through a policy that radically reduced reliance on Post Office card accounts. Frankly, in the first drafts that we saw, they were not being straight with Post Office card account customers and what their options were. The Minister might like to correct me, but I understand that that process has resumed.

It is outrageous if Post Office card account customers are not clearly told in their advice from the Government and the Post Office that they can maintain a Post Office card account. What was put to us back then and I understand may be being put to the Minister now is advice to customers on how to change from a Post Office card account to a bank account, without telling them explicitly that they have the ability to stay.

Secondly, if the policy is be loss-leading, we cannot just rely on the good will of private banking institutions. Let us put in place an ongoing levy for high street banks to make sure that an institution is rooted in communities, guaranteed by that, and let us strongly consider that institution being the Post Office.

3.14 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, Mr Rosindell. I congratulate my fellow Instagram lover, the hon.

Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), on securing this debate. We have more in common than just posting fun pictures.

Banks are a really important part of our communities. When they close they leave a hole not only in our high street, but in our community as well. The reasons for that have been stated to a considerable extent in this debate already. I am deeply concerned about Santander's decision to close branches at the scale proposed. In the area that I represent, it intends to close the New George Street branch on 5 December this year, which is quite some Christmas present for local customers, and it is not good for the staff who will lose their jobs just before the festive season.

In Plymouth we like to think that we have a special connection with Santander because we are one of only two places in the country where you can actually get a ferry to Santander, so to see the closure of branches in Plymouth is deeply worrying, and what that means has not been lost on the good folk of Plymouth.

Who do we need to aim this debate at? The remarks made by Members of all parties have been focused on the banks, but I want to focus on the Government, because the banks have had a good kicking already and certainly my fellow Devon MP, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), did a very good job of explaining why banks deserve a good kicking at times. However, we need to be cautious about what can be done to reverse the decline in branches on our high streets.

We need to make sure that people can access the services they need and that the personal touch is there, but I believe that there is something missing from this debate so far: consideration of the social purpose of banking. Banking has a financial purpose: it enables us to trade, to borrow, to invest, to save, but the social purpose is also important. It is about pooling risk, coming together, having access and being able to speak to someone to get advice on borrowing, investment and saving, and making sure we get the best financial products, but all that diminishes hugely when branches close.

I am a big fan of online banking and challenger banks. I really like my hot coral Monzo card. I like the way that I can access financial services online and in many cases get a better and faster service than I can get elsewhere—but I am not the same as everyone. We need a market within our financial services that recognises that online banking and quick dynamic services in the modern age need to sit alongside traditional high street banking that is fit for purpose. There is no better example of that than on Mutley Plain in Plymouth. I use Mutley Plain as an example because I know that the Minister was a Conservative candidate in Plymouth before he found his current seat, so he will know Mutley Plain well. When he was a candidate, Mutley Plain was full of banks. It now has hardly any banks. We have seen HSBC, Halifax, Lloyds, Barclays and NatWest all leave Mutley Plain, effectively leaving the entire community without banking services.

Not only has the community been left without the ability to access a cash machine or to get advice, but people have been left without the ability to go in and speak to someone. That is why we need to look at the importance of local banks and local services. The banks need to rediscover their social purpose. It is not sufficient

[*Luke Pollard*]

to have social purpose in PR and marketing if it does not extend from the communications department through to the boardroom and the branches themselves.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a poignant and strong speech. I could not agree with him more about spending corporate social responsibility funds to support the communities and customers that the banks are meant to serve. Does he agree with me that they should spend less money on fancy advertising and sports sponsorship and more money on keeping branches open in rural and deprived urban areas?

Luke Pollard: I am grateful for that intervention. We should ask the Minister to look at that suggestion. The Government have the power of regulation in legislation, but they also have strong soft power in terms of encouraging the banks to do the right thing. We need to recognise that customers—each of us as a customer of a bank and the people we represent—also have soft power in relation to where we choose to bank and who we choose to bank with.

When we talk about what options are available to us, it is important to recognise that the post office is an option only when we have a post office. Equally, internet banking is only an option when someone has access to the internet. There is sometimes an assumption in this place that everyone has access to the internet. That is not true. In places such as Plymouth, where we have high levels of poverty and deprivation, not everyone has access to the internet. Not everyone has a mobile phone with data allowance that allows them to access data. With the closure of libraries in recent years, free access provision through library services is also not always available. If the Post Office network and the library network is to be a genuine and meaningful alternative, we need to make sure that they can be accessed. We must not fall into the middle-class trap of thinking that everyone has the same as the people who largely populate the House of Commons. That is certainly not true in Plymouth and it is a point that we need to address.

I asked people on my Facebook page a few days ago about their experiences of banks closing. The most powerful testimonies come from people with disabilities, for whom the ability to access a local banking service is not just about the service they should have as a normal human being, but is about the additional support that they need and deserve to access those services, which cannot be provided by someone at the end of the phone or a few clicks away on the internet. They need a real human being to interact with. That was the case for so many people who spoke to me and gave me their stories and views about what we need to do. I turn back to the Minister. Where do we go from here?

There is a real risk that whole communities will lose access to banking services, because banks are closing progressively. Today's debate is about the decisions of Santander. A few months ago, it might have been about other banks, and in a few months' time, it will probably be about other financial service providers. What is the safety net? What is the minimum guarantee that the Government believe that we should have?

The idea about banking hubs is a good one. In Plymouth, we are doing something similar in bringing together health and wellbeing services. City centre hubs will bring together all the aspects of the public estate that need a front door in the city centre, and I hope the Department of Health and Social Care will fund that. The principle applies to financial services, just as it does to dentistry, GP services, sexual health and mental health provision, and we should look at that.

One element of hub services is about using empty buildings. My hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) talked about empty buildings. In many cases, the buildings left vacant by banks still have an ongoing lease—they are still paying for the lease of the buildings. There should be questions about the social purpose of an empty building, and about how we as parliamentarians can put pressure on, as we have done on empty homes, to rediscover the social purpose of empty buildings with an ongoing lease.

The post office network has been mentioned, which reminded me of a visit I made to the Efford Road post office in Compton ward in my constituency, just before Christmas. I spoke to Michael Zheng, the postmaster of that small but well-loved post office. He described how since the banks have closed locally, he has taken on the financial transactions for local shops and has huge amounts of cash deposited with him, but the contract for local post offices for processing cash transactions has changed recently, which means that in many cases it is not viable for him as an employer to pay someone to spend the time processing the cash in and out and providing banking services for local businesses; the agreement between his local business and the Post Office no longer makes that worthwhile. That needs to be looked at.

The health of our high street depends not only on shops where people want to spend their money, banks where they can access their money, borrow and save, a culture where people can enjoy shops, and restaurants where they can eat and drink. We need to look at how we repurpose the high street in those terms, but there are also regulatory protections that deserve consideration. We are not in a normal time for Conservative party thinking in respect of allowing the free market to do its thing on high streets, where financial services can come and go as they please. We are now seeing the forced financial exclusion of people in our communities because banks are exiting our high streets. That demands a different approach, which we need to identify before we get to the point where we have lost banks entirely from our high streets.

There are alternatives and there are models of investment in our high streets. I mention in particular South West Mutual, a co-operative that has formed in the four counties of the far south-west to provide high-street banking services on a mutual model. As the big multinational banking giants are exiting our high streets, in many cases, it is the small mutuals—the people with social purpose—that are coming to replace them. I commend the work that South West Mutual is doing. I love it when it says:

“We believe that bank managers who know their communities well make the best lending decisions, and we are committed to providing branch facilities so that you can choose how you want to bank.”

That is precisely the type of ethos we need to see lived and breathed by those big financial giants, not just the mutuals. If we keep seeing TV adverts from big banks telling us just how much they care about us and our communities at the same time as they close our banks, more people will take their custom away from those banks, and rightly so. We deserve better, they deserve better, and our high streets and our communities deserve better than the high PR spend trying to tell us something different from the lived experience of far too many people in our communities.

3.25 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I am pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who always speaks with so much authority on matters not just in his own constituency, but across the piece.

The Santander branch in Crouch End in my constituency is one of the 140 scheduled to close. One hundred and forty is quite a large number and I am pleased to see how well attended the debate has been. I have heard from elderly constituents who are devastated by the news that the Santander branch is going to close. One constituent who got in touch is 88 years old. He is uncomfortable using computers and prefers to do his banking in the branch rather than online. He said that it is always busy when he goes there, but now he will be forced to get on the bus and travel all the way up to Muswell Hill. His friend changed her bank to Santander because her local bank branch had closed, and now Santander is doing the same. She is elderly and disabled and feels betrayed and let down.

I met with Santander bosses this week to express my opposition to the plans. At the meeting, I asked about the impact on staff. I was told that the branch has 10.8 full-time equivalent staff, and while they hope to redeploy some, there are no guarantees. In the meantime, the bank has put new staff on to short-term contracts, so that when those contracts finish, other staff can be put into those roles. That leads to lack of security in the workforce, something that many of us have campaigned very hard to counter.

