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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 7 March 2019

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport was asked—

Social Media Platforms: Harmful Content

1. **Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): What steps he is taking to help ensure that social media platforms remove harmful online content. [909637]

10. **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): What steps he is taking to tackle harmful online behaviour. [909649]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): More needs to be done to tackle harmful online content and to make it clear that social media platforms have responsibilities to their users. Our forthcoming White Paper will set out those responsibilities, how they should be met and what should happen if they are not.

Drew Hendry: On this issue, the Health Secretary said in January:

“It would be far better to do it in concert with the social media companies, but if we think...that they’re refusing to do so, then we can and we must legislate.”

What legislation is the Culture Secretary planning, and will he confirm whether this includes plans for an independent social media regulator?

Jeremy Wright: I agree with the Health Secretary, and I have made it clear on a number of occasions that I believe the era of self-regulation must come to an end in this space. But the hon. Gentleman will understand that this is not just a complex matter, but a subject on which it is important to put forward our proposals in the round. We will do that in the White Paper that he will see shortly, and in that he will see what proposals we make for further legislation.

Vicky Ford: The Select Committee on Science and Technology heard chilling evidence about the impact that social media can have on young people’s mental health. Does the Secretary of State agree with the Committee’s recommendation that social media companies should have a duty of care towards young people, and if

so, how does he intend to legislate for it and by when? If he does not agree, what other route does he suggest taking?

Jeremy Wright: The Science and Technology Committee report to which my hon. Friend refers makes an important and worthwhile contribution to this debate, and I am grateful to her and her colleagues for it. Again, I hope she will forgive me if I do not set out at this Dispatch Box now precisely what the White Paper will say, but perhaps I can reassure her by saying that we are strongly considering a duty of care as part of the proposals we seek to make, and we believe it is important that responsibilities are taken seriously to protect not only young people but everyone from the harms that the internet may provide.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Secretary of State mentions the duty of care applying to platforms. Is he aware that there are gaming platforms similar to social media platforms which are circulating material such as the rather horribly named “Rape Day” game, and will he extend any legislation he is planning for social media to game platforms?

Jeremy Wright: I believe it is not what a company calls itself that matters, but what it does. What we will seek to do in the White Paper and anything that follows it is make sure that we can tackle the harms we define as in scope of that White Paper, wherever they may lie on the internet. I understand that the game the hon. Lady mentions has now been withdrawn; quite right too—I think all of us would have been horrified had any other course been taken.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree with the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee report that if social media platforms host harmful content and fail to act against it, they should have liability for it?

Jeremy Wright: Again, my hon. Friend will have to wait for the detail of the White Paper, but I have made it, I hope, very clear, and am happy to make it clear again, that I believe that social media companies have responsibilities in this space. They should take those responsibilities seriously, and if they do not there should be consequences.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Following on from the question from the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) from the Labour Benches about “Rape Day”, the game was created by developer Desk Plant. For the benefit of the Secretary of State, those in the Chamber and those watching, I should say that the game enables players to

“verbally harass, kill, and rape women”,

and its contents include

“violence, sexual assault, non-consensual sex, obscene language, necrophilia, and incest.”

A game of this nature has no place in our society. I am glad it has been pulled by gaming site Steam, but its statement was woeful; it did not even accept or acknowledge the risk that it could pose. At a time when one in five women will experience sexual violence in their lives, and in the week when International Women’s Day falls, will

the Secretary of State work with me and others to launch a review of how this game even got to the development and approval stage and make sure that it appears on no other platforms?

Jeremy Wright: Yes. The hon. Lady makes a good point, and I think that we should ask questions about this. It is profoundly unacceptable that material such as this should be available to young people, and older people, and we must worry about the sense it creates of proper relationships and the way in which these types of activity should be regarded by any fundamentally decent society. Of course, we must understand exactly how it has got to this point in relation to this game. As I have said, I welcome the fact that the game has been withdrawn. I think we would all have been having a very different conversation this morning if it had not been.

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): Every major social media platform other than YouTube has taken down Stephen Yaxley-Lennon's profile because of his hateful conduct. Late on Monday night, Yaxley-Lennon turned up at a journalist's home and banged on the doors and windows demanding to be let in. After being escorted away by the police, he returned at 5 am and continued his intimidation. The incident was live-streamed. He later warned journalists in a YouTube video to expect a "knock on the door". Does the Secretary of State think it is right that YouTube and its parent company Alphabet are continuing to give this man a platform?

Jeremy Wright: In this House, we all believe in freedom of speech, but we also believe that that freedom of speech has limits, and that when people seek to intimidate others, and potentially to break the law—the description that the hon. Gentleman has given the House this morning is potentially a description of criminal behaviour—it is unacceptable. It is beyond the reach of the type of freedom of speech that we believe should be protected. As I have said, all internet companies and all platforms for this kind of speech need to take their responsibilities seriously, and I hope that YouTube will consider carefully what the hon. Gentleman and I have said, and reconsider its judgment.

Tom Watson: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. Those who have expressed their opinion online will know that doing so can unleash a torrent of abuse designed to make them wonder whether they should speak out at all. This week we have heard of female colleagues having panic buttons installed in their homes because of the death and rape threats they have received. This culture of abuse, intimidation and threats undermines our democracy and the principles of free speech. Will the Secretary of State consider, and even guarantee, that the online harms White Paper will introduce measures to prevent hate figures, extremists and their followers from turning the online world into a cesspit of hate?

Jeremy Wright: I will of course consider what the hon. Gentleman has said, but we must ensure that we preserve our ability, online as everywhere else, to debate and discuss issues that are sometimes uncomfortable and certainly controversial. I repeat, however, that no freedom of speech can survive in this country if we do not protect people's ability to feel free to say what they

think, free of intimidation and free of the threat of violence. Those who engage in intimidation or threats of violence should not find succour online or anywhere else.

Rural Broadband

2. **David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve access to broadband in rural areas. [909638]

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The Government have invested £1.8 billion of public money to ensure that 95% of the country has access to superfast broadband. Broadband UK operates voucher schemes, and the Government are introducing a universal service obligation that will give everybody the right to a minimum speed of 10 megabits per second. These interventions are particularly designed to help people in rural areas.

David Duguid: I thank the Minister for her response. The Scottish National party has been boasting about the £600 million that the Scottish Government have supposedly invested—past tense—in the R100 broadband scheme. That money has not been invested; more than a year and a half after the funding was promised, they have still not got round to awarding the contracts. This so-called investment remains just a promise, and the ambition of 100% superfast access by 2021 is looking less realistic than ever. Can the Minister assure me that when she next meets Scottish Government Ministers, she will remind them of the importance of sticking to their timetable?

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister's responsibility is for the UK Government's policy. She has no responsibility for the policy of the Scottish Government—a fact of which I am sure she is fully aware.

Margot James: I am indeed aware of that, Mr Speaker, but it is crucial that Governments stick to timetables when delivering an essential utility that is a fundamental part of public need. I will of course be happy to discuss this when I am next in communication with Scottish Government Ministers, who should be held to account for the unacceptable delay in even getting started on this vital work.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): The Government's shift to fibre investment is very welcome, although the levels of fibre in this country for delivering essential infrastructure are very low. North Wales has put forward an impressive bid to support our strong local economy. Will the Minister look closely at the bid and accelerate investment in fibre?

Margot James: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we need to catch up on fibre. The Government have exciting plans and funding to accelerate fibre roll-out, with a £200 million programme, which was announced in the last Budget, starting this April and a further £300 million before 2022. I will look at the north Wales proposal with great interest.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I thank the Minister most warmly and sincerely for her announcement yesterday of £1.91 million to get superfast broadband into Unst and Yell in Shetland. That money truly has the potential to be transformative for those

communities. If she would like to come and see that for herself, she would be very welcome. If she does so, she will also be able to see the remaining communities in Shetland and Orkney where such investment could make a massive difference.

Margot James: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his positive input, and I am planning to visit Scotland in April. I draw his attention to the excellent 5G testbed pilots that we are running in rural areas in his part of Scotland.

Sports Coverage

3. **Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support media coverage of sport played by (a) women and (b) disabled people. [909639]

13. **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What steps his Department is taking to (a) support and (b) increase the broadcasting of minority sports. [909653]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): Sport is a devolved matter in Scotland, but through Sport England we fund 45 different sporting governing bodies that support grassroots participation and talented athletes. When people watch broadcast sport, they should see women and disabled people, too. Although progress has been made over the last few years, especially in women's sport, there is scope to do better. I met broadcasters and sporting organisations recently to discuss with them what more they can do.

Craig Tracey: As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for golf, I am proud that we were one of the first signatories to the R&A women in golf charter, which commits to the development of a more inclusive culture in the sport. Will the Secretary of State join me in welcoming that initiative, and will he meet me and major golfing bodies to discuss what we are doing and what can be done to encourage more women and girls to enjoy the sport?

Jeremy Wright: I am happy to join my hon. Friend in offering congratulations on that significant step forward, and we want to see more. I am sure that I or my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), who is the Minister responsible for sport, will be happy to meet him to discuss the matter further.

Gavin Newlands: With the decline in print media, and in sports coverage in some local news programming, minority sports struggle to be noticed and they face challenges in attracting new participants. The problem is infinitely more acute in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which have much smaller media and broadcast markets than England. I back the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport contestable fund, which supports children's TV, but I wonder whether the Secretary of State or the Minister with responsibility for sport will meet me to discuss what we can do to support minority sports coverage.

Jeremy Wright: Again, I am happy to agree to that proposal. It is worth our understanding more clearly the exact picture in Scotland, as the hon. Gentleman

says. Broadcasting is a reserved matter and sport is a devolved matter, so we must make sure that the two work in sync. In England, we support a range of sports—I am sure that the same thing happens in Scotland—and we want to see whether we can give such sports greater prominence so that people can find a sport that they get on with, that they want to do and that they enjoy, in order to promote greater participation in sport more broadly.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): This lunchtime sees the official launch at Lord's of the women's parliamentary cricket team, which will attract media coverage. Will the Secretary of State, on International Women's Day, wish the venture all success? Will he perhaps offer a word of congratulation to my senior parliamentary assistant, Megan Williams, who has gone to huge efforts to make this happen and will be captaining the side?

Jeremy Wright: I am very happy to do that, and I wish Megan and the rest of the side the very best of luck. My hon. Friend is a doughty champion of women's cricket. He makes the case for it very well and often, and we hear him. We are also talking about the broadcast of women's sport, and I know that he will recognise that it is a step forward that the first stand-alone women's world T20 competition this year will be broadcast on British free-to-air television.

Mr Speaker: Let me join in the congratulations to Megan Williams, the senior parliamentary assistant to the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight). I am aware, courtesy of a letter from her to me dated yesterday, of the inaugural event, which I am advised will take place from 11 am onwards. I gather that as a result of co-operation with the England and Wales Cricket Board, they will be joined by Lydia Greenway, a top England women's cricketer—lending real weight and ballast to this very welcome initiative. I think Megan deserves huge plaudits from across this House.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Thanks to Sky Sports, the women's Six Nations has received much wider coverage since 2017 than ever before. However, Sky Sports is a subscription channel. Can the Minister tell us whether the conversations he has mentioned extend to conversations with the rugby unions of the home nations and free-to-view channels about getting this competition on a free-to-view channel before the next International Women's Day?

Jeremy Wright: We are certainly having conversations with all the broadcasters about what more they can do.

By the way, I should correct myself: I think it is in fact Sky that will be broadcasting the women's world T20, not a free-to-air broadcaster as I suggested. Sky is doing a good deal, and we welcome that. We hope it will do more. I am having conversations about how we can broaden the scope of women's sport and disability sport that people see on television so that they can see a variety of different sports, perhaps including in the highlights packages they may see. That is an important way of engaging people with a broader understanding of what is happening in the sporting environment.

Society Lotteries Reform

4. **Brendan O'Hara** (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): What the timetable is for the Government's response to the consultation on society lottery reform. [909640]

5. **Sir Henry Bellingham** (North West Norfolk) (Con): When he plans to respond to the consultation on the reform of the regulation of society lotteries. [909641]

12. **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What the timetable is for the Government's response to the consultation on society lottery reform. [909652]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): I am carefully considering the evidence submitted during the consultation, and I hope to respond in the first half of this year.

Brendan O'Hara: Despite many warm words stretching back over several years, the Government have shown a distinct lack of urgency in considering the future of society lotteries. It has now been six months since the consultation closed and, all the while, charities and good causes are losing desperately needed funds. Will the Minister now confirm that the Government's preferred option of a £100 million annual sales limit will be applied and implemented, as previously stated, on 6 April? If not, why not?

Mims Davies: I accept the hon. Gentleman's point that there is a real strength of feeling on this matter. The fact that I am still regularly meeting colleagues and hearing from the sector shows that we want to get this right. I understand the sense of urgency, but I appreciate that we need to get the balance right. Society lotteries are important, and they make a huge contribution to the fundraising landscape, with £296 million raised for good causes last year alone. Of course we need to balance that alongside supporting the national lottery, too.

Sir Henry Bellingham: In concurring with the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara), does the Minister agree that the request by society lotteries to raise the maximum prize to £1 million is both popular and reasonable, and that there is no evidence this would damage the national lottery? She will be aware that society lotteries do untold good in our constituencies, so will she now stand foursquare behind them?

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and it is right to admit and react to the fact that we consulted on the £1 million prize, but we need to balance it with any potential impact on the national lottery. There is a balance to be made. Society lotteries, as we well know, are widely used as a fundraising tool across our communities to support local charities and hospices. To my mind, if we find this balance, we will grow the pie and help all lotteries to survive.

Deidre Brock: The players of the People's Postcode lottery, based in my constituency of Edinburgh North and Leith, have raised an amazing £400 million for good causes, but achieving that incredible fundraising milestone has been greatly hindered by this outdated legislation. The Government said last June that a £100 million

annual sales limit is their preferred option. Why has that not been implemented? When exactly will they bring forward the legislation to do just that?

Mims Davies: I know that the People's Postcode lottery does a huge amount in the hon. Lady's constituency. In fact, it recently brought George Clooney to her constituency to celebrate this success. I am very disappointed not to have been able to accept the invite—can't think why!

The work of the People's Postcode lottery has supported our building connections fund, with £11.5 million going to tackle loneliness. It is right that we balance all these great but competing opportunities to support charities across the country.

Free TV Licences: Over-75s

6. **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on free TV licences for people over 75 years of age. [909642]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): I discuss a range of matters with my Cabinet colleagues, and we know that older people across the country value TV as a way to stay connected with the world. That is why we have guaranteed the over-75s licence concession until June 2020, at which point responsibility for it will transfer to the BBC. After that, it will be for the BBC to decide on the future of that concession, but the Government have made it clear that we would want and expect the BBC to continue with it.

Patricia Gibson: A recent report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has shown that one in six of our pensioners are now living in poverty, so the last thing they need is an extra £150.50 added to their bills. I know that the Minister and his Government are keen to shift responsibility for this on to the BBC's shoulders, but will the Secretary of State accept that having promised in his party's manifesto that licences for the over-75s would be maintained, he must either fulfil that promise or admit that his party and his Government have let pensioners down?

Jeremy Wright: First, the responsibility has been transferred—that happened by statute in 2017. The deal was done with the BBC in 2015. What we do not yet have are the proposals that the BBC intends to make. My suggestion is that we all wait to see what the BBC actually decides to do, and then we can comment upon it.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The Secretary of State is right: it is in statute. We opposed it, and right now the National Pensioners Convention is protesting outside DCMS—not outside the BBC. That is because this policy was invented by this Government. It is about transferring social policy to the BBC, which should not have happened. Should this not be up for the prize for the most cynical policy this Government have ever created?

Jeremy Wright: No, but what is truly cynical is to criticise the Government for the transfer of a financial liability without any hint whatsoever from Her Majesty's Opposition that they would be prepared to take it back. So I would be very interested to hear whether it is the

policy of the Labour party, in government, to take this responsibility back into the Government's hands, and exactly what would be cut, what extra would be borrowed or what taxes would be raised to pay for it. Otherwise, it is just hot air.

Charity Regulation

7. Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help increase public trust in charity regulation. [909646]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): The Charity Commission performs a vital role as the independent regulator and registrar of charities in England and Wales. The National Audit Office conducted a review of the commission as recently as November 2017 and was positive in its findings. The commission continues to regulate robustly to ensure that the public can support charities with confidence.

Dr Huq: Some £43 million of public money going on a bridge across the Thames on which zero construction occurred has led us all up the garden path and now we know that the trust is being wound up. The Charity Commission says it will do no further investigation, so will the Government instigate an independent inquiry so that lessons are learned and no project like this ever has the same fate? Frankly, to have a regulator that is not regulating feels useless.

Mims Davies: The hon. Lady raises the specific issue of the Garden Bridge Trust, which is concerning. The commission has rightly scrutinised the trustees' conduct and management, and the charity itself, carefully, and it continues to monitor the charity's progress on winding up. I understand that the commission intends to publish a concluding report on the running of the trust and to learn those wider lessons, setting them out for policy makers so that we can learn from them. I am happy to hear from the hon. Lady if she has further concerns.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): The Minister will be aware that public trust in charities was shaken to the core by the revelations of the sexual abuse and harassment that occurred not only in the UK and Europe but around the world. What work is the Charity Commission doing to make sure that that issue is addressed, and that emerging concerns about the role of overseas orphanages in issues of modern-day slavery are looked into? These are important issues involving charities.

Mims Davies: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this issue; she is a doughty campaigner for women around the world and it is absolutely right that we will have the debate later today ahead of International Women's Day tomorrow. People have been horrified by what has been allowed to be done around the globe under the watch of charities, and it is absolutely right that we learn lessons. I am due to talk to Ministers from the Department for International Development about this matter, and I would be happy to speak to my right hon. Friend about particular issues if she feels that anything has not been picked up on. We must make sure that we learn further lessons. Nothing can be left alone on this issue.

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): I want to press the Minister further on the garden bridge issue. It has been a total fiasco. We have seen £40 million of public money wasted; public tendering and procurement processes bypassed; contracts awarded before the business case was even drawn up; and a cosy relationship—to say the least—between the chair of the trustees and senior figures at the Charity Commission itself, as well as the former Mayor of London. How can the public have trust in charity regulation if the Charity Commission will not properly investigate a scandal of this magnitude? What is the Minister going to do herself to make sure that a full investigation—not just a report—into this scandal is conducted?

Mims Davies: As I said, there has been an investigation and lessons will be learned. I am due to meet the Charity Commission fairly shortly. The Government increased the commission's budget by £5 million in January 2018 so that it could increase its core regulatory functions. I admit that I have had issues in my own constituency relating to concerns about the Charity Commission, so I am happy to take the matter further. I am the charities and lotteries Minister and, as we heard earlier, if we do not have confidence in our charities' ability to make sure that they look after other people's money properly, we need to carry on and do more.

Mobile Phone Coverage

8. Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to improve mobile phone coverage throughout the UK. [909647]

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): Our ambition is to have good mobile coverage where people live, work and travel. I welcome the coverage obligations that Ofcom recently proposed ahead of the 700 MHz and 3.6 GHz to 3.8 GHz spectrum auctions. We have reformed the electronic communications code and made changes to planning laws, all to encourage the roll-out of digital infrastructure by making deployment cheaper.

Norman Lamb: People living in part of North Walsham in my constituency have been waiting years for any signal at all. They thought their wait was over when a mast was erected in November 2017 but, despite constant pressure on BT Openreach, it still has not been connected. Openreach needs to lay cables across land owned by Anglian Water. Should we not be able to compel these monopolies to provide a service to local people?

Margot James: The right hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. We are looking to improve and strengthen the requirements on landowners to allow access to their land for vital infrastructure.

Leaving the EU: Tourism

9. Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to help ensure the UK remains an attractive tourist destination after the UK leaves the EU. [909648]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): The UK has a thriving tourism landscape. Both 2016 and 2017 showed

all-time record numbers of visitors and spend, and we want that to continue. The UK and EU have proposed reciprocal visa-free travel for tourism, and the use of e-passport gates will be expanded to seven countries this summer. An additional 6.5 million passengers per year will benefit.

Stephen Crabb: The B&Bs and caravan parks in Pembrokeshire are looking forward to another good season, but the concern I hear time and again is that poor broadband and mobile phone signals are a real hindrance. In 2019, who wants to go on holiday to a place that does not have a decent signal? Does the Minister agree that these 21st-century essentials are vital for a healthy tourism industry?

Michael Ellis: They are vital. Everyone wants to go on holiday in Pembrokeshire. We need broadband to work well. The Government have allocated £66 million to Welsh regions to support the roll-out of superfast broadband, and we will continue to work in partnership with the Welsh Government to support that roll-out. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to promote Pembrokeshire's wonderful assets, including its beaches and tourism vista.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Minister aware that Huddersfield has more listed buildings than either Bath or York? Does he also realise that we have just launched as the first gigabit town, which gives us superfast broadband right through the town and makes us one of the most attractive towns in Britain?

Michael Ellis: The hon. Gentleman is welcome. We are very pleased to have supported his area in the way that we have, and we will continue to do so.

Public Libraries: Northamptonshire

11. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): If he will take steps to prevent the closure of public libraries in Northamptonshire. [909650]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): Northamptonshire County Council is responsible for the delivery of a comprehensive and efficient library service. The Department is aware of its plans for changes to the service. Officials have been in regular discussions with it, as I have too.

Mr Hollobone: Against a very challenging financial background, will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating the county council on finally coming up with sensible plans to keep all the libraries open?

Michael Ellis: Yes, I will, and I thank my hon. Friend for his work in this regard over many months. I have been in touch with the council leader and the chief executive. I am pleased to confirm that their plan is not to close any libraries in Northamptonshire. They are working towards that end, and he, I and others in Northamptonshire have worked and lobbied in that regard, but we will continue to monitor the situation carefully.

Gagging Orders: Charities

14. **Emma Dent Coad** (Kensington) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of gagging orders on the freedom of expression of charities in receipt of public funds. [909654]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): It is vital that charities feel free to speak on behalf of everyday people and continue to develop the right policy with Government. Government contracts will include provisions to ensure that providers adhere to the high standards that we expect. However, those provisions are in no way gagging clauses.

Emma Dent Coad: In my constituency, we have a large number of charities and advice agencies dealing with the fallout of Government cuts, universal credit, and, of course, the after-effects of Grenfell. Does the Minister truly believe that those frontline organisations should be silenced rather than being able to share their justified concerns, which could then be rectified? I draw particular attention to some of the groups involved in Grenfell that have been told, "Play nice, and you'll get what you need." They should be allowed to speak out.

Mims Davies: I reiterate that this is not a gagging clause. I repeated that when I met the charities group in December and spoke at its event here in Westminster, and the Prime Minister wrote to Sir Stuart Etherington and reaffirmed the point. If the hon. Lady wishes to meet me to discuss those who feel that they cannot speak out, I would be very happy to do so. It is absolutely right that we should be able to hear the sector's voice and to hear its expertise, its insight and everything that it can bring to Government to tackle burning injustices. As I say, I am very happy to meet her to discuss the matter.

Topical Questions

T1. [909655] **Peter Heaton-Jones** (North Devon) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): On the eve of International Women's Day, I am sure that the whole House will join me in congratulating the England women's football team on winning the SheBelieves Cup this week. I also congratulate all our outstanding British winners in this year's Oscars, particularly Olivia Colman for her Best Actress award. We are proud of them all, and they remind us of how sport and culture can unite us.

Peter Heaton-Jones: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. I am a former employee and a huge supporter of our public service broadcaster, but on the issue of TV licences for those over the age of 75, is it not the case that the BBC accepted responsibility for this concession when it made an agreement with the Government? Should it not now deliver that in full, and do so without the threats of cuts to services?

Jeremy Wright: My hon. Friend correctly relays the history of this. As I said earlier, it is right for us to await the conclusions of the BBC's review of this matter. It is far more sensible to comment on something when we have seen it rather than before we have seen it. Once we have seen it, we will all be able to reach a judgment. It is the Government's clear expectation that this concession should continue.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Will the Sports Minister comment on whether English Football League football fans were consulted on the “fans fare” scheme to protect the fares of away travelling fans?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): My hon. Friends in the Department for Transport have been working strongly with fans to ensure that travel is appropriate. My understanding was that the issue had been dealt with, but I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman if he still feels that there are concerns in this area.

T2. [909656] **Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): May I congratulate the entire DCMS team on their truly world-leading work on online harms? On the issue of online abuse specifically, it would appear—certainly in this place—that women are targeted far more than men. Will the Minister confirm whether there is evidence to suggest that this gender bias in online abuse is an issue more broadly?

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): My hon. Friend is quite right. There is a mounting body of evidence that women in public life—in an elected capacity or as journalists—face a disproportionately high level of abuse online compared with men. If we are to protect free speech and open debate, it is vital that our White Paper on online harms addresses all types of abuse, harassment and intimidation online.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): Last week the Government admitted that only a fifth of FTSE 350 boards had a grasp on cyber-security. Only 4% of businesses recalled using any Government sources of information, and there is a growing skills gap of 50,000 specialists. May I politely ask the Government to wake up to their failing strategies and urgently get a grip on the growing cyber threat?

Margot James: I assure the hon. Lady that the number of FTSE 350 companies—which I met representatives of to discuss this subject earlier in the week—prioritising cyber-security is growing. The Government have committed funding, through the cyber-security high impact skills fund, to helping industry close the skills gap.

T3. [909659] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): Equipping our ageing population with new skills is key, especially in areas such as Cornwall, where people have to travel long distances for local services. What plans does the Department have to ensure that technology can be used to support our elderly?

Margot James: The Department has just launched the digital inclusion innovation fund, which has been specifically designed to tackle digital exclusion among older and disabled people. A few weeks ago I visited a 5G test bed in the Kensington part of Liverpool, where I saw at first hand how we are harnessing this technology to improve social care and tackle loneliness among older people.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): The Offensive Weapons Bill bans the online sale of offensive weapons to residential addresses, but it has revealed a significant

gap in the legislation around the sale of offensive weapons on platforms. Will the Secretary of State address that gap in the upcoming White Paper?

Jeremy Wright: I will look carefully at the issue raised by the hon. Lady. Of course it is important that we closely keep track of where these weapons are being sold and the methods being employed. She would expect me to say that the online harms White Paper will focus on the responsibilities of the online platforms to keep people safe from harm. Harm varies, and we are concerned about a variety of different harms, but we will certainly pay close attention to the point that she has raised.

T4. [909660] **Mrs Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con): Ahead of International Women’s Day, we should remember the thousands of women who live with nude and sexually explicit images of themselves posted online without their permission. The current legislation is piecemeal and ripe for reform. Will my right hon. and learned Friend look at amalgamating the legislation to outlaw all forms of image-based abuse and make it easier for such images to be removed quickly?

Jeremy Wright: Yes. My right hon. Friend will be aware of the Law Commission’s work in this area, and we are looking at the issue carefully. May I take this opportunity to pay tribute to her, as she has played a significant part in the development of the law in this area? Whether on upskirting or revenge pornography, she and other Members have done a great deal to put the law in a better place.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Bearing in mind the dwindling pipeline of musical talent coming through from state schools, does the Minister agree with the chair of UK Music that music education should be seen as an intrinsic good, just as sporting education is?

Margot James: I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government take music and other creative arts education very seriously. The Minister for School Standards has introduced a hub scheme across the country, with substantial funding to enable state school pupils to access music, as they deserve.

T6. [909662] **Anne-Marie Trevelyan** (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Will the Minister comment on the recently announced £500,000 campaign by VisitBritain in conjunction with Airbnb? Regulated holiday cottage and bed-and-breakfast owners across north Northumberland spend a lot of money each year meeting licensing, fire and health and safety requirements, whereas Airbnb owners do not have to.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight that issue. Northumberland is, of course, a county that millions want to visit, and should do. I am hoping, in fact, to visit myself; I commend it to everyone. I have addressed the issue of Airbnb with its representatives in person, and I see the Bed and Breakfast Association regularly. In my discussions with Airbnb representatives, I have made it clear, and cautioned them, that they need to

work to satisfy all concerned about health and safety issues, and they assure me that they are doing that. We will continue to monitor the situation.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What discussions has the Minister had with Tourism Ireland to ensure that visitors from the United States of America who come to the Republic of Ireland are encouraged to go to Northern Ireland to enjoy its attractions as well?

Michael Ellis: I am delighted to say that Northern Ireland tourism is doing extremely well with visitors from North America and elsewhere. The Titanic exhibition, for example, is extremely popular and has been winning awards. The “Game of Thrones” television programme also draws people to Northern Ireland. There are myriad reasons to visit—not least, of course, the warm welcome from the people of Northern Ireland. I commend the hon. Gentleman for his question.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Could I draw the Minister’s attention to an initiative that I launched a couple of weeks ago—“Derbyshire, the County of Culture”—to try to bring tourism to Derbyshire and make it a cohesive county? Would he like to comment on that initiative?

Michael Ellis: I commend my hon. Friend for what she does for her county of Derbyshire. I previously referred to her as the prima ballerina assoluta of this House when she asked a question about ballet, and she is absolutely an advocate for her county as well. There is also a major call from across the House for towns of culture, and we are working on and discussing that matter. I will continue to consider her suggestions.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): When are the Government going to crack down on ticket reselling websites? A constituent of mine was scammed by being charged over £600 for tickets that should have cost £130 at the box office. Viagogo refused to take any responsibility even though it facilitated and profited from this rip-off transaction. The Government have to haul these companies in and get it sorted out.

Margot James: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we have taken many measures to bring these ticketing companies into better standards. StubHub, GetMeIn and Seatwave have all complied with the law during discussions with the Competition and Markets Authority. Unfortunately, Viagogo has, for the second time, refused to do so. The CMA announced yesterday that it will be undertaking proceedings for contempt of court against Viagogo. I would urge all Members to make their constituents aware that there are alternatives to Viagogo and that they should use them.

Attorney General

CPS: Serious and Organised Crime

1. **Leo Docherty** (Aldershot) (Con): What steps the CPS is taking to improve its response to serious and organised crime. [909663]

3. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What steps the CPS is taking to improve its response to serious and organised crime. [909666]

4. **Neil O’Brien** (Harborough) (Con): What steps the CPS is taking to improve its response to serious and organised crime. [909667]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): The Crown Prosecution Service has a crucial role in tackling serious and organised crimes such as human trafficking, money laundering and child sexual exploitation. It works with other criminal justice agencies to support the Government’s serious and organised crime strategy.

Leo Docherty: How effectively does the CPS work with other law enforcement agencies to fight serious and organised crime?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to talk about international co-operation. I am happy to remind him of the important network of up to 27 specialist prosecutors who are based abroad and who work closely with other jurisdictions across international boundaries. Recent examples are the successful conviction of Matthew Falder for child sexual exploitation offences and the conviction of Keith Morris for multiple counts of rape and sexual assault against victims in Kenya. I am happy to say that the Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate has reported that the international justice and organised crime division has a conviction rate of over 90% and undertakes high-quality work.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for his answers thus far. One of the most insidious aspects of serious and organised crime is the modern slave trade. What action is he taking to bring those criminals to justice, so that we can smash these rings once and for all?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to draw the House’s attention once again to the grim reality of modern-day slavery. The importance of the CPS in providing early investigative advice in all cases has been underlined, because solely relying on the testimony of victims, who are often vulnerable, can lead to challenges. I am happy to say that in the last year, there was a 119% increase in cases where that vital early advice was provided to the police.

Neil O’Brien: What steps is the CPS taking to better prosecute county lines offending?

The Solicitor General: Rightly, we are hearing a lot of concern about the existence of organised county lines, which are affecting our towns and cities across the country. The CPS has developed a particular approach and typology to help the police and other agencies deal with county lines, concerning in particular the balance between the need to safeguard the vulnerable persons—often young—who are being used and the proper investigation and prosecution of criminal offences.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Solicitor General remember replying to me when I said that it was a great concern for those of us who represent towns where there have been dreadful grooming

gangs that a senior police officer—not in my patch, but another part of the country—said that the under-resourcing of the CPS meant that it was unable to proceed when it found new evidence about perpetrators?

The Solicitor General: I assure the hon. Gentleman, who has long been properly concerned about this serious offending, that resource will not be a barrier to the prosecution of offences. We have seen an important sea change in attitudes to the complainants and victims of child sexual exploitation. Gone, I hope, are the days when young victims are disregarded or ignored by the authorities. The message has to go out that we will listen and act to protect victims.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Does the Solicitor General agree with the Chancellor that, rather than new money being spent, knife crime and serious and organised crime should simply be prioritised? If he does, which area does he think should be de-prioritised?

The Solicitor General: I assure the hon. Lady that it is not a question of choice when it comes to the prosecution of offences. I am happy to say that in the last year, more than 27,500 cases involving possession of a knife or bladed article were commenced in our courts. That is an important testimony to the seriousness with which the prosecuting authorities take the possession and use of knives and offensive weapons.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Can the Solicitor General outline how long it takes for proceeds of serious crime to be administered to communities through the safer communities fund and other grants?

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that question. I do not have the detail of that administration, but I know that in the last seven years, £1.5 billion has been collected in proceeds of crime. That is shared out between the police and other enforcement authorities, and I can write to him with more information about how it is then administered.

CPS: Disclosure Obligations

2. Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the adequacy of the level of CPS resources to comply with its disclosure obligations. [909665]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): I have frequent conversations with ministerial colleagues about this issue and all issues relating to the criminal justice system. In November last year, the Attorney General published his review of disclosure, which examined the efficiency and effectiveness of the current system.

Bambos Charalambous: The disclosure process is a fundamental cornerstone of the criminal justice system. Can the Solicitor General outline his priorities to combat its shortcomings?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman knows that the Attorney General and I, as criminal litigators, have a long and deep interest in this issue. One of the newer challenges has been the rise of technology and the proliferation of telephones and other instruments

that have to be examined in many cases. I will chair a digital summit in the months ahead, to try to develop innovative new ways in which we can assist the process. The disclosure issue, I am afraid, is a cultural issue of long standing. Not only the CPS but the police and other agencies have to change their ways and improve the position.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): What steps is my hon. and learned Friend taking to ensure that victims do not feel afraid or concerned about reporting crimes?

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. She knows, in the context of disclosure, that we must be very careful to strike a balance so that it does not become a box-ticking exercise. In particular, in every case the necessity to seize telephones and other items from victims should be assessed very much on the evidence, rather than as a matter of course. I think we must do everything to make it clear to victims that they will get support and encouragement, rather than feel that the process is working against them in a way that can be just as traumatic as the crime itself.

EU Withdrawal Agreement: Northern Ireland

5. Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the legal implications of the Northern Ireland backstop. [909668]

7. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What recent steps he has taken to seek legally binding changes to the Northern Ireland protocol in the EU withdrawal agreement. [909670]

The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox): I regularly meet ministerial colleagues to discuss important issues of common interest, including matters relating to the United Kingdom's exit from the Union. I am unable, I am afraid, to talk about the legal content of those discussions because, as the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) will know, the Law Officers are bound by the Law Officers' convention to disclose neither the fact nor the content of that advice.

I remain committed to considering what assistance I personally can provide to this House on the legal implications of the backstop, to ensure that Members have what they need to make an informed decision. We have been engaging in focused, detailed and careful discussions with the Union, and we continue to seek legally binding changes to the backstop that ensure it cannot be indefinite. These discussions will be resumed shortly.

Helen Goodman: I am most grateful to the Attorney General for that very full reply. On 29 January, the Prime Minister told the House:

"What I am talking about is not a further exchange of letters but a significant and legally binding change to the withdrawal agreement...It will involve reopening the withdrawal agreement".— [Official Report, 29 January 2019; Vol. 653, c. 678.]

Given the response that the Attorney General has had in Brussels and the remarks of the French Minister on the radio this morning, is it still Government policy to seek a reopening of the withdrawal agreement?

The Attorney General: It is Government policy to achieve the necessary change in the backstop that will cause me to review and change my advice. That is Government policy; that is the subject of the discussions that we are having. I would say that it has come to be called “Cox’s codpiece”. What I am concerned to ensure is that what is inside the codpiece is in full working order.

Mr Speaker: Well! I hope everybody heard that. In the interests of the accessibility of our proceedings—in case anybody did not hear it—the right hon. and learned Gentleman referred to Cox’s codpiece. I have repeated it so that the alliterative quality is clear to all observers.

Patrick Grady: Thank you for that breather, Mr Speaker.

They say that the definition of insanity is repeating the same thing and expecting different results. Given that the Attorney General has not and will not be able to change a single word in this withdrawal agreement, how exactly would he describe the Government’s plans to put it to a vote again in this House next week?

The Attorney General: The plans for next week are not mine to decide, but what I can tell the hon. Gentleman is this: we are discussing detailed, coherent, careful proposals, and we are discussing text with the European Union. I am surprised to hear the comments that have emerged over the last 48 hours that the proposals are not clear; they are as clear as day, and we are continuing to discuss them.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Will my right hon. and learned Friend give Parliament 48 hours’ notice or, at any rate, properly full notice of the outcome of his discussions with the EU? Will he provide to Parliament a draft of the withdrawal and implementation Bill, so that my European Scrutiny Committee, and others in Parliament and others outside, can assess how the withdrawal agreement will be enacted in domestic law, as obliged by article 4 of the withdrawal agreement; how the Bill would ensure the statutory manner in which the express repeal of the European Communities Act 1972 will be dealt with; and how the question of disapplication by the courts—by the Supreme Court—will be handled under that enactment?

The Attorney General: We will endeavour to give as much notice as we possibly can. Of course those discussions are running. They will resume very shortly and continue almost certainly through the weekend. We will endeavour to give the House notice as early as we can, if and when we have something to report. My hon. Friend made a second point about the Bill. That is not for me to decide, although I will certainly discuss the matter with those who will make that decision. We will endeavour to give the European Scrutiny Committee, and my hon. Friend, the earliest possible notice.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The Attorney General is now in the interesting position of leading on these negotiations, which means that—to follow his nomenclature—he will end up examining his own codpiece in front of the House of Commons. How can he provide the objective advice to the House on which we rely when he will, in effect, be marking his own homework?

The Attorney General: The law is the law. The question of whether whatever is negotiated with the European Union affects the legal risk of the indefinite duration of the backstop is a matter that I shall judge entirely impartially and objectively. If I did not, I would be conscious that there are many lawyers—

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Too many.

The Attorney General: The hon. Gentleman may be right. There are many lawyers who are eminently capable of deciding whether I have got my judgment right or wrong.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Article 175 of the withdrawal agreement which, as the Attorney General knows, deals with resolving disputes about the interpretation of the agreement, states that rulings of the arbitration panel shall be binding on the EU and the UK. In his letter to the Prime Minister of 13 November, the Attorney General stated that although the withdrawal agreement does not

“expressly state”

that the backstop review mechanism

“is intended to be arbitrable...I consider that the better view is that it is.”

In his recent discussions with the EU, has it confirmed that it shares that better view—in which case, why would one need to consider another separate arbitration mechanism for dealing with the backstop? Or has the EU said that it does not regard binding arbitration as applying to the backstop itself?

The Attorney General: That is a question I would have expected from such a sophisticated Select Committee Chair. The problem is that although the arbitration system applies to the protocol, the question that one asks the arbitrator is at the heart of the effectiveness of any arbitration. Although I am not at this stage able to disclose to the right hon. Gentleman the question that has been proposed by the United Kingdom to the Commission, the question is everything. He may very well need to take that into account, because the question about when the protocol would end is likely to be determinative of whether the mechanism is effective.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I am glad to see that the Attorney General’s powers of alliteration have not dimmed since we first appeared in court together, and I know that neither have his independence, rigour, and respect for his constitutional position, which should never be questioned. Does he agree that when dealing with important matters of textual analysis and detail, it is unhelpful to attempt a running media commentary? Such commentary will inevitably be partial and inaccurate, and these matters are best pursued with care and rigour, and with the overall objective that he has just given to the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn).

The Attorney General: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for that question, and of course he is right. Any negotiation of this kind involves dealing with complex legal questions and matters, and a running commentary that is partial and often based on hearsay and rumour is not helpful to the analysis of the question, or conducive to the success of the negotiations.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sensitive to the fact that this issue is of enormous, and for some consuming, importance. I therefore want to let the question run, but colleagues must ask short questions of one sentence, and the Attorney General will treat them as he sees fit.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I understand that the Attorney General's conversations with the Cabinet are privileged, but has he turned his mind to the concerns that, should the backstop be indefinite, it is likely to breach the commitments under the Belfast agreement, and indeed the commitments that are given to me as a Northern Ireland citizen under article 3?

The Attorney General: The hon. Gentleman knows that if I were to answer that question, I would be breaching the Law Officers' convention. All I can say is that I turn my mind to a great many of the legal implications of the treaty, and those that he has mentioned have not escaped me.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The withdrawal agreement contains many issues that we all agree on, such as citizens' rights and a transition for business. Is it still the EU's negotiating position that in order to reach agreement on our long-term relationship we need to agree a withdrawal agreement first?

The Attorney General: Yes.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Northern Ireland protocol is there primarily to protect the peace process. Yesterday, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland made some rather unfortunate comments that killings during the troubles at the hands of the security services were "not crimes". Has the Attorney General advised her that her comments were ill-informed, insensitive and seriously potentially contemptuous of the current legal process, wherein the Director of Public Prosecutions is shortly to announce whether prosecutions will be brought against soldiers for unlawful killings on Bloody Sunday? Will he please tell his colleagues to be more mindful of these conventions in future?

The Attorney General: I think the hon. and learned Lady knows that the Secretary of State has corrected those comments. I do not think it is necessary for me to advise her on the various matters that she suggests. I believe firmly that the Secretary of State will not have intended any offence and she has, in any event, corrected those remarks.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): It is widely reported that, should the Attorney General have a more successful trip to Brussels tomorrow than he has managed so far this week, he will be putting any concessions that he receives on the backstop to a star chamber of Eurosceptic lawyers—one QC, six Tory MPs and one Democratic Unionist party MP. Why are there no MPs from other parties in the star chamber?

The Attorney General: I assure the hon. Gentleman that I shall be putting them to the star chamber of this House. I am delighted that there are eight very distinguished Members who are going to sit in judgment on my opinion, but I expect and welcome the judgment of all Members of this House, on both sides of it.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I really hope the Attorney General appreciates the fundamental concerns here, because it now seems that as well as being part of the negotiating team he is advising the Government on the outcome of the negotiations. It seems he will then bring his proposals to the star chamber and then he will have to answer to this House. First, will he commit to publish any advice that he gives the Prime Minister on any concessions that he receives? Secondly, will he record what he has said in the star chamber, so that all MPs can make a decision on Tuesday on exactly the same information?

The Attorney General: The hon. Gentleman is labouring under a misconception. I am not appearing before any star chamber, either on this side of the House or the other. The star chamber I am appearing in front of is this House. I will account to this House. I am not going to be appearing in front of any star chamber, although it is composed, as I say, of exceptionally distinguished people. Any Member of this House can come and see me if they like and I shall account to this House. I say to the hon. Gentleman: do not grieve because I shall, I assure him, be wholly open about my advice. He asks me whether I will commit to publishing it. I will commit now to saying to this House that I shall publish my legal opinion on any document that is produced and negotiated with the Union.

Leaving the EU

6. **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on his Office's priorities. [909669]

10. **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on his Office's priorities. [909674]

The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox): The priorities of my Office are published in the business plan. In relation to the UK's withdrawal from the Union, my priority continues to be supporting the successfully delivery of the Government's objectives by giving legal and constitutional advice within the Government, and, in particular, by contributing to international negotiations. I take a keen interest in the programme of Brexit-related domestic legislation and I am of course involved in supporting preparations for future international co-operation with the Law Officers' Departments and the prosecution agencies.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are running late, but I am willing to accommodate colleagues. I know that the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), notwithstanding any advance text that she has penned, will express herself with admirable succinctness, which reflects the urgency of the situation.

Deidre Brock: I will attempt to be pithy, Mr Speaker. We now know that the Department for Transport's botched tendering process for ferry contracts has already cost the taxpayer £33 million to settle legal action. Will the Attorney General tell us whether similar tendering

processes across Government could mean further litigation, and how much public money has been set aside for the contingency of such court action?

The Attorney General: The hon. Lady knows that she is asking me questions that belong to the Department for Transport, not to me. These matters do not come to the Law Officers unless they have a Law Officers' point, so the reality is that I am afraid I must direct her to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport.

Stuart C. McDonald: Will the Attorney General therefore confirm whether or not he provided any legal advice to the Department for Transport in relation to that contract and settlement with Eurotunnel; and if he did, given the huge public concern about this, will he publish it?

The Attorney General: It grieves me to have to say to the hon. Gentleman that he knows I will be bound, and am bound, by the Law Officers' convention not to disclose either the fact or content of my advice, if any were given on that subject. I am sorry.

Legal Education

8. **Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): What steps the Law Officers have taken to promote public legal education. [909671]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): The Attorney General and I are the pro bono champions of Government. As part of that, I work closely with those involved in public legal education, supporting initiatives to increase its profile and to reach more members of the public.

Eddie Hughes: It is important that all citizens have the opportunity to learn about the law and their basic criminal legal rights, so will the Solicitor General explain his vision for the public legal education committee?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the work of my public legal education committee, which released its vision statement in October 2018. Among the goals that we have set, we are looking at scaling up the delivery of PLE via the legal profession, using on and offline methods, and we are looking to embed it in public services as an aspect of early intervention in health advice and community settings.

Treason

9. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What information his Department holds on the most recent prosecution for treason. [909673]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): The most recent prosecution for what is sometimes known as high treason was that of William Joyce, also known as Lord Haw-Haw, in 1946. Treason remains an offence that can be prosecuted. However, its provisions are somewhat archaic. Modern criminal and terrorism offences are more likely to be applicable and provide sufficient sentencing power, and usually offer a better chance of a successful conviction.

Mr Hollobone: Will the Solicitor General strongly encourage the Law Commission to revise its 2008 guidance that the Treason Act 1351 has ceased to be of contemporary relevance, so that the law may be applied to British nationals who betray our country by going abroad to join a jihad against Her Majesty's armed forces?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to remind us that the 1351 Act is very much on the statute book. The question of who the sovereign's enemies are is perhaps easily answered when we have clearly defined state actors who are clearly acting against the interests of our country. It is somewhat more difficult when it comes to returning foreign fighters, but I assure him that when people come back to this country who have committed atrocities abroad and where there is evidence, we will prosecute them.

Knife Crime

10.44 am

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Home Secretary to make a statement on the crisis of knife crime.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): The Home Secretary flew to Brussels last night to participate in the EU Justice and Home Affairs Council, the significance of which at this time I am sure colleagues across the House will recognise. He asked me to respond to this urgent question on his behalf.

The senseless killings in recent days, and the too many others before them, have rightly shocked the country. Our thoughts and sympathies are with the families of all the victims and everyone affected. There is no denying the urgency of this issue. Day in, day out, we are acting to end the bloodshed. At the start of the week, the Home Secretary came to the House to set out our approach to serious violence. He said there was no single solution and that we had to unite and fight on all fronts to stop the slaughter.

We are taking a tough law enforcement approach with our Offensive Weapons Bill, which is going through Parliament, and we have listened to what the police tell us they need and at their request are introducing knife crime prevention orders in that Bill. We are also increasing police funding by up to £970 million next year, including council tax, and police and crime commissioners are planning to recruit hundreds of new officers as a result.

We recognise, though, that we cannot arrest our way out of this. In the serious violence strategy, we announced a multi-agency approach, and we will consult very soon on a statutory public health duty of care to ensure that all agencies that can and must work on this play their part. We are also investing more than £220 million in early intervention projects to stop the most vulnerable being sucked into a life of violence and addressing the drivers of crime, including the drugs trade, with the launch of our independent drugs review.

Day in, day out, we, the police and others are acting across the country to try to stop the bloodshed. We continue to look for new ways to tackle this epidemic. Yesterday, I attended a serious violence summit with senior police officers hosted by the Home Secretary as part of our continuing work under the serious violence strategy. Consulting those on the frontline is vital to making sure our next steps are effective. While lives are being lost, we are determined to do even more to stop knife crime and serious violence. We owe it to our young people and our communities to get this right.

Ms Abbott: We have had several days of newspaper headlines on knife crime, but does the Minister accept that for families and communities up and down the country this is not just a few days of newspaper stories; this is their lives? It is every mother's worst nightmare: they say goodbye to their son in the morning and the next call they get is from the emergency services telling them their child is the victim of violent crime.

On police numbers, does the Minister accept that it is a question not just of police officers on patrol, but of community policing, safer school partnerships and police officers working with our diverse communities? Does

she agree with the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Cressida Dick, who says there is a clear correlation between the fall in police numbers and the rise in violent crime, including knife crime, or does she agree with her Prime Minister, who denies any such correlation? Does she agree with the former Metropolitan Police Commissioner, who said of the Prime Minister:

"I don't think she listens, quite frankly, to what she's being told"?

Does the Minister accept that many people will find the Chancellor of the Exchequer's suggestion that the police only have to move resources from other areas to fight knife crime, monstrous and an insult to grieving families? The police are under pressure in nearly every area. Our constituents know this from the delays in responding to 999 calls—not just a few hours, but sometimes the next day—and they know when they ring up to say they have seen people selling drugs or other criminality on the street that the police do not have the resources to respond. We need more resources for the police, and we need them now.

Yesterday, the Home Secretary met police chiefs from seven forces and others. Since 2010, Tory Governments have cut more than 9,000 officers from those forces alone. Did the Home Secretary apologise to them? Did he offer them extra resources? Is the Minister able to tell us?

In 2009, the Home Affairs Committee published a comprehensive appraisal of what needs to be done to fight knife crime. We know about the success of what has been done in Glasgow. Does the Minister accept that what frightened communities, families and mothers need is not more hand-wringing, not more summits, not more committees, and not more reviews? They want the Government to put the necessary resources into the youth service, into work with excluded children, into strengthening mental health services for young people and adolescents, and, above all, into the police service. Only then will the public believe that the Government are taking the knife crime epidemic seriously.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the right hon. Lady for her comments. She knows from the many debates that we have had on this matter, and the many occasions on which she and I and Home Office Ministers have discussed it, that we all recognise the great fear, worries and concerns of mums and dads in certain parts of the country that have been suffering from these crimes for some time. That is precisely why we issued the serious violence strategy last year. [*Interruption.*] The right hon. Lady is chuntering at me. I am trying to answer her questions.

It is because of that fear that we are putting so much effort into supporting local charities, through both our anti-knife crime community fund and our early intervention youth fund, to help young people and children and their families. We are also working on the youth endowment fund, which will invest some £200 million over 10 years to support projects to intervene on young people and protect them from being ensnared by gang leaders.

The right hon. Lady was right to raise the issue of resources. Only a couple of weeks ago we voted to increase police resources by nearly £1 billion, and I am sorry that she did not feel able to vote for that. Police funds were increased last year, and will be increased again next year.

[Victoria Atkins]

The right hon. Lady talked about summits and meetings and so on. The point of those is getting the right people into the room to tackle this issue together. As we all know, there is no single simple solution. I wish that there were, but the issue is very complex. That is why there are both short-term and longer-term measures in the strategy, which meets with the approval of the police and others with whom we engage to try to crack this problem.

I very much hope that today we will yet again hear fruitful, constructive and non-partisan comments about this topic, because it is affecting every single one of our constituencies. We need to work together to get it right, because when I meet victims and their families they want to hear what we are doing, not what our conversations across the Dispatch Box are about.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Many police in London now use body-worn video cameras. Does the Minister agree that that should help to give them the confidence to use stop-and-search in all circumstances within the law as part of a concerted effort to end the terrible tragedies that are afflicting our city?

Victoria Atkins: My right hon. Friend has made a very important point. The use of body-worn cameras enables officers to use their stop-and-search powers with even greater confidence than they had before. Interestingly, the chief constable of Merseyside told us yesterday that since his officers have started using body-worn cameras, the volume of complaints about stop-and-search has decreased dramatically: I think he said that there were about seven last year. This is the point of stop-and-search. If we target it correctly and officers are stopping people when they believe that a search meets the test of being proportionate and necessary, that will not just help them to catch those who are carrying knives, but will, I hope, give confidence to communities.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I thank the Minister for explaining why the Home Secretary is not here to answer this question, but there can be no doubt that the Home Secretary faces a massive crisis on his doorstep. We have heard repeatedly in recent weeks about how the public health approach to knife crime has worked not just in Glasgow, but across Scotland, where knife crime has greatly reduced and crimes of handling an offensive weapon have decreased by 64% over the last 10 years. The evidence speaks for itself, and the World Health Organisation has commended this approach, so I want to know why there is not more of a sense of urgency on the part of this Government about following the public health approach.

The Prime Minister's comments that police numbers on the streets have not been a factor in this crisis have been met with significant criticism and fly in the face of what experts such as Cressida Dick have told us. By contrast, Scotland has a better record on police numbers: in 2018 in Scotland there were about 32 officers per 10,000 of population, compared with only 21 officers per 10,000 of population in England and Wales. So does the Minister agree that the Home Secretary should take immediate steps to match the ratio of police to population figures that we have in Scotland?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for her question. I understand there are reports of a stabbing in Glasgow last night, and I am sure the condolences of the House are with the families and those concerned.

We are determined to act on the public health multi-agency approach. It was in the strategy published a year ago, and we are due to consult very soon on whether we should put into law that relevant agencies have the duty to collaborate and work together on this. One listens to doctors working in A&E departments talking about the data they can gather and provide to the police, which will then help the police target particular houses on streets in huge cities; precision policing is what it is called in New York and Chicago and places overseas. This sort of data can really help to protect those who may be victims, but also frankly help go after those who may be perpetrators and the gang leaders we are all determined to crack down on.

