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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Monday 11 March 2019

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SEVENTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 13 JUNE 2017]

SIXTY-EIGHTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 656

THIRTY-FIRST VOLUME OF SESSION 2017-2019

House of Commons

Monday 11 March 2019

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Sixth Form Curriculum

1. **Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support schools to deliver a diverse curriculum to sixth forms. [909675]

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): We want young people to have a range of options so that they can mature and develop the skills they will need in adult life. There was a wide consultation on reforming A-levels to ensure that they meet the needs of the future, and the new T-levels will increase the options available. I should add that £600 a year for each additional student taking maths A-level to increase take-up is now on the table.

Matt Western: The Minister will be well aware that we have seen a significant reduction in the take-up of subjects at sixth form level, with a 57% reduction in German, a 38% cut in Spanish, a 35% cut in French and a 38% drop in science, technology, engineering and

maths—STEM—subjects. This is down to a 21% real-terms cut in education funding for sixth forms. Does she not share my concern that the young people in the secondary schools in my area will not have the same opportunities as we enjoyed when we were at school?

Anne Milton: We recognise that there is an issue around languages, but when I think about some of the good work that is being done on STEM subjects in particular, I am very impressed with what is going on.

21. [909696] **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): Given that the UK has one of the lowest levels of women engineers anywhere in Europe, what steps are being taken to encourage girls to study physics as well as maths at A-level?

Anne Milton: It is extremely important that girls and women have exactly the same opportunities and are represented at all levels, not only in engineering. We know that 44% of our STEM ambassadors are female, and we are investing in programmes such as the advanced maths support programme and the stimulating physics network, both of which help to increase participation, particularly among girls. I have seen lots of apprentices over the past week, and interestingly, more than a quarter of the apprentices in STEM subjects are women.¹

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): With more than three quarters of schools and colleges post-16 reporting a significant reduction in support for extracurricular services and in all other means of supporting students, such as mental health services, is it not time to raise the rate and to address this real problem in post-16 funding?

Anne Milton: I know that the hon. Gentleman has been a doughty champion of raising the rate, not least as a result of his experience in the education sector. I visited a sixth form college last Friday, and I am aware of the challenges that they are facing, as is the Secretary of State. We have protected base rates, but of course all this will be looked at in the context of the spending review.

1. [Official Report, 19 March 2019, Vol. 656, c. 5MC.]

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The curriculum, diverse or otherwise, can be successfully delivered only if students attend. Will the Minister condemn the growing trend of students going on strike to protest against current political issues?

Anne Milton: My hon. Friend believes that it is a growing trend; I do not know that it is a trend. I think we all agree that it is good when young people are passionate about the issues that they care about. I do not believe that anybody should go on strike as such, but I am sure that those students made up their studies in their own time and at weekends.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): The 15,000 young people who protested about climate change last month in the Youth Strike 4 Climate were passionate and committed. Instead of condemning them or branding their actions as truancy, as some would do, would it not be better for the Government to review the curriculum to ensure that greater importance is attached to the urgency of attending to the ecological crisis that we face?

Anne Milton: We would like to see those young people who have an interest in climate change becoming the engineers and scientists of the future, particularly the young women among them. It is important that people who care passionately about these subjects should use that passion to take up careers that will make a real difference to our climate.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): In the past few days, research has exposed one of the devastating impacts of cuts to the curriculum in schools and sixth forms: music provision has fallen by over a fifth in five years, with schools in the most deprived areas suffering the worst. That was among the concerns raised by 7,000 headteachers last week, but the Secretary of State refused to meet them. Let me make it clear that I would happily meet those headteachers any time. The question is: will the Education Secretary now agree to do the same?

Anne Milton: Yes, we have invested £500 million in music and the arts. To put that into context, the hon. Lady should be aware that the Secretary of State met headteachers on Thursday, Friday and Saturday. He did not meet any on Sunday, but I am sure that he will meet more headteachers this week, so there has been no snub from the Secretary of State. He meets headteachers all the time—[*Interruption.*] From a sedentary position, the hon. Lady suggests that the Secretary of State refuses to meet headteachers, but that is not the case. That is not an honest representation of the Secretary of State that I know—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Please stop issuing instructions to withdraw. The statement from the Minister was borderline, because there can be no accusation of anything other than honesty in the Chamber, so I was happy to leave it there. I do not require advice or help from any other quarter.

Free Schools

2. **Dominic Raab** (Esher and Walton) (Con): What progress he is making on increasing the number of free schools. [909676]

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): There are 443 open free schools, and we will establish another 263. Today, I announced the approval of a further 37 special free schools and two alternative provision schools. In the spring, we will announce the successful applications from wave 13, and we recently published the wave 14 applications.

Dominic Raab: Cobham Free School's secondary department has been in temporary accommodation since 2014. While it is welcome that the sixth form is moving in to the new site at Munro House in September, the rest of the pupils will not join them until 2021, which is frustrating for pupils and parents and will cost over £1 million. Will the Secretary of State see whether more can be done to seek early vacant possession, given the additional money and expense that would otherwise go on temporary accommodation, to get those children into the permanent site as soon as possible?

Damian Hinds: I commend my right hon. Friend for his ongoing work with the Cobham Free School and the upcoming project at Heathside Walton-on-Thames. He has met my noble friend Lord Agnew to discuss vacant possession and, as he knows, there have been delays in trying to get it, but I would be happy to meet him to discuss the matter further.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Whether free schools or not—a policy I disagree with—Stoke-on-Trent now has a huge gap in the number of places available at secondary schools to the point where 11 of my 14 secondary schools are oversubscribed, with some constituents having to get three buses to get to their allocated school in September. What is the Secretary of State planning to do about that?

Damian Hinds: This decade we are on course to create 1 million new places in schools across the country. It will be the largest expansion in school capacity in at least two generations, following the net loss of 100,000 places during the last six years of the Labour Government. Although there will always be individual situations that we need to address—we have a capital programme to do that, and I will be happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss it—there are now tens of thousands fewer pupils in schools that are over capacity.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): In *The Times* on Friday, the Secretary of State said that

“an exclusion should not just be the end of something but be the start of something new and positive.”

What is he doing to address the postcode lottery of alternative provision, particularly in areas with high amounts of exclusion? Why does the latest free school wave contain just two free schools with alternative provision? What is he doing to change that?

Mr Speaker: Three questions truncated into one.

Damian Hinds: Some alternative provision free schools are already open, and there will be more over time, and my right hon. Friend is right that today's announcement contained two more. Like him, I have seen some outstanding alternative provision in our country, and we need to ensure that that happens everywhere.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Today's announcement of 37 new free schools to deal with exclusions is all very well, but the fact is that the reason why headteachers feel that they have to exclude pupils is that there is simply not enough money in special educational needs and disability provision in the first place. More is not enough from this Government. When will the Secretary of State finally fund SEND provision properly?

Damian Hinds: As the hon. Lady knows, there is more money going into high needs provision—£6 billion. However, it is also true—this is implicit in what she says—that there are greater demands on the system. That is why we brought forward as a first stage the package that I announced a few months ago, including the extra revenue funding and extra capital funding, but we know that there is more to do.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Parents and children in Middlesbrough were left angry and upset last week by the announcement that 100 pupils will not receive a secondary school place in the town from September and will instead be placed with neighbouring authorities. A key cause of that is population growth. Middlesbrough Council is supporting a bid for a new free school in Middlehaven, so will the Department expedite it as a matter of urgency?

Damian Hinds: As I said to the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), there are areas where we need to continue creating new school places. That is why we have already created over 800,000 school places since 2010 and are on course for 1 million new school places over the decade.

On the free schools process, we expect to announce the outcome of wave 13 before too long.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Instead of increasing the number of free schools, will the Secretary of State look at how we could improve the quality of the free schools we already have? Plymouth School of Creative Arts does exceptional work in some respects, but it is failing in others. Will he look at investing more in making sure such failing and troubled schools give our kids the education they deserve?

Damian Hinds: That is at the heart of what we do. That is why we have Ofsted and a school improvement programme, and it is why we encourage schools to learn from one another. One of the main reasons we have multi-academy trusts is so that they are able to work together. I think the hon. Gentleman will be meeting my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards, who takes a close interest in Plymouth schools, to make sure the very best can be done.

School Standards

3. **John Stevenson** (Carlisle) (Con): What recent steps has his Department taken to raise standards in schools.
[909677]

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): We have reformed the curriculum and ensured we have rigorous qualifications so that employers and young people themselves can take full confidence in them.

John Stevenson: At the end of the day, the most important thing that matters is that a child's education is one that gives them the greatest opportunity in life. Although resources are clearly very important, what also matters is the quality of teaching, the learning environment and, above all else, leadership within schools. Does the Minister agree it is those ingredients that will really make the difference to a child's education and to standards within schools?

Damian Hinds: I agree with my hon. Friend, and we will be investing over £20 million by 2020 through our teaching and leadership innovation fund. On Saturday I had the opportunity to talk about the benefits of diversity in leadership at the "Break the Cycle" event, and I take this opportunity once again to thank and pay tribute to teachers and leaders in our schools throughout the country.

17. [909692] **Bridget Phillipson** (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): Half of all secondary schools in Sunderland are judged by Ofsted to be inadequate or requiring improvement. Small-scale initiatives are always welcome, but it is clear that the issues we face are much greater. When will the Secretary of State get to grips with the deep-seated problems we face in areas like the north-east?

Damian Hinds: As it happens, on Thursday—in three days' time—we have a session with Opportunity North East to look specifically at working directly with secondary schools in the north-east. The hon. Lady is right to identify that there is a particular issue in parts of the north-east, where primary schools have strong and outstanding results, as do nursery schools, but we clearly need to do more for secondary schools, which is partly what we will be looking at on Thursday.

16. [909691] **Neil O'Brien** (Harborough) (Con): Some of the very highest standards in our school system are in small village primary schools. When the national funding formula is reviewed, will the Minister provide additional support for these hugely important rural institutions?

Damian Hinds: Of course I recognise the value of rural schools, not least as a constituency MP—I have many brilliant rural schools in my constituency. As we come to look again at the formula, of course we will look at how the different elements work to make sure that all types of schools are supported.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) is a jolly lucky fella to get in at Question Time, as he withdrew his own question. He is a very busy fella, with many commitments and a very full diary, but I got him in early, which I know he duly appreciates.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Surely it is impossible to raise standards in schools when 15.93% of children with special educational needs and disabilities are excluded, compared with 3.6% of children without special educational needs. What is the Minister doing to address this stark difference in exclusions?

Damian Hinds: Of course it is a matter of concern that some groups are more likely to be excluded than others, particularly when it comes to children with special educational needs, who deserve and must have our particular attention. The hon. Lady will know that

there is an ongoing review by Edward Timpson, the former schools Minister, and we expect to hear back on that quite soon.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Two thirds of children who are excluded from school are found to have speech, language and communication difficulties. Tackling this at an early age would make a real difference to their life chances and, indeed, to the standards they achieve at school, so will my right hon. Friend please outline what the Government are doing to show they realise this and to tackle it?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is, of course, exactly right on that. The very earliest development of speech and language is crucial; someone who arrives at school unable to communicate fully just cannot access the rest of the curriculum. That is why I have set out the ambition to halve that gap in early language development. It is also why we must look at the home, because what happens in school and nursery is not the whole picture. We have to think about the home learning environment and make sure we are giving as much support to parents as possible.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Standards in schools are wholly dependent on the recruitment and retention of quality teachers. Does the Secretary of State agree that the immigration Bill, with its £30,000 threshold, is going to be a barrier to the recruitment of teachers post Brexit? Surely he must agree that it is time to scrap this flawed legislation.

Damian Hinds: A relatively low number of teachers from other EU countries are working in our education system. For the development of languages, for example, we could do more, and of course we will always look at the immigration system and make sure that the highly skilled people we need for our system are welcome.

Disadvantaged Children: Attainment Gap

4. **Sir David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): What progress he has made on closing the attainment gap for disadvantaged children. [909678]

10. **Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What progress he has made on closing the attainment gap for disadvantaged children. [909685]

20. **Anne-Marie Trevelyan** (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): What progress he has made on closing the attainment gap for disadvantaged children. [909695]

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): Our reforms, backed by the £2.4 billion pupil premium, have helped schools to narrow the disadvantage attainment gap by 13% at age 11 and 9% at age 16 since 2011.

Sir David Evennett: I thank the Secretary of State for his response. Research shows that when children fall behind in the early years it is incredibly difficult for them to catch up. Will he advise me as to how his Department is supporting disadvantaged children in those crucial early stages of education?

Damian Hinds: Of course, my right hon. Friend is correct on this, which follows on from the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow). We are investing more than £100 million in our early years social mobility programme, including for professional development for early years practitioners and in grant support for the home learning environment, as I was outlining. Across the country, more than 150,000 disadvantaged two-year-olds benefit from the 15 free hours entitlement, 540 of whom are in the Bexley local authority area.

Nigel Huddleston: Quite a few children from disadvantaged backgrounds in my constituency start school with English as a second language. That is one reason why my constituency ranks relatively low on reading skills and in social mobility indices. What is the Secretary of State doing to enhance English-speaking skills in the very early years at nursery and in primary school?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is correct about this; at the early years foundation stage, providers have to make sure that there are sufficient opportunities for children whose home language is not English to learn and reach a good standard in the English language.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: Rural poverty means that children in north Northumberland are doubly disadvantaged in terms of educational opportunities. Headteachers such as Nicola Mathewson at Rothbury First School, in my most sparsely populated rural community, are struggling to balance budgets because of the apprenticeship levy forced on them there. This money cannot be spent on a teaching assistant to help with reading or maths. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can free up these funds by correcting what I assume was an oversight in respect of excluding small rural schools when the apprenticeship levy framework was put together?

Damian Hinds: Of course, I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss how we can make sure that apprenticeships do work for the Rothbury First School and others in her constituency. Local authorities, which are the levy payers in this case, should ensure that schools can benefit from apprenticeships; they can combine the levy across schools or share apprentices to ensure that the money is best spent.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): As the Secretary of State will be aware, one institution that does close the disadvantage attainment gap in the early years is our valued maintained nursery schools. As hundreds of headteachers gather in Parliament today to lobby their MPs before we go on a march to Downing Street, may I, first, pay tribute to the children's Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), for securing the down payment of £24 million for these maintained nursery schools? May I also ask the Secretary of State to redouble his efforts and work across government to make sure they have a long-term, secure funding stream?

Damian Hinds: I thank the hon. Lady for her kind words about the schools Minister. *[Interruption.]* I mean the children's Minister. Did I say schools Minister?

He is also very good. I do recognise the particularly important place that maintained nursery schools have. With this recent announcement, local authorities can plan with confidence for the full academic year. As the hon. Lady knows, we are also doing further work to look into the value added and additional services that maintained nurseries provide.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State listen to a little bit of advice? A lot of people in the educational world want him to be a big beast. They want to know what he stands for and what he is passionate about. If he cannot be passionate about identifying which little children have talent but are lost to the system by the time they get to 11, he will be nothing. Why does he not take it seriously, bring back children's centres and early years support, and do something about underprivileged children as early as possible? Be a big beast!

Damian Hinds: Wow. I believe my commitment to social mobility and closing the disadvantage gap is strong. I used to chair the all-party group on social mobility before I came into this job, and believe that social mobility is at the very heart of what we do. It is the core purpose of the Department for Education to ensure that every child, whatever their background, has the maximum opportunities available to them. I gently remind the hon. Gentleman that since the party of which he is a member was last in government, we have narrowed the disadvantage attainment gap at every stage—from nursery to primary, through secondary and into higher education.

18. [909693] **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The average student support in Scotland was up 1.4% in 2017-18. Does the Secretary of State agree that the SNP Scottish Government's approach of supporting students, rather than charging prohibitive fees, explains why in Scotland the gap between students from the most and the least deprived communities achieving a positive destination has halved since 2009-10?

Damian Hinds: It may come as no surprise to anyone at all that I am not about to commend the Scottish Government for their approach. Actually, in the last few years England has seen record rates of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds being able to go to university. We need to work further on not only access but successful participation, bringing down drop-out rates and increasing completion rates, and making sure that everybody has full access to the most stretching opportunities available to them.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): We know that per pupil spending in England has fallen by 8% in the past 10 years, which has led to many schools now having to rely on substantial parental funding—in some cases, it is up to £1,200 per year. How is the Department ensuring that schools in disadvantaged areas are able to continue to deliver for pupils, given that the parents in such areas cannot possibly consider contributing such fees?

Damian Hinds: The simple truth is that that gap has been narrowing in England. I will take no lessons from SNP Members, whose Government in Scotland are failing to narrow the gap.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): As we have heard from Members from all parties, communication, articulacy and oracy are the absolute keys to closing the disadvantage gap. A child with poor vocabulary at five and under is twice as likely to be unemployed at 30. We know that high-quality early years education can make a massive difference for disadvantaged children. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) for mentioning the heads of maintained nurseries who are campaigning outside No. 10 right now. Sadly, the Secretary of State chooses to lock the most disadvantaged youngsters out of the 30 hours of free childcare. Does he not agree that to make a serious attempt at closing the disadvantage gap, he must drop the requirement that both parents have to be in work to qualify for entitlement to 30 hours of free childcare?

Damian Hinds: There are currently 154,960 disadvantaged two-year-olds benefiting from the 15 hours' free entitlement programme—a programme that was never available under any Labour Government. As for the increase in eligibility from 15 to 30 hours, that supports working families and helps to sustain employment. I gently remind the hon. Lady that we have record levels of employment in this country and the lowest level of unemployment we have seen since the mid-1970s.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. Progress is very slow, so we need to speed up. There are a lot of questions to get through; short questions and short answers would facilitate us in the process.

Post-18 Education and Funding Review

5. **Ben Bradley** (Mansfield) (Con): What progress his Department has made on its review of post-18 education and funding. [909679]

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): The Government's post-18 review is making good progress. As part of the review, the independent panel chaired by Philip Augar has undertaken an extensive programme of stakeholder engagement and evidence-gathering with students, graduates, providers and employers, including a call for evidence that received more than 400 responses. They are producing a report that will form part of the wider post-18 review and this will be published shortly.

Ben Bradley: I thank the Minister for that answer. There have been rumours in this place about the possibility of reduced or variable tuition fees forming part of the proposals from the Augar review. In my opinion that misses the point; it is actually the cost of living and maintenance rather than tuition that causes accessibility problems at universities. Can my hon. Friend assure me that the Government will properly consult the sector on any recommendations and seek to follow the evidence, rather than offering quick fixes and good headlines?

Chris Skidmore: I agree that we want to maintain the financial stability of our world-class higher education and research sector. I congratulate many universities on their appearance in the QS World University Rankings last week. That is why, when the Government conclude

the review, we will ensure that people from every background can progress and succeed in post-18 education to contribute to a strong knowledge economy and deliver the skills that we need.

Support for Pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

6. **Anna Turley** (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to support pupils with special educational needs and disabilities. [909680]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): The special educational needs reforms of 2014 were the biggest in a generation. In December we announced a further £250 million in high-needs funding over the two years, bringing the total to £6.1 billion this year and £6.3 billion in 2019-20. We announced today that 3,500 extra school places will be created for pupils facing the biggest challenge in their education, with 39 new free schools to support children with special educational needs or those who have been excluded from mainstream schools.

Anna Turley: I appreciate the Minister's response and announcement, but it does not yet recognise the reality that schools are facing. One of my primary school teachers told me last week:

"SEND funding is in crisis. We have pupils who have been promised a place at schools with a special educational needs base, but due to a lack of this specialist provision, pupils have had to remain at our school. We cater for their needs as much as we possibly can."

The reality is that those pupils are not getting the care that they deserve. We have only one chance of giving our children the best start in life. Minister, will you look again at the needs of all pupils being met, particularly those with special needs?

Nadhim Zahawi: That is exactly what we are doing. Today's announcement of 37 special free schools is on top of the 88 special free schools and 54 alternative provision schools that are already either open or in the pipeline. The announcement today is in addition to that provision, which is why we are doing that. Additionally, we have put £100 million into increasing capacity in mainstream schools as well as increasing the high-needs funding for local authorities.

Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con): The Federation of Heathfield and St Francis Special Schools provides invaluable learning opportunities for more than 200 children with special educational needs in Fareham. Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to the inspirational head, Steve Hollinghurst, whose record of service spans 36 years, and will he set out what further support there is for these essential schools so that they can continue providing this support for our most vulnerable children?

Nadhim Zahawi: I certainly join my hon. Friend in praising Steve for the work that he has done. Today's announcement provides a portfolio of provision in local areas. Almost every local authority will benefit from this increase in provision.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): This morning, I met students on the foundation skills course at the excellent Stockton Riverside College, which also operates

in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley). What is the Minister doing to support colleges to deliver foundation skills courses to young people with high needs such as learning disabilities, including those whom I met this morning?

Nadhim Zahawi: Colleges do absolutely critical work, and they do brilliant work with special needs children. I have seen it for myself at Hammersmith and Derwent colleges, and we continue to support those colleges.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Parents of children with SEN very rarely welcome the closure of their schools, and I say respectfully that we must treat the parents in Chippenham and Trowbridge with great sensitivity. None the less, does the Minister not agree with me and welcome Wiltshire Council's great vision in spending £20 million on building a state-of-the-art school at Rowdeford, which will bring children from across the whole of North Wiltshire to an absolutely superb facility?

Nadhim Zahawi: I agree with my hon. Friend that Wiltshire is doing a tremendous job in SEND provision. The inspection by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission has been exemplary. There is a legal challenge to the investment of £20 million and it would be inappropriate for me to comment on that. I know that neighbouring colleagues take a different view as well.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Restraint and restrictive practices in schools and healthcare settings carried out by adults on children as young as two with SEND have caused bruising, black eyes, carpet burns and post-traumatic stress disorder. Guidance promised half a decade ago has yet to materialise, and the Department does not count these complaints. Fed-up parents are preparing to take legal action against the Government. Despite today's announcement of placements for children with complex needs, should not the Minister be focusing on the fact that, on his watch, some schools are no longer a safe place for children with SEND?

Nadhim Zahawi: I had hoped that the hon. Lady would commend today's announcement and confirm that she takes a different view from her Front Bench on abolishing free schools. If we abolished these very good free special schools, we would actually put more children with SEND at risk. We are undertaking a root-and-branch review of restraint with the Department of Health and Social Care, and we will be reporting back.