The Communication Workers Union is working hard to defend its members nationwide. It says that the reductions to the Santander UK branch network place 1,270 workers at risk of redundancy and the bank expects to be able to redeploy only around a third of those affected, so hundreds of qualified hard-working employees will be out of work. Elderly and disabled customers will have to travel further to access vital services. Crouch End will also lose its ATM, so thousands of shoppers, workers and local residents will be inconvenienced.

Bank branches are disappearing at an alarming rate—a whopping 40% have closed since the Conservative Government came in in 2010. That is symptomatic of a wider problem in the banking sector, and is a quiet scandal that has seen many people lose their local services.

All too often, big banks have put their own profits above the needs of their customers. Think back to the origins of banking, with good banks, originally run by

Quakers such as the Barclays; then look at the recent stories of Barclays, where the chief executive was forced to pay fines to the Financial Conduct Authority due to bad behaviour. Look at the banks flogging dodgy mortgages, a major cause of the crisis in 2008. Look at the LIBOR scandal or the exorbitant fees. We used to have bank robbers; now the banks rob us. We had foreign exchange manipulation. We had overdraft charges, ripping off customers. We had the payment protection insurance mis-selling scandal, which has been going on since 2005 and which I believe is at £40 billion so far—the shadow Minister may correct me. Furthermore, there are charges on withdrawing cash from ATMs, and operators fail to repair ATMs in a timely manner. Just how low can the banking sector get?

What can the Government do? Well, they could do much more. They are being a bit too *laissez-faire*, considering that closures of bank branches are landing blow after blow on the high street. The Minister will correct me if I am wrong, but I think there have been three reviews of the high street since 2010. Rather than launch just another review, why not play a key co-ordinating role between banks and stop the closures of Crown post offices, or at least support credit unions? I believe that another credit union has gone out of business this year because it was slightly overleveraged, and because so many people cannot afford to pay back very small loans. A number of small loans have led to certain credit unions not being able to survive. What are the Government doing proactively to support credit unions in areas where we know they can do so much good?

I would like to see a much more proactive approach. My colleagues mentioned the Labour approach to regional banks, which is a very good idea. I had a good look through the Minister's written parliamentary responses to Members' questions on bank closures and I have to confess that I found them mealy-mouthed—"Well, it's the commercial decision of banks. We haven't got anything to do with it." Is that not the attitude that has got us into so much hot water since 2008? Have we learned nothing about the attitude of banks? Do they care about their customers? No, otherwise Santander would not be closing 140 branches. It might be acceptable to close a few, or to close the same number at a slower pace, but there will be 140 bank branch closures. Despite being in a different party, I completely agree with the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) on the dreadful treatment of customers, the fact that there is no personal approach to banking anymore and the fact that so many customers are being let down. I very much look forward to hearing some really innovative, far-reaching and radical suggestions from the Minister.

3.31 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I pay tribute to my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), for securing this debate. He spoke very powerfully about the impact that these bank closures will have on the city of Glasgow and further afield.

As I listened to my constituency neighbour's comments, I reflected on the picture in Glasgow. By my calculation, there are five Santander branches in the city of Glasgow, yet the two that have been earmarked for closure are in Springburn in my constituency and in Parkhead in the

[Mr Paul Sweeney]

hon. Gentleman's constituency. They just happen to be the two worst areas of Glasgow for social multiple deprivation, which leads to me to look at the wider programme of branch closures. In the last four years there have been four branch closures in my constituency, including two run by the Royal Bank of Scotland—one in Dennistoun and the other in Possilpark, directly opposite my constituency office—and the Clydesdale Bank in Springburn, just around the corner from the Santander branch that is earmarked for closure. The only branches left will be the TSB in Dennistoun and in Springburn. We are down to some of the last banks in the poorest communities in Scotland, which is a great tragedy. What does it say when we extrapolating that observation across the country?

Of the five branches in Glasgow, the ones in Shawlands, Byres Road, Argyle Street and Sauchiehall Street are staying open. They are in quite prosperous parts of Glasgow, and I think they are staying open simply because the current accounts held at those branches are much more valuable to the bank. It is profit-seeking behaviour, and there is no legislative imperative for the bank to correct it. The bank will therefore seek to maximise profit at the expense of its customers.

David Linden: There was a point that I omitted from my speech due to time constraints. One of the things that I learned from speaking to the staff was that we had a mortgage adviser in Parkhead. Given that they were not doing a roaring trade, apparently they were taken out six months before the decision to announce the plans for closure. That absolutely backs up the hon. Gentleman's point: these decisions are made entirely on the basis of profit rather than on serving the people who live in those communities.

Mr Sweeney: I accept that observation. To be fair, my interaction with a physical branch is limited, because I have adopted new technology—I suppose it is because I am a millennial. I use the banking app for TSB, despite some recent difficulties with the transfer from Lloyds TSB using the banking technology. The only time I visited a branch for any substantial business was when I took out a mortgage in Dennistoun about three years ago. The hon. Gentleman makes the point that if we are going to cut the cloth, we will create almost a self-fulfilling prophecy by stripping out key banking services such as mortgage provision, which is a great problem.

Luke Graham: The hon. Gentleman is making a very solid point about deprivation. Some of his branches, and my branch in Alloa, are in some of the most deprived parts of our country, yet they are having services taken away. When Santander and other banks consider branch closures, they look at levels of deprivation in a constituency and they have an index. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the index should be made public and that we should put the access to banking standards on a statutory footing, so that these closures can be subject to real consultations and be far more transparent?

Mr Sweeney: A rare collegial moment for the Chamber, perhaps. I agree entirely, and I was just about to come on to that issue.

When I met with Santander management last week to discuss the closure of the Springburn branch, I made the observation, "I recognise exactly why you're doing this." They did not deny it. I also said, "Yes, there needs to be total visibility about the economic impact and the disparity in terms of the demographics of where these bank closures are happening, because there is no visibility of that pattern." This was recognised long ago: in the 1970s in America, there was a practice called red-lining, which involved American banks deliberately blacklisting poorer communities and withdrawing banking services.

In 1977, the Carter Administration passed the Community Reinvestment Act. As a result, commercial banks in America are obliged to redistribute their profits into sponsoring co-operative banking services and mutuals, and to promote credit unions. There is therefore a much more diverse range of banking services as a result of direct Government intervention to redistribute those services, which dates back to the 1970s. As a result of the Community Reinvestment Act, Santander will invest £11 billion in sponsoring co-operative banking, mutuals and other sustainable banking activity. That is a hefty redistribution and is in stark contrast with what happens in the United Kingdom, where there is no legislative imperative for banks to do it. We need to address that yawning chasm in legislation.

I made the point to the Santander management that the root cause of a lot of these problems is the increasing monopolisation of the banking sector in the UK. We have five major clearing banks, which hold 85% of all current accounts. By comparison, in Germany there are 400 local Sparkassen banks and over 1,000 co-operative banks. Clearly the picture there is very different, because there is legislation in place to redistribute the holding of capital in the banking system, so it is done more sustainably and is more responsive to local communities and to sectors of industry. As a result, Germany has a much healthier and more balanced economy.

I also made the point that Santander's origins lie in the Abbey National, which was demutualised in 1989, the year I was born. We have seen a pattern of demutualisation across the banking sector, which has been negative for the UK economy. I would seek legislation to reverse the demutualisation of the British banking system.

Catherine West: Is it not particularly galling that a bank that used to be a building society with a sense of social conscience is inflicting this huge series of bank closures on our local communities?

Mr Sweeney: Absolutely. It is a stark example of the exploitation that we see on multiple fronts. We see it not only in universal credit, jobcentre closures and post office closures, but in things such as fixed-odds betting terminals and bookmakers being concentrated in poorer communities and high streets. We also see a stark contrast in microcosm in Springburn shopping centre. Right next door to the Santander branch is a branch of BrightHouse, which is a rapacious lender exploiting the poorest communities in our country. In my opinion, its practices should be illegal. It is just as bad as the payday loan lenders. That is a good example in microcosm in Springburn of what is wrong with the British economic system, writ large. We need to address that.

I hope the Minister will reflect on the reality. He is welcome to come and visit my constituency and see what it looks like on the ground. If we do not fix it, we will entrench economic division, alienation and the sort of social tensions that exist in our country, and which might have erupted as the reason why so many people voted to leave the European Union. A source of their frustration was an economic system that does not serve their interests. This is all connected; there is a complex interdependency. We need to address the wider tensions in society. This is yet another example of what is wrong with the state withdrawing from regulation and permitting neo-liberal practices to prevail. It is a major concern and needs to be addressed.

In the case of Springburn, the bank justified its closure programme by saying that there was a 25% reduction in footfall. I accept that the industry is subject to disruption due to changes in technology, as the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) said. However, the curve is way ahead of where people are at on the ground. The Government should be involved in closing down that gap, so that it reflects the real transitions that people make, particularly elderly people and disabled people.

It was claimed that 91% of people use a variety of other ways to engage with the bank in Springburn, but that includes phoning up the local branch to make an enquiry and using an ATM. Those are not mutually exclusive activities, so that is a questionable statistic. A minority of users—only 46%—use another Santander branch. The nearest branch is in Glasgow city centre, which is an expensive bus ride away for many people, particularly given that the community has a very low car ownership rate. A minority of customers—only 49%—use online or telephone banking services.