I thank the hon. and learned Lady for her support on this. We talk a great deal about the Glasgow model, and I for one am very pleased to be learning from it, and also from the experiences in Wales, where great work is being done on adverse childhood experiences.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): A national newspaper this week featured a smirking criminal outside court having been given a suspended sentence for a second knife offence. Will this Minister, whose tenacity is matched by her talent, disregard those who are blinded by the soft soap of self-righteousness and see what in the eyes of those living on the frontline of crime is as clear as crystal: that more of the thugs and gangsters who, through their criminality, punish the innocent, should be stopped, searched, charged and locked up for as long as possible?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my right hon. Friend for his kind words, and I am reminded of the many comments made about him in celebration of his recent knighthood. He makes an important point about sentencing. Of course, it is the judiciary who decide the sentences they impose on defendants as they appear before them in court, but we really must emphasise the importance of the public message on this for local communities living in the sorts of circumstances outlined by the shadow Home Secretary, where people fear for their sons and daughters. That is why we have introduced mandatory minimum sentences for those caught in possession of a knife on more than one occasion. We have asked judges to apply a minimum of six months' imprisonment to such people to send out that very clear message that holding a knife is not acceptable, is not normal, and if you hold a knife in a public place not only do you put other people at risk, you put yourself at risk as well.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I do not doubt the Minister's good intentions on this, and I think the whole House would agree on many of the things that can make a difference. The problem is that she could have been saying most of these things about a year ago. There is no real sense that the Government are doing anything on the scale that is needed or with the urgency that is needed, whether that is on extra policing, early intervention, youth intervention or tackling exclusions from schools. One summit is just not enough.

We want to know what the Home Secretary is doing. Is he holding weekly meetings, either in Cobra or in the Home Office, to pull everyone together and get some action by the end of next week or by the end of the month? Let us see something that actually makes a difference and saves lives.

Victoria Atkins: I take the right hon. Lady's point about meetings and summits and so on. As she knows, the way in which we get things moving in Whitehall and then across local government and local areas is through drawing everybody together into rooms. We have been working on this day in, day out since the serious violence strategy was launched. We are already funding 29 projects through the early intervention youth fund and working with police and crime commissioners to reach those young people who need help. We have already funded many programmes through the anti-knife crime community fund, which involves smaller projects, and I hope that many Members of Parliament will have received letters from me about the projects in their constituencies that have benefited from it. We have a media campaign called #knifefree, which we in this place are probably not aware of because frankly we are not the people that the campaign is targeting. It is targeting young people in a very direct way on social media, through catch-up television and elsewhere, and it is supporting the message that it is not normal for people to carry knives.

I want to put out this plea: there is more that we as a society can do to press this message home. I am due to meet representatives of the Premier League to ask whether they can encourage their football legends to do even more as role models to get the message out there that carrying a knife is not normal, that people do not have to do it, and that if they do, they are putting themselves at enormous risk. There is a great deal more that we as a society can do to get that message out there to young people about carrying knives, but there is also a huge amount of work going on involving police officers. We have weeks of intensive activity in which police forces across the country make tackling knife crime the priority for that week. I went to an operational briefing on Friday where the plans for the following week were being laid out. Those weeks have extraordinary rates of success: in the last one, 9,000 knives were taken off the streets of our country. The more of these surge operations we can have, the greater benefit there will be in the immediate term on this very complex issue.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): So, with a suspended sentence for a second offence, it is self-evident that we cannot rely on the judges, can we?

Victoria Atkins: My right hon. Friend yet again attempts to skewer a Minister with a short, direct question. He knows that I must, and will, defend the independence of the judiciary, but my colleagues in the Ministry of Justice and I do emphasise the point to the judiciary about the public messaging of sentences. We impose mandatory minimum sentences for those who are found in possession of knives precisely to get the message out there that this is simply not on.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Can I tell the Minister what the country is saying to the Government? It is saying, "Get a grip of this, and get a grip of it urgently." Let me give her an example of what I mean. We had a

crisis meeting yesterday where the police chiefs demanded emergency funding. The Home Secretary supported that and said that he wanted £15 million of emergency funding. The Chancellor then went on the radio this morning and said that it was a question not of additional resources but of re-prioritisation by the police. Absolutely pathetic! It is about time the Government listened to what the police chiefs are saying. This should not be a matter of debate. They want emergency funding so that they can surge police numbers into those areas where there are real problems. In the short term, that is what works, although of course we need a public health approach in the longer term. Surging police numbers into those areas requires emergency funding, so the Chancellor should be told where to go and the Home Secretary should be supported by the Prime Minister. The whole of this House will say, "Give the police the money they need to tackle this scourge." The public of this country will have no idea what we are doing if we do not do that, so get a grip and give the police the money they need.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, although I might not have employed all the language that he used. Yesterday's meeting was not a crisis meeting; it was part of a programme of meetings that the Home Secretary has regularly with chief constables, precisely as one would hope.

On the hon. Gentleman's point about resourcing, we voted recently to provide just under £1 billion to police forces, with the help of police and crime commissioners. We are actively looking at what the chiefs are saying and what more they need. We are conscious of the need to ensure, over the long term, that in the surge exercises that they conduct regularly as part of their operational policing powers, they can get their officers to the places where they need to be. So I do not think there is any disagreement here about operations; about how the police can crack down on this. The Home Secretary discussed that in detail yesterday with the chiefs precisely because we want to listen to their needs and take the matter forward.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): We know that, when children go into care, they are more likely to join gangs. In Essex, we know that early intervention works; the number of children in care has fallen from 1,600 to 1,000. We also know that stop and search works. We have put 390 more police on the streets in Essex, and the number of stop and search encounters in my constituency has risen from 80 to 500. That is resulting in arrests, which mean that those at the top of the gangs are being taken off our streets. Will my hon. Friend congratulate all those in Essex and look at whether some of the lessons we have learned in our county can help the rest of the country?

Victoria Atkins: I note that some 50 officers were recently sworn in to serve the good county of Essex. We are all learning about, and determined to do something about, the link between exclusions and participation in or victimisation by gangs. The Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), who is sitting next to me, is awaiting delivery of the Timpson report on exclusions. We need to make sure that if children are excluded—if that is what a headteacher believes to be appropriate

[Victoria Atkins]

not just for the child, but for the wider school community—they have excellent provision of services outside mainstream schooling.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Is it not now beyond dispute that the Government's cuts to police officer numbers have gone much too far?

Victoria Atkins: I think we all recognise that the demands on policing have changed and intensified in recent years, not just in the realm of serious violence but, for example, in the investigation of historical sexual abuse. There has been a rise in the recognition of modern slavery cases, and in the reporting of domestic abuse cases. That is happening because we are trying to help people to understand when they have been victims of crime, and it has added to the existing pressures on the police. That is precisely why the Home Secretary has said that police funding is his priority for the next spending review, and it is why we have increased the funding to police forces for next year by nearly £1 billion with the help of police and crime commissioners.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The Minister has already mentioned the link with exclusions and the report by the former children's Minister, Ed Timpson, which I gather has been completed. When will it be published, and when will the lessons be learned? What lessons have been taken away from the "Positive for Youth" report, published in 2011 by the then children's Minister, about better engagement with young people?

Victoria Atkins: We expect to publish the Timpson report shortly. There are lessons to be learned on youth engagement. When I talk to youth workers and former gang members, I find it is about listening to people with lived experience; it is about former gang leaders and former gang members explaining to young people who may be at risk or already ensnared in criminal gangs, listening to them and advising them about their life chances. That has huge benefit.

Yet again, I ask role models in the sporting world and the music world to help us to send out the message that carrying a knife is not right.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Home Secretary has tried to use the threat of prison to stop young people carrying knives, and it clearly has not worked. I passionately disagree with the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes): short-term prison sentences do not work, and I include six-month sentences in that. Why are the Government creating more mandatory short-term prison sentences in the Offensive Weapons Bill, including for breaches of the new knife crime prevention orders?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising knife crime prevention orders, because it gives me an opportunity to explain what they are. Some of her colleagues in the other place may have misunderstood, because this is not about criminalising young people. We have put these prevention orders in the Bill at the request of the police to help to provide wraparound support to a small cohort of young people who have not yet been convicted of a criminal offence, and who have not yet entered the youth justice system.

Where the police receive intelligence from teachers, families or friends that they think a young person is carrying a knife, and where one of these civil—not criminal—orders is obtained, we will have the structure to wrap services and support around that young person. That might include, if appropriate, banning them from entering a certain postcode—the hon. Lady will know of the sometimes competitive nature of postcode gangs—or from using social media to incite violence. All these requirements can be included in an order to make sure that that child does not continue down the path of criminality, blighting not only their life with the harm they may cause but their life chances by having a criminal record.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I am glad the Minister sees this as not just a London problem. The number of people carrying knives in Thames Valley has doubled in the past five years. Has she considered what role MPs can play in this process so that we are not just observers but participants?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend makes a good point. We are leaders within our communities. If colleagues would like to speak to me afterwards about how they can help to lead the message on knife-carrying in their constituencies, I would be delighted to work with them. Members can google our #knifefree social media campaign, which provides all sorts of information about what one can do if one is worried about a young person or if a young person wants help and advice. There is so much that we as a community can and must do to tackle this.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): We know that the rise in knife crime is multifaceted and multi-layered, we know that we need to adopt a public health approach—increasing community policing, youth work and early years intervention—and we know we need it to be a long-term approach. How will the knife crime summit be determined? Who will attend? Will it be long term, sustainable and cross-party, like the work of the Youth Violence Commission? How will the Government report back to the House?

Victoria Atkins: As I say, the Home Secretary has his meetings with the chief constables. I hesitate to give the House a diary of my engagements in the next couple of weeks, but I am meeting police and crime commissioners. We also have the serious violence taskforce coming ahead of that—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Lady is not letting me finish. I am about to get there. I am just trying to lay out the plan of work. I am meeting PCCs, because they are obviously vital. We have the serious violence taskforce, which, as she knows, is a cross-party body that brings everyone who can help nationally and locally into the same room. The Prime Minister has announced her summit, which will involve not just Ministers, but external stakeholders—victims, youth workers and others—to help to cement the work that is happening under the serious violence strategy.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Does my hon. Friend think the time has come to have a fresh look at sentencing for those caught carrying knives?

Victoria Atkins: We looked at this issue in detail in the preparation of the Offensive Weapons Bill and we have maintained the mandatory minimum sentence of

six months. There are colleagues across the House who do not agree with that approach, but we think it is absolutely right to send out the clear public message that carrying a knife more than once will get you into very serious trouble. I should say that on the first occasion when someone is found carrying a knife it is of course open to judges to imprison them if that is appropriate. Through the Bill, we also wanted to make sure that the law on corrosive substances mirrors that on knives, so that we do not have gangs swapping knives for corrosive substances—we know they have done that in some circumstances—because the law simply is not up to date on that.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Three stabbings have occurred in my constituency since Monday. Two young men were stabbed last night in Queen's Park, just yards from where I live. We have lost a third of our police since 2011. London policing is at its lowest level for two decades. Three years ago, Westminster City Council pulled all funding from the youth service, after school and holiday schemes. Whatever the debate about the causes of the current escalation in serious youth violence, can we agree that that is a catastrophic decline in our capacity to respond, and that we need an urgent intervention to help these authorities to intervene with young people and stop this tide of violence before it gets worse?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady will know that London is seeing a reorganisation at operational level of how it is policed. I am sure she has made those representations to the Mayor of London, who is accountable for the operation of the police in London, as the PCC. On youth services, my understanding is that Westminster City Council has brought forward a programme called “family hubs”, where it is putting all the services together in one hub to try to make them as easy and accessible as possible for members of the public. I repeat that at the central level we are working to help charities across London and further afield through the early intervention youth fund and the anti-knife crime community fund—I am sure I have written to her about local funds that have benefited from that. These are charities that use youth workers, many of whom have lived experience of the problems they are trying to counteract. That sort of work is very effective in trying to steer young people away.

Mr Speaker: The Minister's answers are comprehensive, and that comprehensive character of answer and her commitment to the House are hugely appreciated. However, may I gently say to her that we are, in productivity terms, making very slow progress? So if she could speed up a bit, that would be enormously appreciated, but I respect her commitment on this subject, as well as her unfailing courtesy, which I think everybody acknowledges.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Nineteen people have lost their lives to this in London alone this year, which comes after a record number last year. Clearly, we need to send the message that carrying a knife is unacceptable, and I agree with what has been said about the increased use of stop and search. Will the Minister talk about an amnesty for knives, so that we can take them off the streets, they can be turned into the police and they are therefore taken out of circulation?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. One of the most successful parts of Operation Sceptre, the national weeks of action to which police forces throughout the country sign up, is exactly what he mentions: amnesties and knife bins. As I said, in the most recent week of Operation Sceptre, more than 9,000 knives were taken off our streets.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Ind): This is now a national crisis, with young people losing their lives not only on the streets of major cities but even in towns like Dudley. In the west midlands we have lost 2,000 police over the past few years. The police urgently need more resources so that we can get more police on the streets to deal with this problem. We have also lost youth services, sports clubs and all the other projects that keep young people off the streets and out of trouble. Will the Minister support the police and crime commissioner's bid for more funding for the West Midlands Violence Prevention Alliance? Finally, when people are caught with knives they should be locked up. That is what the Conservatives promised in their 2010 manifesto, but that promise has never been upheld.

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Gentleman knows that I have often raised on the Floor of the House the use of reserves, because police reserves are made up of money that the taxpayer has given to police forces to spend on policing. In March last year, West Midlands police's reserves were £85 million. I am sure the police and crime commissioner would be able to explain why that money is sitting in reserves and, indeed, he may have spent some of it in the past year, but the issue with funding is how it is spent as much as how much is given. On the hon. Gentleman's point about sentences, we have put the legislation in place, and although it is open to any judge or magistrate to imprison someone who is found in possession of a knife once, it is then mandatory on the second occasion of their being caught. If that is not being followed by judges, it is a decision of the judiciary.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I appreciate that the focus is on cities at this difficult time, but will my hon. Friend reassure my constituents in Erewash that measures will be put in place to make sure that this epidemic does not spread to our towns?

Victoria Atkins: I very much will. I was delighted to visit my hon. Friend's Erewash constituency recently to see the use of a scheme called Radio Link, which helps to co-ordinate the activities of people in the local town centre with the police. Those types of schemes are not huge in terms of resources or their public impact, but they can make a real difference in helping the police to police our streets.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): On behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer), I am sure the House will want to send condolences for the young man who was murdered in Leyton yesterday.

Tackling knife crime requires an effective criminal justice system. With a damning National Audit Office report out last week highlighting the failures of the privatised probation services, it is clear that the system is not working. A joined-up approach is clearly required,

[*Ellie Reeves*]

so what discussions has the Home Office had with the Ministry of Justice to ensure that the probation service is fit for purpose?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady, and we of course echo her condolences to the grieving family. She is absolutely right that probation needs to be part of the answer. We have talked about imprisonment, but effective probation can steer children and young people away from criminality. I am in discussion with my ministerial counterparts in the MOJ about that, but we need to ensure that the criminal justice system is able to respond quickly and robustly to those who take the very bad decision to carry a knife or, indeed, to use one.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I agree with the Minister that there is no one single solution to knife crime. As we heard earlier, knife amnesties are used right across the country, but there are often press reports questioning whether they are actually useful or working. Surely every single time we take a knife off the street, that is a good thing. Will the Minister confirm that knife amnesties do work?

Victoria Atkins: I most certainly can confirm that, and I encourage all constabularies that are taking part in Operation Sceptre events in the coming weeks to use amnesties as part of their toolbox against knife crime in their local area.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Since the Minister's party came to power in 2010, knife crime in Wales has risen by 50% and in north Wales by 86%. Yesterday, the Chancellor told the Home Office that extra emergency policing resources would need to be found within the Department. Will she state today that she will not be finding those resources from rural forces, because knife crime is affecting communities everywhere?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady knows that I represent a rural constituency. She is absolutely right to emphasise the fact that this issue not only affects the larger urban areas, but is reaching out across our rural and coastal areas through county lines. I am afraid that I cannot comment on resources or ongoing discussions, but I very much take on board her observations.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): Following on from the previous question, one issue that affects all of us who represent rural parts is that though our police community support officers do a phenomenal job, they are not trained to the level of a police officer and they do not have the same defensive equipment as a police officer. Will the Government explain what they will do to make sure that PCSOs across the United Kingdom are adequately protected and adequately backed up for the vital jobs that they do?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend understands the value that PCSOs can bring to their local communities, not least because they can often be a very good way of engaging with young people who may be at risk, or who may know others who are at risk. He will be pleased

that police and crime commissioners have pretty much universally said—there may be one or two exceptions—that they intend to use their increased funding to recruit more officers. Some have also said that that includes PCSOs. We leave it to local police and crime commissioners and chief constables to work out what works in their local area, and I welcome and support those plans.

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): We already know what works in tackling violent youth crime because we have done it before. For instance, the public health-type approach that I and others introduced in Lambeth in 2008, more than 10 years ago, dramatically cut violent youth offending at the time. It included services such as better family support, tackling school exclusions, better youth provision, more community engagement and leadership, support for the voluntary sector and better mental health care targeted at young people. This Government came in and cut the funding for all those services, and now we see more young people dying on our streets. Will the Minister finally acknowledge the scale of the Government's mistakes in cutting funding, think again about the fair funding formula, which will target precisely those services and precisely those community for further cuts, and urgently restore funding so that we can tackle the complex root causes of violent youth crime?

Victoria Atkins: I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman is supporting our multi-agency approach under the serious violence strategy. He will, I am sure, welcome the fact that part of the troubled families programme, which he knows funds a great number of vital projects across the country to help those who are most deprived, has been apportioned by the Secretary of State specifically to tackle knife crime. It is exactly that sort of approach that will not just commend itself to the House, but have real, real effect on the ground.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Ind): The Minister knows that this is not just a London problem. In cities and towns across the country, including in Nottingham, people want practical answers on this, not politicking across the Chamber. Yes, it is about police officer numbers and, of course, a public health approach is necessary, but may I ask her about the availability of knives and how people, young people in particular, are purchasing them, possibly evading age verification by buying online. There was a time when the Government promised action on that. Will she commit to report to the House on how the Government have cracked down on the online purchasing of knives?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Indeed, it was a pleasure to open the services of Redthread in Nottingham's hospital recently. Youth workers are situated in the A&E services so that they can reach out to young people at the teachable moment when they come into A&E with injuries. The Offensive Weapons Bill is in the other place at the moment, and it is through that Bill that we are cracking down on those online retailers who are not conducting proper checks as they should be. It has been the law for 30 years and they should be abiding by that law. It is precisely through that Bill that we are addressing the matter, and I look forward to discussing it with the hon. Gentleman when the Bill comes back.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): It is all very well the Minister referring to attending meetings and summits, but police bosses this week demanded an extra 10,000 police officers to deal with this absolutely dreadful problem. More children may well die this weekend. If the Government refuse to provide the 10,000 extra officers that the police bosses demand, it prompts the question: what price do this Government attach to a child's life?

Victoria Atkins: I hope the hon. Lady recognises how seriously the Government take this issue. We are carefully considering the requests from chief constables and others. This is on top of the work that we do day in, day out to improve the life chances of those who may fall victim to these gangs and who may be ensnared in this criminality, or who may just be carrying knives because of the fear they have when they leave their front door. I encourage the hon. Lady to send out the message loud and clear in her constituency—as I am sure she already does—that carrying a knife is not right and not normal.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): In her opening remarks, the Minister said that knife crime is particularly an issue in our larger cities, but as we have been hearing, it is also a real issue in our towns. In the last year, there have been two stabbings in Rugby in Warwickshire, one in Nuneaton, one in Bedworth and, just recently, one in my town of Leamington Spa. Does the Minister accept that when the Prime Minister was Home Secretary, she was wrong to cut the number of police officers by 21,000, which meant a reduction in the number working in our schools and, most importantly, in the intelligence that we get from community police officers?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Gentleman is right to emphasise that knife crime happens not just in large urban areas, but in rural and coastal ones. I am afraid that I must just pull him up on one detail, which is that it was not the Home Secretary who made decisions about police numbers. That is the responsibility of police and crime commissioners, who manage budgets locally. That is the case precisely because they live in their local community so they can set their policing priorities, and they are voted in or out by the local electorate.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): The Minister must accept the reality, which is that funding cuts to police forces across Wales and England since 2010 have directly contributed to the rise in knife crime. In my constituency last year, 131 knives were seized inside Cardiff magistrates court—inside a court! What are the Government doing to reassure my constituents that they will be safe on the streets?

Victoria Atkins: We have launched the serious violence strategy, and we are doing a great deal of work in Wales. As I have said in previous answers, we are funding the early intervention youth fund, the youth endowment fund, knife-free campaigns in the media and small anti-knife crime charities. We are about to consult on a public health duty; we are taking the Offensive Weapons Bill through the House to strengthen the powers of the police; and a couple of weeks ago we voted to increase the police budget by up to £970 million with the help of police and crime commissioners.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): May I bring the Minister back to the matter of school exclusions, and encourage her to talk to the Department for Education about adopting an assumption that there should be zero school exclusions, as advocated by my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) and Siobhan Benita, the Lib Dem mayoral candidate in London? Does the Minister understand concerns over the borough command unit mergers that have seen Sutton, Croydon and Bromley merge, and the risk that a one-size-fits-all approach will be adopted in relation to knife crime when what is really needed is a targeted borough or ward-based approach?

Victoria Atkins: The right hon. Gentleman is right to raise the matter of exclusions. As I have said, we are awaiting the report from Ed Timpson. Instinctively, I would want to give headteachers the flexibility to exclude if they feel that a child is a danger to the wider school community, but I accept that this is for headteachers to decide, so we are very much listening to the evidence. The decisions on the borough command unit set-up are taken by the commissioner. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman has made representations to the Mayor if he is concerned about this issue, because obviously the Mayor is the police and crime commissioner for London.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Government were warned about cutting police numbers. Had the 20,000 police officers we have lost still been in place and enabled one stop and search per week, there would have been 1 million stop and searches. Had there been one a day, which is not a lot to ask, there would have been over 7 million stop and searches. If we add to that the intelligence-based use of resources, would that not have had a major impact on knife crime?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Gentleman rather highlights the reason we changed the voluntary guidance for police officers, in that we do not believe that a one-size-fits-all approach helps. Listening to communities where young people have been stopped and searched without reason—as they see it—we are very conscious that that can harm relations between the police and the community. That is why we have encouraged the use of intelligence-led, targeted stop and search. I refer to the answer I gave earlier about the huge benefit of body-worn cameras in this space, because the public and the police have that extra reassurance that searches being conducted are in fact lawful.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Ind): Why are the Government not making a real and substantial funding commitment now to address this issue, as requested by the Home Secretary? If it is a matter of priorities, why have they agreed to give £20 million of taxpayers' money to test alternative arrangements to the Brexit backstop—a fool's errand—while refusing to give our police an extra £15 million to tackle the knife crime crisis and save lives? We need visible neighbourhood policing at the heart of our communities. There should be a one-off fund for a surge in temporary officers targeted at knife crime hotspots, as police forces are requesting.

Victoria Atkins: I assure the right hon. Lady that when we have spoken to the commissioner and her commanders about this, they say that that is exactly

[Victoria Atkins]

what they are doing on the streets of London. They are surging numbers where they are needed in hotspot areas. If she has particular issues, she should please let me know or speak to the Mayor of London. On the wider point about funding and resources, I am afraid that, as I say, I cannot comment further at this stage, but we are very clear that, with the help of police and crime commissioners, the extra £970 million next year will help with some of the issues that she raised.

Points of Order

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In the light of Attorney General's questions this morning, I thought it would be convenient—

Mr Speaker: Order. I probably ought to say that is not the norm to take points of order at this stage, but in deference to what I would describe as the celebrity status of the hon. Gentleman, and the salience of his inquiry to earlier exchanges, of which he has recently notified me, I am willing to take his point of order now, and I think the House should listen with bated breath. I mean that most sincerely.

Sir William Cash: I am extremely grateful, Mr Speaker. Tomorrow, as recorded on page 12 of today's *Votes and Proceedings*, the European Scrutiny Committee will be publishing a unanimous report—"The draft EU/UK Withdrawal Agreement: key legal and political questions"—and written evidence entitled "Ministerial Correspondence". I thought it would be convenient for the House, and for those who pick up on these things in the press and otherwise, to know that that would be available as of tomorrow.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is ever solicitous towards the House, protective of its interests, and periodically keen to secure its attention for what I might describe as a helpful public information notice. I feel sure that he would work on such a basis in any event, but given his additional status as a highly respected and experienced Chair of the European Scrutiny Committee, we are, if I may politely say so, doubly grateful to him.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I wish to raise a point of order regarding another Member. I attempted to ring his office and give notice, but I could only leave a message.

Earlier, at Attorney General's questions, I asked the Attorney General about the sensitive issue of how, if he is now negotiating the Government's potential deal on the withdrawal agreement and specifically the backstop, he would get round the problem that he would then have to give advice to the House and would therefore, in effect, be marking his own homework. I appreciate that that is a controversial question, but given the seriousness of the matter, I think it was a fair one. As I was leaving the Chamber, the Attorney General's Parliamentary Private Secretary ran down the corridor and asked to speak with me. I said that I was in a hurry and needed to go, but he insisted. He remonstrated with me about my question and said it was "indecent" of me to ask that question in the House.

I realise that feelings are running high; I am inured to that. Those in the House who know me know that I am not a snowflake. I am used to being disagreed with, but I suggest that for a Government aide to attempt to intimidate a Back Bencher for asking a difficult question is wrong, because if we are not going to ask the Government difficult questions in this place, what is the point of us? I would like to know your opinion, Mr Speaker, on how I should take this further.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. Let me say to him, for the avoidance of doubt, that there was nothing in procedural terms disorderly about his inquiry, and from my recollection of what he posited to the Attorney General, there was nothing that I would regard in any way as indecent. A little light-hearted fun was had on the subject of a codpiece, but if memory serves me correctly, it was the Attorney General who introduced the concept of “Cox’s codpiece” and the merit of it being in full working order.

Mr Francois: He brought it up.

Mr Speaker: The Attorney General did indeed raise that matter, and he delivered his point in his usual magnificent baritone and with considerable eloquence. There was nothing improper in procedural terms about what the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) had to say.

If I can, in a light-hearted spirit, say something else to the right hon. Gentleman, it is this. I know that he is not a notably delicate flower, and the reason why I can say that with absolute certainty is that I was myself very disobliging—indeed, I would go so far as to say rude—to him long before he came into this House. It was on the occasion when first we met, at a student conference in September 1983—[*Interruption*]. I do not remember the time of day, but I will check. I very wrongly suggested that he was intellectually knee-high to a gnat.

Mr Francois: It was a grasshopper.

Mr Speaker: Oh, a grasshopper. All I can say is that thereafter, his career went from strength to strength, and he certainly did not seem to take umbrage.

The right hon. Gentleman is in perfectly good order. I am sorry if there is some ill feeling, but there is no way that anybody is going to intimidate him; I have known him long enough to know that that is simply not going to happen. I am sure the PPS was doing his duty as he thought fit. The hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) is a decent man, and I make no criticism of him, but the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford is not the sort of person to be pushed around, and we need to be absolutely clear about that.

The Leader of the House has been extremely patient, so if there are no further points of order, we come now to the business question.

Business of the House

11.43 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 will be:

MONDAY 11 MARCH—Remaining stages of the Children Act 1989 (Amendment) (Female Genital Mutilation) Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 12 MARCH—Debate on a motion relating to section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018.

WEDNESDAY 13 MARCH—My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will deliver his spring statement, followed by a general debate on housing.

THURSDAY 14 MARCH—Debate on a motion relating to the NICE appraisals of rare diseases. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 15 MARCH—Private Members’ Bills.

On Tuesday 26 February, the Prime Minister made three clear commitments to this House. I have just confirmed that the meaningful vote will take place on Tuesday 12 March, and I hope that the House will support the Prime Minister’s deal. However, in the deeply regrettable case that the House does not support the deal, I will make a further business statement on Tuesday 12 March in order to fulfil the Prime Minister’s commitments to allow the House to vote next week on whether we should leave the EU without a withdrawal agreement on the 29 March or extend article 50.

On World Book Day, we can all agree with the words of Frederick Douglass, the American social reformer and abolitionist, who said:

“Once you learn to read, you will be forever free.”

World Book Day’s campaign aims to provide every child and young person in the country with a book of their own. It also offers a great opportunity for many children to go to school dressed as their favourite character. If this Chamber were to join in this morning, my choice would be for the Mad Hatter’s tea party as a theme, with my friend the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) taking the leading role.

Tomorrow is International Women’s Day. This year’s theme is “Balance for Better”—promoting a more inclusive world, where equality for women is a right, not a privilege. A balanced world is a better world, and the UK has some way to go until we have a 50:50 Parliament. This is something I hope all MPs will push for so that future Parliaments look more like the society they represent.

Speaking of balance and equality, I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) is the first male Member to take up proxy voting for baby leave. I am sure we all congratulate him and his family on the arrival of their new baby. We also send our warmest wishes to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) and her family on the birth of their baby.

Last but by no means least, it is Apprenticeship Week, so I want to thank the many apprentices working in the House to support the work of MPs and of Parliament. I am lucky enough to have the support of

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

apprentices in my brilliant Leader of the House's office, as well as having my ninth annual parliamentary apprentice who is doing a superb job for my constituents.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the very short business for next week and her very long speech on various other matters. I thought this was business questions.

I am absolutely staggered to hear what the Leader of the House says about the business next week. It would have been more appropriate to fulfil what the Prime Minister set out in her statement to this House on 26 February, rather than doing it the other way around and putting in debates that then have to be moved. That would have been more appropriate in the light of the utmost seriousness of what is going to happen to the country in the next few weeks.

The Leader of the House seems to be openly in defiance of the Prime Minister. We also see that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs appears to be announcing that the Easter recess will be cancelled. Will the Leader of the House confirm that he said to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee that

“there may not be an Easter recess”?

More Government chaos: the Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill was pulled before it was debated on Monday. May I ask the Leader of the House why, because a very important cross-party amendment was going to be put to the House? Will she say why, and when is it likely to come back?

Something else that needs to come back to this House is the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union—[*Interruption.*] I am really sorry, but the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), has had her go. I need to ask the Leader of the House some questions, so would she mind not speaking so loudly?

Something else that has to be brought back to the House is the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union. I do not know whether the Leader of the House heard the point of order from the Chair of the Exiting the European Union Committee yesterday, but he suggested that the Secretary of State is meeting individuals privately and has not said when he is coming to the Committee. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) has made it absolutely clear that the Committee wants to hear from the Secretary of State before the vote on Tuesday. Will the Leader of the House please ensure that the Brexit Secretary—with or without his other half, the Attorney General—appears before the Committee, particular as one of the Government's red lines was lost in the House of Lords yesterday?

We know that the Government have paid £33 million to settle a lawsuit. Labour Members have totalled up the amount of money that the Secretary of State for Transport has cost the taxpayer, including in his previous guises, and it amounts to £2.7 billion. Imagine if all that was given to police officers, bringing them back on the beat. The Metropolitan Police Commissioner said that there is “some link” between violent crime on the streets

and police numbers. Of course there is—everybody can see that. It does not matter whether the Prime Minister is in Cabinet Office briefing room A, B or C, the fact is that west midlands police and crime commissioner David Jamieson has asked for £964,000 to set up a violence reduction unit. All PCCs should be given funds straight away, before another young person dies this weekend. Yesterday, my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) raised a point of order to ask when the Home Secretary or Prime Minister will come to the House to update it on knife crime.

There has been yet another defeat in the courts—yesterday the High Court ruled that the Government's fracking guidelines were unlawful. Mr Justice Dove said that the consultation was

“flawed in its design and processes”.

May we have a statement on the Government's policy—well, lack of policy—on fracking, given that High Court judgment?

It may be the 50th anniversary of the Race Relations Act 1968, but the Government's “hostile environment” policy has caused immeasurable misery for ethnic minorities. A challenge by the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants found that the Government's right to rent scheme is “discriminatory” and in breach of human rights laws, and that evidence “strongly showed” that landlords were discriminating against potential tenants because of their nationality and ethnicity. That, again, is a judgment of the High Court, so may we have a statement on the change in policy following that ruling?

The Public Accounts Committee has published its report on the Windrush generation and the Home Office, and stated that the Home Office has failed to take ownership of the problems it created. The Home Office considered 11,800 Caribbean cases, but failed to renew around 160,000 non-Caribbean Commonwealth cases. When will the Government end their discriminatory policies?

Last week the Leader of the House said that the United Kingdom is doing extremely well, and that we are well prepared for exiting the European Union. I think she needs to correct the record, because the Institute for Government identified eight red areas where the Government will not be able to mitigate fully the major negative impacts of a no-deal scenario in 2019. On Tuesday, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs warned that businesses in Northern Ireland will not be ready for new border procedures if there is no deal. Which is it? The Leader of the House mentioned World Book Day—is she “Alice Through the Looking Glass” or is she going through the cupboard into Narnia?

It is with sadness that we remember Lord Bhattacharyya, founder of the Warwick Manufacturing Group—never has his advice been more important than it is now.

I thank Sir Amyas Morse for all his public service. He said that not enough Ministers “sweat blood” over how they spend public money. That lesson needs to be learned by us all, and particularly the Secretary of State for Transport.

We are celebrating International Women's Day. It was women's pay day yesterday, which means that as of today women will start being paid for the work they do—they will not be paid for the work they did in the first 65 days because the current pay gap stands at 17.9%. May we have a statement on how the Government will close that gap? We also celebrate the next generation of

young women activists, including Greta Thunberg who started a movement to combat climate change. Our young people are getting ready for their day of action on 15 March. They know that climate change and equality know no boundaries, and that such matters are not about the ego of the few, but that the compassion and co-operation of the many will change the world.

Mr Speaker: Just before the Leader of the House responds, I thank her very much, as will other colleagues, for what she said about World Book Day, and I report that my daughter has today gone to school dressed as Pippi Longstocking. I am sure other Members will have examples with which they can regale the House.

Andrea Leadsom: That is very reassuring, and not at all surprising, Mr Speaker. I am sure the whole House will celebrate the fact that maths A-level is now one of the most popular subjects for students to take, and the whole country can be proud that more children are getting a serious and good education. Thank you for sharing that, Mr Speaker—I shall not share what my children have gone to school in, as because they have not dressed up. That is mainly because they are 23, 20 and 15—[*Laughter.*] It would be a little odd! They used to go as things like Peter Pan. It used to be fun. I remember making many a costume, but sadly those days are behind me.

The hon. Lady raised a number of extremely important questions. She asked about next steps. She will appreciate that the Prime Minister's commitments mean that I have had to announce the business as we know it today. As she appreciates, it is the Government's intention to seek to win the meaningful vote on Tuesday. Should it be the case that the Government do win it, I would then need to come forward—if I had already announced contingent business, I would have to come forward to change it. What we are expecting, and what the Government are working towards, is winning that meaningful vote on Tuesday. As the hon. Lady will know, the Attorney General, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and the Prime Minister herself are very carefully seeking agreement from the European Commission and the EU27 to resolve the outstanding issues on the backstop. It is very important that she understands the reason why the business has been announced as it has.

On recess dates, the hon. Lady will appreciate that for decades, if not longer, Leaders of the House have had to say that recess dates are announced and will then take place subject to the progress of the House. I am sure she appreciates that I will have to make that comment to her again.

On the Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill and the fact that that business did not go forward, as the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride), said on Monday, it is right that we take the time to look properly at the proposed amendments and consider their impact with the Crown dependencies, which are separate jurisdictions with their own democratically elected Governments. Taking the time to review those amendments was therefore extremely important.

The hon. Lady asks if the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union will appear before the Select Committee. I understand that he has agreed to do

so. As she will appreciate, his absolute priority is to seek the support of the European Union for the changes that the UK Government are looking for to the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration. He always shows himself willing to appear before this House for scrutiny. He has been absolutely assiduous in his determination to be open to scrutiny at all times.

The hon. Lady asks about the two debates earlier this week, on Eurotunnel and the Standing Order No. 24 debate. She will be aware that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and the Transport Secretary have both been to the House this week to provide updates on this very important matter. She will know that leaving the EU with a deal remains the Government's top priority, but it is important that we prepare for all scenarios. The agreement with Eurotunnel secures additional freight capacity and helps to ensure that the NHS has essential medicines in the event of a no-deal Brexit.

The hon. Lady asks about fracking. She will be aware that the Government are determined that, as we move towards a carbon-free future, we will need to continue to rely heavily on gas for some years. Gas is the cleanest carbon fossil fuel and it is essential that we take our gas security seriously. Fracking offers not only a UK-grown source of gas security, but huge opportunities for economic growth in those areas that have it.

On the right to rent, the hon. Lady will be aware that the Government are challenging the judgment. The Government do not agree with the findings and that will continue to be looked at.

Finally, the hon. Lady made a point about the pay gap for women. She will be aware that the Government have brought in mandatory reporting on the pay gap for large employers, with unlimited fines for those who do not comply. The official overall gender pay gap in the UK is 17.9%, which is a record low. There is much more to do, but on the Government side of the House we are committed to reducing and eliminating the gender pay gap.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): For years I have waited, with a degree of patience that verges on indulgence, for any glimmer of insight or glint of inspiration from the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas). Finally, listening to the wireless this week, the eureka moment came, when she persuasively backed a campaign for all children to be taught something of natural history—our native trees, birds, flora and fauna. One might describe it as “the wind in the willows”. Will the Leader of the House bring an Education Minister to this Chamber to say how schoolchildren will learn about those things, not because they are useful but just because they are lovely?

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend that learning about natural history—and, indeed, the history of our country and of the world—is absolutely vital for the education of young people. In particular, in the context of the extraordinary peace that has broken out between him and the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), I am sure that there is a campaign there somewhere. If they perhaps wanted to seek a Westminster Hall debate, I am sure that that would be widely welcomed across the House.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. I, too, welcome International Women's Day and join the celebrations around World Book Day today. If we are looking for further Lewis Carroll characters, perhaps we should look at the Government to find out who is the mad March Hare, and possibly who are Tweedledee and Tweedledum.

I suppose this is about the closest that the business statement will ever come to being a work of fiction—it is sort of *Walter Mitty* meets “*Waiting for Godot*”. What it is not is a tablet of stone. I do not think that anyone in the House believes that the statement will survive the rigours of next week, because Tuesday is when the Prime Minister finally faces her Waterloo, and it is not going to end well. With 22 days left before we leave, on Tuesday the road finally runs out and we approach the end of these chaotic, clueless Brexit days. In the intervening weeks, the Government have wasted all their available time by trying to make their rotten deal more palatable to their Back Benchers while hoping beyond hope that the EU somehow bends to their will. Neither of those things looks like it is going to happen, and the Government will go down to another glorious defeat.

There has been lots of talk about postponing that vote, and there is even more talk that this fiction could indeed be the business for next week, and that if the Government are defeated on Tuesday, they will renege on their commitment to hold consecutive votes on taking no deal off the table and extending article 50. We have been here before with the Leader of the House, when she said to me categorically at business questions that the last meaningful vote would go ahead, only for it to be pulled a couple of days later. While we are grateful for all the reassurances that this will go ahead next week, will she write to party leaders today with a cast-iron commitment that the sequence of events, as put forward by the Prime Minister, will be honoured in full? We need to have it written down that under no circumstances will the meaningful vote be pulled and the subsequent votes taken away.

If there is a defeat on the meaningful vote, we must have those other motions. The Leader of the House must say to the House that they will all be amendable, and that the Government will fully honour the outcome as determined by the membership of this House, without any equivocation. If she will do that today, we can take this work of fiction off the table and have it as nothing other than a little, depressing footnote to the bounties of World Book Day.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his very precise and specific question. I am very pleased to be able to confirm to him that each of the motions that the Prime Minister has committed to next week would be amendable. The Prime Minister has committed to a second meaningful vote by 12 March. I have just announced that the debate on that motion will take place on 12 March. It will be a motion under section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, which will be tabled on Monday. It will be an approval motion as required by the Act and, under the normal procedures of the House, it will be amendable.

Under Standing Order No. 16, any debate under an Act of Parliament—which this is—is limited to 90 minutes, so I expect to bring forward a business of the House

motion in order to provide more than 90 minutes. The exact details of that will in due course be discussed through the usual channels, and will ultimately be for the House to agree. Only if the Government have not won the meaningful vote on 12 March will the other debates follow. The motions for the House to approve leaving the EU on 29 March without a withdrawal agreement, and on whether Parliament wants to seek a short, limited extension to article 50 will be tabled by the rise of the House on the day before debate, as is the usual practice. I have given the hon. Gentleman as much clarity and assurance as I possibly can.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on re-establishing a new town building programme in the UK? When I represented the new town of Basildon, I found the development corporation and the new town commission to be extremely effective in delivering affordable homes in large numbers and in building a vibrant community, certainly while I was there. Can we have a programme started again?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes a very good point about new towns—although I would have expected him to talk about new cities, which is what he usually does. I had the pleasure recently of visiting the new Bicester garden town with my excellent Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), who is sitting just in front of him. The Government have backed new towns through their garden communities programme, with 23 towns and villages in the current plans and more to be considered. We have also committed a new £10 million fund to help local areas prepare proposals for development corporations, because we recognise the need for strong delivery vehicles for significant new developments. He will have opportunities to put his views on those proposals in due course.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I was aware before I left the house that it was World Book Day, but I was still glad to be joined on the bus by the Cat in the Hat, Harry Potter, Snow White and Princess Elsa from “Frozen”—some were not readily recognisable, but I certainly recognised the Cat in the Hat.

I am aware that Back-Bench business can be a moveable feast, but if it comes to pass that the debate scheduled for next week has to move, we would look to get repeat time as early as possible, because it is an important debate about the appraisal process for the treatment of rare diseases, and the obstacles to funding for appropriate treatments for muscular dystrophy, phenylketonuria, cystic fibrosis and so on.

I would like to give notice of another matter. We have had on the stocks for some time now an application from the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) and friends for a debate on world autism awareness, this year being the 10th anniversary of the Autism Act 2009, and we would prefer a debate before World Autism Awareness Week, which is from 1 to 7 April.

Andrea Leadsom: As ever, I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me prior notice of upcoming debates. He mentions the Back-Bench debate proposed for next week on rare diseases. I have two young people

in my constituency with cystic fibrosis who are both desperate for access to the Orkambi drug, so it is my very dear wish that that debate go ahead. It will not surprise him to know that I am also extremely keen that it goes ahead because that will mean that the House will have passed a previous motion. I will take careful account of what he is asking for.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Can we have a debate in Government time to discuss the breakdown of the voisinage agreement between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland? The impounding of two Northern Ireland fishing vessels recently shows the Republic of Ireland imposing a hard border while its vessels are still allowed to fish in UK waters off the coast of Northern Ireland.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a very important matter, and I know she is very knowledgeable in this area. The voisinage arrangement has been in place since 1965 but was suspended by Ireland following a decision by the Irish Supreme Court in October 2016, as she knows. On 26 February, two Northern Ireland fishing vessels were detained, but on 1 March the skippers were not convicted under the Probation Act and the vessels were released. Since the suspension of the arrangement, the UK Government have raised this issue several times and have been clear that we cannot accept continued unequal application indefinitely. We continue to explore solutions to reinstate a level playing field as quickly as possible for the benefit of all our fishermen.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Unfortunately, skin cancer is very much on the rise in the UK, partly because lots of us have skin like mine with freckles and fair hair and are not really built for the sun, but still go on holiday to Spain and other places and do not cover up properly when the sun is out.

May we have a debate on skin cancer, so that more people can be made aware that if they have a dodgy mole, going to the doctor can save their life if it is caught very early; so that everyone covers up their kids, particularly when the sun comes up; and so that no one uses a tanning machine, because, frankly, those things are death machines?

While I am here, let me say this. I am nobody special—I am just one of the many, many hundreds of people who have received diagnoses of skin cancer in the last few weeks, including other Members—but I am enormously grateful for the love that many people have shown in the House, some of them people to whom I have been phenomenally rude across the Chamber. I am not going to stop being rude, but may I just say thank you to those who have been truly, truly lovely, including the Leader of the House herself?

Andrea Leadsom: Let me say first to the hon. Gentleman that he is very special to me, and he is very special to many other people both in the House and outside it. He has made some incredibly important points, not the least of which was that his own skin cancer was under his hair. We often put sun cream on the exposed bits, but not necessarily in our hair, because that would be slightly odd. I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman about the need to wear a hat.

Chris Bryant: I have a hat.

Andrea Leadsom: I am pleased to hear it. I hope it is one of those Foreign Legion hats with the collars that we make our five-year-olds wear.

The hon. Gentleman has raised an extremely important point. I will look very carefully at whether we can provide Government time for a debate, but in the meantime I urge him to seek a Westminster Hall debate. I think that sometimes when one of us in the House has a very personal experience we can send a clear message to which people will listen, and I commend him for raising his experience here.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The whole House sends good wishes to the hon. Gentleman. It is good to see him back in his place—and it would not do if there was nobody being rude to people; it just would not do at all.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): As someone who has not always agreed on everything with the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) since we have been in the House together, I too join the chorus of welcome. It is fantastic to see him in his place, and we all admire him for the courage with which he has spoken up to warn others of the dangers of this dreadful disease. Now, that is it for 18 years.

I understand the argument that the Leader of the House has advanced, but the truth is that the Government's Brexit policy is in chaos. Collective responsibility has disintegrated, junior Ministers run amok—some of them threaten to resign about 27 times, but never have the guts to go through with it—senior Ministers blackmail the Prime Minister in Sunday newspapers and nothing happens to any of them, but a popular parliamentary private secretary is sacked for having the temerity to table an amendment that was in line with Government policy, which the Government then adopted with a Division in the subsequent debate. This is a farce.

May I make a positive suggestion? Given that the Cabinet members are so divided, would they like to come down to Rayleigh and sit in on a meeting of its town council? It is well run, its members are all on the same side—pretty much—it does not leak, it makes decisions, and by God it sticks to them.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving us both barrels. Mr Speaker said earlier that my right hon. Friend was no retiring delicate flower, and I think that that is absolutely the case. He is right to raise his concerns in the Chamber, but I must say to him that I remain absolutely committed to supporting the Prime Minister, to delivering on the referendum, and to ensuring that we leave the European Union on 29 March. That is all I am prepared to say on the subject. The entire Government are united in that respect, and we are putting everything we can into getting that motion passed next Tuesday.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): On 4 April 1949, 12 states signed the Washington treaty that founded NATO. They agreed to collective defence, to living in peace with all Governments and peoples while living under the rule of law, to democracy, and to individual liberty. May we, in Government time, celebrate being one of those 12 early signatories, and also the fact that, hopefully by the end of the year, 30 Governments will have signed up to those policies and principles under the articles of the North Atlantic treaty?

Andrea Leadsom: I think that the hon. Lady will have heard a number of Members agreeing with her that we should celebrate our membership, and being one of the original signatories, every day. We have enjoyed the protection—the mutual protection—of NATO for many decades, and it is right that we continue to support it as a core part of the UK's mutual defence. As the hon. Lady will know, we are committed to meeting our NATO pledge to spend at least 2% of GDP on defence in every year of the current Parliament, and the UK remains completely committed to NATO. I will certainly take away her request for a debate and see what can be done.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I feel that before I say anything else, I must put on record that I found out today that my daughter—although she did not dress up as a fictional character for World Book Day—is adorned from head to toe in Peppa Pig paraphernalia, which does not surprise me in the slightest.

May I associate myself with the Leader of the House's earlier comments about apprenticeship week? The international engineering business Score Group plc, whose headquarters is in my constituency, is the largest private employer of apprentices in Scotland. It has 30 facilities around the globe, including one in Brighouse, Calder Valley, where an apprenticeship open evening was held on Tuesday. A similar event is to be held this evening in Peterhead, in my constituency, and I hope to arrive home in time to attend it. Will my right hon. Friend join me in commending the award-winning efforts of Score Group in this respect, and may we have a debate on how we can encourage more young people to embark on engineering and technical roles through apprenticeships?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in congratulating Score Group on its brilliant efforts to encourage more people to take up apprenticeships. He is absolutely right to highlight the fact that, particularly when it comes to the STEM subjects—science, technology, engineering and maths—and the gaining of technical skills, apprenticeships are often a good choice for young people. As he will know, there have been more than 1.6 million apprenticeship starts since May 2015, and we can all be proud of that, because they are giving more and more young people a good start in life. Apprenticeships are devolved in Scotland, but I welcome my hon. Friend's request for a debate, and thank him for expressing his desire to see more young people enter the engineering and technical industries.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): My constituent Connor MacLeod, who is 23, has Asperger's and type 1 diabetes. He cannot monitor his own blood sugar levels, and has issues with understanding written and oral questions and requests. He cannot prepare or cook a meal or plan a journey without supervision, and is heavily dependent on his parents. Ewan Lamont, who is 47, suffered brain damage at the age of three weeks as a result of meningitis, and now lives in supported accommodation. He has issues with comprehension, reading, writing and planning journeys, and relies on his elderly mother. Both were awarded zero points in their assessments for the personal independence payment. The changes announced this week are welcome, but they are not good enough. May we have a debate on the wide-ranging issues relating to PIP, as a matter of urgency?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman has raised very concerning constituency issues, and he is absolutely right to do so. I am glad that he welcomes the announcement of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions that we are improving the system by scrapping regular PIP reviews for those with the greatest needs, but he is right to cite cases in which there is concern about the assessment itself. If he will write to me following business questions, I will take up those specific points with the Department on his behalf.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): The coroner of north Staffordshire, Mr Ian Smith, who is retiring—I congratulate him warmly on his work and thank him for it, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash)—has raised the problem of the lack of availability of pathologists to coroners conducting inquests. May we have an urgent debate on the matter? It means that funerals are being delayed, sometimes for weeks, which is causing huge concern and distress to families whose loved ones have passed away.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has raised a very concerning issue. I pay tribute to the amazing work done by coroners: I have had something to do with them myself in connection with constituency matters, and I know that they do an incredible amount of work that is often quite stressful and harrowing. It would probably be best for my hon. Friend to raise the issue in an Adjournment debate, so that he can discuss it directly with Ministers.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Last week I asked the Leader of the House when the review on expulsions would be brought forward to the House. The Leader of the House, surprisingly, said that I needed to give advance notice of this question, so I have written to the Leader of the House and will ask her again this week: when will we be getting the Timpson review into exclusions? This is extremely important.

Andrea Leadsom: I did see the hon. Lady's tweet saying that she did not know she had to give prior notice. Of course she does not have to give prior notice. My point was merely that she was asking a question about a particular date, and since I am not a mind-reader, if she wanted a specific answer she could have asked me and I could have come to the Chamber well prepared. So the specific answer I can give her now is exactly what the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), said in the urgent question: it is expected that the Timpson review into exclusions will come soon, but my hon. Friend does not have an exact date for it. *[Interruption.]* Well, the reality is that there is not an exact date for that report. When I see the hon. Lady's letter I will try to find out if there is any further clarity on when that can be brought to the House, but I absolutely accept her desire to see urgent evidence on the issue of a link between exclusions and what happens to young people. She is absolutely right to be so passionate about the problems with serious violence, and I commend her for that.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I was pleased to support the ten-minute rule Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) on low-level

letterboxes, and I am delighted that that has come to fruition and that there will be changes. However, I was shocked yesterday to receive a letter from Royal Mail informing me that no mail would now be delivered to one estate in my constituency and that the residents would have to go to the Royal Mail depot to collect their post. The reason for this is that the postie who delivers that part of the round was threatened with a knife at his throat on the estate and, as a result, Royal Mail has withdrawn postal services. May we have a debate or a statement in Government time on the threats our posties face in carrying out their duty to the wider public?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a really concerning case; it is appalling to hear that a postal worker would be threatened with a knife in that way. That is appalling when they are doing their best to give a good service to all residents. It equally seems very harsh on the residents of that estate to have the entire postal service withdrawn. I encourage my hon. Friend to raise that matter directly on 19 March at Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions or perhaps to submit a parliamentary written question to BEIS asking what more can be done.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Depression among men and women is one of the hidden ailments in society in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The smile often hides the true fact that the life and soul of the party is in reality empty, exhausted and perhaps even hurting physically. People can be active socially but inside are depressed, numb and self-loathing. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement or debate on this matter?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important issue and is absolutely right to do so. He will be aware that the Government are putting a record £12 billion into mental health issues to try to achieve parity of esteem between mental health and physical health issues, and at the heart of the NHS long-term plan is the biggest expansion of mental health services in a generation. It will see 350,000 more children, at least 380,000 more adults and, very dear to my own heart, 24,000 more new and expectant mothers able to access mental health services; that is very important. It will also see 24/7 mental health crisis care for adults, children and young people rolled out through NHS 111, giving them access to vital support when they need it, and for the first time ever we will have comprehensive access standards for mental health. So we are seeing change; it is absolutely vital that we do, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): On the day before International Women's Day will the Leader of the House join me in recognising that there are currently almost 4,000 women in prison in this country, many of whom have been victims of domestic abuse or require support for mental health or drug and alcohol addiction? Will she also recognise that at least 17,000 children are affected each year by maternal imprisonment? May we therefore have a debate in Government time on the female offender strategy?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is right to raise this important issue. Of course, quite often those women have very young children so the impact of being in prison is not just on them; it is on their families, with the breakdown of the family that ensues. The hon. Lady will be aware that the Government have prepared a draft Domestic Abuse Bill that will be receiving pre-legislative scrutiny. That will radically change the way that women are protected from the kind of domestic violence and abuse issues that all too often wind up with them being imprisoned because of retribution or lack of access to justice. The hon. Lady is right to raise the Government's strategy on women prisoners, and I will certainly see whether Government time can be found for that.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): May we have a debate—another debate—on Home Office incompetence? I have a constituent who is going to become an overstayer in the country today because she cannot sit her Home Office life-in-the-UK test as the same Home Office has failed to return her expired passport. We have had no progress via the hotline, so may we at least have a Minister come to the House and take some responsibility for this shambles?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sorry to hear that; I, too, have had cases where passports have not been returned in good time. I am also sorry to hear that the hon. Gentleman has not had any success with the MPs' hotline, which is designed to enable MPs to intervene on behalf of constituents. I recommend that the hon. Gentleman raises this directly with the Home Office and if he wants to write to me after business questions I can do that for him.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): It is nice that the Leader of the House talks about World Book Day, but 700 libraries have closed since 2010 under this Government. May we have a debate about that, because earlier this week the National Literacy Trust released research showing that a quarter of eight to 18-year-olds now read daily, compared with 43% back in 2015? That is a pretty shocking statistic; is not the loss of our libraries a lot to do with that?