School Funding: Distribution

7. **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that school funding is equitably distributed. [909681]

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): In 2018, we introduced the national funding formula, which distributes funding based on schools' and pupils' needs and characteristics, not accidents of location or history. Since 2017, we have given every local authority more money for every pupil in every school, while allocating the biggest increases to the most underfunded schools.

Andrew Bridgen: I thank the Minister for that answer, but given that the national funding formula only reduces the funding disparity by some 5%, when does he think his Department is going to fulfil our manifesto promise of creating fair funding for all schoolchildren, and will he meet me and colleagues from Leicestershire to discuss these matters?

Nick Gibb: I will certainly meet my hon. Friend and his colleagues from Leicestershire. The national funding formula is delivering rapid gains for the most underfunded schools while also ensuring stability for all schools. By 2019-20, schools in Leicestershire will receive 5.5% more funding per pupil compared to 2017-18, or £31.5 million more in total. In 2019-20, 92% of schools in Leicestershire will already be attracting their full gains under the national funding formula.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): I am here on behalf of Balham Nursery School and Children's Centre in my constituency, which knows that it has guaranteed funding until 2020, but is deeply concerned about what will happen going forward. The people there do an incredible job bridging the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers, so what assurances can the Minister provide them with today?

Nick Gibb: Everything about this Government is about closing that attainment gap, and we have closed the attainment gap between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their more affluent peers by 13.5% in the primary sector—in early years and primary schools. The hon. Lady will know that we have awarded an extra £60 million funding to recognise the higher costs of maintained nursery schools. We are working with the sector as we prepare for the spending review.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I was at the Cotswold School in Bourton-on-the-Water in my constituency on Friday. It is not even going to reach the £4,800 per pupil under the national funding formula. How can it be fair that that school gets that sort of funding, yet schools in Hackney—with a range of pupil premium funding on top—get £6,800 per pupil?

Nick Gibb: The purpose of the national funding formula is not to give every school across the country the same amount of funding per pupil. It must be right that schools with lots of children with additional needs—for example, coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, with English as an additional language or with low prior attainment—do need to receive more money to help to ensure that those children's needs are met. It is also right that schools in areas of high costs receive extra money to reflect those costs. That is what our fairer funding system delivers, and my hon. Friend's county will have benefited from the national funding formula.

Ann Coffey (Stockport) (Ind): Tithe Barn Primary School in my constituency is a low-funded school in a low-funded authority with an above average percentage of special educational needs children. The Minister has said that he will be gathering evidence on the adequacy of special educational needs funding. Is he able to give us any more information about when he will start to gather evidence, how he will gather it and who will be invited to contribute?

Nick Gibb: We understand the pressures on the high-needs budgets of local authorities up and down the country, including medical science and a whole range of other issues such as extending the age range for special educational needs provision up to 25. All those things have added pressure to high-needs budgets, which is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State towards the end of last year announced an extra £250 million between this financial year and the next financial year to recognise the pressures that local authorities are facing.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Figures show that our schools have 66,000 more pupils but 5,400 fewer teachers, 2,800 fewer teaching assistants, 1,400 fewer support staff, and 1,200 fewer auxiliary staff—a total workforce reduction of 10,800 from 2016-17. With weekend reports of headteachers having to clean the toilets, does the Minister still maintain that schools are not experiencing funding cuts from this Government?

Nick Gibb: As I said, since 2017 we have provided and are providing local authorities with more money for every pupil in every school. There are 10,000 more teachers in our school system today than there were when we came into office in 2010. In the recruitment cycle last year, we recruited 2,600 more teacher trainees into teacher training. It is an attractive and an honourable profession to work in. I wish the hon. Gentleman and Labour Front Benchers would support our schools and talk them up instead of talking them down.

Mental Health and Wellbeing: Support in Schools

8. **Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab):** What recent assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of support in schools for children and young people's mental health and wellbeing. [909683]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): We conducted a national survey of mental health provision in schools that showed that most take action to support their pupils' mental health. Schools need specialist support, so under the NHS long-term plan we are introducing mental health support teams as part of a major investment in children's mental health.

Paul Blomfield: During my annual community consultation, I met students from secondary schools right across my constituency. In every school, they raised the difficulty in accessing mental health services as a top priority. The Minister said that he is encouraging schools to offer counselling. Schools want to do that, but the funding crisis is preventing them because they do not have the resources. Next Tuesday, I am hosting a delegation of headteachers from every Sheffield constituency. Will he meet them to discuss this issue?

Nadhim Zahawi: I would happily discuss the issue. I am very proud to share with this House the fact that the funding that we are increasing to £2.3 billion a year by 2023-24 would mean that funding for children's and young people's mental health services will grow faster than overall NHS funding, but also, more importantly, faster than total mental health spending overall.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Saxon Hill Academy in Lichfield, like many other schools that look after severely disabled children, has a programme of sleepovers for the children. That benefits the children, and it is great for the parents because it gives them respite, but the school is now having to discontinue it because of local funding issues. Is there anything the Government can do centrally to help Saxon Hill and similar schools?

Nadhim Zahawi: Saxon Hill does a tremendous job, and respite is incredibly important. Part of the reason we have increased the funding, with £250 million over the next two years, is that we are very much cognisant of the fact that there are funding pressures on local authorities' higher needs budgets.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The online game "Doki Doki Literature Club!", which is available as a free download, promotes self-harm and has been linked to the suicides of several young people. What steps are being taken within schools to raise awareness of such dangers? What steps are being taken with the Minister's colleagues in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to tighten the regulations that currently allow children and young people to download such harmful games?

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. The relationships curriculum addresses these online harms directly. We also have the online harms White Paper that is to be issued imminently.

Teachers' Pension Scheme Costs: Effect on Universities

9. **Eleanor Smith** (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect on universities of increased teachers' pension scheme costs. [909684]

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): The Department's public consultation to gather evidence on the impacts of increased contributions to the teachers' pension scheme for all TPS employers, including universities, for 2019-20 closed on 12 February 2019. Final funding decisions will be made in due course when the consultation evidence has been reviewed.

Eleanor Smith: Modern universities across the country are deeply anxious about the upcoming charges to the teachers' pension scheme, with one institution forecasting a 5% cut in staff members if the Government do not act. Will the Secretary of State urgently commit to supporting universities with these huge additional costs that have been earmarked for schools and colleges?

Chris Skidmore: The Department's initial analysis of each sector—state schools, further education, higher education, and independent schools—suggested that state schools and further education colleges would be most affected by the increase in employer contributions, so prioritised funding has been made available for them on this basis. However, final funding decisions will be made when the consultation evidence has been reviewed.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the most serious financial pressures are not on universities but on further education colleges and

that it is time for a fresh, fair settlement for FE colleges, to ensure that learners get the investment in education that they deserve?

Chris Skidmore: My hon. Friend is right that analysis has demonstrated that the FE sector would be affected. Obviously, FE colleges are most directly funded by Government grants, in contrast with higher education providers, which are autonomous bodies that are ultimately responsible for ensuring their financial viability.

Northern Powerhouse Schools Strategy

11. **Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): What progress he has made on implementing the northern powerhouse schools strategy. [909686]

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): As recommended in the northern powerhouse schools strategy, we are implementing a range of measures in the north to improve teaching and leadership capacity, to recruit and retain more teachers and to close the disadvantage gap. In 2018, 80% of children were in good or outstanding schools in the north, compared with 67% in 2010.

Imran Hussain: Many of the projects that the Minister has referred to today and previously have a national reach and are not solely catering for the north, which betrays the very purpose of the northern powerhouse schools strategy. Will he commit to creating a northern schools improvement board, drawing together local authorities and schools commissioners, and to extend funding beyond 2020, to deliver the regional strategy that we in Bradford need and were promised?

Nick Gibb: We are absolutely committed to the northern powerhouse strategy. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will be in Middlesbrough on Thursday to announce more plans for Opportunity North East. The northern powerhouse strategy involves a range of policies. For example, we are rolling out a three-year programme of tailored support for some of the schools facing the most significant recruitment and retention problems; around 100 schools in the north will benefit from that. Five opportunity areas in the north will receive a share of £72 million to improve social mobility. In the Bradford opportunity area, we are targeting up to £1.5 million of school improvement support, improving literacy through £600,000 of investment in Bradford primary schools, including nine schools in the hon. Gentleman's constituency.

Technical and Vocational Education and Training

12. **Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve the delivery of technical and vocational education and training. [909687]

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): We are introducing T-levels from 2020, with the first ones being in construction, education and childcare, and digital. With longer teaching hours and substantive industry placements, T-levels will provide a high-quality technical alternative to academic education. That builds

on the growing work with high-quality apprenticeships, which are now longer and better, with more off-the-job training and proper assessment at the end.

Kevin Hollinrake: One of Sir Michael Wilshaw's departing recommendations when he left Ofsted was that every multi-academy trust should contain a university technical college that offers maths, science and a technical specialism. Will the Minister look at taking that forward?

Anne Milton: We want UTCs to join suitable MATs wherever possible, as it is beneficial to both of them. It allows UTCs and MATs to offer a broad base of education, which can only be in everyone's interests.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Minister's rhetoric bears no relation to what we are seeing in our schools, where vocational education opportunities are shrinking all the time, and the Government's sense of direction seems to be narrowing our young people's curriculum. When will the statements that the Minister makes at the Dispatch Box start to have even the slightest relevance to what people are experiencing on the ground?

Anne Milton: I am not sure where the hon. Gentleman was last week, but it was National Apprenticeship Week. The opportunities that are available from the age of 16 in apprenticeships are extraordinary, and the Government are putting substantial investment into T-levels. For the first time, I have seen technical and vocational education get some real traction both inside and outside schools.

23. [909699] **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): As the Minister knows, Southport College in my constituency is a beacon of excellence in technical and vocational education and training, but will she review the cap on apprenticeship funding, in order for more young people to forge a pathway into employment?

Anne Milton: I know that my hon. Friend is a fantastic champion of apprenticeships in his constituency and across the country, and I am delighted to hear that he will host an apprenticeship fair in Southport in May. It was a pleasure to visit Southport College last year. There were 1,250 events during National Apprenticeship Week this year, which was a 50% increase on last year. The opportunities for young people and, indeed, older people are quite extraordinary.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): The Minister rightly talks about the opportunities of the National Apprenticeship Week, but the National Audit Office says that the financial sustainability of the apprenticeship levy, which is key to the Government's strategy, is at risk. We have a crazy situation with the overspend on higher apprenticeships producing a £500 million deficit, but non-levy payers, which are the training providers for three out of four apprenticeships, are left without funding. Following the catastrophic falls in apprenticeship starts in 2017, why is this Department now looking at another disaster, and how will this Minister stop this driverless levy going over the cliff and taking huge numbers of chances with it?

Anne Milton: I have to say that I do not think the hon. Gentleman always believes what he says from the Dispatch Box. *[Interruption.]* He talks apprenticeships

down. How can he possibly talk about an overspend on higher level apprenticeships? In this country, we are desperate for people who are able to do level 4 and level 5 qualifications. The National Audit Office report was a very backward-looking report. I am sure he would agree with me in private, if not from the Dispatch Box, that the difference he will have seen between National Apprenticeship Week this year and the one last year is quite extraordinary.

Mr Speaker: Everybody in this Chamber believes what he or she says from either the Front Bench or the Back Benches. It is a point so blindingly obvious that only an extraordinarily sophisticated person could fail to grasp it.

Teaching and Support Staff: Recruitment and Retention

13. **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of trends in the levels of (a) pay and (b) workload on the recruitment and retention of teaching and support staff. [909688]

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): Our recent integrated teacher recruitment and retention strategy prioritises reducing unnecessary workloads. We will ensure teaching continues to offer one of the best pensions available, and teacher pay ranges have increased by between 1.5% and 3.5% this year.

Dr Huq: I was back for assembly at my alma mater, Montpelier Primary School, this morning. It is an outstanding school, but it is coming under pressure from churn, with Brexit moving parents' jobs so pupils are off, while teachers, finding their salaries are not enough to meet the London cost of living, either commute from outside London or permanently move their jobs there or overseas. What is the Secretary of State doing specifically about the London pressures, which are masked by the figures he has quoted, so that teachers are paid enough to be rooted in their community, as they were in my day, not passing through?

Damian Hinds: Of course we recognise the additional cost in high-cost areas, in particular in London. It is true that there are 200 more teachers in the Ealing local authority area than there were in 2010. However, it remains a very competitive recruitment market, particularly for graduate recruitment, partly because of the historically very low unemployment we have, and that makes our recruitment and retention strategy all the more important.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: It is time for the right hon. Gentleman to issue his brevity textbook. Let us have an extract.

Sir Desmond Swayne: We are spending more per pupil than any other G7 nation, but headteachers are complaining that they are cleaning the loos themselves. Something is going wrong. What is it?

Damian Hinds: On the first point, we are spending more than any other G7 nation bar the United States in per capita funding for state primary and secondary education, but there are particular cost pressures in

the system. We were discussing high needs earlier, and we do need to address that particular set of pressures. There are others as well, such as the way we go about purchasing and so on, and some of the costs that are particularly rising. I want to reassure my right hon. Friend that we are looking at all of those factors.

Topical Questions

T1. [909700] **Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): I am pleased to confirm that we are providing £24 million of supplementary funding to local authorities to enable them fully to fund maintained nursery schools for 2019-20. Last week marked National Apprenticeship Week, celebrating apprenticeships and their positive impact on people, businesses and the economy. We have recently confirmed plans for reforms to the relationships and sex education and the health education curricula, to be implemented in schools from September 2020, so that children can be taught about mental and physical wellbeing, as well as about online safety, subject of course to parliamentary approval.

Melanie Onn: For how many more years can my Great Grimsby constituents expect Great Coates and Scartho state-maintained nursery schools to remain open?

Damian Hinds: As I said earlier, we recognise the particular place that maintained nurseries have in our system. They often provide additional, high-quality services, which we value. Work is ongoing to assess that value and of course we will make announcements about future spending as part of the spending review.

T2. [909701] **Stephen McPartland** (Stevenage) (Con): I am incredibly proud of Peartree Way maintained nursery school in Stevenage. Will the Secretary of State commit to keeping it open for as long as he is Secretary of State?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): I commend Peartree Way maintained nursery school. Maintained nursery schools do a brilliant job because they cater for the most disadvantaged children in our communities. That is why we have provided the additional £24 million that has been mentioned many times today. What happens next obviously depends on the spending review. We are working with the sector, which I want to thank for its hard work in allowing us to understand the additional costs so that we can put our best foot forward in the spending review.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): It is great to see the pupils in the Gallery who have been listening throughout Question Time.

In the Government's vast backlog of Brexit legislation, they recently slipped out regulations that allow them to withdraw the UK from the European University Institute. Legal experts say that that is completely unnecessary and academics warn that it will be deeply damaging. Will the Secretary of State publish the legal advice and allow a debate on the Floor of the House—or, better still, withdraw the proposal and think again?

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): The Department is working closely with the EUI. The issue is around the convention, which states that the UK cannot be a member of the EUI when it is not a member state. That is why, on exit day, we will automatically fall out of the EUI. We are keen to remain involved, but it would mean looking at further association after exit day.

T3. [909702] **Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): Will the Secretary of State consider taking schools in Lewes out of paying the apprenticeship levy to help them cope with the rising costs that they face?

Damian Hinds: All employers with a payroll in excess of £3 million pay the levy, but many apprenticeships are available that can work for schools, including apprenticeships for school business professionals and teaching assistants. Of course, there is also the postgraduate teaching apprenticeship. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that further.

T5. [909704] **Stephen Lloyd** (Eastbourne) (Ind): East Sussex College is an excellent FE college in my constituency. A deplorable situation has developed over the past two years whereby teachers teaching A-level at that college earn, like many others across the sector, nearly 20% less than teachers in the school just down the road. That is not sustainable. What will the Secretary of State do to ensure that enough money is ring-fenced for staff wages in the FE sector?

Damian Hinds: I am sorry; we struggled a tiny bit to hear the full question. We have several programmes on the subject of FE staff and ensuring that posts are sufficiently attractive. However, it is probably best if I say that either my right hon. Friend the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills or I will meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss the college in Eastbourne.

Mr Speaker: I heard perfectly clearly. Does the hon. Gentleman want to blurt out the last sentence very briefly?

Stephen Lloyd: Thank you, Mr Speaker. In the past few years, the salaries of FE teachers teaching A-levels and vocational education have ended up almost 20% lower than those of the teachers at the school down the road. What will the Secretary of State or the Minister do to address that?

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): I am aware of some of the discrepancies between the salaries of FE teachers and schoolteachers. We have several programmes, not least the taking teaching further programme, which will encourage industry professionals into FE teaching. However, as I said, I am aware of some of the issues around recruitment in the FE sector.

T4. [909703] **Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Businesses in my area tell me that they need more young people with STEM skills to fill jobs. As well as encouraging an increase in girls taking STEM A-levels—up 27% from 2010—what more is my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State doing to inspire and enable girls to study STEM subjects?

Chris Skidmore: It is absolutely important that girls and women are equally represented at all levels, not only in engineering and STEM, but in all sectors. We invested in programmes such as the advanced mathematics support programme and the stimulating physics network, which aim to increase participation, particularly among girls. This week is British Science Week. I encourage all Members to get involved, not just to stress the importance of STEM education for the future of this country and for the next generation, but to ensure that women and girls can be involved in the wonders of science.

T10. [909709] **Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): Earlier this afternoon, my hon. Friends the Members for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) pointed out that in Scotland the achievement gap between the most and least deprived pupils has halved in less than 10 years. The Minister declined to welcome that, because the gap has not got any smaller. Mr Speaker, if the people running education in England think that cutting something in half makes it bigger, is it any wonder that so many schools are struggling to achieve acceptable levels of standards?

Damian Hinds: We are proud of our record in reducing the attainment gap in England, but I recognise that one always needs to go further. That starts, of course, in the early years. We are seeing progress at every stage, but there is always more we can do.

T6. [909705] **Andrea Jenkyns** (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Average funding per student for the 16 to 19-year-old age group is less than that for secondary school A-level students. What is the Minister doing to increase college funding to sustainable levels and to see greater parity with secondary schools?

Anne Milton: Like for like comparisons are not always appropriate, because both systems contain different elements. I am very aware of the campaign going on—the Association of Colleges and the Sixth Form Colleges Association have been doing a very good job. I need no persuasion to champion the cause of FE colleges, which have extremely complex courses to deliver and do a fantastic job. We need to get the right balance between schools and colleges. It is the case that colleges are dependent on the educational attainment of those who come in at 16, so that part of the sector matters as well.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): The new times tables tests for year 4 come in soon. The test is taken using a machine. Martin, a dad of a boy with autism in Bury, is concerned that not enough provision is being made, or at least communicated to our schools as to what reasonable adjustment can be made. What provision is being made for our students who are anxious learners? Does the Minister agree that children with special educational needs and disabilities need the time and allowances to ensure that their circumstances can be managed?

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): The Standards and Testing Agency has a protocol in place for adjustments to be made for children with special educational needs. We have piloted a roll-out of the multiplication tables check over the past couple of years. We are rolling it out voluntarily this year and it will be compulsory next year.

T8. [909707] **Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): As my right hon. Friend knows, Dudley College has submitted an outstanding bid to be an institute of technology. Can she confirm that the IOT programme will go ahead as planned on published timetables?

Anne Milton: I am aware that Dudley College has progressed to stage two of the competition and we expect to announce the outcome shortly. As it is a competition, I obviously cannot comment on that. IOTs are a new kind of prestigious institution. It is important to note that they are not about new buildings, but collaborations between FE colleges, universities and leading employers to deliver the high-quality technical education we need.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): At a time when pupils' emotional and mental health needs are increasing, cuts to our schools mean that teaching assistants are being lost. In Derbyshire, we are about to lose 200 early help staff. The number of school nurses is being halved and child and adolescent mental health services say that they can only see pupils where there is proof that they have attempted to commit suicide. Will the Secretary of State look at the cumulative impact of all the cuts to education and health on our pupils' wellbeing?

Damian Hinds: We do recognise the additional demands relating to young people's mental health. That is why our programme ensures a designated mental health lead in every school, a further roll-out of mental health first aid, a shortened time for CAMHS referrals and support teams operating around schools to help them with mental health needs.

T9. [909708] **Neil O'Brien** (Harborough) (Con): Under the previous Government, schools often found it impossible to exclude even violent pupils because they were tied up by appeals panels, often with little knowledge of the situation. We were right to get rid of them. Does the Minister agree that it is better to invest in pupil referral units, rather than backtrack on that important reform, to keep people safe?

Nick Gibb: We support headteachers in using exclusion as a sanction where warranted. We also believe that independent review panels provide for a quick, fair and accessible process for reviewing exclusion decisions in a way that takes account of the rights of the pupil and of the wider school community, and the ability of the headteacher to maintain a safe and ordered environment.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): As a former chair of governors, I am sad to report to the House that the Northern Education Trust has failed the children who attend and who have attended the Thomas Hepburn school. The Secretary of State's Department has agreed with the trust to the closure of the school in Felling in my Gateshead constituency. The other schools in the borough have already accepted additional pupils and are above their plan for September. Will the Secretary of State meet me and my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) to discuss how we are going to find places for the other 40 year 7 pupils who do not have places in Gateshead next September?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Gentleman and I have had a chance on previous occasions to discuss and correspond on the Thomas Hepburn school, and of course I will meet him, as he suggests.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): A not insignificant number of parents feel compelled to take their children out of school and into home-schooling as a result of bullying. Will the Department's call for evidence on home education look at the support being given to these children to try to get them back into mainstream schooling as soon as possible?

Nick Gibb: Yes, of course, and I will very happily meet my hon. Friend to discuss this further.

Mr Speaker: I feel I must respect the position of a former headteacher, no less—I call Thelma Walker.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. When a child is excluded, where the responsibility for their education lies can be ambiguous, meaning that too many pupils fall through the net. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to clarify who has responsibility for excluded or off-rolled children to stop that from happening in future?