The Springburn branch is proposed to close in June this year, yet Santander's lease will not expire until December, so for six months it will be a blight on the community with boarded up frontage. I want the bank to address that, as a minimum. If it is going to close the branch, it should ensure there is a transition. I appeal to it to realise its social responsibilities.

Ironically, at 2 pm today the Springburn Regeneration Forum kicked off across the way from the Santander branch in the Springburn shopping centre that is proposed to close. It is a community-led approach to bring together the council and other stakeholders to plan the regeneration of Springburn. What a blow that on the same day that that is happening the bank across the way in the Springburn shopping centre has announced that it is pulling out of the community. That is a sad illustration of our commercial banks' lack of social conscience. That should be addressed. If the banks do not do so voluntarily, it should be done through legislation.

In a nutshell, that is what I think is wrong with the UK banking system and what the Minister should reflect on. I am sure our Front Bench team will do so, too. I am a Labour and Co-operative Member of Parliament. We are committed to a massive restructuring of the UK banking system in favour of co-operative banking, mutuals and a more equitable form of financing our economy. That is what we are supporting.

3.41 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I thank my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), for securing this debate.

In my constituency of Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill, we have seen the loss of local branches in recent years. Recently, Stepps, Tannochside and Bellshill have all seen their local Royal Bank of Scotland close down, despite the fact that the Government own the majority stake in RBS and could have kept some of those branches open and protected those jobs. We have also seen the collapse of Scotland's oldest savings bank, the Airdrie Savings Bank, which led to the loss of branches in Coatbridge and Bellshill.

The loss of those branches in my constituency are just a snapshot of what I have heard today and what is happening throughout the whole country. I repeat that the rot started with the Crown post office closures. Now Santander says, "Let's turn to the Post Office. It can help us." Too little, too late.

Mr Sweeney: My hon. Friend is making a very important point about the post offices. One of the justification for the Santander closures was, "Don't worry. The bank service can transition over to the post office." The Springburn post office has been put up for franchising and will be in the back of a grocery store somewhere. That is hardly a place that someone is going to go to take out a mortgage, is it?

Hugh Gaffney: That is exactly what is happening up and down the country. I have seen many fighting for people's jobs in Crown post offices, which have good terms and conditions that are not matched by WHSmith.

I asked the Chancellor in a written question whether the Treasury had made any assessment of the impact of Santander's decision to close branches on consumers' access to money. I received a reply from a Minister, who stated that the Treasury had made no assessment, and that it was a commercial decision for Santander. How often have we heard that? I would like the Chancellor and his Treasury Ministers to tell the affected communities that the Government have made no efforts to determine the impact of the proposed branch closures on their ability to access their money. That is their written answer: no effort, no access. That is shameful, but it is an all-too-common attitude for this Government.

The impact of the branch closures has been worsened by the loss of cashpoints. Figures released this week by Which? show that 280 cashpoints were lost across Scotland in 2018, 203 of which were free to use. Despite the growth of online and telephone banking, 73% of the public continue to use cash frequently to pay for goods and services. My children still use cash; the elderly still use cash. This is not a cashless community yet. The branch closures and the loss of cashpoints only make it harder for people to access their money. The branches and cashpoints are being lost in the poorest and most vulnerable communities in the UK, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) pointed out, and as many others up and down the country know.

[Hugh Gaffney]

Which? has asked the Government to appoint a new regulator with sole responsibility for cash infrastructure. I think that is a much-needed step forward to ensure that consumers and businesses can continue to access cash. I urge the Government to take action by creating a regulator, so we can begin to reverse some of the devastating effects that our communities have experienced because of the branch closures and the loss of cashpoints. If they are not listening today, when will they start listening?

3.45 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I, too, thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) and the other Members who supported his bid for this debate. It is great to see this Chamber so busy, as it often is not. That shows the strength of feeling and how much the closures will affect our communities.

The letter that I received was sent to me as a customer. That was the first that I heard that our Santander branch in Troon was closing. I was previously a customer of RBS, and, like some other hon. Members, I moved my custom to Santander. I am not really sure where I am heading next. That is one of 140 closures—one fifth of the Santander network—15 of which are in Scotland. Some 1,300 jobs are now under threat, and only one third are likely to be redeployed. In the meeting, we were told that a third of those staff are looking to retire, get a package and get out. Have those discussions taken place, or is that a presumption?

Catherine West: Does the hon. Lady agree that it is inappropriate for an organisation to put staff on to less secure contracts in the knowledge that it will make 1,200 staff redundant, and might need those jobs later? It is not just a slap in the face to customers but to the staff who work hard in those branches.

Dr Whitford: I absolutely agree. I pay tribute to the staff in my branch, who were very helpful when we opened our account and are always cheerful. They are not about to retire. They are young working people who are not looking to take a package, but will need a job. They are being made unemployed, and they are deeply shocked by that.

There have been 3,000 branch closures since 2015, 230 of which are in Scotland. Two thirds of branches have been cut since the end of the '80s. By the end of this year, we will have fallen from 21,000 to less than 7,500 across the UK. That is an incredible change. I totally accept that banking is changing, but, like many others, I use mixed banking. I will use an ATM, go into my branch and do online banking, but it is important that I have that choice. We are talking about choice being taken away.

This change is 20 years too early; we are not yet cashless or online. My mum, who is 84, and most people over 70 are not happy to do banking or any sensitive financial transactions online. My mum has her iPad and can do emails. It is not stupidity. She simply does not trust it. In making this change, we are leaving two decades' worth of older citizens feeling uncomfortable and like they have had things taken away from them.

When banks move out, they do not leave their ATMs behind, which means that there is less access to cash in community after community, and the ATMs that remain are running out. Troon has already lost three banks. This is our fourth. I went through all this with RBS, which tried to use a unique customer identifier. It told me that only 97 customers a week went into the branch. I found that really strange, because every time I went in, I was in a queue. It only counted people who only went into that branch and went into the branch every single week. As was said, no other business would count custom in that fashion. When I finally got the correct figures out of RBS, that number was 10 times as high. Yet the bank would not reconsider its decision.

Although my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East has highlighted the issue of vulnerable people who have poor internet access, in Troon, a place to which many people retire, the issue is the elderly. In the impact assessment, it says that 58% of people have, on at least one occasion, used online, mobile or telephone banking, meaning that 42% have never used those methods. There is no quantification, so we do not know—as the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) said—whether someone simply phoned the branch to ask what its opening hours are or when they could go in to get a statement. The idea that that means someone is suddenly ready to manage all their finances by phone or online is just a fairy tale.

The problem we have is that our elderly population is suddenly being told, as I was assured, that the closest branches are within a 10-mile radius—it is seven miles in one direction and 11 miles in the other—and for most of the elderly who live in Troon, however, that means taking two buses and more than an hour's journey on a bus that is not frequent, so a visit to the branch could mean a three-hour round-trip. As was highlighted earlier in the debate, that also takes footfall out of Troon's town centre, because if someone takes the trouble to go to Ayr, the chances are that they will shop in Ayr. They will not come back, go in to the middle of Troon, shop, and then get a bus home. That is gradually killing our high streets.

The access to banking standard and the need for an impact assessment were mentioned. We have all been sent little infographic-laden impact assessments, but it strikes me that they are largely about the impact on the bank. They are not really about the impact on customers, staff or our high street. The hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) mentioned the idea of having a hub. The obvious way to do that would be to bring back Crown post offices, but why do we expect post offices to co-locate with other businesses, but not banks to co-locate with each other or with post offices? It is absolutely vital that communities have some form of safe and secure access to financial services and advice.

Post offices are proposed as the answer to everything, but we cannot use them to open new accounts, carry out bank transfers or, if trying to manage our money, get full bank statements—only a balance. We certainly cannot arrange loans. Many of us used to go into a bank to speak to our bank manager, who was very strict about the income that we needed to obtain a mortgage. Part of what led to the 2008 crash was random decisions to lend people three, four, five, six or seven times their income so that they could get a mortgage, instead of giving them the chance to sit down and talk with someone who could see their financial performance. That applies to

business customers who, at the early stages of development, need really personal input from someone who manages their service.

Quite apart from being the answer to all those problems, post offices are struggling financially. Previously, postmasters would get a fee, but funding for that is being cut from £210 million to just £70 million. As this is the fourth bank to close in Troon, all of that work is going to the post office. It has the same number of counters that it has always had, and it had a two-year gap of struggling to find a new postmaster when our previous one was ill and found it frankly all too stressful. In the Which? survey, 42% of those not happy about the move to the post office were concerned about queues. If the post office has the same number of counters but is suddenly doing the work of four banks, queues are inevitable.

Our closest town, Prestwick, has also lost three banks. When I met our postmaster after the most recent closure, he was initially quite positive, because he saw it as a business opportunity. I met him recently, however, and the bank transactions actually take money out of his business. Cash deposits are time consuming and he has had to take on an extra part-time member of staff. He does over 500 extra banking transactions a month and takes in £1 million a month. While Santander charges £7 per £1,000 deposited, the postmaster is paid 37p per £1,000 deposited. The Government subsidy for the 3,000 community post offices that are protected as the last shops in the village will end in 2021. We will literally have dead and empty communities with no access to anything and nothing to maintain footfall in a town centre.