Andrea Leadsom: I share the hon. Gentleman's love of libraries, and he will be aware that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport works with the Libraries Taskforce to support libraries, and the Government are committed to seeking a sustainable future for them. He will no doubt appreciate that the change in the reading levels has a lot to do with social media and so on—I am constantly struggling to get my own daughter to read a book rather than go on Instagram, for example—so there are challenges. The hon. Gentleman is also right to raise the importance of libraries not just for reading books, but also as community hubs. Many other activities take place in libraries, and it is vital that we ensure that local authorities in England keep up their statutory duty to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): May we have a debate in Government time on postcode discrimination? The Leader of the House will know that I have raised many times the issue

[Drew Hendry]

of unfair delivery surcharges which result in £38 million of additional costs for Scots citizens every year. Is she content that her Government's latest dismissive response to my MSP colleague, Richard Lochhead, is to tell Scots that they will just have to "shop around", rather than taking action on this outrage?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly share the hon. Gentleman's concern at the postcode lottery around delivery charges to different locations. He will appreciate that there are obviously different costs incurred in delivering to more remote areas, but the principle of a single charge where that has been agreed should be upheld. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to perhaps seek an Adjournment debate so that he can discuss this properly directly with Ministers, who could then see what more can be done.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Today is indeed World Book Day, and I am sure we all want to thank teachers, parents, mentors and schools in our constituencies for their efforts in delivering quality literacy education to young and old alike. Shockingly, the UK ranks 17th for literacy out of 34 OECD countries, and one in five children in the UK cannot read well by the age of 11. Today sees the release of the incredibly moving documentary "H is for Harry", described by *The Sunday Times* as

"casting a spotlight on one of the biggest education scandals in Britain",

It was filmed at Reach Academy in my constituency and tells the story of 11-year-old Harry's struggle to learn to read, and indeed that of his father and grandfather. Following the release of that documentary, may we have a debate about intergenerational illiteracy, which is more widespread than we realise, its impact on social isolation, life chances and wellbeing, and the increasingly urgent need for much more early intervention?

Andrea Leadsom: I am really sympathetic to the hon. Lady. Through the work that I have been doing for the Prime Minister in an inter-ministerial group looking at early years, I have found that one of the challenges that parents often face is their child having delayed speech. That has an impact on the child's ability to learn, and therefore to learn to read. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that we need to look at earlier interventions. On the other hand, I am sure she will join me in celebrating the fact that 1.9 million more children are being taught in good or outstanding schools than was the case in 2010, that 86% of all schools are rated as good or outstanding, up from 68% in 2010, and that the gap between disadvantaged pupils and others is narrowing. All these outcomes represent a good direction of travel, but she is absolutely right to raise the importance of literacy at an early age.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I have engaged in extensive correspondence with successive Secretaries of State at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to urge them to introduce a cap on the price of resale tickets on online platforms, as that is the only way to protect consumers from the extortion and sharp practice of big business. I have been told repeatedly that imposing such a cap would not work, but I have been given no explanation as to

why it would not work. Will the Leader of the House make a statement acknowledging that the current system is not working and explaining why such a cap on the price of resale tickets would not work? Will she work with me to stand up for consumers?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to stand up for consumers, and we are all aware of issues relating to the unfair resale of whatever it might be—it is often concert and theatre tickets. I recommend that she seeks an Adjournment debate, so that she can put her points directly to Ministers to see what more they can do.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in welcoming the announcement today by the Welsh Labour Government of a new specific fund for university student mental health services? Will she also commit to a debate in Government time on student mental health services?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly join the hon. Lady in welcoming that new strategy from the Welsh Government. It is incredibly important that we do everything we can to protect the mental health of young people. It is pleasing to see that individual universities right across the United Kingdom are doing more to try to support the mental health of their students. It is right that they should do that. Equally, I am sure that she will welcome the fact that the Government are putting a record £12 billion of investment into mental health and that we are developing a 24/7 health crisis care service that will be accessible to adults, children and young people. It will be rolled out through the NHS 111 service and give people access to vital crisis care whenever they need it.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): May we have a debate in Government time on the importance of, and investment in, cervical cancer charities? Local charities such as the Michelle Henderson Cervical Cancer Trust in my constituency and Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust play a huge role in reducing the rates of cervical cancer, but the uptake of cervical cancer tests is at a 20-year low. Many years ago, when I was in my teens, I was unfortunate enough to contract the human papilloma virus. I went on to give my cells to develop the new vaccine, and I am very proud of that. That vaccine is saving lives, but young women are still contracting cervical cancer and dying because they are not going to get their cervical smears. May we have a debate in Government time to discuss this important issue?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that having a cervical smear is a critical thing that every woman can do to protect herself. I am sure all hon. Members would encourage every woman to please go and get that smear and not to let time go past, because there are often no symptoms until it is too late. I would also like to commend the hon. Lady for her own personal contribution to ensuring that others do not have to go through what she went through. I encourage her to seek a Westminster Hall debate so that all hon. Members can contribute their thoughts on this important issue.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The prize for perseverance and patience goes to Sarah Jones.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I want to raise the issue of knife crime, which has been the subject of much debate this week. Yesterday, the officers of the all-party parliamentary group on knife crime, which I chair, wrote to the Prime Minister with a range of suggestions and asking for a meeting. They suggested that, alongside her summit, she should host an event with young people who have been affected by knife crime, so that they could put their point of view across, as that is also important. Will the Leader of the House convey that message to No. 10? Will she also tell us whether she can guarantee that the Offensive Weapons Bill, which has been through the Lords and is due to come back to this place, will come back before the Easter recess?

Andrea Leadsom: I commend the hon. Lady for her efforts. There is huge concern across the House about the recent spate of knife crimes and the loss of so many young lives. What a terrible waste. I will certainly draw the Prime Minister's attention to the letter that the hon. Lady has written asking for a meeting with young people. She will be aware that the Prime Minister will be holding a summit in Downing Street with community leaders, including the police, in the coming days to look at what more can be done. She will also be aware that we have published a serious violence strategy and established the serious violence taskforce. With regard to the Offensive Weapons Bill, we will be bringing it back to the Commons as soon as possible. I cannot absolutely commit to that happening prior to the Easter recess, simply because we do not know what the course of events will be following next week's votes, but I will certainly take her request back to the business managers with real urgency, and we will see what can be done.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: I apologise—there is another prize for even greater patience and perseverance, and it goes to Naz Shah.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Leader of the House may be aware that the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims recently came together and published a definition of Islamophobia. Given the crisis that the Conservative party finds itself in over Islamophobia, does she agree that it is right we should have a debate in the House on Islamophobia?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising this issue. I am sure she will be pleased to see that the Conservative party is taking very strong action in any cases of Islamophobia that we identify. We have been extremely robust and urgent in our response to this. She raises the important point about whether we should seek a definition of Islamophobia. I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate in the first instance so that she can discuss with Foreign Office Ministers whether that would be a useful way forward.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the Leader of the House for her patience and perseverance.

Kashmir

12.37 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for this opportunity to update the House on the current situation between India and Pakistan in Kashmir, as promised after the urgent question was tabled last Wednesday. On 14 February, a terrorist attack against a convoy near Pulwama in India-administered Kashmir killed more than 40 members of the Indian central reserve police force and injured many others. The individual who claimed responsibility for the attack associated himself with the group Jaish-e-Mohammed. This suicide attack drew international condemnation, including from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and increased tensions between India and Pakistan.

Exactly what happened after the attack remains contested, but it is our understanding that on 26 February Indian aircraft crossed the line of control between India-administered Kashmir and Pakistan-administered Kashmir and carried out airstrikes into Pakistani territory. The following day, Pakistan launched missile strikes into India-administered Kashmir and there was an aerial exchange between Indian and Pakistani fighter jets. An Indian air force plane was shot down by Pakistan and its pilot was captured. At this point there was a serious risk that a mishap could lead to a fully-fledged war between the two nations, with both regional and international implications.

On 28 February, the Pakistani Prime Minister, Imran Khan, announced that he would hand over the captured Indian pilot. The next day, Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman returned to India. This, together with public and private indications that Pakistan was prepared to tackle the terrorist groups that threaten India, has seen a welcome pause in the escalating tensions between the two countries. Nevertheless, the UK Government remain deeply concerned by the raised tensions between the two countries and the underlying issues that have led to this situation.

We welcome the fact that India and Pakistan have both stated publicly that they do not want to escalate tensions further. The situation remains fragile, however, and both militaries remain on heightened alert. There accordingly remains a high risk of some further incident, and the situation could move quickly back into crisis. Just this morning, media reports have come in of a deadly grenade attack in Jammu.

India and Pakistan are close and long-standing friends of the United Kingdom. Our bilateral ties with both countries are long and deep, and they are bolstered by the UK's large Indian and Pakistani diaspora communities, which are also deeply concerned by the situation. We encourage both countries, and our friends on these shores, to find diplomatic solutions to the underlying causes of conflict.

Members should be assured that the UK has worked and continues to work tirelessly through all diplomatic channels to encourage further de-escalation and to ensure long-term regional stability. We do this alongside our international partners and with a wide range of counterparts in India and Pakistan. I visited India last weekend, between 1 and 3 March, and I was able to reiterate to those whom I met that the UK unequivocally condemns

[Mark Field]

all forms of terrorism, including the appalling terrorist attack in Pulwama that sparked the current crisis. In New Delhi, I discussed with Foreign Secretary Gokhale steps to decrease tension and improve regional stability, including vital efforts to tackle terrorism.

Since I last updated the House, the Indian wing commander has been reunited with his family. We saw that as an important and welcome step by Pakistan to reduce tensions. Our Prime Minister spoke to Prime Minister Imran Khan of Pakistan on 3 March, and they discussed the need to address the causes of this conflict. Our Prime Minister emphasised the importance of Pakistan's taking action against all terrorist groups, in support of global efforts to counter terrorism.

We remain firmly committed to working closely with Pakistan to combat the terrorist threat and the extremism that sustains it. We recognise the steps that Pakistan has already taken against groups such as the Pakistani Taliban, but we continue to highlight the importance of effective and demonstrable action against all terrorist groups in Pakistan. That is something that Pakistan has committed to undertaking. We have been clear that that action needs to be urgent, sustained, credible and transparent. Alongside others in the international community, we encourage Pakistan to meet the requirements of its Financial Action Task Force action plan, which includes taking specific action to address terrorist financing.

For our part, we ensure that UK aid to Pakistan continues to address the conditions that could allow radicalisation and violent extremism to grow. A more prosperous and stable Pakistan is vital for regional and global security, and it is very much in the UK's national interest. Our programmes on the ground aim to reduce overall poverty, promote inclusion, increase economic opportunities and meet basic needs, including girls' education.

The UK and India also have a close working relationship on counter-terrorism, which includes regular dialogue. During Prime Minister Modi's visit to the United Kingdom last April, the two Prime Ministers agreed to strengthen co-operation to take decisive and concerted action against globally proscribed terrorists and terror entities to protect our citizens. They agreed that terrorist and extremist organisations must be denied space to radicalise, recruit and conduct attacks on innocent people. We will continue to work closely with and support India, but the matter goes well beyond the bilateral India-UK relationship.

We believe that all countries need to work closely together to disrupt global terrorist networks, their financing and the movement of terrorists, including foreign terrorist fighters. As part of international efforts to tackle terrorism, the UK continues actively to support the listing of JEM leader Masood Azhar at the UN. The JEM is already listed by the UN and has been proscribed in the UK since 2001, and in Pakistan since 2002.

In parallel to the important fight against terrorism, we expect India and Pakistan to focus on securing longer-term regional stability and security. Dialogue is an important confidence-building mechanism, even though we recognise the complexities. We strongly encourage both countries to engage in that way. The UK will follow developments closely, and we stand ready to support should India and Pakistan both deem that to be constructive.

As hon. Members will be aware from our conversations both at the all-party parliamentary Kashmir group and in this House only eight days ago, our long-standing position is that it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting political resolution, taking into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people. It is not for the UK to prescribe a solution or act as a mediator. In the meantime, I confirm to the House that we continue to monitor the situation closely. Naturally, we keep our travel advice under constant review.

I close by reiterating the Government's wholehearted support for those who fight terrorism, and restating our sustained commitment to working with India and Pakistan to further de-escalate the current situation. Many Members of the House—a lot of them are here today—agree that a calming of these tensions is in our collective interests. I think we have an important part to play. When I went to New Delhi and Mumbai last weekend, I was struck by how many of my counterparts had watched last week's urgent question. The message goes out loud and clear from this House that here there are many friends of India and Pakistan who wish to see a better future for all who live in Kashmir. I commend this statement to the House.

12.45 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I thank the Minister of State for advance sight of his statement.

There is great concern across this House, and in many of our constituencies, about what is happening in Kashmir and the tension that that is creating between India and Pakistan—the biggest military confrontation between the two countries for 20 years. I applaud the Foreign Office team for keeping the House updated and for the sober and constructive tone of the statement.

It is important at the outset to go back to the immediate cause of this crisis, namely the vicious terror attack on a convoy of Indian troops travelling through Pulwama on 14 February, leaving more than 40 of them dead. India has been absolutely right to take action against the terror group responsible, known as the JEM, and to demand that Pakistan take action as well.

We welcome the fact that Pakistan has started to take the necessary action, with the detention of several members of the JEM and other proscribed organisations earlier this week. As the Indian Government have done, however, we urge Pakistan to go further by, first, prosecuting those individuals if there is evidence of their links to terror offences; and, secondly, arresting and prosecuting the head of the JEM, Masood Azhar. We welcome the latest moves to ensure that Masood Azhar is finally designated as a global terrorist by the UN Security Council. May I ask the Minister of State whether there are signs of movement on that issue by China, given its previous veto of such action?

Finally on the Pulwama attack, will the Minister join me in urging the Indian authorities, at national and regional levels, to follow the welcome instructions of the Indian Supreme Court to ensure the protection and safety of the innocent civilians of Kashmiri origin—men and women, from suited businesspeople to street traders—who have faced violent reprisals across India following the attack?

I turn to the recent military escalation around the line of control. In this age of doctored images and social media misinformation, it has been genuinely bewildering

trying to work out what has actually happened, as opposed to what has been claimed. I think we can all say one thing with clarity: both sides have a responsibility to dial down the rhetoric, de-escalate the tension and avoid taking any further military action—in the air or on the ground—that could inflame the situation further and risk a descent into open conflict.

As the shadow Foreign Secretary said on this subject last week, the danger of this claim and counter-claim—the tit-for-tat attacks and what we are repeatedly told are airstrikes designed to send a message—is that amid the fog of war, mistakes will be made, and even without either side intending it, a major incident will occur from which there will be no going back. I know the Minister of State will agree that instead we urgently require the resumption of immediate talks between India and Pakistan, to de-escalate the crisis and avoid any further military action.

I would go further than that and say this should be the catalyst for the resumption of proper negotiations and a substantive dialogue between India and Pakistan on the future of Kashmir. The blueprint is there in the sadly short-lived plan worked out between the Singh and Musharraf Governments in the early 2000s. If such dialogue was possible back then, and if a workable, mutually agreed plan for Kashmir was possible back then, it can be possible today or, at the very least, after the Indian elections this spring.

What we must remember about the Singh-Musharraf plan is that it had at its heart not just military disengagement on both sides but a genuine regard for the political and economic rights of the Kashmiri people that, along with their human rights and humanitarian needs, have been so tragically overlooked for the past 70 years.

Let me repeat what my right hon. Friend the shadow Foreign Secretary said last week: our thoughts must first and foremost be with the innocent people of Kashmir, over whom this battle is being fought. Their human rights have been serially abused, their humanitarian needs have been neglected and their wishes for their own future have been treated as unimportant.

Generation after generation of Kashmiri children face growing up trapped in the same cycle of instability, violence and fear. It is time to break that cycle. Only peaceful dialogue and a negotiated settlement can achieve that, and I hope the Minister of State will continue urging both sides not just to de-escalate the current tensions, and not just to take effective action against the terror groups that helped create that tension, but to commit to resuming constructive dialogue to eliminate those tensions for good and finally bring peace and stability to the people of Kashmir.

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Lady for her thoughtful and wise words. She is absolutely right in many ways about one of the depressing things for all of us as parliamentarians in recent months. Despite all the attention on the battles being fought on Brexit, a huge amount of work is going on on this issue. We all feel strongly about this, and I have spent a lot of time, either on the phone, in video conferences or in person, with our excellent ambassadors, Sir Dominic Asquith in New Delhi and Tom Drew in Pakistan. I realise just how much work has gone on behind the scenes as we try to play our part in bringing about the dialogue to which the hon. Lady refers. Where I entirely agree with her, and I think the

whole House would agree, is that it is time to break the cycle, which can happen only through dialogue. She is quite right to recognise that, after the desperately tragic events of 14 February, making substantive steps forward in the next five or six weeks, during the Indian elections, is not entirely realistic. However, once the dust has settled on those elections—obviously in Imran Khan we have a relatively new Pakistani Prime Minister, too—one hopes that sense will prevail and there can be ongoing dialogue. Obviously, the UK stands ready to keep lines of communication open, as we have over the difficult past fortnight or so. We will play our part in that regard.

The hon. Lady asked some specific questions, one of which was about the hoped-for movement by China. Clearly a lot of discussions are taking place at the UN Security Council, and we hope that any veto on proscribing and listing Masood Azhar will not come about. The situation is clearly fluid. As soon as I am in a position to say more, I will naturally do so.

The hon. Lady is right to say that the Indian Supreme Court has made judgments to which we should all pay close attention in relation to the duties and responsibilities of the Kashmiri public.

The hon. Lady referenced the idea that what has happened is still open to some dispute, and I read a rather perceptive piece in *The Guardian* yesterday that said, rather skilfully, that both sides have an interest in keeping the narrative malleable. That gives both India and Pakistan room to claim victory but also, more importantly, to refrain from further strikes. There is a sense of each side perhaps being able to get the last word because there is that sense of ambiguity, and such ambiguity can at times assist de-escalatory sentiment. It is therefore all the more important for us to maintain elements of that ambiguity, rather than trying to ramp up the pressure.

I thank the hon. Lady for her kind words, which add so much to our diplomacy. There will always be differences of nuance, and perhaps even more fundamental differences, on Foreign Office-related affairs, but it adds so much more to our voice in diplomatic quarters if we are, at times, able to speak as one, particularly during such a tragic era.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thank the Minister for updating the House, and I thank him and the shadow Minister for their tone in trying to de-escalate the current crisis between India and Pakistan. I read with interest the read-out from the conversation between our Prime Minister and Prime Minister Imran Khan, in which our Prime Minister made it clear that the responsibility for Pakistan is to remove and dismantle the terrorist camps and to make sure that terrorism is not encouraged in Pakistan. What is not clear is the response from Prime Minister Imran Khan to actually make that happen. If it happens, it could lead to dialogue and could prevent terrorism.

Will my right hon. Friend the Minister update the House on what the reaction has been from the Pakistani Government to achieve the peace and stability we all want to see?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. An even-handed assessment is that effective, visible and verifiable action against terrorist groups in the vicinity of Kashmir is an urgent necessity, so I welcome the

[Mark Field]

reports of Pakistan's intent in that regard. Obviously we recognise that verifying and sustaining those efforts will be vital.

It is also worth pointing out that much of the commentary in the immediate aftermath of 14 February was pessimistic, and both Prime Minister Modi of India and Prime Minister Imran Khan of Pakistan have shown statesmanlike qualities that were perhaps not expected by many commentators. It is still early days, and one recognises that the potentially escalatory events in Jammu earlier today mean we cannot be complacent, but the international community can be relieved that some of the very worst predictions of only two or three weeks ago have not come to pass. I very much hope that the two Premiers will show statesmanlike behaviour in trying to ensure a verifiable change of heart on the ground.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank the Minister for early sight of his statement. I also thank him for his work and particularly for the work of Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials, which is often overlooked. I join colleagues on both sides of the House in our unequivocal condemnation of terror attacks.

We are dealing with two nuclear-armed states, which concerns us all and means this is a global problem, not just a regional problem. De-escalation is critical, and obviously we welcome the return of the Indian pilot. I welcome the Minister's work on that de-escalation. There is a concern about the role of non-state actors that could not care less about the nuclear element—that concerns us, and obviously it concerns the Minister, too. It would be interesting to get his further thoughts on that.

India and Pakistan have good friends the length and breadth of the United Kingdom, and I welcome the Minister's remarks about the UK's readiness to support the peace process should India and Pakistan require and want that support. This role should not begin and end with the FCO. If we are looking at a long-term solution, we must look to our engagement with diaspora communities and to the fantastic ongoing work that some tremendous non-governmental organisations—many of them funded by the FCO—and others are doing. I highlight the groundbreaking work of some of the Scottish NGOs in providing a space in Scotland for peacebuilding activities, and I know the Minister has taken that on board, too.

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He is right to say that there is a role to be played by bodies other than the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. He will appreciate that a lot of work goes on, particularly in Pakistan, where the biggest Department for International Development budget goes. Some of that work is too sensitive to bring up on the Floor of the House, as he will understand. In addition, the Department for International Trade plays a role, and technology is becoming increasingly important to both India and Pakistan. I am well aware from my own speeches to diaspora communities from both the Pakistani and Indian side that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has an important role to play. Indeed, when I was in Mumbai, on a pre-arranged visit that ended up being at a fortuitous time in diplomatic terms,

I had conversations about FinTech initiatives that take place between India and the UK. It is also worth pointing out that there is a fledgling but important technology industry in Pakistan, and we have tried to encourage our Pakistani diaspora to play an important role in that.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I particularly welcome the proactive way in which the Minister has brought this statement to the House. I do so for two reasons, the first of which is that I thought I detected a slight evolution in the Government's position and perhaps willingness to react to a demand from India and Pakistan to get involved. I do not particularly wish to press him on it, in case it proves to be a will-o'-the-wisp, but if I did correctly sense an evolution in the position, I am extremely grateful for that. The second reason is the one highlighted by the Opposition Front Bench, which is that Kashmiri people in the UK and doubtless across the world have long felt neglected. They have felt that the international community has not paid attention to their human rights. If this is not the moment to escalate this issue in the minds of the international community, when will we ever do it? I welcome this statement but I ask the Minister to make sure the international community pays attention.

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for that. I am well aware of the work he does with a significant Kashmiri population in his constituency, and I have had a chance to meet some of the main community leaders there. I would not wish him to think there has been too much of an evolution of the Government policy, but what I have seen, having spoken at great length to our high commissioners in Islamabad and New Delhi, is a recognition that one area where we can and will assist, as we have done, is through the breadth of our diplomatic knowledge on the ground. We are able to have lines of communication open with diplomats, politicians and the military on both sides, which we hope will enable us to assist, but it would be wrong to assume that we are in any way going to try to put our own template or mediate there. I would not want the House to be in any doubt about the huge amount of work that goes on in our diplomatic community, which will continue.

I know that my hon. Friend takes the Kashmiri issue very seriously and he is right to say that this is perhaps an important international wake-up call, when progress can be made. We are perhaps reluctant to make a comparison with what happened in Northern Ireland, but the single worst attack on civilians there, in Omagh, in 1998, finally became the moment when many, not only in Northern Ireland but in surrounding countries, thought that something fundamentally had to change. That was the path towards the Good Friday agreement.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): I value the Minister coming here to give us this statement and I thank him for that. However, I am struggling with the fact that although we rightly hear about terrorism and how Pakistan needs to get rid of all the terrorism, I do not hear—and I want to hear—about the Kashmiri people. We do not hear about the fact that we have illegally occupied territory, and people who have been persecuted for years and years. There is no end in sight for those people at the heart of all of this. We are not talking

about that. We are not talking about the Indian armed forces doing what they are doing, and blinding people. We are not talking about the resurgence of all the terrors put upon these people. What really alarms me is that while we are talking about Pakistan playing its role, we have seen a Prime Minister in India who is using the conflict to electioneer and for his election purposes. What have our Government done? Have we made any representations to the Prime Minister of India about not using this conflict for electioneering purposes?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Lady for that. She will appreciate, and we have very much noted, the concerns across Kashmir raised in the report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in June 2018. It made firm recommendations for both India and Pakistan to consider. Even eight days ago, I was not quite aware of just how much work goes on. I alluded in my statement to the work on child education. When I was in Pakistan at the end of 2017, I went to Mardan in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, which at that stage was the stronghold of Imran Khan's party. I saw the terrific amount of work that was going on in trying to develop trust-based policing, similar to what we have here in the UK, rather than the police being a police "force". There was also a real commitment to education, particularly girls' education. These things go on throughout Pakistan. Some of them are quite sensitive and I cannot go into great detail here.

One very much hopes there will be an ongoing de-escalation and calming of passions, but later in the year we will have a leadership week at the Foreign Office, when our high commissioners in India and Pakistan will both be here, so it might be useful to have the all-party group on Kashmir come in. I hope that people will recognise that some of what will be said will be a little sensitive, so I cannot go into deep detail on this on the Floor of the House, but that might be a useful exercise for the all-party group and friends of India from both sides of the House—I am well aware that the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) speaks in that regard. That might be useful, as it would give all Members a little more idea of just how much work goes on in Kashmir, some of which it is difficult at this stage to avow.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I very much welcome the tone of the Minister's statement, and that of what was said by the shadow Minister and by the Scottish National party spokesperson. The sight of two nuclear-armed nations firing on each other was clearly frightening, and the de-escalation that has happened since is welcome. Can the Minister reassure me about the work that will be done to maintain the communication, particularly between the two militaries that sit both sides of the line of control? In London, at the Royal College of Defence Studies, we can see members of both those nations' armed forces working and participating together, and building up friendships and relationships. This should not be impossible and it is certainly something we could help to facilitate.

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for what he has said, because he is right: our defence capability here involves a significant number of leading figures in both the Pakistani and Indian military having come out of Sandhurst and having been trained here. That is one

aspect of UK soft power, as having these sorts of institutions allows alumni to maintain contact in the future. We will do all we can to keep as many lines of communication open as possible. One does not perhaps recognise until such incidents occur just how important developing the soft power of those connections is, both for the UK's purpose and for countries caught in the sort of problems faced in Kashmir.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Ind): I welcome the tone and content of the Minister's statement and of the remarks made by the Labour Front Bencher. That is very important at this time, when, as the Minister said, there has today been a terrorist attack on a bus stand in Jammu with a grenade. I understand that it has killed at least one person and left three more in a serious condition—apparently, 28 people were injured. This is the third attack on a bus stand in Jammu in the past year. Clearly, there are people in the region who wish to create tension, conflict and all-out war between India and Pakistan for their own reasons. This is a time for all voices in this country—in this Parliament and in diaspora communities—to come together to tone down the rhetoric and work for long-term, difficult political solutions.

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he said. He is absolutely right that it is incumbent on us all, as responsible Members of Parliament, to do all that we can to try to tone down the rhetoric, which was at a very high level at some points. He asked me last week about the Kargil war. I very much hope he will take up my offer and come to the Foreign Office. It would be useful to learn a little more because, as I say, one thing one learns quickly in Foreign Office and diplomatic affairs is that very few problems are entirely novel and we can always learn from perspectives on the past. The hon. Gentleman had an important role to play in the Foreign Affairs Committee at the beginning of the new Labour time, when Robin Cook was the Foreign Secretary.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for coming back to the House to update us on this situation. He will recall that in his comments to me last Wednesday he made a pledge to the people of Walthamstow and, indeed, to the people of this country, that in his conversations with both the Pakistani and Indian representatives he would raise explicitly the question of UN investigations into human rights in Kashmir. Will he update us on the conversations he has had on human rights and whether he has been able to use Britain's influence to persuade them to co-operate with those investigations so that the people of Kashmir can finally have some justice?

Mark Field: We are working together on this. There have been a lot of other priorities, but I very much took on board the concerns expressed. As I mentioned earlier in answer to a previous question, we obviously feel that, given the pretty robust report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, with its own recommendations, we want both India and Pakistan to ensure that they adapt their domestic laws in line with the international standards. It is clear that a lot of work will continue at the UN; I do not think there is any sense of complacency or of thinking we are by any means out of the woods in respect of these tensions.

[Mark Field]

The current mandate of the UN military observer group in India and Pakistan authorises it to observe developments relating to the observance of the 1971 ceasefire and to report to the Secretary-General. Obviously, any allegations of human rights abuses or violations are therefore a matter of deep concern under that mandate. We expect all countries to comply with the international obligations. We will continue to do a lot more on this issue at the UN. We are well aware, as the hon. Lady will be, that several countries, including Germany and Indonesia, that have strong interests in this issue, either for regional reasons or because of their trade and diaspora connections, are on the UN Security Council this year, and we will be working together with all those countries. It will take a little time. I am sorry that I do not have too much more to report from the past eight days, but a lot more will be going on in the months to come.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The Minister has been most assiduous and thorough in his replies to questions, but—

Mark Field: I think I know where this is going.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The Minister knows what is coming next. We have a lot of business to get through today, so I think the House would now appreciate rather shorter answers.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I join the unanimous condemnation of these callous terrorist attacks and underline, as I think the Minister would, that the matter of Kashmir will be resolved only when India and Pakistan put the interests of Kashmiris centre stage.

I was hoping the Minister would clarify one point in relation to his statement. He referred to the fact that Pakistan's actions need to be

“urgent, sustained, credible and transparent”,

but it is not clear to me whether he believes that to be the case, so will he confirm that? Will he also confirm what further action the UK Government may be able to take with Pakistan in future on tackling terrorism?

Mark Field: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. There is a clear intent from the Pakistani authorities to ensure that things are going to be verifiable and transparent, as I have pointed out. That will obviously be tested in time, but we have felt that Prime Minister Imran Khan has taken a positive stance, recognising our concerns about terrorist-related organisations on the ground in Pakistan. Again, we stand ready to work with the international community to try to ensure that any terrorist organisations on either side of the divide that would do harm to Kashmir's interests and to Kashmiri people are kept at bay.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I thank the Government for the steps they have taken to de-escalate the tension between Pakistan and India. The world cannot afford for these two nuclear countries to go to war. We all want to ensure the safety and human rights of the people of Kashmir. It is disappointing that the Minister did not say a single word on human rights in

his three-page statement. Does he agree that there is a role for the United Nations and the other independent parties to monitor and report on alleged human rights abuses? The Indian Government have locked up hundreds of Kashmiri leaders. Does the Minister agree that India must remove restrictions on the Hurriyat leadership and accept that Kashmiris are the third party in this conflict?

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman knows that I cannot go as far as to satisfy him on what he said about the idea of Kashmir being a third party. We do not recognise the notional government of Kashmir, for the obvious reasons we have pointed out. On human rights, I referred in my response to the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) to what we are doing at the UN level. It is important to recognise that we will continue to make representations, as we have in the past, to try to ensure that there is a proper, verifiable process for concerns about human rights, wherever they come from, and I accept that they come predominantly from the Pakistani side about what is happening in Indian-administered Kashmir. We will continue to make strong representations in that regard.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Many of us were appalled by the despicable terrorist attack in Pulwama, but it was also awful to see reprisals against entirely innocent Kashmiri people in India. Along with my Slough constituents, I was heartened to see various Sikh groups in the neighbouring Punjab and human rights organisations elsewhere stand up for and protect Kashmiris living in their neighbourhoods. Will the Minister continually make it clear to his Indian counterparts that although we understand their anger, they must ensure that innocent people are not harmed in response?

Mark Field: I can confirm that in my conversation with Foreign Secretary Gokhale in New Delhi last week I brought up that very point, and we shall continue to do so.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I join other Members in our unanimous condemnation of terrorism in all its forms. I welcome the Minister's efforts to de-escalate this very dangerous situation. I also welcome the efforts of all people on all sides who continue to voice with reason the message of de-escalation, peace and stability in the region. In particular, I note the Pakistani Government and Imran Khan's real gesture of peace in the release of the captured Indian pilot.

At the heart of this issue continue to be the sons and daughters of Kashmir. Tragically, I did not hear anywhere in the Minister's statement the outright condemnation of the continued human rights violations. Just this morning, constituents have given me reports of ceasefire violations in the Bhimber, Kotli and Samahni districts that have left people injured and many others running and fleeing. I urge the Minister to demand an urgent end to the violations of the ceasefire and to urge the Indian Government, as Pakistan has done, to allow the international community to come together and act as mediators to allow an end to the human rights violations, and to allow self-determination.

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point. I am doing my best to de-escalate some of the passions and tensions even on the Floor of the

House. As I said last week, I very much admire the hon. Gentleman's real sense of passion. He should not think that we do not express the concerns about human rights. There are of course concerns on both sides of the divide, and it would be wrong to think of it as a one-way thing. Of course we do not support human rights violations, but one concern is that using the word "condemn" is not enough; we want to try to do something more constructive. Condemning is simply words; I hope the hon. Gentleman recognises that a lot of action is also taking place in both Islamabad and New Delhi, and we shall continue to do that work.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I, too, welcome the tone of these exchanges on what can be a tense subject matter and what has been a very tense situation. One problem that causes terrorism all around the world, and certainly in this area, is information and misinformation. Many Members have called for monitoring by an honest broker, the UN, in Kashmir. It could not only help to find out what human rights violations are going on and seek to offer aid, support and condemnation, but help with some of the efforts to stop terrorism through misinformation and propaganda. Should not the UK Government constantly be pushing for UN investigators and monitors in Kashmir to protect Kashmiri people?

Mark Field: The issue of disinformation, which the hon. Lady rightly mentions, is a global phenomenon, due in part to the nature of social media. It is something that we will try to address. At the very least, we will try to corral the international community with a conference on press freedom in July, in which this will be one of the issues that will emerge.

The trust that has been built up over the years within our diplomatic network genuinely assisted in keeping open the lines of communication between Indian and Pakistani counterparts during the fraught weeks since 14 February. We can be very proud that, at a time when so much of our energy and attention is on Brexit disputes, we have in the Foreign Office individuals who are working hard to do their best to ensure that, when there are flashpoints such as those that have happened in Kashmir, we can utilise as much of our diplomatic network's muscle as possible to bring sides together. We can all be proud of that, but equally, we are not complacent and we will continue to work very hard to ensure that that de-escalation and the sense of calm that has come into place over the past couple of weeks are maintained.

Windrush Generation and the Home Office

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE

Select Committee Statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I will briefly remind the House of the fairly new procedure. Meg Hillier will speak on her subject for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of her statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and call Ms Hillier to respond to them in return. Members can expect to be called only once. Interventions should be questions, and should be brief. Ministers on the Front Bench may take part in the questioning.

1.22 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to speak briefly on what is our 82nd report of this parliamentary Session, which looked at the Windrush generation and the Home Office. We asked the National Audit Office to look into this issue when it became apparent that a large number of British citizens and residents had lost jobs, homes, benefits and access to healthcare as a result of errors in the Home Office. We then took evidence from those who represent people who were victims of this and from the victims themselves, and we challenged Home Office officials about how they handled the matter. That is what our report covers.

We looked into what led to the Windrush scandal and how the support that was set up to help those affected is working. We also flagged up concerns about the future and laid down a number of recommendations for the Home Office, which are to be responded to through the normal Treasury minutes process and in other responses by certain deadlines.

What we discovered was that the Home Office failed to understand the real-life impact of policies that it was implementing. There was a group of people with citizenship and residency rights who were badly affected—people who were legally in the country with citizenship prior to 1973 when citizenship was granted automatically to many citizens, including those from the Caribbean Commonwealth. By changing the rules, the Government created huge problems for many people, but appeared unaware of that. I will come on to the warning signs that they missed in a moment. Those people, as I said, lost jobs and lost housing. Some went on holiday to the country in which they or their parents had been born, and were refused readmission to the UK, and others were deported.

The Home Office was warned about these problems and about the potential impact in 2014 through countless individual cases raised by Members of Parliament and by others working for some of the individuals concerned. Caribbean Ministers also raised these issues from 2016. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), who did so much to raise the profile of this issue. Our job as a Committee is not just to look at what went wrong. It is important that the Minister is here to listen to what went wrong so that lessons can be learned. Most of our recommendations are about what can be learned for the future.

[Meg Hillier]

Since the failure of this system, the Government have set up a Windrush scheme. Although it has achieved much—people can ring up and speak to an individual—it has certainly not helped everybody as it should have done. The urgent hardship fund that the Government established took eight months to set up. One of the concerns that we had as a Committee was that people had lost their jobs, and therefore their livelihoods and their homes, and so had to borrow money off friends. The lack of urgent funding was a real issue. We are pleased that the Government have now set up the scheme, but we think that there is more to be done. As we speak and as our report was published, there is no compensation scheme yet established, and we are a year on from that. It would be helpful to hear the Government's response in that regard. I am sure that the whole House is hanging on what that compensation scheme will look like. This is also a generation of people who are not getting any younger. Some of them have already died waiting for a resolution.

Let me go through a number of our concerns. The first is that, although the Department has reviewed all 11,800 cases of people from the Caribbean who may be affected, we understand that there are around 160,000 cases from other Commonwealth countries that have been not reviewed by the Home Office. It is not the policy of the Home Office at this stage to review them. We are concerned about that, because there are many people from other Commonwealth nations who are affected, or could be affected, by this, and it is important that the Government understand that, get on top of it and make sure that others are not affected.

There is a big systemic issue in the Home Office. I speak as someone who, although Chair of the Committee now, was in the past a Minister in the Home Office, in part dealing with immigration. Under several Governments there have been poor systems, poor data and poor information about people, but this Government set great store by their Atlas programme, which is their new software system to deal with immigration matters. We as a Committee are clear that, on its own, a new software programme does not solve matters. We have to make sure that, in the first place, the right data is being put in. We want to make sure that the Government are focused on sorting out those systemic issues, and we have made a number of recommendations on which we expect the Government to come back to us with a response over the next six to 12 months.

As well as Commonwealth citizens, there are also lessons that could be applied to those going through the European Union registration scheme in the hope that the Government can stave off a similar crisis. At the moment, our European Union citizens have until the end of this month to register as resident in this country. That is a fast-paced programme. After that date, it is important that anyone who has not got the right paperwork is caught by the Home Office so that their existing rights, which have been guaranteed by the Government, are protected and that they do not hit problems with employment and other services if they have to provide certain information that they do not have. It is a digitally focused system, so there are real lessons there for the Government, and we are keen to hear from them how they will make sure that those citizens are protected because of the lessons that they have learned from the Windrush scheme.

In summary, the Home Office has very much focused on processes—it introduced new rules, which, in turn, led to different processes—but it has not taken a bigger-picture view of the impact that those processes and the problems have, if not resolved, on real people's lives. When someone loses their job and their livelihood there is a long-term impact. These issues were flagged up to the Home Office by many of us in this House, by many agencies and by Governments. This report now flags up some serious issues for the Government to respond to, and we look forward to their response.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I am surprised that there are not more people with an interest in this subject. This is a very useful report, as it demonstrates how deeply embedded the hostile environment still is in the Home Office and how much further there is to travel. It also shows the need for far-reaching cultural change.

I wish to pick up on recommendation 5, on the need to extend the review beyond Caribbean Commonwealth citizens. I wonder whether the Committee discussed quite how wide ranging that should be. In particular, I wonder whether the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee is aware of the situation of the Chagossian community—the Chagos islanders—who were forced from their homes in the Commonwealth in the 1960s, many of whom have made their homes here in the United Kingdom. Getting citizenship for them, and for the future generations that have come after them, has been very difficult. The least that can be done to demonstrate that there is a change to the hostile environment would be to grant these people the citizenship that they deserve.

Meg Hillier: Our role as a Committee is not to dictate or comment on the exact details of Government policy or whether the Government are making the right policy, but to examine whether that policy is working. It is very clear in law that if people arrived from certain countries to the UK before 1973, they automatically gained citizenship, and others had rights to residency. We are saying loud and clear to the Government that other people from the Commonwealth are in this group, and it is not good enough just to expect them to find access to what is badged “the Windrush scheme”, because that may not mean as much to people from Canada, Australia, Nigeria, Ghana or wherever.

In our recommendations, we have urged the Government to actively reach out—to assess the cases that they have on their files, but also to encourage people to apply. Some of these people may now be in their countries of origin, so there is an international aspect to the issue. Just as some people went back to the Caribbean on holiday and could not come back into this country, there may be people in the same situation in other Commonwealth countries. It is absolutely imperative that the Government deal with this matter before it becomes the next big scandal.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I congratulate the Public Accounts Committee on this important report. Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the most important sentences in the report is the one that says that

“while the Department has reviewed 11,800 Caribbean cases, around 160,000 non-Caribbean Commonwealth cases remain unreviewed”?

What does she advise the Government to do? These people cannot simply be ignored.

Meg Hillier: Absolutely. As my right hon. Friend and I know, there are probably more citizens affected by the issue in our own borough—perhaps this goes beyond my remit as Chair of the Public Accounts Committee—who are from the wider Commonwealth than from the Caribbean. I am glad to see that the Immigration Minister is in her place to hear this statement. As I said in response to the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), it is important that the Government really get a grip on this issue and take a proactive approach to publicising the support that is available. If people are legally entitled to support and protection, it is absolutely right that the Home Office ensures that they have access to it, and that they know their rights.

The Government have set up a scheme for Windrush—there is some architecture in place now—so it is really important that this message goes out to the wider Commonwealth. This issue has been raised with me since before this report and our inquiry; many across the wider Commonwealth are concerned. It is important that the Government deal with this situation more effectively, as we have recommended.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Has the Committee looked at compensation for the Windrush people? A number of them in Coventry have been a bit concerned, to say the least.

Meg Hillier: As I said earlier, it is not our job to recommend how the Government do things. They have promised to deliver a compensation scheme, and my hon. Friend can rest assured that my Committee will be keen to look at that when it is unveiled—as, no doubt, will the National Audit Office. Our concern was that, a year on, there is no further information about the compensation scheme while people are waiting.

Although it is beyond the remit of what we were looking at, a compensation scheme could involve a formula or there could be bespoke compensation. It is obviously for the Government to decide exactly how that goes ahead. Once a compensation scheme is established, no doubt many of us will be scrutinising it—including, quite possibly, the Public Accounts Committee.

BILL PRESENTED

POSTNATAL CHECK-UPS (MENTAL HEALTH) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Wera Hobhouse, supported by Christine Jardine, Layla Moran, Rosie Duffield, Rosie Cooper, Catherine West, Tom Brake, Dr David Drew, Tim Loughton, Jo Swinson and Steve McCabe, presented a Bill to require routine six week National Health Service check-ups for new mothers to include mental health assessments and advice; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March, and to be printed (Bill 352).

Backbench Business

International Women's Day

1.33 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered International Women's Day.

It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair for this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker, and a great pleasure to lead this debate. I was the 265th woman ever to be elected to this place—I think many of us memorise our number because it is important—and I am proud to be the first ever Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, which was made permanent by this Government. I pay tribute to the members of that Committee who are present here today, those who have been members in the past and those who have served on our Committee's staff. We will continue to work to keep the issues that affect women right at the top of the political agenda. May I also, on behalf of the whole House, thank the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time on the Floor of the House, demonstrating the importance of this debate?

In this relatively short debate we have the opportunity to celebrate, reflect on and contemplate the lives of women under this year's theme of forging a more gender-balanced world. There is much to celebrate and we should not be shy in doing so. One hundred years ago, Nancy Astor was the first woman to take her seat in this House of Commons. I am proud that she was, like me, a Conservative woman, and that she was not afraid to speak out. She very much serves as a reminder to us all of our obligations to speak truth to power, even if that sometimes does not make us very popular. One hundred years on, we have our second female Prime Minister, tackling the most difficult political issues that this country has seen in our political lifetime—again, following in that tradition of Conservative women speaking truth to powerful EU leaders on our behalf.

There are record numbers of women in work in this country, and that economic empowerment of women is the pathway to equality. The UK has some of the best anti-discrimination laws in the world and a gender pay gap that, for women under 30, has all but evaporated. This Government have shown that they understand the challenges faced by women who have children and want to return to work, with their returnships programme. The expansion of apprenticeships has also helped women positively to progress in their careers, and there are programmes that give women access to complete degree-level qualifications, including my constituent Karen Russell, who works for Hampshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust. After 14 years as a healthcare assistant, Karen has been supported to develop and complete her degree qualification while working part time and looking after her family, and she is now a staff nurse in our hospital emergency department. This is the support that women need so that they can be economically independent in the future.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I have a vested interest in making this intervention. My daughter is doing legal exams today, and 68% of women accepted as law undergraduates this year were women. That bodes very well for the future of the legal profession.

Mrs Miller: I thank my hon. Friend and fellow member of the Select Committee for raising that point. I am married to a lawyer who works for the firm Kingsley Napley, where more than 50% of the partners are women. However, I urge my hon. Friend to look at some of the other law firms in the City of London that do not have the same proportion of women at the top, and to encourage his daughter to look for those good employers so that she, too, can progress right the way through to the top.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Could the right hon. Lady tell us what progress has been made regarding the pay gap between women and men?

Mrs Miller: The hon. Gentleman raises a really important point. I think that the biggest amount of progress has been in the Government making companies publish their gender pay gap; for the first time ever, the pay gap has become an issue that is on the agenda of businesses throughout the country. However, in answer to the hon. Gentleman's question, there has not been nearly enough progress. Although the gender pay gap has all but evaporated for women under 30, for older women it is alive and well, and we need to resolve it. I will come to that issue later in my speech.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), I believe in equality of opportunity. We need to continue to look for ways of ensuring equality of opportunity for women in our communities. As women we are resilient, but we are so resilient that we sometimes need to stop and appreciate the blatant discrimination that still pervades our lives every single day, and which still denies some women the level playing field of opportunity. Too many women's confidence is sapped—their career even destroyed—by bullying and sexual harassment at work. Forty per cent. of women in this country, and millions more around the world, suffer sexual harassment.

That issue was well highlighted this week by the day of action that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) and I hosted, when women from across the country, supported by CARE International, came into Parliament to lobby Members of Parliament to support the new International Labour Organisation global convention, which will outlaw sexual harassment and abuse at work in every country in the world, if it gets the support of their Governments.

Discrimination is still blatant because so much of the enforcement of the laws that we have passed in the UK is not working as we would want it to. In the Government's new good workplace report, they set out the importance of enforcement of workplace rights, and they are right to do so. However, I urge the Minister for Women also to look at the enforcement of anti-discrimination laws and the laws that pertain to health and safety, as well as others that are being looked at as part of the good workplace report. Legislation puts enforcement powers for those anti-discrimination laws into the hands of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, but if it is not exercising those powers, we should give them to somebody who does. No one should be prepared to stand by and watch more than 50,000 women a year leave their jobs simply because they are pregnant, even though we already have laws in place to prohibit that.

One in eight women in this country want to start their own business, often as a way to create their own business culture, yet they find that just 9% of funding for start-ups goes to women, despite women-led businesses delivering double the returns on investment for financial backers. When a woman looks to Parliament to fix the problem, she might see a very strong Prime Minister admired for her resilience, but on these green Benches—well, perhaps not today, but usually—she will see that just one in three MPs are women. As I have said, the most important way to build in a resilient equality between men and women is through women's economic empowerment—women's full participation in work, including here.

The truth is that many of the barriers in women's workplaces, including those that remain here, are in need of reform. With regard to the laws that we are so proud of having passed in this place, the reality is that a lack of enforcement on the ground often makes them worse than useless for many women. Most women do not work in the City of London, in large accountancy or law firms or in City institutions that may have modernised their approaches. Our constituents face a very different workplace, often still stuck in the '70s, with presenteeism, a long hours culture, a lack of flexible working, employers who routinely use non-disclosure agreements to cover up discrimination, and management who look down on dads who want to take parental leave to share in the care of the newest members of their family.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I know that the right hon. Lady's Committee has been doing a lot of work on non-disclosure agreements and she has very much led the charge on that. It is a very complex legal issue, but does she agree that a starting point could well be to compel companies legislatively to publish the number of NDAs that they use, the reason that they use them, and how many they use each year?

Mrs Miller: The hon. Lady brings up a very important possible solution, which our Committee will certainly look at. We have been struck by how many companies and organisations do not use NDAs at all, particularly the Government. Some people have said that the reason the Government—or the civil service—do not use them any more is the oversight of Ministers and the media, so, as she says, transparency may well be a way forward.

We have to shake free from the notion that a modern workplace will cost too much to deliver and be too much of a burden on business, because the fact that millennial dads tell us that they would rather downgrade their jobs than take a promotion or a pay rise because they cannot balance their family and work commitments indicates that productivity is really under threat. With more than 1 million economically inactive mums not working because there are not the jobs that allow them to look after their kids and work as well, we have a real problem to tackle. As labour becomes in shorter supply after we leave the EU, it is a problem that we cannot afford to continue to sweep under the carpet. We need modernisation and reform.

That message of modernisation is for this place, too. One of the very first reports by the Women and Equalities Committee was on women in the House of Commons. I was struck by the plans that all political parties have in place to address the under-representation of women in

Parliament. The proof of the pudding will obviously be at the next election as to how many get elected. There is no way of disguising the real appetite for change among the parties, but can we identify the same appetite for change with regard to Parliament itself? Can we be so sure, when the political parties are recruiting a new generation of female MPs, that they will be arriving in a place that they want to stay in, or will it still look as though it is in a time warp?

Very good work has been done by Professor Sarah Childs, thanks to Mr Speaker's significant commitment to modernising this place. He put his money where his mouth is and commissioned her to produce a report in which she painted a picture of what a good Parliament looks like. Some of those measures have been taken up—in particular, proxy voting for parents with new children. I note that Madam Deputy Speaker was in the Chair when that change to Standing Orders went through; we thank her for her support. We do not now routinely sit through the night, and there are some rudimentary family facilities in Parliament. The crèche is important. However, what someone whose children are beyond crèche age needs as a parent is certainty about what they are doing day by day, so that they can plan what they might be doing on a particular day. That certainty is wholly lacking in this place, as evidenced by this debate, which should have started about two hours ago. We need to do more to make sure that parents, whether they are commuters or need to get back to their constituencies to look after their children, have certainty as to when we will be sitting here. I can see one or two hon. Members nodding vigorously at these comments.

Hannah Bardell: Does the right hon. Lady agree that implementing a process such as the Scottish Parliament's set decision time, together with electronic voting, which would seriously reduce the amount of time that we waste in this place, would be two very positive steps forward?

Mrs Miller: The hon. Lady is probably pressing me a bit too far on electronic voting, but I definitely think that the Scottish Parliament has a very sensible way of organising its day. People know that voting will take place at a particular time, so they do not lose that opportunity to get together, to see each other and to have all the important conversations that they need to have as a body of people, but they do it at a regular time during the day. We can stay here until 1 o'clock in the morning debating all we like, but it should not be at the expense of people's family life. One colleague has told me about the real problems of not being able to get home at night for her teenage children. We are neglecting this at our peril, because such good women will vote with their feet and not necessarily stand for re-election at the next election.

This is partly why the Women and Equalities Committee has decided to set up a Sub-Committee to scrutinise the implementation of a recent report, "UK Gender-Sensitive Parliament Audit 2018", published by a group of MPs including my hon. Friends the Members for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) and for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), the hon. Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker) and the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), as well as Members in the other place. The report looks at how we could make the House of Commons a better place to be a female MP.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making some very powerful arguments on the way that this place could change to make it a better place for female MPs and mothers, but does she agree that such changes would be good for fathers as well? I have had quite a few conversations with dads with young children about how difficult they find some of Parliament's practices and hours.

Mrs Miller: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. Many of our colleagues have young children and have partners who are working; they have the same pressures on them as their constituents.

A gender-sensitive Parliament would be good for everybody. We have lacked to date a process and procedure to take these really good ideas and make change in this place. Change is glacially slow, and we have to change that and make these things happen. The Sub-Committee has not yet formed and met, but it will look at the strong recommendations made by the "UK Gender-Sensitive Parliament Audit", which include increasing the predictability of parliamentary business, reforming the sitting hours, eliminating bullying and harassment, and implementing the new behaviour code and grievance procedures—the list goes on. I hope that Members will agree with what I hope will be a change to the Standing Orders, so that our Committee can scrutinise what not only the Government but Parliament are doing on these issues.

As a House of Commons, we have not grasped this issue in the way we need to and in the way that most modern Parliaments have. I am immensely proud to be a Member of Parliament and to be the first ever woman to represent my constituency. Indeed, I am still the only woman to ever represent a constituency in north Hampshire, although we have quite a few incredibly powerful women elsewhere in Hampshire, one of whom was just sitting on the Front Bench. It is our responsibility to ensure that the women who follow us have more opportunity and economic empowerment and that our daughters—wherever they live, and whatever their race or religion—have the same opportunity as our sons.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Before we proceed, I am afraid that I will have to introduce an initial time limit of seven minutes, to ensure that everybody gets an equal chance to make all the important points that have to be made. I would also like to welcome to the Gallery of the Chamber Stacey Abrams from the USA. It is good to have an international input to our proceedings. Ms Abrams was the Democratic candidate for Governor of Georgia and the House of Representatives minority leader, and we are delighted to be observed by her this afternoon.