Damian Hinds: As the hon. Lady will know, we instituted the Timpson review into exclusions, which will report back soon. She will probably also have heard me say that we have to look at the question of making sure that schools retain some responsibility for pupils who are excluded, and I expect to have more to say soon.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): A recent report commissioned by the Welsh Government has shown that fining parents for unauthorised school absence has had no impact on raising attendance levels in Wales. Is it not time to have a review of that policy in England and, if the evidence shows that it does not work, to drop it?

Nick Gibb: Parents have a duty to ensure that their children who are registered at school attend regularly. We have not formally assessed the impact of penalty notices, but comparable data shows that overall absence rates have remained stable in recent years following a downward trend since 2006—a 6.5% absence rate in 2006 fell to 4.7% in 2016.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): A number of schools in my constituency are facing severe financial pressures, with some having to merge year groups and rely on parental donations. The Minister says that more money is going into education, but these smaller, rural schools are really struggling. Will he meet me to discuss what we can do for these schools in my area?

Nick Gibb: As I say, we are spending record amounts on our schools and we have special provision within the national funding formula to help rural, small schools in particular. There is an extra £25 million to ensure that those schools can support themselves and there is a fixed sum for every school of £110,000, but I will meet the hon. Lady and her headteachers to discuss her schools' particular concerns.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): On Friday, I was one of 3.5 million parents who received a letter from their school concerned that costs are outstripping funding. I was threatened with detention unless I asked the Secretary of State this: when it comes to more funding—and I hope that there will be more funding—will he ensure that it goes to those areas that are currently the lowest-funded counties?

Damian Hinds: Come the spending review, we will of course be looking at funding for education alongside other Departments. Funding for education is vital for our society and the productivity in our economy, and of course, we need to continue to look at how that is distributed through the national funding formula and to consider aspects such as rurality as part of that.

EU Withdrawal Agreement: Legal Changes

3.39 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Prime Minister if she will make a statement on progress made in achieving legal changes to the EU withdrawal agreement and the timetable for approval in this House through a meaningful vote.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): As negotiations are ongoing and at a critical stage, I am here to update the House on the latest developments. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister spoke to President Juncker by phone yesterday evening, teams will continue to talk throughout today and the Government will make a statement later today updating the House on the progress of discussions. As previously understood, the Attorney General's legal analysis will be updated following the outcome of negotiations, and he will publish his legal analysis of any document produced and negotiated with the EU and present it to the House before it meets tomorrow.

Clearly, I cannot pre-empt the outcome of these sensitive and urgent discussions, and I am sure the House understands that I am not able to share details or engage in speculation about talks that are still ongoing, but I can assure it that, as soon as the negotiations have concluded, it will be updated. The meaningful vote will take place tomorrow and the motion will be tabled today ahead of that debate. The House will then face a fundamental choice: back the Brexit deal or risk a delay that would mean months more spent arguing about Brexit and prolonging the current uncertainty—uncertainty that would do nothing but pass control to Brussels and increase the risks.

It is incumbent on the House to deliver on the will of the British people and to provide certainty. Tomorrow, right hon. and hon. Members will have the opportunity to do just that in a meaningful vote fully informed by the Government's legal analysis. I believe that the right hon. Gentleman the Leader of the Opposition and every hon. Member in the House should take that opportunity to move forward and provide certainty.

Jeremy Corbyn: This is a Government in chaos and a country in chaos because of this mess. I left my office at 20 past 3. At that time, Downing Street was unable to confirm who would be responding to my urgent question. It seems that the WhatsApp group, a lottery or something has chosen the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) to reply to the House, when my question was to the Prime Minister.

We find out from journalists and the Irish Government that the Prime Minister is apparently heading to Strasbourg this evening, or not heading to Strasbourg this evening, hours before a meaningful vote is due. The Prime Minister was clear and categorical on 26 February. She said:

"I want to reassure the House by making three further commitments. First, we will hold a second meaningful vote by Tuesday 12 March at the latest"—

there are still 24 hours to go, so who knows? She also committed to a vote on no deal by 13 March and a vote on whether to extend article 50 by 14 March. She then concluded:

"They are commitments I am making as Prime Minister, and I will stick by them"—[*Official Report*, 26 February 2019; Vol. 655, c. 166-7.]

This is a matter of trust. Time and again, the Prime Minister has failed to negotiate, failed to compromise and delayed and delayed. After three months, she has not achieved one single change to her deal. As we have often said, she has simply run down the clock, leaving us with a choice between her deal and the chaos of leaving the EU without any agreement. It was a bad deal in December, when it was first tabled; it was a bad deal in January, when it was rejected by the largest parliamentary margin by which any Government has ever been defeated; and it is still a bad deal today, 11 March.

These shambolic negotiations and endless delays are having real-life consequences in workplaces across the country: businesses are holding back on investment, jobs have been lost, workplaces are closing, workers fear for their jobs and the national health service and public services are having to spend millions of pounds preparing for a no-deal outcome, which the House has already clearly rejected.

Can the Prime Minister, I mean the Minister—I am sorry that the Prime Minister cannot be here, apparently—tell us what changes the Government have got to the backstop and when the Attorney General will publish his apparently new legal advice, or is it that, after three months of delay, nothing has changed? Given that they whipped their MPs to vote for the amendment in the name of the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady), which said the deal could only be supported with changes to the backstop, will the Prime Minister be voting against her own deal if no changes have been secured?

Will the Minister confirm that we will, absolutely, have the meaningful vote tomorrow, and that it will not be delayed yet again? Will we also have the vote to rule out no deal on 13 March, and the vote on extending article 50 on 15 March, as promised? If the deal is rejected again tomorrow, will the Prime Minister shift her red lines, and show that she is not just willing to meet Members, but willing to compromise with them as well?

This chaos cannot go on for much longer. The fate of people's workplaces, jobs and businesses is at stake as the Government fail to negotiate and there is simply dither after dither, and then further delay. It is time for answers.

Mr Walker: The right hon. Gentleman talks about further delay. I have confirmed to him that there will be a meaningful vote in the House tomorrow. I have explained that negotiations are ongoing, and the Government are seeking legally binding changes that will address the concerns that have been raised in the House.

The right hon. Gentleman speaks of chaos. We all remember his advice to the Government, on day one after the referendum, to trigger article 50 immediately. I think that we can be very clear that this process would be no safer in his hands. He talks about investment. He and his party will have the opportunity to vote to secure and unlock investment tomorrow by backing the deal, and they will do so fully informed by the Government's legal analysis. He asked about the timetable for the

[Mr Robin Walker]

publication of the Attorney General's advice, and I can confirm that that advice will be published before the House sits tomorrow.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): My hon. Friend firmly confirmed that the vote on the deal would come tomorrow. He did not actually mention the event, if it is defeated, of the vote on Wednesday on whether or not we leave with no deal, and, further to that, the vote on Thursday about delaying article 50 if, indeed, the House rejects no deal. I hope that that was a mere oversight and that my hon. Friend is not going back on last week's undertakings.

Mr Walker: I am happy to confirm that the exact words of the Prime Minister in giving that undertaking, which we absolutely stand by, were

"First, we will hold a...meaningful vote"

on 12 March. If the Government did not win a meaningful vote, they would

"table a...motion...to be voted on by Wednesday 13 March...asking this House if it supports leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement... Thirdly",

if the House rejected both those options,

"the Government will, on 14 March, bring forward a motion on whether Parliament wants to seek a short, limited extension to article 50."—[*Official Report*, 27 February 2019; Vol. 655, c. 377.]

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is crucial that the House has the opportunity to extend article 50 on Thursday, because we have to take back control from this shambles of a Government.

We are 18 days away from the scheduled UK exit from the EU, yet the Government still have no plan to protect jobs and living standards. This Prime Minister is guilty of neglect. She has proved incapable of governance, incapable of negotiation and utterly incapable of leadership. The truth is that the politics of the United Kingdom has become a farce. The lack of leadership from either the Tory or the Labour party has left people across the country at a loss, panicking about their futures and abandoned by their so-called leaders.

This morning, Downing Street exclaimed that tomorrow's vote would go ahead, and the Minister has repeated that. It must happen, and it is welcome, because to dither and delay yet again would be another act of grave cowardice. We cannot ignore the facts: this place is in total chaos, and the crisis engulfing the United Kingdom is deepening. In Scotland, businesses, students, farmers, academics, mothers, fathers and EU nationals are rightly worried about their futures, but this Government, this Tory party and this Prime Minister could not care less about the people of Scotland. This deal will damage our economy, destroy growth and deprive Scottish people of all the cherished opportunities that the European Union has gifted us.

Michel Barnier was very clear: the negotiations are over. He said:

"We talked all weekend and now the discussions, the negotiations, are between the government in London and the parliament in London."

Can the Minister answer these questions? Will the Government back the Prime Minister's deal tomorrow? Will the text of the motion on which we shall vote

provide for a new arrangement in relation to the Northern Ireland backstop? Has the Prime Minister negotiated with the European Union new protections for the Scottish economy? If not, are the Scottish MPs in her party ready to resign? Scotland did not vote for Brexit, and we must not be dragged out of the European Union against our will. The sovereign right of the Scottish people to choose our own future must be respected. We are, and we will remain, a European nation.

Mr Walker: We are all leaving the European Union, but we are not leaving Europe. Amid the right hon. Gentleman's rhetoric, he spoke about the interests of the Scottish people. Of course, the interests of the Scottish people are in our strong Union of the United Kingdom. We want to deliver a good deal for the whole United Kingdom.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): Unlike the Leader of the Opposition, may I welcome the Minister to the Dispatch Box? I know from my own experience that, unlike the Leader of the Opposition, the Minister is a brilliant master of his brief. The Leader of the Opposition talked about trust. Is not the Prime Minister demonstrating the trust that this House should put in her by going to Europe and negotiating with the Europeans a deal that will deliver on the requirements of the British people—unlike the Opposition?

Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I pay tribute to his work on this process. He has said many times that negotiations with the EU often go right to the eleventh hour. We have a demonstration of that today, and there will be a statement from the Government later today.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Can the Minister explain to the House why the Irish Foreign Minister Simon Coveney said earlier today:

"The...Prime Minister is travelling to Strasbourg this evening...to try to finalise an agreement, if that's possible, to be able to put that to a meaningful vote in Westminster tomorrow..."?

Can the Minister confirm that? If an agreement that changes the withdrawal agreement or the political declaration is reached tonight, will that have the approval of the Heads of Government? If not, will it actually constitute a negotiated agreement under the terms of section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018?

Mr Walker: The right hon. Gentleman, who is the Chair of the Exiting the European Union Committee, asked me a series of questions, and I think that he knows I cannot answer them all. My Secretary of State has reiterated to me that he is keen to give evidence to the Select Committee tomorrow, so perhaps he can update the right hon. Gentleman and his Committee on all those issues.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): May I likewise welcome the Minister? Before his well-deserved promotion, he was an excellent Parliamentary Private Secretary—[*Interruption.*] That was before my demotion, but there we are. Has not the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) just shown us exactly what the Leader of the Opposition should have done in an urgent question that is entitled "EU Withdrawal Agreement:

Legal Changes”? The nub of the matter is that we would be better served by a forensic examination of the January letter from Presidents Tusk and Juncker, in which much was conceded by the EU, and that now needs to be turned into legally binding text. Many complain about delay, dither and the consequences for workplaces, but does the Minister agree that all that could be solved if the agreement were passed tomorrow?

Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point. Of course we should pass this agreement, but it is vital that the Prime Minister has gone in to negotiate right up to the last moment so that she can address the concerns of this House. I agree with my right hon. Friend that the letter from the Presidents took some steps to address those concerns, but we have sought, and we will continue to seek, legally binding changes.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Minister could not answer the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn). The status of tomorrow’s meaningful vote matters because we want to be sure that the Government will not use any shenanigans to avoid further votes later in the week. Will the Minister confirm that if by the end of tomorrow Parliament has not approved a withdrawal agreement and future partnership that have been agreed with the EU for the purposes of section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act, the Government will go ahead on Wednesday with the vote on no deal, followed by the vote on the extension of article 50?

Mr Walker: I have already confirmed that by repeating the Prime Minister’s assurance, and we do accept that section 31 of the withdrawal Act is binding.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Should the country leave the European Union without a deal, what would be the liabilities owed to the European Union?

Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend asks an interesting question, and of course there are a range of different views on that. The House of Lords Committee has taken one view, and other hon. and right hon. Gentlemen will take others.

Hon. Members: Only gentlemen?

Mr Speaker: I think that the right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) was asking for the view of the Minister. The clue is in the nature of the exchange. If an hon. Member or right hon. Member gets up and asks a question, he is interested in the view of the Minister, not of some other Committee in some other place. I would have thought that that was fairly straightforward, but there you go.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Minister says that he does not engage in speculation, but may I encourage him to make an educated guess? If the Prime Minister’s deal is passed tomorrow, how many more years of very public Tory bickering will the country face as the UK seeks to establish its new relationship with the European Union?

Mr Walker: The right hon. Gentleman asks a question about what might happen if the deal is passed. I think that he should get behind the deal and support it, because we would then secure the implementation period that would provide certainty to businesses and citizens in this country while we negotiate the future relationship and ensure that it is put in place. It is certainly my aspiration to ensure that that is done before the end of the implementation period.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The European Union has known for some considerable time that we are going to have this vital vote tomorrow. Supposing it actually does offer to pull a rabbit out of the hat sometime late tonight, what would that say about the bad faith in which it has been negotiating?

Mr Walker: It is our determination to progress the negotiations in good faith, and we have done so throughout. I am sure that the European Union will want to show its good faith by meeting the concerns of this House.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Will the Minister acknowledge that tabling an amendment with Government support tomorrow to make support conditional on a not-yet-negotiated agreement would fulfil neither the letter nor the spirit of the Prime Minister’s promise?

Mr Walker: I think that the right hon. Gentleman should await developments later today and see what the Government put forward tomorrow. I have been very clear that we absolutely stand by the Prime Minister’s commitments on the meaningful vote and on what follows.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend to the Dispatch Box and congratulate him and his colleagues on getting the European Union to agree to set up a taskforce or workstream to work up the Malthouse compromise proposals. Will he commit to getting those into the legally binding text, so that there will be an implementation date that is fixed for the future?

Mr Walker: I know that my right hon. Friend speaks with considerable experience in these issues. The alternative arrangements have been a crucial part of this conversation, and they will continue to play an important part in our negotiations. We are seeking legally binding changes.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Does the Minister care at all about the real impact of his Government’s utter incompetence on real people? In my constituency, American Express, the biggest private sector employer, is deeply concerned about recruitment problems because of his recklessness. Will he answer a very simple question? Will he himself vote against no deal if the Prime Minister’s deal is lost tomorrow?

Mr Walker: I want to take the first opportunity to vote against no deal by voting for the deal in a meaningful vote. That is the best way to secure the absence of no deal and to secure the interests of this country.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The Minister has arrived at the big time and he is doing well. He has told the House that the Attorney General

[Mr Mark Francois]

will publish any revised legal advice before the House sits tomorrow, which I am sure the whole House will welcome for obvious reasons. With regard to the motion that we might then have to vote on, will we get sight of it tonight, or will it be placed in the public domain only when the Order Paper is published electronically in the small hours of the morning?

Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend asks an important question. The Government will bring forward the motion as soon as we possibly can, but I cannot necessarily guarantee the precise timing given that the negotiations are still ongoing.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 says that the vote must be on “the negotiated withdrawal agreement”. Does the Minister accept that a vote tomorrow on anything other than that would not count as the second meaningful vote and would not fulfil the Prime Minister’s promise of 22 February, when she said that

“we will hold a second meaningful vote by Tuesday 12 March at the latest”?—[*Official Report*, 26 February 2019; Vol. 655, c. 166.]

Mr Walker: I can only reiterate what I have already said, which is that we will be holding the meaningful vote tomorrow. Of course, exactly what is brought forward by the Government will depend on the outcome of the negotiations, which are still ongoing.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): With regard to the legal changes required to the withdrawal agreement, this House voted for the entire removal of the backstop. Does it not strike my hon. Friend as incongruous at the very least that it is harder to the leave the backstop than it is to leave the EU under article 50?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point, as always. The Government have heard loudly and clearly this House’s concerns about the backstop, and they are what the negotiations are to address. I am confident and hopeful that we will come forward tomorrow with something that will allow even him to support the Government’s deal.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Given the mess that the UK Government are in at this eleventh hour, does the Minister think that his boss—the real Prime Minister—will ultimately be grateful for the ruling secured by myself and other Scottish parliamentarians from the Court of Justice in Luxembourg that article 50 can be unilaterally revoked and that there is a way out of this mess for the United Kingdom?

Mr Walker: I simply say to the hon. and learned Lady that the way forward for the United Kingdom is to agree a deal and to leave the EU with a deal.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): If the withdrawal agreement is defeated and this House assents to leave the EU without a deal following the votes this week, does my hon. Friend agree that there will be a whole series of permissions and protocols that we will need the EU to agree to in order to manage that situation? In those circumstances, why would the EU

not turn around and make the obligations within the withdrawal agreement a prerequisite to it agreeing to any of the things that we need from it?

Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend asks an interesting hypothetical question, but the best thing that we can do this week is to secure a deal that this House can support and then get it through the House so that we can avoid such eventualities and speculations.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): May I press the Minister on the timing of the motion for tomorrow? For those of us wishing to speak in the debate, it would be particularly helpful to have the text of the motion so that we know exactly on what we are going to be voting. Will he please put it out by 5 o’clock today?

Mr Walker: The hon. Lady sets a deadline to which I cannot commit, but the Government will bring forward the motion as soon as we can based on the outcome of the negotiations, which are ongoing.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The Government are formally seeking a legally binding text on the Malthouse compromise as an alternative to the backstop, aren’t they?

Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend is as pithy as always. I can confirm that the Government are seeking legally binding changes to address the House’s concerns about the backstop.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Ind): The Minister needs to be very clear about the timetable. As I understand it from the answers that he has given, as much as he can give them, he is committing on the Government’s behalf to a meaningful vote tomorrow, and the motion will be tabled as soon as the Government can do so, which I think means as soon as they get all their ducks in a row. In any event, as far as I understand it, it must be published by the close of play this evening, which is 10.30 pm. Does the Minister think that that would then allow enough time not just to consider it, but for right hon. and hon. Members to table the necessary amendments to it? How does any opinion from the Attorney General then fit into that important timetable?

Mr Walker: The Attorney General has committed to providing the House with his legal analysis of any document published by the UK and the EU as part of this process, and he will do so ahead of the debate. We will ensure that the Government’s motion is tabled as soon as it can be. The right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) will appreciate that, with negotiations ongoing, I cannot commit to a specific time on that, but I take note of Mr Speaker’s advice from the Chair.

Mr Speaker: Well, I do not think I am offering the hon. Gentleman advice, but what I can give is a very clear indication of what the procedures of this House require. It is not by way of advice; I am telling him, on behalf of the House, what the position is.

The right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) is correct in her understanding of the required deadline for the tabling of a Government motion to appear on the Order Paper tomorrow. I understand the Minister’s

natural reluctance to commit to a specific time, pending the progress or otherwise of negotiations, but the deadline is the rise of the House.

In so far as the right hon. Member for Broxtowe and other hon. and right hon. Members might legitimately be concerned about the matter of adequacy of time for the possible tabling of amendments, it would perhaps be helpful to the House if I indicated that, in extremis—that is to say if circumstances require it—manuscript amendments will be taken. *[Interruption.]* That is absolutely the case. I do not need any help from the right hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands), who would not have the slightest idea where to start. I know what the position is, and I am helpfully indicating it to the right hon. Member for Broxtowe, which I think will help the House.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Many questions this afternoon seem designed to construct negotiating hurdles that are impossible for the Prime Minister, or any Government, to jump over. I have met lots of constituents in Gloucester over the last three days who want to see this issue resolved as sensibly and quickly as possible. Can I therefore give my hon. Friend the Minister all encouragement for the Prime Minister to come back with legally binding changes that will make a huge difference, particularly to the Northern Ireland situation, and then for this House, 80% of whom were elected on manifestos to respect the referendum, to get behind the deal and see it through?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. All I can say to him is that I hear the same thing from my constituents in Worcester as he hears from his constituents in Gloucester.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The Minister is asking Parliament to accept that, two and a half years after the referendum, he will give us maybe just a few hours to consider the deal that the Prime Minister may or may not conclude sometime overnight before we have one of the most important votes this Parliament will ever hold. That is not acceptable, is it?

Mr Walker: The hon. Lady knows that negotiations often go to the wire, and I think it is absolutely right that the Government should fight for the best possible outcome to those negotiations, especially when we have been instructed to do so by this House. That is what we are doing.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the intransigence of the EU on making legally binding changes to the backstop, whether to the time limit or an exit mechanism that would enable many of us to support the deal, justifies our concern that, if we ever enter the backstop as it stands now, the EU would never let us leave?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend clearly expresses the concerns that have been raised on both sides of the House about the backstop, which is why we are seeking to address those concerns through a legally binding change.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Tonight I was supposed to be meeting the Farmers Union of Wales in Caernarfon, rather than being here. Those hard-working and resourceful people battle the elements to produce the finest beef

and lamb in the world. When they find that something they are doing does not work, they change what they do. What lesson for tomorrow's proceedings does the Minister derive from their success?

Mr Walker: It is important for those farmers that we get a deal with an implementation period, and with the good trading terms that that can provide, to make sure that Welsh lamb and beef can continue to be a huge success internationally.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The withdrawal agreement gives certainty to the British and European citizens most affected by Brexit; it gives our businesses the certainty of a transition period; and it brings certainty about the size of the bill we have to settle. Does my hon. Friend agree that the one individual who is bringing uncertainty, by his refusal to negotiate and compromise, is the leader of the Labour party?

Mr Speaker: Order. That is absolutely no responsibility of the Minister. It was a disorderly question; an answer is unnecessary and it was a complete waste of everybody's time.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The Government intend to publish a motion, an agreement and legal advice on that agreement. Can the Minister commit to ensuring that we have all of this before the beginning of the debate tomorrow? Will he also ask the Attorney General to come to give a statement about the legal advice, so that we can ask questions on it in advance of tomorrow's debate?