We need to reward and support the post office. Santander is one of the biggest users of post office services, because it makes its business customers deposit cash in the post office. The fee paid to post offices for those transactions is currently being renegotiated. It is critical that that fee be fair, because otherwise we will see the last remaining Crown post offices not redeveloped as banking hubs, but shut down. Frankly, post offices wedged in corners of shops are not always accessible, are often cluttered and do not offer privacy to carry out financial decisions and management.

Albert Owen: Is there not an additional risk of going in with one retailer—WHSmith, for example—because many high streets brands are closing down, meaning the whole service could go?

Dr Whitford: That is the problem. We almost have that tumbling effect—the work is just passed to someone else, who cannot maintain it, and it is passed on again. It is important that there is a different way of looking at the issue. I agree with the hon. Member for Glasgow North East: it is down the Government to look at innovative approaches across the world, see how such banks are expected to behave in other countries, and, perhaps, to learn from America—not in all things, but in the idea of having regulation to ensure support for financial facilities in all our communities, and not just the leafy streets of middle-class suburban areas.

3.56 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) and the Backbench Business Committee for enabling us to have this debate on a topic that is clearly vital to many communities.

We have heard some very good speeches today from the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), the hon. Members for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), my hon. Friends the Members for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) and for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon), the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), my hon. Friends the Members for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) and for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) and my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney). That is quite a coalition, by any measure of parliamentary activity. Each of those speakers articulated very well the impact of bank branch closures—not just by Santander, but more widely—on their communities. Each speech raised several issues of public policy that I certainly agree need to be addressed.

The debate has shown that the challenge to maintain a banking sector that works for everyone at a time of rapid technological change is not being met and that the balance between digitisation and traditional banking models is not being got right. I want to say a few words to concur with the sentiment in the room today, but also a little about some possible solutions to these problems.

In advance of the debate, Santander provided some statistics on how people use its services and how that has changed. It said it has experienced a decline of about a quarter in branch transactions over the past three years, including for branch ATMs. It went on to say that that trend is expected to continue, with a projected 37% decline in branch visits across the industry in five years' time. That is an empirical case for branch closures. We understand that—it is based on numbers and projected future demand. Those numbers alone, however, do not tell us the real story of how people depend on some of those services.

Today we are here specifically to debate the impact on local communities, and to do that, I want to share with colleagues and with industry, which will listen to the debate, the experience of my constituents and what bank branch closures have meant for them. Thankfully, the Santander branch in Hyde is not earmarked for closure in this round, but in recent years my constituency has lost branches of RBS, Lloyds, HSBC and Yorkshire Bank. Yesterday, on my Facebook page, I asked my constituents to share with me some of their direct stories of what that has meant for them. The first comment was:

“Losing the Lloyds in Stalybridge has been a blow. Yes there is one in Ashton”—

the town next door—

“and there is online banking. But there is no substitute for making an appointment you can walk to, talking to an actual human being.”

Another constituent, from Droylsden, which is just outside my constituency, said:

“Here...we now don't have a single bank! We've gone from having Lloyds, NatWest, Royal Bank of Scotland and Halifax to having none!!! Our infrastructure dwindles by the day.”

The problem is even more acute for colleagues in more rural constituencies.

[Jonathan Reynolds]

For businesses as well as individuals branch closures have posed particular challenges. One business owner—an existing Santander customer—said:

“You can do banking at the Post Office but, in order to pay things in, you have to get in touch with your bank first and get paying in slips sent out. Santander would only send me 5 and I have run out now. It means that I can’t accept cheques for my business easily, and I don’t have time to keep ringing up for more paying in slips.”

Someone else said:

“It’s a killer for small businesses, who have to close their shops to go and stand in a queue for a lengthy period of time just to get change.”

Catherine West: Given the history over the past decade of how small businesses have been let down by the big banks, does my hon. Friend agree that this is yet another slap in the face for small business?

Jonathan Reynolds: I agree with my hon. Friend. She is right to highlight—she did so in her speech—the many difficult issues with conduct in the UK banking industry, and specifically the abuses of lending to small businesses, which we have had many debates about in this Chamber and the main Chamber. Such abuses are particularly difficult to hear about—people have suffered some real abuses—and compounding them makes things especially difficult.

I have heard some particularly moving stories from those who care for others, who have borne the brunt of some closures. This comment choked me up:

“My mum with Alzheimer’s relied on her Lloyds branch in Droylsden before it was shut. The staff knew her well and helped her. They knew her condition and if she was in a bad way they would phone me and give her a cup of tea while they waited for me to arrive. The staff said there were lots of other people like my mum. The closure really affected her.”

Such stories show that we are talking about real people and the impact on their lives. Those are real experiences. The data do not always reveal that. The banks, of course, have the right to present that data to us, but our job is to tell the human side of the story.

We cannot hold back the tide of technological change—like some of my colleagues, I am not a luddite, and I love technology—but we can stop to think about how to make it work for us, not the other way around. Without protection the move to online as a default option will risk leaving the most vulnerable and marginalised in our society without services that work for them.

As we have seen in the debate around ATMs—which were raised several times in this debate—the risk is that we will sleepwalk into a society without access to cash at all, with the industry realising that we need those safety nets only when it is too late. Access to cash is becoming an increasing challenge for people, following bank closures and the decline in our high streets. The chair of the Payment Systems Regulator, Charles Randell, was right to ask in a Treasury Committee evidence session earlier this week whether access to ATMs should be seen as a universal service. I am sympathetic to that.

No one wants to prevent innovation. Indeed, some technological advances, such as remote video appointments or audible speaking ATMs, could for the first time help to include people who have historically had trouble

interacting with traditional banking. Our objective, however, must be to use technology to benefit all customers, rather than creating a pared-down, automated banking sector that leaves people without the support they need.

The bank branch network has been shrinking at an accelerating rate. In December 2016, Which? reported that more than 1,000 branches of major banks had closed between January 2015 and January 2017. Banks stopped publishing data on closures in 2015, and there is now no central source for it, so the exact number of closures becomes more and more difficult to find out. Since those figures were published, however, we have seen multiple further closure announcements from banks, including Yorkshire Bank, RBS, Lloyds and now Santander.

The scale of the closures seems disproportionate and does not necessarily match how people want to use their bank branches. Also—this has come out in the debate—some of the modelling around the closures does not reflect the fact that branches are all closing at the same time. That was particularly the case in Scotland with RBS. Research conducted by the Social Market Foundation in 2016 found that strong consumer appetite remains for a physical presence. Nearly two thirds of consumers would prefer to talk to someone face to face when making a big financial decision.

A report by Move Your Money, published in July 2016, made the damning assessment that, far from responding to market pressures, the major UK banks are simply closing branches in poorer areas and opening or retaining them in more affluent ones. That is simply not acceptable. The same report mapped bank branch closures against the postcode lending data from the British Bankers Association, which is now UK Finance, to show that bank branch closures dampen SME lending growth significantly in the postcodes affected. The figure grows even higher for postcodes that lose the last bank in town. At a time when we all want to stimulate more lending to SMEs and to encourage growth, a sustained programme of bank branch closures risks taking us in precisely the wrong direction.

Labour’s answer to that is a proposal to change the law regulating banks so that no closure can take place without a real local consultation or the Financial Conduct Authority approving the tranche of closures. A future Labour Government would obligate banks to undertake a real consultation with all customers of the branch proposed for closure, including local democratic representatives on the relevant local council. The bank would be mandated to publish details of the reasons for closure, including the financial calculations showing the revenues and costs of the relevant branch. The share of central costs such as accounting systems, IT, cyber-security and personnel would have to be identified separately, because many of those costs are relatively fixed and not proportionate to the number of branches. The FCA’s approval would be needed for any bank branch closure. We think that is the right balance. It accepts that, as technology changes, there might be some closures, but it would ensure that customers are not forgotten about or taken for granted.

That is our policy on closures, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn said, we wish to go further. The Post Office is often referred to as the solution to bank branch closures, through its relationship with the Bank of Ireland. That is better than nothing—something like £14 billion in deposits is held in accounts linked to

the Post Office—but there are clearly shortfalls. The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire highlighted some of those in her speech.

The potential exists, however, to build on that model and to create a genuine Post Office bank, which would ensure universal access to banking services for every part of the UK. It would be a standalone institution; it would pay the post office network for use of those branches, and it would therefore replace the network subsidy payment. It would offer a future for the Post Office, as well as for financial services in every part of the country. It would be held in a public trust model, with 100% of the shares held in trust for the public benefit, ensuring that no future Government could seek to privatise it. I plan to develop those plans and to present them in more detail in the near future, alongside our plans for the future of the public stake in RBS and other measures designed to increase plurality in the banking sector, including the return of new post offices to the UK.

Albert Owen: Is not one of the problems—perhaps a future Labour Government could address this—that so many different Departments are involved? We have heard about the Department for Work and Pensions and about the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, with its responsibility for the Post Office, and the Treasury Minister is responding to the debate. Would my hon. Friend include in his plans a responsible Minister so that there is accountability to Parliament?