1.52 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): In the first International Women's Day debate I attended, I promised to read out the names of the women killed by men since the last International Women's Day. Today I will honour that promise. Over the years, I have had the pleasure of meeting the families of these women, who were grateful that their loved ones were being remembered. I read these names not only to continue to highlight

[*Jess Phillips*]

how male violence can terrorise ordinary women's lives, but to pay tribute to these women and those who did not survive and give them the opportunity to be heard. The reason that these women are no longer with us is that they are hard to see, hard to hear and hard to believe. I could not do this without the brilliant work of the Counting Dead Women project and Karen Ingala Smith, who tirelessly records the lives of these women. The first name I will read out is that of a woman who was murdered just days after I rose to my feet here in this Chamber a year ago.

Their names are: Jennifer Rogers; Heather Whitbread; Michelle Savage; Diane Jones; Jenny Cronin; Leyla Mtumwa; Ourania Lambrou; Tanesha Melbourne; Tracy Stonehouse; Alexis Flynn; Lesley Potter; Viktorija Sokolova; Margaret Howlett; Maryna Kavaliauskas; Angela Craddock; Samantha Clarke; Jennifer Morgan; Julie Hunt; Hollie Kerrell; Elizabeth Lacey; Fiona Fisher; Faye Caliman; Nicola Roberts; Onees Khatoun; Jessica Patel; Rosina Coleman; Bernadette Green; Sophie Cavanagh; Angela Conoby; Christina Abbotts; Laura Mortimer; Denise Rosser; Joanne Bishop; Jill Hibberd; Andra Hilitanu; Molly Frank; Sofija Kaczan; Tina Cantello; Marie Gibson; Gitana Matukeviciene; Tracy Patsalides; Gita Suri; Klarissa-Charlene Faith; Shuren Ma; Samantha Toms; Lorna Myers; Stela Domador-Kuzma; Patricia Franks; Dawn Sturgess; Gina Ingles and her son; Riasat Bi; Katerina Makunova; Lesley Davies; Sheila Thomas; Lucy McHugh; Sam Eastwood; Karen Peter; Kelly Franklin; Katherine Kemp; Tracey Evans; Marie Walker; Simonne Kerr; Barbara Davison; Kaltoun Saleh; Carole Harrison; Sharon Perrett; Raneem Oudeh; Khaola Saleem; Celia Levitt; Julie Owens; Joan Hoggett; Memunatu Warne; Kylie Dembrey; Susan Gyde; Kay Martin; Cristina Magda-Calancea; Frances Hubbard; Sandra Zmijan; Margaret Harris; Sharon Harris; Jeanna Maher; Glenda Jackson; Avan Najmadeen; Natalie Saunders; Sarah Wellgreen; Nazia Ali; Teresa Garner; Lynn Forde; Mavis Bran; Sheena Jackson; Fiona McDonald; Natalie Smith; Tanseen Sheikh; Sana Muhammad; Pauline Kilkenny; Katarzyna Paszek; Maureen Watkins; Jacqueline Allen; Samantha Gosney; Karen Cleary-Brown; Barbara Findley; Grace Millane; Maureen Whale; Sally Cavender; June Knight; Keely McGrath; Poppy Devey-Waterhouse; Lana Owen; Marissa Aldrich; Parwin Quriashi; Angela Mittal; June Jones; Joy Morgan; Lisa Jane McArity; Charlotte Huggins; Jay Edmunds; Simbiso Aretha Moulai; Sarah Ashraf; Asma Begum; Luz Isaza Villegas; Leanne Unsworth; Christy Walshe; Alison Hunt; Mary Annie Sowerby; Regina Marilyn Paul; Margaret Smythe; Mary Page; Rosie Darbyshire; Aliny Mendes; and Sarah Henshaw.

I could feel the nervousness in the room that I would not finish reading the list within seven minutes. That is how we should feel every single minute of every day—nervous that one of our constituents will wake up dead. The fear and tension that we felt in our bodies that I would not get through the list and would be made to sit down is what victims of domestic violence feel every minute that they walk around their houses. The second they wake up in the morning, they feel frightened and have to walk on awkward eggshells all day long. These women need us in this place to hear their names and hear their stories, so that we can change and make it so that next year's list might at least be a little bit shorter.

1.58 pm

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I would like to praise my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for a fantastic opening speech and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) for her hugely powerful speech.

Gender equality is a crucial agenda for the whole planet. The reality is that we simply will not fix the many challenges that the world faces today with half the world's population locked out of being able to contribute to any of the solutions. It is five years since we held the Girl Summit in 2014, while I was Secretary of State for International Development. It was an international summit to use the UK's role as a major aid investor to step up to the plate on gender equality. In doing so, we wanted to highlight two key issues that I felt did not get anywhere close to the level of attention domestically and internationally that they needed for the many women they affected: female genital mutilation, and early and forced marriage. It was all too easy for many people in Britain to think that those two issues were other countries' problems. In fact, it turned out that they were actually ours as well. The Girl summit in 2014 was our attempt to try to provide some momentum not only to an international agenda that needed it, but, as I and the then Home Secretary—now the Prime Minister—felt, to a domestic agenda that needed it, too.

I am proud of what we have been able to do since. I wanted to say in this debate that I very much hope it will not be the last Girl summit this country hosts. I very much hope that, as UK aid steadily shifts, we can make sure it keeps at its heart the issue of tackling gender inequality. In the end, countries that are not able to use all their human capital simply will not be successful, whatever broader development programmes they have under way. It is now crucial that the UK plays its role in delivering the sustainable development goals, particularly goal 5 on gender equality. This country worked so hard to make sure that that goal had a list of issues to tackle that could transform the lives of women wherever they were in the world, which included the issues we campaigned on at the Girl summit.

Before I turn briefly to the domestic agenda, I want to finish talking about the international agenda by saying that I am proud of what UK aid does in helping other countries to achieve gender equality alongside the path our own is on. I do not accept that there is a choice to be made between an aid strategy in our national interest and an aid strategy in our global interest. Anyone who suggests that there is somehow such a choice is misunderstanding the fact that we live in a common world, where helping other countries escape from poverty is one of the best ways to ensure our own future as well as theirs. I would be very opposed to seeing what I think has been a very effective aid strategy under the Department for International Development subsumed into a Foreign Office one. Our aid strategy should be about pioneering work on things such as gender equality; it should not be used simply to curry favour with other countries around the world.

The other thing I want to say is that, since that Girl summit, many things have continued to change in the world, not least the issue of social media. I want to finish by looking at the aspect of gender equality in the context of that social media challenge. The reality is that, while social media platforms can be amazing platforms

for the voices of girls and women to be heard loud and clear, they will not prove to be successful platforms for any of that if those voices are just drowned out by trolling, abuse and the kind of domestic abuse that happens offline, sometimes with fatal effects, if it shifts on to the online world as well.

I very much join others in calling for more action to be taken in relation to the social media giants, and for Facebook and Google to step up to the plate to do more of what they can to combat this. It is interesting that when we look at some of the surveys by organisations such as Amnesty International, we see that they are completely shocking in relation to the impact of social media on women. Amnesty International's research back in late 2017 showed that one in five women it polled said they had experienced abuse or harassment through social media. Of those, more than a quarter, shockingly, had received direct or indirect threats of physical or sexual violence, while 47% had experienced sexist or misogynistic abuse and nearly 60% said that they had no idea who the perpetrator was. Many MPs and colleagues in this House will know what it is like, as I do, to be targeted online purely because of the views we hold, which is totally unacceptable.

We can and should do much more about this. I think we need domestic action, and I would like to pay tribute to the many companies that are now actually stepping up to the plate and showing that they can use social media for a positive good. For example, Avon has a fantastic campaign called "Stand4her". There are brands such as Missguided, which has the #keeponbeingyou movement, which will do no more photoshopping; it will just use models as they are—all kinds of models. They will look as beautiful as they are in real life; they do not need any touching up or anything like that. Other brands include Emily Attack and #ITSjustgotreal, which says that

"we will not be smoothing out any lines, wrinkles, lumps or bumps to sell you something that just is not real."

That is the kind of leadership we need, but I would like to see it matched by our social media companies as well. If we can have stronger domestic action on this, we can perhaps, as we have on the international gender equality front, lead on this gender equality campaign too.

2.5 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I am delighted to speak in this debate on my first International Women's Day as a Member of this House. I just want to say that the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) reminds me that, when I was a teenager, my cousin was brutally raped and murdered. The speech was really powerful, and I just want to pay tribute to her for it. I would like to thank the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and Members across the House who supported the application for this debate, and the Backbench Business Committee for helping to facilitate it.

Today, I would like to celebrate some of the achievements and advancements women have made and highlight some of the challenges we still face. Last year marked 100 years since women gained the right to vote and to sit in the House of Commons. We marked the occasion with the brilliant 209 Women exhibition, which powerfully displayed the contribution women are making to this House daily.

We have also seen the rise of the Me Too movement, which has swept the globe. It has forced a long overdue reassessment of our treatment of and response to sexual harassment and abuse. We have seen the first conviction in a female genital mutilation case, which sends a strong message that this crime cannot be tolerated, and we have also seen the upskirting legislation. However, there is more to do, and I hope we can soon classify misogyny as a hate crime.

Within the Labour party, we have just launched important new sexual harassment procedures, which give victims access to an independent adviser throughout their case and support from the Rape and Sexual Abuse Support Centre. This is industry-leading practice, and is rightly being celebrated.

Although much can be celebrated, we are yet to achieve full gender equality for the women of the world. Recently, in a conversation with a friend of mine, she said, "We women have never won anything without a fight"—indeed, what is won without a fight?—and that is true. International Women's Day is about all women, from all backgrounds and all ages, lifestyles and experiences.

This morning, I was delighted to meet two young women—16 and 17 years old—from the Defence for Children International Palestine Section, who are speaking up for their rights and are fighting for them, and rightly so, like those from the suffragettes to Rosa Parks, the women who blazed a trail in this House and the fantastic women in the Chamber today, including in the Gallery. I am pleased to say that some constituents of mine from Lewisham East are here. With all that said, in this day and age many women and girls do not have the ability to fight, but we who can fight must fight for them.

I will name a few areas in which much more needs to be done to reduce gender inequality: employment, gender pay, pensions, prisons and the need to eliminate period poverty. On employment, the female employment rate is still low compared with that for men. On gender pay, female pay is much lower than that of their male counterparts, and the median rate is up to £100 less. The reality of money in old age is far from equal, and I do not think anyone can disagree with that when we consider the WASPI women, who have been failed in their retirement funding. This should not be the legacy for many of our older British female population.

On prisons, according to the Prison Reform Trust, nearly one in three foreign national women in prison is serving a sentence for drug offences. That does not sound right. Sentencing guidelines should be reassessed to consider mitigating factors, such as evidence of coercion. Black British women are over-represented in prison, and that is overwhelmingly due to the socio-economic inequalities that arise from deprivation, disadvantage and discrimination.

The extent of period poverty is a national embarrassment, and socks, toilet paper and kitchen towels are some of the items being used by girls and women as sanitary products. Period poverty is on the rise, and one in 10 girls is unable to afford sanitary products each month. This issue is fundamental to equality for women, and the Government should abolish VAT on sanitary products and immediately explore ways to achieve universal, free access. We could start with our own house, and I am supporting the campaign to ensure that free sanitary products are available here.

[Janet Daby]

A 2017 report from the World Economic Forum said that it could be another 100 years before the global equality gap between men and women disappears. I hope I speak for the whole House when I say that we cannot afford to wait that long. Such a responsibility should not be taken lightly by this Government, or any other.

2.10 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): When making her maiden speech 100 years ago Nancy Astor, the first woman to take her seat in this House, reassured the crowd of men around her. She said that Members should not be frightened and that

“when Drake and Raleigh wanted to set out on their venturesome careers, some cautious person said, ‘Do not do it; it has never been tried before. You stay at home, my sons, cruising around in home waters.’”—[*Official Report*, 24 February 1920; Vol. 125, c. 1623.]

Like those other pioneers who set out from Plymouth before her, Nancy Astor charted a new course, and changed the world. Thanks to her, when I was growing up in the late 1980s I thought that being Prime Minister was a woman's job. Thanks to her, I am standing here today, surrounded by talented female colleagues—I am glad to see that some male colleagues are also here supporting us. Also thanks to her, when I was elected my daughter said to me, “Mummy, are men allowed to be MPs?”

International Women's Day is a chance to reflect on how far we have come, and to celebrate the achievements of women in all parts of the House. I pay tribute to the work of brilliant colleagues such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), who is the Mother of the House, and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) who made such a powerful speech a moment ago. My hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) does a fantastic job speaking up for women, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) referred to her own work on international development. My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) cannot be here today, but she has been a powerful campaigner for women during her time in this place.

As the Conservative party's vice-chair for women, I will take a moment to speak about what my party does for women, and I suggest it is no coincidence that the first female MP and the first female Prime Minister were Conservatives. We believe that someone's talents, rather than their identity, background or gender, should determine where they go in life, and that women should have the same choices and opportunities as men. I am a feminist because I am a Conservative, not in spite of that. The Conservative Government introduced mandatory gender pay gap reporting and the right to request flexible working, and they are tackling crimes that particularly target women, such as modern slavery and domestic violence. This Government are consulting on extending redundancy protection for pregnant women, and on stopping the use of non-disclosure agreements to cover up sexual harassment.

Our economic reforms have also supported women, with 1.6 million more women in work than in 2010, increases to the national living wage and personal allowance,

and the extension of free childcare to 30 hours a week, which particularly benefits women. There has been great progress, but we all recognise that the job is far from done. For example, although the gender pay gap for full-time employees is close to zero for those aged 18 to 39, women's careers and earning potential still take a hit after they have children. Fewer than 10% of FTSE 100 companies have a female CEO.

Unconscious bias and discrimination are still holding women back. Just last week a man told me that women do not want to stand for election because they would rather stay at home in the evening, and because men are the breadwinners and like to work hard—I had to pause for a moment in disbelief that such things are still being said, but it happened literally last week. I have lost count of the number of times people have asked me how I “manage” to be an MP and look after my children. It is as if that is some kind of incredible feat, as opposed to what women do day in, day out, when juggling childcare with being a Member of Parliament or any demanding career.

On this International Women's Day I urge the Government to build on Nancy Astor's legacy and go even further to make equal opportunity a reality for women. I wish to suggest practical actions on three fronts: reforming working practices, giving families greater choice in how to share caring responsibilities, and challenging the sexual stereotypes that prevent women from achieving their potential. That way we can create a society that works for everyone.

Women must have equal opportunities to succeed at work and gain financial security. Sexual harassment, which curtails women's careers, must be stamped out. We must close the maternity pay gap. We know that when women reach their late 20s and early 30s their wages start to plateau. Not only do women earn less, but they also save less and hold fewer assets. By the age of 65 the average woman has just £13,000 in savings and under £36,000 in a pension—just one fifth of the average man's pension at the same age. The Institute for Fiscal Studies puts that down to mothers working part time.

The 40 hours, five-days-a-week model that is still so pervasive in our country was designed to suit single-earner households and stay-at-home carers, but that no longer reflects how many people wish to organise their lives. The Government have introduced the right for employees to request flexible working, and they are considering placing a greater onus for that on employers. I think we should go further and ensure that all jobs can be flexible, unless proven otherwise.

I want to see more equal choices in modern families, because the great inequality between maternity and paternity rights makes it harder for women to participate in the workforce, and harder for fathers to spend time with their children. The take-up of shared parental leave is low, and there is no statutory option for partners to take more than two weeks' leave without that affecting the mother's entitlement. There is also a limit to the number of antenatal appointments that men can attend, and we must do more to enable fathers to be involved in their child's life from day one.

Finally, we must end the social attitudes that prevent women from achieving their potential. To really tackle sexism in society we must understand, and undermine, its root causes. We must be unafraid to challenge outdated attitudes whenever we encounter them. We must be

forceful about what we will no longer accept, and we must finish the journey that Nancy Astor started 100 years ago.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. A lot of colleagues still wish to speak, so I will reduce the time limit to six minutes from now.

2.18 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Thank you Madam Deputy Speaker, and I wish everybody here and beyond a happy International Women's Day.

Women's day was celebrated for the first time 110 years ago in the United States in protest at the working conditions to which garment workers—mostly female—were subjected. Although we as a global society have made significant strides towards gender equality since then, it is important to acknowledge that issues regarding the workplace, and about violence towards and the subjugation of women, are nowhere close to being resolved.

As we have heard, in this place 100 years ago Viscountess Nancy Astor made history and became the first female Member of Parliament to take her seat. Countess Markievicz of Sinn Féin was, of course, the first woman to be elected to this place, although she never took her seat. Today 209 women sit in the House of Commons, and 206 women in the House of Lords, but there is still work to do.

Some challenges have merely evolved in nature. For example, over a six-month period in 2017, women MPs were sent nearly 26,000 abusive tweets—that point has already been touched on, and I hope that the Government will respond to it. We need to address anonymity on social media, and the need for a compulsory code of practice for social media publishers. Social media giants must recognise their responsibility and cease hiding behind the description of “platforms”. They publish and make money from this issue, and they have an effect on our democracy, and especially on female politicians. Today, 2.7 billion women live in countries where their employment choices are legally restricted because of their gender. In Bangladesh, 73% of female garment workers have witnessed or experienced workplace violence. And here in England, Wales, and Scotland over half of women say that they have been sexually harassed at work.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. She is making a very powerful point. She will be aware that my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) and I are ambassadors for White Ribbon Scotland. Does she agree that it is very important to get more men to sign up and speak out about violence against women, and that they should sign the pledge that says:

“never commit, condone or remain silent about violence against women in all its forms”?

That applies in Scotland, as well as in the other nations around the UK.

Liz Saville Roberts: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. What strikes me as a female politician is perhaps the risk of women talking

about women's issues and that in itself not generating status and attention. Of course, women's issues are as much a matter for men as they are for women. That we are all here to discuss this matter is extremely significant.

Violence against women remains a major issue. Globally, one in three women will experience either physical partner violence or sexual violence in her lifetime. In 2017, 137 women across the world were murdered by a member of their own family every single day. Women and girls are routinely denied rights to their own bodies and lives. Some 9 million girls between the ages of 15 and 19 have been victims of forced sex in the past year alone. At least 200 million women and girls alive today are victims of female genital mutilation; 137,000 of them live in the UK.

There is still much to be done, but we should celebrate the progress we have made and the incredible women in our world today. Last year, Nadia Murad of Iraq—I was honoured to meet her two years ago; I am sure many others have, too—was awarded a Nobel peace prize for her work. She has amplified and raised the voice of the victim, not as a victim but as the voice of a survivor. That had so much impact and she very much deserved to receive the Nobel peace prize. Sinéad Burke, in Ireland, passionately advocates for people with disabilities to be included in design considerations. Rachel Williams of Newport, Wales, works tirelessly for survivors of domestic abuse since becoming a survivor herself.

I will be brief, because there are many other people who want to speak, but I am proud of this point: the National Assembly of Wales, my home Parliament of course, has now just about reached gender parity, with women currently accounting for 47% of our Assembly Members. I am optimistic for the future ahead of us.

One other point I am very proud of—other Members have raised it—is that we can now actually discuss periods in Parliament and talk about period poverty. I will mention Councillor Elyn Stevens of Rhondda Cynon Taf, whose campaign has been successful in the establishment in the National Assembly of Wales of a £1 million fund to address period poverty in Wales. For a woman of my generation, even five years ago I would have been embarrassed to talk about it—I would have gone bright red—but now we can talk about it.

I would like to end on these famous words:

“Here's to strong women: may we know them, may we be them, may we raise them.”

At the same time, we must acknowledge that global power structures still exist which liberate some women—possibly us here—at the expense of others. We must therefore work towards liberation, equal opportunity and justice for women everywhere. Dydd Gŵyl Rhyngwladol Menywod hapus i chi i gyd: happy International Women's Day.

2.24 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): Over the past century, women's voices have become louder. I am happy to add my voice to the brilliant speeches from all Members here today calling for further progress. I also thank my hon. Friend, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), for remembering those women who lost their lives in the past year due to domestic violence.

Today, women are more represented than ever before, but there is still so much to do to achieve proper gender balance in both the workplace and here in Parliament.

[Gillian Keegan]

I believe the best way to shift this imbalance is through education and by example: supporting young girls to have the confidence and self-belief to break into sectors that are traditionally male-dominated. We know that girls are underrepresented in science, technology, engineering and maths subjects at school and in STEM jobs in the economy. Despite being 50% of the workforce, women account for less than 15% of the jobs in engineering and technology sectors, according to a recent report in *The Guardian*.

Eddie Hughes: Having started my life as a civil engineer, I realise just how unrepresented women are in the construction industry. I would like to praise the work of the National Association of Women in Construction, which is doing its very best to move the focus from gender to ability, to make sure we get the best people for the job, regardless of their gender.

Gillian Keegan: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I remember well myself being told at my comprehensive school in Knowsley that “Girls don’t do technical drawing courses.” We had to do needlework and home economics—until, that is, the headmaster met my mother.

It was National Apprenticeship Week this week and I met some fabulous young girls in the construction and technology industries. Alia Saddique, Olivia Dobell, Chyanne Mwangi, Chyanne Brown and Megan Whitbread are all blazing a trail and they were here in Parliament this week to tell us what they are doing to change things. And things are changing—earlier this week, I visited the University of East London to mark National Apprenticeship Week in my role as apprenticeship ambassador. On my tour of its hi-tech facilities, such as a computer-aided manufacturing room, I met a number of degree apprentices. Of the 14 students using the new technology, four were women—roughly 30%. Some progress is being made, although not enough.

Technology should be a massive enabler for women in the workplace and we must ensure that it is. Being able to use modern collaboration tools enables employees to work at home, participate in video conference calls, and work with other co-workers anywhere in the world. These trends in technology will enable women to become agile workers and achieve better life-work balance. I truly believe these developments are even more liberating and profound than anything we can do in this place. They will also help women who want to return to the workplace after a career break.

The importance of role models can never be overstated. You cannot be what you cannot see. We have many remarkable women leading the way in West Sussex: Susan Pyper, our lord lieutenant; Dianne Sheppard, who leads Chichester District Council; Louise Goldsmith, the leader of the county council; Katy Bourne, our police and crime commissioner; Kate Mosse, the famous author; Jane Longmore, the vice chancellor of Chichester University, and her deputy, Professor Catherine Harper; Sheila Legrave, who runs Chichester College; Dame Marianne Griffiths, the CEO of the Western Sussex Hospitals NHS Trust; and Sam Allen, the CEO of the Sussex Partnership Trust.

Building confidence and establishing good networks is a vital first step in achieving the empowerment of women in our society. Twenty years ago, in 1999, the

Everywoman Network was established by two remarkable women, Maxine Benson and Karen Gill. Today the network has many thousands of members, and is well supported by both businesses and the public sector across all sectors of the economy. They run leadership programmes, networking and recognition events, and online mentoring services for women in the UK and beyond. I am proud to say that Karen Gill is a constituent of mine and, together with her co-founder Maxine, they are helping to ensure that the pipeline of female talent for leadership roles is growing stronger and stronger with every year.

Rightly, our efforts to better the lives of women and girls go beyond our shores. I am pleased that we are leading the global effort to reach girls across the world and give them an education. As we have seen with inspirational conviction from women like Malala, education is empowerment. I saw for myself the joy that learning brings to children in desperate situations when I visited a refugee camp in Tanzania last year. The children told me that they were working hard to become doctors, lawyers and leaders of the future. I believe it was knowing they were lucky to be learning that gave them that burning desire and hope for their future. I am pleased that our Government are targeting help towards the most marginalised girls around the world through the global challenges research fund. Those girls, who face multiple disadvantages, will hopefully be better educated, healthier, participate in the labour market and earn high incomes in the future.

It was former UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, who said:

“The world will never realise 100 per cent of its goals if 50 per cent of its people cannot realise their potential”.

When we unleash the power of women, we can secure the future for all. On this International Women’s Day, we will redouble our efforts to unleash the power of women in our society. As Chichester-born Helena Morrissey said in the title of her most recent book, it is “A Good Time to be a Girl”.

2.30 pm

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): Tackling sexism in the workplace and employing more women is the key to making the world richer, more equal and less prone to devastating financial collapse, according to the head of the International Monetary Fund, Christine Lagarde. She says that some countries could boost the size of their economies by up to 35% if they abandoned discriminatory laws and took advantage of women’s skills. Last year, in our FTSE top 100 companies, the number of female chief executives was the same number as that of men named Dave or Steve. There is no shortage of exceptionally talented women in business, yet representation is still poor and the pay gap is still very evident in most areas of employment.

Even small changes can make a difference and create a more inclusive working environment. In my constituency office, a member of my staff team returned from maternity leave and was given time to express milk so that she could continue to breastfeed her baby. She is a skilled, intelligent young woman who is a great asset to our team. If she had not been given that reasonable adjustment, we may have lost her from the workforce. The seemingly small things can make a massive difference to women’s wellbeing and have a great, positive impact on the world of work and our economy.

I could name so many great, high-achieving women from history, including women who are alive today, some of whom are here in this place. I would like to focus, however, on real heroes in our country and around the world: the single mum who has three jobs, starting as a school cleaner at 6 am, then working as a lunchtime supervisor, and finally working a shift stocking shelves at the supermarket at 10 o'clock at night; the woman caring for her disabled child while also caring for her mum with dementia; the woman battling stage 4 cancer and continuing to work; and the woman starting a new job having moved out of her family home after surviving years of domestic violence. These are the women who have been hit hardest by the Government's tax and benefit changes and who continue to fight on, managing life's everyday challenges, made worse by nine years of relentless austerity.

In recent years, reports have shown that 86% of the burden of austerity since 2010 has fallen on women. There have been punitive benefits changes, cuts to legal aid, job insecurity, the closure of refuges and advice centres, and cuts to Sure Start centres. The women who face all these challenges every day of their lives are the ones we should acknowledge and pay tribute to today.

Charlotte Brontë said in "Jane Eyre":

"I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will".

It was true in the days of Charlotte Brontë, as it is true for women today. Women have always had this strength and passion, and I am proud to celebrate that today. Happy International Women's Day, sisters.

2.33 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker). I know from personal experience that there are some very strong women in Colne Valley, and she is definitely one of them. It is also a great pleasure to speak in this debate to celebrate women across the whole world. We are celebrating and highlighting women's achievements, as well as their tenacity and determination to beat the odds.

We can all cite many examples of exceptional women locally, nationally and internationally, but I start by focusing on an issue that predominantly affects women: domestic abuse, and specifically coercive and controlling behaviour. At this stage, I commend the Minister for her dedication and determination to stamp out domestic abuse and to build on the groundbreaking, world-leading work carried out by our right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), who is sadly no longer in her place, but who once again helped us all to pay tribute to those who have lost their lives as a result of domestic abuse.

This Government have done more than ever before to tackle violence against women and girls, but there is still more to do. It is not acceptable that in today's society, one in four women in the UK will experience domestic abuse in their lifetime and one in five will experience sexual violence. Looking around the Chamber today—this includes the officials in the box—that means that probably five of us will experience domestic abuse and four will experience violence. These are, so often, hidden crimes that need to be brought out of the shadows.

That was recently brought to life in my surgery. A very brave young lady came to see me and told me of her experiences. For obvious reasons, I will not go into too much detail, but she raised a very important and relevant point. Her husband has been convicted of coercive behaviour and is now subject to quite a lengthy restraining order. However, as things stand, he still has shared parental responsibility for their children. I am led to believe that the restraining order does not trump parental responsibility, hence, for example, should any of the children need a passport before the age of 18, their father still has to sign the forms. Therefore, the restraining order would become null and void in that respect. Will the Minister look at such situations and see whether legislation can be strengthened to ensure that any restraining order takes precedence over parental responsibility?

On a lighter note, when I look around my local schools and nearby colleges, universities and hospitals, I see many amazing women heading up these public sector organisations. Across Derbyshire, we can now add Bishop Libby Lane to our amazing list of women. Bishop Libby was the Church of England's first female bishop and she will become the first female Bishop of Derby after Easter. I look forward to welcoming her to the area.

On a political note, I am proud that four out of the five Erewash MPs since the seat was created in 1983 have been women. Erewash is definitely leading the way when it comes to female representation, and long may that continue. It shows that women can get into politics at whatever level, whether that is parish level, local authority level or as Members of Parliament, and we must never forget the House of Lords, where there are some very strong women. We still have a long way to go with regard to getting equal representation, and I know that everybody in the House today is playing their part in helping to achieve that.

When I talk in debates such as the one today, I am always conscious of mentioning names, because I am always fearful that I will forget somebody. I mentioned Bishop Libby Lane and she is the only one that I am going to mention by name, because so many women across Erewash and Derbyshire are so important to everybody's lives. That includes businesswomen as well as those in the public sector, and not only those who are heading up companies but those who play other important parts in industry. One of the traits of women is that we do not shout out. We do not say how good we are; we just get on with life. We get on with conducting our business, looking after our family, furthering our education and making a success of whatever we do. I finish by commending everybody for playing their part to raise the success of women and for making sure that those who are listening today realise that if we can do it, anybody can.

2.39 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to speak in this year's International Women's Day debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing the time.

International Women's Day provides an opportunity to reflect on how far we have come and on how far we still have to go. We also get the opportunity as sisters to

[Marsha De Cordova]

celebrate our sisterhood. The first International Women's Day was held back in 1911, at a time when women were still considered the property of men and our rights were limited, but, with International Women's Day organised by an international socialist women's conference, these pioneering women dared to dream of a world beyond oppression, indignity and subordination to patriarchy, of a world where men and women could stand as equals—imagine that!

It would take a further seven years for some women, and a further 17 years for all women, to win the right to vote. Leading that struggle were women such as Sylvia Pankhurst and Battersea's own Caroline Ganley and Charlotte Despard—I follow in the footsteps of some fantastic women. Courageous socialists, these women refused to accept injustice. They were oppressed, they fought, they struggled. Charlotte was arrested twice, but she fought on, and, because of what she and others did, we now have the right to stand in Parliament as women MPs. In 1918, Charlotte was the first woman to stand in Battersea North, and while she did not win, she paved the way for others to stand, and in 1945, Caroline Ganley became the first woman to be elected for Battersea.

I come now to the present day. For nine years, women have borne the brunt of austerity: many women services have closed, women have been hit hardest by public service job losses and the pay cap, and according to figures from the House of Commons Library, 86% of the cuts since 2010 have fallen on the shoulders of women. It is a near-decade-long assault on women's rights and freedoms. Women face sexual harassment and domestic abuse. The gender pay gap stands at 20%. I know that all my sisters on both sides of the House will agree that we have to address these inequalities.

Those inequalities are so much worse for working-class women, black women, women from ethnic minorities and disabled women such as myself, and it is as a disabled woman that I want to share something with the House. I have faced many barriers in my life—in education, in the workplace and so forth—so getting elected was a huge achievement, but unfortunately obtaining the additional support I need in this place to operate as an MP has been challenging. I am continuously fighting for additional support but being told by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, "We know you have additional needs, but we are not going to support those additional needs". It has made it very difficult for me.

The people of Battersea sent me here to represent them, and I should not have to fight the authorities here for the additional support I need, but I will fight on, because that is what I have had to do my whole life. I will keep fighting. It does not stop here. This is the one place where equality should exist and where no one should have to fight for the support they need, whether they are a woman, disabled, a black person, whatever. No one should have to fight that fight.

We have come a long way. We should never forget and never not celebrate it. The struggle and the courage of women such as Charlotte Despard and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), who is no longer in her place, paved the way for so many of us, and I am deeply grateful to them. Happy International Women's Day, sisters, and solidarity!

2.44 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): It is a huge honour to speak in the Chamber on the eve of International Women's Day and 100 years after the first woman took her seat in this place. What an amazing year it has been. I think of that beautiful day in June when thousands of people took part in processions, dressed in suffragette colours, across each of our capital cities; that inspirational day when hundreds of women from all across the country came here to take part in the Ask Her to Stand event; that powerful day when 100 women MPs from all across the world came here to stand together and share experiences; and that very proud day for me when I held a Pankhurst party on the famous lady's birthday at which I, as the first woman MP for Chelmsford, joined the woman mayor and woman lord lieutenant to lay a wreath on the plinth where the suffragettes stood and made speeches.

Equality matters. Organisations that are more diverse are more effective and successful, which is why I am proud to chair the all-party group on women in Parliament, the women's caucus. We work to encourage women to stand and then when they come to this place we stand together to support each other. This has been a great year for the all-party group, and we have made some progress. Just yesterday was a historic day. My hon. Friend the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) was entrusted with the vote of my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami), who became the first man to vote by proxy after the birth of his child last weekend.

There is a lot more to do, particularly about online abuse and harassment. That is not just an issue for us in the UK. The Inter-Parliamentary Union recently looked at MPs and staff in 45 countries in Europe: 85% had suffered psychological threats of violence, nearly half had received threats of death, rape or beatings, one in seven had suffered physical violence and one in four had suffered sexual violence. The violence against women in public life is linked to the rise in online abuse, and our election law is not fit for purpose in the digital age. It is changing the way women who are elected act. It is deterring women from standing for election. It is a direct threat to our democracy. I ask the Government to make sure that our new online harms report does everything necessary to rectify this situation.

On a positive note, I was pleased to take part in the gender-sensitive Parliament audit with staff and Members from both this House and the other place. We have made several recommendations that should improve accessibility for all who want to come into this place, and I am glad that the Women and Equalities Committee, under our excellent Chair, is taking responsibility for making sure that those recommendations are implemented. As a member of the Committee, I have been very pleased to take part in our work on women in the workplace more broadly. The numbers of women in work in the UK are at record highs and the gender pay gap is at a record low. I understand that the way we measure the gender pay gap has now been adopted by Bloomberg as the metric by which companies all across the globe will be measured.

People who know me well know that I often like to look at how the UK compares with other countries. A report this week, the women in work index, compared the situation for women all across the OECD. It looked at the gender pay gap, access to maternity rights, and

the number of women at different levels. The good news is that in comparison with our peers, we are on the way up—we have gone from No. 14 to No. 13—but wouldn't it be great to get into the top 10? That is what we should aim for. It is estimated that if we could get to No. 2, it would help not only women but the whole of society. According to the maths, we would enhance the GDP of our country by 9% and enhance prosperity for all.

The women's economic empowerment strategy on which the Government are working is important for everyone. It focuses on helping women who are on lower pay and helping older women to return to the workforce, and I hope that it will also focus on sexual harassment in the workplace. As was pointed out by my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, a recent survey showed that 40% of women have experienced it, and I strongly support her call for the role of the Equality and Human Rights Commission to be strengthened in that regard.

We in the UK are lucky, however. Across the world, 63 million girls are out of school and in conflict zones. Girls are two and a half times more likely not to be in school than boys and three times more likely to be victims of modern slavery. We should be enormously proud, as women, of the work that we are doing overseas, and as women, we should champion the work of the Department for International Development. Our DFID programmes are leading the fight to end sexual violence and conflict, to stamp out female genital mutilation and to protect children from forced marriages. We must stand together to support all the work that we are doing both here and overseas.

2.50 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): In 2018, CNN declared that it would be the year of the women, because 2017 had not been. We might have started the Me Too movement, but we were promised that the glass ceiling would be shattered by a woman President, and instead we got Donald Trump. To this day, Harvey Weinstein and the Presidents Club men do not face any censure. However, I refuse to let my anger about those injustices deny my sisters around the world this platform on which I can celebrate and shout out their achievements of 2018.

I stand with those women who marched in January and set up the Time's Up defence fund, now worth \$22 billion. I pay tribute to Emma Gonzalez, a student in Parkland, Florida, who inspired us in February by fighting for gun control against President Trump, and to Professor Stephanie Page, who in March announced the details of the male contraceptive pill that she has finally been able to develop. I pay tribute to Caroline Criado-Perez, who finally got us a statue of a woman in Parliament Square—Millicent Fawcett—and to Beyoncé for shattering the record for the number of YouTube views for her performance at the Coachella festival.

I pay tribute to our sisters in Northern Ireland and in Ireland, where, in May 2018, they finally won the right to an abortion after their campaign to repeal the eighth amendment to the Irish constitution, and to our sisters in Uruguay, who—also in May—finally saw the first conviction for femicide. I pay tribute to Jenny Saville, who smashed records for women artists in selling their wares at Sotheby's. In June, our sisters in Spain made

history when the first female-led Cabinet was appointed. Just a few decades ago Spain had no women Ministers at all, so that is a massive shift.

I pay tribute to our sisters who are now on the committee that monitors the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, standing up for disabled women around the world. I pay tribute to Jacinda Ardern, the first elected woman leader to take maternity leave in office, and the second ever to give birth while in office. I pay tribute to our sisters in Argentina, who in June marched with the Green Tide movement for their own abortion rights. I pay tribute to our sisters who last summer, in Iran, finally had the opportunity to watch sport in a stadium alongside men, and to our sisters in Saudi Arabia who are finally allowed to drive.

In September, we stood with the inspirational Dr Christine Blasey Ford as she stood up against Brett Kavanaugh. In the same month Dame Jocelyn Bell Burnell, having been ignored by the Nobel prize system, finally won \$3 million for her breakthrough achievements in physics, and chose to donate it to support those who are under-represented in physics. In October Nadia Murad won the Nobel peace prize, Donna Strickland won the Nobel prize for physics—she was only the third woman to do so—and Frances H. Arnold won the Nobel prize for chemistry; she was only the fifth ever to receive it. Sahle-Work Zewde was elected the first female President of Ethiopia. In November, those amazing women of America—including some who are here with us today—stood for election. We were rooting for you, and we will continue to root for you: we stand with you.

In December, Charlotte Prodger won the Turner prize, and Imelda Cortez, a rape victim who had been charged with attempted murder in El Salvador after giving birth to her abuser's baby, was finally freed from prison. Our Palestinian and Jewish sisters organised a strike to voice their outrage at the murder of Yara Ayoub and Sylvia Tsegai, mobilising to break the silence and impunity for the murder of women.

However, last year we also saw our sisters in Ethiopia attacked. We saw Marielle Franco murdered in Brazil. We worked “for free” from 10 November. A teenage girl's knickers were described to jurors in evidence during a rape trial. We saw a similar case involving Ulster rugby players. We saw Google employees having to stage a walkout because of sexual harassment. We saw a fall in convictions for rape and sexual assault; and yes, we still see inequalities in our society. We saw our sisters in South Africa having to take to the streets to protest against the increase in gender-based violence.

We also saw that the rates of female genital mutilation are going down in Africa but are still prevalent, and this year already we have had to speak up for Rahaf Mohammed, the teenager from Saudi Arabia who fled to Indonesia to escape her family, for the women of the south Indian state of Kerala who have come together to protest women of menstruating age being banned from entering Hindu temples, for our sisters in Sierra Leone who declared a national emergency over the sexual and gender-based violence, and for the cyclist who was stopped in a race because she was going as fast as the men. This is the world we still live in.

We have seen time and again the challenges our sisters fight, whether our sisters in Northern Ireland still denied their basic right to control over their body or our sisters facing the problems of climate change.

[Stella Creasy]

To every one of those sisters out there I say, "We are with you." To every one of those sisters I say, "You will find a voice here in the United Kingdom Parliament." To every one of those sisters I say, "Liberté, Egalité, Sororité."

2.55 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I am pleased to be able to contribute to this debate ahead of International Women's Day tomorrow, and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) on securing it.

The theme of this year's International Women's Day is "Balance for Better", which is a call to action for driving gender balance across the world. For women to reach their full potential we need to address the issues that are holding women back, and very important among them is female genital mutilation. We all know that all too often the first message a girl receives about her body is that it is imperfect—too fat or too thin, too dark or too pale—but for some girls the message is that in order to be accepted by the wider community their bodies must be cut, altered and even reshaped by female genital mutilation.

In many communities, FGM is seen as a rite of passage, but it can result in serious health complications including infections, chronic pain and infertility, and it can even lead to fatalities. FGM is internationally recognised as a human rights violation, yet some 200 million girls and women alive today have undergone FGM. If current rates persist, around 68 million more will be cut by 2030.

Where it is practised, FGM is supported, usually without question, by both men and women, yet the reasons for the practice are often rooted in gender inequality. In some communities it is carried out to control women's and girls' sexuality. It is sometimes a prerequisite for marriage and is closely linked to child marriage.

FGM is practised in countries around the world: in 29 African countries, in Asia, in the middle east, in eastern Europe and in South America. In many western countries, including the UK, FGM is practised among diaspora populations from areas where the practice is commonplace. Some 5,391 new cases of FGM were reported in the UK in 2016-17, but it is well known that there has been only one successful prosecution for FGM in this country.

It was my pleasure yesterday to meet representatives from the Freedom Charity at an event organised by the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan). The Freedom Charity does vital work in engaging with schools in the UK to raise awareness of, and help combat, FGM, forced marriages and other crimes against children.

Although some associate FGM with religious practices, no religion promotes or condones FGM and many religious leaders have denounced it. FGM is a cultural rather than a religious practice, and now women and girls who have suffered FGM are speaking out.

Kadiga from Ethiopia said:

"I will never subject my child to FGM if she happens to be a girl, and I will teach her the consequences of the practice early on."

Meaza, 15 years old, said:

"In my village there is one girl who is younger than I am who has not been cut because I discussed the issue with her parents. I told them how much the operation had hurt me, how it had traumatised me and made me not trust my own parents. They decided they did not want this to happen to their daughter."

Zainab, who was infibulated at the age of eight, said:

"My two sisters, myself and our mother went to visit our family back home. I assumed we were going for a holiday. A bit later they told us we were going to be infibulated. The day before our operation was due to take place, another girl was infibulated and she died because of the operation. We were so scared and didn't want to suffer the same fate. But our parents told us it was an obligation, so we went. We fought back, we really thought we were going to die because of the pain. You have one woman holding your mouth so you won't scream, two holding your chest and the other two holding your legs. After we were infibulated, we had rope tied across our legs so it was like we had to learn to walk again. We had to try to go to the toilet. If you couldn't pass water in the next 10 days something was wrong. We were lucky, I suppose. We gradually recovered and didn't die like the other girl. But the memory and the pain never really go away."

To eradicate FGM, co-ordinated and systematic efforts are needed, and they must engage whole communities and focus on human rights and gender equality. They must also address the sexual and reproductive health needs of women and girls who suffer from its consequences. The United Nations Population Fund, jointly with UNICEF, leads the largest global programme to accelerate the abandonment of FGM. The programme currently focuses on 17 African countries and also supports regional and global initiatives. The law provides little protection, however. Many of the countries where FGM is prevalent have laws against the practice, but the enforcement of those laws is the problem, with much of the activity around FGM being secretive and concealed. On International Women's Day, let us remember the girls and women around the world who have been or may become victims of this barbaric practice, and let us wipe it out once and for all.

3.1 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is an honour to be the penultimate Back-Bench speaker in this debate. We have heard many powerful contributions, including those dealing with discrimination leading to violence against women. I have experienced great solidarity on the issue of fighting discrimination in the past year and a half since I became a Member of Parliament, and if that solidarity continues, I really believe that we can make progress, particularly on the very dark side of discrimination.

Today I want to focus on something slightly closer to home—namely, my own experience as I was growing up. As I grew up in the 1970s, I looked forward to a future of exciting possibilities. The world was my oyster. I could follow my passions, study, develop my skills, build my career and have a family. It never occurred to me that my career options could be limited because I was a woman, that I would not automatically attain the same level of responsibility, pay and influence that my male counterparts would, that I might have to sacrifice my career aspirations when we started a family because I earned less than my husband, that there was an automatic assumption that I would take on the lion's share of looking after our young children, or that in 2019 I would still have to speak out in this House against the ongoing discrimination and undervaluing of women in the UK. But here I am, and because I have a voice in Parliament, I am using it today to remind

everybody that we must continue our efforts to fight discrimination—particularly its darker side—and to create a true gender balance in every sector of our society.

In the world of business, recent research from the Chartered Management Institute shows that, despite long-standing efforts to shift deeply entrenched attitudes, systems and practices, as many as 85% of women and 80% of men say they have seen discriminatory behaviour in a professional environment. The same research found that 75% of senior managers believe their peers are not actively and visibly promoting gender initiatives.

Although the gender pay gap has narrowed, women in this country are still being paid less than men. This has many damaging consequences. When a couple choose to have a child, they decide which parent will take time out to raise that child. They will weigh up what makes the most sense financially. In most cases, the partner on lower pay will, at least initially, reduce their working hours and take the hit to their career. In the majority of cases, the partner who stays at home is the woman.

Once a woman exits her career, for whatever reason—be it to start a family or to care for a family member—her promotion prospects are likely to diminish. Re-entering the world of work can be very challenging, especially if a person wants to do it on their own terms by job sharing, working part time, working flexibly or working from home. Those who return to work may have to start on lower pay, sacrificing years of valuable experience. They may be overlooked for promotion, and they are often seen as not being committed enough.

Gender generalisation can be dangerous, but most of us have seen that our cultural conditioning has promoted competitiveness and risk-taking—qualities that are more associated with male attitudes than with female ones—in the workplace over co-operation and empathy. Women bring a different approach to business and organisations. There is sound evidence that a company's long-term profitability rises with a more gender-balanced management. Collectively, we are failing ourselves and the generations that are to come by perpetuating discrimination, even if it is subtle. Our economy is losing out, as we all are.

The vision of a truly liberal society is that everybody can be themselves and thrive. We must not hold women back. I want every woman in our society to feel as though she can realise her full potential, and we are not there yet. As I said at the very beginning, I hope very much that the solidarity that we have created in this place—that includes men as well as women—means that we do more and do better. I hope that by next year, rather than just talking the talk we will be walking the walk, and that we will see progress, particularly against the dark side of discrimination where women face violence. Let us do better than we have done in previous years.

3.6 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I am thankful to be able to make a contribution. I was raised by a wonderfully strong and loving mother, and I married an equally strong wife. I also have two granddaughters, and I am conscious that my mother's strength of character and my wife's compassion will make them very successful in their lives to come.

My mother is 87 years of age and 4 foot 10, and she laboured beside my 6-foot father, stride for stride, all their lives. She was determined not by her tiny frame,

but by her heart of a lion. No task was ever too much for mum, and I like to think that some of her grit and determination has come through to me and the rest of the family. My parliamentary aide often uses a wee statement that reminds me of a comment by Margaret Thatcher: "If you want something talked about, let a man do it, but if you want something done, give it to a woman." I am ever mindful of the fact that there are exceptions to that, and I hope that I am one.

Today, I want to mention three people of Ulster extraction who played a big role in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and across the world. The first is Cecil Frances Humphreys, a famous hymn writer. In the 1840s she wrote many compositions that appeared in the Church of Ireland hymnals. She married William Alexander, who became the Bishop of Derry and the Archbishop of Armagh. Many of her hymns are still important to us. "All Things Bright and Beautiful", "There Is a Green Hill Far Away" and "Once in Royal David's City", to mention just three, remain popular across the world.

Isabella Tod was born in Edinburgh, but she spent most of her life in Belfast. She became Ulster's pre-eminent advocate of votes for women and women's education. She campaigned for changes in the law that resulted in the Married Women's Property Act 1882. She secured the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, and she championed the right of women to higher education. She also persuaded the Queen's University of Ireland to allow girls to take examinations and be awarded certificates. What a wonderful legacy she has left behind.

Sarah Leech, the daughter of a linen weaver, was born in Raphoe, in County Donegal, into the Ulster Scots tradition. Her staunch Unionism was evidenced by her poems. Sarah's weaver poetry is genuinely impressive, and I greatly appreciate her impact on Ulster Scots poetry even to this generation and beyond.

I read a tremendous article on family life among the Ulster Scots settlers in America—it is nice to have a lady from the United States with us in the Gallery—that praised the role of women. That is something that my wife would agree with. Among those settlers, men were the warriors and women were the workers.

For generations those men had to be warriors in the old countries of Scotland, England and Ireland, and the pattern did not change just because they migrated to America. In any society where the men go off to war, the women do much more labour at home. That was true for those Ulster Scots, too. In those families, the women laboured in the fields right beside their husbands—the women of Ulster and this United Kingdom remain the same.

I join everyone who has spoken in this debate in celebrating the achievements of women who work hard in their occupation, raise their family, reach the top of their field—as everyone who has spoken in this debate has done—and raise the next generation to stop seeing gender and simply judge on ability.

3.10 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a huge pleasure to follow such an esteemed list of female parliamentarians and, indeed, our esteemed colleague from Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

[*Hannah Bardell*]

The comments of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), who is not in her place, were incredibly powerful. We could have heard a penny drop in the Chamber as she read out the names of the women who have died as a result of domestic violence and abuse in the past year. I am proud that in Scotland the SNP Government have brought in world-leading domestic abuse legislation, but we still face a huge challenge.

Today is World Book Day, and one of my favourite books I have read recently is "Eve Was Shamed" by Helena Kennedy, who sits in the other place. She talks about structural inequalities in the justice system, which we must continue to focus on across all jurisdictions in the UK.

This year's theme for International Women's Day is "Balance for Better," and it is a great opportunity to talk about those structural inequalities for women, as well as intersectionality and discrimination against women from black and ethnic minority communities, from the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community, who are disabled or from any minority group.

I stress at the outset that it is essential to understand that women's rights are not to be achieved at the cost of men. There is a huge role for men to play—husbands, fathers, sons, brothers and friends. I hasten to add that my own brother is an ardent feminist. He and I were brought up by a single mother, and he has a female partner and a female daughter, so he has been surrounded by women his whole life.

One of the things we have talked about recently—I raised it earlier at Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions—is the scourge of online media, particularly social media and gaming. Much has been said about the abuse that female parliamentarians particularly receive, and about the creep of abuse online.

The streaming of the game "Rape Day," which was recently released by developer Desk Plant, has, thank goodness, been stopped on the Steam platform. I find it incredible that someone would sit behind a computer and create a game based on verbally harassing, killing and raping women, with content including violence, sexual assault, non-consensual sex, obscene language, necrophilia and incest. In any world, why would anyone play that game?

There has been a huge outcry, including from Shona Robison, my colleague in the Scottish Parliament, who raised it at First Minister's questions today. The First Minister herself called it out. A game of this nature has no place in our society, and I am glad it has been pulled but, at a time when one in five women will experience sexual violence in their life and young teens are learning about sex from online porn, I question the morals of those behind the game.

A few weeks ago, the NSPCC published a report highlighting its research on social media and online harm, and I am sure the results will shock everyone in the Chamber and parents at home. Technology-facilitated grooming has become a major challenge. In 2017-18, across the UK, there were more than 3,500 police-recorded offences of sexual communication with a child. In England and Wales, 70% of offences, where the data was recorded, took place on Facebook, Snapchat or Instagram. We must do everything possible to challenge those online platforms to stop the scourge of online harm and abuse.

An average of one child per primary school class has been sent or shown a naked or semi-naked image online by an adult, and more than one in seven children aged 11 to 18 has been asked to send self-generated images and sexual messages. Terrifyingly, the Home Office says that an estimated 80,000 adults in the UK pose a sexual threat to children online. I am sure that is shocking for all of us.

The Scottish Government have implemented a huge number of progressive and world-leading policies to better support women and young people across Scotland. We have introduced legislation that makes Scotland the only part of the UK with requirements for gender parity on public boards. The Gender Representation on Public Boards (Scotland) Bill was recently passed in our Parliament and it sets an objective for listed public authorities that 50% of the non-executive members of their boards should be women. I hope the Minister will take that into consideration. I know that her Government have done a significant amount, particularly on getting companies with more than 250 employees to register their gender pay gap, but more must be done. We must look at the position in companies with fewer than 250 employees, because some of the worst discrimination often lies in those companies.

The Minister will know that as soon as Nicola Sturgeon became Scotland's First Minister she had a Cabinet with a 50:50 gender balance—one of only three in the world. Many Members have spoken of pioneering women, and I want to pay tribute to my colleagues in the constituency, Fiona Hyslop, the Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Tourism and External Affairs, and Angela Constance MSP, who was until recently the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning. Both women have represented West Lothian constituencies and both have been in the Cabinet. The Livingston constituency has fielded female candidates in the past six elections, including my mother in 2010.

I was interested to hear the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) say that International Women's Day was started 110 years ago, by women who were garment workers. My grandmother was a garment worker during the second world war. She met my grandfather when working for Rolls-Royce. When she returned to work after marrying, she was told that her job was a job for men and that she should not be doing it, and she was given her books—in essence, she was dismissed. Married women were not eligible for employment of this sort—she was told that it was "men's work". It took her until she was in her 80s to tell my mother and I:

"And the three men they kept on to do my job weren't worth a tenth of me."

It has taken four generations of women in my family to get to a position of what could be called "power and influence", but we got there. In the words of Angela Davis:

"I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept."

3.17 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): It is great to have this International Women's Day debate today, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) for leading on the tabling of the motion.

I also thank the Select Committee chaired by the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for its work. As I have said publicly, she does an amazing job on the Committee; it is just a disappointment that the Prime Minister often does not take on board its recommendations. This debate began about two hours later than we expected. I know that that is because of the business of the House, but if the Government had secured the time and made this Government business, the debate could have had protected time. The situation is a little disappointing.

I wish to welcome our international guest Stacey Abrams. It was not so long ago that I was walking the long, long streets of Atlanta with a friend of mine, Gary, trying to get the first black woman elected as Governor of Georgia. I am sure that her next election will be very successful. I saw some voting practices in the United States that truly shocked me. There were no practical reasons for the long four-hour queues, but there were political reasons for them. That is why I support Stacey's fight for free and fair elections, and the fairfight.com campaign.