Mr Walker: Yes, I do commit that that information will be available before the debate tomorrow, and the Attorney General has been clear that he will publish his analysis.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Minister is answering the questions admirably, but we have heard from those on the Opposition Benches the desire for time to look at the legal advice and the motion, and time to table amendments and to consider them. Given that the Opposition are, in effect, requesting an extension to the meaningful vote, will the Minister take from this that we should perhaps consider putting off the vote until Parliament has time to consider what the Prime Minister brings back?

Mr Walker: I note my hon. Friend's representations, but the Government are clear that we will be having the meaningful vote tomorrow.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The thing is there is only one possible motion that can be considered tomorrow for it to be a meaningful vote under the Act. It is very straightforward and the Government themselves argued repeatedly to the Procedure Committee that if the motion had any other riders added to it, it would not be legally competent—it would not have any legal effect. So the Government could publish the motion now. I could publish the motion for them now—and, for that matter, the business motion which we will have to have tomorrow, because of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010. They could also introduce that now. Then we would be able to have proper scrutiny. Isn't it time we had some proper scrutiny and we stopped flying by the seat of our pants all the time?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman talks about proper scrutiny. He will know that the Prime Minister and Secretary of State have been at this Dispatch Box literally hundreds of times facing proper scrutiny on this issue. We will bring forward the Government's motion for tomorrow's debate as soon as we can.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I echo the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) in wishing the Prime Minister every success today. On the important decisions we face this week, when will the Government publish the World Trade Organisation tariffs and quotas which are going to be needed to assess the merits of no deal, in the event that the deal is defeated?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes an important point, although I think it is for another Department to answer. We will be having a meaningful vote on a deal that ensures that we need not have those tariff barriers between ourselves and the EU. That is one of the many reasons we should support the deal.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): It will not be lost on many listening to this debate that those who are condemning the Prime Minister for not getting a deal are the very ones who have made it difficult for her to get that deal because they have insisted she rule out no deal as an option. Will the Minister give an assurance that regardless of what the Prime Minister comes back with, she will not accept the diktat of Michel Barnier on Friday, who said that the UK can leave but the one thing that cannot happen is Northern Ireland leaving the EU unless the EU gives us permission?

Mr Walker: I say simply to the right hon. Gentleman that it is very clear that the UK as a whole will be leaving the EU. Whatever the outcome of these negotiations, that will be the case: we will leave the EU as one United Kingdom.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I welcome my Worcestershire neighbour to his place. I know he is an assiduous doorstep campaigner and I wonder whether his experience is the same as mine in Redditch, which is that people just want us to get on with this. Does he therefore agree that it is very important that we hold the vote tomorrow so that we can express the wishes of the House and, most importantly, of our constituents, who want us to deliver on the result of that referendum?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: our constituents want us to deliver on the result of the referendum. They also want us to secure the strongest economy for every part of our country—from Redditch to Worcester, and all around the country. We can do that by backing the deal.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Ind): This is completely crazy. The hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) had this absolutely right: we are nearly three years on from that referendum and yet the Minister is perhaps going to give the House three minutes to consider a motion. *[Interruption.]* He is shaking his head; he will not give us three minutes. So will it be half an hour—or perhaps an hour? I am not sure whether my question should be to the Minister or to you, Mr Speaker, because I feel that the House should be suspended, or at least the Government should bring forward an opportunity

for the House to properly look at the motion and consider any Attorney General's advice, because I, for one, want to table an amendment with my hon. Friends for a people's vote, so that we can sort this out straightaway.

Mr Walker: Let me be clear that, as I said earlier in my statement, the Government will be seeking to make a statement later on today.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Does the Minister agree that no competent negotiator would take no deal off the table and that an extension of article 50 would simply be a bigger bridge to nowhere? Will he reject the representations from the Labour party and its fellow travellers in the Independent Group and rule out a second referendum?

Mr Walker: I heartily agree with my hon. Friend about seeking to rule out a second referendum, which I do not think would provide any solutions. All it would do is prolong the uncertainty. It is absolutely right that we should deliver on the people's vote that this House voted for and voted to respect back in 2016.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm that tomorrow we will not be asked to consider and vote on a unicorn motion—that is, a motion that contains a withdrawal mechanism that could be unilaterally triggered by the UK, which is just wishful thinking and not agreed with at EU level?

Mr Walker: I have updated the House by saying that negotiations are ongoing, the Government are seeking legally binding changes and we will come forward with a meaningful vote tomorrow. I do not believe in unicorns and neither does the hon. Lady. We should vote for a deal.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Over the past months I have contacted hundreds of local businesses in East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow and the message is loud and clear: they want the single market and the customs union. Is the Minister risking what businesses need from Brexit with his pursuance of the backstop issue? Not one of my local businesses mentioned the backstop. We need to get a consensus across the House for business, jobs and livelihood.

Mr Walker: The hon. Lady makes an interesting point. I agree with her to the extent that it is not traditionally businesses that express concerns about the backstop—or perhaps not businesses in Scotland; perhaps some businesses in Northern Ireland do—but we also have to recognise the concerns in the House. To get and secure a deal that will secure the market access about which she speaks, we need the House to vote for it. That means we need to address the concerns of communities up and down our United Kingdom.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): If we are to take the Minister at his word—and I think we should—he is confirming that tomorrow the House will vote on something that is meaningful under the provisions of section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act. How does he think a Back-Bench Labour Member of Parliament, standing up for his constituents in Edinburgh

South, will be able to table an amendment to that motion, have it signed by MPs from across the House so that it is selectable, and understand the legal implications of the Attorney General's information?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman asks a fair question and I respect the integrity with which he does so. The Speaker has already indicated that he would be prepared to accept manuscript amendments and I have been clear that the Government will bring forward their motion and the Attorney General's advice as soon as they can. I am sure the hon. Gentleman's ingenuity will allow him to pursue the ends he means to pursue in a parliamentary way.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): What assessment has the Minister made of what I think is an increasingly compelling case, which is that if the Prime Minister is able, tomorrow or subsequently, to bring forward an agreement that may be acceptable to Parliament, parliamentary approval for it should be subject to ratification in a subsequent public vote?

Mr Walker: The right hon. Gentleman makes a call for a subsequent public vote—a people's vote. I am very clear that that is not something that this Government would ever support.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): It is often said that a lawyer who acts for himself has a fool for a client. We are going to receive legal advice tomorrow that has not yet been written because the negotiations have not finished. Will the Minister ask for that legal advice to cover the fact that what we will vote on tomorrow is a negotiated agreement for the purposes of section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act?

Mr Walker: The Attorney General has committed to publish his analysis in full.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Potentially extending article 50 until the end of June is, of course, welcome, but I am curious and a wee bit bewildered as to what dramatic change the Prime Minister expects by then. Perhaps the Minister could enlighten us on that, but would it not be more honest, more courageous, and more statesmanlike to abandon these futile and embarrassing attempts to hold the fractured Tory party together, revoke article 50 altogether and get on with the day job?

Mr Walker: I do not think that it would be honest or statesmanlike to turn our back on the outcome of the referendum. I know that the hon. Lady's party likes to ignore referendum results, but our party wants to deliver on them.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): It is customary on these occasions for the House to complain that the Government have sent the monkey and not the organ grinder, but on this occasion we have not even got the monkey—we have not even got the codpiece. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] While the Minister is enjoying his very exciting work experience day, can he confirm one

thing that he said earlier in this statement, which was that the Attorney General's advice would be available before the House sits tomorrow? Can he confirm that that will be the case—that it will be available before the House sits, and not just before the debate?

Mr Speaker: I just say for the benefit of hon. and right hon. Members that the hon. Gentleman's choice of language is really a matter of taste rather than of order. I know that the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) will not take it in the wrong spirit if I say that whoever else might be in a position to complain about others' use of language, I think that he is not on strong ground on that front. I have tended to indulge him because I know that he speaks with passion and conviction, but he tends to be rather robust in his treatment of others, so, all of a sudden, objecting to the hon. Gentleman is perhaps for someone else to do.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I was sticking up for the Minister. I am a Government loyalist.

Mr Speaker: Yeah, and I as a Back Bencher had a really good relationship with my Whips! I had a relationship with my Whips that was characterised by trust and understanding; I did not trust them and they did not understand me.

Mr Walker: The Attorney General has said that he will publish his analysis, and I believe that to be before the House sits tomorrow.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The Minister has clearly been sent out today to defend an absolute Horlicks of a situation in Government. Given that he has already confirmed that there will be a meaningful vote tomorrow based on section 13(1)(b) of the Act and that there will not be any unicorns contained within it, can he also confirm that, if the Government cannot negotiate some last-minute changes to the withdrawal agreement and future framework, the meaningful vote tomorrow will take place on the existing negotiated agreement, which will not have changed?

Mr Walker: The hon. Lady asks a series of hypothetical questions. The Government are negotiating, and I fully expect them to come back to this House with the results of that negotiation and then to hold the meaningful vote on those. I hope that she will be joining me in the Lobby to secure a deal as we exit the European Union.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): In order to gauge whether it is worth my bothering to turn up for the statement later on, will the Minister confirm that the statement will outline legally binding changes to the withdrawal agreement? If it does, will he tell us what red lines have been rubbed out to allow that to happen?

Mr Walker: Of course it will be worth the hon. Gentleman's while to turn up to any statement from the Government. I look forward to him seeing that the changes that the Government have been negotiating for have been achieved.

Points of Order

4.23 pm

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Does it appertain to the exchanges that have just taken place? [*Interruption.*] Oh, very well, I will indulge the hon. Gentleman. Points of order ordinarily would come later.

Ian Murray: I am very grateful to you, Mr Speaker, but this does pertain to the exchanges that we have just had. The Minister confirmed in his answer to my question, and indeed it was confirmed in your intervention in relation to the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) that, should the Government table a motion before the rise of the House, that indeed could happen at 10.29 pm this evening and therefore no Members of this House will be able to table amendments in the normal fashion. You suggested that the rules of the House would allow you to accept manuscript amendments. Can you inform the House whether you will be able to accept all of the manuscript amendments that come in, how, given the timescale that is available, the House will be able to get cross-party signatures on those manuscript amendments, which give an indication of the support in the House, and what the process will be for our being able to place those manuscript amendments between the rise of the House tonight and the opening bell tomorrow morning?

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Further to that point of order.

Mr Speaker: If it is on the same matter, I will hear the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr Francois: Of course we all know that it is entirely in your gift, Mr Speaker, whether to accept manuscript amendments, but under these very unusual circumstances, will you advise the House—to give hon. Members from all corners a chance to plan—whether you have some idea of an indicative deadline tomorrow, by which time you would expect those manuscript amendments to be in so that they can be printed and circulated, in order that all Members of the House would know the options on the table?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) and the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) for their points of order. I am reluctant at this time to specify a deadline or an intended target time. I would say to the right hon. Gentleman that I very much hope—with antennae finely attuned to the wishes of colleagues and the matter of basic courtesy in this place—that representatives of the Executive branch, who I am sure are keenly listening to these exchanges, will ensure that they get that motion down as soon as possible. If that is so, it may be that there is some time available tonight for colleagues who are interested to see what the Government have tabled. They would then have the advantage of that many more hours to consider whether to table an amendment—and, if so, which—and indeed to seek to garner support, possibly cross-party, for their amendment. However, if that is not the case, we will have to adjust as best we can.

There could well be several hours tomorrow in which Members will have sight of what has been tabled and will have the opportunity to table amendments. It is not to be assumed that we will necessarily be on to the business immediately after question time. There may be a longer period of time than that for colleagues to make their judgments about the matter. Certainly as far as I am concerned, the longer time that colleagues have to table amendments if they so wish, the better. The Government are perfectly entitled simply to put the motion down just before the close of business tonight—possibly obliged to do so because of what has taken place in Strasbourg, or possibly because of a judgment that they have made. That is not really my concern. My concern is that colleagues should be facilitated; and I will do on this occasion, as on every other, everything I can to facilitate the House. My role is to champion the legislature, not to be a nodding donkey for the Executive branch.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. The annunciator tells us that there is to be a statement on Brexit. It might be helpful to the House if you were able to confirm whether it is your understanding that that is not necessarily going to follow sequentially upon the other statements that are going to be made, and that it might be quite a bit later this evening. That may have a bearing on the two points of order to which you have just responded.

Mr Speaker: Certainly that statement will be the last of any statements today, but the right hon. Gentleman is quite right in expecting that it will not simply follow after the second statement. My understanding at the moment is that that statement would either come at the moment of interruption—which, I say for the benefit of those from outside the House attending our proceedings, is at 10 o'clock—or it might come a little earlier than that. But is it to be expected that it will automatically come straight after the second statement? No. It will come when the Government are in a position to make—dare I say it—a meaningful statement to the House.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. You have understandably been referring to the motion for tomorrow, but, as I understand it, there will have to be two motions for tomorrow. There will have to be a business of the House motion as well, because otherwise we can only have a 90-minute debate as this will be a motion brought forward under an Act of Parliament. It would obviously be good if we were able to have that motion as soon as possible as well.

One of the things that is of enormous convenience to Members is knowing when votes are going to happen. I would guess that, in particular, people who have family commitments and things like that may want to know that the votes are going to be at 7 o'clock tomorrow evening rather than at 9, 10 11 o'clock, or whatever, and the sooner that is established, the better.

Finally, would you confirm that it is not your view, on the whole, as much as you are prepared to take manuscript amendments, that it is really in the best interests of Parliament to proceed on some of the most important issues affecting our country on the basis of manuscript amendments because the Government have taken so much time to present their business in the proper way?

Mr Speaker: Taking the last point first, I am happy to agree with the hon. Gentleman and to confirm that it is certainly not my view that it is desirable to proceed on the basis of manuscript amendments. It is far preferable that colleagues should have plenty of time in which to table amendments in the usual way. If, however, that proves not to be possible, I have to adjust. It is obviously much more popular with Members of the House if I say, yes, I will consider manuscript amendments than if I simply preclude them from consideration.

As for the question of motion singular or motion plural, I think that the hon. Gentleman is, as usual right: there will need to be two motions. *[Interruption.]* I am grateful. It is always useful to have the ballast of endorsement from a sedentary position from the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois). I cannot count on it at all times, and therefore, when I have it, I should put it in the bank and earn interest on it. Yes, there will need to be two motions: a business of the House motion and a substantive motion relating to the withdrawal agreement. It would be helpful to know about that earlier rather than later.

At this stage, I do not know whether the Government are thinking in terms of protected time—that is to say, a guaranteed number of hours irrespective of when we start—or in terms of a conclusion of the debate at 7 o'clock and votes immediately thereafter. Again, it would be helpful to know earlier rather than later. Of course, it is perfectly possible, and highly desirable, that tonight's statement either by the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), if he is delivering it, or—more likely, perhaps—by the Secretary of State for Brexit, makes that clear. That will then satisfy not only the curiosity of the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) but the interests of a great many other Members besides.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. As I have always understood it, our system is based on Cabinet government. Does what we have now heard mean that the Government will be laying a motion to which they are inviting amendments from Members of this House and which will be about the most important decision we have taken since the second world war, and it will not even have been considered by the Cabinet?

Mr Speaker: Well, I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I think that that is, I will not say above or below my pay grade, but on a different remuneration scale—let me put it like that. I know that he served with very considerable distinction as a Minister in the past. In fact, I remember beetling over to his ministerial office on one occasion in years gone by. He was a figure of considerable celebrity in the then Government. I have never been a Minister, still less a member of the Cabinet. Quite how the Cabinet operates, when it meets and what is discussed, I have no way of knowing, so whether the Cabinet will have met to discuss this matter, I do not know. But I can say to the hon. Gentleman that whatever motions are tabled, they will be tabled in the name, and therefore with the authority and, by implication, the full agreement, implicit if not explicit, of the Government.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. On the Government's website at the moment, there is a month-long consultation on door closure warnings on the docklands light railway. So there is now currently more consultation on door closure warnings than there is on the entire future of our country and what is going to happen on Brexit. Do you not think that the Government are being utterly irresponsible and reckless? Is this incompetence or is it just contempt for Parliament?

Mr Speaker: I do not particularly want to get into the matter of contempt today. We have had the matter of contempt raised previously, and of course a motion was passed by the House on that matter. I hear what the right hon. Lady says. Suffice it to say that I think it is important that we treat of this business in a responsible way, and part of treating it in a responsible way is ensuring that parliamentary colleagues and, very importantly, Back Benchers have the opportunity to express their will in both written and spoken form, as well as by vote.

I do not want to reach a premature judgment. Let us keep an eye on this as the day unfolds. However the Government make their own decisions, which is obviously not a matter for me, the way in which the House disposes of business is ultimately a matter for us all, and that must meet a proper test. We must not be messed around. I am sure that that is not the will of the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), who is a most courteous fellow, but we cannot allow that to happen. I hope the right hon. Lady, with whom I have co-operated closely on parliamentary matters over the last nine and a half years of my speakership, will accept that I will always try to do what is right by the House of Commons, and I give my commitment to ensure that I do so again.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am not aware of any point during my time in Parliament when statements have not come one after the other. My understanding of what you said is that there will now be an urgent question and then three statements; the first two will come straight after the urgent question, but the third might not. How will it be communicated to Members at what time that statement is likely to come? Is it possible that it will come in the middle of the debate on the Children Act 1989 (Amendment) (Female Genital Mutilation) Bill, or will it come before or after that? When will we know, and how will we find out?

Mr Speaker: The answer is that it could come at any time, with the agreement of the Chair. I do not seek to minimise the significance of the hon. Lady's point. However, there are precedents for most things in this House, and I can assure her that there are many precedents for statements being delivered at the moment of interruption. It is perfectly possible to have a statement that is not taken sequentially after the others but at the moment of interruption—in the case of a Monday, 10 o'clock.

It could be at 10 o'clock. However, pursuant to what the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) said about people needing to honour external commitments,

[Mr Speaker]

it might be for the convenience of the House, if the Minister is ready to deliver that statement, for it to be delivered to the House earlier than 10 o'clock. If I had a sense that it would be for the convenience of the House, I would be minded to agree to such a request. How would it become known to Members? My strong advice to the hon. Lady and all colleagues is to keep their eyes on the annunciator, and we will try to ensure that there is proper notice; it will not be at five minutes' notice or anything like that. On that, I can assure the hon. Lady, I will insist.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am concerned, like other Members, that we have enough time to consider the motion, to table amendments and to consider those amendments before we debate and vote. You said that the debate might be some time after questions. Were you indicating that there might be statements or urgent questions, or was there something else in your mind?

Mr Speaker: No, I was not thinking of one thing rather than another, but it is perfectly possible that there could be urgent questions. As colleagues know, urgent question applications are very common in the House; they are very commonly submitted and very commonly granted by me, if I think they warrant the attention of the House. It is perfectly possible that there might be ministerial statements. It is even conceivable—I do not say for certain, but, depending on what happens at this very important time—that there could be a request to secure the attention of the House on another matter for a significant period before we even get to that debate. That is perfectly possible; the Standing Orders allow for it. I understand how conscientious the hon. Gentleman is, but he should not

be unduly concerned that there will simply be no time to consider what has been put down. There'll be time all right.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. For those of us who find the palpitations are starting in relation to the week ahead of us—the words “as the day unfolds” are quite inducing of panic in some Members, even those who do not have an Executive role—may I ask whether there is a precedent, on such an important matter, for Members not being given 24 hours to plan and discuss points of common interest with those from other Benches and so on? Is there a precedent for this sort of decision making?

Mr Speaker: I am sorry if the hon. Lady is concerned, and I do not cavil at that: these are very important times for all of us. The answer is that there almost certainly will be a precedent, for the reason I gave to the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) from the Scottish National party a few moments ago, which is that there are precedents for most things in this House. If the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) is challenging me about when there was a precise precedent, I admit I cannot tell her. In fact, there will not be a precise precedent, because the particular circumstances of Brexit are a little different from anything else that has previously occurred. If she is wondering whether there has ever been such a situation, the answer is that there will have been precedents in the past.

What I am trying to do is to ensure that there is maximum time for those who care about these matters—I think a lot of Members do care about these matters, and may potentially have an interest in tabling an amendment and so on—and their interests will be protected by the Chair as effectively as I can possibly do so.

If there are no further points of order—I thank colleagues for their interest, and I hope to keep them updated—we come now to the second urgent question.

Shamima Begum and Other Cases

4.41 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department to make a statement on Shamima Begum, the death of her son Jarrah and other cases.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): We estimate that over 900 people left the UK to engage with the conflict in Syria and Iraq. Many have been killed fighting, some remain there, some have returned and others could still come back. Some irresponsibly took young British children with them, and some had children while they were there as part of their mission to expand the so-called caliphate. We have made it very clear since 2011 that no British citizen should travel to Syria. Those who have stayed until the bitter end include some of the most devoted supporters of Daesh. One of the ways we can deal with the threat that they pose to the UK is to remove British citizenship from those holding another nationality. Since 2010, this power has been applied to about 150 people of a range of nationalities.

It would not be appropriate for me to comment on the details of an individual case—although, clearly, the loss of any child is a tragedy—but, if I may, I will address some of the issues that have been raised. First, these decisions are made very carefully. Where citizenship deprivation is being considered for national security concerns, decisions are based on advice and intelligence from the security services, counter-terrorism police, and specialist security and legal officials in the Home Office. When people dedicated to keeping our country safe give an informed recommendation, any Home Secretary should listen very carefully. Secondly, we are unable to provide support to British nationals within Syria as the UK Government do not have a consular presence there. Thirdly, the status of a child does not change if their parents' British citizenship is subsequently revoked.

There are no easy answers. I must also think about future conflicts and the precedents that we set. I do not want any more children brought into a war zone because their parents think that they will automatically be bailed out, no matter what the risk. However, the UK is doing all we can to help innocent people caught up in this conflict. We have committed £2.8 billion to Syria since 2012—our largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis—and we are on track to resettle 20,000 vulnerable refugees who have fled the country, with our national resettlement programmes resettling more than any other EU member state in 2017.

Of course, I understand the public interest, so I have asked my officials to expedite the publication of our next transparency report on disruptive and investigatory powers, including the most up-to-date annual figures on the deprivation of citizenship. This Government remain committed to protecting our citizens around the world, but I will not shy away from using the powers at my disposal to protect this country.

Ms Abbott: When she was 15, Shamima Begum made a very bad decision, and it is arguable that much of the tragedy that has engulfed her since then flows from it.