Jonathan Reynolds: That is an interesting submission. Ultimately, if we wish to see the kind of developments that my hon. Friend and I would like to see, we have to have the Treasury behind them, in whatever way Whitehall responds to that. Clearly, there are lots of different aspects; some are about the legislative environment, some about the regulatory environment and some about the spending decisions that need to be made if we are serious about ensuring universal access to financial services.

In every debate such as this, we all recognise that the financial crisis has had a severe and long-lasting impact on communities in Britain. That fallout has damaged the banking sector in the public's eyes—we cannot get away from that—but banks must not compound that damage with an overly aggressive and sustained programme of closures, which risks being another step in leaving the high street as an empty shell. Regulators, banks and policy makers need to work together to build a viable banking infrastructure that works for all customers and all communities in a way that will ultimately restore trust and confidence in the UK banking sector.

4.09 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): May I say what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell? I commend the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for securing this debate and the 28 colleagues across the House who have made speeches or interventions in what has been a thorough examination of this important issue. As well as a Minister I am a constituency MP, and I recognise the pressure on us when our constituents are not happy with decisions.

Since taking up the position of Economic Secretary last January, I have become well acquainted with branch closures. They can be very difficult for the communities affected and, as we have seen this afternoon, they arouse strong passions across the House. I have taken time to speak with affected customers and businesses, including on my visit to Scotland last August, in order to really understand the concerns. I frequently raise this topic in my regular meetings with banks and the Financial Conduct Authority.

I will seek to address the points made by the hon. Member for Glasgow East and others across the Chamber. He referenced his community in Parkhead and the issues of staff, the impact assessment, the limitations of the relationship with the post office network that many Members have mentioned, and access to cash, which falls under the Treasury's remit, although the Exchequer Secretary is responsible for that.

Closing a branch is never an easy decision, but it is one that banks take based on their assessment of current and future branch usage and customer behaviour. It is an assessment that they, as commercial businesses, are better placed to make than Government. That is why the Government do not intervene in individual branch closure decisions. However, the Government should not abdicate responsibility for some of the issues that arise.

Catherine West: In his reply to a written question by my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), the Minister said:

“the Treasury does not collect data relating to bank branch closures or related job losses.”

Does he believe that is an adequate Government response to 1,200 job losses and the closure of 40% of bank branches? Does the Minister believe that the Treasury should collect that kind of data?

John Glen: As I was going to respond to the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), who also raised that point about bank branch closure figures, the FCA, which is the regulator responsible for regulating banks, did some analysis of branch closures as part of its “Strategic Review of Retail Banking Business Models” published in December last year. The full research can be found in an annex to the review. The analysis looks at the number and pattern of closures, how they affect urban and rural areas, the age of the customer, the level of deprivation and income levels. It is a thorough analysis across multiple banks and it very much informs Government policy.

Neil Parish: How much do the Government ask the banks to co-operate with one another, so that there is some sort of service from whichever bank denomination it might be? At the moment, they are just closing and there does not seem to be any pattern to help our constituents who want to receive financial services.

John Glen: My hon. Friend's intervention picks up on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) and others about hubs. The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) raised it to, and I think in his maiden speech he talked about the need to bring banks together. There is no regulatory bar to that and it might be a model that banks will wish to reflect

[John Glen]

on. As has been pointed out, representatives from Santander are in earshot—that may be a model they wish to take forward.

Neil Parish: You should encourage them to do so.

John Glen: As Minister I have conversations with banks and the FCA frequently. These are matters that can be considered.

John Woodcock: Will the Minister give way?

John Glen: I would be happy to—I was just going to refer to the hon. Gentleman's points.

John Woodcock: Perhaps the Minister should do that first, then.

Jonathan Reynolds: Will the Minister give way?

John Glen: In deference to my esteem for my shadow Front-Bench colleague, I will.

Jonathan Reynolds: I am very grateful. The idea of banks collaborating and having hubs that would be the joint front end of their back-office functions comes up time and again, but it has not happened. There is no work being done to deliver that. Surely, there are issues to do with competition law, regulatory compliance and liability for mis-selling that simply make it quite unlikely. That is why a serious alternative is required.

John Glen: I respect the concern that the hon. Gentleman has raised and I will respond to it.

Before I get into the detail into what I am trying to do as the Minister with responsibility in this area, I want to reflect on some of the facts of changing banking practices. More of us choose to bank online or on an app, but the point made by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) about a mixed appetite for banking services is important, as is the intergenerational point. Between 2011 and 2016, branch usage declined by 42% whereas mobile banking usage increased 354% between 2012 and 2017. Cash was used in 61% of payments in 2007, but it is projected that by 2027—in just eight years—it will go down to 16%. There is a significant and rapid change.

Dr Whitford: I must highlight that 2027 is eight years away. We are talking about elderly people now.

John Glen: I was laying out the statistics to show the rapidity of the direction of change. On the point made by the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), we must look at alternative provision. I recognise the point made by the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) about South West Mutual. I will meet Tony Greenham, the executive director of South West Mutual, on 26 February, to discuss regional mutual banking in the era of expansion of alternatives. I will attend the Annual Conference of the Association of British Credit Unions Limited on Saturday 9 March, to look at how to expand the role of credit unions. When I visited Glasgow I met the 1st Class Credit Union and saw its appetite to develop new delivery models. I recognise it is an area we must invest in.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport made the point about learning from overseas; I recognise that is important, too. That is why the Chancellor's

Budget of 29 October included pilots for interest-free loans. We looked at the way credit unions function so they can be given more freedom to develop an alternative presence and range of services. At a micro level, that will sometimes be a relevant alternative to provide for communities in difficulties.

Luke Pollard: It is really good news that the Minister will meet South West Mutual. It is important that credit unions and new regional co-operative banks are seen not just as a nice periphery exercise in corporate social responsibility, but as a genuine mainstream alternative to financial services, and they need to be structured as such in Government policy.

John Glen: I am doing all I can to work towards a situation where the best credit unions can see a way to grow and to provide more. The money from dormant assets can be used to help them grow.

David Linden: I am grateful that the Minister is talking about credit unions. The only major job I have done other than being a politician was to work in a credit union. On Monday I have a meeting with a local credit union that is pretty much on the brink of bankruptcy. Part of that is because of a lack of succession planning in the credit union movement and a culture issue about governance. If the Minister is so keen on working with credit unions, what practical support will the UK Government provide, specifically for governance and succession planning issues that challenge them? It will not be just that credit union in my constituency.

John Glen: I am anxious not to make my response completely about credit unions, but the 146 credit unions that exist have a whole range of governance models and levels of confidence about the future. I do not think it is my role to dictate how they change, but I am trying to find a model—there are many in Northern Ireland, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) will know—that can be used as a viable alternative.

I want to move on and make a little progress if I may. I said I would respond to the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock).

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister give way?

John Glen: I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, but I want to focus on the thoughtful point made by the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness. He referred to his time as an adviser in the Department for Work and Pensions, and to joined-up Government and the Post Office card. It is true that universal credit will have to be paid into bank accounts, but basic bank accounts, which do not involve any fees, are available. Those a viable and accessible alternative. I am happy to take up any further points he wants to make about that, and to learn from his experience in government.

John Woodcock: It would be useful to understand why universal credit is not being made available for payment into Post Office card accounts, but I wanted to intervene on another issue relating to the Post Office. The Minister said the Treasury has a policy on access to cash. One of the big issues with Santander going from Ulverston and, I imagine, other areas is that the cash machine will go as well. We have a post office without a

cash machine. That will really damage Ulverston, which is a fabulous market town. On festival days, there are huge queues at the existing cash machine. Can the Government direct the Post Office to increase its cash machines in such areas?

John Glen: I am very happy to look into that. On access to cash machines, as I mentioned in the Adjournment debate last Thursday, we set up the payment systems regulator, which is responsible for overseeing payment systems. The regulator is closely monitoring the situation with LINK and the commitments it has made to maintain the spread of ATMs across the UK. I recognise that the pressure on that network is growing. However, I need to reflect on the relationship with the Post Office rather than trying to answer the hon. Gentleman's question now.

I am going to make some progress, because I need to leave time for the hon. Member for Glasgow East to respond. Given unparalleled consumer change, the banks have adapted to keep competitive, including by taking some of the decisions we have discussed. That has meant investing unprecedented amounts in digital development, financial capability and tailored support for vulnerable consumers so banking is more personalised, on-demand and flexible, which many people expect in the modern world.

Let me address the impact on the franchising of Crown post offices, which a number of Members raised. Prior to finalising its plans for franchising, the Post Office runs local consultations to engage the local community and help shape its plans. That is in line with its code of practice and has been agreed with Citizens Advice. Indeed, Citizens Advice reported that the Post Office's consultation process is increasingly effective, with improvements agreed in most cases, demonstrating its willingness to listen to the community.

The Government acknowledge that the post office plays an important part in the lives of customers, and accessibility of post office services is a key Government priority. That is why we have set specific access criteria, requiring 99% of the UK population to be within 3 miles of their nearest post office. Despite the point made by the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) that legislation does not impose a specific requirement for Post Office Ltd to undertake an equality impact assessment, the Post Office considers the impact of proposed changes to the network on its customers, and the Post Office and all its franchise partners, including WHSmith, are subject to all relevant accessibility legislation.