As we have heard many times, in some amazing contributions from Members from all parts of the House, the theme of this year's International Women's Day is "Balance for Better", with the vital aim of building a gender-balanced world. I do not mind what works or how it works, just as long as it works for all women and as long as we remove the structural barriers. After all, gender stereotypes have a detrimental effect on men as well as women, as we see in the mental health problems among men and the growth in the number of male suicides. If we could eliminate the gender stereotyping, we would have a better society for all.

We need to call out the barriers to progress. Although it has been nice to agree with Members from all parties, we have to call out the structural barriers, which means we have to call out the burden the Government have placed on women. Some 87% of cuts have fallen on women's shoulders. Cuts have consequences. We have heard today about knife crime and the NHS. When funding for all these vital services is cut, it has devastating consequences, especially for women.

It is no secret in my office that I like to go home and watch "Neighbours"—[*Interruption.*] "Bless you," I hear from a sedentary position—I know! There was quite a storyline this week when the well-loved character Sonya, played by Eve Morey, died of ovarian cancer. That made me look at the figures on how NHS cuts affect women. Twelve women a day die from ovarian cancer. We need more investment in things like the NHS to get better outcomes for women.

The next Labour Government will have a different approach and go much further than this Government in tackling the structural barriers in society. We will put forward a radical and progressive agenda to empower women. I think the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) agreed with Labour's policy that I announced at our conference. Channelling the great philosopher Dolly Parton, I announced that we would introduce rights to flexible working from day one of employment.

Under our plans, no women will be shut out of the workplace. It is about bringing the workplace into the 21st century. It is not about working longer hours; it is about working hours to suit our complicated lives. The United Nations reported that the disadvantages facing

women and girls are a major source of inequality and one of the greatest barriers to the progress of human development. In around 90 countries, women spent roughly three times as many hours in unpaid domestic and care work as men, which is why the flexible working policy that I announced at the Labour party's conference is so important.

The gender pay gap is growing in hundreds of companies, which is worrying. Combined with the fact that companies have reported mathematically impossible data and that there are no sanctions for that, it kind of makes a mockery of the system and calls into question the Government's commitment. After all, even the Ministry of Justice missed the deadline. Labour will go further by making it mandatory for large companies to conduct audits, alongside action plans. Those with good gender practices will receive Government certification, while those that fail to take action will face fines. We will not just monitor the pay gap but close it.

It is time to stop paying lip service to women and time that we value women and their contribution to society, whether it be at work or in the home. Part of that valuing is acknowledging the changes from menstruating to menopause. Not all women will have these issues, but when they do, it should be acknowledged and accommodated. So, on period poverty we will go further. Labour has pledged to provide free sanitary products in schools, colleges and food banks, and we are currently working with the GMB trade union on a menopause workplace policy and a WASPI women policy.

When it comes to harassment at work, I am afraid the Government have again failed to deliver progress to prevent another Presidents Club scandal from happening. By contrast, Labour has pledged to reinstate section 40 of the Equality Act to protect employees from third party harassment, from day one.

As we have heard, one in three women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate-partner violence or non-partner sexual violence. The World Health Organisation states that violence against women is a major health problem. We must tackle it with great urgency. I hope the domestic violence Bill that the Minister has announced will go further than the draft Bill currently does.

The way to advance gender equality is not by having one person at the top, but by removing the structural barriers so that many women and under-represented groups can make it to the top. That is why a Labour Government will remove the career ladder that has held so many women and people of colour back for too long, and we will replace it with a career escalator, so that the journey to success and the top will be smoother and unhindered. The UN found that the structural barriers that act as obstacles to women's participation include discriminatory laws and institutions, lack of contacts and resources, lower levels of education, gender stereotypes, and the disproportionate effect of poverty on women.

This year marks the centenary of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919. The Act enabled women to become barristers, solicitors, jurors and magistrates. It also enabled them to enter professions such as accountancy. One would have thought that our progress would be much faster than it is now.

[Dawn Butler]

As I come to the end of my contribution, I wish to mention our international responsibility. Just this week, with representatives from Unite, I met Thabitha, who, like me, represents the Opposition party. We have shared beliefs in justice, equality and democracy—we even share a sense of humour. Thabitha's battle brought me to tears. On 22 November last year, she and her colleagues were beaten by police in the Parliament for refusing to stand for the President. Footage of this horrific act can still be seen online.

I asked Thabitha where she gets her strength from, and she told me that she wants her dignity back. She said that she wants to see more women in Parliament and that she does not want the next generation to suffer. She also said that she does not want the next generation of women to be raped. She is an inspiration and exactly the kind of strong woman that we should be celebrating on International Women's Day, but her story shows just how far we still have to go for the emancipation of women across the world.

In delivering Labour's policy, we will allow all women to progress. We will reward good work and good workplace practices and help those businesses to grow. We will ensure that strong workplace protections are in place and that there is access to justice. On International Women's Day 2019, as we "Balance for Better", I say let us remove the structural barriers, let us build for an escalator and a lift to success, let us understand the policies and outcomes, cuts and consequences, and let us value women and girls.

3.26 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): May I start by saying what an honour it is to be part of this debate on such an important day in our national and international calendar? I thank and pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) who, as Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, very much stands by what she addressed us on, namely speaking truth to power. I note the fact that she is the 265th of 491 women ever to have been Members of Parliament. The fact that we have not yet managed to fill a five-year term with female MPs does show us the scale of what we have to climb before we get true equality in this place.

I thank every Member, both female and male, who has attended the debate and contributed today. International Women's Day is primarily a day of celebration. We have certainly heard speeches today that offer great hope and optimism for the future and that have demonstrated that, in many areas, we are making real progress towards a more equal society. At the same time, we have heard appalling details of inequality from a number of speakers and clear evidence of the prejudices that women and girls still face.

We heard what I consider to be one of the most important events in the parliamentary calendar, which was the reading by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) of the names of the women who have been killed by men since the last International Women's Day. Their names have been read out. They are in the parliamentary records, and they are remembered.

I am pleased also that colleagues raised the issue of the domestic abuse Bill. This is a landmark piece of legislation and, of course, is accompanied by a raft of

non-legislative measures. As if we had not already heard reason enough from the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley for this Bill, my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) cited a particularly concerning case of coercive behaviour—a relatively new offence that we introduced in 2015, and I will of course look into that.

Yesterday, we launched an updated version of the violence against women and girls strategy because, sadly, violence against women and girls happens in the home, in the workplace and on the streets, and this strategy will implement a review of the criminal justice response to rape and serious sexual violence. Having visited several rape centres recently, I am concerned—as are others in the Chamber—about the drop-off between reporting and action to bring perpetrators to justice, so I hope this review will get the answers we require.

The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) rightly raised the matter of FGM and so-called honour-based violence. We have secured the first conviction for FGM only recently—not for want of trying by many police forces and those who support victims. In addition, a great deal has been going on over the last few years, including forced marriage protection orders, anonymity for victims and mandatory reporting duties for FGM survivors. Indeed, at this very moment in time there is an event at No. 10 to discuss what more we can do to tackle FGM and forced marriage.

Hannah Bardell: Does the Minister agree that something that has not been mentioned an awful lot in this debate is the responsibility of the media and victim-blaming? We hear far too much about violent men who "just snapped" and innocent women who have been killed or injured not taking enough responsibility for their own safety. That has to stop and the narrative has to change.

Victoria Atkins: I very much hope that the hon. Lady will be making those points to the Joint Committee on Human Rights, which has been appointed to look into the domestic abuse Bill.

Several colleagues, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) and the first ever female MP for Plaid Cymru, the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), mentioned the role of social media and tech including games. We are due to publish our online harms White Paper very soon. Hon. Members may also be interested to know that I have commissioned research into the effect of pornography on attitudes towards women and girls; there is a lot that we need to look into there. We have also initiated projects tackling child sexual exploitation across the world, including WeProtect.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Victoria Atkins: I am afraid that I am going to have to continue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) continued her campaign to encourage women who enjoy science, technology, engineering and maths, and I have to say that her mum sounds as persuasive as she is.

Many colleagues drew on the experiences of the last year's gender pay gap reports. Of course, this year's reporting deadlines are approaching: 30 March for public sector employers, and 4 April for private and third sector employers. Please meet the deadline. I am delighted that 100% of employers who should report did report last year, and we expect that level to be maintained; it is the law. I am also pleased that around 48% of employers have published action plans to tackle their pay gaps. Reporting is the first step, but sorting it out is the second step that we demand.

We are working to normalise flexible working. We have launched a £1.5 million campaign to promote shared parental leave, and we have invested more than £5 million in increasing opportunities and support for people who have taken time out of the labour market for caring responsibilities.

Financial independence is absolutely key for women, and I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke mentioned the difficulty that women entrepreneurs face when obtaining loans and finance. I hope that the Rose review, which will be published tomorrow, provides her Committee with much evidence to look at. This week we have announced the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy consultation on non-disclosure agreements because of the concerns that she and her Committee have raised about the use of such agreements.

Many colleagues understandably raised the issues of political representation, including my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group for women in Parliament. She reminded us of the centenary celebrations last year, which were enjoyed by many thousands of people across the country. She also set out the challenges facing female candidates and MPs across political parties. My hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent reminded the House that the first woman MP ever to take her seat here and the first ever woman Prime Minister were Conservative women. My challenge to Labour Members is: next time trust a woman to lead your party. I wonder if they will take me up on that challenge.

Many colleagues mentioned international work. We are doing an enormous amount of work through DFID to help women and girls around the world.

The theme for this year's International Women's Day is "Balance for Better", and I want to highlight some of the ways in which a better gender balance is becoming a reality. Female employment is at a record high. The gender pay gap is at a record low. There are now 1.2 million women-led businesses across the country. We have higher percentages of women on boards than ever before. I am delighted that the hon. Member for Livingston set out what Scotland is doing as well.

These are just some of our excellent achievements in recent times that deserve to be celebrated, but there is much more to do across every aspect of public life. That includes, interestingly, the role of female statues. Last year, the Prime Minister unveiled the statue of Millicent Fawcett in Parliament Square—a fantastic celebration and achievement. One new female statue has been added to London in recent days. I commend it to everyone who has time when they are in and around St Paul's cathedral—it is the statue "Fearless Girl". She resembles every little girl I have ever seen who looks defiant and

determined to get her way. My encouragement to everyone across the House is this: be fearless this International Women's Day.

3.35 pm

Mrs Miller: I thank all Members who have taken part in this excellent debate. It is right that we remember Nancy Astor—an extraordinary woman who had the courage to be the first woman to sit on these green Benches. The unacceptable abuse that too many women parliamentarians face today means that courage is a necessity for all of us who are elected to public life. To women around the country, whether they are councillors, mayors, police commissioners or Members of Parliament, I say, "Courage calls to courage everywhere", and happy International Women's Day tomorrow, which is also my youngest son's 17th birthday.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered International Women's Day.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I have to inform the House of corrections to the results of some of yesterday's deferred Divisions. In each case, there was one power Aye vote than previously announced. On the motion relating to electricity, the Ayes were 301 and the Noes were 44; on the motion relating to gas, the Ayes were 299 and the Noes were 44; on the motion relating to food, the Ayes were 302 and the Noes were 44; on the motion relating to electronic communications, the Ayes were 300 and the Noes were 257; and on the motion relating to road traffic, the Ayes were 300 and the Noes were 251.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I just want to understand the reason for the change in the number of votes. I am curious about what caused it.

Madam Deputy Speaker: A name was recorded in error, I gather.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. These things sometimes happen when the Tellers cannot count. I once had to confess that I had got something wrong. In those days it mattered, but now it does not seem to.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. I suggest that that is the sort of thing best kept quiet, really.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Because there was so little time at the end of the previous debate, the Minister did not have a chance to pay tribute to the work done by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, which is funded by the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development. It hosted the great conference for women here in November, it recently hosted another fabulous conference on political leadership for women in Malaysia, and it will continue to do that work.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has ingeniously made a point about the previous debate as opposed to the debate I am anxious that we now get on to, because time is still short.

Sir William Cash: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Minister did not have time to take my intervention, but I simply wanted to put on record the massive contribution of the International Development (Gender Equality) Act 2014, which I had the honour of introducing with my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening).

Madam Deputy Speaker: Splendid. I am sure that the hon. Members for Stone (Sir William Cash) and for Gloucester (Richard Graham) would have been welcome in the debate, but their retrospective contributions to it have been noticed.

The Modern Commonwealth: Opportunities and Challenges

[Relevant Documents: Seventh Report of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Global Britain and the 2018 Commonwealth Summit, HC 831, and the Government response, HC 1427.]

3.39 pm

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered opportunities and challenges facing the modern Commonwealth in its 70th year.

It is that time of year when we await the riot of colour of 53 flags representing the Commonwealth opposite Parliament. It is for that reason—the celebration of Commonwealth Day—that I am here today. I wear my own riot of colour: the rather disgusting combination of colours on my tie is that of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association UK branch, which is not to be confused with the international branch, chaired by Emilia Lifaka, who will be here next week.

I have chaired the UK branch since the rather unfortunate general election in 2017 and very much enjoyed the task. I see in the Chamber my hon. Friends—I think I can use that term—the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) and the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson). Without their tireless work, the CPA as it is now would not be in existence.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The House will be grateful to my hon. Friend, others who serve on the executive committee of the CPA UK branch and those who work for it for the good they do in this country and with our fellow Commonwealth nations around the world. It seems to be one of those things where the work that parliamentarians do is not noticed but is appreciated and could be even better in the future.

James Duddridge: I thank my hon. Friend for that and extend thanks to Jon Davies and his team of 30 people who work here in the UK, off Westminster Hall, and overseas.

To give an idea of the volume of activity, in 2017-18 there were 15 outbound delegations, 35 inbound delegations and nine multilateral delegations. As I look around the Chamber, I see people who have been involved in inbound and outbound trips in the last month. There have been trips to Fiji, the Seychelles, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The CPA was also very much involved in election observing, particularly in the overseas territories. As a committee, we have formed our strategic priorities. We decided that we could not do everything exceptionally well, so we are concentrating on five key themes: women in Parliament, public finance scrutiny, modern slavery, trade and security.

This debate is about opportunities and challenges facing the modern Commonwealth in its 70th year—“modern” because the Commonwealth existed in various guises before the 1949 London declaration, but it was a free association of independent member countries. Quite how we got away with that as part of the European Union, I do not know. Crucially, the Commonwealth gave an equal say to all its 53 members, regardless of size—at one end is India, with a population of 1.3 billion, and at the other is Nauru, with a population of only 13,000. Of the states, 31 have populations of fewer than 1.5 million and five have populations of fewer than 1 million.

They are nations all around the globe. There are 19 in Africa, which I know and love well, and others are in parts of the world that I know less well, with seven countries in Asia, 13 in the Caribbean and the Americas, three here in Europe and 11 in the Pacific. It is so popular, and it is expanding, to Cameroon, Mozambique and Rwanda—more of Rwanda later. It was good to see the Gambia come back into the Commonwealth in February 2018, and I was able to travel there.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the most welcome developments in the Commonwealth's expansion in the past 70 years is that its members now include countries that have no historical links with the United Kingdom, such as Mozambique and Rwanda?

James Duddridge: Absolutely. That shows the strength of the Commonwealth. It is of course Her Majesty who leads the Commonwealth and makes the final decision, before they come in, on whether such countries share the same values, but it is certainly an expanding and very diverse organisation. I have mentioned that Her Majesty the Queen is the head of the Commonwealth, and we also have the secretary-general, Baroness Scotland, leading its work.

It is Commonwealth Day on Monday. It is always in the second week of March each year, and I asked myself why? It was the Canadians' idea. They wanted the Commonwealth to be about the future and about young people, and they wanted it to be celebrated by schoolchildren. They worked out that we have different term times all around the world, but the most likely time when all children will be in school is the second week of March, and that is why we celebrate it at that particular time.

Here in the UK, there will be a week of celebrations, including at Westminster Abbey and Marlborough House. There will be cultural events, civic events and school events. Flags will be raised across the United Kingdom, and there will be some street parties. Anyone who has not invited me to their street party should feel free to email me at the House of Commons.

One of the big issues in the Commonwealth recently has been the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, where all 53 members come together. There are normally one or two that, for various domestic reasons, cannot make it. It was particularly good to see Prime Minister Modi of India at CHOGM here. CHOGM is not a one-off event: the country that hosts CHOGM is then responsible for the operations leading up to the next one in two years' time. We are passing the mantle from London to the Rwandans in Kigali.

One of the things I very much hope to do is to work with the Rwandans to have a Commonwealth forum. CHOGM is dominated by the Executives, and we in the UK felt that parliamentarians should lobby the Executives. Parliamentarians from around the Commonwealth came together to talk, and then went back to our Executives before CHOGM to lay out the issues we cared about, and that was powerful. It was not perfect, and we have lessons to learn on what we did with the parliamentary forum. Almost 50 parliamentarians met about a month before CHOGM here in the UK, and this is something we would like the Rwandans to do.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Does he agree that parliamentarians also work on issues such as malaria? I chair the all-party group on malaria here, but there are also all-party groups in Tanzania and Uganda. That had a great effect on the commitment by the Commonwealth Heads of Government last year to halve the number of deaths in malaria cases in Commonwealth countries over the next few years.

James Duddridge: My hon. Friend makes a good point. In fact, when he was here at that time, Bill Gates spoke in praise of the value of the Commonwealth, particularly our ability to do something in the health sector. As people are pointing out, it is not just the health sector; it is the education sector, the universities sector and the business sector. The Commonwealth is actually a multiplicity of different organisations, both intergovernmental and external to Government. I apologise to the tens of organisations, if not more, from the Commonwealth that have written to me and said, "Please do mention my bit of the Commonwealth". We have added them up, and I think at least 80 different organisations with Commonwealth branding are part of this process.

Sir Peter Bottomley: May I suggest to my hon. Friend that, as and when Commonwealth parliamentarians get together, they ought to work how to force on to the agenda the scandalous discrimination against pensioners from this country? When they live in retirement in other Commonwealth countries, they do not get inflation increases to their state pensions. Will he try to make sure that this is considered, and will he see whether the Commonwealth secretariat could publish which other Commonwealth countries make the same kind of imposition on people who would otherwise be able to share in the fruits of their retirement?

James Duddridge: One of the great advantages of being a Back Bencher, not a Minister, is that one can say, "I am sure the Minister was listening", and move on swiftly.

I am conscious of time, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the last point I want to make involves trade and Brexit. The Commonwealth is not the solution to any problems or the definition of any Brexit opportunities, but the Commonwealth currently represents 9% of UK exports. By various measures, there is an advantage to it: doing business with the Commonwealth is easier, and there is a shared language, history and legal system. It makes sense, and it is easier, to trade intra-Commonwealth and with the Commonwealth. Overall, Commonwealth trade represents 14% of the global economy, so as we look at trade deals post Brexit, we should pay particular attention to the Commonwealth. Clearly it is not as simple as having one Commonwealth deal, but we should look first to the Commonwealth and then to the rest of the world.

I wish all Members of this House a very happy Commonwealth Week.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. This will be quite a short debate, so I will start by imposing a seven-minute time limit on speeches—I was able to warn the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) about that.

3.50 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) for securing this debate, and for his excellent chairing of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association UK. As he noted, this debate is timely not only because it allows us to consider opportunities in the Commonwealth, but also because Commonwealth Day is next Monday.

This is a really important period for the Commonwealth and for the role that the UK might play in helping it to address the key issues of our time. The UK currently holds the position of chair-in office for two years, following the successful CHOGM in 2018. It is welcome that the Foreign Secretary stated that the UK is determined to work closely with its partners to maintain that momentum following CHOGM, and to revitalise and reform the Commonwealth for the 21st century.

The enormity of the task from CHOGM is perhaps best reflected in its communiqué, in which the following notable goals were agreed: to adopt the Commonwealth blue charter on sustainable development; to commit to ratify and implement the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women; to address the stigma around disability; to expand investment and boost intra-Commonwealth trade; to adopt a Commonwealth connectivity declaration; and to adopt a Commonwealth cyber declaration.

In the short time available, I will focus on three of the issues raised in the communiqué. The first is the commitment to ratify and implement the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, as it is incredibly important for the Commonwealth to have that as a priority. For many years, the Commonwealth Women's Forum, the Royal Commonwealth Society and Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians have sought to address the lack of women's representation in Parliament, and that is a key issue if women's lives across the Commonwealth are to be improved.

Some of the best practice in securing greater parliamentary representation for women is found in the Commonwealth. Rwanda tops the global league table for women's representation, at 61.3%. That is followed by Namibia, at 46%, and Uganda, at 34%. In lots of Commonwealth countries women's representation is around 30%, including in the UK, but sadly the level is lower in a number of countries, such as Malawi, where it is 16.7%, and Botswana, with 9.5%. There is zero representation in Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu. Those figures demonstrate that much more needs to be done to improve the representation of women in Parliament, because without mechanisms to address that issue, women's representation tends to stagnate at 30% or lower.

The mechanism most frequently used in the Commonwealth is quotas, but there are issues attached to that—most notably that women are often brought in on a top-up list and find it difficult to get re-elected. We need a culture change. The recommended benchmarks for democratic legislatures were recently updated by the CPA. That helps with this issue, as those benchmarks state that Parliaments should take issues of equality seriously and encourage the use of equality impact assessments in the development of legislation, policies and budgets. All Parliaments—including our own—would benefit from doing that. It is important that those

benchmarks do not sit on the shelf, and that they inform the work of Parliaments. The work on gender is supported by the sustainable development goals. One opportunity we have is to work on universal SDGs right across the Commonwealth, and ensure we empower all women and girls to meet their full potential.

The second issue I want to raise is the need to address climate change. This relates to SDG 13. It is a huge issue across the Commonwealth, but particularly for Pacific countries. We need to work with our other family members in the Commonwealth to ensure that they address climate changes issues, and that we assist them in that process by the actions we take in the UK and across the Commonwealth.

The third issue is trade. The Commonwealth has a population of 2.3 billion, 60% of whom are aged 29 or under. Enormous opportunities exist for us to develop key services. I would pick out, given the age of Commonwealth members' citizens, opportunities in education and economic development. We all want to improve opportunities for trade and investment for all countries.

In the final couple of minutes, I want to raise two omissions from the communiqué. The first, extraordinarily, is Brexit. That might be because of the countries that attended, but there are challenges with Brexit in terms of the impact that it will have on some of our overseas territories, including Gibraltar. Clearly, there are also opportunities and we need to do what we can to exploit them. The second omission from the communiqué is the absence of any measures to address the lack of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights in some Commonwealth countries. I know that that is a difficult conversation to have, but it is one we need to undertake.

The CPA does amazing work across the Commonwealth to advocate for and provide training to achieve more inclusive and effective Parliaments. It works with clerks and public accounts committees, so that higher standards of probity exist, and campaigns to ensure that the voices of parliamentarians are not ignored by the Executive. It could, however, do so much more if its status as a UK charity was changed to that of an international parliamentary organisation. CPA has requested that change and it is currently sitting with Her Majesty's Government. It would be great if the Minister could give us an update today on the timescale to deal with that.

In conclusion, we need to have vision and ambition for the Commonwealth. We need to work across both Houses of Parliament and all Parliaments across the Commonwealth to achieve that, and to build a better and more prosperous Commonwealth for all of us.

3.57 pm

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): "Hear, hear" to the concluding statements of the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods), with which I completely concur.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge). I would like to think that it was our joint time in the Foreign Office that gave us a deep respect and a certain understanding of the Commonwealth. Being Minister for the Commonwealth for over four years was one of the most enjoyable parts of my political career to date. I was, however, always aware that one had constantly to remind the Foreign

Office that it is the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. While I am enormously pleased to be taking part in this debate before Commonwealth Day, which falls on Monday, I regret and lament the fact that we do not debate the Commonwealth more regularly. It is not something that we should pick up and dust down once a year; it is something that we should embrace and encourage. The Commonwealth is only as good as its constituent members and we have a lead to give. I do wish this place would take the Commonwealth a little bit more seriously.

When I left the Foreign Office, I wanted to continue doing something for the Commonwealth, so I took on the deputy chairmanship of the Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council—I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. In the time available this afternoon, I want to focus on some of the economic issues surrounding the Commonwealth. I think the opportunities are huge, although I agree with my hon. Friend; I would never think that trade with the Commonwealth could replace trade with Europe. It is an “also”, not an “instead of”. I made that point during the debate on Brexit, at a time when I was arguing for remain. We would be foolish to ignore the statistics for the Commonwealth, because it is so self-evidently in our interest to take it all a bit more seriously.

While the growth of the populations and the GDP of the United States, the EU, China and our other traditional partners has been stagnating, Commonwealth economies continue to grow, along with the disposable income of their consumers. Let us take, for example, Commonwealth Africa, which is dear to my hon. Friend's heart. Since 2000, GDP growth in sub-Saharan African nations has been much faster than the global average and the growth of the more prosperous north African nations, with the IMF projecting the region's GDP to have increased by 468% between 2000 and 2022—a staggering statistic. The African Development Bank estimates that Africa's middle class has grown to 350 million since 2010, with private consumption increasing by an average of 3.7% year on year in the same period. Consumer spending is estimated to account for 50% to 60% of the growth in Africa's economy and is expected to rise from \$680 billion in 2008 to \$2.2 trillion by 2030.

That is just Commonwealth Africa. Let us move across and look at Commonwealth India. India has outpaced China to become the world's fastest-growing economy. According to the United Nations, its population is projected to overtake that of China by 2022. In the eight years culminating in 2012, the size of India's middle-class population is estimated to have doubled, to 600 million. Between 1990 and 2015, the number of households with a disposable income of more than US \$10,000 has risen twentyfold, to nearly 50 million, and its middle-class population is predicted to overtake that of China, the US and the EU by 2027. That is manifestly good, both in terms of addressing the issues of poverty and in the opportunities that that presents for British companies and exports.

The UK recorded a trade surplus of £7 billion with the Commonwealth in 2017. UK exports of goods and services to the Commonwealth stand at £56.3 billion. UK imports from the Commonwealth stand at £49.3 billion and the UK has recorded a trade surplus with the Commonwealth every year since 2010. The problem, and one of the challenges, is that India, Canada, Australia, Singapore and South Africa currently account for 71% of the UK's total trade with the Commonwealth. I would

like to see total trade grow, obviously, but I would also like to see it much more widely spread right across the Commonwealth.

In 2020, as my hon. Friend pointed out, we have the next Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Rwanda. In addition there will be the Commonwealth Business Forum, which, I am pleased to say, the Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council will again be organising. That is a huge opportunity to truly display the strengths and the potential of often-overlooked Commonwealth markets. Rwanda should be praised for its commitment to gender equality—that is important after our previous debate. Only Iceland compares to Rwanda's gender pay gap. No other country's Parliament approaches Rwanda's gender balance of 68% female MPs, and 26% of Rwandan small and medium-sized enterprises are run by women. Those statistics would also have stood well in the previous debate.

Rwanda also ranks within Africa's four least corrupt nations, according to Transparency International, placing it—amazingly—above Italy. When we think where Rwanda has come from, that is a truly extraordinary position for it to be in. To say nothing else, the fact that such an independently successful nation with no historical connection to the United Kingdom or the Commonwealth would choose to join the organisation as recently as 2009 speaks to the understood value of the union to those who take advantage of it. I am always particularly pleased that the French are always looking at the Commonwealth to see how they can do their equivalent—which is a poor equivalent—better.

The question that we all have to ask ourselves is one that we should ask ourselves of everything: if something does not exist, should we invent it? Should we invent the Commonwealth, if it did not exist? I think that not only should we invent it, but we should spend much more time talking about and supporting it. I believe that the opportunities are huge. We can do more for the smaller Commonwealth nations, representing them at the UN on the Security Council. When we leave the EU, there will still be two EU countries—Cyprus and Malta—that are also Commonwealth countries. The United Kingdom must be careful not to over-dominate the Commonwealth, but at the same time it must show leadership. The potential is absolutely huge. This is a Commonwealth of nations of people who wish one another good will, who wish to share education and values, and who want to trade with one another. We can do much, much more and it is in our interests so to do.

4.4 pm

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) and to have supported the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) in his application to the Backbench Business Committee, which I thank for granting this debate. I serve as vice chair of the CPA UK branch and was pleased to support the application.

This is the 70th year of the Commonwealth, and in that time we have done much to be proud of. The Commonwealth remains a force for good and for international co-operation and provides an opportunity to develop a positive future, and the UK has a role to play in that. I am pleased to see the Minister showing leadership through the UK's role in chairing the Commonwealth in this current period.

[David Hanson]

There are 53 countries in the Commonwealth and 2.3 billion people, but the challenges we face are symptomatic of some of the major challenges in the world at large: concerns about sustainability and climate change and the need to develop a positive programme; the challenge of chronic poverty and promoting opportunity for all, particularly for women, in Commonwealth countries; the international challenges of cyber-security, prevention of terrorism and modern slavery; and the opportunities to continue to develop trade and investment across the Commonwealth and to welcome it from Commonwealth countries into the UK.

We asked the Backbench Business Committee for this debate to discuss ways of achieving action on some of those common challenges and threats, and I ask that the Minister focus on that in her remarks. We want the Government, particularly in their current role, to report back on progress towards meeting those objectives, particularly on sustainability, the oceans and the prevention of plastic pollution, a fairer future, girls education, advancing human rights, reforming discriminatory legislation, securing a more secure future, particularly around cyber-security and modern slavery, and harnessing trade and investment. I want to see progress on all those issues.

The Minister will know that the Foreign Secretary laid a statement in the House on 14 January with several progress statements on how the Government were approaching some of those key issues. It is important today to focus on how we are trying to achieve some of the clear international objectives the Commonwealth has set, particularly on quality education for girls by 2030, the Pacific Commonwealth equality project and the Commonwealth blue charter on protecting and developing sustainable oceans. We are on track to achieve several of those objectives, but I would welcome an update from the Minister. Indeed, I would like quarterly progress reports on the objectives the Commonwealth has agreed and on which the UK Government take a particular lead.

I want to highlight one aspect of the Commonwealth's activities that we in the UK branch are undertaking in partnership with other Commonwealth countries: tackling modern slavery. In addition to being vice chair of the CPA UK, I chair its modern slavery implementation group, which has been well supported by UK Government funds, particularly from the Home Office, and is investing in supporting and promulgating positive action on modern slavery across the Commonwealth. Of the 40 million people around the world who are victims of modern slavery at the hands of criminal gangs, 71% are women and 55% reside in Commonwealth countries, so the Commonwealth has a key role to play in tackling modern slavery.

Through the project the UK branch is undertaking, we have—I hope—helped to generate discussion on how to use the UK's lead on modern slavery to support Parliaments and Governments across the Commonwealth to take action. I pay particular tribute to Adeline Dumoulin, an official at the CPA, and her team who are working on this issue. We have had support from the Home Office for projects targeting Uganda, Ghana, Nigeria, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. In 2018-2020, the target countries will be Uganda, Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Malawi, Namibia, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

We are trying to work with Commonwealth parliamentarians to generate legislation on modern slavery and to stop criminal gangs taking action. The CPA UK branch has supported three Parliaments in the past year, in Nigeria, Pakistan and Uganda. I went to Uganda to meet parliamentarians there. I am pleased to report not only that we have deepened the knowledge of parliamentarians, who have also brought their own experiences to modern slavery, but that Members of the Ugandan, Ghanaian and Nigerian Parliaments have drafted anti-slavery legislation. I am hopeful that, in co-operation, we will be able to take action in those countries, at least, in the very near future.

A legislative drafting seminar will be held in the House of Commons between 26 and 29 March, and will be attended by parliamentarians from countries including Uganda, Ghana, Nigeria, Malawi, Namibia, Kenya, Bangladesh and Pakistan. We will look at how we can learn from them, because they will bring great expertise to the table, and also at how we can continue to work together to tackle the issue of modern slavery.

The CPA does great work, both in the UK branch and internationally. It has common ideals and objectives. If the Minister can report on what happens with CHOGM and how we are progressing, that would be very positive, but I think we should be proud of the work that we do, and continue to build on it in the next 12 months.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I shall have to drop the speaking limit to six minutes.

4.11 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), and to all the Members who have spoken so far. The debate has featured a common theme, namely the values that all Commonwealth countries share. That is reflected in the tremendous work that the CPA does in promoting the Commonwealth, which itself promotes friendship and co-operation between 2.4 billion people in 53 countries across the globe. That is built on our people, our shared values and our shared history. Millions of people who live in our country have strong connections with one or more Commonwealth countries. We have shared identities through our families, our diasporas and our ancestors.

I think that there can be no greater example of global Britain than the work that we undertake through the Commonwealth. That brings me to a number of themes. One, about which we have already heard, is trade, along with investment and markets. There is no doubt that the current perception of intra-Commonwealth trade activity, and of our own country's trade links with the rest of the Commonwealth, needs to move on. We should recognise that it is no longer about the past; we need look at the future and tomorrow's trends. We must revitalise our understanding, and acknowledge that the modern Commonwealth is no longer about a uniform group of "developing countries"—a phrase which, in my view, is becoming increasingly outdated.

We should embrace what are now some of the fastest-growing and most high-technology economies on the planet, alongside—as we have already heard—some of the smallest and most vulnerable. We must cover a range of issues including skills, technology, innovation

and education, but also, at the other end of the spectrum, some of the challenges that small and vulnerable states face from climate change. That means that we must change some of our assumptions. It is not always a case of the UK providing support in some of the more conventional ways. We should recognise that some of the largest economies are becoming prime sources of capital and market growth, and we are now relying on them for investment, trade and growth opportunities. Digital, knowledge-based and service-based patterns are now generating more than half the total wealth of international commerce, and the Commonwealth has a role in that.

I want to touch on one Commonwealth country with which we have very strong links, although they could be even stronger. I can speak of that country with some personal knowledge. It is, of course, India, which, although it is the cradle of civilisation, is also a young country: half its population are under 25. More than 1 million people enter the job market every month. It is, of course, the youngest workforce the world has ever seen, and, building on our shared values, our shared heritage and some of our personal links with the diaspora community, there is much more we can do together to recognise the role of one of the largest and fastest growing economies in the world. It also brings a new perspective to a modern and developing Commonwealth. After all, half the population of the Commonwealth is Indian, so we must broaden some of the ways in which we work together.

People everywhere in the world are on the move as never before and the Commonwealth can collectively provide some new answers and solutions to issues such as how we can provide and accommodate better educational transfer between our countries, how we can support new business regimes and visas across Commonwealth countries, and how we can ease some of the current restrictions on our people-to-people movements. At the same time, there are enormous opportunities, which colleagues have already touched on. They range from disease eradication to some of the climate change issues we face as well as fighting for women and girls and standing up for all the issues in the rights agenda and the equality agenda. We must not just focus on securing trade and security prospects and on wider global patterns of influence. We must recognise also that there are some key characteristics we can all bring together that demonstrate where we can build on the right shared values as we enter a new chapter, not just in our nation's history, but also in terms of foreign and economic policy priorities.

My message to the Government is this: let us make sure that we put our friendships and partnerships within the Commonwealth at the forefront of what we do, while at the same time ensuring that we support Commonwealth nations as they seek to build their own growth, prosperity and success in the future.

4.16 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I want to focus today on a matter that has already been mentioned: the adoption at CHOGM last year of the Commonwealth blue charter. Some Commonwealth countries are among those most affected by our failure to tackle what we should now call the climate emergency. We have heard of droughts in the Caribbean, Australia and many

parts of Africa, sea level rises in Bangladesh causing flooding, loss of livelihoods, and what could become the climate migration of more than 20 million displaced people.

In 2013 it was reported that in Tanzania, Mount Kilimanjaro's shrinking northern glaciers, which are thought to be 10,000 years old, could disappear by 2030. In fact forecasts show that both Mount Kenya and Mount Kilimanjaro could be without ice within a decade. But I want to talk today mostly about the Commonwealth's small island states, many of which are already vulnerable on a number of fronts—their size, their remoteness, and their narrow resource and export base. They are now increasingly being affected by climate change and extreme weather events.

In the Caribbean, islands are experiencing more intense hurricanes, coastal erosion and rising sea levels, and their fisheries are also highly vulnerable to climate change. In Kiribati in the Pacific the shorelines are being pounded away by high tides: whole villages are having to be relocated, food crops are being destroyed, and freshwater supplies are contaminated by sea water.

In the Indian ocean, around the Seychelles and Mauritius much of the coral reef has been lost to bleaching. If sea levels rise by 1 metre, the Maldives, which was in the Commonwealth until a few years ago and may yet return, will disappear entirely.

Climate change is not the only environmental threat. There has been a very welcome rise in public and political awareness of plastic pollution in recent years. Richard Branson recently led a dive expedition to the bottom of the beautiful Blue Hole in Belize, which is 400 feet deep, and found plastic bottles. In his blog he wrote that

"the real monsters facing the ocean are climate change—and plastic. Sadly, we saw plastic bottles at the bottom of the hole, which is a real scourge of the ocean. We've all got to get rid of single-use plastic."

I have dived in Belize and it remains the most beautiful place that I have dived. I have not been to the bottom of the Blue Hole but I can pay testament to just how upsetting it is to see man-made pollution wrecking the marine environment.

Other threats the oceans face include ocean acidification, which has been described as the "evil twin" of global warming, and unsustainable fishing, whether over-fishing or environmentally damaging pulse fishing and bottom trawling. There is also a real issue with waste disposal in small island states. They do not have space for landfill, so where do they put the rubbish? With the ban from China, and with Malaysia now refusing to take waste, including that from the UK, that issue has become an ever more pressing problem.

For many of these small island states, there is a conflict between immediate economic needs and environmental protection. In the Seychelles, for example, the fisheries sector is the second largest industry after tourism, and 95% of its exports are fish products such as canned tuna. The Seychelles also have amazing biodiversity, especially round Aldabra, the world's second largest coral atoll. Six plant studies students from Oxford University have just gone out there, along with six Seychellois students, to do a three to five-week plastic clean-up project, and I am looking forward to hearing what they report back.

[Kerry McCarthy]

In a recent debt-for-nature deal with a US conservation group, \$21 million of Seychelles debt was written off in return for the island nation committing to designating 30% of its waters as marine protected areas. That sounds like a great initiative. With the help of the World Bank, the Seychelles have also raised \$15 million through the world's first sovereign blue bond, which is designed to support sustainable marine and fisheries initiatives. Again, these are examples of the positive things that are happening to help the small island states, but we need to move faster.

It is quite depressing to look back at past efforts to address these issues. In 1994, the first meeting of the small island developing states on sustainable development was held in Barbados, and it resulted in a 14-point programme of action. The first listed priority area was climate change and sea level rise, followed by natural and environmental disasters, management of waste, coastal and marine resources, freshwater resources and more, but that was 25 years ago, and it does not feel as though much progress has been made since then—certainly not enough.

It was 10 years ago, before the Copenhagen climate summit, that the then President of the Maldives, Mohamed Nasheed, held an underwater Cabinet meeting to highlight the impact of rising sea levels. He warned that with a 2° rise in temperatures, his country would be “on death row”, yet it is only in the past year or so that it is becoming accepted that limiting temperature rises to 2° would not be sufficient to address the climate emergency, and that 1.5° should be the target.

I hope that the discussions at CHOGM 2018 will represent a much greater step forward. It was acknowledged at CHOGM that temperature and sea level rises, and other aspects of climate change, posed a significant risk to many of the Commonwealth's most vulnerable member countries, and that climate change could push an additional 100 million people into poverty by 2030. There was renewed support for a target well below 2°, along with support for innovative financing solutions including disaster risk insurance, which is important for farmers affected by climate change. It was agreed to establish action groups on ocean issues led by Commonwealth member countries, and for the secretariat to take forward the Commonwealth blue charter. The UK is the chair of CHOGM until Rwanda takes over in two years' time, and I really hope that we will be in the forefront of pushing this forward.

4.22 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): It is a privilege to be the tail-end Charlie in this debate on the Commonwealth on its 70th anniversary, with the UK in the chair and only a day or two before Commonwealth Day. The theme during the UK's period in the chair has been a connected Commonwealth. I hope that one thing that will come out of this debate is that we will all feel more connected to this place, and indeed to all places, because this Chamber, which was rebuilt after the war, in 1950, has benefited hugely from the contributions of individual Commonwealth members. Let me highlight some of them.

Given that Australia's former Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, was in this Chamber yesterday, it is worth starting with the Speaker's Chair in which you are sitting,

Mr Deputy Speaker. It is made of blackbean wood—or Moreton Bay chestnut—from Ravenshoe in northern Queensland, and it was made by H. H. Martyn and Co in my neighbouring constituency of Cheltenham in Gloucestershire, as were the Dispatch Boxes in front of the Minister and her Opposition counterpart. They are made from puriri wood from New Zealand. The chairs at the Clerks' Table are, or were, from South Africa. They were made from blank stinkwood. The Table is in Canadian oak and was made by the Globe Furniture Company in Ontario. The south entrance door is of English oak but was the gift of Pakistan.

There are contributions from almost all the other Commonwealth nations, either in this Chamber or just outside it. They include mayflower wood from Belize, silver gilt inkstands from Bermuda and a silver gilt ashtray from Botswana. Those gifts came from all over the world to the mother of all Parliaments, and it is striking that many of them are in the woods of those Commonwealth nations. The woods from Africa include gold walnut from Sierra Leone, iroko wood from elsewhere in Africa and mvule from Uganda. All the designs were put together by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, but it was the generosity of other Commonwealth nations that helped to resurrect our own Chamber. It is poignant today to look at the silver gilt inkstands with stationery racks, which are in front of the Minister. They were a gift of Zimbabwe, a nation that is currently outside the Commonwealth. That fact is a source of huge disappointment to the many of us who had hoped for successful untarnished elections last year as the gateway to re-entry. Alas, it was not to be, and we all hope that things will improve there.

I turn from heritage to the present day. It is particularly appropriate for this debate to be on the same day as our International Women's Day debate, given that the first and most important goal of our chairmanship of the Commonwealth is to ensure that by 2030 its members provide 12 years of quality education for girls. It is worth highlighting the other three goals. The UK is making great progress with the Commonwealth blue charter, particularly around Ascension Island. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) has referred to harnessing trade and investment, and to the work of the Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council; 8% of our trade is with the Commonwealth. Lastly, on cyber-security co-operation, the UK has pledged to fund 10 national cyber-security reviews by next year. That is vital for all members of the Commonwealth.

Other work is being done. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) has played a key role in the anti-malaria campaign, which is funded not least by generous charities such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Members of the royal family have done much to support other initiatives, such as Commonwealth scholars and the work of the Royal Commonwealth Society, which—here I declare an interest—supported the all-party group for the Commonwealth, which I founded a few years ago. It still works very closely with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), who has done so much in the CPA along with our colleagues the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) and the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson), is leading progress on that.

I want to touch on the contribution of accountable parliamentary democracies to the Commonwealth. Finding out what more can be done to strengthen that is the overriding aim and ambition of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, which I currently have the privilege of chairing. Democracy is having a rocky time globally. The rise of populism and nationalism, the vagaries of climate change, volatile governance and far too much civil conflict have caused huge dislocation of populations. Alongside more sophisticated technology for rigging elections, there is a greater questioning of democratic government than perhaps there has been at any point in our lifetime. There is a temptation to believe that single-party autocratic regimes could be a way forward.

All democracies, whether they were planted 1,000 years ago or 10 years ago, are fragile plants. They need careful nurturing. The UK's democratic constant gardener is the WFD, which is funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development. Both are admirably represented by the Minister, who has been very supportive of the work of the foundation. We focus on advancing inclusive and accountable democracy. The Commonwealth partnership for democracy—the CP4D, as it is known—which includes several bodies, is helping to bring democracies alive by making them more representative, with more women, more young people, more people with disabilities and more religious minorities. Those are things that autocracies can never offer. I went to a conference in Kuala Lumpur last month, and it was brilliant; there was, I think, also one in Fiji last month; and there was another one in Uganda last week. Those things are making a real difference. Further Government support for the Commonwealth can only help to nurture democracy in one of the most special networks in the world.

4.28 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship in this House, Mr Deputy Speaker, as I do very often. I extend my thanks to the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) for securing this important debate, and to the Minister for her continued passion and unwavering commitment to her duties.

The title of this debate is “The Modern Commonwealth: Opportunities and Challenges”, and in the short time that I have I want to focus on the challenges. In my role as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion and belief, I—alongside many hon. Members and colleagues from the other place—stand up for the right to hold and practise one's faith in peace, or indeed to have no faith at all. Unfortunately, in some parts of the Commonwealth, as in the rest of the world, that right is increasingly under threat. Open Doors UK and Ireland this year produced a fantastic report detailing the worsening persecution that Christians face around the world, simply for being Christian. According to the report, up to 245 million Christians are discriminated against in countries across the world. As many of those countries are members of the Commonwealth, I would like to discuss one of the most important challenges facing the Commonwealth: how to protect the right to freedom of religion or belief. To illustrate the depth and breadth of this challenge,

I will discuss violations of the freedom of religion or belief in three countries, starting with Pakistan, which I visited last year.

When I was in Pakistan, I heard how Christians and other religious minorities are systematically discriminated against in education and employment, with even Government Departments failing to meet quotas and advertising sanitation work as exclusively for Christians. They should implement the 5% job allocation. For goodness' sake, give those people a chance to gain the education so they can get better jobs.

The Movement for Solidarity and Peace estimates that at least 1,000 Hindu and Christian girls a year are kidnapped, forced to convert and forcibly married, or sometimes sold into prostitution, in Pakistan. Christians and other religious minorities face all manner of societal discrimination, harassment and physical attacks, sometimes resulting in death.

According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal, there have been more than 5,000 deaths in Pakistan due to sectarian violence since 1989. Such intercommunal violence is also common in India. The rise of the nationalist Hindutva ideology, which defines being “Indian” as being Hindu, is leading to increased religious oppression and attacks against minorities. According to data from the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs, there was a 28% rise in communal violence between 2014 and 2017. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom reported some 300 attacks on Christians in 2015 alone.

Other worrying developments in India include the Indian Government effectively stripping 4 million people in Assam state, mostly Muslims, of their citizenship, branding them as illegal immigrants from neighbouring Bangladesh. This move bears worrying similarities to the plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar, who have also been denied their citizenship.

In Nigeria, sadly, things are not much better. According to the “Global Terrorism Index”, violence between Christian farmers and Muslim herders has led to over 60,000 deaths since 2001. Christian Solidarity Worldwide reports that more than 1,000 Christians were killed in violence during the first quarter of 2018 alone. That is to say nothing of Boko Haram, which is still very active. Just a few weeks ago, human rights organisations such as CSW marked the first anniversary of the day a young Christian girl, Leah Sharibu, was captured by Boko Haram, alongside over 100 of her school friends. Ahead of International Women's Day, it is important to remember that that young girl is still imprisoned. Whereas all the others were released, Leah was kept for refusing to give up her Christian faith, and she remains in captivity today.

The issues I have mentioned today are, unfortunately, just the tip of the iceberg. According to the Pew Research Centre, 70% of people living in Commonwealth countries face high or extremely high Government restrictions on their right to freedom of religion or belief. Worse still, 88% face high or very high social hostility simply for holding minority beliefs. This is a major challenge that must be met head-on.

Although protecting the right to freedom of religion or belief is the right thing to do for its own sake, developing social and societal respect for different religions and beliefs is vital to reducing conflict, building stability and encouraging economic growth. Failure to protect

[Jim Shannon]

freedom of religion or belief can be disastrous. Although it is an extreme case, the plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar teaches us how unaddressed Government and social persecution towards religious groups can explode into violence, undermining stability and creating humanitarian crisis.

That is why I ask the Minister to encourage our Commonwealth partners to make promoting freedom of religion or belief a priority and to make funding available for non-governmental organisations to work on behalf of persecuted Christians and other religious or belief minorities. I also ask her to work with other Commonwealth nations to safely develop a statistical database of violations of the freedom of religion or belief, and other data on religious or belief communities, to support policy making.

I thank the Minister for the contribution she will make shortly and for her support on the many things I have brought to her attention. I look forward to hearing her response.

4.34 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) on securing this debate. I share with him a lot of interest in this issue and in wider issues, on a range of all-party groups. It is very timely to be having this debate before Commonwealth Day on Monday and nearly a year after the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting took place here in London. We are marking the 70th anniversary of the modern Commonwealth of Nations. As he said at the start, it was constituted by the London declaration in 1949, building on previous constitutions, and reflecting the process of decolonisation and a willingness of the newly independent countries to continue to co-operate and develop a new and more positive relationship with the UK, as the former colonial power.

As the debate has reflected, there is renewed interest in the Commonwealth in many quarters as preparations for some shape or form of Brexit continue. It is therefore right that the Members who applied for the debate wanted to look at both the challenges and the opportunities facing the Commonwealth, which in some respects reflect those facing the wider global community, and the multilateral rules-based order in particular.

In 1949, the world was still very much in flux. Many of the multilateral or supranational organisations we know today were still in their infancy or did not even exist. Today, the marketplace is considerably more crowded, so making sure that the voice of the Commonwealth is heard and that a relevance is maintained is a challenge, both to the institution and to the member states. Another challenge was described well by Lord Anderson of Swansea: distinguishing between the “Commonwealth of declaration” and the “Commonwealth of reality”. Proclaiming support for human rights, transparency, democracy and equality is one thing, but putting them into practice is another. The legacy of ancient colonial laws, not least the criminalisation of the LGBT community in many Commonwealth countries, stands in contrast to many of the proclamations that are made.

As was said by the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), with whom I serve on the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, democracy building is still

a challenge in many countries. There are countries that are still, in effect, one-party states or elective dictatorships. Those in the Chamber will be astonished to hear that some Commonwealth countries still include hereditary members of the aristocracy in their legislatures. These countries include Tonga, Lesotho and a small island state known as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Perhaps there will be some progress there in due course. The Commonwealth has also not been without structural and institutional challenges in terms of governance, internal accountability and the role of the secretariat.

However, we should not let striving for perfection be the enemy of the good that is already being done. The Commonwealth provides the hooks on which a range of worthwhile initiatives—I believe the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East said there were more than 80—can be hung. Many Members have shared experiences of our work with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. I had the privilege of serving on its executive between 2015 and 2017, and have met many delegations here in Westminster. I also had the privilege of travelling to Uganda in 2016 to work with committee chairs and, last year, to Rwanda as part of preliminary outreach with its Parliament as the country prepares to host CHOGM and take on the role of chair-in-office thereafter. As we have heard, Rwanda is a relatively new member of the Commonwealth and it was not historically part of the British empire. Clearly the Commonwealth does offer some advantages through membership, even to new countries.

Monday marks Commonwealth Day, and the theme of a connected Commonwealth will drive activities that day and throughout the year. These events, activities and gatherings can help young people, in particular, to understand their roles as global citizens and promote solidarity around the world. The theme of a connected Commonwealth and protecting the oceans, as we heard about from the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), is hugely important and very relevant, in looking at our common responsibility to protect and maintain the oceans, whether that is through reducing plastic pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, or by promoting biodiversity and the conservation of sea life.

The UK has a particular role to play, not just for the rest of this year as the chair-in-office, but with the Queen remaining the head of the Commonwealth. It was agreed at CHOGM last year that she would be succeeded by her son, the Duke of Rothesay, as we know him in Scotland, in due course. The UK must recognise its colonial legacy, and ultimately if it seeks to lead, it must lead by example. If it seeks to drive positive social change in Commonwealth member states, it must ensure that people here in the UK are not being left behind, whether as a result of welfare reform or a hostile immigration environment. Platitudes from the new Home Secretary are not enough; action is needed to demonstrate that the UK truly is a welcoming place for our friends from Commonwealth countries, whether they are applying for visas simply to visit friends and family, whether they are newly choosing to make their homes here or whether, like the Windrush generation, they have lived here for decades. Likewise, on climate change and tackling pollution, the UK must always be setting the most ambitious goals that others might follow.

One of the most ambitious and visible aspects of Commonwealth life is the Commonwealth games. It is a source of enduring pride for my city of Glasgow that we hosted the 20th Commonwealth games in 2014. We were blessed with glorious weather for almost the full fortnight and witnessed world-class sportsmanship in an atmosphere of welcome and exuberance, and the legacy in terms of physical infrastructure and the good will that was generated was there to see. I am proud to sport the Commonwealth tartan in my tie today.

Of course, in 2014 we were also debating the opportunity for Scotland to take its place as an independent member of the Commonwealth of nations. That remains the goal of my party and a growing share of Scotland's population. The "Scotland's Future" White Paper repeatedly referenced Scotland's ambition to become a good global citizen and play an active role in the Commonwealth. There is this idea that Scottish independence is somehow about insularity or isolation, but in fact the complete opposite is the case: we want to play our part as part of the global family of nations. As Winnie Ewing once famously said:

"Stop the world, Scotland wants to get on."

There are challenges but also opportunities for the Commonwealth, and I look forward to Scotland's playing its part in meeting them to the fullest extent possible over the next 70 years.

4.40 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady). It is also a pleasure to speak for the Opposition in this important debate in this, the 70th year of the Commonwealth.

Many excellent speeches and points have been made about the opportunities and challenges that face the Commonwealth. The hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) made the point about the important work of the CPA in ensuring our good relations with the Commonwealth.

My hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) talked about the need to keep up the momentum following CHOGM 2018, and to harness that into a revitalised Commonwealth fit for the 21st century. She also talked about the involvement of women in Parliaments.

The right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) talked about the growth in the economies of Commonwealth countries and Rwanda's particular commitment to gender equality, which is very appropriate in the light of the fact that it is International Women's Day tomorrow. My right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) raised issues relating to sustainability, climate change, poverty, cyber-security and modern slavery, to name just a few.

The right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel) talked about the changing face of the Commonwealth and the fast-growing economies of some of its countries, particularly India. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) talked about the urgent need to tackle climate change and plastic pollution, and about the adoption of the Commonwealth blue charter.

The hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) gave us a tour of the different gifts given to this place by Commonwealth countries, thereby highlighting the special

nature of our relationship. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) focused on the persecution of Christians in some Commonwealth countries and the need to concentrate on ensuring that rights to freedom of religion or belief are not further eroded but are addressed using our Commonwealth partnership and power.

The Commonwealth encompasses a diverse range of countries, and I wish to inject a cautionary note into the talk about increasing our trade with the Commonwealth. Let me use Australia as an example. Australia has become a much more multicultural nation, with 46% of the population either born overseas or having one parent who was born overseas. The Australian population looks at a post-Brexit world through the lens of an increasingly non-British-affiliated population. Many Australians see the future of their country as being focused on Asia rather than the UK, as evidenced by the recent free trade agreement with Indonesia. Although our cultural ties with Australia are still strong, Australia's economic focus appears to be elsewhere.

Despite the CHOGM in London last year being the first to be held since the Brexit vote, there was no notable movement or declaration on the issue of trade between Commonwealth countries. Given that the Brexit campaign asserted that increased trade with the Commonwealth could help to alleviate the economic impact of leaving the EU, that seems to me to be a notable omission.

Despite the Prime Minister's high-profile speech at the summit, in which she apologised for the colonial imposition of anti-LGBT laws that still persist in many Commonwealth countries, there was no follow-up agreement among attendees to do away with those laws or, indeed, to begin to address the discrimination faced by the LGBT community in many Commonwealth countries.

The Commonwealth's annual theme for this year, 2019, is, "A connected Commonwealth". That theme encourages collaboration among the people, the Governments and the institutions of the Commonwealth to protect natural resources and promote inclusive economic empowerment so that all people—particularly women, young people and marginalised communities—can benefit equally. That builds on the goals agreed at CHOGM 2018, most notably adopting the Commonwealth blue charter on sustainable development and protection of the world's oceans; committing to ratify and implement the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women; and the adoption of the Commonwealth cyber declaration, with a common commitment to an open, democratic, peaceful and secure internet, respecting human rights and freedom of expression.

The Commonwealth faces many challenges: job creation, trade, ending absolute poverty, tackling climate change and making progress on achieving the sustainable development goals by the target year of 2030. Across the Commonwealth, we have ongoing human rights or instability issues in countries such as Bangladesh, Cameroon and Pakistan. We have had the recent clashes in Kashmir between Commonwealth partners India and Pakistan, and the recent violence and instability in Zimbabwe, which expressed the wish to be readmitted to the Commonwealth following the fall of Mugabe.

There are many challenges. Let us not forget the opportunities, but given that the size of our exports to all 52 Commonwealth countries in 2016 was similar to

[Liz McInnes]

the size of our exports to one EU country—Germany—we have a long way to go before our trade with the Commonwealth even begins to compensate for the loss of our customs union with the EU.

4.46 pm

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): It is an absolute privilege to wind up for the Government in this very important debate marking the Commonwealth's 70th anniversary. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) for securing the debate and to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this debate just a few days before Commonwealth Day. I pay tribute to everyone who spoke in the debate—I thought that we had a range of excellent speeches—and particularly to those who work on the executive of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.

I will pick out a few of the themes that came up in a range of speeches. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East, in a wide-ranging speech, talked about the very valuable work done by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. The hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) managed very cleverly to link the two debates this afternoon with her focus on women in Parliament, on climate and on LGBT issues. On the specific point that she made about the status change, the business case for which is currently with the Government, I can say that that is with our protocol and legal teams for review.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) made an excellent speech, and one that I hope to emulate by presenting the importance of that fast growth in Africa and the trade opportunities that that presents. The right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) rightly talked about climate change. He asked for a quarterly update. I cannot say that I can promise that at this point, but I can say that the work is there if he wants to probe further on that through the other means available to him. He largely spent his speech focusing on the incredibly important issue of modern slavery and the really valuable work that the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association is able to take forward with legislators from—I think—40 different countries.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) talked about the future and the importance of focusing on the youth of the Commonwealth, which has such a young population. She highlighted the situation in India. The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) made a really important contribution, highlighting the value of the work that has been done across the Commonwealth on not only the Clean Oceans Alliance but climate change, and I shall touch a bit more on that very important issue as I go through my speech.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) gave a veritable tour of this Chamber. I certainly learned some things that I did not know before, and colleagues will want to read the full details in *Hansard* so that they can share that information with their constituents. I also pay tribute to him for his work as chair of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy.

The absolutely indefatigable hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made a passionate speech, as he always does, about his campaign passion—Christianity around the world, and the importance of freedom of religion and belief. We should recognise how much the Government are already doing in this area, but his important recommendations will inform that work. Many of the issues and conflicts that he mentioned also related to other matters raised in the debate, including climate change.

The hon. Members for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) and for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) made some important points about the role of the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth charter states that members are

“opposed to all forms of discrimination, whether rooted in gender, race, colour, creed, political belief or other grounds.”

That is an important, all-encompassing statement that touches on a range of the topics raised today, and I will try to respond to all the issues raised in the time available to me.

As colleagues have pointed out, it is our two years as Commonwealth chair-in-office, and we are already working closely with our friends in Rwanda, given that they are hosting the next Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in 2020. The UK is unbreakably bound to the Commonwealth and its democratic values. As chair-in-office we are promoting those values, and we are working to help the Commonwealth realise its potential for prosperity, security, fairness and sustainability together. We are also working to tackle global challenges such as climate change, extremism and modern slavery, and to support small, fragile and vulnerable states. It is truly a remarkable organisation with a remarkable reach.

Our objectives can be summarised in four words: delivery, voice, solidarity and reform. Delivery is about implementing the ambitious commitments made at last year's meetings to build a fairer, more sustainable, more prosperous and more secure Commonwealth. We cannot do this on our own, so our co-operation with the 52 fellow member states, the Commonwealth secretariat, and the many Commonwealth organisations and networks—many of which were mentioned in today's debate—is crucial. The Government are delivering on those commitments with over £500 million of projects and programmes. We are making significant progress, and I would like to highlight a few examples.

To build a more sustainable future, the UK and Vanuatu together have established the Commonwealth Clean Oceans Alliance under the new Commonwealth blue charter. That work now includes 24 member states, which have committed themselves to concrete action to reduce the scourge of plastics in the oceans—an issue that I know concerns so many colleagues. With UK funds and expertise, the Commonwealth marine economies programme is promoting growth, innovation, investment and jobs while safeguarding healthy seas and ecosystems in 17 different Commonwealth island states.

To build a more secure future, UK-funded training events will benefit the cyber-security of 37 Commonwealth countries. We have established an African cyber-security fellowship network and have helped nine African Commonwealth countries to build capacity in critical information infrastructure protection. To build a more prosperous future, we are promoting connectivity and inclusive growth. Earlier this week, we announced that

we would co-lead with South Africa the digital connectivity element of the Commonwealth connectivity agenda. Over 2,300 women-owned businesses have joined the UK-funded Commonwealth SheTrades programme for women entrepreneurs. And, propelling Commonwealth trade, the Commonwealth standards network, which was launched in September, now has 38 members.

To build a fairer future, we are providing over £200 million of support for girls' education in nine Commonwealth countries. We are supporting collaboration between civil society and Commonwealth countries wishing to address legislation that discriminates on the grounds of sex, sexual orientation and gender identity.

We are funding programmes to drive inclusive and accountable democracy. I have highlighted the work of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy and paid tribute to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, but there is also the Commonwealth Local Government Forum, which does fantastic work. I must commend the work that the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association has done through its updated recommended benchmarks for democratic legislatures. It was wonderful to hear what my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East said about the number and energy of the visits that we have had, outward and inward, over the past 12 months.

Our second objective as chair-in-office is to ensure that the voice of the Commonwealth is heard. Aside from the United Nations, no other group of nations encompasses such a range of countries from all continents. This huge diversity is both an opportunity and a strength. At the UN General Assembly last year, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister advocated for the rules-based international system on behalf of all 53 Commonwealth Heads of Government. It was the first time that this collective voice had been heard in the General Assembly in this way.

Our third objective is to strengthen collaboration between Commonwealth members in international organisations by ensuring that we know about each other's candidacies in international elections; briefing each other on the business of bodies to which we do not all belong; and supporting, as the UK does, the Commonwealth small states offices in New York and in Geneva.

Our final objective with Commonwealth partners is to refresh the governance of the Commonwealth secretariat and its collaboration with other organisations. In fact, the board of governors is meeting today to discuss that, and we hope that Foreign Ministers will soon approve

its recommendations. We welcome the secretary-general's appointment last week of Dr Arjoon Suddhoo from Mauritius as deputy secretary-general. We very much look forward to working with him.

Moving on to Rwanda, I am delighted that the next Heads of Government meeting will take place in Africa. The Rwandan Government are preparing for CHOGM 2020 with enormous energy. I am confident that our successful pursuit of the Commonwealth's potential will continue seamlessly with the Kigali meeting.

We are determined to make the most of our two years as chair-in-office, to ensure that a modern Commonwealth can meet future challenges, from climate change to cyber-attack, and to seize the opportunities flowing from the organisation's huge diversity and enormous global reach. We have made important progress, but there is a huge agenda and lots more to do. We will work tirelessly to build a fairer, more sustainable, more prosperous and more secure Commonwealth. The fact that countries wish to join and to rejoin the Commonwealth, as Gambia did last year and as the Maldives wishes to do now, demonstrates its value. We must realise that value to the full. I am delighted to recommend that all members of the Commonwealth take the opportunity to read the debate that we have had this afternoon.

4.57 pm

James Duddridge: I thank everybody who has spoken in this debate. One thing that strikes me is how different each contribution has been, which perhaps represents the diversity within the Commonwealth. I neglected to place an advert for the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association challenge fund for Members who want to do something that is not in its programme. Members can apply to its exec and we will try to fund and support specific activities that they want to pursue.

Next week is not Brexit week—it is Commonwealth Day and Commonwealth Week. If I can mention one speech, it is that of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire), who said that this is not about a day or a week; we should be debating the Commonwealth day in, day out. It is a third of the world. They are our partners, they are around us, and in some cases we are sat upon their gifts. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate and, again, Members who have spoken.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered opportunities and challenges facing the modern Commonwealth in its 70th year.

New Ferry Regeneration

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Iain Stewart.)

5 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I thank Mr Speaker for granting this Adjournment debate. I want to discuss a matter that is very important to me, my constituents and all those in Merseyside, and that is the situation in New Ferry.

New Ferry is a small town that I represent, and it also happens to be the place where I live and where my office is. It is very important to all my constituents. I am glad to say that the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), has visited New Ferry, which we were grateful for. Nearly two years ago the town suffered a most terrible explosion.

At just after 9 o'clock on a Saturday evening on 25 March, there was a huge blast. This is an ongoing matter before the courts, so I will not discuss the specifics of the explosion, but I want to say a few words about New Ferry as a place. The Minister knows New Ferry, as he has visited it, but many others will not be aware of what it is like. I want to talk about the response to that explosion, the situation we are now in and the rebuilding of New Ferry, and ask the Minister some questions.

New Ferry is a small town on the Wirral peninsula in Merseyside. It is just south of Birkenhead. For many years, it was a place where ferries stopped, hence its name; long ago, the Mersey ferries stopped there. It was a town where people would go shopping. There used to be a number of hotels and other historic buildings, but over time, the ferries ceased calling there, and it just became a place where people would go to shop. This will be a familiar story. As with lots of our high streets up and down the country, the change in New Ferry has been significant, particularly over the past 20 years. The onset of out-of-town shopping and then the impact of the internet has hit New Ferry just as it has hit many other places.

Before the blast two years ago, we already had a big challenge in New Ferry. We had used the coalition Government's initiative of having a town team to try to get more shops into New Ferry and more events happening that would bring people into the town centre. Local people put lots of effort into that. We had arts and cultural events in New Ferry, but nothing really stuck because the quality of many buildings was very poor, as it is now. It was hard to get small businesses to use those buildings and bring them back to life.

The place was crying out for investment, and then two years ago we had the terrible event of the huge explosion. The community was struggling with the fact that the place they loved and had grown up in was no longer somewhere they could go shopping to buy fruit and veg or a loaf of bread. Lots of businesses had closed down already. Major supermarkets had left, and we had seen the last bank in the town close.

I had already been campaigning for regeneration when the blast happened. As I said, I am not able to talk about the details because of the legal situation. However, I want to put this on the record. As the Minister knows, the blast was extraordinarily traumatic for the area. It had a big impact on people. One of the frustrations that people in New Ferry feel is that although, in the

aftermath of the blast, they were listened to and people saw the pain that had been caused, the response has been too little and too slow. I turn now to that response.

After the blast, there was a question about whether Wirral Council would apply for the Bellwin scheme, but it was advised not to apply for funding from that scheme because the response required at that time did not hit the £500,000 threshold. There is a problem because, as I understand it, the rules of the scheme stipulate that the assessment of funds needed under the scheme had to be completed within four weeks. However, the site was completely unsafe, and it remained out of bounds for reasons of investigation for six weeks. In my opinion, the council was not properly in control of the scene, and it was not able to do what it would have needed to do under the Bellwin scheme. That was a problem, and it has been quite difficult to find out more about whether there are any exemptions under the scheme, or how this could be reopened.

I was glad that, in September 2018, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government received a delegation from New Ferry in his office here, and he listened carefully to what my constituents said. Unfortunately, in the letter he wrote to us after that meeting, he said that no change in the Government's approach would be forthcoming, and that they were still not prepared to look again at the issue of the Bellwin scheme. That is really hard for my constituents to take. Given the level of cuts to Wirral Council, the situation that New Ferry was already in and the fact that it is really struggling, the idea that Wirral council tax payers should just pick up the entirety of the bill for what happened in New Ferry, through no fault of the people there, is one that my constituents find very difficult to understand. I am sure that the Minister will wish to comment on that.

I want to talk about the rebuilding of New Ferry. As I have said, the place needed regeneration long before the blast. It was crying out for it. I had spent hours and hours in meetings with potential developers—such as the Co-op supermarket, which owns one of the buildings—desperately trying to say to people that this could be a great place if they would be prepared to invest in it. Unfortunately, there has never been significant regeneration capital from the Government for New Ferry, and that has held the place back because commercial organisations must feel that it is too big a risk. It has always needed the state to step in, and that has never happened. It is happening now in a small way, but my complaint is that it is not being done quickly enough and we really need to see progress, because people in New Ferry are losing faith in that ever happening.

This is the situation as it is today. Homes England, which the Government charge with regeneration, has now spent about £100,000 on a plan and a study of how the rebuild should happen, but that means that we are still—two years on—only in the planning stage. I think most people, and certainly most people in Merseyside who drive through New Ferry, think it is actually a bit ridiculous that we have not been able to move this on faster. I really want to say to the Minister: this has got to happen more quickly.

The consultation options are out there, and people are talking about them. I would like to support an option that has been put forward by traders and residents that would see more rejuvenation of the town centre. They want better parking arrangements, which will help

with the footfall, and units of different sizes, so that we are not just reliant on big business coming in to rescue New Ferry, but can have small and developing businesses too, and I support that.

The city region is also trying to step in and help. Applications have been made to the town centre fund from the Liverpool city region. That is a really positive option that could help us with the town centre and make sure that we still keep a commercial heart, not just become a dormitory area. I think I know what the Minister is going to say, which is that we should rely on what the Liverpool city region is doing. I know that the Minister supports devolution, as I do, and that is fine.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): I support Liverpool too.

Alison McGovern: We both support Liverpool, and we both support devolution—but it is not really a good enough answer. When, through no fault of its own, Salisbury experienced terrible events that damaged its prosperity and possibilities, the Government found £2.5 million to assist it. I and my constituents, and indeed the public at large, do not understand why such support was not found for New Ferry. Put simply, if such resources could be allocated to New Ferry, rather than needing permanently to be bid for, asked for, or cobbled together from different sources, we could get that regeneration and rebuild under way. That is why it is slow. The Government have all the resources of the Treasury, and they could help people in New Ferry today.

I am grateful that the Minister came to meet people, and that the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government met my constituents, but that is not enough because we need actions, not just people listening. Will the Minister answer a simple question today? Can he commit capital, so that when we have finished the consultation on what the rebuild will look like, we will know that those plans will happen, and that we will not be stuck in the permanent state that I—and before me my predecessor, Ben Chapman—have been stuck in, with constant bidding rounds where money never comes forward? The plans are there, but they never seem to be realised to allow people to see the prospects of our town changing. That is what people want. They do not want any more plans and consultations; they want action.

In conclusion, across the road from my office in New Ferry is a block of derelict shops. Every time I walk to my office, I walk past those shops and I think about the impotence of politics, and about the lack of care and attention for the ordinary considerations of British people. The Minister knows this already, but I repeat that if he thinks I will ignore the dereliction and lack of care and attention in the town of New Ferry, or that I will stop coming to the House to badger the Government and ask them to do more, and to request action that is quicker and has more effect, he is wrong. Nobody in New Ferry will ever give up on the place that we love and care about. I will never give up asking the Minister, so he might as well just say yes today.

5.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): The hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) has

made an impassioned plea on behalf of her constituents, and I pay tribute to her for her tenacity and for the regularity with which she has brought this important issue to the House. Her constituents should be proud of the service that she offers as a constituency Member of Parliament who cares passionately about the community she represents.

As the hon. Lady said, I visited New Ferry a couple of months after the initial explosion, and nobody who has been there—the hon. Lady visits every week when she walks to her office—could be anything other than moved by the devastation caused by the explosion. She is right to say that today we should not get into the details of how that explosion may have happened. There will, I hope, be a day of reckoning regarding the cause of the explosion, but it will not be today.

Immediately after the event the Government, as with all such incidents, deployed one of our liaison teams—we call it a RED team, as it covers resilience, emergencies and disasters—to work with Wirral Council and consider how to support it. The hon. Lady mentioned a good meeting with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, and residents and business owners from her area. She says that she will not ignore any dereliction of duty and that she will keep on fighting. I am sure that after that meeting she, like me, went away and reflected on the fact that in some areas Wirral Council had failed to react correctly and speedily enough on behalf of its constituents. It had a hardship fund at the time that could have been accessed, but it was not. I know a hardship fund has now been made available. At the time of the explosion, despite what the hon. Lady says about local authorities up and down the country being hard pushed in terms of public finances—and I accept that Wirral Council is one of them—the council did have some £68 million in unallocated reserves.

As well as pushing me on the Government's response, I hope that the hon. Lady will continue to push Wirral Council. In the very moving meeting we held with the Secretary of State, it was absolutely clear that people felt that the initial response—what people often talk about immediately after such disasters—had simply not been good enough from Wirral Council, despite the support from the Government and the resilience and emergency division. There may be lessons for the Government to learn—I will come on to some of the ways in which we will continue to support the people of New Ferry—but there are also lessons for the local authority to learn. I will leave my remarks there, but if the hon. Lady would like to talk to me about that after this debate, I will happily do so privately.

The hon. Lady is absolutely correct to say that the regeneration of the site has been slower than any of us would have hoped for. Following my visit in June 2017, I immediately asked Homes England to make £100,000 available to work jointly with the local authority on a regeneration plan. Those plans, by their very nature, are complicated and take some time to work up. There was, however, a significant delay on that plan coming back to Government with any request for support.

I welcome the work that has been undertaken. There has been an opportunity for local residents to ensure that their views are heard. The council, in conjunction with Homes England, is now evaluating the comments from the feedback sessions that were held in New Ferry. Work is ongoing to find a preferred residential mix-use

[*Jake Berry*]

development for New Ferry. I recognise what the hon. Lady says about the challenge facing high streets up and down the country. She makes the point extremely well that any regeneration in New Ferry must be of that mixed residential and commercial use for it to continue to be sustainable. In parallel to that, Wirral Council is planning to invest £1.3 million to start the land assembly of the New Ferry site, which will enable that exciting regeneration to take place.

On Government support, the hon. Lady has campaigned tirelessly to support the residents and businesses affected. She talks about the Salisbury nerve agent attack, an appalling national and international incident that saw the murder and attempted murder of people by foreign actors on British soil, and the support the Government made available to the people of the city of Salisbury. Such support is normally dealt with through a Bellwin scheme. The hon. Lady correctly says that the Bellwin scheme is for expenditure by Wirral Council, which is currently in excess of £495,000. At the time the discussions were taking place, Wirral Council estimated that it had spent only £400,000.

I would point out that following the explosion—the hon. Lady is absolutely correct—the site was in the hands of Merseyside police, who were, quite correctly, gathering evidence about any criminal acts that may or may not have happened on that site as part of the explosion. It was handed back over to Wirral Council on 6 April. Although there was some delay in the council gaining control of the site, there was ample time and it was well within the Bellwin scheme qualifying period. It may have been apparent to the local authority at the time that it would not be successful in putting forward a claim, but it is simply not correct to say that it did not get control of the site within the claim period. I understand that Wirral Council has agreed to set aside funding for individual residents and business owners who have suffered considerable financial hardship in the period following the explosion, and I welcome that.

I shall now turn to what help the Government can, and I hope will, provide to the residents of New Ferry. I understand that a bid of some £5 million has been made to the Mayor of Liverpool City Region's town centre fund. That is, of course, Government money that is part of the gain share that gets paid to the city. I hope that Steve Rotherham, former Member of this House and Mayor of Liverpool City Region, will look with favour upon the application along the lines of the plan that has jointly been worked up with the Homes and Communities Agency.

Alison McGovern: The Minister describes the city region funding as “Government money”. In some sense, we can describe anything that comes from the Treasury as Government money, but if New Ferry is not helped directly by the Government, that city region development money that was there for the purposes of rebalancing our economy is effectively doing the work that the Government should be doing in this shocking and terrible event. It is simply not acceptable to the people of New Ferry that they should have to bid to a fund that is there for general economic development.

Jake Berry: For a start, I am sure that the hon. Lady would agree that there is actually no such thing as Government money. It all belongs to all of us as taxpayers.

I gently point out—I did so in my opening remarks, and I do not want to get in a war of words about this—that at the time of the explosion, Wirral Council had tens of millions of pounds in reserves, which was money paid in by Wirral taxpayers over a period. In her speech, the hon. Lady, who has been in Parliament since 2010—we came in together—talked about the need for regeneration of this site under her predecessor's term as the Member of Parliament. She talked about how in her entire time in Parliament—nine years in total—she has been campaigning for the redevelopment of this site. Although, as she points out, the explosion has taken something from being “important” to “urgent”—and that is absolutely correct—it is an area that would, I hope, have been the recipient of regeneration funds from the Liverpool city region in any event. However, I accept that this explosion has taken it from being important to urgent. I do not think that anyone could deny that.

More widely, there is the future high streets fund, which was announced at the last Budget. It is open for bids of exactly this type, looking at a wider high street and town regeneration plan. The plan is already in existence. The expression of interest for the future high streets fund has to be in by 22 March. The hon. Lady said, I think, “bid, bid and bid again”. With the future high streets fund, we have ensured that the expression of interest round is very light touch. I am aware of the bidding fatigue in local authorities—in fact, it affects my authority in Lancashire—so we have tried to ensure that the first round of bidding for the future high streets fund is at a very low bar to enable local authorities to access it without unnecessary expense. Working up that bid to the second phase—if areas are successful in that competitive fund—is revenue-funded, so the Government will pay for and support the bid, working it up with the local authority.

I gently mention to the hon. Lady that I hope that, using her influence, she may be able to persuade Wirral Council to bring New Ferry forward as its preferred bidder for the future high streets fund. As she rightly says, it has made significant progress with the Homes and Communities Agency, looking at wider regeneration. In that fund, there is the possibility of fast-track funding for areas that already have a plan to deliver for their area. The intention is that the capital element of the fund could be spent this year, so if New Ferry were successful, either by being fast-tracked or by getting into the second round, it would mean that support could be available from central Government this year as part of our desire to invest in our high streets up and down the country and see wider regeneration.

Finally I shall turn to the public support available from central Government. In addition to the Mayor's fund and the future high streets fund, this week we announced the stronger towns fund, which involves a wider regeneration package that could encompass New Ferry, Port Sunlight and other areas and looks at how, on a town deal basis, areas could pull together a wider bid to Government. That is more long term and may not lend itself as well to this redevelopment, which, as the hon. Lady said, has gone from important to urgent, but it is available. In terms of Government support, however, the future high streets fund, which is a competitive fund, albeit with a light-touch bidding scenario, is probably the way to go.

Finally, I want to talk about the importance of devolution. The Liverpool city region, which I know well, having been born and brought up in the city of

Liverpool, is really changing the conversation around politics. The hon. Lady is an exemplar of that. She, quite rightly, is fighting like hell for her constituents. I have huge admiration for it. It is evident in the way she brings this debate back to the House of Commons and has meetings with the Secretary of State. It is clear that she will never ever give up, as she says.

I think that devolution is part of that and I am very pleased to be part of a Government who have taken real power, money and influence and returned it to the

people of Merseyside. I hope that with the Mayor's gain share fund and the opportunities for redevelopment it will also deliver for the people of New Ferry, who I know the hon. Lady will continue to work for.

Question put and agreed to.

5.25 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 7 March 2019

[JAMES GRAY *in the Chair*]

Dangerous Dogs

1.30 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Ninth Report of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, Controlling dangerous dogs, HC 1040, and the Government response, HC 1892.

It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir James. I accept—

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but the knighthood has not yet appeared in the post. No doubt it is on its way.

Neil Parish: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. It always has been, and I hope today will be no different. I see we are completely packed out this afternoon, with standing room only. We are discussing a serious issue, and the fact that parties have a one-line Whip on a Thursday probably does not help with attendance.

It is often said that the UK is a nation of dog lovers. As more than 9 million of us are dog owners, it is not hard to see why. Dogs are a huge source of love, comfort and companionship to so many of us. It is also good to see postal workers and others in the room. While we love our dogs, we have to remember that many workers have to come into or close to our homes, and we have to ensure that our dogs are under control. All those things need to be taken into consideration.

That love for our dogs is why it is so heartbreaking when relationships go wrong with dogs, when dogs are not treated with the care and compassion they deserve, and when they are not trained properly, or worse, when they are forced into aggressive and violent behaviour. Each year, thousands of dogs are seized under the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991. Hundreds are subsequently put down. That might once have been described as a price worth paying to save people from vicious dog attacks, but I was concerned to discover that since the Act was introduced, injury and fatality rates from dog attacks have increased, not gone down.

More than 200,000 people are attacked by dogs each year in England alone. Between 2005 and 2017, the number of recorded hospitalisations rose by some 81%, from 4,110 to 7,461. It is heartbreaking to look at the hospital data, which shows that children under nine are statistically the most at risk. Metropolitan police figures for 2015-16 indicate that legal breeds accounted for 80% of section 3 offences under the Act, which relate to dogs dangerously out of control. Sixty-seven people have died following dog attacks in the UK since 1991. The issue is not only dogs on the dangerous dogs list; many of the bites are from dogs not on that list. We have to consider that, however well intentioned the 1991 Act, it is not addressing the totality of the problem.

The Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs therefore launched an inquiry on 11 May 2018 into the adequacy of the Government's approach to tackling dangerous dogs. It is good to see the new Minister in his place. We focused on the effectiveness of the breed ban and examined the actions needed to improve public safety and safeguard animal welfare. We received more than 400 written evidence submissions to the inquiry and held three evidence sessions in June and July last year. We are grateful to all those who gave us evidence in person or in writing, as well as to the substantial number of people who contacted the Committee in relation to our report and the Government's response. Many were keen to help address the problems we face, and for that I thank them.

We have a great opportunity today to discuss how the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs plans to incorporate the Committee's recommendations on dangerous dogs and make the system better for everyone, owner and canine alike. The lessons we learned during the inquiry and the themes I want to highlight today can only be summarised as legislation, trepidation and education. The existing legislation does not deliver the protection that society needs, and I will discuss that in a minute. The trepidation is that of the Department to change the status quo and act decisively in a number of ways. Education could save adults and children alike from dog attacks.

First, I will talk about the legislation. The Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 was introduced to protect the public from dangerous dog attacks. The Act made it an offence to keep four types of dog traditionally bred for fighting, unless the dog was placed on the index of exempted dogs and kept in compliance with certain requirements. The dogs were the pit bull terrier, the Japanese tosa, Fila Brasileiro and Dogo Argentino. As of May 2018, 3,530 prohibited dogs were on the index, of which 3,514 were pit bull terrier-types. Only 16 of the dogs were not pit bull types.

Dogs suspected of being of a prohibited type may be seized by the authorities and held in police-appointed kennels pending examination by a qualified expert. Most dogs seized under section 1 are suspected pit bull terriers. If a dog is found to be a banned section 1 type, an owner wishing to keep the dog must go to court to determine that they are a fit and proper person and that the dog will not pose a risk to public safety. If successful, the dog is placed on the index of exempted dogs and the owner must comply with certain conditions, such as that the dog is neutered and microchipped, the owner purchases third party insurance and the dog is leashed and muzzled in public.

Section 3 of the 1991 Act makes it an offence for any dog to be dangerously out of control, regardless of its breed or type. That includes a dog injuring someone or an animal, a person believing the dog might injure them, and a person believing that the dog would injure them if they tried to stop it attacking their dog or animal.

During our inquiry, we heard substantial debate about the effectiveness of this breed-specific legislation and the impact on dog welfare. According to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, 30 people died between 1991 and 2016 in dog-related incidents. The RSPCA told us that 21 of those dog-related incidents involved dogs of breeds not prohibited by law. One

[Neil Parish]

person dying from a dog attack is one too many. The Government are responsible for protecting the public from dangerous animals, so it is essential that the laws evolve alongside our understanding of what works. We investigated whether the Government's current approach is having the desired effect and whether any changes are needed to ensure that the public are properly protected and that animal welfare concerns are adequately addressed.

The Committee looked at the effectiveness of breed-specific legislation, and identified several areas for improvement to protect the public more effectively. One of the saddest consequences of the 1991 Act is that, when someone has to give up a section 1 dog, the law does not allow the dog owner to be changed; the dog can be transferred only if the owner dies or is incapacitated. If a section 1 dog strays or was abandoned and is being kept in a rescue centre, or if its owner cannot care for it due to a change in circumstances, it cannot be rehomed and is liable to be put down. The dog will also be destroyed if the owner is judged not to be a fit and proper person.

At Battersea dogs home, I saw a dog that had been brought in because its owner could no longer look after it. As far as I could tell, it was a very good-tempered dog, but because it could not be rehomed it had to be checked by the police to assess whether it was of a pit bull type. When the policeman saw the dog, he decided that it was of a pit bull type, and it was put down. I felt that that was one dog too many put down, because its temperament was good. I will talk a little more in a minute about how, with proper care and attention, such dogs can be placed with an owner who understands the type of dog, can handle it and complies with the regulations regarding taking it out in public.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I apologise for being unable to stay for the whole debate; I need to speak in the House. As the Committee inquiry highlighted, the prohibition on the transfer of dogs is utterly ludicrous. There was a very high profile case in Bristol on this matter. The dog can be transferred if the owner dies, but not if they move abroad because of work, as happened in one case, or if they lose their home and have to move into a flat where they are not allowed animals. It seems completely ludicrous that in some situations the dog then has to be destroyed when it might be, as the hon. Gentleman said, a perfectly well-behaved, acceptable dog.

Neil Parish: The hon. Lady is a very good member of the Committee, and I am delighted to see her this afternoon, even if only for a short while. She makes a really good point. We should look at the dog and its temperament. If the original owner could keep it, and take it out muzzled and on an leash in public, why can it not be rehomed? As she stated, such a dog can be rehomed if its owner dies, but not if it goes into a rescue centre either because it was left to stray or its owner could no longer look after it. I am sure that the Minister, being a very sympathetic and thoughtful man, will give that due consideration, because that is an anomaly. I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention.

This is an unfortunate situation, which is surely simple to resolve. The Government have the opportunity to improve the lives of these innocent animals. Our report called on the Government to avoid imposing an unnecessary

death sentence on good-tempered animals. We therefore call on the Government to remove the ban on transferring section 1 dogs to new owners. That simple amendment could be accompanied by adequate checks and balances at animal rescue centres and appropriate safeguards to ensure that the rehoming of section 1 dogs is conducted responsibly and safely. They say, "It's a dog's life," but in this case it really is. Good-natured dogs are being killed under section 1 of the 1991 Act. I understand that they have to be rehomed carefully, but if a dog can be rehomed after somebody dies, why can it not be rehomed when it has been brought in for other reasons? Two dogs could have the same temperament, but one would be destroyed and the other rehomed.

The Government's response noted that

"it would be irresponsible to amend the breed ban immediately without adequate safeguards"

and stated that the prohibition

"should remain in place for reasons of maintaining public safety."

When we began looking at the matter, I originally thought that the Committee would call for the repeal of the breed-specific legislation. However, we fell short of that because, although 80% of dog bites and attacks come from dogs outside those specific breeds, the number of pit bull type dogs that bite is quite high given their total number. We therefore do need to have legislation in place regarding those dogs, but it has to be fairly administered.

What we want is for the legislation to be amended. Unfortunately, the Government told us that they do

"not consider that it is a priority to amend legislation at this time."

We understand that any change in the law would have to consider the implications for public safety, the potential increased burden on the courts, and the extra work for rescue and rehoming centres. The Committee was clear that any amendments to the legislation would need sensible safeguards to be put in place to protect the public. However, those are achievable goals. Too often in politics we are faced with what appear to be insurmountable problems—heaven knows we are at the moment—but this is not one of them. This problem can be sorted. A simple change to the law would ensure that a good-natured dog, such as the one that I saw, could be kept safely. I hope that the Minister will take the opportunity today to reconsider the Government's position.

From looking at evidence against breed-specific legislation during our inquiry, the Committee was not convinced that there was enough independent evidence to justify the current approach to controlling dangerous dogs—something that we all want to see done more effectively. It was clear to us that, in order to do that, DEFRA needed more information. One of our key report recommendations was that

"the Government should commission an independent review of the effectiveness of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 and wider dog control legislation... We expect this review to take account of the concerns and recommendations raised throughout this Report."

Particular breeds are potentially very dangerous, but they account for only 20% of the bites and attacks. The Government need to review how we protect workers and others who enter homes where there may be other dogs that are potentially dangerous. Just sticking to the four breeds on the dangerous dogs list is not working.

Our second recommendation was:

“Defra should commission a comprehensive independent evidence review into the factors behind canine aggression, the determinants of risk, and whether the banned breeds pose an inherently greater threat... These results must then be used to inform the Government’s future dog control strategy.”

Any dog can bite, but the larger the dog, the more chance of the attack being a vicious one. Should we therefore ban every large dog that we come across? The answer is that of course we will not. In that case, do not just pick on particular breeds.

We were pleased that in their response to the Committee’s report the Government committed to commissioning research to review the effectiveness of current dog control measures. I do not know whether the Minister will be able to give a timescale for that. In November 2018, DEFRA commissioned Middlesex University to conduct research to assess the effectiveness of current dog control measures, and to identify and examine the causes of dog attacks, how to address dog behaviour problems, how policy might need to develop, and how to promote responsible dog ownership.

DEFRA committed to updating the Committee “later this year”—I wonder how late in 2019 that might be. I welcome the excellent news, but we cannot let the Government off the leash too quickly—sorry for that one. I ask the Minister to give us more details today about the review that he has commissioned of the dog control measures. What are its terms of reference, when will it be completed and who will be consulted? Will it examine whether the current Dangerous Dogs Act is fit for purpose?

There is much work to be done to create a truly fair system. I assure the Minister that the Committee will follow progress closely, and I promise that we will co-operate in any way to make the situation better. There needs to be more focus on the owner, not the breed. The destruction of a dog based purely on its breed is cruel and often unnecessary.

My second theme is trepidation. Although the Government’s response recognises the importance of improving the identification and control of dangerous dogs, they have so far lacked the confidence to take any decisive action. A degree of trepidation is understandable—some might even call it wise. It is always difficult when a dog is of good temperament but a potentially dangerous breed, because it might turn. When a dog turns after being allowed to live, there is always a big inquiry. I understand the trepidation and even have some sympathy for the Minister, but I still think that we need to take action.

No one wants to make the situation worse. The Metropolitan police told us that they would be open to a new approach to addressing dangerous dogs, but they stressed the importance of having a full system in place before any of the legislation is amended. Things are difficult for the police under the current legislation, because when they inspect a dog at Battersea, Blue Cross or any of the rescue centres that do good work, they have to decide whether it is of good temperament; if they say it is, but then it bites somebody, the responsibility will come back on them. That is why it is so important that the re-homing of these dogs be proper and thorough.

Our inquiry heard compelling evidence from the RSPCA and animal behaviourists, who argued that dogs should be judged by deed, not breed. The Government must do more to recognise in legislation the temperament of the dog. We also know that human safety is paramount, so

we need effective dog control measures that focus on the deed, not the breed—I repeat that 80% of dog attacks are not carried out by any of the four dangerous dog breeds—and put reasonable safeguards in place for dogs that are judged to be dangerous. I emphasise that such measures need to address dangerous owners as effectively as they address dangerous dogs. Dogs are not born dangerous; they are made dangerous by not being cared for, and sometimes by actually being brutalised. Sometimes we do not recognise that enough.

That brings me to my final theme: education. A common theme throughout our inquiry was the need for a fundamental shift towards a more holistic approach to dog control that prioritises prevention through education, responsible ownership and early intervention. Witnesses from animal welfare charities felt that existing efforts fall short of what is required, and they called on the Government to develop a new approach—a call that our report echoes. It is clear to us from the evidence that human factors play a prominent role prior to the majority of dog attacks and that any systematic attempt to reduce the number of incidents needs to place a greater emphasis on education.

There are now charities that take dogs into schools, particularly primary schools. That should be encouraged, because some children do not have access to dogs and do not know how to handle them; they may approach them too quickly, grab their tail and ears or do things that they think are fine but that make the dog react badly. Unfortunately, there are some homes in which dogs are treated cruelly, but the charities that go into schools can make a real difference by showing children how dogs should be properly treated.

There is no requirement for schools to make use of the readily available materials on dog safety. That is a missed opportunity. Although education is not the Minister’s responsibility, I know that DEFRA works with the Department for Education and I think more could be done. Young children are at the greatest risk of dog attacks, and many suffer injuries that are horrific and in some cases avoidable. That is unacceptable, when education could help to prevent such life-changing injuries. I accept that we can never stop all dog bites, but we must do all we can to reduce the number of avoidable incidents. Teaching children how to stay safe around dogs is essential to that.

Our report further notes:

“A consistent approach is needed across the country to avoid the current post-code lottery of intervention.”

Naturally, resource implications differ among councils. Some councillors, of whichever political party, may feel that dealing with stray or potentially dangerous dogs is an essential part of a council’s work, while others may not feel the same. That inconsistency needs to be addressed.

Our witnesses told us that targeted initiatives to educate children on safe human-dog interactions are key. Some of them advocated adding such information to mandatory childhood education. The RSPCA said that having a Government policy would avoid the

“piecemeal and sometimes duplicated approach”

that is currently being delivered by the charitable sector across the country. Our report therefore calls on DEFRA to

“commission a childhood education plan from experts and charities to determine the most effective education measures and how these could be implemented consistently across the country.”

[Neil Parish]

We also concluded, based on the wide-ranging evidence we received, that DEFRA

“should introduce a targeted awareness campaign to inform dog owners and the general public about responsible ownership and safe interactions.”

Most people who have dogs are good owners who know how to handle them, but there are some who choose to treat them badly. There are also some who, because of a lack of education, just do not have the ability to look after their dogs properly. Those are the people who need our help.

We recommend that DEFRA

“should further develop proposals to help local enforcement bodies increase engagement among hard to reach demographics. This should involve a thorough assessment of the merits of mandatory third party liability insurance and training classes for dog owners.”

We were struck by the evidence that third-party insurance is not actually that expensive. It could certainly greatly help to compensate workers and others who are bitten. Responsible owners act responsibly. We need to reach out to those who are not responsible.

The Government’s response stated that they

“will develop a plan of action with stakeholders on the most effective way to reach children across the country”.

I am aware that the new Minister is keen to bring sensible change in this area. I and the Committee will very much support his endeavours. Will he update us on the progress that the Department has made since January? The sooner we teach children how to be safe with dogs, the better. We could save a life. We could save many lives. It is worth taking action.

With young children at risk of serious injury, Ministers should support wider dog awareness training for schoolchildren. The report recommended a targeted awareness campaign for dog owners and the general public on dog safety. New dog control legislation should be introduced to consolidate the existing patchwork of legislation, with dedicated dog control notices to allow for early intervention in incidents. All dogs can be dangerous, and we cannot ban all dogs that might one day bite someone, but we can take every sensible step to ensure that the law and Government policy is fit for purpose and effective. That means recognising the threat and dealing with it comprehensively.

The Government’s current strategy for tackling dangerous dogs is well intentioned, but in some cases misguided. I hope that the Minister will reflect on that and that DEFRA’s policy will be revised so that it is truly fit for purpose. I hope to meet the Minister and charities to facilitate a way forward, and to look at ways that a dog can be rehomed when the owner can no longer look after it. I do not want to hound the Minister, but we really need to see some action.

2.2 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure and privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I have two points to declare—they are not declarations of interest, but they are points of relevance. I have been the owner of two dogs, which came to me as a pair, inherited from a friend and constituent who died. One dog, whose name is Tweed, is

a bull terrier cross—a rescue dog found wandering in the streets of Weeton in Lancashire, and taken to an animal shelter, where my constituent and her husband fell in love with her and took her home.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) and the Committee on such a comprehensive set of proposals and summary of how they came to them. The proposals are quite specific. The report, published on 17 October, spurred me to ask the Prime Minister 10 days later what the Government’s response was going to be. Having said to the Prime Minister that I was going to give her some brief relief from Brexit to talk about dogs instead, I said:

“Last week, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee said that the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, with its specific breeds definition, was not fit for purpose, as hundreds of pit bull-type dogs are confiscated yearly and destroyed, with no impact on dog bite numbers. Will she ask the Secretary of State...to act urgently on the Committee’s recommendations and not take the approach of the Lords Minister, who told the Committee that even a good-tempered dog had to be put down as ‘collateral damage’? My wonderful bull terrier-type dog was rescued from the streets, and to think of her being destroyed because her face did not fit in court is chilling.”

The Prime Minister was positive in her response:

“I had not looked at the detail of the Select Committee report on that particular issue, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the Secretary of State is a keen dog owner, as indeed is the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who is sitting next to me, and that the Secretary of State will be looking at this issue very carefully.”—[*Official Report*, 24 October 2018; Vol. 648, c. 273.]

I come to the debate today to ask the Minister what the Secretary of State has done to fulfil the Prime Minister’s assurance to me last October, and to make some observations on what has happened since.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton has drawn attention to the need for checks and balances and to the difficulties involved in any Government dealing with this broad range of issues. I want to be positive about one or two parts of the Government’s response, such as the approval for the need for a central database for dog bites and the speeding up of court cases, and their general support for and assurance with respect to the principles of education. However, as the hon. Gentleman said, that is for other Departments, and as a shadow Education Minister, I might be able to take it up with the Department for Education myself.

What I found distressing, disheartening and difficult to understand was why, having heard all the information, the response was so negative in this particular area. I place a great deal of store by what Select Committees do—I declare another interest: I was on several of them, for about 10 years. As the hon. Gentleman said, most of the time they are very cohesive and collaborative, and they and the Government should work on the basis of evidence-driven policy. Unfortunately, in this Government response, that approach seems to be notably lacking.

It is slightly beyond belief that nowhere in the response did the Government address the issues of consultation. That is what the Committee was asking for. I can well imagine the “Yes Minister”-style conversations that might have gone on in the Department: “We do not want to address the substantial evidence in the Committee’s report, Minister, that shows mission creep, which sometimes condemns a wide range of pit bull dogs in this area. Minister, we have a perfectly reasonable argument—there are so many other things to think about in the context

of Brexit—so why do we not just try to ride it out, with the usual excuses about it not being a priority or not having enough legislative time?” Perhaps that is why that is exactly what they did.

On page 7, paragraph 22, on the very modest proposal by the Committee

“to amend the law to allow prohibited dogs which have no previous court approved owner to be rehomed, or to transfer a prohibited dog to people who have had no contact with the dog” the Government said that that

“would require an amendment to the DDA and the supporting secondary legislation. The Government does not consider that it is a priority to amend legislation at this time.”

I can only say that given the stasis that there has been in the House in the last few weeks, they might want to revisit that particular reason for doing nothing. That was one of the Committee’s modest proposals.

We have had no consultation, as well as the complete ignoring of what the Committee had said, but, so that the Department did not appear to be ignoring the Committee’s thrust entirely, perhaps it thought, “What can we cherry-pick that suits us and means we do not have to do anything?” In paragraph 15, we have a classic twisting of something that the Committee never suggested, but which allows the Department silkily to slip in—tucked away, and without further justification of the policy—the fact that the Government “notes and agrees” with the Committee that it would not be right to implement the process immediately. The Committee never considered implementing it immediately, but on that basis:

“The Government considers that the prohibition on possession of such dogs should remain in place for reasons of maintaining public safety.”

That is an absolutely classic non-sequitur and it has not impressed the various animal charities that have given focused and comprehensive evidence to the Committee. In response to Members of Parliament on that debate and the Government’s response, Blue Cross said:

“We were... disappointed that Defra’s response failed to address some of the key welfare issues surrounding dangerous dogs and responsible dog ownership, and its refusal to consider repealing section 1 is an issue of great concern to Blue Cross and many members of the public.”

It went on to mention that even dogs that are in the index of exempted dogs are sometimes likely to suffer long-term welfare implications as a result of the conditions that are put on them and their owners.

Dogs Trust said something very similar. It is

“highly concerned about the impact of the current legislation on dog welfare”

and the protracted periods dogs could spend in kennels during the court process. It had serious concerns about how subjective the interpretation of the standard for identifying pit bull terriers can be, and about how a dog can be deemed dangerous based on physical appearance in itself. Battersea dogs and cats home said it was disappointed that the Government had chosen to disregard the Committee’s recommendation to review breed-specific legislation and whether breed is a factor in causing dog fights.

In the evidence session involving the Lords, the Minister’s colleague, Lord Gardiner, and the deputy director of DEFRA were quizzed very strongly on section 1 of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991. Their answers clearly did not impress the Committee, and in response the Committee stated at paragraph 22 of its report:

“We were concerned to hear that the Government considered the Dangerous Dogs Act to be successful on the grounds that it was impossible to tell how many attacks would have occurred without the law. This is not convincing... The increase in attacks—most of them from legal breeds—clearly indicates that the current approach is failing to protect the public adequately.”

The hon. Gentleman supplemented his concerns about the welfare of dogs with his concerns about the welfare of humans. This is not just an unevidenced and disproportionate application in the Act; it is missing some of the main points that are necessary to give the public confidence. That is why the Committee asked for the independent review of the Act’s effectiveness, which the Department has studiously ignored. It is also why the comments in the report came down rather hard on the Department. The Committee stated:

“We are concerned that Defra’s arguments in favour of maintaining Breed Specific Legislation are not substantiated by robust evidence. It is even more worrying that non-existent evidence appears to have been cited before a Parliamentary Committee in support of current Government policy. This lack of clarity indicates a disturbing disregard for evidence-based policy-making.”

It goes on to talk about the independent review.

I said that there were aspects of the Government’s evidence that were chilling, and I want to quote one of them. It might be the same one that the hon. Gentleman, who chairs the Select Committee, referred to earlier—the case of the Battersea dog that was put down. On this occasion, after the Committee had heard evidence of how difficult it is to classify or identify pit bulls genetically, and that seizure could sweep up other dogs simply on the basis of appearance, the Chair of the Committee said:

“To get to the point about the Battersea dog that was put down, as far as you are concerned, that is just collateral damage. It was a pit bull type and it may have been good-tempered, but as far as you are concerned, just put it down. Is that where you are?”

Lord Gardiner, the Minister in the Lords, replied, “Yes.” So, it is not surprising that 80,000 people have signed a petition to this House—hopefully for the removal, but certainly for the examination, of what seems to be an extraordinarily defective part of the law.

The hon. Gentleman made the point that, when changing the law, Governments have to be very careful about unintended consequences and so on. However, it is worth remembering the climate that brought about the Dangerous Dogs Act. I will not go into the details, but in my view this is a perfect illustration of hard cases making bad law.

There is a way out for the Minister to rid himself of the incubus of complacency and callousness that he has been lumbered with in trying to defend the shameful response from his Department to the Select Committee’s measured and humane representations. The Department’s response largely ducks the Select Committee’s call for an independent evidence review on the factors behind canine aggression, because that would mean admitting the inadequacies in the evidence base for the original Act.

The defence given in the Select Committee’s report included a reference—the hon. Gentleman has referred to it—to the Middlesex University research that has been commissioned by the Department. Why not use this commission, which has already been set up, to widen the terms of reference for that research and review the adequacy of the breed-determinant evidence that justified four types of dog being included in the Act in the first place? That would cut the Gordian knot the Department has tied itself up in. Why not give a deadline

[Gordon Marsden]

before the end of the year for there to be some answers to what the Select Committee is asking? If the Minister and his Department need a face-saving mechanism and a deadline, let this be it. That would be far better than continuing the evidence-poor status quo on breed determination, which has condemned thousands of dogs in those categories for 30 years, and which the Select Committee's report shines such a poignant light on.

This issue has aroused strong passions and it affects many personally. One of my constituents, Helen Harris, supports an end to breed-specific legislation. In an email sent to me on 1 March, she gives her perspective on what she saw when the Act was introduced:

"I worked in a pet shop in 1991 and we had quite a few customers with pitbulls and I remember the devastation this law caused. We allowed people to bring dogs into the shop and every pitbull I met was friendly and happy. Once the law came in and the dogs were no longer allowed off the lead in public places and had to wear a muzzle the dogs noticeably changed. I did not live with these dogs and only saw them when they were brought into the shop but they all went from calm happy dogs to very unhappy dogs in a few weeks, some of them were very hyperactive because of the decrease in exercise. They had done nothing wrong and did not know why they were being punished. Breed specific law is not working."

I understand that that has to be weighed up against all the other issues, but this issue will not go away. Dogs might have been man's best friend, but man has not always been dog's best friend. In this case, the Department has certainly not been dogs' best friend. It is crucial for us to reduce the terrible toll meted out to children and adults year after year, to which the hon. Gentleman referred, but this is actually being aided and abetted by the misidentification of the causes of this particular position.

We are taking about statistics, but we should be talking about individual animals. Blue Cross cited the case study of a section 1 dog called Duncan:

"Duncan was brought to us as an injured stray. Unfortunately the Status Dogs Unit (SDU) confirmed he was of type and would have to be euthanised after serving his stray days. Staff who dealt with Duncan described him as a gentle giant who was very well behaved. He knew basic commands and had he been another type of dog would have made a great companion to someone. Duncan was put to sleep at our central London hospital after the mandatory period of seven days, during which no owner came forward."

That should lie heavily on the Department's conscience; the Minister should consider it.

My dog Tweed was fortunate, as she was picked up from the animal shelter within seven days. Duncan was not. Perhaps we need a Duncan's law to rectify some of the problems and injustices that this excellent Select Committee report has highlighted.

2.20 pm

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I am sure that hon. Members will remember that last July we had a similar debate in this Chamber, on breed-specific legislation and Staffies. Many of the concerns that have been discussed today were raised then. Following that debate, I am pleased to see such an excellent report from the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. I thank its Chair, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), for clearly outlining the report and the Committee's concerns about the current legislation.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) for making such an important contribution and for making some interesting suggestions to the Department about how we can move the situation forward.

There are two main issues in the report that we must address. The first relates to public health. The Government's current approach to dog control is failing to protect people adequately. The second relates to animal welfare. Too many harmless dogs are being destroyed simply because they are a banned breed—because of what they look like—regardless of their temperament. There can be no denying that, since the Dangerous Dogs Act came into force nearly three decades ago, more people have been killed by dog attacks, and more people are being admitted to hospital due to dog bites. I have spoken to the Communication Workers Union, and I understand that about 3,000 postal workers are attacked by dogs every year. The union has very much welcomed the Committee's report.

The hon. Members who have spoken have given examples of dogs that have been put down when they were in rescue centres. Last year I launched the Labour party's animal welfare plan. When I visited the RSPCA's Harmsworth animal hospital, I met Bailey—a really lovely dog who could definitely have been rehomed to the right owner. I actually asked whether I could take him home myself, because I could not bear the thought that that beautiful dog was going to be put down, but sadly that could not happen because he had been typed. Tragically, he was put to sleep the week after my visit. I personally find that very hard.

We had a consultation after we launched our animal welfare plan, and we had a huge response to it. Many of the responses referred to breed-specific legislation, which we had not actually put in the plan. Dog owners and rescue centres asked us to consider looking at the issue in any future policy documents that we put out on animal welfare.

We must be a lot more pragmatic when it comes to banning certain dogs based just on their breed. As the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton said, we must recognise that all dogs can bite. Any dog can be dangerous in the wrong hands, regardless of breed or type, or the fact that they look a certain way. Any action to tackle dog bites, and all other instances of canine aggression, as the hon. Gentleman said, must focus on the deed, not the breed.

The RSPCA told the Select Committee that it believes that breed-specific legislation is ineffective in protecting public safety, and results in the suffering and euthanasia of many dogs unnecessarily. It believes that breed-specific legislation should be repealed, and that issues surrounding human safety should be tackled using education and effective legislative measures that do not unnecessarily compromise dog welfare. The RSPCA told me that in recent years, in order to comply with the legislation, it has euthanised hundreds of dogs. We have heard that many other rescue centres have had to do the same. Many of those dogs, like Bailey, would have been suitable for rehoming.