It is also the case that she has recently made some reprehensible statements to the media. However, the Home Secretary will know that the Opposition believe that she and her baby should have been allowed to return home. Now we know that that baby is dead. We believed that she should have been allowed to return home because this schoolgirl, born and brought up in Bethnal Green, was Britain's responsibility. As it happens, that is also the general view of the President of the United States. Above all, bringing the mother and baby home would have given the baby a chance of life.

Instead, the Home Secretary, in the face of a media outcry, chose to strip Shamima of her citizenship. He knows that many authorities contend that that was done illegally, because she was not a dual national. Article 15 of the United Nations declaration of human rights states:

"Everyone has a right to a nationality. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality".

Does the Home Secretary accept that the child was British? Does he further accept that the British legal system does not hold children responsible for the wrongdoing of their parents? Does he also accept that, despite what Ministers have said about the dangers of sending officials into the refugee camp, aid workers, doctors and journalists go backwards and forwards to and from those camps all the time?

Does the Home Secretary further accept that, by stripping Shamima of her nationality, he made it impossible for her to fulfil her duties as a mother and bring her baby home to a safe place? Will he confirm that, as he said earlier, as well as taking legal advice, he took advice from the police and security services about the desirability or otherwise of bringing Shamima home? Can he explain why he deemed this 19-year-old, with a baby that was not quite three weeks old, more dangerous to Britain than the hundreds of foreign fighters who have already been allowed to return?

We now know that there are other British women in those camps who have been stripped of their nationality by the Home Secretary's predecessor, the right hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd). Can he assure the House that he will work with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to see how best those British children's rights can be protected?

The Home Secretary's decision in this case has caused widespread concern and alarm. We understand the issue of keeping British people safe, but this was a British baby, who is now dead. No Opposition Member condones—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Wallace, please, I respect your governmental responsibilities and the seriousness with which you take them, but I appeal to you just to listen to the exchanges. You can always look wise—that is not difficult for you—but it is best for you just to listen. As for the Parliamentary Private Secretary, Mr Hoare, you are a junior Member of the House, trying to come to terms with your responsibilities as a PPS. Your role is just to sit there and nod or shake your head in the appropriate place. It is not for you to give a running commentary on the shadow Home Secretary's performance. I have not the slightest interest in what you have to say, and you will say no more in the course of these exchanges or I shall have to ask you to relocate yourself.

Ms Abbott: This is a very serious matter and it is unfortunate that Members on the Treasury Bench do not seem to take it with the seriousness it deserves. I say to the Home Secretary that no Opposition Member condones what Shamima Begum did—the choices she made and the things she said. But if it was his 19-year-old daughter, however badly she had behaved and however reprehensible or near criminal her choices, would he want her to bury three babies in the course of a year? The Home Secretary of course has a responsibility to protect the British public, but he also has a responsibility to appear just and fair in the eyes of the British public. This decision, which has led, as night follows day, to this less than three-week-old baby dying, does not appear just or fair to the majority of the British public.

Sajid Javid: First of all, the one thing I do concur with the right hon. Lady about is that the death of any child is a tragedy, wherever it takes place in the world. It is not something that anyone—any Member of this House—would want to see.

The Government are committed to protecting British citizens, but it is very different when it comes to a war zone where there is no consular presence. That is a fact not just under this Government; it has been a fact under successive Governments and it is true for many other European countries. For the same reasons that we do not have a consular presence, they do not have a consular presence. Whichever British citizen in that war zone in Syria the right hon. Lady might be referring to, whether a child or an adult, if there is no consular presence there is no way for British authorities—as much as someone might want to, especially in the case of a child—to provide any type of assistance.

The right hon. Lady is trying to make this issue about British citizenship. It is not about British citizenship. One confirmation I can give to one question she asked is that it is the case that if a child is born to someone who is a British citizen at the time the child is born, that child is a British citizen, even if the parent's citizenship is subsequently removed. This is not about citizenship; it is about the ability of the British state to help. For the British state to send officials, whether Foreign Office officials or others, into Syria in a war zone would risk the safety of those officials. That is why the Foreign Office has been very clear, ever since 2011, that no British citizen should travel to Syria in any circumstances, because it is incredibly dangerous. That is the view taken on Syria by almost every other liberal democracy, even when it comes to children from their own countries and their own citizens.

The right hon. Lady suggested, on citizenship deprivations, that the Government are somehow making decisions that are making people stateless. She rightly stated that that would be illegal under international law. That means that no such decision can be made, whether by this Home Secretary, my predecessors, or previous Labour Home Secretaries. Under international law, no decision can be made unless the Home Secretary is satisfied, based on expert advice, that that individual will not be left stateless.

The death of any British child, even one born to a foreign terrorist fighter, is of course a tragedy, but the only person responsible for the death of that child is the foreign terrorist fighter.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I think it is well established international law that one does not take away the citizenship from even one's most unpleasant fellow citizens if it will leave them stateless. I thought it was policy not to take away citizenship unless someone had substantial citizenship of and some connection with another country. I had not previously heard it described as some sort of punishment for past misbehaviour.

May I ask the Home Secretary to address the security implications for our safety? There are thousands of European nationals who are jihadists. They are now scattering over the middle east, in camps and elsewhere, trying to get out. Does he not agree that if each European country desperately tries to turn away its own in the hope that they will go to some other country, we will actually expose ourselves to considerable danger? Is it not preferable that everybody who gives up and wants to return to their own country comes back to that country, where they can be put in the hands of the police, prosecuted if necessary, and kept under surveillance by the intelligence services for as long as is necessary?

Sajid Javid: The first point that my right hon. and learned Friend raised was on citizenship. Again, to make it clear, under international law it would clearly not be possible for the British state to remove British citizenship from anyone unless the Home Secretary who is making that decision is satisfied, based on expert advice, that that individual will not be left stateless, so he is right to make that point about international law.

On the security implications that my right hon. and learned Friend asked about, clearly there is a balance that needs to be met. The primary objective should be the safety and security of all those who live in the United Kingdom. That should be the overriding concern, based on expert advice and expert intelligence about what is necessary to protect British citizens. There is a case for more co-operation with our international partners because, as I mentioned earlier, they face many similar challenges. It is something that I discuss regularly, especially with our European partners—I discussed it just last week in Brussels with some of them—and that we are trying to get better co-ordination on so we can better manage some of the joint threats that we face.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Save the Children said that the death of this innocent, newborn baby was an “avoidable tragedy”, and I still have not heard any satisfactory explanation from the Home Secretary as to why the Foreign Secretary said that it would be too dangerous to have brought this baby to safety, when many journalists have visited the camp that the child was in on numerous occasions. I also gently say to the Home Secretary that I am sure that some of these women who were “married” to jihadi fighters did not have much choice in the decision about whether to have children or not. I do not think those fighters were too interested in a woman's right to withhold consent to sex, never mind women's reproductive rights.

Last time I raised this matter, the Home Secretary was very stung by my criticism and suggestion that revoking Ms Begum's citizenship might have been contrary to law, but in the meantime, many other lawyers, in addition to the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), have pointed out that the basis of his decision is questionable, because it seems quite

clear that Ms Begum has no right to Bangladeshi citizenship. There are claims that the Home Secretary did not consult either the Attorney General or the Solicitor General before making his decision—something that could leave him vulnerable in the event of a legal challenge. Will he tell us whether these claims are accurate, and will he refrain from retreating behind the argument that the case is sub judice, as you have already explained to him, Mr Speaker, that that is not the case?

Other countries, including the Republic of Ireland, that are faced with this situation are not depriving their citizens of citizenship, but are taking responsibility for citizens radicalised on their watch, rather than dumping them on poorer countries whose security arrangements are already strained to the nth degree. Finally, in the camps and hospitals of northern Syria, there are many more innocent children who are not British citizens. The Kurdish authorities need more help to deal with these families and these innocents fleeing Daesh. What discussions has the Home Secretary had with his Foreign Office counterparts in respect of that humanitarian aspect of the situation?

Sajid Javid: The hon. and learned Lady suggests that because journalists are getting into Syria—into some of the camps—that it is perfectly safe, then, for British officials to enter. She will know, first, that that is a decision for journalists to make. She will also know that, thankfully in most cases—even in war zones—journalists have some degree of protection. If it was a British official, it would be a very different category of risk, and I know that she would recognise that.

The hon. and learned Lady also made a reference to women foreign terrorist fighters. All I would gently urge is that no one should make a judgment on the threat that a foreign terrorist fighter poses to our national security based on their gender. That would be entirely wrong.

The hon. and learned Lady has also questioned the legality of such decisions. As I have said—I am happy to repeat it—these decisions are never taken lightly and are based on both expert security advice, intelligence advice and legal advice. As to the last part of her question, the Minister for the Middle East, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), will be making a statement later in which he will cover that point.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Of course, the Home Secretary must decide on what is in the best interests of British public safety on the basis of information that we have not seen, and he is entirely right that it would be wrong in these circumstances to put British officials and personnel in harm's way, as has been suggested by some on the Opposition Benches. Further to the point made by the Father of the House and former Home Secretary, however, is Britain, with its rule of law and governance structures, not wrong to leave people in ungoverned space who would then be prey to terrorists and their recruiters? Has he noted that Ms Begum was 15 when she was radicalised in London—indeed, groomed by bad people—and that her family, who want her back, and her local community have repudiated her acts and disagree with what she has said and done?

Sajid Javid: I always listen carefully to what my right hon. Friend says, and he was right in his opening comment. Much has been said about this case—many accusations and insinuations and much so-called detail—that people could not possibly know because, for security reasons, No. 1, but also for other reasons, it is not possible for the Government to share the details of any such case. It would not be appropriate. It has never been so in the past and would not be appropriate now, and as I have said, the decisions would always be taken on expert legal advice.

On the second part of my right hon. Friend's question about the security risks posed, whether it is our security or that of others, we need to look carefully at the security threats, but first and foremost I must be concerned about the safety and security of all those who live in the United Kingdom, and, where threats remain after we take action, we will work with our international partners to minimise them.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I asked the Home Secretary about the vulnerability of this little baby, who has now tragically died, at the Select Committee session. Can he confirm that Shamima Begum's son was a British citizen? I see no reason not to confirm that, rather than make generic statements. He also told me that he had considered the interests of the child. That is a bit hard to understand, given what has happened to this little baby. Was he advised by his officials that there would be a greater risk to this child's life if he made this citizenship decision about the mother?

Sajid Javid: I can confirm that if a child is born to a British citizen anywhere in the world, as long as that British citizen is not a naturalised British citizen, that child is British, even if the parent's British citizenship is subsequently removed. I have mentioned before in the House, and I am happy to repeat it, that these decisions are never taken lightly—I believe that to be true of all my predecessors—but they are based on expert advice by officials. Where a child is involved, the interests of that child are taken into account.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Can I follow the logic a little further about what is necessary to keep British society safe? I am sure that people on both sides of the House believe that the best way to deal with something such as this would be for each country to take people back, put them through the court process, prosecute them and, if necessary, imprison them. The problem is: what do we do when we do not have an offence for which a person can be prosecuted? We now have a new offence of entering a designated area. What is the maximum prison sentence that someone would serve if convicted of that offence? If it is a very short period, will the Home Secretary consider upgrading the law on treason—as was done temporarily during the second world war—to ensure that anyone who comes back will serve a very long sentence? It takes between 20 and 25 security service operatives to cover a single suspect 24/7, and that is simply impossible when there are hundreds of such suspects.

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend has made a number of good points. He is, of course, absolutely right: someone who returns can be prosecuted for an offence only if the relevant laws exist. He alluded to new counter-terrorism

[Sajid Javid]

legislation that is included in the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019, and to the “designated areas” offence. I believe that the maximum sentence that can be received for that offence is up to 10 years. It was precisely to try to secure more tools with which to prosecute returning fighters that I made that amendment to that Bill. We are constantly considering what further improvements can be made, and what further tools can be introduced to prosecute returning foreign fighters. I agree with my right hon. Friend that it is time to look at the laws on treason, and to modernise them.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Did the Home Secretary seek advice on whether a charity already active in the Syrian camps, such as Save the Children, could have helped the British Government to remove this British baby to safety?

Sajid Javid: As I have said, these decisions are never taken lightly. A number of factors would be considered, on a case-by-case basis, and we would look at what is in the best interests of defending our national security and act on the basis of the advice that we received.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): The Home Secretary faces a daily set of choices and decisions to keep the citizens of this country safe which no other member of the Government faces, and he has the support of Conservative Members in doing his very difficult job. Does he agree, however, that there is still a huge amount of work to be done for us to understand why so many British children and young people from British homes chose to go and be part of Daesh, and that we need to build trust in those communities and invest in them so that more young people feel that they have a greater stake in a liberal and free society such as ours?

Sajid Javid: I very much agree with my right hon. Friend. Much work has been done when the UK has suffered some terrible terrorist attacks, and the Government have been required to consider sensibly what more can be done to help us to understand what motivates individuals either to commit acts of terrorism here or to go and join foreign groups abroad.

My right hon. Friend rightly talked about communities and community relations. It should be borne in mind that many members of the British Muslim community do not want foreign terrorist fighters to return to this country, because they fear both the precedent that that will set for future potential foreign fighters and the radicalism of vulnerable young British Muslims by those returning foreign fighters.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Shamima Begum was my constituent. She fled to Syria in 2015, along with two other girls, after being groomed and radicalised—mainly online—and influenced by a former classmate who had left earlier. As the Home Secretary will know, the police were working in enormously difficult circumstances, but one of the errors made was their sending letters about interviewing the girls to the girls themselves instead of their parents. The police subsequently apologised for the error. The girls were minors then, and they had not committed crimes at the time when Shamima Begum fled.

I recognise, especially given what she has said in the media, the abhorrent views that Shamima Begum now holds and the fact that she has been radicalised, but, that said, no child should face punishment for the sins of its parent, and in this case that child is the child that died. I disagree with the Home Secretary’s decision to rescind her citizenship, because doing so makes her stateless, given that the Bangladeshi authorities do not recognise that she has citizenship of their country.

That said, national security and the protection of our communities are paramount. I want to flag up some of the issues that my constituents have raised, because we need to think deeply about how we deal with them. My constituents are concerned about the fact that the case has gained the oxygen of publicity, and about the abhorrent views that have been allowed to be peddled in our media day in, day out. My constituents are worried about the repercussions and the possibility of a backlash from far-right groups. I have already had cases of innocent people, who happen to be Muslim, being attacked. Those are the issues that we have to reckon with and deal with.

My constituents are concerned to ensure that if people are returned—as they should be, given the debates about nationality—they should be prosecuted and face the full force of the law. If those people are returned into their communities, we face the massive challenge of dealing with backlashes in those returnees’ localities. Our constituents become vulnerable to attacks from the far right and other religious extremists, and they may face unhelpful media attention while they are trying to get on with their lives.

I ask the Home Secretary this, once again: will he please work with the Foreign Secretary and our allies in other countries to come up with a long-term solution? We must address the problem of people who go to conflict regions, to ensure that they do not find clandestine ways to return to our country, create more insecurity and pose a greater danger to people’s lives.

Sajid Javid: I listened carefully to what the hon. Lady said. As she said, sadly, a number of her constituents are known to have gone to Syria to join Daesh and other terrorist groups. I understand the concerns that have been raised in the community, and she touched on some of them. She might be interested to know that I recently visited a Prevent panel in Tower Hamlets to see some of its excellent work with many members of the community. It safeguards vulnerable young people not only against groups such as Daesh but against far-right extremism, which she mentioned.

The hon. Lady has said a lot, and I have listened carefully. If it would help, I would be very happy to meet her later and discuss some of those issues in more detail.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The problem is that not enough British nationals who return from Syria are being prosecuted. We know that 900 British nationals have gone to aid Daesh in Syria and Iraq. Some 180 have been killed in theatre, 360 have returned and another 360 are likely to return in the near future. Of the 360 who have returned, just 40—10%—have been successfully prosecuted. I say to the Home Secretary that that is simply not enough.

Sajid Javid: I absolutely understand my hon. Friend’s point. He has pointed out, quite correctly, the challenges

of prosecution of foreign terrorist fighters who return to the UK. As we have heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), one challenge is having the right laws in place—we are making some changes to that—and another is collecting battlefield evidence. These individuals are returning from a war zone. Collecting evidence in the battlefield is incredibly difficult, but we have done, and continue to do, a lot of work through the MOD and with our defence allies and Five Eyes partners to try collect more such evidence, so that we can use it in the courts for more successful prosecutions.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Ind): We now know that some 100 Daesh terrorist fighters have returned to the United Kingdom, and it seems that only 40 of them have been prosecuted. Meanwhile, a number of women who have given succour and support to Daesh—ISIS—have been stripped of their British citizenship. Several of them are mothers and their children are British citizens, to whom the Government, like it or not, have a duty because they are under the age of 16. The Home Secretary tells us that those young women are such a threat to our country's security that they have had to have their British citizenship taken away from them. On what possible basis does the Home Secretary take the view that they are fit and proper people to care for children who are British citizens in refugee camps?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend raises a number of points. First, there is no British consular presence in Syria, so it is incredibly difficult for the British Government to intervene directly or to provide help for any British citizen there, whether a child or an adult. That is why the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has been making it very clear since 2011 that no British citizen should enter that war zone. She also seems to question the dangers that might be posed by female terrorists. One public case that I can refer to went through our courts in June 2018. Safaa Boular, aged 18, was convicted of planning to travel to Syria and to engage in terrorist acts. Soon after, her mother, her sister and her female friend also pleaded guilty to terrorism charges. They were going to set up a female terror cell, and had they succeeded, there would have been deaths in this country. No one should make a judgment on the threat of a terrorist based on their gender.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): So how lethal are female terrorists?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend asks a good question. It has been well documented that female terrorist fighters who have gone to join Daesh have engaged in murder, recruitment and radicalisation, including of British citizens through online means. They have assisted in rape and helped to keep sex slaves, and they have also prepared suicide vests and carried out suicide attacks themselves.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Home Secretary is at pains to tell us that there is no consular presence in Syria. However, the aid agencies have a presence there. The International Rescue Committee tells us that the al-Hol camp in Syria is at “breaking point” because 12,000 women and children have arrived there since last Wednesday. Since then, 100 children have died, two thirds of whom were under the age of five. The Home Secretary has been quick to talk about his power to strip someone of their citizenship without

due process, but can he tell us how quickly he has acted with the aid agencies to identify whether there are other British children in that camp who need our help? Surely standing up and speaking out for them represents the best of the British values that we want to uphold.

Sajid Javid: We should be very proud of what we are doing as a Government to help those who have been hurt or displaced in that conflict. The UK Government have committed more than £2.8 billion since the start of the conflict, which is more than almost any other country. As we will hear shortly in the Foreign Office Minister's statement, we have committed a further £400 million this year. We are also leading a donor conference, and we resettled more vulnerable refugees through national resettlement programmes than any other country in the EU last year.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): The Secretary of State has mentioned figures relating to the last couple of months. He said that about 900 British citizens had been in the caliphate, of whom 400 had returned, 10% had been prosecuted and between 100 and 150 had died. That leaves about 300 people still out there. Can he give us any further information now? Are those people meeting and gathering in any particular part of Syria? Are they intending to try to return to the UK? Will he listen to the voices of Conservative Members who think that the current treason laws are insufficient and need to be reviewed?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to suggest that these are approximate figures. It is impossible to get the actual number of people who have gone to Syria and remain there, but he is right to suggest that there are possibly about 300 with British connections. We have received some information through the security services and through some of our allies, but it would be inappropriate to share that publicly. I can say, however, that many of those individuals remain active and very dangerous, and we are continuing to work with our allies to see what we can do to maintain our national security.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I have had a lot of contact with my constituents regarding this case and others, and they have shown absolute compassion and believe that it is a tragedy. However, they are also extremely mindful of the risk posed by individuals who have been radicalised coming back to the United Kingdom, and they want me to ask the Home Secretary to confirm that such decisions are based on evidence and clear risk assessments, not ad-hoc judgments, as has been described.

Sajid Javid: I am happy to give the hon. Lady that confirmation. Due process needs to be followed in all such decisions. As I have already said to the House, the powers are used rarely. They have been in existence for over 100 years after being set out by Parliament and put in place by this House. The last time that the House updated them was relatively recently in 2014, and they have been used by successive Home Secretaries of different political colours. On each occasion, such decisions are based on detailed expert advice, including national security assessments, intelligence and advice from lawyers.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): The Home Secretary discharges his duties with diligence and care in the

[Mark Garnier]

interests of British nationals, but in removing the citizenship of a suspected terrorist in the middle east and thereby passing the responsibility on to a less-developed nation, possibly with fewer resources, are we not potentially putting British nationals overseas at risk? As we leave the European Union, should we not be setting an example in how we take responsibility for people we consider to be a threat not just to British citizens, but to the world in general?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes a fair point and draws out the fact that each decision must be made on a case-by-case basis. There is sometimes a fine balance to be struck about the best way to protect the national security and citizens of this country, and such decisions are never easy. There should be no suggestion that citizenship deprivation is always used whenever it is considered, and it is sometimes not used because we try to balance out the best way, based on expert advice, to protect British lives.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Section 66 of the Immigration Act 2014 requires the Home Secretary to commission a review of the use of deprivation powers. That was done for the first year, but it has not been carried for the period between July 2015 to July 2018, and the Library confirmed to me that there is no requirement for that to be done by the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation. I am pleased that the Home Secretary mentioned the review today, but how has it taken me asking a written question and receiving an answer from the Immigration Minister that a review will not be commissioned until we have a new independent reviewer of terrorism legislation for the Home Secretary to confirm that one will happen? What is the timetable for the review? This House needs to see how the deprivation powers have been used, and the letter of the law in the 2014 Act needs to be carried through.

Sajid Javid: First, we are in the final stages of appointing the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, so I will come back to the hon. Lady on the specific point about the 2014 Act. Secondly, in my opening remarks, I referred to the fact that we make regular transparency reports on the use of such powers to protect the country. The last such report was published in May 2018, and it is appropriate for us to publish another report soon, which is why I have asked my officials to expedite the preparations so that I can place a report in this House as soon as possible.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): When the Home Secretary refers to working with allies in respect of managing the threat from British citizens now in captivity having been working or living in the ISIS area, will he confirm whether the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria is one of those allies? What help are we giving or intending to give to the DFNS to best oversee the British citizens now in its charge?