Liz McInnes: Will the Minister give way?

John Glen: I am not going to take any more interventions, because I only have four more minutes.

Liz McInnes: I just want to raise the issue of disabled access, which would be covered by an impact assessment.

John Glen: I will take that matter away and respond to the hon. Lady by letter.

The Government recognise that there are people who are struggling to adapt to new ways of banking or just prefer to carry out their banking in a more traditional way, over the counter. Members made powerful representations on behalf of constituents who find the closure of their

local branch an inconvenience at best and a severe obstacle to their daily business at worst, so I want to take the time to reassure them that there is support available to minimise the impact and disruption of those changes.

I recognise the points made by the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) and others about the access to banking standard, which I mentioned in a previous debate. The access to banking standard is an important tool for ensuring that customers feel informed and supported when a branch closes, and all major high street banks are subject to it. It is my view that Santander adhered to the letter and the spirit of the standard when providing support to customers. I cannot account for every individual branch, but I am sure Members will be able to take that up with Santander, who were here to hear their representations.

I recognise that it is important that the standard is adhered to in both letter and spirit, and that support is given, but the Post Office's commercial agreement with 28 high street banks and building societies enables 99% of personal banking customers and 95% of small business banking customers to carry out their everyday banking at one of the Post Office's 11,500 branches, which provide an excellent alternative to a bank branch. Everyday essential banking services, such as cash withdrawals and deposits, cheque deposits and balance checking, are all available in every Post Office branch, including those located in retail facilities. Since 2010, the Government have invested close to £2 billion in the Post Office, and we have provided an additional £370 million from April last year until March 2021 to ensure the network can continue to modernise and maintain suitable coverage across the UK. That has meant post office numbers have been at their most stable in decades.

This issue is not just about individual customers; it is about businesses, too. Santander has long had an arrangement with the Post Office for its business customers, who currently cannot deposit cash at a Santander branch and must use the post office instead. Indeed, a third of SMEs visit post offices every week, highlighting the Post Office's value for business banking. The Government believe that too few customers know about those excellent services, so, at my predecessor's request, UK Finance and the Post Office worked together to launch an action plan to raise awareness of Post Office banking services. I encourage every Member to support their local post office and make their constituents aware of those banking services.

I also hear Members' concern about the depletion of the high street. That is why, in the last Budget, the Government introduced a £675 million future high streets fund—not another review but a fund—that seeks to make high streets and town centres fit for the future. Alongside that, we are helping smaller retailers by cutting their business rates by a third for two years from April 2019.

I am conscious of the time, so I thank all Members for taking the time to speak in the debate on behalf of their constituents and local communities. I fully respect the fact that bank branch closures are a symptom of wider changes in our economy. It is important that, in response to those changes, we strike the right balance between promoting a dynamic and competitive financial services sector and ensuring that customers are treated

[*John Glen*]

fairly. I take my responsibility for supporting the development of alternatives to banks across the United Kingdom very seriously.

Andrew Rosindell (in the Chair): I call David Linden.

4.27 pm

David Linden: Thank you very much for calling me, Mr Rosindell. You have taken over in the Chair since I opened the debate. It is a pleasure to see you in your place; thank you for chairing the remaining proceedings.

Westminster Hall debates on a Thursday afternoon tend not to be the best attended, so the fact that no fewer than 29 Members took part in this debate highlights the seriousness of this issue. I was reflecting that when

the votes are called in a little over half an hour, we will return to the main Chamber and go our separate ways into different Division Lobbies. The fact that we have come here on a completely cross-party basis and spoken with one voice is incredibly powerful. The House is at its best when we come together and speak with one voice, and I am pretty certain that today we have spoken with one voice. I know that Santander are in the Gallery. I hope not only that have they been listening but that they will act and save our Santander.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the effect of Santander branch closures on local communities.

4.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 14 February 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Leaving the EU: Nuclear Energy Policy

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The Government continue to make progress in putting in place all the necessary measures to ensure that the UK can operate as an independent and responsible nuclear state upon the UK's withdrawal from Euratom and the European Union.

The UK has now concluded all replacement international agreements required to ensure continuity for civil nuclear trade following exit day. These include new nuclear co-operation agreements (NCAs) with Australia, Canada and the US, and voluntary offer agreement and additional protocol safeguards agreements with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). All of these have passed in Parliament on 19 December.

In addition to the new bilateral NCAs described above, the UK has an existing bilateral NCA with Japan which has been in place since 1998. This agreement will remain in force following the UK's withdrawal from the EU. The UK and Japan are holding formal negotiations to put in place arrangements to reflect the UK's future safeguards arrangements, with both sides confident that appropriate arrangements will be in place for March 2019 if required.

Significant progress has been made in the setting up of a domestic nuclear safeguards regime. Government's new domestic safeguards regulations are now on track to commence on exit day, having been debated and passed by both Houses of Parliament as of 22 January 2019.

In addition, the state system of accounting for and control of nuclear material (SSAC) has commenced parallel running alongside Euratom, processing and checking reports received from industry through the safeguards information management and reporting system (SIMRS) IT system and producing the decorations required to enable the UK to meet its international obligations. This will provide the opportunity to identify and make any necessary adjustments before 29 March 2019.

Working closely with industry, Government have been putting in place measures to address the issues that may affect the civil nuclear sector in any exit scenario. This includes laying all the necessary statutory instruments (SIs) required for any exit scenario, to minimise civil nuclear business disruption and ensure health and safety standards remain robust. The SIs will also ensure that no inoperabilities are retained in domestic law following the UK's departure from the Euratom treaty.

Today I will be depositing a report in the Libraries of both Houses that sets out further details on the overall progress on the Government's implementation of their Euratom exit strategy, including EU negotiations, domestic operational readiness, legislation and international agreements. The report covers the three-month reporting

period from 26 September to 26 December and is the second statutory report under section 3(4) of the Nuclear Safeguards Act 2018. The next report on Euratom exit progress is due to be deposited after the start of May 2019.

[HCWS1333]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

General Affairs Council, February 2019

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Lord Callanan, Minister of State for Exiting the European Union, has made the following statement:

I will attend the General Affairs Council in Brussels on 19 February 2019 to represent the UK. Until we leave the European Union, we remain committed to fulfilling our rights and obligations as a full member.

The provisional agenda includes:

Multiannual financial framework 2021-27

Ministers and the Commission will discuss progress on the multiannual financial framework (MFF) negotiations with the presidency.

Preparation of the European Council 21-22 March 2019: Annotated draft agenda

The Council will discuss the draft agenda for the March European Council. It is expected to include: jobs, growth and competitiveness; climate change; and external relations.

Towards a sustainable Europe 2030

In January 2019 the Commission released a reflection paper as part of its 2019 work programme titled "Towards a sustainable Europe by 2030, on the follow-up to the UN sustainable development goals, including on the Paris agreement on climate change". Ministers will discuss this paper ahead of the Sibiu summit in May, where issues relating to Europe's future will be discussed.

Values of the Union—Hungary | article 7(1) TEU reasoned proposal

Ministers will discuss the article 7(1) procedure in relation to Hungary.

Rule of law in Poland | article 7(1) TEU reasoned proposal

The Commission will provide Ministers with an update on the rule of law in Poland.

[HCWS1330]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council, February 2019

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs will attend the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) on 18 February. It will be chaired by the High Representative of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini and will take place in Brussels.

Ukraine

Ministers will discuss the EU's response to the Russian attack on Ukrainian vessels in the Black sea and look ahead to what is likely to be a challenging election year for Ukraine. Ministers will take stock of Ukraine's reform efforts and consider how the EU can provide socioeconomic support to the sea of Azov region. The UK will welcome the EU's readiness to provide economic

and humanitarian support to those regions most affected by the ongoing conflict. It will also reiterate the need for a collective and high-profile response to Russia's malign influence in Ukraine.

Syria

This discussion will focus on preparations for the upcoming Brussels III conference, "Supporting the future of Syria and the region", taking place on 13 and 14 March. The conference will aim to improve humanitarian access and the protection of civilians in Syria, as well as mobilise humanitarian assistance, including for refugee-hosting countries.

Horn of Africa

Ministers will discuss the political and security situation in the horn of Africa, including changing regional dynamics following reconciliation between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The UK supports the EU proposal to review future engagement. The Council will also discuss mutual concerns about the Sudanese Government's use of violent tactics in response to protests, and the need for wider reforms; as well as the political situation in Somalia, where the EU is urging the Somali Government to translate their commitment to progress into tangible results.

Council conclusions

The Council is expected to adopt conclusions on Yemen, EU human rights guidelines on non-discrimination in external action, EU priorities in UN human rights forums in 2019, climate change diplomacy, and in response to the recent European Court of Auditors report on the implementation of the Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRiT).

[HCWS1332]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Building Safety

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Since the discovery that a glass-reinforced plastic (GRP) composite fire door from Grenfell Tower marketed as meeting a 30-minute standard failed a test after approximately 15 minutes, the Government have led a programme of work to investigate fire door performance across the market in the interest of public safety and reassurance. Today I am updating the House on actions taken.