DEFRA's figures show that no dogs on the index of exempted dogs have actually been involved in an attack. As the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) said, this is not working. Why are we putting down healthy, innocent dogs from rescue centres simply because they are a particular breed when we have no evidence to prove that

there is a problem? We must look at the reform of dog control legislation. We should introduce education to ensure that high-risk behaviour towards dogs is avoided. All severe and fatal dog bites must be properly investigated.

I visited Battersea dogs and cats home and, like the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton, saw a beautiful dog that the home said was perfectly able to be rehomed, waiting for the police to come to take it away to be euthanised. Battersea said very strongly to me that the Dangerous Dogs Act is completely ineffective at protecting the public. It is arguing for the abolition or reform of BSL, and has called it a sticking plaster that does not prevent harm. It wants the Government to amend the legislation to ensure that dogs are not put down simply because of the way they look.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South said, the current law is not supported by scientific evidence. The Select Committee criticised the Government about that, stating that their lack of clarity when it comes to robust evidence

“indicates a disturbing disregard for evidence-based policy making”. I think that is extremely worrying.

It is absolutely right that we have proper engagement processes and education in place to help the public to understand dog behaviour and responsible ownership much better. The Chair of the Select Committee talked about getting people into primary schools to teach children about how to behave with and understand dogs. That is incredibly important.

I have a dog—my family has always had dogs—so I know at first hand that being a pet owner is terribly rewarding but a huge responsibility. Anybody taking on a pet needs to recognise that. The dogs that I have had have always been large dogs, from Irish wolfhounds to Dalmatians, and I currently have a Labrador. It is really important to train and socialise big dogs properly, because in the wrong hands every dog has the potential to injure either people or other animals. We must focus on ownership, rather than on the type of dog.

Prevention through education, responsible ownership and early intervention is clearly a better, more holistic approach than slapping a blanket ban on certain dog breeds and saying that that is the way to protect the public. As the rising figures show, it is not. Evidence presented to the inquiry shows that human factors play a prominent role in many dog attacks, so we must ensure that dogs have responsible owners.

I want to talk briefly about livestock worrying, which the Committee's report touches on. This is an issue about which the National Farmers Union, and farmers generally, are very concerned. It is a particular problem in my constituency in Cumbria. It is thought that, in 2016, 15,000 sheep were killed in livestock attacks. The cost to the farming sector is about £1.6 million a year. Sheep worrying can have a devastating impact on small hill farmers, such as those in my constituency. Responsible ownership is critical. Livestock worrying often happens because a dog has escaped or because the owners simply do not believe that their dog will be dangerous when it is around sheep. People say, “My dog is a Labrador; it is not going to do any damage.”

Neil Parish: I thank the shadow Minister for talking about sheep worrying. Many members of the general public do not always understand that the dog does not

actually need to be dangerous; it just needs to run through the sheep. The sheep will run from it and very often wind up in a ditch. The sheep might be heavily in lamb. If there are several dogs together, they actually think that they are playing half the time, and although they may not actually be vicious, they still have a hugely detrimental effect on that flock of sheep.

Sue Hayman: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. In an area such as Cumbria, where I live, many visitors are perhaps not used to being with their dogs in the countryside and around sheep. The education aspect of the issue is absolutely critical, because I do not think that those people appreciate the damage that can be done simply by allowing a dog to run amok among a flock of sheep. We really need to raise awareness of the issue and look at how we can tackle it. I know that the all-party parliamentary group on animal welfare produced an excellent report last year on livestock worrying, and I ask the Minister to look at it and consider its recommendations on how to tackle the problem.

The Select Committee's report is very clear in its recommendation that changing the law is widely desirable but also achievable, and that it will protect the public much better than the status quo. Let us get the legislation right in order to protect both the public and dogs. We need the right education in place, and we need to focus on how we can tackle irresponsible dog owners, not just the dogs. I look forward to the Minister's response. I hope that he has paid close attention to the recommendations of this excellent report. It would be good if we could finally start to move the issue forward.

2.31 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Gray. I am grateful to the Liaison Committee for determining as the subject of the debate the EFRA Committee's report on controlling dangerous dogs and the Government response to it. I am also grateful for the thoughtful and considered contributions that have been made in this debate, which although not one of quantity, has certainly been one of quality. I know that those contributions have been made with conviction, first-hand experience and considerable passion, not least that of my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), which is characteristic of him.

I will provide some information on the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 and the Government's position on breed-specific legislation. The 1991 Act does two things: it provides offences in connection with fighting dogs and offences in connection with dog attacks on people and other animals. Section 1 prohibits four types of fighting dogs: pit bull terriers, Japanese tosa, Fila Brasileiro and Dogo Argentino.

Pit bulls have been associated with a number of serious attacks on people and it was decided that action should be taken against their ownership. Fundamentally, the 1991 Act is about public safety. Under that Act, it is an offence to breed from, sell or exchange those dogs. Courts can allow owners to keep prohibited dogs if they are not a danger to public safety, taking account of the dog's temperament and of the intended keeper, who must have had substantial prior responsibility for the dog.

Neil Parish: The Minister is addressing the crux of the matter. When courts deal with dangerous dogs that have owners, they look at the temperament of the dog and say, "That dog can be kept by the owner as long as it is properly muzzled, leashed and handled." The problem occurs when the same type of dog, with the same temperament, turns up in a rehoming centre that can no longer look after it. It has to be checked, but nobody will actually take the case to court, meaning that the dog will potentially be destroyed. That is exactly the type of dog that could be saved if it still had an owner. Instead, it is put down because it has gone into a rehoming centre. That is the real problem.

David Rutley: I thank my hon. Friend for clarifying. He spelled that out very well in his speech and, with his permission, I will come to that specific point later, but I think it is important to set the context before getting into the meat of the issues that have been raised.

Prohibited dogs that owners are allowed to keep are placed on the index of exempted dogs, which is managed by DEFRA. In addition to restrictions on certain fighting dogs, under section 3 of the 1991 Act it is an offence to allow any dog to be dangerously out of control in any place. Severe penalties are in place for allowing a dog to be dangerously out of control. Those penalties were increased in 2014 to three years for allowing a dog to attack an assistance dog, five years if a dog injures someone and 14 years if someone is killed. We realised from the tragic cases that we had seen that the sentences needed to be more in line with the crimes committed.

Both my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) were absolutely right to raise the issue of postal workers. We need to get the balance right between public safety and animal welfare. The number of attacks on postal workers is absolutely to be regretted. It is unacceptable that people are unable to go about their business because of fear or actual attacks. We therefore work closely with police and local authorities to see how we can best respond to those attacks. I am sure that many MPs have worked with their local postal workers at Christmas or at other times of the year to better understand those situations and to make representations.

The Government are committed to public safety and to tackling the issue of dangerous dogs. We believe that communication and co-operation between the police and local authorities is vital. That is why we have endorsed initiatives such as the early intervention and partnership working scheme, Local Environmental Awareness on Dogs, or LEAD—that is not one of my hon. Friend's puns, but the name of the scheme.

The scheme encourages police and local authorities to co-operate and share information when there has been a minor incident, provide advice to a dog owner on dog control issues, improve public safety around dogs and help to improve dog welfare. There have been strong endorsements of the initiative. The then deputy chief constable of North Wales police and recently retired National Police Chiefs' Council lead on dangerous dogs, Gareth Pritchard, said:

"Problems regarding dogs can cause a great deal of anxiety in some communities. The new LEAD initiative aims to allay some of these fears to help educate dog owners and residents further by promoting responsible dog ownership."

The Government also support an increase in awareness at all levels across society. We are aware, for example, that many police forces and welfare charities, such as the Dogs Trust, visit schools to raise awareness of responsible dog ownership. We fully endorse that work and I will come to how we will do more on the back of the EFRA Committee's excellent report. I want to make it clear that the Government are keen to tackle irresponsible dog ownership. As I have explained, a number of changes were made to the laws and powers available to enforcement agencies in an attempt to improve responsible ownership of dogs. The Government acknowledge that the number of people admitted to hospital as a result of being bitten by a dog has risen from 6,836 in 2013-14 to 8,014 in 2017-18.

A number of concerns have been raised about whether it is fair to put particular focus on pit bulls, but as a nation we are not alone in doing so: France, Spain and Germany have also put restrictions on keeping a number of types of dog, including pit bulls. It is also worth looking at some of the evidence that I have seen and that has been submitted to my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton in his capacity as Chair of the Select Committee, about section 3 incidents—the particularly difficult ones—involving pit bulls. There were 92 such cases in 2015-16, and those pit bulls were not on the dangerous dogs index. In comparison, there were 84 attacks by Staffordshire bull terriers.

We could say, "Well, there is not much difference," but I think we would all accept that the number of Staffordshire bull terriers in the UK is sizeable—around 300,000, according to the latest estimates—whereas, although we do not know the exact number of pit bulls, there are about 3,000 on the DDI. We probably need to get more evidence, but the evidence that is to hand points to the fact that there is a greater likelihood of incidents involving pit bulls.

Gordon Marsden: That is what the Department says, but is it not ludicrous that it does not openly address the issue—it is an issue, and one that was put forcefully to the Committee—that it is very difficult for police on the ground to determine genetically what is a pit bull and what is not? The Minister spoke about Staffordshire bull terriers. What is the logic for having an investigation into attacks by pit bulls, which are covered by the Act—albeit many of us dispute that—and not into attacks by Staffordshire bull terriers?

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. Interventions should be brief.

Gordon Marsden: If the Minister looks only at the issue of the breeds in the 1991 Act, he will of course come to the same conclusion, because he is not examining the broader evidence.

David Rutley: I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman makes. When I appeared before the Select Committee, I said that we should remember that the Dangerous Dogs Act is trying to deal with two things: fighting types, which are bred specifically to fight, and dangerous dogs. That is my worry. The hon. Gentleman might have had cases of this in his constituency and, as I said at the meeting, I certainly did in Macclesfield, where a few years ago pit bulls were being trained to hang from tree branches. That is not what most people do with a normal dog. Certain types of dog are bred for

a specific purpose, and that needs to be tackled, because there are people who carry out that practice, which I abhor. Dog fighting is a separate issue, and we could have a separate debate on it. The legislation tries to recognise both those aspects. I understand his point, but I hope that he understands at least that there are differences in why dogs are being bred. As long as dog fighting goes on, there will be such challenges.

We understand the concern about dog control and the need to reduce the number of dog attacks. People are of course not the only victims of dog attacks; other dogs and animals can be the victims of such attacks. Dog attacks on livestock have caused suffering to animals and misery for farmers, and we want to reduce all such attacks and to improve responsible ownership of dogs. That point was made well by the hon. Member for Workington and my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton.

I emphasise that section 3 of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 also applies to attacks on other dogs, livestock and any other animal, and the High Court and the Crown Prosecution Service have made that clear. There has been a lot of talk about amending the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) Act 1953, but our advice is to use the Dangerous Dogs Act because it is more up to date and applies anywhere. We are working with the CPS and the police to ensure a universally accepted position on that, which we will promote.

The Government do not want to reduce dog ownership. Dogs have been a part of our lives for hundreds of years, and we certainly do not want to change that. However, owning a dog comes with responsibilities. Ownership means that we have to provide a dog with its welfare needs—at all times—and that a dog must be trained. The owner is responsible for looking after the dog as well as its behaviour. The more irresponsible ownership of dogs we have, the more calls we and local authorities receive to introduce restrictions such as banning dogs from parks and beaches. The Government therefore agree with the vast majority of good, proper owners and stakeholders that we need more responsible ownership of dogs if we are to see a reduction in the number of dog attacks.

Last year, the EFRA Committee conducted its review into controlling dangerous dogs. The review focused on section 1 of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991. The report was welcomed by the Government and, again, I take the opportunity to thank my hon. Friend, the Select Committee Chair, and the rest of the Committee for publishing the report. We are all in agreement that we are not looking to increase the number of types of dogs that are named in the legislation, nor are we looking to remove any types.

The report made 16 recommendations to improve dog ownership and reduce dog attacks. The Government responded positively to the recommendations, which reflects how in tune the Government, the Committee and most stakeholders are on the issue of dangerous dogs. There are, obviously, a few exceptions, which came out in the debate today, but on the vast majority of issues we all want to see positive progress. The EFRA Committee's report was published in September 2018 and the Government's response was published by the Select Committee in January this year. Last month, the Committee had another sitting, also on dangerous dogs.

I will take this opportunity to update hon. Members on the Government's progress with some of the recommendations. Rehoming of pit bulls is an emotive and difficult issue. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton—instead of Tiverton, I keep almost saying Tytherington, which is in my constituency—I do not want to see healthy and well-adjusted dogs being put to sleep. For the reasons I have set out, however, we are subject to what is legally possible. Recent case law has interpreted the legislation, so the court may decide to give possession of a pit bull to a person who has had some contact with it, such as taking the dog for a walk. Ultimately, the courts will make the decision on whether the dog is safe, and the prospective person is fit and proper.

The difficulty is putting a stray dog that has no owner with a person the dog has not met before the court case. That is not feasible under the law. We continue to discuss with stakeholders what can be done, and we will involve my hon. Friend in those discussions, as I promised following my recent evidence to the Committee. We are happy to meet him and relevant welfare groups for further discussion and greater clarity. It is a tricky area, but the case law needs to be explored fully. I hope that my hon. Friend will accept the invitation to meet as sincere. He knows that I want us to do all we can to address the concerns that he has expressed.

In the course of the debate, a number of specific issues were raised. If the owner of a dog dies, it can be transferred under article 12 of the Dangerous Dogs Exemption Schemes (England and Wales) Order 2015. If an owner moves and abandons a dog, it can be rehomed to a person who can be considered the person in charge of that dog for the time being—but remember that abandoning a dog is in the first place a criminal act. If someone got to know the dog before the owner moved—this is important, with an educational aspect—that person could apply to be the person in charge of the dog, and the new person would need to be considered fit and proper by the court. There are opportunities therefore for such dogs to be rehomed. We need to look through all such opportunities.

The hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) asked why we are not recommending a change in the law. That would require primary legislation and, as I said, there are concerns about public safety. We need to explore the issues that we have just discussed. However, I point out that while there may be disagreement on that issue, the Government are absolutely committed to the welfare of dogs and cats: we have looked to increase sentences for animal cruelty, and are trying to find the right legislative vehicle to do so quickly; third-party sale has been banned; and we are reviewing our approach to the licensing of rehoming centres. All those issues are being taken forward with conviction.

Continuing the theme of preventive action, the EFRA Committee recommended more research on the causes of dog attacks. In December 2018, therefore, DEFRA in collaboration with Middlesex University commissioned further research into responsible ownership across all dog breeds, with a budget of more than £70,000. Middlesex has five main researchers to consider different approaches and the effectiveness of existing dog control measures.

The research seeks to identify and examine factors and situations that might cause dog attacks, and how to promote responsible dog ownership. The initial stage of the project, which is a literature review, is nearly complete.

[David Rutley]

Middlesex has started initial stakeholder engagement to inform a number of focus groups, which is the next phase. We expect an interim report at the beginning of September, with a final report at the end of the year. I hope that reassures my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton. The project, as I said, will include a review of dog control measures.

Related to that research is the need to educate children in particular, and the public more widely, about safety around dogs. The Government are committed to developing a plan of action with stakeholders on the most effective way to reach children across the country, in order to make them aware of dog safety. We have had early discussions with stakeholders and are developing the delivery plan, which is due later this year. We are working with the Department for Education, and are keen to ensure that that links with our wider work on communications and engagement about how to take forward responsible ownership and purchasing of dogs, and education regarding them.

Hon. Members can be assured that the Government will continue to take forward the actions I set out in response to the EFRA Committee with speed and conviction. I am grateful to the Liaison Committee for bringing this debate forward and giving me the opportunity to set out the Government's position and proposals.

2.50 pm

Neil Parish: I thank all Members who have spoken. I thank the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) for his thoughtful contribution and support for the report, as well as the hon. Members for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and for Workington (Sue Hayman). From the tone of the speeches, it is apparent that there is cross-party support for some change to the Dangerous Dogs Act. I thank the Minister for his very humane response, because this is a humane issue.

In the Select Committee we have tried not to be too demanding. We perhaps started out wanting to repeal the Act entirely, but did not end up with that conclusion. I restate that similar dogs to those that go to rehoming centres and are put down because they cannot be rehomed are allowed to be kept, under licence, but the original owners. Blue Cross, Dogs Trust, Battersea dogs home and the RSPCA need to be confident that there is a system that allows them legally to rehome that dog. That is why I look forward to meeting the Minister and officials to try to get a legal basis for that.

I do not think the Government are necessarily hiding behind breed-specific legislation, but those four particular breeds, mainly pit bulls, account for 20% of attacks. The other 80% are by other dogs. Therefore it is about education, management of dogs, responsible dog ownership and getting to those sectors of society that create dangerous dogs. They may not be pit bull types, because it is the way they are treated that makes them dangerous.

There is a lot of work to be done, because we do not want more postal workers to be attacked or for the number of dog bites to keep going up as they have. Again, I thank the Minister for his engagement. The Select Committee, the Opposition and the Government can make the law work much better, and I hope that fewer dogs of good temperament will be put down in future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Ninth Report of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, Controlling dangerous dogs, HC 1040, and the Government response, HC 1892.

2.53 pm

Sitting suspended.

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Short Prison Sentences

[PHILIP DAVIES *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the cost and effectiveness of sentences under 12 months and consequences for the prison population.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for this debate, which follows several others with a similar theme in the past few weeks, including a debate on the effectiveness of short sentences led by my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans), and one on the recall of women prisoners led by my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris). That shows the appetite across the House for discussing these important issues.

As a member of the Select Committee on Justice, I am proud of our “Transforming Rehabilitation” report, which was published last summer and included a recommendation that the Government should introduce a presumption against short sentences. I welcome the recent news that the Secretary of State wishes the emphasis to move away from the short sentencing model, but although the policy direction of the Ministry of Justice seems centred on sentences of six months or less, I believe we should consider the costs and consequences of sentences of up to 12 months, and enshrine a presumption against them in law.

In 2017, more than 37,000 people entered prison to serve a sentence of less than 12 months. The short time available often means there is little opportunity adequately to address the needs of that population, with limited access to offending behaviour programmes, education and work. Research by the Revolving Doors Agency showed that nearly half of all people sent to prison are sent there for less than six months, and that the overwhelming majority are imprisoned for non-violent offences.

I do not dispute that offenders who have committed serious or violent crimes, or those who pose a risk to society, should often be given a custodial sentence, but four out of every five people sent to prison last year had committed a non-violent crime. Most reasonable people expect jail terms to deliver rehabilitation for offenders and a clear means to reduce reoffending, as well as punishment.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this significant debate and making such a powerful speech. I have information that replacing custodial sentences of less than six months for theft and non-violent drug offences with effective community sentences could save the public millions of pounds.

Ellie Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for that important intervention. She is absolutely right that handing out short sentences is a false economy. I will say more about that later, but as she rightly identifies, it is clear that the current system of short sentences is failing with respect to rehabilitation and reoffending.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. One thing that troubles me is the use of short custodial sentences after

a pattern of repeat offending, where people go from fines straight to custody, with little evidence that community penalties, and particularly supervision orders, have been tried along the way. Does she agree that it would be useful if the Government had a particularly careful look at why that is happening and whether there is a lack of confidence in community penalties among sentencers?

Ellie Reeves: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about escalation to prison sentences instead of increased use of community sentences. Community sentences have halved in the past decade. Again, I will talk a little more about that, because it is really important that we have robust and effective community sentences, and that sentencers have the confidence to hand those sentences out.

The Secretary of State has admitted that shorter sentences do not work. The Ministry’s data shows that adults released from custodial sentences of less than 12 months had a proven reoffending rate of 64%, compared with the overall rate of 29%, yet it has been shown that offenders serving a community sentence typically have a reoffending rate seven percentage points lower than similar people serving prison sentences of less than a year. Those with suspended sentence orders have a reoffending rate nine percentage points lower. The emphasis needs to be on better rehabilitation in the community.

It is clear from the issuing of four urgent notifications on squalid prisons and countless news reports about falling standards that the prison system is failing offenders and the public. It is uncomfortably apparent that committing offenders to custody can cause further issues, which may arise only during an offender’s stay in prison. Her Majesty’s chief inspector of prisons recently published a report on standards at HMP Durham. Nearly a third of prisoners surveyed said they had developed a drug problem while in prison, 66% of prisoners said they had mental health problems, and many more said they felt depressed or suicidal on arrival in custody. Some 70% of prisoners at HMP Durham were in custody on remand or following recall, and three quarters of the population had been at the prison for less than six months. Those are precisely the kinds of prisoner so disproportionately and negatively impacted by the current model of short sentencing.

Like a lot of the prison estate, HMP Durham is a Victorian building in need of repair, where prisoners are kept in rooms that are falling apart, and often unclean, and are provided with little stimulating activity or purposeful rehabilitation. Sadly, HMP Durham is not alone. A year ago, I visited HMP Rochester with the Justice Committee. That Victorian prison is not fit for purpose, so it was issued with a closure notice, which was later rescinded due to MOJ cuts. When we visited, we were told that lessons had to be cancelled when it rained because there was a leak in the classroom roof, and the drug rehab programme had stopped because the prison thought it was closing down.

More recently, we visited HMP Birmingham—a prison so bad that the private contractor, G4S, had to hand back control to Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service. The recent inspections at HMPs Nottingham, Wormwood Scrubs, Wandsworth and Bedford all showed that problems with safety and overcrowding are particularly acute at local prisons, where large numbers of people are often held for short periods. A reduction in the use of short prison sentences could significantly reduce

[Ellie Reeves]

overcrowding, particularly in local prisons, which in turn might help restore the standards of decency that the Minister has called for.

In monetary terms, it costs nearly £40,000 a year to keep someone in prison. The point at which prisoners enter the prison system is often the most costly and labour intensive and, given recent falls in prison officer numbers, it can often divert resources from where they might be needed elsewhere on the prison estate.

On the day before International Women's Day, it is important to recognise that restricting the use of short custodial sentences is particularly important to achieve a reduction in the female prison population. In 2017, some 7,185 women in England and Wales were sentenced to immediate custody. Of those women, 68% were sentenced to less than six months and 26% to less than one month. Women's offending is often linked to underlying mental health needs, drug and alcohol addiction, and domestic abuse. Many have caring responsibilities, and at least 17,000 children are affected by maternal imprisonment each year. Despite those children having committed no crime, their lives are often uprooted. They end up in care, having to lose their home, their school and their family. The human and emotional cost is immeasurable.

Kate Green: Will my hon. Friend therefore join me in welcoming the inquiry being undertaken by the Joint Committee on Human Rights? The Committee is looking specifically at the impact on children of their mother's imprisonment, whether the law should be changed or strengthened to protect children, and whether sentencers should have a different presumption in those circumstances.

Ellie Reeves: I absolutely agree. We know that parental imprisonment is considered an adverse childhood experience, which we hear so much about at the moment. That inquiry is really timely. It is important that we look at this issue very carefully and question whether prison is the right place for women to be much of the time. Women released from prison are likely to reoffend, and reoffend more quickly, than those serving community sentences. Some 48% of women are reconvicted within one year of leaving prison, which rises to 61% for sentences of less than 12 months.

Reducing reoffending has a clear cost benefit not only to Ministry of Justice budgets, but to police budgets, local services and beyond. The failures in our prison system, not least due to the 40% real-terms cut forced on the Ministry's budgets and the profound problems with the privatisation of the probation service, have left that system in disarray.

Last Friday, the National Audit Office published yet another critical report on the Government's transforming rehabilitation programme. It stated that not only has the Ministry of Justice failed to achieve the wider objectives of its original reforms, but that those failures were leading to significant numbers of prisoner recalls and that through-the-gate was wholly ineffective. The NAO report suggests that the Ministry of Justice will pay at least £467 million more than was required under the original community rehabilitation company contracts in completely avoidable bailouts. Worryingly, the full costs will not be known until at least December 2020. It is clear that the current model does not work for taxpayers or offenders.

We need meaningful community sentences, far more robust than the CRC-monitored rehabilitation that we have at the moment where offenders too often just have supervision on the telephone rather than face to face, and missed appointments go unchecked. The Government make the right noises, but clear action is required. As the Prison Reform Trust's latest Bromley briefing succinctly states:

"Short prison sentences are less effective than community sentences at reducing reoffending. Yet, the use of community sentences has more than halved in only a decade", falling from 193,000 to 91,000 over a decade.

The Ministry of Justice's own research has shown that community sentences are particularly effective for people who have committed a large number of previous offences and for those with mental health problems. For those with more than 50 previous offences, the odds of reoffending are more than a third higher when a short prison sentence is used rather than a community sentence. Another piece of research by the Ministry of Justice, published in 2017, found that providing treatment for drug and alcohol addictions in the community has also been shown to reduce reoffending. More than two fifths did not reoffend and there was a 33% reduction in the number of offences committed in the two years following treatment. As much as the instinct is to think that repeat offending must mean harsher sentences, that is not what the evidence suggests we should do. Policy must be evidence-led if we are to expect results, and the current approach is too costly and too ineffective to continue following the short sentencing model.

There is the question of the cost of the failures around short custodial sentences not only to prisons and wider Ministry of Justice budgets, but to other Departments and society as a whole. Short sentences can see prisoners lose their homes, their jobs and their family ties. Combined with the failure of the through-the-gate initiative, the impact and effect of prison last much longer than any original custodial sentence.

To be given a custodial sentence is one thing, but to have all the means to reduce the propensity to reoffend and to get back on with life removed in the short time that someone is in prison is quite another, and it has far longer and wider-ranging consequences than the original sentence. One of the most fundamental issues is that of housing. The link between rough sleeping and prison leavers is deeply concerning, and short sentencing does nothing but exacerbate the issue. The latest figures from the Combined Homelessness and Information Network show that 36% of rough sleepers in London have been in prison—up 3% on last year.

Colleagues have also repeatedly raised concerns and frustrations with Friday releases from prisons as prisoners are unable to contact housing providers until Monday morning or get a prescription to deal with an addiction. If someone does not have a place to stay, it is far harder to register with the council or a jobcentre, and offenders are more likely to end up sleeping rough. The most vulnerable might simply immediately return to crime.

The issue is summarised perfectly by a case study from the social justice charity, Nacro:

"C was released on a Friday after serving a 4 week sentence with a history of homelessness. Given the short amount of time spent in custody, it was not enough time for us to source stable housing for him on release. C had to present at the local authority to make a homelessness application and was told to come back the next week for an appointment. C slept rough that weekend."

Short sentences do not work. They very often increase rather than decrease reoffending rates. They can tear families apart and put pressure on a crumbling prison system with very little benefit. They have failed. The Government have been making the right noises, but I hope they will now follow in the direction of Scotland and seek to enshrine in law a presumption against short sentences of 12 months or less, backed up with robust, effective and properly funded community sentences.

3.15 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) on securing the debate, and I extend my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee. She also had the support of the Justice Committee. The debate stems from our “Prison Population 2022” inquiry, which looks at the make-up of the current prison population and how it might develop in future. We also produced a report on transforming rehabilitation. I am glad to see the Minister in his place. I appreciate his evidence in relation to our two inquiries. It is also good to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain).

I very much agree with the thrust of what the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge said. Our reports were cross-party and both were unanimous. There is a growing recognition in the House that we need to revise our approach to some aspects of sentencing policy and the way in which we use imprisonment. I am fortified by the nearly 30 years I spent in the criminal justice system as a practising barrister before coming here. I prosecuted as much as I defended. I therefore had a hand in convicting people who sometimes went to prison for long periods of time—deservedly so—and sometimes people who went to prison for short periods. I also defended people who sometimes went to prison for long periods, having been convicted after due process, and deservedly so, and also people who sometimes went to prison for short periods.

I defended and prosecuted people who were sometimes fundamentally dangerous, and in a few instances really quite evil, but in very many instances people who were foolish and had made a series of chaotic and disastrous mistakes in their lives. Some were greedy, some were naive and some were easily led. There was a mixture of reasons. Some needed to be kept out of circulation for some time, but they were a minority. The vast majority were going to have to return to society at some point once they had served their sentence. Regrettably, we have a system that does not do all that it could to make sure that those people change their lives when they get back into the community.

I see our proposals and those put forward by the Secretary of State, which I warmly support, to look again at the way in which we use shorter custodial sentences as absolutely not going soft on crime—quite the reverse. Preventing reoffending is the best possible way of reducing the number of victims. The less reoffending, the fewer victims there are likely to be. That is a desirable state of affairs.

There is a place for punishment in our justice system. People who break the rules against society have to be brought up sharp and must recognise that it is not acceptable. However, the punishment has to be constructive

as well as condign. That is why we need to make sure there is room in our prisons for those who have committed serious offences for which prison is the only appropriate penalty. That will always be the case, but there are many for whom that is not the most appropriate and constructive way forward. We need to be more up front about recognising that.

The debate has a focus on cost-effectiveness. That is worth mentioning because, as well as having a background as a criminal justice practitioner, I am also influenced by being a Conservative and believing in the good use of taxpayers’ money. The way we currently deal with people going through the prison system, particularly in relation to shorter sentences, is not a good use of taxpayers’ money, for the reasons that have been set out.

It is exceedingly expensive to keep people in custody. Sometimes it must happen, with the public policy justification of protection of the public and prevention of crime. However, there are other proper purposes of imprisonment; not just punishment, deterrence and public protection. A recognised purpose of sentencing—I hope that in due course it will be enshrined in statute as a purpose of imprisonment—is reform and rehabilitation. The vast majority of people whom I dealt with were not beyond reformation or rehabilitation, and I think that is true of human society as a whole. However, we do not carry it out effectively, for the reasons that have been set out, and we spend significant amounts of public money. The consequence is high rates of reoffending, which hurts the economy.

As to the social and economic cost of crime, the total cost is about £59 billion. I think that, broadly, the cost attributed specifically to reoffending is about £15 billion to £18 billion. That is the economic cost. There is also a social cost to the victims of reoffending. Both those costs should be treated as important, but at the moment we are not getting there. Were we to make more effective use of our resources, by concentrating on those who need to be inside for a period of time, we could do the proper rehabilitative work that is needed in many cases. There may be some who it will be impossible to turn around, or who it will never be safe to release.

However, such people are a small minority of the population. In the vast majority of cases, if there is sufficient time, there can be rehabilitative work. That can involve education and training—getting people literate so that they can hold down a job—and dealing with what are sometimes significant addiction problems of one kind or another. That weaning-off cannot be done in a short period, and neither can the acquiring of skills to get back into society. Frequently there are underlying mental health or personality issues that need treatment, and those cannot be dealt with in a short period either.

Short sentences do not permit any of those things to be done, and they often disrupt such ties as the offenders have in the community, as the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge pointed out. The Minister and others have rightly observed that the best way to keep people out of trouble and out of offending is a home, a family and a job. The things we equip people with should mean that when they come out they are better placed to achieve those things, but if they already have them, a short sentence is more likely than not to disrupt them.

To do as I have described, we must have credible alternatives. One of my concerns is the decline in sentencer confidence in community sentences that has been noted,

[Robert Neill]

which has been well referenced by many who have given evidence to the Select Committee and, recently, by the former chairman of the Sentencing Council, Lord Justice Treacy, an immensely experienced criminal justice practitioner and judge. That means that there must be a punitive element to community sentences. There has to be some bite to them for sentencers and the public to have faith in them. I do not see the move to community sentences for less serious offences—I do not say non-serious, because I mean those of perhaps lesser gravity—as a soft option. That is not how the approach should be perceived.

The challenge, at the same time as we make better use of prison space, is to come up with tough and viable alternatives that bring home to the offender the fact that they have done wrong and broken their contract with society, but that do so constructively, in a way that enables them to turn their life around. I should have thought that a move in that direction, which I know the Secretary of State and the Minister seek, is to be welcomed and supported. It would be a better use of public resource and, above all, it would produce better social outcomes.

I have said that there is a social reform case for the change in question. Social reform does not belong to one party. There is also a case on the basis of good economics and use of taxpayers' money, which does not belong to one party either. It is interesting to note that an approach that is closer to what we propose, and closer to the direction in which the Minister and Secretary of State wish to go, has been successful under Governments of various political complexions elsewhere in the world. Right-of-centre Governments have adopted the same approach in Germany, the Netherlands and Scandinavia, and the same thing has been done by some Republican governors and state legislatures in parts of the United States. It does not belong to one political side. That point is worth emphasising, because we need a more informed debate about the most cost-effective and socially effective way to use prison. That requires a degree of recognition of the evidence base, which I hope is well set out in the Committee's two reports, across political opinion. I hope that the debate will contribute to that process.

3.26 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) on securing the debate, and it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill). I wholeheartedly agree with much of what he said.

In England and Wales, roughly 83,000 people are presently in prison, and the majority are there for sentences six months or less. In 2017 almost 50,000 offenders were sentenced to custody for six months or less. In England and Wales, we incarcerate 139 people per 100,000 of the population. That is the highest number in Europe. The Netherlands, for example, incarcerates 61 people per 100,000. In Denmark it is 63 people; in Germany it is 76; in Italy it is 99; and in France it is 104. We therefore incarcerate far more people proportionate to the population than those countries.

In the past five years, more than 250,000 custodial sentences of six months or less have been given to offenders. More than 300,000 sentences were for 12 months or less. However, nearly two thirds of those offenders go on to commit a further crime within a year of being released. Clearly, custody is not working for those people. They are the ones whose situation we need to address so that, as well as punishment, there can be rehabilitation that stops them reoffending.

Some 27% of all reoffending is committed by those who have served 12 months or less, and the most common offence for which a sentence is given is shoplifting. More often than not, offenders who shoplift have a drug or alcohol problem, and almost half of the sentences in question are given to women; 60% of female offenders who are convicted of shoplifting are victims themselves—many have been victims of domestic violence and have mental health issues. Part of the problem, therefore, is that we are not addressing those issues. We need to tackle them in order to get to the root of why the offending occurs in the first place.

Kate Green: My hon. Friend is right about the high incidence of short custodial sentences imposed on women for shoplifting. Is he aware of the initiative in Greater Manchester that the police have taken up with some large stores? When a woman is found shoplifting in one of those shops, they can immediately refer her not to the police—and into the criminal justice system—but to our women's centres. Does he agree that that would be a really positive model for the Government to encourage across the whole country?

Bambos Charalambous: I am aware of that initiative. More investment in women's centres would be a great thing that would help to stop reoffending, particularly by female offenders. I support women's centres in their plight; we should provide them with as much funding as we can.

All the evidence shows that there is a strong case for abolishing sentences of six months or less, but we also need to have a robust community order regime. The Revolving Doors Agency made a freedom of information request and found that, of those people sentenced to six months in custody, three in five reported a drug or alcohol problem on arrival in prison, one in four were released homeless, and seven in 10 reoffend within a year of release. Clearly short sentences are not working. In his speech on 18 February, the Secretary of State for Justice said:

“Why would we spend taxpayers' money doing what we know doesn't work, and indeed, makes us less safe?”

I entirely agree with him about that.

I have touched on some of the issues where our investment could help. Accommodation is a big factor. When people leave prison and they are homeless, they are more prone to reoffend. Clearly, the through-the-gate resettlement service has not been working with the probation service, which needs to be looked at. Making sure that prisoners are housed and have accommodation when they leave prison would help prevent reoffending.

Many of the support services that prisoners need when they are released relate to benefits applications. They also need to be looked at, as well as the mental health support that they need. Sometimes people leave prison having had some treatment, but they do not get

treatment further on. Finally—I meant to mention this earlier—when they are in prison people can receive treatment for some of their addictions, but six months is too short a time for them to have the full support they need. All these areas need investment.

The Secretary of State also said in his speech that he supported “smart” justice. I agree with the gist of what he said, but much more needs to be done. There is a place for punishing people. We need prison for serious offenders and it should also be there as a deterrent. There may be an issue with why prison is not working as well as it should do; the reoffending rate is high, and there may be issues about what goes on in prison, the prison estate itself, the fact that there are insufficient prison officers, the prevalence of drugs in prison and various other factors. Clearly, prison is not working for some people.

I suggest that community orders are the best way forward for short sentences. There should be an element of rehabilitation but community orders should be tough, should not be treated as a soft touch, should be fully enforced, and people should be made to fulfil them. Serving them over a longer period of time could also help offenders change their ways.

Community orders would also save us money. The Revolving Doors Agency estimates that community sentences would save £9,237 per prisoner. I am often staggered by the fact that it costs roughly the same amount to send somebody to Eton as to send them to prison. I say let us send them to Eton—that is instead of prison, not as well as prison. These areas need to be looked at. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response. I broadly support what the Secretary of State has set out and I hope he has the courage of his convictions to follow through. We could be in a position where these measures save us money in the long run and we are able to rehabilitate offenders, which has long-term benefits for us all.

3.33 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): One of the greatest changes in my lifetime, and indeed my time in Parliament, has been the growing gulf between the preoccupations of the liberal establishment, and the hopes and fears of the people who have to live with the effects of their doubt-filled and guilt-fuelled erosion of the collective wisdom of ages.

That collective wisdom is given shape by institutions, small and large. There are large institutions, such as the law, Parliament, the Church and the monarchy, and small institutions, such as civil society, families and Burke’s “little platoons”. Sadly, what Burke said about order being the foundation of the good life and a working civil society—

“Good order is the foundation of all things.”—

is a far cry from where Britain is now, as a result of the work of that liberal establishment over the decades.

Too much of urban Britain, in particular, is either brutish or brutalised. When good order and the rule of law is eroded, it is the vulnerable who suffer most, for they, unlike those bourgeois liberals who live gated lives, survive on the frontline of crime. Those vulnerable people are suffering at the hands of violent criminals who are punishing them every day, through the fear they cause and the hurt they do.

Yet we are very sheepish now about punishing the culprits. We have learned so little from the time when I studied criminology, almost 40 years ago. We have continued down the road of seeing crime as an illness to be treated, rather than a malevolent choice to be dealt with.

Kate Green: Will the right hon. Member give way?

Sir John Hayes: I will make this point, and then happily give way. The effect of that is to put great emphasis on the culprit and, by nature, less emphasis on the event and the victims of crime. That is precisely what has happened, and I know the hon. Lady could not possibly want to agree with that.

Kate Green: I do not disagree at all that people’s lives are made a misery by violent and persistent criminals in their community, but I cannot really agree that we have become less willing to take action against criminals, when the prison population has gone from between 42,000 and 43,000 in the mid-1990s to more than 80,000 today.

Sir John Hayes: The hon. Lady is a very distinguished Member of this House, with whom I have worked in the past, so I do not want to suggest in any sense that I am patronising her. However, that could be a measure of either the scale of the problem or of our response to it, and I suggest that it is much more likely to be the former. I have to tell her that the view that is frequently expressed in this House—I put it this way only for the sake of brevity, because it is a little more complex—that we should place greater emphasis on the way we deal with criminals, rather than focusing on the way we support victims and protect those who are at risk of crime, is at odds with the sentiments of most of our constituents.

Robert Neill: I have great respect for my right hon. Friend, and I understand the thrust of where he is coming from, but would he reflect on the fact that the two are not mutually exclusive? It is not mutually exclusive to have concern for the victims of crime and, at the same, to consider that one very potent means of having concern for victims of crime is to ensure that those who offend are punished and sentenced in a way that is more likely to rehabilitate and reform them than not. As a one-nation Tory of the cavalier tradition like I, he will know that few are beyond redemption.

Sir John Hayes: It is, of course, right that we need to consider the causes of crime. That is why I have talked about the erosion of civil society. Of course it is true that when communities become weaker, and when the ties that bind us become looser, people are more likely to act in a malign way. As my hon. Friend knows, life in the state of nature is “nasty, brutish and short”. What stands between us and all of that are the things that I have described—the civil society that Burke defined and that I attempted to illustrate. The truth is that when we emphasise crime as an ill to be treated, by nature we put less emphasis on its effect: the event itself. In that way, there is often, although not necessarily, a tension between one position and the other.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): Although linguistically my right hon. Friend may be correct, and in language we may sound as

[Rory Stewart]

though we are more liberal, the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) pointed out the reality. Not simply do we incarcerate twice as many people as we did 25 years ago, but the crime rate has almost halved over the same period, so proportionately, the number of people incarcerated per crime is considerably more than it was 25 years ago. Typically, this is the hypocrisy of liberalism: we talk a liberal language, but in fact we are much more punitive than the Victorians were. In the Victorian period at the end of the 19th century, there were only four prisoners held in prison for sentences longer than two years. Now, for the first time, we have a very large number of young men serving 25 or 30-year prison sentences.

Sir John Hayes: My hon. Friend the Minister knows that that argument is predicated on several misassumptions. The first is the fundamental issue of population growth. Of course when we look to the past there were fewer criminals, because there were fewer people. The second, as he will know, is the very well-known criminological explanation of under-counting and under-reporting of crime; it is known as the black or dark figure, the number of crimes that are never reported and therefore never recorded. It also is probably true that the tolerance of crime has risen and more and more of what might be described as petty crimes, which would once have been taken very seriously, are now ignored, partly because people do not think they will be dealt with. That happens in all our constituencies all the time.

The third problem is that there has been a prevailing view about rehabilitation that, while not intrinsically incompatible with the idea of just deserts and a retributive approach to crime, is too often presented as such by people who are on what I described as the “liberal” side of this argument. Part of the business of the criminal justice system is to punish, and part of public faith in the criminal justice system relies and depends on people believing that those who do very bad things get their just deserts. Frankly, every poll that the Minister or I could cite shows that a growing number of people do not think that criminals get their just deserts.

There is a separate issue about what happens once people get to prison; my hon. Friend is the Prisons Minister, so he will know what a mess prisons are in. I hope he is trying to do something about that, because he is right that when people go to prison, one hopes they will not go back. Recidivism is a profound concern, but given that he is the Minister, that is as much his problem as anyone’s.

Rory Stewart: Since my right hon. Friend has taken the opportunity to challenge the statistics and suggest that they can be explained by population growth, population growth from 1992 to 2018 in Britain has been approximately 10%. The prison population during that period has doubled. This cannot be accounted for by population growth.

Sir John Hayes: Yes, but if we look at the number of crimes committed in the year of my birth, 1958—I know that is hard to believe, but that is the year—compared with the number of crimes committed now, in almost every category crimes have grown. The number of

homicides, for example, in that year, the number of violent crimes in that year, the number of sex-related crimes in that year—if the Minister looks at the figures, which by the way are available from the Library, he will see that in all those categories and many others, the number of crimes has grown immensely over my lifetime, the period I mentioned at the beginning of my remarks.

I want to address the specifics of the debate introduced by the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves). It is useful that she has brought this matter to the attention of the House, because the figures from the Minister’s Department make clear that the effect of doing what I understand the Minister has advocated, and with which others may agree, would essentially be that 34,000 offenders who currently go to prison would no longer do so. Roughly speaking, 30,000 of those are repeat, not new offenders. Their offences include burglary, theft, public order offences and weapon and drug possession, as well as drink-driving and other similar things.

Those are not offences that most members of the public would regard as inconsequential, slight or not a cause for worry—far from it. I suspect that the vast majority of our constituents would anticipate that those sorts of things should attract a prison sentence. If any hon. Members take the opposite view, I would be happy to debate with them in their constituencies on a public platform, and see who held the majority view and who was seen to be on the margins. I wonder whether the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) is on the margins; I will give way to him.

Bambos Charalambous: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. He has just said that there are 30,000 repeat offenders. Those are people who have already been to prison, so clearly that would indicate that prison has not worked for them and we should look at other forms of punishment. Does he agree that prison is not the only form of punishment that would act as a deterrent, and that other options might work better and stop people being recycled into prison?

Sir John Hayes: I mentioned recidivism a moment ago, but since the hon. Gentleman was clearly listening, I cannot have made myself clear. I did not say people who had been to prison once; I said repeat offenders. These may be people who have had other kinds of sentences and then gone to prison, because very often, for a first offence, people do not go to prison; they go to prison for a second or later offence. When I speak of repeat offenders, I do not necessarily mean people who are in and out of prison regularly. It is very important to be precise about these things.

The problem with that kind of policy is not only what it would do to public faith in criminal justice, on which it would have a devastating effect—in its response to the Government’s proposals, Civitas, the think-tank, says that it would unleash a crime wave on hundreds of thousands of citizens—but that it would reinforce the idea that prison cannot work. We have profound problems at present; the Minister is aware of that and has spoken very openly and straightforwardly about it. The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate has just alluded to those problems—prisons becoming universities of crime, where people who go in are worsened by the experience, rather than rehabilitated.

Even from the rehabilitative perspective, therefore, prison is not doing what it could, but that is not a good enough reason to say to the public, “We are worried about sending people to prison, because they might get worse, so we will leave them on the streets.” That cannot be the signal that this place or this Government want to send. Let us get our prisons right, not be embarrassed or ashamed to send people there.

Kate Green: The point we are trying to make in this debate is that people are going to prison for short sentences. By definition, that is unlikely to be for the level of serious crimes that the right hon. Gentleman rightly says our constituents would be horrified if they thought people could commit and then run around at liberty. He is right that we are talking about, in some cases, persistent offenders. A written answer from the Minister, which I received on 5 November last year, said that in 2017, 6,793 people went to prison for less than six months, having never previously received a community penalty for offences that they had committed. I find that baffling. Does the right hon. Gentleman not think that sometimes we are too ready to use custody?

Sir John Hayes: All I would say in response to that is that the hon. Lady will have seen the national newspaper this week that showed, shockingly, a picture on the front cover of a smirking criminal who, having committed an offence for the second time, took a selfie of himself outside the court. This was a person who was found in possession of both a knife and cocaine, and had been known to the police for a considerable time. Time permitting, I could give account of many similar stories, and particularly of the police’s frustration when we do not, in their judgment, provide the just deserts I mentioned earlier, which so undermines their confidence. As one policeman said of a similar case, “Why do we bother?”.

Prison is of course about trying to put people straight, but it is also about punishing people for the harm they have done. That is an entirely respectable part of criminal justice, and it is what our constituents expect of us and of the Government.

Rory Stewart: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir John Hayes: I will give way one last time, but then I really must conclude, because others may want to speak.

Rory Stewart: The only reason I keep intervening is that, unfortunately, my right hon. Friend will be unable to hear my speech, so will be unable to hear me answer, point by point, every point that he makes. Evidence from the Ministry of Justice strongly suggests that sending somebody to prison makes them more likely to reoffend, by one offence a year, than somebody given a non-custodial sentence. Given that the short-sentence population in a single year is about 50,000 people, my right hon. Friend’s proposals would indirectly inflict 50,000 additional offences on innocent victims in Britain. In other words, the wrong use of short prison sentences endangers the public, rather than protecting them.

Sir John Hayes: Yes, but by letting on to the streets 34,000 people who would currently go to prison, we would by nature make it more likely that those people would have more victims, unless the Minister believes

that those non-custodial sentences have a perfect effect—are an entire solution. I think that the Minister should refocus his efforts on getting prisons right, as I would not want his ministerial career to be characterised by prisons being worse when he ended than when he started. I know he is determined to do so, but he has a lot of work to do. The Government have to pull their socks up in respect of the way our prisons are run, partly because of the policies adopted by previous Governments.

My earlier offer applies to the Minister, too: I would be happy for him to come to my constituency, or for me to go to his, and debate this issue with the people there, to see whether they think that fewer or more criminals should be sent to prison. When they know that we are speaking of the kind of crimes that I described earlier, according to data from the Minister’s own Department, I think they would not only be surprised but, frankly, be outraged.

G.K. Chesterton spoke of the people of England who have not spoken yet, but now the people of England are speaking loud and clear. There may be those who have been deafened by the shrill bleating of political correctness, but many of us have not. We will speak for the people of England, and we will not be silenced.

3.53 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) on securing this important debate. “Follow that” is still ringing in my ears; I will make an attempt. She gave a positive and persuasive argument for looking at 12-month prison sentences, talking about how squalid prisons do not help with rehabilitation, drug abuse or mental illness, and looking at the difficulties for prisoners of being released.

The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), who chairs the Justice Committee, gave us the benefit of his time in the criminal justice system, although I should add that that was as a barrister. He talked about constructive punishment and the good use of public money, saying that prisons must reform and rehabilitate, and that the high rates of reoffending of those who serve short sentences have a social and monetary cost. The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) further exemplified some of the difficulties with short-term prison sentences. He talked about women and shoplifting, looking at the other side—why they commit such crimes and what we can do to prevent that. That is an important issue, which the Scottish Government have taken on board a bit. I will speak further on what we are doing in Scotland, which I know the Minister and the Secretary of State have been looking at.

The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) gave a speech at odds with a lot of what had already been said. He spoke with real passion about how people who do bad things should get their just deserts. The abolition of prison sentences of up to 12 months is not about people not getting their just deserts; it is about an effective use of the prison estate and of public money that actually helps people not to reoffend. That is how we look at things in Scotland.

The Scottish National party is committed to smart justice and proportionate, just and effective responses. A focus on community sentences in place of short

[Marion Fellows]

custodial sentences has helped to achieve a 19-year low in reconviction rates in Scotland, and it is encouraging to see the UK Government following Scotland's lead in this area. Scotland has the highest imprisonment rate in western Europe, with 144 per 100,000 of the population incarcerated. The average length of prison sentences has increased by 21% over the last decade. For many individuals, however, prison is not an effective solution.

Individuals released from short sentences of 12 months or less are reconvicted nearly twice as often as those sentenced to a community payback order. It makes sense to look at community payback orders. Community sentencing has proven to be an effective tool in replacement of short sentences, as the statistics bear out. Between 2006-07 and 2015-16, the reconviction rate in Scotland fell by 5.4%, to a 19-year low, while the average number of reconvictions per offender has fallen by 22% over the last 10 years. Under the SNP Government, completion rates for community sentences have increased to 70%.

Around 7 million hours of unpaid work have been carried out since community payback orders were introduced, delivering real benefits to communities. In 2017-18, some 1.7 million hours of unpaid work were imposed as part of these orders, and the projects undertaken ranged from support for winter resilience to the refurbishment and redecoration of community spaces. I have seen many such things in my constituency—work that would not otherwise be done, improving how the community lives and works. Overall, recorded crime is at its second-lowest level since 1974, down 42% since 2006-07.

Robert Neill: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving examples of what has been very effective in Scotland. It is asserted that the public equate just deserts and punishment only with imprisonment. Does she agree that, when the public see community sentences in operation, they are often much more appreciative of the constructive way in which somebody is being punished while doing some good at the same time? The public are not as blinkered in their views as is sometimes suggested, once they see good schemes working.

Marion Fellows: Indeed. Several projects that have been undertaken are marked by plaques saying how that was done. It is really positive that people can see that there are other ways. The public are not necessarily bloodthirsty or looking for people to be locked up and the key thrown away. They want people to be better. I have been around Shotts prison in my neighbouring constituency and looked at the good rehabilitation work it does. It follows that, if prisons are full of people on short sentences, there will be less time and money available for real rehabilitative work within the prison system. While prison is still the right place for the most serious offenders, the extension of the presumption against short sentences to 12 months would help to ensure that prison was used only when the judiciary decided it was necessary, having considered alternatives.

The Scottish Government have spent quite a bit of money working on that basis, because it is important. I hope that this Minister will say that, if and when that happens in England, the UK Government will put money into the equivalent of the criminal justice social work services that we have in Scotland. It cannot just be

said, "We won't put people in prison and therefore we'll save money." Some money has to be put into the restorative justice system and community criminal justice. The Scottish Government have given additional funding for community sentences and women offenders, which includes additional provision for bail supervision for women. A number of years ago, there was a suggestion to build a new women's prison in Scotland. That was stopped because what we are trying to do now is more preventive work and more work that does not separate women from their families, especially their children.

Lots of work has been done, and there are statistics proving that things such as workloads have gone down in the criminal justice system. The number of criminal justice social work reports submitted and social work orders issued both fell by 6%. That is another saving for the criminal justice system. There has also been a 7% drop in community payback orders recently.

In Scotland, we do things in partnership across the system, from local government all the way up to the national Government. The Scottish Government are committed to working with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, Social Work Scotland, Community Justice Scotland, local authorities and third-sector partners, which take a great deal of interest and do some of the work when it comes to preparations for community payback orders.

It is strange to me, standing here opposite the Minister, whom I might quote in a moment, that Conservative MSPs in Holyrood criticise the SNP's approach. It is very encouraging to see the UK Government looking to follow Scotland's lead in this matter. What exists in Scotland has sometimes been called "soft-touch justice" in a derogatory sense, but it is actually proving to be effective and a much better way to use our prison estate. As the Justice Secretary said last month:

"Why would we spend taxpayers' money doing what we know doesn't work, and indeed, makes us less safe?"

This Minister has said:

"My No. 1 priority is to protect the public. I believe that the best way of protecting the public is to reduce significantly, if not eliminate, the under 12-month prison population, because people on community sentences are less likely to reoffend than people who are put in custody."

The Justice Secretary has also said:

"If we can find effective alternatives to short sentences, it is not a question of pursuing a soft-justice approach, but rather a case of pursuing smart justice that is effective at reducing reoffending and crime. That is the approach that I want to take in England and Wales."—[*Official Report*, 5 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 146.]

I am glad that there is almost unanimity across the House in this matter.

I believe that evidence was given to the Justice Committee by Karyn McCluskey, chief executive of Community Justice Scotland. She says in relation to Scotland:

"We have been on a prevention journey for the past 15 years. Short-term prison sentences do not reduce offending. It causes homelessness and breaks up any positive bonds"

that offenders may have. She continues:

"Our courts and prisons should not be de facto psychiatric hospitals. I have met people who would much prefer to go to jail: it's much easier for them. We want to change society's view of what works."

I think that that is really where we all are.

I should just say that, in Scotland, prison sentences of less than 12 months are not being abolished. Sheriffs and judges retain the discretion to pass the most appropriate sentence based on the facts and circumstances of the case. The legislation states that the court should not pass a sentence of a period shorter than the stated presumption, but it may do so where it considers that no other method of dealing with the person is appropriate. We have to look at this. It will never be the case that one sentence fits all in any justice system, but the facts speak for themselves. A presumption of no prison sentence under 12 months would only benefit the prison estate and the people being sentenced.