Sajid Javid: My understanding is that we do not officially recognise the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria but that British officials may deal with individuals who are themselves affiliated with the federation. When I refer to allies at the Dispatch Box, I specifically have in mind our European allies and our Five Eyes allies.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As a father and grandfather, my heart aches for any mother who loses a child, but that does not change my support for the Home Office's decision, just as it does not change the heartache and loss for every victim of ISIS terrorism, including children across the world and especially here in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Does the Secretary of State agree that the safety of our citizens must always be the priority of the Home Secretary?

Sajid Javid: I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman about the loss of any child, whether the child of a terrorist or any other child. All children, especially babies, are innocent in every way, and such a loss is a tragedy for us all. Everyone would have sympathy with that.

As the hon. Gentleman says, our duty is to prevent further loss of innocent life, including of children in Britain. The Home Office's paramount responsibility is to keep this country safe.

Dr Phillip Lee (Bracknell) (Con): Sadly, there is plenty I could disagree with on the justification for this decision, which I do not think was the right one. As we all realise, this baby was British. The papers were not served on the mother until after the baby was born. Did the Home Secretary seek any guidance on infant mortality rates in that refugee camp or, indeed, in any other refugee camp in northern Syria? Did he speak to any international aid organisations via the Department for International Development? Did he seek for any notes to be produced by his private office to that effect? Finally, on the difficulty of removing this woman from this refugee camp, did he inquire at all, via various sources, with Kurdish authorities about whether it was possible to deliver this mother and her child to a border at which civil servants could collect the child in safe circumstances?

Sajid Javid: It is worth reminding the House that there is no British Government consular presence in Syria, which is why we have made it very clear since 2011 that no one should enter Syria. Syria is incredibly dangerous, and what the British Government can do to help or protect any British citizen is very limited.

My hon. Friend refers to a particular case, but where a child is in a camp or anywhere else in Syria who happens to be a British citizen, it is not possible for our officials, without risk to their own lives and their own safety, to enter Syria. To do so would be to provide that consular presence, which cannot happen. That is why we have been very clear in our approach.

Finally, as I mentioned earlier, whenever a decision is taken to carry out a citizenship deprivation and a child may be affected by that decision, it is taken into account.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): The Home Secretary knows I have immense respect for him, but I disagree with his judgment on this case. He has just said that he is working closely with international partners and our EU partners to ensure that we keep our citizens safe here, across Europe and around the world. What is the difference between that and the policy applied by France, which is taking back all its Daesh fighters? France had the largest number of Daesh fighters who went to Syria, and they are now coming back. What is the difference between France's policy and the United Kingdom's policy?

As I have previously raised with the Home Secretary, 900 British nationals went and 400 have come back, and 40 of those have been prosecuted, with some receiving heavy sentences. The United Kingdom stands for the rule of law and justice. What is the difference between those cases and this case in depriving a person of their citizenship? We need to apply our laws fairly, justly and consistently.

Sajid Javid: First, let me say that I have respect for my hon. Friend, too. I say gently to him that, although he is absolutely entitled to his view, he could not possibly know the facts of each of these cases, including the one he is referring to. He has asked me what the difference is between a case and potentially another case, and this is why we take a case-by-case approach; each case has to be balanced and a judgment has to be made about what is in the best interests of the UK and protecting its citizens. That has to be balanced against all other concerns, and that is what is done. He has also referred to France, suggesting that it somehow has a policy of taking back all children. I do not believe that is France's policy.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I have three children, and I cannot imagine what it feels like to lose one baby, let alone three. But the tragedy surely is that there are millions of people, including millions of children, in Syria today who are surviving only because of humanitarian aid. We know that people went off to fight with ISIS from not only the UK, but France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and many other western countries. So what more do we need to do to prevent our young people from being radicalised? Clearly, there is a concern about more fighters coming back and more radicalisation taking place. Is the Prevent strategy working well enough? What lessons can we learn from other countries?

Sajid Javid: First, my hon. Friend reminds the House that, sadly, many children have died in Syria because of the conflict, with many having died because of the acts of Daesh and its terrorist supporters. She has asked what we are doing on de-radicalisation. A number of programmes have been in place for many years. One of the key programmes is the Prevent programme. Last year, there were, I believe, approximately 7,000 references to the programme, and some 400 people were put into the Channel programme—they are the ones we would have the most concerns about—and the vast majority are coming out successfully, with no further concerns. We are also finding that there is an increase in the number who have been subject to far right extremism, so this is about all types of extremism. The heart of these programmes is about protecting and safeguarding vulnerable people, often young people.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Ultimately, is it not the case that any Home Secretary has to make very difficult decisions, such as this, based on information that they are simply not able to share in the public domain?

Sajid Javid: That is right, and it is as true for me as it has been for my predecessors. As I have said before, it has been the case for predecessors of all political colours. This whole power of citizenship deprivation has been set by this Parliament—by parliamentarians—and it has been given to Home Secretaries to use in cases where there is good reason to do so. Ultimately, the purpose of the power is to protect our country.

Syria

5.33 pm

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on the wider humanitarian situation in Syria, following the statement by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. This House has followed developments in Syria for eight years now, since this terrible conflict began. Today, I regret that I have to report to the House little positive news on the humanitarian situation: there remain nearly 12 million people in need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria; more than 6 million people have had to flee their homes in search of safety for themselves and their loved ones—and as the locations of fighting have shifted, many of them have had to flee again and again; we now see 80% of Syrians living in poverty; 2 million children are out of school; and 6.5 million do not have food security, not knowing day to day if they will be able to feed themselves or their families. In addition, there remain 5.7 million Syrians who have called upon the kindness of their neighbours, sheltering in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt. And that is to say nothing of the estimated 400,000 Syrians who have lost their lives through these eight years of bloody conflict. The situation is dire and heartbreaking. It is both morally right and in our national interest to do what we can.

Let me update the House on the UK's continued leadership as part of the humanitarian response in Syria. I hope later this week to attend an annual international meeting of donors to the Syria crisis response, where I will commit that we will spend at least £400 million this year to help those who have suffered at the hands of the conflict. The United Kingdom is already one of the largest donors to the Syria crisis response, and this week's pledge will take our total commitment to over £2.8 billion since 2012. The funding is targeted at those most in need, both inside Syria and in neighbouring countries. In total, we have now allocated over £1.2 billion for supporting Syrian refugees and host communities in neighbouring countries. I continue to be full of admiration for the generosity of those states.

Last week, I visited Lebanon, where I had constructive meetings with His Excellency Prime Minister Saad Hariri, His Excellency President Aoun, His Excellency the Foreign Minister, and other Ministers. I reaffirmed the UK's commitment to supporting a strong, stable and prosperous Lebanon, including the country's efforts to help so many of those most affected by the Syria crisis. Many of my conversations focused on the large number of Syrian refugees that Lebanon continues to host. We should be in no doubt of the burden placed on host countries, and the generosity that they show in supporting refugees.

I was particularly grateful during my visit to have the opportunity to visit a local school that is part of the British Council's Connecting Classrooms programme, accompanied by the Minister of Education. I was touched by the children's enthusiasm for learning, and proud that the UK is helping to make a difference to their lives through a £160 million commitment to the goal of reaching every child in Lebanon, whether Lebanese or Syrian refugee, with education.

I wish also to mention the contribution of other neighbouring countries. Turkey is generously hosting more than 4 million refugees and is now the largest refugee-hosting country anywhere in the world. Jordan

[Alistair Burt]

continues to show its support for the people of Syria. Last month, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and His Majesty King Abdullah of Jordan co-hosted the London Initiative 2019, an international conference for Jordan in central London. It was a great success, laying the foundations to unlock further economic growth, jobs and investment for Jordanians and refugees alike.

When I meet fellow donors later this week, as well as reaffirming the UK's commitment to the people of Syria and to neighbouring countries, I will take the opportunity to stress again the importance of ensuring that there is regular, unfettered access for the humanitarian agencies that are trying to work inside Syria. Let me be clear: by that I mean that I will again call on the Syrian regime and its backers to end the cruelty of refusing or obstructing the delivery of humanitarian aid. More than 1 million people live in what are known as "hard to reach" areas, where ongoing hostilities and shifting lines of control make it incredibly difficult and dangerous to provide the support that people need. Throughout the whole country, 50% of the UN's requests to the Syrian regime for permission to deliver aid are rejected or simply go unanswered.

Aid agencies continue to struggle to get the necessary approvals to operate. This is only prolonging the suffering inside Syria and increasing the number of families waiting desperately for food, water, shelter or healthcare, and it has to stop. Put simply, there can be no good reason for this, and no excuse. To me, it provides the answer to the question I am often asked: whether we are entering a new chapter in Syria, whether it is time to reconstruct the country, and whether it is now time that refugees can return home. If the Syrian regime is not even seeking to support those trying to deliver humanitarian assistance to those most in need of it their country, how can we accept any narrative of change? I spoke to refugees in Lebanon over a period of time during my recent visit, and of course most of them want to return home—but only once the conditions inside Syria have improved and, most notably, only when they are confident that they will be safe.

So, we have to continue to stand firm. We must send a strong signal that we will not give up on the Syrian people who are being denied justice, security and a legitimate Government that can truly represent them. We must continue to press for a negotiated political settlement that can bring the people of Syria back together. The UN-led process is the legitimate forum to achieve this, and we will continue to call on the Syrian regime to seriously engage in the Geneva process.

The humanitarian situation inside Syria remains severe, with immense human suffering, as we enter the ninth year of this tragic crisis. But we will continue to stand firm, support the people of Syria, stand shoulder to shoulder with their neighbours who do so much and, ultimately, do what we can to bring this crisis to an end. I commend this statement to the House.

5.39 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I thank the Minister for providing an advance copy of his statement.

As the conflict in Syria enters its ninth year, the humanitarian needs in Syria remain overwhelming. More than 12 million Syrians still need humanitarian assistance

and more than 6 million refugees are displaced outside the country. We welcome the Government's commitment to pledge an additional £100 million of UK aid—£400 million this year—for Syria at this week's conference in Brussels.

As we have just heard in the previous urgent question on Shamima Begum's case, we know that conditions for refugees living in camps are not as safe as they should be, and I take this opportunity to express my deep sadness at the loss of an innocent British life in a Syrian refugee camp. The situation in many refugee camps in Syria and in neighbouring states is critical. The al-Hol camp in Syria is now at breaking point. A total of 12,000 women and children have arrived from ISIS-controlled Baghuz in eastern Syria since Wednesday morning, bringing the total population to more than 65,000. In the past three months, there have been at least 100 deaths, nearly all children, on the way to or after arriving at the camp. Two thirds of those deaths are babies and infants under five years of age. Will the Minister tell the House what plans are in place now rapidly to improve conditions at refugee camps?

In 2018, more than 1,100 children were killed in fighting, the highest number since the start of the war. What steps is the Minister taking to protect vulnerable Syrian children who are key to the country's future? Non-governmental organisations on the ground are clear: Syria is not safe for refugee returns, and I welcome the Minister's clarity on that position today. Any discussion on returns must be based on conditions being in place to enable displaced people to make voluntary, informed and sustainable choices about their future. Where refugees do seek to return, what steps are being taken to ensure that organisations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees are present to provide the necessary support?

Although we must protect those caught up in conflict, what we ultimately want is an end to the conflict and a lasting peace so that people can return home. We have heard in recent days that the last vestige of Daesh control is under assault. Kurdish forces have made huge sacrifices in that battle against Daesh, so with the threat of US forces withdrawing from the region, what plans are in place to support and protect the Kurdish population there in that eventuality?

As the Minister has stated, NGOs active on the ground report severe difficulties reaching those most in need inside Syrian regime-controlled areas. Long approvals processes for programmes, activities and travel and visa restrictions are all impacting on organisations' ability to carry out humanitarian work. He says that the Government will stand firm, and calls on the Syrian regime to stop obstructing the delivery of humanitarian aid. We all want to see humanitarian aid delivered, but how realistic does he think it is to expect a change of approach by that regime on access for humanitarian organisations to reach the populations that are most in need, and will he tell the House what more he is doing?

Finally, will the Minister speak urgently with his counterparts at the Home Office to bring forward an announcement on plans for a future refugee resettlement programme here in the UK, ahead of the conclusion of the current vulnerable person's resettlement scheme in 2020?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman both for his questions and for the way in which he asked them.

As I indicated, UK support of £2.81 billion over the past few years has covered those refugees both outside and inside Syria. DFID works on the basis of humanitarian need, not on the basis of who controls territory. This also means that, at present, we are providing assistance to those who have been in Daesh-controlled areas and who are in need. We provide support through governance in areas that have been under opposition control, but we are also prepared to provide for need inside those areas that are under regime control.

In this specific instance, as the hon. Gentleman said, there has been a lot of focus recently on the camps where there are those who have been involved in the fighting and who are now, because of the end of the military campaign against Daesh, in that small area and moving out of it. Our understanding is that male foreign fighters are in one camp, and spouses and children are in another. The United Kingdom does not provide aid to those who are classified as foreign fighters in their camps but we do, and rightly should, provide aid and support for women and children in the other camp.

In 2018-19, UK aid has provided in excess of £40 million to address basic life-saving needs across areas previously held by Daesh, including to children in camps for internally displaced persons. In these camps specifically, DFID-funded partners are providing support, including medical screening on arrival at the camp; medical services for children through mobile medical teams; clothing for children; mental trauma counselling for children; child protection checkpoints for unaccompanied or separated children; and activity tents for children.

We are already providing support for those who are considered the most vulnerable: children, who are innocent of what has happened around them and will be immensely damaged by it, almost whatever age they are. If they are very tiny, they may have seen things that have been imprinted on their consciousness with very little understanding of them. If they are older, they may have been subject to indoctrination or the like. Regardless of that, we are helping inside the camps to try to provide them with the assistance they need.

I am conscious of the increasing numbers. Our aid is not distributed directly by DFID workers because, as we discussed earlier, access is difficult, but we do work with agencies to provide aid. I am also conscious of the increasing needs. The recent announcement of the £400 million, including the extra £100 million, is flexible. We can adjust where that might be distributed, according to need. We are conscious of the pressures everywhere, so I hope that this will provide flexibility to deal with those concerns.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned support for children generally. When I have been in international areas, I have been impressed that there has been recognition of what the United Kingdom has sought to do in order to support children who have been displaced by the crisis, wherever they have been. We have sought to provide support for children with education both in Lebanon and Jordan, and have provided a lot for needs. Our support has helped the Lebanese education system to reach 215,000 children, and has provided access to non-formal education for almost 71,000 refugee children. Improved infrastructure and services in 200 of the most conflict-prone municipalities has helped children who have moved there, and our support has also provided

psychological support, trauma counselling and basic medical assistance in the camps. Since 2012, we can say that UK support has delivered nearly 28 million food rations, 14 million medical consultations and 10 million vaccines across the region, and of course a lot of the vaccination work has been with children, so we have specifically recognised the needs of children.

The hon. Gentleman asked me about keeping in touch with agencies as the situation in Syria becomes clearer. Absolutely—it is still a conflict zone in many places, but that will gradually change, enabling us to do rather more. At present we cannot go into the areas that are conflicted, so we work through the agencies. We are doing all that we can to keep in touch with UN agencies such as the World Food Programme and others to ensure that we can give them the support that they need. However, as I mentioned in my statement, the regime is reluctant to give approval for agencies to go in at Rukban. As the hon. Gentleman will know, we made repeated efforts to get the UN convoy in there, but only two have got through—the second one recently. There is no good reason why that should have been delayed. We have pressed the regime to allow the humanitarian agencies to do their work.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the situation of the Kurdish community on the north-western border.¹ The situation there remains an uncertain stalemate. There is no clear indication of what the boundaries may be of a so-called safe zone. Turkey is entitled to take steps to ensure no terrorist attacks on it. It is very clear that it has no issue with the Kurdish population; 10 million Kurds live peacefully in Turkey. It is only concerned about those who might be outside its borders planning terrorist attacks and is looking to create a safe zone that might resist that. That situation remains unclear. Since the American forces announced their withdrawal, an anticipated Turkish incursion has not taken place, and we remain hopeful that that will be the case. I should be clear that this is not directed against the Kurdish community per se but only those who might be engaged in terrorist activities. We hope that this will be resolved diplomatically and without any fighting. We are doing all we can to support that.

The hon. Gentleman asked about hopes for the regime and any serious change in these areas. At present, it does not look very good. He will know that both Lebanon and Jordan are very keen to return refugees. Refugees, in general, are keen to return, but that cannot be universally taken for granted. Some have made different lives in Lebanon or Jordan. They have now been there for many years, and are thinking about whether it may be better for them to remain. This is very difficult for Lebanon and Jordan. One thing that would help considerably is for everyone to know that they would be safe if they returned. However, those who have returned to southern Syria and are in contact by telephone with families elsewhere talk of the regime still interrogating people when they return, preventing people from returning by crossing them off lists so that they cannot go back, imposing forced conscription and the like. No one is going to be safe in those circumstances, and no international agency or collection of countries is going to urge or encourage refugees to return in those circumstances. The hon. Gentleman is right: there has to be real evidence of change by the Syrian regime. This will come only through the political developments that are taking place through the UN. But unless people can see that,

1. [Official Report, 25 March 2019, Vol. 657, c. 1MC.]

[*Alistair Burt*]

the United Kingdom will not be engaging in reconstruction and will not be urging Syrian refugees to return to unsafe areas.

The hon. Gentleman asked me to be in contact with the Home Office in relation to resettlement programmes and the like. I will certainly pass on his concerns, but of course we have had a lengthy explanation from the Home Secretary of issues affecting the Home Office and returns to the UK. He spoke very clearly and very properly about those situations.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I greatly welcome my right hon. Friend's important statement today. In a bleak situation, British humanitarian leadership and the expertise of DFID shines out. The House will want to pay tribute, too, to the extraordinary bravery of many British and international humanitarians who so stoutly put themselves in harm's way to help their fellow human beings.

Can my right hon. Friend confirm that Britain has given more help to those suffering in this dire humanitarian situation, both inside Syria and in the countries around it, than the rest of the European Union added together? Will he again pay tribute to the quite extraordinary generosity of the surrounding countries—particularly Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon—in taking in so many people who have been driven out, often under gunfire, from Syria? Will he put pressure on other humanitarian donors and wealthy countries who are in a position to help—and sometimes, indeed, contractually bound to help—to boost their support and follow Britain's international leadership on this matter by putting their money, too, where their mouths are?

Alistair Burt: I thank my right hon. Friend for his usual perceptive comments. He knows a great deal about the background to this. He asks first about the courage of aid workers. Bearing in mind the dreadful circumstances of yesterday's air crash in Ethiopia, and recognising the number of aid and humanitarian workers who were on that plane from the UN and the World Food Programme, it is appropriate to recognise that those who are in conflict areas, and even those who are travelling around the region following what they believe is the right thing to do to assist humanity, are taking risks. We grieve for those who lost their lives. I am quite sure that I speak for the whole House in putting on record our sadness at yesterday's events.

In relation to the extent of aid, I absolutely agree—the £2.81 billion has been an extraordinary contribution. Last year in Brussels, we made the third largest pledge of £750 million, and the £2.81 billion that has been spent by the United Kingdom is indeed, I believe, a stronger sum than that provided by the European Union altogether over this period.¹ But our support also goes through the EU, and some of its funding is very significant and important to us.

In relation to urging others, later this week there is a conference in Brussels that, all things being equal, parliamentary business being dealt with and whipping being sensible, I am very keen to go to. I hope that will be the case. These international conferences do provide the opportunity for us to work with others. As the House will know, I keep in regular contact with other significant donors in the areas—those in the Gulf,

European colleagues and the like. I am quite sure that, just as with Yemen, states have recognised their needs and responsibilities. The Brussels conference, I hope, will be an indication from all states, following the United Kingdom's example, that this is a conflict not to turn away from even though it has lasted so long.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank the Minister for his statement and for setting out the massive humanitarian disaster that has unfolded, and is unfolding, in Syria. The resources that he sets out are of course welcome, but I am sure he will agree that we are looking at a massive reconstruction effort that may take the better part of decades. I echo his words about the generosity of Syria's neighbours and the people of Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and elsewhere. On refugee returns—I can fully understand why that is being discussed in these countries given the burden that they are under—what more can he tell us about making sure that any returns have to be done safely? I was somewhat reassured by his words earlier.

I join the Minister and others in paying tribute to the work and the bravery of the non-governmental agency sector, and pay tribute to those who lost their lives in the air disaster in Ethiopia yesterday. I reflect on the work done by UK NGOs such as Oxfam, Save the Children, Mercy Corps and others, but also some smaller NGOs such as Donna Jennings's Sam's House in my own constituency. What can we do to protect humanitarian workers, and what work is ongoing in terms of access to those who are most in need? That continues to be a challenge and may be so for years to come. Can any future efforts be done in partnership with these NGOs, because they cannot begin and end in Whitehall?

Finally, I hope that the Minister's Department will commit to work with the Scottish Government and fully support their efforts, including to support and empower Syrian women and their role in the peacebuilding process.

Alistair Burt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. On reconstruction, the support that the UK provides at the moment is termed stabilisation and resilience, in that people who have absolutely nothing need access to food, water and shelter. There is a distinction drawn between providing for the immediate needs of people—stabilisation and resilience—and what is termed the longer-term reconstruction, which is the rebuilding of infrastructure and of the country. There is an international difference of opinion. There are those who have taken the side of Syria during the time of the regime in saying, "This is what Syria needs going forward in order to settle its people." However, we have a concern about this reconstruction being provided to an unreconstructed regime, where, as I have indicated, all the evidence suggests that there are refugees it deliberately does not want back for political reasons, and that for those who do come back, there are risks attached.