Following consultation with representatives from the Metropolitan Police, the Government's chief scientific advisors and the National Fire Chiefs' Council, the Government's independent expert panel advised that, while the overall risk to public safety was low, further investigations should be undertaken into other GRP composite fire door manufacturers.

During testing, a sample of GRP composite fire doors from nine manufacturers failed to meet the required fire performance standard. The sample of fire doors failed for a range of reasons including but not restricted to performance at the glazing unit, letter box and the door frame. There was some evidence of over reliance on written assessments being used in lieu of primary tests for significant changes in hardware and ironmongery, and for the reverse side of the door. These findings clearly indicated broader failings within the industry. The Government therefore took further urgent action.

My Department wrote to all building control bodies highlighting the need to check that existing building regulations guidance on new GRP composite fire door installations is followed. The guidance sets out the tests which should be performed—including testing on both sides of the door—to meet building regulation requirements.

My Department also notified Trading Standards of the test results and local Trading Standards are working with the individual companies concerned.

On 28 July I instructed major GRP composite fire door manufacturers to meet urgently to agree actions to tackle the failings which have been identified. As a result, the following actions have been taken:

In August 2018, the three companies providing GRP composite fire door blanks in the UK agreed to stop production and sale of any door blanks with immediate effect. This stopped any new GRP composite fire doors from entering the market.

In August the Association of Composite Door Manufacturers (ACDM) further agreed that all GRP composite fire doors sold from their members would be removed from the market until they could demonstrate meeting the required standard. This stopped any fire doors from ACDM members already in production leaving factories.

In August the ACDM established a collaborative testing programme to facilitate manufacturers bringing quality product meeting the required standard back to market. The ACDM provided assurance that all products brought back to market will have the required furnace test report for both sides of the door before being sold.

The ACDM also agreed that all members of the ACDM will be required to sign up to a third-party accreditation scheme carrying out additional checks on their fire doors to drive up quality across the market.

All GRP composite manufacturers with a failed test are consulting their customers to establish an effective new building safety risk assessment. At least one manufacturer has gone beyond this providing a dedicated telephone helpline for their customers and offering meetings to help customers understand the situation.

The ACDM is working on an industry-led plan for repair and replacement of affected doors. The ACDM is working closely with my Department on its plan to ensure it can be published by industry as soon as possible.

As well as work to encourage industry action, my Department has liaised closely with social housing building owners to ensure that they have been kept up to date with the fire doors investigation. To facilitate this, it has established a mechanism for local authorities and housing associations confidentially to share test results from fire door testing to inform building risk assessments and support our investigation.

Manse Masterdor, the manufacturers of the door from Grenfell Tower, went into administration in November 2014 and is therefore not part of the wider industry action outlined above. My Department has been working closely with local authorities and housing associations with Manse Masterdor GRP composite fire doors in their buildings regarding replacement of these doors.

In parallel, the expert panel has issued guidance for building owners looking to fit or replace fire doors, which can be found on the building safety programme website. The summary results of the GRP composite tests to inform building risk assessment are also now available on the building safety programme website.

I can confirm that the expert panel advice remains unchanged and the risk to public safety remains low as even when not meeting full resistance standards fire

doors will provide some protection from the spread of fire and are part of a layered fire protection systems within buildings.

The National Fire Chiefs Council continue to advise that, in the event of a fire, people should follow existing fire procedures for the building. Residents should also test their smoke alarms regularly to ensure they work and ensure that their flat front door is fitted with a working self-closing device. All doors provide some essential protection in a fire if they are properly closed.

I want to reassure hon. Members that my Department is doing all it can as quickly as possible to properly investigate these issues and to make sure that where needed appropriate action will be taken.

On the advice of the expert panel, investigations are ongoing into the timber fire door industry. Public safety is paramount and I will continue to keep the House updated.

[HCWS1334]

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Ebola Response

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): Six months on from its formal declaration, the Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) remains challenging to contain. I am updating the House on how the UK Government are continuing to support the response in DRC, and preparedness in neighbouring countries.

Since my hon. Friend the Minister for Africa's statement on 20 November, *Official Report*, column 737, elections have taken place in the DRC and a new President inaugurated. Disruption over the election period hindered response activities; as a result, there has been an increase in the number of new Ebola cases reported this year.

As of 12 February, there were 823 confirmed and probable cases. Of these, 517 people have died and 280 recovered. The response, ably led by the DRC authorities with international support directed by the World Health Organisation, has continued to expand and adapt. Approximately 7,000 contacts are currently under surveillance. The experimental vaccine, developed with UK aid following the 2014 west Africa outbreak, has been administered to over 78,000 people in DRC, including 21,000 health and frontline workers and 16,000 children. Let me pay tribute to all the DRC health workers and international experts who are dealing with this outbreak in very challenging circumstances.

Geographical shifts in the outbreak are testing the capacity of the response. As more health zones are affected and cases move further south, there is an increased likelihood of an outbreak in Goma, the provincial capital on the border with Rwanda. Preparedness work has been under way in Goma, including setting up case surveillance, an Ebola treatment centre and a laboratory.

The DRC Government have just released their third strategic response plan, which sets out plans for the next six months. It is quite possible that it will take longer for this outbreak to be fully contained. The UK is supporting the response through both funding and expertise. At the request of the DRC Government I am not announcing specific funding figures, to avoid putting first-line responders

at further risk of attack. But let me restate that it is in our national interest to find ways of building resilience to such deadly diseases, preventing their international spread and saving lives. The UK has supported the response since the very start and will continue to do so for as long as it takes to curb the outbreak.

The critical challenge now is to break the chain of transmission in DRC. That means redoubling contact tracing; training and supporting health workers in infection prevention control; continuing the vaccination effort; and working with local communities so they can spot symptoms, report them and seek treatment. WHO is doing a good job in difficult circumstances to lead the international response. It has over 500 people deployed to DRC and is working closely with other parts of the UN system and with international NGOs including MSF, ALIMA and Oxfam to help the people of DRC tackle this deadly disease. Key areas we would like to see strengthened in the international response include leadership, co-ordination and analysis.

This will require sustained support. To date, the UK is one of the largest bilateral donors to the Ebola response in DRC and for regional preparedness efforts in Uganda, Rwanda and South Sudan. Others must now step up and I will be urging our international partners to do so.

In addition to funding, the UK has supported preparations for clinical trials of new therapeutic drugs which have started in Beni. The UK public health rapid support team has played a major part in making this work possible. Technical experts have been deployed to eastern DRC, including two senior epidemiologists, a data scientist and a clinical trials specialist.

UK aid has provided WHO with six armoured vehicles to facilitate response work in such insecure operating environments. We are also backing efforts to understand and address the social and cultural dimensions of the outbreak, which in turn supports key interventions such as ensuring that burials in affected areas are conducted in a safe and dignified way.

There remains a significant risk of transmission to neighbouring countries and measures are being taken to prepare. For example, in Uganda, closest to the current outbreak, the Government have already vaccinated over 3,500 health workers in high priority districts. Community sensitisation is also taking place.

In Rwanda, the UK is backing the Government's preparedness plans, including the training of health care workers, vaccination planning and the screening of more than 24 million people at Rwanda's borders.

In South Sudan, UK support has led to the installation of an Ebola screening facility at Juba international airport. So far, over 1 million people at land and air borders have been screened. We are also helping to procure ambulances and sanitation equipment for isolation facilities.

The risk of Ebola to the UK population remains very low. Public Health England continues to monitor the situation daily and review the risk assessment on a two-weekly basis.

The UK is fully committed to containing this outbreak and to our longer-term efforts to combat deadly diseases in sub-Saharan Africa.

[HCWS1331]

JUSTICE

Contingencies Fund Advance

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): The Ministry of Justice requires an advance to discharge its commitments which are set out in its supplementary estimate 2018-19, laid before Parliament on 11 February 2019.

The Ministry of Justice has sought a repayable cash advance from the Contingencies Fund of £840,000,000. Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £840,000,000 will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Ministry of Justice. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £840,000,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

The advance will be repaid upon Royal Assent of the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill.

[HCWS1336]

Justice and Home Affairs Post-Council Statement

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): The first meeting of EU Interior and Justice Ministers during the Romanian presidency of the Council of the EU took place on 7 and 8 February 2019 in Bucharest. The Immigration Minister represented the UK on Interior day. I represented the UK on Justice day.

Interior day focused on counter-terrorism, policing co-operation, the Schengen area, and migration and asylum.

Interior day began with a discussion on the European Parliament's report on the EU's approach to counter-terrorism. The Immigration Minister welcomed the European Parliament's report in general, and emphasised areas—such as counter-radicalisation, tackling terrorist content online, addressing issues relating to returning foreign terrorist fighters, and aviation security—where the UK considers that continued European co-operation is vital in the fight against terrorism. The Immigration Minister also welcomed the committee's call for close co-operation with the UK after Brexit. A number of member states agreed, urging immediate Commission and member state action to prepare contingency plans in case of no deal, including a mechanism of continued information exchange. Some member states also noted that member states retained competence for national security, and noted concern about expanding the competence of the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) at this time.

The policing discussion focused on mechanisms to share experience and expertise on gathering and analysing digital data. The Immigration Minister intervened to

support proposals to explore developing means of identifying and sharing best practice on the recovery and analysis of digital information, during the course of the prevention and investigation of criminal activity. Most member states also supported this work, and were keen for Europol to have a central role.