Will the Minister confirm that this is not just a money-saving exercise and that money will be spent on the implementation of the presumption of no prison sentences under 12 months? Does he agree that more money spent in that respect would reap huge rewards in the prison system and in the criminal justice system more generally?

4.5 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): It is, of course, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. First, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) for bringing this very important debate to the Chamber. She is right to say that it follows a number of linked debates of equal value. That shows the interest among hon. Members in this important subject, and I thank hon. Members for their valuable contributions.

The starting point is that we cannot shy away from the fact that many short sentences simply do not work. The points in that respect have been eloquently made by my hon. Friends the Members for Lewisham West and Penge and for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), and, of course, by the Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill).

The reoffending rate for those serving a sentence shorter than 12 months is higher than that for community orders or suspended sentences. That is causing real damage not just to communities and victims, but to the public finances—another point that has been made. Short sentence reoffending is conservatively estimated to cost the economy between £7 billion and £10 billion a year; others rightly say that the figure could be £15 billion or more.

It is glaringly obvious why short sentences are so ineffective. An offender who is sentenced to just a few months or even a few weeks will still lose their job, their home and their family. These are all things that offenders themselves say are factors that influence whether they reoffend. The problems are exactly the same as those that an offender serving a sentence that runs into years experiences, but crucially, people serving short sentences are not in prison long enough to put in place steps to address these needs before their release.

An offender serving a short sentence also has no time for purposeful activity, which is proven to reduce reoffending. They have no time to equip themselves with skills or gain qualifications to get a job and pay for a home after release, because in most cases a course cannot be taught and skills cannot be gained in a matter of months, particularly when much of the time is spent isolated in cells due to the lack of experienced prison officers and the other issues that we face in the emergency that exists within our prisons.

There is also no time to get help with regard to other drivers of offending, such as mental health issues and substance misuse. Her Majesty's inspectorate of prisons states that one prisoner in three has mental health issues—a problem that is undoubtedly much greater than is portrayed—and one prisoner in five tested positive for drugs and psychoactive substances in 2017-18. Those are real, serious problems that these offenders face, but when serving short sentences they cannot get the treatment or rehabilitation that they need to get their lives in order. In some cases, people need rehab and medical attention, not cells.

It is clear that we need to end the use of ineffective short sentences, but although the Government have floated the idea on several occasions, the reality is that they are not doing much about it; we have yet to see them take any concrete action.

The proportion of short custodial sentences has barely shifted in the past three years. More staggeringly, community sentences, which can provide an alternative to short custodial sentences, have fallen by 78% over the past five years, with the fastest decline being for non-violent theft and drug offences. The Minister's first step must be to halt this worrying trend. Forgive me if I do not entirely believe that the Government will act.

I am even less assured by the Government's record, because every major policy announcement that the Ministry of Justice has made on prisons falls short of the mark and has come to nothing thus far. The female offender strategy promised five new residential women's centres—a rehashed Labour idea—which are nowhere near being built. The educational employment strategy scrapped careers advice in prison, which is a negative step, and has not done much beyond that. The Minister's 10 prisons safety project is failing to deliver improvements in safety anywhere, let alone across the whole estate.

If we have learnt anything from the MOJ it is that it is all noise and no substance. I wish that were not the case. The overuse of short sentences is a substantial and important issue. We want to be able to work with the Government on this. We agree that short sentences do not work and that locking someone up for just a few weeks or months provides no benefit to anyone. We have common ground to build on.

However, the Government do not seem serious about tackling short sentence overuse. If they were serious, they would ensure that there was a real alternative to custody, in the form of robust community sentences or a stricter fines regime; they would not allow the disaster that is our probation system, which provides community sentences, to continue; and they would address the dangerous lack of confidence among magistrates in the probation system and community sentences—a point that the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst made very well.

A study conducted last year with the support of the Magistrates Association found that 37% of magistrates are not confident that community sentences are an effective alternative, 45% are not confident that community sentences currently rehabilitate effectively, and almost half believe that community sentences cannot be tailored to suit the individual needs of an offender. By contrast, a survey in 2003 showed that magistrates had much higher levels of confidence in the ability of community sentences to punish and rehabilitate offenders.

[Imran Hussain]

Even after that study and numerous recent, high-profile and wide-ranging critical reports, the Government are continuing with their failed privatisation experiment in probation. The reports are long and damning. Her Majesty's inspectorate of probation found nine out of 13 community rehabilitation companies to be performing poorly overall, with poor-quality work in reducing reoffending and protecting the public. The Justice Committee ripped into poor performance on reoffending, concerning high workloads and worries over the confidence of judges and magistrates—a point made earlier. Last Friday's National Audit Office report found that CRCs failed to meet MOJ targets to reduce reoffending and had created an increase in offenders on short sentences who were recalled. Community sentences simply are not viable under their current providers. Magistrates and judges do not trust them, and neither do the public.

We have heard about Scotland's model in contrast to the Government's action. The Labour shadow Justice team has committed to bringing probation services back in-house to deliver a service that works, has the confidence of judges and magistrates, and can show the public that there is a real robust alternative to short custodial sentences. The shadow Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), recently visited Scotland, where a presumption against short sentences is being rolled out. He saw the positive work done to deliver justice for the public and victims through sentencing alternatives that do reduce reoffending. The use of community sentences in Scotland has risen by 16% in the past decade, which contrasts to a decline in England and Wales. The Scottish model has been in place for some time and shows a clear way forward, which the Government must seriously address.

The Government must show that they are capable of more than just words and setting the mood music; they must prove that they are serious. The Minister must set out what they are doing to end the huge overuse of ineffective short sentences, which serve little purpose in our justice system, including what action they are taking to stop the dramatic fall in the use of community sentences in recent years and how long it will be before the MOJ gets the proportion of community sentences back to previous levels.

Addressing this important issue can reduce reoffending, so I extend an offer to work with the Minister to bring reoffending down. However, that offer is not a blank cheque. A new consensus must be built on strong proposals by the Government. The Minister must show us that he is doing this for the right reasons: to reduce reoffending and better serve the public, not just to reduce the prison population. He needs to outline how he will regain the confidence and trust of the judiciary, which the Government have lost with their probation changes. Given the growing number of damning reports on these probation changes and their failure to reduce reoffending, he must commit to ending the failed privatisation experiment, which cannot deliver the viable and robust alternatives to custody that are needed, and bring this back into public ownership.

4.15 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) for bringing this important debate.

To think clearly about prison, we need to think about victims, and we must begin with a strong statement that the prime responsibility of the Government is to protect the public. That is particularly clear at the moment, when we are dealing with the horror of knife crime. We need to be absolutely clear—as this Government and, I hope, Members on both sides of the House are—about our abhorrence of crime and the misery it inflicts on victims, about our absolute commitment to punish criminals in proportion to their offence, and about ensuring, above all, that serious criminals are imprisoned.

We can go beyond that, because the point is that somebody who commits an offence is not simply technically breaking the law. For example, a shoplifter imposes misery on the individual who owns a private shop by stealing valuable possessions and affecting their psychological sense of security. Therefore, in responding to that act, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) has pointed out, we need to ensure that we punish them for the crime they committed, not only to give justice to the victim but to protect future victims of crime.

The nub of the issue is that punishment needs to be combined with deterrence and rehabilitation, and to symbolically express society's abhorrence of crime. All that is true, and all that was recognised by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes). However, where I respectfully disagree with him—I regret that he did not stay to hear my response—is that he must be more rigorous and serious in thinking through whether, in fact, a short-term prison sentence achieves any of the objectives that he wants to achieve.

Let me take a single example. In Bedford prison last month I saw a prisoner who had been a heroin addict and had serious learning difficulties. Every time he is released from prison, he shoplifts again and he gets put back in prison for four weeks—he was put in Bedford prison eight times last year. My question to my right hon. Friend is this: what does it achieve to put this man in prison eight times in a year? Clearly it is not deterring him from committing crime or rehabilitating him, because he commits another crime as soon as he comes out. He does not even personally experience this as a punishment, so what is being done here?

Perhaps the judge feels that they have no other options, because the individual has committed many other crimes in the past. What else are they supposed to do? Yet what does imprisoning them achieve? Perhaps the judge feels that it is a symbolic disapproval of the act of shoplifting, but what kind of symbolism is it if it is untethered from reality? What is the symbolism of a punishment that does not deter, does not punish, does not rehabilitate and is not experienced subjectively by the victim or by society as having any purpose at all?

We then need to think about prisons, which are vast, complex, expensive organs of Government. A modern prison costs more than £100 million to build. It is manned by hundreds of highly trained prison officers, filled with electronic equipment and fitted with bars on its windows. It is a continual fight, day in, day out, which requires energy and dedication, to stay on top of the drugs and the phones, to challenge violence from prisoners and against prison officers, to control issues of suicide and self-harm, and, above all, to protect the public from the most serious offenders in society.

Short-term prisoners destabilise the whole prison system. They are the ones who disproportionately bring drugs into prisons, because they are the people who go in and out eight times a year—if a criminal gang is looking for somebody to carry drugs in, they target a short-term prisoner, not somebody who is in for 25 years and has no opportunity. They disproportionately have learning difficulties and addiction problems; they are disproportionately connected with violence against prison officers and against themselves.

Short-term prisoners also absorb disproportionately more time in the system than should be attributed to them. That distracts the entire system from focusing on rehabilitating and working with the serious criminals, such as the sex offenders, violent offenders and murderers, who pose a significant threat to the public and who, because of the distraction of this cohort, are not getting the education programmes, work and protection that they require.

As the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) has pointed out, we can do much more in relation to community sentences. We have just introduced GPS-enabled tagging, which for the first time allows us to know exactly where an offender is in the community by the minute, day in, day out. We have also introduced alcohol and drug monitoring tests, which for the first time allow us to know whether an individual outside prison is taking drugs or alcohol in violation of their conditions. We are improving unpaid work and investing in community rehabilitation companies to make sure that they have better supervision in place, that they are meeting people face to face and that they have a proper plan in place to follow them through.

We are investing in addiction treatment in the NHS. Again, with deference to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings, that is not just liberal nonsense. Shoplifters make up by far the largest element in the under-six-months prison population, and 74% of shoplifters are addicted to heroin or crack cocaine. There is a direct causative relationship between their addiction to heroin or crack cocaine and their shoplifting. As the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) pointed out, that investment in NHS treatment requirements will be central if we are to reduce their reoffending.

The key point is that putting these people in prison is not simply futile, but perverse. It is not simply a waste of time; it makes the situation worse. It does not protect the public, but endangers them. A considerable amount of research has now been done on that. The National Institute of Economic and Social Research did a paper on it in 2012 and the Ministry of Justice did another in 2013.

We have just produced another paper that looks at 350,000 offenders and 130 variables—everything from offender demographics to school attendance, family,

childhood and trauma—to produce a statistically significant survey of a large number of people that compares like with like. By taking two people who have both committed seven offences and who have almost identical backgrounds and offending histories—in so far as we can; we are looking at a statistical variation of 5%—it shows that the one who is given a custodial sentence, as opposed to the one who is given a community sentence, is likely to commit one extra offence a year. Some 50,000 people get custodial sentences, so that is 50,000 more victims of crime because of the wrong type of short prison sentence.

There is much that we should still learn from Scotland and much that we need to reflect on. It is important to bring people such as my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings with us and keep public confidence. He may be correct that if we were to go in front of an audience, without the time to present incredibly serious and detailed research, it would be possible to whip up a crowd against it through cheap language about decriminalisation and laxity. I do not doubt that. The evidence is absolutely clear, however, and we should be bold in asking what we are trying to achieve with a prison or a community sentence. Is this prison sentence really deterring this individual? Is it really rehabilitating them? Above all, is it really protecting the public?

4.25 pm

Ellie Reeves: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for taking part in this important debate, particularly the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), the Chair of the Justice Committee, who co-sponsored the application for the debate and has done a huge amount of work to push the issue up the agenda.

I echo what other hon. Members have said. A presumption against short sentences is not about being soft on crime, but about following the evidence. We have heard that evidence today, which is clear that community sentences are more effective in reducing reoffending than short prison sentences. Short prison sentences simply exacerbate the problem. It is clear from the debate that there is cross-party support for reducing the use of short sentences, which I hope we can continue to build on in future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the cost and effectiveness of sentences under 12 months and consequences for the prison population.

4.26 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 7 March 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Offshore Wind Sector Deal

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): As part of the industrial strategy, the Government are committed to continue to work closely with the offshore wind industry to further drive down the costs of clean power, while building a competitive UK supply chain.

Offshore wind is a huge UK success story, with the world's largest offshore wind market and 8 GW of operational capacity (rising to 14 GW by 2023). Long-term Government support has underpinned growth and technological innovation in the sector, leading to significant cost reductions and resulting in offshore wind becoming one of the cheapest low carbon generation sources.

As a key part of our modern industrial strategy, sector deals bring industry and the Government together in partnership to boost productivity and earning power in specific sectors. The offshore wind sector deal sets out an ambitious partnership between Government and industry that will ensure the UK continues to play a leading role in the global market for offshore wind, and that UK companies capitalise on the opportunities of this growing export market; delivering on the industrial strategy's clean growth grand challenge.

The development of the deal was led by the Offshore Wind Industry Council in close engagement with offshore wind developers, major equipment manufacturers, the wider supply chain in the UK and local communities with an interest in the success of the sector. This reflects on the excellent existing collaboration between the industry, the UK Government, and local, regional and devolved partners, who supported the formation of this deal. It follows ambitious sector deals with the life sciences, automotive, construction, creative industries, artificial intelligence, nuclear, aerospace and rail sectors.

The deal will build on the United Kingdom's global leadership in offshore wind by growing the UK supply chain, increasing its competitiveness and productivity, taking advantage of new technology and developing the innovative products and services needed in the future. It will do this by:

- Providing forward visibility of future contracts for difference auctions with support of up to £557 million, with the next auction to open by May 2019 and subsequent auctions around every 2 years thereafter¹.

- The sector committing to increase UK content to 60% by 2030, including increases in the capital expenditure phase.

- Increasing the representation of women in the offshore wind workforce to at least a third by 2030, with an ambition to reach a higher figure of 40%.

- Setting an ambition of increasing exports fivefold to £2.6 billion by 2030.

- The sector investing up to £250 million of funding to establish a new offshore wind growth partnership to work with UK businesses and SMEs to address the UK's productivity gap, increase business competitiveness, drive supply chain innovation and support the UK's export drive.

Working to integrate offshore wind to support grid integration, such as co-located storage and wind to hydrogen.

Furthermore, the deal aims to bolster regional clusters in alignment with the industrial strategy's aim to support prosperous communities throughout the UK. The offshore wind sector will continue to co-ordinate its approach and work with local, regional and devolved Governments and their economic development agencies to build on the opportunities created by this deal, through local industrial strategies in England, and city and growth deals across the UK.

Constructing up to 30 GW of offshore wind by 2030 and boosting exports to £2.6 billion per annum will bring new jobs and economic growth; the sector expects to grow its skilled workforce to 27,000 by 2030, creating opportunities across the UK. The sector aims to employ women as more than a third of its workforce by 2030 and a stretching ambition will be set for raising BAME representation, with the sector committing to initiatives for including people with diverse backgrounds, perspectives and needs, which include age, ethnicity, education and other abilities.

This deal will support the offshore wind industry into the next phase of its development as a world leading industry. I will be placing a copy of this document in the Libraries of both Houses.

¹ Depending on the prices achieved, this could deliver up to 30 GW of offshore wind by 2030.

[HCWS1382]

CABINET OFFICE

Committee on Standards in Public Life: Intimidation in Public Life

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): In July 2017 the Committee on Standards in Public Life was asked by the Prime Minister to conduct a review of intimidation experienced by parliamentary candidates, including those who stood at the 2017 general election. The Committee also considered the broader implications for other candidates for public office and public office holders. Its report, "Intimidation in Public Life", was published in December 2017.

In March 2018 the Government published their response to the Committee on Standards in Public Life's report. We thank the Committee for its work on the report which makes sobering reading. In that response, we committed to a series of actions based on the Committee's recommendations, and today I wish to update Parliament on the work the Government have taken since March 2018 to play our part in building a democracy in which every voice can be heard. The Committee also made recommendations to a range of organisations including social media companies, political parties, Parliament, the police, and broadcast and print media. In our response we committed to encouraging and supporting those organisations to implement a number of the recommendations.

We have:

- Undertaken a public consultation entitled "Protecting the Debate: Intimidation, Influence and Information". The consultation sought views on a proposed new electoral offence

of intimidation of candidates and campaigners, recasting the offence of undue influence, and on extending the imprints regime to cover digital electoral materials. The consultation closed in October 2018 and the Government's response will be published in due course. As was said in the consultation, intimidatory behaviour during election campaigns harms everyone—including all voters—by putting people off taking part in elections and public service.

Consulted stakeholders on changes to deliver, and to go beyond, the recommendation for removing the requirement for the addresses of candidates at local council elections to appear on the ballot paper. The four statutory instruments to make these changes for local government, parish council, combined authority mayoral and local mayoral elections in England have been approved by Parliament, and are now in place for the local elections in May.

Consulted on our Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper, and we will publish a joint DCMS- Home Office White Paper. The White Paper will set out a range of legislative and non-legislative measures detailing how we will tackle online harms and set clear responsibilities for tech companies to keep UK citizens safe. It will establish a Government-wide approach to online safety, delivering the digital charter's ambitions of making the UK the safest place in the world to be online, while also leading the world in innovation-friendly regulation that supports the growth of the tech sector. It will also include ambitious measures to support continued education and awareness for all users and to promote the development and adoption of new safety technologies.

Led contact with other five eyes countries (Australia; New Zealand; Canada; USA) to establish a network of learning regarding our approaches to identifying and tackling online hate crime and intimidation. This aims to identify synergies or gaps in approaches, promote consensus, and gather best practice that can be shared for the benefit of all countries.

Written to local authority chief executives, to raise awareness about the sensitive interest provisions in the Localism Act 2011 which protect the personal addresses of councillors in England, ensuring that monitoring officers are aware of the guidance published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. This has been made public on gov.uk.

Held discussions with the social media companies and the Electoral Commission about how a "pop up" social media team for elections could provide support for users that report inappropriate behaviour work and we will continue to collaborate as we explore potential next steps.

Over and above the recommendation in the Committee's report, the Government will be considering what further steps are necessary to ensure the safety of parliamentarians and their staff, in the vicinity of Parliament, in their constituencies and online, and Ministers are open to representations from hon. Members across the House on this matter.

Alongside the work by the Government, other public bodies have been delivering on the recommendations from the Committee:

The Deputy Speaker of the House of Commons and the director of security for Parliament have written to all MPs reminding them of the security advice and services offered by police and the parliamentary security department's Members' security support service. There has been a significant improvement in the take up by MPs of recommended security measures.

In the area around Parliament, the Metropolitan Police have maintained an ongoing policing operation. Their role is to facilitate peaceful protest and balance the needs and rights of all those present, including protestors, MPs and members of the public. The police will deal robustly with incidents of harassment and abuse against anyone where that harassment or abuse constitutes a criminal offence. Officers in the area have been briefed to intervene appropriately where they hear or see breaches of the law.

The Metropolitan Police, through their parliamentary liaison and investigative team (PLAIT), provide support to all local forces on all issues relating to parliamentary candidates. Each force has a single point of contact in place, who has contact with the PLAIT through regular updates and meetings as required. In regard to social media training, the College of Policing has developed a new digital policing curriculum which includes communication offences (which social media is a part of). This is now incorporated into the policing education qualifications framework for all new starters and the college is currently developing the learning products for all existing staff to be up-skilled across the digital policing landscape including social media.

The College of Policing, in collaboration with the Electoral Commission, has been working to update the policing elections authorised professional practice on stalking and harassment, which will be available in spring 2019. The College of Policing also has a new digital policing curriculum which includes communication offences.

A working group led by the National Police Chiefs' Council has been convened to develop new guidance for parliamentary candidates in line with the Committee's recommendations. The revised guidance will feature two complementary documents, with the intention that both guides are read in conjunction. The first signposts a rapid pathway to achieve a resolution for both criminal and non-criminal unwanted behaviour and conduct and provides advice based on the experiences of prospective candidates. This is complemented by a longer piece of guidance, which provides details of what might constitute a breach of a number of criminal laws, in order to inform and assist candidates on any contact they may have with police and the wider criminal justice system. The working group will consult with the appropriate stakeholders, including the parliamentary parties panel, with a view to publishing the full set of guidance in April 2019.

We cannot allow intimidation to threaten the vibrancy and diversity of our public life. Intimidatory behaviour impacts on the quality of our democracy and the lives of those who play an active role in it. It is incumbent on all of us in public life to combat this issue and the Government will continue to work with others including public bodies, social media companies, policing and prosecution authorities, and political parties.

[HCWS1389]

DEFENCE

Armed Forces' Pay Review Body: Appointment

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I am pleased to announce that the Secretary of State for Defence has appointed Miss Kerry Holden as the next public sector member of the Armed Forces' Pay Review Body. Her appointment commenced on 1 March 2019 and will run until 28 February 2022. This appointment has been conducted in accordance with the guidance of the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

[HCWS1391]

RAF Police Review

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I wish to inform the House that I am laying before the House today the second report from Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services (HMICFRS) inspection of the Royal Air Force Police (RAFP).

The Armed Forces Act 2011 places a duty on HMICFRS to inspect and report to the Ministry of Defence on the independence and effectiveness of investigations carried out by each service police force, and this is HMICFRS's second statutory inspection report on the RAFP.

I consider this report to be a very positive endorsement of the RAFP providing assurance from an independent civilian authority that the RAFP has a strong performance management process for investigations. No recommendations were necessary although a number of areas for improvement have been identified. The Royal Air Force accepts the report's findings and work is already under way to address the areas for improvement.

[HCWS1390]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

EU Exit: Advisory Groups on Negotiations

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): The Government are committed to working at pace with the EU to have a future relationship in place by the end of December 2020, ensuring that the backstop solution to Northern Ireland is never used. However, the Prime Minister set out to the House of Commons that the Government's objective is to ensure that, even if the full future relationship is not in place by the end of the implementation period, the backstop is replaced by alternative arrangements. The withdrawal agreement and political declaration already set out the shared determination of the UK and the EU to replace the backstop solution in Northern Ireland by a subsequent agreement establishing alternative arrangements.

President Juncker has already confirmed with the Prime Minister that the EU will give priority to the specific work stream intended to replace the backstop with alternative arrangements. There have been further discussions on how to take forward this commitment with the EU—between the Prime Minister and President Juncker, and the Exiting the EU Secretary and Michel Barnier. The Government expect to give more shape to how the UK and EU will take these commitments forward in due course.

The Government expect that joint UK-EU work on alternative arrangements will be an important strand of the next phase of negotiations. In anticipation of this, and to ensure that the UK is ready to move at pace in the next phase, the Government are putting in place the UK's arrangements to support this work, with a team drawing in all the relevant Departments including DExEU, HMT, HMRC, BEIS, DEFRA, the Home Office, and the NIO. This will report directly to the UK's negotiating team.

In this context, the Government intend to establish three advisory groups to inform the UK's negotiations with the EU, with the UK's work co-ordinated by the Secretary of State for Exiting the EU and the Financial Secretary to the Treasury (FST), who has responsibility for customs policy and administration:

- an expert advisory group of technical experts in trade and customs—such as from academia, think tanks, and customs brokers, to ensure those with specialist expertise are involved in developing options;

- a business and trade union engagement group—to ensure that the views of those trading with the EU and the rest of the world inform the ongoing work;

- and a parliamentary engagement group—to allow Government to consult with Members of Parliament from across both Houses with an interest in the work. The Government will discuss with parliamentarians how best to constitute this group. This will not affect the Government's ongoing engagement with the Exiting the EU Select Committee, the Treasury Select Committee and the EU Select Committee.

The new groups will be constituted following the passing of the meaningful vote, and first meet in advance of the commencement of the next phase of negotiations between the UK and the EU. In the immediate term, the Government will look to engage with these groups on developing the UK's understanding of alternative arrangements to inform negotiations with the EU, and ensure that the UK's input is informed by a broad and inclusive range of voices domestically. Over the longer term, the Government will also consider how best these groups can contribute to their goal of ensuring that the UK is at the cutting edge of global customs policy, facilitating the greatest possible trade between the UK and the rest of the world. The Government will make available £20 million of funding, to support the development, testing or piloting of ideas that emerge from these groups where the Government believe it would be helpful.

Specifically, the technical advisory group will have a remit to support the Government on exploring approaches to reduce the risk associated with the movement of goods and for simplifying processes for businesses trading in goods. The Government will also seek the input and views of the business advisory group and parliamentary engagement group to the proposals that are brought forward, and will ensure they have the opportunity to contribute their views on how proposals might be developed.

Ministers will be supported in their engagement by the civil service. Ministers will attend the meetings, supported by those civil servants leading the work on alternative arrangements with the EU.

In the first instance, the technical advisory group will consider work drawing on, but not limited to, the following issues. The Government will also invite views from the other groups on potential areas for exploration.

- Facilitations and simplifications for businesses—building on global precedents and best practice to develop the most ambitious possible trusted trader programmes, in addition to considering the scope for checks and controls to be conducted at a broader range of premises, and making processes easier for smaller traders to ensure schemes are accessible and affordable to them.

- Advanced use of data and IT systems—seeking effective, secure data-sharing to provide for general customs and regulatory co-operation to anticipate and manage risk, combat customs fraud and other illegal activity, and support the recovery of claims related to taxes and duties. This includes the scope for big data to enable more advanced risk assessments and technologies.

- Transit—including looking at global precedents for transit schemes, and considering how existing transit processes can be streamlined and modernised to reflect evolutions in goods movements.

- Cutting-edge technologies designed to streamline and modernise border controls and support engagement with customs and regulatory processes, including:

- Radio—frequency identification (RFID) technology—which has potential to identify the movement of relevant vehicles/ consignments, and log where they have passed specific points;

App platforms—including the scope to use apps and other technologies to enable the tracking of goods movements across borders, in a way that can address legitimate concerns about data gathering and retention; and

Single windows—assessing the scope for allowing traders to lodge all information relevant to the movement of goods in one place, rather than across different platforms, and considering the scope for interoperability between the UK and the EU and other partners; and

Machine learning and automatic intelligence to allow traders to automate the collection and submission of data.

The minimisation and simplification of processes surrounding trade in commodities which are prohibited or restricted, including those associated with requirements for regulatory checks and controls. This will include an assessment of their interface with customs proposals.

All three groups will have a particular focus on how any arrangements take into account the UK's commitments to protect respective legal orders and markets, and avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland. They will also take into account how arrangements can apply more broadly beyond the specific focus on how they would operate in the unique circumstances of Northern Ireland, to include how they could also help facilitate trade between the UK and EU.

The Government will provide a further update to Parliament, including on the membership of the respective groups, at the earliest opportunity in the coming weeks.

[HCWS1386]

EU Exit: International Arrangements

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): The Government's aim remains to ensure that the UK leaves the EU on 29 March with a negotiated deal which honours the result of the referendum. As the UK leaves the EU, it will also leave a number of international agreements to which it is currently party by virtue of EU membership. If the UK leaves with a deal, the EU has agreed that it will notify treaty partners and third countries that the UK is treated as an EU member state for the purposes of its international agreements during the implementation period up until 31 December 2020. This approach provides a basis for the UK to continue to be covered by EU international agreements during the implementation period. During this period, the UK will also be able to negotiate, sign and ratify new international agreements that come into effect after the implementation period ends. This approach provides continuity and gives businesses and international partners the certainty and confidence they want and need.

However, the Government are also continuing to plan for all eventualities, including a no-deal scenario. Colleagues across Government have been working with our third-country partners and international organisations to transition existing EU international agreements. My Department has co-ordinated the cross-departmental programme for the delivery of these agreements across a broad range of sectors, including fisheries, nuclear and transport.

This is essential preparation for our departure from the EU to ensure the UK can, where relevant and possible, maintain the benefits of these agreements, thereby providing continuity and stability to businesses and individuals.

It is the duty of Government to ensure that, as we leave the EU, business and citizens have the certainty, clarity and access to information they want and need in order that they can prepare accordingly. Departments have been communicating progress on plans to transition agreements to stakeholders and, where necessary, laying agreements before Parliament for scrutiny ahead of ratification.

In addition to this, my Department is today publishing on gov.uk further information on international agreements in the form of guidance, which will support stakeholders in preparing for our departure from the EU, and information on specific agreements. This information details those agreements that the Government are seeking to transition, including in a no-deal scenario, and clarifies whether they are expected to be in place for 29 March 2019. This information will be updated as further international agreements are agreed, signed and ratified. This includes information relating to trade agreements. Further details on trade continuity were recently published by the Department for International Trade on 21 February: <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2019-02-21/HCWS1352/>.

If the UK leaves the EU without a deal, it will not be possible to complete the transition of all agreements by 29 March 2019. Where an agreement or arrangement is not in place on exit day, the Government will seek to ensure successor agreements and arrangements are in place as soon as possible thereafter. The information that will be available on gov.uk ensures that our stakeholders are aware where this is the case.

For those EU agreements for which the transition is not yet complete, discussions continue with our international partners to replicate their effects as far as possible and to minimise any potential disruption, and more agreements are likely to be finalised ahead of exit day. Unless an exceptional case should arise, the Government will continue to lay treaties subject to ratification before Parliament for scrutiny in accordance with the provisions of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 (CRA G Act).

Given that there are limited sitting days, we are also exploring other means through which we could prevent any potential gaps. One option would be the use of provisional application. Provisional application would allow an agreement to be applied after signature, but before ratification, pending completion of parliamentary scrutiny. This would enable the Government to deliver their policy objective of securing continuity for the effects of existing EU-third country international agreements as far as possible. In exceptional cases it may be justified for the Government to use their powers under section 22 of the CRA G Act and ratify a treaty without parliamentary scrutiny, thus ensuring continuity from exit day. However, the Government's strong preference remains to avoid using this power unless there was a justifiable case for doing so.

Specific country situations

It is not the Government's intention to transition all agreements in their entirety. This includes the EEA agreement, the EU-Swiss free movement of persons agreement and the Ankara agreement.

The EEA EFTA states (Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein) participate in the EU single market through their membership of the European economic area (EEA).

The EEA agreement is the primary basis for the UK's current co-operation with these countries in a number of important areas, including on trade and citizens' rights to reside and work in another EEA state. The trade elements of our relationship with these countries are described in the annexed list available as an online attachment.

In the absence of any further action, the EEA agreement will no longer operate in respect of the UK when we leave the EU, including in a no-deal scenario. However, if the UK leaves with a deal, the EU has agreed that it will notify treaty partners and third countries that the UK is treated as an EU member state for the purposes of its international agreements during the implementation period up until 31 December 2020. This includes the EEA agreement. Once the implementation period ends, the UK will no longer be covered by the EEA agreement.

The UK and the EEA EFTA states have reached an agreement, which will mean that in a no-deal scenario UK and EEA EFTA nationals living in each other's countries before exit day will be able to continue living their lives broadly as they do today. The Government have also published guidance on how the EU settlement scheme, which will be open to EEA EFTA nationals, will work after exit day.

Through the UK's membership of the EU, we are party to the EU-Swiss free movement of persons agreement. In a no-deal scenario, this agreement will no longer apply to the UK from exit day.

The UK and Switzerland have reached an agreement which will mean that in a no-deal scenario UK and Swiss nationals living in each other's countries before exit day will be able to continue living their lives broadly as they do today. The Government have also published guidance on how the EU settlement scheme, which will be open to Swiss nationals, will work after exit day.

We are in discussions with Switzerland on transitional arrangements for UK workers wishing to move to Switzerland and Swiss workers wishing to move to the UK after exit in a no-deal scenario. We are close to reaching an agreement and details on this will be published in the near future.

Turkey's relationship with the EU is largely governed by the agreement creating an association between the Republic of Turkey and the European economic community (also referred to as the Ankara agreement) and its additional protocols and council decisions. The trade elements of our relationship with Turkey are described in the annexed list available as an online attachment.

Turkish nationals enjoy particular rights derived from the Ankara agreement. Following exit from the EU, the UK's obligation to this agreement falls away either after 31 December 2020 in a no-deal scenario, or earlier in a no-deal scenario. However, as a transitional arrangement, the UK will seek to replicate the effect of the ECAA arrangements for the resident Turkish population. This will allow resident ECAA workers and ECAA business persons and their family members to apply for further leave with similar eligibility requirements as they have now, and apply to settle in the UK. We have not yet entered into any commitments in respect of Turkish nationals arriving after the UK's departure in a no-deal situation.

I hope the House welcomes this statement as a demonstration of our commitment to transparency in our approach to transitioning international agreements, and will agree that it will help those affected to prepare for all eventualities.

Online attachments are available at:

<https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2019-03-07/HCWS1392/>.

[HCWS1392]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Middle East and Yemen

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): The United Nations describes the situation in Yemen as the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. Of a population of less than 30 million people, 24 million depend on aid for their food and medicines. The number of children treated for malnutrition exceeds 420,000. The number who have died from starvation is estimated to be in excess of 85,000. Behind these stark numbers are individual men, women and children. Their suffering is caused not by natural disaster but by man-made conflict. I will update the House on my visit to the region and my judgment about the prospects for the Stockholm peace process. I want to start by commending the extraordinary efforts of UN special envoy Martin Griffiths, without whom Stockholm would not have happened.

My message on this trip to all parties was simple: the ceasefire in Hodeidah, the first sustained ceasefire since the conflict began four years ago, is in peril. It will not last unless what was agreed is implemented in full—and time is running out.

On Sunday, I was the first western Foreign Minister to visit Yemen since the war began. I travelled to Aden where I met the Deputy Prime Minister of the legitimate Government of Yemen, along with the Foreign Minister and the Interior Minister. Our talks were in the presidential palace where the scars of battle were visible. I emphasised how all sides must redeploy their forces away from the port of Hodeidah. The Stockholm agreement requires them to hand over control to neutral local security forces “in accordance with Yemeni law and answering to local state institutions”. That matters because Hodeidah is the entry point for about 70% of Yemen's food imports. Over 50,000 metric tonnes of grain from the world food programme are stored in the port. Unless the withdrawal happens they cannot be distributed to the rest of the country. I ask the House to reflect on the obscurity of people starving to death in a country where food is just sitting idly in a port because warring parties will not allow it to be released. But a ceasefire in Hodeidah was also meant to be the first step to a nationwide ceasefire. If trust can be established there, it has the potential to be a bridge to the lasting political settlement sought by all sides. But if it cannot, and Stockholm is not implemented rapidly, the ceasefire will end and the prospects for humanitarian relief evaporate.

After meeting Government of Yemen representatives, I travelled by helicopter to Aden's port where a United Nations official described the unique challenges of distributing aid in a country torn by conflict.

I also met Mohammed Abdulsalam, spokesman for the Houthis, in Oman. I listened carefully to their concern but also delivered a candid message about the need to act quickly to save the Stockholm agreement. I also requested humanitarian access for UN helicopters and NGOs, which is currently either impeded or prevented. I also travelled to Saudi Arabia where I met President Hadi of Yemen and his Foreign Minister as well as my Saudi counterparts, Adel al-Jubeir and Ibrahim al-Assaf.

Finally, I visited the United Arab Emirates, where I held talks with my counterpart, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed. I welcomed the restraint shown by the Saudi-led coalition in Hodeidah since the Stockholm agreement but also reiterated my judgment that no side in this conflict can achieve outright military victory. The only way ahead is a negotiated political settlement. In the meantime, Britain and our allies are doing everything possible to alleviate the human suffering. Last month, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced another £200 million of British aid for Yemen, enough to treat 20,000 children for malnutrition and provide food for 3.8 million people for a month.

This year, the UN has asked for over £3.2 billion to cope with the emergency in Yemen—the largest humanitarian appeal ever. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have each pledged over £570 million. But the people of Yemen cannot be left to depend on outside aid forever. From my meetings in the region, I concluded that all parties genuinely want Stockholm to succeed, but there is a profound lack of trust and a deep reluctance to take the necessary steps in case they are not reciprocated. But in any successful peace process, all sides must take risks that are deeply uncomfortable. The Government of Yemen are understandably worried that without military pressure, the Houthis will not negotiate seriously. The Houthis, meanwhile, do not wish to hand over Hodeidah to any force that might be under Government control.

I told all sides that the only way to truly build confidence is for all parties to do precisely what they promised in Sweden, including not just leaving Hodeidah but also prisoner exchanges, paying salaries to Government employees, and allowing full humanitarian access to UN agencies. We then need to move rapidly on to discuss a long term political settlement, including the creation of a Government of national unity in which all sides are represented. The Stockholm peace process is our best chance yet to end this war. But the window for implementing it is closing. In the critical weeks that lie ahead, Britain will use every diplomatic and humanitarian lever we have to ensure this opportunity does not slip away.

[HCWS1383]

HOME DEPARTMENT

EU Settlement Scheme

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is today laying before Parliament a statement of changes in immigration

rules (HC 1919). The changes provide for the full opening of the EU settlement scheme from 30 March 2019 for resident EU citizens and their family members to obtain the UK immigration status which they will require in order to remain here permanently after the UK's withdrawal from the European Union.

The Government are also laying before Parliament today two negative procedure statutory instruments: the Immigration and Nationality (Fees) (Refund, Waiver and Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which provide for no application fee for the scheme as announced by the Prime Minister on 21 January 2019, and the Immigration (European Economic Area Nationals) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which, in part, make changes associated with the scheme to other secondary legislation.

Protecting EU citizens' rights remains our number one priority. We value the contribution they make to the social, economic and cultural fabric of the UK and we want them to stay. The best way to protect their rights, and those of UK nationals resident in the EU, is for the UK to reach a withdrawal agreement with the EU. However, as a responsible Government we are planning for all scenarios. In response to the proposal put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa), my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has written to the EU about the possibility of a joint UK/EU commitment to preserving the citizens' rights part of the withdrawal agreement in the event the UK withdraws from the EU without a deal. We await their response. The full opening of the EU settlement scheme will enable EU citizens and their family members to secure their UK immigration status whether a deal is reached or not.

In the light of the successful testing of the online application process for the scheme during the private beta test phases from August to December 2018, in which we received and processed more than 30,000 applications, a public beta test phase of the scheme began on 21 January 2019. This phase is open to resident EU citizens (and their EU citizen family members) with a valid passport, and to their non-EU citizen family members with a valid biometric residence card. In this public beta phase, we received more than 120,000 applications by the end of February 2019, enabling us to test the system at a greater scale than previous phases.

By the end of February 2019, more than 105,000 of these applications had been concluded, with 71% granted settled status, the rest granted pre-settled status and none refused. 75% of these applicants received their decision within three days and 80% of those who provided feedback found the online application process easy, or fairly easy, to complete. A report on the public beta test phase will be published after its conclusion on 30 March 2019.

This means that, since the opening of the initial private beta test phase on 28 August 2018, we had, by the end of February 2019, received more than 150,000 applications under the scheme, of which 135,000 (nearly 90%) had already been concluded. Of these concluded cases, 71% were granted settled status, with the rest granted pre-settled status and none refused.

The Government therefore intend to go ahead, as planned, with the full opening of the EU settlement scheme from 30 March 2019. The immigration rules for the scheme contained in the new appendix EU include the following changes to the scope of the scheme:

Resident citizens of the other European Economic Area (EEA) countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway) and of Switzerland, and their family members, will also be able to apply for UK immigration status under the scheme, in line with the citizens' rights agreements reached with those countries;

EEA and Swiss citizens and certain family members will from 9 April 2019 be able to apply under the scheme from outside the UK, so that they can obtain status under it, based on their previous residence in the UK, without needing to travel here in order to make an online application;

The scheme will be open to the family members of British citizens who were exercising their free movement rights under EU law before returning to the UK ("Surinder Singh" cases), and to the family members of certain dual British/EU citizens ("Lounes" cases);

The scheme will be open to others lawfully resident in the UK by virtue of a "derivative right" to reside, based on wider EU law. These are "Chen carers" (the primary carer of a self-sufficient EEA citizen child), "Ibrahim and Teixeira" cases (a child of a former EEA citizen worker who is in education in the UK and their primary carer), and "Zambrano carers" (the primary carer of a British citizen child or dependent adult);

Residence in the Crown dependencies (Guernsey, Jersey and the Isle of Man) will be counted as UK residence for the purposes of the scheme, consistent with the wider operation of the common travel area;

EEA and Swiss citizens previously resident in the UK will be able to count as UK residence for the purposes of the scheme time spent on an overseas posting as a Crown servant, as will a partner or child of any nationality accompanying such a person or accompanying a member of HM Forces on an overseas posting. Such EEA and Swiss citizens have made a strong commitment to the UK by serving overseas in this way, or by accompanying someone who is doing so, and this should not disadvantage them under the scheme; and

Consistent with the basis on which the scheme will operate in a "no-deal" scenario, provision is made for the "specified date", by which EEA and Swiss citizens will need to be continuously resident in the UK and certain relevant family relationships will need to be formed, to be 29 March 2019 in that scenario rather than 31 December 2020.

The new appendix EU also includes the following changes to the application process for the scheme:

There will be no application fee under the scheme, as the Prime Minister announced on 21 January 2019;

In certain circumstances, an application under the scheme will be made on a paper application form rather than through the online application process, including in "derivative right" cases where the applicant will need to provide additional information to that generally required under the scheme, and in exceptional circumstances, where provision of a paper application form complements the assisted digital support available for applicants who need help to complete the online application process;

Applicants in the UK will be able to rely on a wider range of documents as proof of their identity and nationality: their valid national identity card for an EEA or Swiss citizen, as well as their valid passport, and their valid passport or biometric residence permit for a non-EEA/Swiss citizen family member, as well as their valid biometric residence card;

There will be scope for applicants to submit their identity document by post to be checked and returned to them quickly, as an alternative, for EEA/Swiss citizens and for non-EEA/Swiss citizens with a biometric residence card, to use the identity verification app or visit one of the locations at which they can be helped to use this (of which there will be at least 50 across the UK by 30 March 2019); and

There will also be scope for the Secretary of State to accept alternative evidence of identity and nationality where the applicant is unable to provide the required document due to circumstances beyond their control or to compelling practical or compassionate reasons.

This statement of changes in immigration rules makes the following other provision associated with the EU settlement scheme:

Consistent with the draft withdrawal agreement with the EU, the new appendix EU (Family permit) provides for a non-EEA/Swiss citizen who is the family member of an EEA/Swiss citizen with status granted under the EU settlement scheme to apply for an entry clearance to join that EEA/Swiss citizen in the UK, or to accompany them here, whether for a short stay or to make an application under the scheme in the UK;

Changes to part 1 and part 9 of the rules to ensure that the grounds for the revocation of an entry clearance granted under appendix EU (Family permit), the refusal or cancellation of leave to enter held by virtue of a person having arrived in the UK with such an entry clearance, and the cancellation or curtailment of leave to enter or remain granted under appendix EU are consistent with the EU law public policy tests for conduct committed before 31 December 2020 (or before 29 March 2019 in a "no-deal" scenario) and with UK suitability provisions for conduct thereafter; and

Enables an application for administrative review of a decision under the scheme to be made outside the UK as well as within the UK, reflecting the scope for overseas applications under the scheme.

The full opening of the EU settlement scheme from 30 March 2019 will provide a straightforward and user-friendly means for resident EEA and Swiss citizens and their family members to remain here permanently. They make a huge contribution to our economy and society and the full opening of the scheme is tangible evidence that we want them to stay.

Further information about the EU settlement scheme is available on gov.uk and was summarised in my 12 February 2019 letter to colleagues. This contained links to a range of further communications material about the scheme which community organisations and others may find helpful, and is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/eu-settlement-scheme-update>

[HCWS1387]

Home Office Funding 2018-19

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £500 million will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Home Office. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure ahead of the resource being voted, estimated at £500 million, will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS1385]

Immigration Rules

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is today laying before the House a statement of changes in Immigration Rules (HC 1919).

Entrepreneurs and investors play key roles in creating jobs and driving economic growth and innovation in the UK. The Government are committed to ensuring our immigration system continues to attract individuals from around the globe who will create innovative businesses in the UK and make substantial investments in our economy.

The changes we are introducing today include two new visa routes that enhance the UK's offer to overseas entrepreneurial talent:

The start-up visa, announced by my right hon. Friend, the Home Secretary, in June 2018, will provide for those starting a new business for the first time in the UK.

The Innovator category will be for more experienced business people who have funds to invest in their business.

Both new categories will build on the endorsement model which has proved successful in our graduate entrepreneur and exceptional talent routes. Business experts, rather than the Home Office, will assess applicants' business ideas for their innovation, viability and scalability, to identify those that will bring the greatest benefits to the UK. These organisations will include business accelerators, seed competitions and Government agencies, as well as higher education providers.

These new routes will replace the existing tier 1 entrepreneur and graduate entrepreneur routes, which have attracted some high-quality businesses, but the tier 1 entrepreneur route also has a long tail of low quality projects which contribute little or nothing to the wider UK economy. We will keep the existing routes open for a transitional period to allow those who are already in them to extend their stay and settle if they meet the existing requirements.

The immigration rules for the new routes are designed to be clearer and easier to read. Endorsement will reduce the evidence which applicants need to submit to the Home Office and provide them with greater certainty. The rules for extensions and settlement are more flexible, recognising there are many ways in which a business may benefit the economy. Accelerated settlement continues to be available for the most successful innovators, and extensions of stay are provided for those whose businesses fail and who wish to try a new business idea.

Parliamentarians and anti-corruption campaigners have expressed concerns about whether the tier 1 Investor route is sufficiently robust against financial crime. There is also more that can be done to increase the benefits of applicants' investments to the UK economy.

We are therefore introducing changes that require investors to provide evidence of the source of any investment funds they have obtained within the last two years—up from 90 days at present. We are requiring UK banks to confirm they have carried out the checks they are required to make before opening an investment account. We are excluding investment in government bonds and tightening the rules around investment in companies.

We also intend to require investors to undergo enhanced checks on their financial situations and business histories, carried out by a UK regulated auditor, before making a visa application. We are working with industry to develop this requirement, with a view to introducing it in a future immigration rules change.

Minor changes are being made to the Government stateless leave policy to simplify the route to settlement for those who are genuinely stateless by granting an initial 5 years' limited leave rather than 30 months'. We are also taking steps to protect the integrity of this route and deter abusive applications by making clearer in the rules that someone must show they have tried to obtain a nationality or right of permanent residence in a country they could reasonably expect to be entitled to, before benefitting from stateless leave.

In May last year, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, committed to look again at what we could do to make it easier for family members of Afghan locally

engaged staff, who worked for UK forces in Afghanistan, to come here. Minor changes will give effect to this commitment, so those who were part of a family before the local staff member relocated can benefit from the relocation scheme rather than having to apply under family migration rules.

Finally, appendix H of the immigration rules contains a list of countries of low immigration risk whose nationals benefit from a streamlined application process for students. 2018 saw the expansion of visa national countries included in appendix H for the first time, which benefitted tens of thousands of students.

Careful consideration is given to which countries could be added to appendix H, taking into account objective analysis of a range of factors including the volume of students from a country and their tier 4 immigration compliance risk. The latest annual review of appendix H has resulted in the inclusion of Brazil, Kazakhstan, Mauritius, Oman, Peru and Tunisia; whilst Argentina, the Maldives, and Trinidad and Tobago are being removed from the list. This will result in approximately 4,500 additional students being able to benefit from appendix H.

The list of countries in appendix H will be kept under review and regularly updated to reflect the fact that countries' risk profiles change over time.

[HCWS1388]

TRANSPORT

Air Services to the EU

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):

Leaving the EU with a deal remains the Government's top priority. This has not changed. However, a responsible Government must plan for every eventuality, including a no-deal scenario.

In December, Cabinet agreed to proceed with the Government's next phase of no-deal planning. This means we are setting in motion our remaining no-deal plans.

Both the EU and the UK have been clear that they are committed to maintaining air services in any scenario. Aviation links are a key priority for the Department for Transport. The UK has the third largest aviation network in the world, and the biggest in Europe. Air travel is vital for both the UK and the EU in connecting people and businesses, facilitating tourism and trade. The UK and EU have a mutual interest in maintaining well-functioning aviation markets.

The Government have made preparations to deliver continuity of air services between the UK and the EU in the event that the UK leaves the EU without a withdrawal agreement. We set out in our technical notices in September 2018 that the UK would take a pragmatic approach to any no-deal scenario, and provide EU airlines with permission to operate. We expected EU countries to reciprocate and provide permissions to UK airlines.

Following this, the European Commission proposed a regulation to ensure air connectivity in the event that the UK leaves without a withdrawal agreement. A final

version of the draft regulation has been provisionally agreed by the EU. This is expected to be confirmed by the Council and the European Parliament shortly. The provisionally agreed EU regulation is intended to apply after the UK leaves the EU, and would entitle UK airlines to continue operating air services from the UK to the EU until March 2020.

Accordingly, I am today publishing a policy statement to set out how the UK intends to provide the necessary permissions to member state airlines in order for them to operate to the UK. We have made all decisions in relation to how the UK will reciprocate based on three key principles. First, we want to provide certainty and reassurance to industry and consumers. Secondly, we want to minimise the potential for disruption. Finally, we want to maintain a level playing field for UK industry, ahead of future negotiations.

Full details on how the UK will reciprocate are set out in the policy statement. In short, for the 12 month duration of the EU regulation, the UK intends to reciprocate the rights provided in the EU's regulation, and grant EU air carriers a level of access to the UK at

least equivalent to the rights that would be granted to UK airlines under the regulation. This includes traffic rights, ownership and control, leasing of aircraft, co-operative marketing arrangements and fair competition. As an exceptional measure to ensure the continuity of regional services and to minimise disruption, we will for a short period go further and allow member state airlines to operate wholly within the UK for the IATA summer season 2019, which ends on 27 October 2019, ensuring continued regional connectivity and providing time for EU businesses to adjust to new arrangements. We will also allow code sharing on existing services to continue.

While continuing to plan for all eventualities, we also believe that it is right to underline the fact that the UK is taking a positive and pragmatic approach. Overall, we continue to believe that liberal, reciprocal market access is in the best interest of the EU countries and the UK, and we will move swiftly to propose negotiations on this basis in the event that the UK leaves without a withdrawal agreement.

[HCWS1384]

Petitions

Thursday 7 March 2019

OBSERVATIONS

EDUCATION

The future of maintained nursery schools

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Triangle, maintained nursery school in Lambeth.

Declares that we are concerned about the future of maintained nursery schools in England after March 2020 as no guarantee has been given by the Government that adequate funding will continue when supplementary funding ends.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons to urge the Government to take action to ensure nursery schools are financially sustainable for the future.

And the petitioners remain, etc—[Presented by Lucy Powell, *Official Report*, 5 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 295.]

[P002370]

Other petitions on the same terms from the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) are: [P002424], [P002425], [P002370], [P002371], [P002372], [P002373], [P002374], [P002375], [P002376], [P002377], [P002378], [P002379], [P002380], [P002381], [P002382], [P002383], [P002384], [P002385], [P002386], [P002387], [P002388], [P002389], [P002390], [P002391], [P002392], [P002393], [P002394], [P002395], [P002402], [P002403], [P002404], [P002405], [P002406], [P002407], [P002409].

Petitions in the same terms were presented by the hon. Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson) [P002421], [P002422], [P002423]; the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) [P002312]; the hon. Member for Halton (Derek Twigg) [P002313]; the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) [P002314], [P002321]; the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) [P002315]; the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) [P002316], [P002317], [P002318], [P002327], [P002344]; the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) [P002319], [P002320], [P002322]; the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) [P002324]; the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) [P002325]; the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) [P002326]; the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Dame Louise Ellman) [P002328]; the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) [P002329], [P002340], [P002342], [P002343], [P002345], [P002346]; the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) [P002330], [P002332], [P002333], [P002334], [P002335]; the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham P. Jones) [P002331], [P002349]; the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) [P002336], [P002337], [P002397]; the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) [P002338]; the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) [P002339];

the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) [P002341], [P002347]; the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) [P002348]; the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) [P002350]; the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) [P002351]; the hon. Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker) [P002352], [P002408], [P002417]; the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) [P002353], [P002354], [P002355]; the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) [P002356]; the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) [P002357], [P002358], [P002359], [P002360]; the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) [P002361]; the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) [P002362]; the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) [P002363], [P002364]; the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) [P002365], [P002366]; the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) [P002367]; the right hon. Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett) [P002368], [P002369]; the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) [P002396]; the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly) [P002398]; the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) [P002399]; the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) [P002400]; the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) [P002410]; the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) [P002411]; the Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty's Treasury, the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer) [P002412]; the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) [P002413], [P002414], [P002415]; the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) [P002416];

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi):

Maintained nursery schools make a valuable and high quality contribution to supporting some of our most disadvantaged children. Many of them have specialist skills and knowledge in supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities, and many of them share this expertise with other early years providers.

In acknowledgement of the costs that maintained nursery schools experience over and above other early years providers, the Government are providing local authorities with around £60 million a year in supplementary funding, to enable them to maintain the funding of maintained nursery schools.

On 28 February, the Government announced that this arrangement would be extended from March 2020 to August 2020, to enable local authorities to maintain the funding of maintained nursery schools for the whole of the 2019-20 academic year. This means that local authorities can allocate places in maintained nursery schools for September 2019 without uncertainty over the summer term in 2020. The cost of this extension will be around £24 million.

What happens after the 2019-20 academic year will be determined by the next spending review, and informed by new research published on 28 February on the services, costs and quality of maintained nursery schools.

ORAL ANSWERS

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