It seems to us that to ask United Kingdom taxpayers, and this House, to support a reconstruction programme in those circumstances is not correct. Accordingly, we—this is a joint EU position—have taken the position on reconstruction of saying no, until we know for certain that this is a different Syria that will provide properly for its citizens and will not provide the basic background that can then be exploited by extremists and terrorists in future because they are dealing with a population that is

1. [Official Report, 25 March 2019, Vol. 657, c. 1MC.]

being appallingly treated. I think we are right to stick to that, but the hon. Gentleman can be reassured about the stabilisation and resilience support.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the neighbouring countries. To put some figures on the record, over the last few years we have provided £608 million for Lebanon, £483 million for Jordan and £319 million for Turkey—a total of £1.34 billion to support the 5.7 million refugees in the region and cover their needs. We are supporting the various programmes that are being run. It is a difficult balance for those states. They want to care for those who are there. In some cases, they are caring for refugees who have been there for a very long time—the Palestinian refugees—and, accordingly, we are building up issues about the length of time that host countries are able to support people for. I am sympathetic to the needs of those host countries, but it must be clear that refugees cannot be put back into a situation of danger, and the international community has to work together to deal with that.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned aid workers and, in particular, Sam's House. He has written to me previously about it, and I commend the work of that small but very necessary agency. We work in close conjunction with it, as indeed we do with any such agency. I visited Holyrood not too long ago and had a good conversation with the Scottish Minister responsible for international development. Of course, we look to support our friends there. The protection of aid workers is about supporting the campaigns we see from time to time which say that aid workers and journalists are not a target, and ensuring that people know how important that is. I commend the hon. Gentleman for his supportive comments.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I warmly commend everything that the Minister, wearing his DFID hat, has been doing to help Jordan in particular. The King and the Government are our close friends and allies, and they have been truly heroic in this situation. I have a little concern about the Minister's position wearing his Foreign Office hat. Does the Foreign Office accept that President Assad and his regime, brutal though they are, have won the Syrian civil war? If they were to show a greater willingness to behave in a more humane way to returning refugees, would the Foreign Office and DFID be prepared to offer aid to those returning to Syria under the Assad regime's control?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's comments. It would be unlike him not to have slight concern about some of the things that the Foreign Office does. I appreciate the situation. First, let us be clear: there cannot be any definition of "winning" this conflict when something like half a million people have been killed—the vast majority at the hands of the regime, and a significant number at the hands of Daesh—and millions have been displaced. Should the regime and its backers claim to have won, I am sure this House would speak with one voice in its disgust at such a term.

Is it correct to say that the situation on the ground indicates that the regime is likely to stay in control of areas that it currently controls and regain control? Yes, that is likely to be the situation. The regime was rescued by Russia on one occasion and by Iran and Hezbollah on another. We do not need to rehearse the events of August 2013, but there are consequences of both

intervention and non-intervention, as the House understands. The situation is plain, and my right hon. Friend is correct; the regime will count its survival as a success in the dreadful circumstances.

What happens next is really important. As I indicated earlier, if Syria's regime and governance returns to where it was, Syria will never be at peace. First, people's human rights will continue to be trampled on. That will provide the base of conflict for the future, and those who seek stability in Syria through the return of the regime will not get it. It is clear that there must be a response from the regime to provide for its people decently, as opposed to the conditions of war that it has waged upon its own people for the past few years. When that time comes, I will be able to answer my right hon. Friend's question.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome this statement. We can all be proud of the UK's substantial contribution to humanitarian relief in Syria and neighbouring countries. I want to ask the Minister two questions. The first is about the area of Syria that has been liberated by Kurdish-led forces. He rightly referred to security issues in that part of the country. What are we doing to support humanitarian and development projects in that part of the country, working with its leadership?

Secondly, the Minister referred to there being 2 million children out of school. We know from Syria and other emergencies that more and more children are spending longer and longer periods of their childhood and adolescence in these protracted crises. Investing in their education and support is vital. Will some of this additional money, which is so welcome, be invested in education for children in Syria?

Alistair Burt: The International Development Committee and the hon. Gentleman, who chairs it, have kept a constant watch on this issue, which has really been appreciated by DFID and all our partners. We have recognised the support needed in areas that have been freed from Daesh. At the moment, DFID-funded partners are aiding the humanitarian effort by providing support to health facilities, child immunisation, de-mining activities—that remains so important—and child protection and education, as well as providing emergency supplies such as food and cash. Between January and June 2018, support to the Hasakah, Raqqah and Deir ez-Zor governorates provided 260,000 medical consultations, 23,000 food rations, 300,000 cash grants and more than 5,500 people with sexual and gender-based violence services. The humanitarian services are quite significant and complete.

However, in the camps, where the women and children of foreign fighters are concerned, there are no cash transfers.¹ The Secretary of State has taken the view that that would not be appropriate. Cash transfers are extremely valuable in many circumstances. They provide some flexibility for refugees and those who are dependent on them and help people to make easier choices. There is little evidence of any abuse, and it can be a most practical way of delivering aid. But in the particular circumstances of the women and children of foreign fighters, in order to ensure that there was no risk of divergence to terrorist sources, my right hon. Friend took the decision that cash transfers would not be used.

1.[Official Report, 25 March 2019, Vol. 657, c. 2MC.]

[*Alistair Burt*]

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked about children. I am impressed with the number of international meetings I attend where support for children and their education and counselling has moved from a nice add-on to the protection provided by shelter and food and protection from harm to something that is absolutely fundamental. Like me, he will have seen UK aid workers and those we fund engage with children in camps. When the children arrive, their drawings are horrific and of deep violence, but after they have had some time with skilled and experienced counsellors, they can begin to exhibit signs of normal childhood, which they deserve. He and the Committee can be sure that we will continue to keep that as a serious priority.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): First, I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the London initiative 2019 and his officials on the outstanding way in which they organised that conference. He is absolutely entitled to claim it as a great success if the international representation that the United Kingdom delivered for Jordan at that conference is reflected in future help for Jordan. He and his officials deserve plaudits for that.

My substantive question is about the custody of British foreign fighters under the aegis of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria. The Government appear to have taken a policy position not to return those British citizens to the United Kingdom, so they will remain in the charge of the Democratic Federation authorities for the foreseeable future. What help are we giving or will we give to best oversee those British citizens?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments about the Jordan conference, which we hope will indeed be a significant success. As was said earlier—and I will repeat it from the Foreign Office—we do not have consular access to Syria, and that is not in a situation to change imminently. Of course, at some stage in the future it will, and that will change matters significantly.

Crispin Blunt: That wasn't my question.

Alistair Burt: I know, but at present, just to reiterate, it is not possible for us to do so, so there is no question of bringing any foreign fighters anywhere. If, like others, they return to the United Kingdom through their own devices, as they have done, then they are subject to UK control when they come back. As was mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary earlier, that process has already happened. If fighters continue to return in that way, that will be the process.

For those who are there, my hon. Friend's point is absolutely pertinent. It came up in Washington a couple of weeks ago when we had the global anti-Daesh conference. We were indeed very cognisant of the fact that many states wish to see justice served in an area where offences may have been committed, which implies that those currently holding and detaining them will continue to do so and will also need resource to handle the legal and judicial consequences of holding them. I can assure my hon. Friend that how best we make a contribution to that is under active consideration.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I very much welcome the Minister's commitment of these new resources to help people in very desperate humanitarian states in

Syria. It is clear from what he says about the interrogation of people who return, and indeed from the Syrian regime's refusal to let humanitarian aid through, that there is no hope of safe return for refugees in the short term at least. May I ask the Minister about what we do as the United Kingdom to accept refugees? We have promised to take 20,000 through the vulnerable person resettlement scheme by 2020 and, separately, to take 3,000 unaccompanied child refugees. How many of those have to date been resettled in this country, and if the prospects for peace in Syria remain as bleak as they are today, does he think that the programme needs to be extended beyond next year?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Lady's question covers more than my own portfolio, but my understanding of the refugee programme has always been that it is on track. My hon. Friend the Minister for Africa tells me that something like 7,000 of the 20,000 are already here. My understanding is that the programme for 20,000 is on track to be fulfilled, but it is always kept under review in relation to who the most vulnerable and where the United Kingdom can provide most assistance.

None the less, it remains clear that the policy—I think it has been absolutely right—is to concentrate our support in the areas to which refugees flee most quickly, because that provides the best opportunity for them to return. There is very little prospect of those who have come to Europe returning to Syria. It is much more likely that those who have made their homes in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey will do so, which has got to be the right answer both for them and for Syria. Again, I will bring to the attention of the Home Secretary the question the hon. Lady raised about the refugee programme.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The Minister has already mentioned Iran, which has a substantial military presence in and a close relationship with Syria. Is that a force for good or, as is my opinion, is it holding up the normalisation of Syria?

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend asks a good question. Iran will say that its support for the Syrian regime was designed to stop extremist forces taking over Damascus at a crucial stage of the civil war. On the other hand, there is no doubt that support by Iran for the regime has also contributed to a civil war being waged against the Syrian people and has involved support for various atrocities carried out by the Syrian regime.

There is no doubt that Iran's presence in Syria is a cause of great concern, not least to Israel, with the stationing of sophisticated weaponry in southern Syria that does not appear to be directed at Daesh or anyone else. Iran will have some questions to answer about how it sees its presence in the future of Syria. What we want to see is an independent Syria, free of foreign constraints upon it, but no longer a regime that wages war on its people. Those who have been its partners will need to answer for the part they have played in the past, and it remains open whether they can play any constructive role in the future.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his very thorough and thoughtful approach, as always, to this region and its problems. He says that 50% of United Nations requests to deliver aid are rejected or ignored by the Syrian regime, so I would like to ask him how he thinks we are ever going to be able to

trust this regime's assessment of when it will be safe for refugees to return, what measures and methods of assessment we are going to apply to evaluate when and to what extent it is safe, and whether he can tell us anything about what work is planned to rebuild the capacity of civil society to ease that transition. If he is able to say anything about that, I would be grateful.

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question, and I thank her for her kind comments. Essentially, it is a UN assessment. The UNHCR and UN agencies are the bodies most likely to give their assessment of when areas of Syria have become safe for return in every sense of the word—not only an end to physical conflict there, but the circumstances being right for people to return—and we support the UN agencies in doing that.

The most likely difficulty will be differences of opinion. For example, it is clear at the moment that it is the practice for some in Lebanon to return to Syria at the weekend or from time to time. Those who fled earlier go back to certain areas, and the Lebanese Government draw attention to that and say that people would not be going back if they did not feel safe to do so. None the less, that is not a definition of safety per se.

I think the honest thing to say is that there is real pressure, rightly so, from host nations that are worried about the burden they are bearing. The first thing we can do is to make sure we continue to support them and that we do not, just because of the passage of time, neglect their needs. Secondly, we should make it clear that we do wish for and support the return of refugees. However, the international community must continue to say that that can only be when the conditions are right for safe and dignified return, and at this stage the facilitation and promotion of returns does not meet that test.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Daesh would not have been defeated in Syria were it not for the valiant efforts of the Syrian Kurds in eastern and northern Syria. When it comes to the post-conflict political settlement in Syria, will Her Majesty's Government be pressing for secure and effective regional autonomy for the Kurds?

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend is tempting me towards a British Government view of the ultimate political settlement that will be decided by the Syrian people and by the international community as well. The situation is that he is absolutely correct to say that the turning back of Daesh at Kobani and the work by others to make sure that Daesh was pushed back was fundamental, as was the work done in Iraq by the Kurds and by the Iraqi security forces in Lebanon, where the Lebanese armed forces again turned back Daesh at a crucial time. Right throughout that region—supported by coalition air support, in which the United Kingdom was involved—all that has been a move in the right direction, but it is clearly correct to recognise the Kurdish activity.

It is not for the United Kingdom to determine what the ultimate political settlement in that region will be. What I do know is that representatives of the Syrian opposition have included Kurdish representatives. Clearly, no settlement in the future that will promote calm in the area can be complete unless there has been a recognition of those of Kurdish background, but also unless there

is clearly an end to any risk of terrorism from those who have perpetuated that particular form of attack on others in the past.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Ind): The Minister rightly referred to Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, and the millions of refugees they have taken. Refugees from Syria have also gone to Iraq, and they were not mentioned in his statement. I understand the complexities of the Kurdistan Regional Government region and its relationship with Baghdad, but what assistance is being given to the Kurdish people in Iraq, who have been so generous in hosting not simply people from Syria, but people fleeing from Daesh in other parts of Iraq?

Alistair Burt: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I was in the Kurdish region of Iraq about three or four weeks ago. I was able to speak to the KRG—to the then Prime Minister elect and others. Our support in the region has been to provide in the case of need, and it has been delivered to those on the ground. We have recognised what has been happening in Nineveh, Mosul and other KRG areas, and support has been given to those who operate through the KRG in order to protect those who have been there. Ultimately, those in Iraq must feel protected by Iraqi security forces, so that minorities feel that they are protected by those on whom they can rely instead of worrying about which militia has control of them at various times. The KRG and others have been very clear about trying to ensure that that support is given.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I very much welcome the statement by the Minister, for whom I have great respect and admiration. The Russian Government, supported by the Iranian militias, have been successful in propping up the Assad regime. However, they do not have the money to rebuild Syria—around £300 billion is needed for that. The Minister says that he will speak to other donors about giving more, but those regional donors will have real concern about giving money that will prop up the Assad regime, which they say is responsible for killing half a million Syrians. Linked to that, we must get the endgame right in Syria. Did the United States consult the UK, as an international partner in the coalition against Daesh, when they considered withdrawing their troops? Withdrawing their troops from Syria will lead to anarchy and chaos if it is not done in the right, constructive way.

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend asks several good questions. Let me repeat what I said about reconstruction. The UK and the EU are very clear that there should be no reconstruction of Syria and that therefore the significant aid that we have seen, for example, in relation to Iraq, should not go to Syria until there is a political settlement that guarantees safety and security there. Other donors and states may have different views.

Of course, we must also recognise that there will be competition for influence in Syria. Some states want to provide support because they believe that it will give them greater influence. I can understand that, but our position must be clear. As my hon. Friend said, the money that is needed can come only from the international community as a whole. Neither Russia nor Iran is likely to be able to find the resources to do that. We therefore have leverage to try to get the right sort of political settlement. My hon. Friend is right about that, but

[*Alistair Burt*]

other states, particularly those closest to Syria, may have different ideas. However, we will stick firmly to what we believe is right.

The US decision about withdrawing troops has become slightly clearer following the President's original decision, which has been ameliorated and discussed by the State Department and others. The UK remains clear that the maintenance of some US influence in Syria is beneficial to the future outcome, and we hope that that will happen, but the numbers are a sovereign matter for the US.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his thorough report and his usual regard and concern for the region.

Is the Minister aware that, last year, more than 10,000 women from over 50 countries travelled in convoy from Istanbul to the Turkey-Syria border to launch a global appeal on behalf of the women unlawfully held as prisoners by the Syrian regime since 2011, often simply because of their links or family friendships with members of the Syrian opposition? Amnesty International estimates that more than 13,500 women have been jailed, with more than 7,000 remaining in detention, reportedly subjected to the most appalling treatment, including torture, rape and sexual violence. What immediate action is the Department taking with our allies to encourage the Syrian regime to cease the torture of prisoners and to secure the release of those detained women?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to the hon. Lady and I commend those who took part in the march and others. From the beginning of the conflict, we were clear about what had sparked it: the conduct of the regime and the way in which a desire for reform in Syria—not the removal of the President—was met with violence, and we remember the killings of children. That turned peaceful protest into something rather different. I am sure that several Members have seen the evidence collected by those who escaped from Syria with photographs of what had happened under regime control. Most recently, the regime itself has started to produce the death notices of those who had simply disappeared to provide some evidence of what happened.

There are therefore two issues. One is, as the hon. Lady said, to draw attention to the horror of the regime's treatment of women—her comments on that are accurate and well documented. Secondly, as well as drawing attention to that and making the case that a regime that conducts itself in such a way cannot expect anything from its people, we need accountability. Although the physical conflict in Syria may come to an end, we must continue to press for justice for those who have been so ill treated. The UK has contributed £9 million since 2012 to various accountability mechanisms and NGOs that gather evidence and assist victims. We also support the independent UN commission of inquiry's investigations into human rights violations and abuses in Syria. We will continue to do that. A line cannot simply be drawn under what has happened to the Syrian people. The abuse of women should not be forgotten.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his hard work and commitment, which many in the House and further afield deeply appreciate. He knows that and I want to put it on record.

One and a half million Christians have fled Syria to Lebanon and Jordan during the war. Three things need to be done for those Christians to return home. They need new safe homes; they require employment opportunities, and they desire freedom of worship in their churches, which need to be rebuilt and restored. What has been done to deliver those three absolutes so that refugees can have the confidence to return?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments. As we have discussed in the House previously, the requirements of the Christian community in Syria for safety and protection are shared by any other community there. We have been at pains to impress upon the region that no minority community feels safe unless there is a sense that the state will protect them so that they do not have to rely on individual militias. That is a long, slow process, but we are working steadily at it and we continue to contribute to everything that will provide for greater state controls, particularly in Iraq. In Syria, the process will be longer. Elements of the Syrian community were not disturbed by the regime's control, while others were. Our general support for the fair and just implementation of the rule of law is clear.

I also commend my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary's review, led by the Bishop of Truro, on Christian persecution. It is another opportunity for contributions to the subject and new ideas. Ultimately, the protection of all protects any community, and the UK is right to insist on that.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I share others' appreciation of the Minister's commitment to the issue and his full answers to our questions.

I too have met refugees in nearby countries who are supported by the UK's commitment to refugees in the region. It is a humbling experience. Syrian refugees have suffered a great deal and I know that the UK's support is much appreciated by them.

I am glad that the Minister will be at the conference in Brussels this week—fingers crossed. I want to follow up on the question that my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) asked about detainees and access to justice. The Minister said that since 2012, we have committed £9 million to that cause. Yet in his statement, he said that we would spend £400 million on the whole crisis. It seems to me that now might be the time to increase the commitment to justice. We cannot give up on justice. Syrian people around the world feel forgotten. Our commitment to justice is a demonstration from the House that they will not be forgotten and that we will stand by them. Will the Minister commit to increasing that spend?

Alistair Burt: The people of Syria will not be forgotten as long as the hon. Lady is in the House. She has been a consistent friend to those in Syria, right from the beginning. She and a number of others in the House have made their presence felt, and I very much acknowledge what she has done.

The announcement this week is that this year's commitment to Syria will be £400 million, which is an extra £100 million. It is flexible. It is not yet individually parcelled, but we will spend a total of up to £400 million. I am keen to look at the justice and accountability mechanisms. I have met those in the UN who are involved with that. I am very happy to give the hon.

Lady a commitment that if there is a need to increase that and support it in terms of programmes, we will look to do so. I cannot commit the money now, but my advice is that our support is flexible if there is a need to provide it in different areas. That may well be one. It is very important, as the conflict physically comes to an end, that we do not forget those who suffered during it, particularly from detention and the rule of the regime.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), what scope is there for UN agencies to collect important evidence that may be helpful should President Assad or any of his henchmen face justice at the International Criminal Court in The Hague?

Alistair Burt: UK funding for the work of the Commission for International Justice and Accountability contributed to the arrest of three former Syrian officials in Germany and France last month on suspicion of crimes against humanity. The commission's documentary and evidence-gathering work also contributed to the recent US District Court judgment that found the Assad regime responsible for the murder of the journalist Marie Colvin. One of the earliest things that William Hague did as Foreign Secretary, when this all began, was to look at what could be done to provide help and assistance to those gathering evidence—it is not an easy thing to do—that would end up at an international court. A bit like the extraordinary work of the International Commission on Missing Persons, which did so much in relation to Srebrenica and the crisis in the Balkans, making sure that the evidence is well kept and well preserved will be essential. My noble Friend made sure right from the very earliest stage of our engagement with those in Syria that that sort of work was available. Clearly, that work has been done on a wider scale. We support that work, and where, technically, the United Kingdom supports that work we will continue to do so.

Point of Order

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In response to an oral question on 6 March, I made inaccurate comments regarding the actions of soldiers during the troubles. It is right that I address these remarks in the House today and correct the record.

What I said was wrong. It was deeply insensitive to the families who lost loved ones in incidents involving the security forces. I have apologised unreservedly for the offence and hurt that my words caused. Today, I repeat that apology both to the families and to Members of this House. The language that I used was wrong.

Last week, I met a number of those families. I am grateful to each of them for giving me the opportunity to apologise in person. Families from throughout Northern Ireland and from all parts of the community who suffered as a result of the troubles rightly want to see justice properly delivered. Where there is any evidence of wrongdoing, this should be pursued without fear or favour, whoever the perpetrators might be.

My position and the position of the Government is clear: we believe fundamentally in the rule of law. That is the principle that underpins our approach to dealing with legacy issues and it is one from which I will not depart. That is why I launched the public consultation on addressing the legacy of the troubles. We received over 17,000 responses to that legacy consultation and I am grateful to all who took the time to respond. We are rightly taking the appropriate time to consider all responses, some containing harrowing and deeply personal stories. I will set out the next steps shortly.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the right hon. Lady for her point of order.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I regret that the Secretary of State has not made a statement to the House. I hope that in the coming days she will consider whether it would be right and proper to come before the House to make a full statement. One of the prime necessities for anybody in her role is that they have the confidence not just of the political parties and broader civil society in Northern Ireland, but of the victims' families, because of the pain they have gone through for so many years.

It is now five years since the Stormont House agreement, which said that there would be a justice process for those families. Time has gone by, but it has still not been delivered to them and the Secretary of State must know that. She must also know that she has lost the confidence of at least some of the political parties and some of those very families. That makes her own position very difficult. She has to think about what that means not simply in terms of her credibility, but her capacity to do the job. I hope she is reflecting on her position and I hope she will come back to the House to make a fuller statement.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. The right hon. Lady and the hon. Gentleman, and indeed the whole House, know that that is not a point of order for the Chair and therefore I will give no answer to the point, but I think the whole House is pleased that the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State have had an opportunity, however briefly, to air this important matter in the Chamber this evening. I thank them both for so doing.