Over lunch and in the afternoon session, Ministers discussed the functioning of the Schengen border free zone, in the context of some member states retaining internal borders, and wider migration and asylum issues. As the UK does not participate in the border free zone, the Immigration Minister did not intervene on the Schengen border discussion. There was discussion about the necessity of Schengen internal border controls. Ministers also discussed but did not agree on the possibility of a temporary redistribution mechanism pending reform of the Dublin asylum system.

Justice day began with a discussion on the future of civil judicial co-operation in the EU. The debate marked the twentieth anniversary of the Amsterdam treaty and of the adoption of the Tampere programme. Ministers reaffirmed the need to focus on the proper implementation of existing legislation before considering new measures. I emphasised the importance of a future relationship with the EU in this area.

There then followed a lunchtime discussion on gathering electronic evidence in criminal matters. Ministers discussed the mandates for negotiations to establish an agreement on access to electronic evidence (e-evidence) with the US, and with contracting parties to the Budapest convention. I updated Ministers on progress towards an UK-US agreement under the US CLOUD Act.

Justice day ended with a discussion on the future of judicial co-operation in criminal matters in the EU. Ministers again emphasised the importance of proper implementation of legislation, and ensuring the current *acquis* works effectively.

[HCWS1337]

PRIME MINISTER

Intelligence Oversight

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): On 22 November 2018, the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament published two reports: its 2017-18 annual report; and its report into the terror attacks in 2017, titled "The 2017 Attacks: What needs to change?". Our thoughts remain with the victims and all those affected by the 2017 attacks in Westminster, Manchester, London Bridge, Finsbury Park and Parsons Green.

Today, the Government are publishing their response to each of these reports. I am separately providing to the ISC a closed response to the redacted recommendations in the 2017 attacks report. I remain grateful to the Intelligence and Security Committee for its continued independent oversight and scrutiny.

Copies of the Government responses have been laid before both Houses.

[HCWS1335]

Ministerial Corrections

Thursday 14 February 2019

WORK AND PENSIONS

In-work Poverty

The following is an extract from questions to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on 11 February 2019.

Justin Tomlinson: This Government are not only delivering record employment in all regions of the UK—it is accepted that work is the best route out of poverty—but targeting support at the most vulnerable in society, with increases in the national living wage, which will see the fastest pay rise in the last 20 years, changes to the income tax threshold and a doubling of free childcare.

[Official Report, 11 February 2019, Vol. 654, c. 606.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Justin Tomlinson):

An error has been identified in my response.

The correct response should have been:

Justin Tomlinson: This Government **have not only delivered** record employment in all regions of the UK **since 2010**—it is accepted that work is the best route out of poverty—but are targeting support at the most vulnerable in society, with increases in the national living wage, which will see the fastest pay rise in the last 20 years, changes to the income tax threshold and a doubling of free childcare.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

Apprenticeships and Work: Fair Access

The following is an extract from questions to the Minister for Women and Equalities on 7 February 2019.

Anne Milton: I have spoken about the targeted support available, and whenever I meet apprentices I ask them about their wages and how they travel to work. We are very aware of some of the problems faced by those young people, and as I have said, the railcard for 16 and 17-year-olds is available, and colleges have discretionary bursaries to support them.

[Official Report, 7 February 2019, Vol. 654, c. 402-03.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills:

An error has been identified in my response.

The correct response should have been:

Anne Milton: I have spoken about the targeted support available, and whenever I meet apprentices I ask them about their wages and how they travel to work. We are very aware of some of the problems faced by those young people, and as I have said, the railcard for 16 and 17-year-olds **will be available in September**, and colleges have discretionary bursaries to support them.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Universal Credit: Food Insecurity

The following is an extract from questions to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on 11 February 2019.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): We know from a series of academic and stakeholder reports that the rise in food insecurity can, at least in part, be put down not just to the implementation but to the value of social security benefits. The Secretary of State has acknowledged that, I think for the first time, this afternoon. We also know from Library figures that higher than expected inflation means that the benefits freeze will save an extra £1.2 billion in the coming year. Does the Secretary of State agree that those low-income families who are being driven into food poverty deserve a break and that the benefits freeze should stop this year?

Amber Rudd: May I just point out to the hon. Gentleman that, by 2020, payments made under universal credit are expected to reach £62 billion, compared with £60 billion under the previous system? *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of the amounts, and I am merely pointing out to him that, with the changes in place, the amounts are larger under universal credit than they would have been under the previous system. *[Official Report, 11 February 2019, Vol. 654, c. 595.]*

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions:

Errors have been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray).

The correct response should have been:

Amber Rudd: May I just point out to the hon. Gentleman that, by **2023-24**, payments made under universal credit are expected to reach **£64 billion**, compared with **£62 billion** under the previous system? *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of the amounts, and I am merely pointing out to him that, with the changes in place, the amounts are larger under universal credit than they would have been under the previous system.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Counter-Daesh Update

The following are extracts from responses to questions during a statement on Counter-Daesh Update on 11 February 2019.

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend of course speaks with great wisdom on this because he was responsible for a lot of the training of overseas armies that makes precisely that strategy possible. We have now trained 70,000 Iraqi forces as a result of the programme that I think he may even have set up when he was Secretary of State for Defence.

[Official Report, 11 February 2019, Vol. 654, c. 655.]

Mr Hunt: In this country, we can be proud of the fact that we have put £2.7 billion into that process, which has had a huge humanitarian impact.

[Official Report, 11 February 2019, Vol. 654, c. 656.]

Mr Hunt: First, in terms of the courage of people who have been fighting in Syria, there is one group that we have not mentioned so far, and that is the White

Helmets, who did an extraordinary job in Syria—not so much in the particular conflict against Daesh, but we can be proud that this country has resettled 29 families of White Helmets and was instrumental in getting about 400 White Helmets out of Syria towards the end of last year.

[*Official Report, 11 February 2019, Vol. 654, c. 657.*]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs:

An error has identified in the response I gave to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon).

The correct wording should have been:

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend of course speaks with great wisdom on this because he was responsible for a lot of the training of overseas armies that makes precisely that strategy possible. We have now trained **nearly 90,000** Iraqi forces as a result of the programme that I think he may even have set up when he was Secretary of State for Defence.

An error has identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes).

The correct wording should have been:

Mr Hunt: In this country, we can be proud of the fact that we have put **£352.5 million into humanitarian and stabilisation support for Iraq**, which has had a huge humanitarian impact.

An error has identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt).

The correct wording should have been:

Mr Hunt: First, in terms of the courage of people who have been **working** in Syria, there is one group that we have not mentioned so far, and that is the White Helmets, who **are doing** an extraordinary job in Syria—not so much in the particular conflict against Daesh, but we can be proud that this country has resettled 29 families of White Helmets and was instrumental in getting about 400 White Helmets out of Syria towards the end of last year.

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 14 February 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
TRANSPORT	1013	TRANSPORT—continued	
A35 at Redbridge	1015	Repair of Local Roads	1018
Bus Journeys	1030	Road Safety	1016
Heathrow: Regional Connections.....	1029	Rolling Stock	1013
Horse Riders: Public Highways.....	1028	Rural Roads: HGV Traffic	1025
Leaving the EU: Haulage Sector	1026	Shingle Eastern Bypass	1030
Leaving the EU: Ports	1023	Topical Questions	1031
Leaving the EU: Travel Disruption	1019	West Anglia Main Line	1024

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 14 February 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY	41WS	INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT	45WS
Leaving the EU: Nuclear Energy Policy	41WS	Ebola Response.....	45WS
EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION	42WS	JUSTICE	47WS
General Affairs Council, February 2019	42WS	Contingencies Fund Advance	47WS
FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE	42WS	Justice and Home Affairs Post-Council Statement.	47WS
Foreign Affairs Council, February 2019.....	42WS	PRIME MINISTER	48WS
HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT	43WS	Intelligence Oversight	48WS
Building Safety.....	43WS		

MINISTERIAL CORRECTIONS

Thursday 14 February 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE	10MC	WORK AND PENSIONS	9MC
Counter-Daesh Update	10MC	In-work Poverty	9MC
WOMEN AND EQUALITIES	9MC	WORK AND PENSIONS	10MC
Apprenticeships and Work: Fair Access	9MC	Universal Credit: Food Insecurity	10MC

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**not later than
Thursday 21 February 2019**

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CONTENTS

Thursday 14 February 2019

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1013] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Transport

Business of the House [Col. 1039]

Statement—(Andrea Leadsom)

Business of the House (Today) [Col. 1068]

Motion—(Jo Churchill)—agreed to

UK's Withdrawal from the EU [Col. 1069]

Motion—(Stephen Barclay)

Amendment (a)—(Jeremy Corbyn)—on a Division, negatived

Amendment (i)—(Ian Blackford)—on a Division, negatived

Motion negatived

Mineworkers' Pension Scheme [Col. 1161]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Santander Closures and Local Communities [Col. 415WH]

General Debate

Written Statements [Col. 41WS]

Ministerial Corrections [Col. 9MC]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