Commonwealth Day

6.37 pm

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): It is an absolute delight to make this statement today to the House as we celebrate Commonwealth Day together. The UK joins our fellow member states in celebrating the bonds between people, organisations and Governments across 53 countries under the theme of a connected Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth is a unique organisation, rich in diversity yet connected by a common language, common history and common values. There is much to celebrate. Celebrations of these unique connections are taking place right across the UK today. Ahead of the Commonwealth, Her Majesty the Queen attended the service of celebration this afternoon in Westminster Abbey. Many other senior members of the royal family, representatives from all Commonwealth countries, the Prime Minister, Members of Parliament, representatives from Commonwealth organisations and over 700 schoolchildren also attended the service. Many councils are raising the Commonwealth flag in celebration, from Dorset to Newport to Glasgow, building connections across the Commonwealth at community level. Indeed, just outside Parliament the flags of the 53 nations of the Commonwealth are flying. Along Whitehall, multiple Government Departments are also flying the Commonwealth flag as a symbol of the UK's commitment to the Commonwealth.

In her Commonwealth Day message, Her Majesty the Queen highlighted the collective values we share as a family of nations and the networks of co-operation that we both draw on and contribute to. The Prime Minister's Commonwealth statement, published earlier today, reflects on the UK's role as chair-in-office, driving forward projects that span the Commonwealth, connecting its citizens in shared aims.

Across our diplomatic network, British high commissioners are celebrating today and this week with a variety of events, programme visits and receptions. Celebrations range from a fashion show showcasing recycled materials in Singapore to the Bangladesh women's cricket team visiting a UK-funded programme helping women and children to escape domestic violence. Even embassies in non-Commonwealth countries such as Brazil are celebrating by bringing together Commonwealth colleagues to discuss shared values.

So how is the UK delivering on this, our connected Commonwealth? Since hosting last year's Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, the UK has taken on the position as chair-in-office—a role that we will hold until leaders from the 53 member states reconvene in Rwanda next year. It is a role that we take extremely seriously, but what does it mean in practice? We have four objectives as chair-in-office, and these can be summarised in four words: delivery, voice, solidarity and reform.

We want to deliver the commitments set out in the official Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting communiqué, the leaders' statement, the Commonwealth Blue Charter, the cyber-declaration and the Commonwealth connectivity agenda for trade and investment. We want to promote the voice of the Commonwealth within the rules-based international system; the diversity of the Commonwealth is a strength and an opportunity. We should

continue to come together as a collective voice to advocate for the rules-based international system. We want to enhance practical solidarity among Commonwealth members in international organisations by ensuring that we know about one another's candidacies and by briefing one another on the business of regional and wider bodies to which we do not all belong. We want to reinforce the three pillars of the Commonwealth by supporting continued reform of the Commonwealth secretariat to ensure that it is a modern, agile organisation.

Since taking on the role as chair-in-office, we have been working hard to ensure that the Commonwealth delivers on the commitments made by leaders at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. Many Members will be interested in the progress made on the commitments made by leaders—commitments that will benefit all 2.4 billion citizens.

At the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in April last year, heads made ambitious commitments to build a Commonwealth that is fairer, more sustainable, more prosperous and more secure. Over the last 11 months, the UK has been working hard to ensure that together, we deliver on those commitments. We cannot do this alone and are working closely with the three pillars of the Commonwealth—our 52 fellow member states, the Commonwealth secretariat and the many Commonwealth organisations and networks. This includes the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, in which many hon. Members here play active roles. These three pillars demonstrate a connected Commonwealth in action.

Her Majesty's Government have allocated over £500 million towards projects designed to deliver on the Commonwealth Heads of Government commitments. Let me highlight just a few examples of the significant progress that we have been making, from oceans to cyber-security and from trade facilitation to education.

We are building a more sustainable future through our action on the Commonwealth Blue Charter. The UK is co-leading with Vanuatu the Commonwealth Clean Oceans Alliance. Twenty-four Commonwealth member states from every region have already joined this alliance to tackle marine plastic pollution and have committed to concrete action that will reduce the scourge of plastics in the oceans. There are eight other action groups of member states targeted at different challenges to the oceans' sustainability. In addition, with UK funds and expertise, the Commonwealth marine economies programme is facilitating the creation of sustainable marine economies in 17 Commonwealth island states, promoting growth, innovation, jobs and investment while safeguarding healthy seas and ecosystems.

We are building a more secure future through programmes to strengthen countries' cyber-resilience. In partnership with the World Bank, we are enabling national cyber-security reviews. In Africa, these have already been delivered in Nigeria, the Gambia, Mauritius and Lesotho. We have established an African cyber-security fellowship network and helped nine African Commonwealth countries to share expertise and build capacity in critical information infrastructure protection. We are also funding training events that will benefit the cyber-security of 37 Commonwealth countries.

We are building a more prosperous future by working with Commonwealth partners to boost intra-Commonwealth trade and investment. Since its launch

last year, the UK-funded Commonwealth trade facilitation programme has already increased the capacity and capability of customs organisations in 18 Commonwealth countries. The UK and South Africa recently announced that we would co-lead the digital connectivity element of the Commonwealth connectivity agenda to boost inclusive growth. We are also promoting inclusive and sustainable trade through the SheTrades in the Commonwealth programme. More than 2,300 women-owned businesses have signed up to this initiative, which will also increase women's participation in international trade.

We are also improving employment prospects for young people through training and skills development programmes. We are building a fairer future through supporting the provision of 12 years of quality education for girls and boys. In particular, we are providing over £200 million of support for girls' education in nine Commonwealth African countries. During Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister offered to help Commonwealth partners who wished to address legacies of legislation that discriminates against women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender citizens. We are supporting collaboration between civil society and Governments that have responded positively to this offer.

The three pillars of the Commonwealth have made important progress, delivering on the Commonwealth Heads of Government commitments, and we will continue to drive this engagement in the year ahead to the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting 2020 in Rwanda. This Government are determined to make the most of our two years as chair-in-office. As we mark the 70th anniversary of the modern Commonwealth next month, we also want to ensure that it can meet future challenges—from climate change to cyber-attacks—and to seize the opportunities from the organisation's huge diversity and global reach. As I said last week, we will work tirelessly with our Commonwealth partners to build a fairer, more sustainable, more prosperous and more secure Commonwealth. I commend this statement to the House.

6.47 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I thank the Minister of State for advance sight of her statement on this, Commonwealth Day. The Commonwealth is more important than ever in a world where there is currently a grave lack of global leadership, where the credibility and relevance of our great international institutions is under threat, and where human rights and the rule of law are being disregarded by dozens of Governments and deprioritised by dozens of others. In a world like that, we desperately need the global leadership and co-ordinated international action that the Commonwealth can offer. We desperately need a strong and united Commonwealth to demonstrate to the rest of the world why institutions such as this are so important, and we desperately need a Commonwealth that will defend and promote respect for human rights and the rule of law. If the Commonwealth can do all those things, it will remain a vital force for good in our world and a central part of Britain's multilateral relationships, not because we simply see Commonwealth countries as trading partners, but because we see them as essential partners in all the challenges faced by the world and by each of our nations.

However, even on the day when we celebrate the Commonwealth, we must be honest about those areas where things have gone backward over the past year and where the Commonwealth needs to be a stronger force for promoting peace, democracy and human rights. We think, obviously, of the current tension between India and Pakistan. We also think of the democratic instability that we have seen in Sri Lanka, Nigeria and Kenya; of the deteriorating human rights situations in Uganda, Singapore and elsewhere; of the dreadful impunity of the Biya regime in Cameroon; and of the discrimination that continues in far too many Commonwealth countries against the LGBT community. I believe that it was a missed opportunity when the Government failed to put that issue formally on the agenda at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in London last April.

Will the Minister make it a priority, when Britain becomes co-chair of the Equal Rights Coalition in June, to seek to persuade more members of the Commonwealth to join that coalition? It cannot be right that a coalition that exists to promote the human rights of the LGBT community should have on it just six members of the Commonwealth and none from Africa, Asia or the Caribbean. We have a particular responsibility to promote that goal across that Commonwealth, along with all our other human rights goals. It is a historical debt we owe to many Commonwealth countries since it is because of us that they have these anti-LGBT laws on their statute books in the first place. The Prime Minister was right to apologise for that fact last year, but it is time for action as well as words.

I will finish with another issue where we literally owe a historic debt to members of the Commonwealth. As the Minister will know, it was recently revealed that when the men of the East Africa Force—hundreds of thousands of black, white and Asian soldiers drawn from Britain's African colonies—received their demob pay at the end of the second world war, it was strictly calibrated according to their race, with a black African soldier paid a third of the amount given to his white African counterparts of equal rank. Many of the soldiers who faced that discrimination are still alive, but they have yet to receive even an apology from the Government, let alone compensation.

The Opposition have yet to receive any answers to the letter we wrote a month ago asking the Government, first, whether this racial discrimination also applied to the demob pay given to soldiers from the British Indian Army and the Caribbean Regiment in 1945; secondly, whether the Government knew how many men were affected in total and how many were still alive; and thirdly, what they planned to do in response. The Minister may not have those answers right now—I would not expect her to—but can she at least indicate when we can expect those answers and when the surviving men of the East Africa Force and any other affected veterans can expect the official acknowledgement and apology that are the very least they deserve?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call Ian Liddell-Grainger.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): Would the Minister not agree that the two secretaries-general—

Madam Deputy Speaker: I beg your pardon. I was distracted by another matter. I have failed to call the Minister, to whom I apologise.

Harriett Baldwin: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, though I cannot imagine what could be distracting you from this celebration.

I am grateful to the shadow Minister for her comments about the values of the Commonwealth and the power of this association of friendly countries to share the values that she rightly stands up for. I will take her points in turn. I can give some great examples of how the solidarity of the 53 countries can lead to progress on the important topics she raises.

On human rights, she will be aware that not only the Commonwealth secretariat but the associations work closely with member states to raise standards on human rights, including by supporting countries going through the universal periodic review process. I am sure that she knows that, using UK funding, the Equality and Justice Alliance is working to create a fairer, more equal and more inclusive Commonwealth, not only for women and girls, but for the LGBT community, through civil society capacity building. It is working on a project to create a cross-Commonwealth network of high-level champions and offer technical assistance in the reform of laws that discriminate against or fail to protect women, girls and LGBT individuals. It is currently speaking with six countries about the offer of technical assistance for legislative change. That is an update since last year.

On our special responsibility, which the hon. Lady rightly drew our attention to, she will be aware that the Commonwealth charter itself states that members are opposed to all forms of discrimination, whether rooted in gender, race, colour, creed, political belief or other grounds. She will also be aware that the largest ever number of visiting LGBT activists came from around the Commonwealth to attend all four of the official forums and a wide range of special events at last year's summit. At that event, the Prime Minister expressed her regret at the legacy of the discriminatory legislation in the Commonwealth and committed to supporting those countries that wished to make a change.

The hon. Lady asks about the letter. It gives me the opportunity to put on the record how grateful we are to all those Commonwealth servicemen and women who served with Britain during the war. She will be aware that, from April 2019, UK aid will protect more than 7,000 Commonwealth veterans and widows who served with British armed forces from extreme poverty. It is an £18.2 million programme working with the Royal Commonwealth Ex-Services League and will support 4,500 veterans and 2,500 widows of veterans in the countries eligible for official development assistance. I acknowledge the letter that we received from the shadow Secretaries of State for Foreign Affairs, Defence and International Development, and I can assure her that the Government will respond in due course.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Ian Liddell-Grainger.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I hope that it is worth the wait, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I know the Minister will be delighted to congratulate both Jon Davies and Akbar Khan, the two secretaries-general, and the remarkable teams they lead, as well as

the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for all the money it has given to the special projects around the world. She rightly mentioned the Commonwealth Blue Charter, which is a phenomenal achievement by the Commonwealth, but will she congratulate all the Pacific islands, especially Fiji, which has gone through difficult times, on the amount of time and work they have put in to come together in very difficult circumstances, with the help of money that we provided to bring them to various organisations in Australia and the United Kingdom, to take part in what is for them a vital and massively important piece of engineering?

Harriett Baldwin: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words, and I can update the House on the progress of this important work. He rightly draws our attention to the Commonwealth Blue Charter, which I mentioned in my statement, and he will be pleased to know that, further to that charter, nine action groups have been established with 12 countries leading them. I mentioned that the UK and Vanuatu were taking the lead on marine plastic pollution, through the Commonwealth Clean Oceans Alliance, but he will be glad also to hear that the UK has joined the coral reef, ocean acidification and ocean change and climate change groups, and intends to join the marine protected areas group. There are 23 member countries: Australia, Antigua and Barbuda, Bangladesh, Belize, Cameroon, Canada, Fiji, which he mentioned, Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Nauru, New Zealand, Rwanda, Samoa, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, St Lucia, Uganda, Vanuatu and Zambia. I am delighted that some private sector organisations are also members.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank the Minister for her statement and join her in welcoming Commonwealth Day today.

The Scottish National party sees the value in the Commonwealth and the positive relationship that dozens of states happily independent from the UK have with others. It is a partnership built on an equal footing. Can the Minister tell us about her work on the Commonwealth? Can she tell us what work is ongoing in terms of good governance and the rule of law—obviously, very important to democracy—and reflect on any discussions she has had on the return of the Chagossians and the ruling of the International Court of Justice?

What discussions has the Minister had about the status of service personnel? I know from my own experience—of having the Army base in Leuchars—of the fantastic work done by serving Commonwealth citizens, not least those from Fiji and elsewhere. My hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) raised this point today in respect of his own constituent.

Climate change—which the Minister has not really mentioned so far—should be the defining challenge of our politics today. Will she tell us about some of the discussions that have taken place about work on the climate crisis, and, in particular, about climate justice?

Harriett Baldwin: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his constructive words. I do not know whether he picked up on this, but I learnt today that according to the findings of a recent survey, 46% of people living in Scotland are actively involved in the Scotland-Malawi partnership or know someone who is, which is something to be celebrated.

He will have heard what I said to the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) about the issue of the armed forces and our gratitude to all who have served in them. He refers to last week's decision by the International Court of Justice. As he will know, we are currently evaluating that decision and will respond in due course to the issues that it raised. He will know that the UK considers this to be a bilateral matter, which we will resolve bilaterally with Mauritius.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise the incredibly important subject of climate change. It extends well beyond the 53 countries that we are discussing today, but many small island states are members of the Commonwealth, and I believe that a centre has been set up in Fiji to address the causes of climate change in the Pacific small island nations. The UK itself has pledged, beyond the Commonwealth, to spend £5.8 billion on tackling climate change during the current spending review period, and we have already helped 47 million people around the world to develop their resilience and ability to cope with its effects.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): May we Back Benchers record our thanks for the magnificent commitment and work of the head of the Commonwealth over 60 years? It is truly astounding.

Our debates about free trade deals go round in circles. At the beginning of the 20th century, we were talking about imperial preference. Many of us were rather disappointed that in 1972, when we joined what is now the European Union, the Commonwealth was treated somewhat shabbily. May I have a commitment from the Government that they will work full time—as the Government of an independent country that is able to engage in a free trade deal outside the European customs union—to make the Commonwealth the greatest free trade area in the world?

Harriett Baldwin: I am sure that the whole House will join me in endorsing my right hon. Friend's tribute to Her Majesty's work as head of the Commonwealth. She has performed that duty, among others, in an exemplary way. It was a great pleasure for Heads of State from around the world to be able to spend time with her last year when they attended a private dinner at Windsor castle.

As for the trade matters raised by my right hon. Friend, some very important work is being done. It was announced last year at the Heads of Government meeting that the UK-funded Commonwealth trade facilitation programme would help member states to implement the World Trade Organisation's trade facilitation agreement. The programme will help the developing and least-developed Commonwealth countries to adopt faster and more efficient customs procedures. My right hon. Friend rightly identified the potential for enormous increases in UK trade and investment activity with the other 52 member states of the Commonwealth, and that is one of many examples that I could give.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Minister will know that much good work is being done in relation to modern slavery, and she has said that she wants to promote trade. Will she try to marry the two by telling us how she intends to support the increase in fair trade and, in particular, how she intends to support the

Fairtrade Foundation's five-point plan for the Commonwealth to promote and develop fair trade throughout the 53 nations?

Harriett Baldwin: I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman for his work with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. On Thursday, he asked me to give the House quarterly updates on Commonwealth matters, and here I am, only a few days later.

The right hon. Gentleman was right to raise the important work that we do with Commonwealth members in tackling both the root causes and some of the impacts of modern slavery. That is part of a much wider piece of work that is being done across the Government, with many different strands in Commonwealth countries and beyond. I believe that Fairtrade Fortnight has just ended. Let me remind him, wearing my DFID hat, that we give extensive support to a range of fair trade projects and that, more important, we try to ensure that farmers, whether or not they are involved in fair trade, are helped to achieve a sustainable price that will give them a fair livelihood.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Given that the transition from colonial status to independence is often extremely difficult and sometimes downright dangerous, should we not pay tribute to all the parliamentarians and diplomats who had the vision to create the modern Commonwealth system, and should we not take some satisfaction from the fact that so many former colonies are happy to participate—with the United Kingdom—in that system, which has been so successful for so many decades?

Harriett Baldwin: I am happy to pay tribute to the work of the diplomatic network in focusing on the modern priorities of the Commonwealth. My right hon. Friend will have welcomed last year's announcement that the UK is to open diplomatic representation in a further nine Commonwealth countries, thus creating a complete set of diplomatic representations in all the Commonwealth countries.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): It is good to celebrate Commonwealth Day today. We are connected by 70 years of partnership and co-operation, but we are also connected by common threats such as the emergency of climate change. I welcomed what the Minister said about the Blue Charter to protect our oceans and, indeed, what she said to the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) about adaptation for the states that are most vulnerable to climate change, but what more can we do to use the forum of 53 countries working together in wider international forums to push that up the priority agenda so that we can tackle the impending climate disaster?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Lady is right to highlight the important role that the Commonwealth can play in ensuring that climate change remains at the forefront of the world's agenda. Last year, for the first time, the UK Chair-in-Office spoke for Commonwealth members at the United Nations General Assembly. As the hon. Lady will know, the UN has asked our Prime Minister to lead the work of this autumn's conference on resilience. An enormous amount of work is being done across the Government to establish how we can work with Commonwealth members and others to tackle the important resilience strand of this crucial issue.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): On this Commonwealth Day, as well as congratulating all who have helped the Commonwealth to survive and thrive for so long, may I highlight its ongoing role in science? It accounts for a third of the world's population, but 12% of the world's researchers and 10% of global research and development—particularly in the key global challenges of food, medicine and energy, where life science has so much to offer. Will the Minister meet me and Lord Howe to look at the potential of genomics? When I was Minister for genomics, we looked at establishing a Commonwealth genomics programme to give the UK scale and leadership in the global values and standards that are key to making sure that this revolution works for the benefit of the whole world.

Harriett Baldwin: I am truly in awe of my hon. Friend's contribution in this area. He led such work before and during his time in Government, and he continues to do so. He has cited some impressive statistics, and I pay tribute to his role in championing such work and its importance to the Commonwealth. I would be more than happy to ensure that he meets the most relevant Minister to take his agenda forward.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I join other Members of the House in celebrating the Commonwealth. I have always been very positive about it, and I think it has huge potential to do even more to unite us. Like all international organisations, however, it is not perfect. In all my years in this place, I have noticed that it is quite difficult to have serious policy discussions with other parliamentarians on issues of common concern. We have much greater influence in the Commonwealth this year, so will the Minister promise to look at how we can facilitate serious policy discussions across the Commonwealth? We need fewer junkets and enjoyable receptions, and more serious work on policy.

Harriett Baldwin: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the Commonwealth is about more than the very agreeable opportunities for Heads of Government to meet up every two years. That is why I alluded in my statement to our important role as chair-in-office, to make sure that everything that was announced at last year's Heads of Government meeting is taken forward.

I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) an update on specific developments in the clean oceans work and the Blue Charter, and the hon. Gentleman will be delighted to know that in my binder there are pages and pages of very specific projects and commitments. Officials from around the Commonwealth are working together with the secretariat to ensure that real achievements are made on the ground. At the end of the day, that is what it is all about.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The Minister will be as aware as I am that the Nigerian elections have come in for considerable criticism. Does she still think that they play a role in achieving a democratic Commonwealth?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend would be wise to read the Government's remarks about the elections in Nigeria. In those remarks, we reflected on some of the points that observers drew to our attention. He is right that the Commonwealth and the secretariat play an

important role in Nigeria and elsewhere in providing expertise to election observation missions. Reports on those missions can reflect points that are made and conclusions that are drawn. Commonwealth members and others can learn from those reports—in all our member states, democracy is in the process of continuously improving—to inform future elections.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Glaswegians hold the Commonwealth in particular affection, because the city hosted a successful Commonwealth games almost five years ago. I was privileged to take part as a volunteer and meet hundreds of athletes from around the Commonwealth. One of the most striking things about those member states and the people who came from them was the huge diversity in culture and development, particularly economic development. I remember that a bike shop in Glasgow had to donate bikes for athletes from one country's cycling team to use in their training regime. That shows the disparity, and the chance for redistribution, of wealth and opportunity in the Commonwealth.

What efforts will be made to equip the Department for International Trade to deal in trade negotiations with the eradication of modern slavery and exploitation from supply chains? The Minister alluded to some general aspects, but it would be helpful to hear about specific projects to enable us to understand exactly what the Foreign Office is doing on that front.

Harriett Baldwin: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his service as a volunteer at the wonderful games that Glasgow hosted, and I thank all the other volunteers from Glasgow. He is absolutely right to pay attention to the range and geographical spread of the Commonwealth, the members of which include the largest country in the world by population, India, and one of the smallest, Nauru. A wide range of diverse countries make up the Commonwealth.

The hon. Gentleman asked me specifically about our work with Commonwealth countries to tackle modern slavery. He will be aware that when the Prime Minister was in Nigeria last summer, she visited a project that we fund in Lagos that provides help in a community in which children are often tempted into being trafficked. We work closely with such communities to get the message out that such routes are not the right ones to follow, and we have committed to further investment in job creation in countries such as Nigeria.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I very much welcome what the Minister has said, and I wish everyone a happy Commonwealth Day. She mentioned cricket—many things bring happiness to us in the Commonwealth, and one of them is cricket—and perhaps she can clarify an anomaly. In Australia, Sir Don Bradman was knighted, and in New Zealand, Sir Richard Hadlee was knighted, but there has been no knighthood for cricketers from Pakistan, India, South Africa or Sri Lanka, which have produced some brilliant cricketers. From Sri Lanka we had Muralitharan; from Pakistan we had Wasim Akram and Imran Khan; from South Africa we had Jacques Kallis; and from India we had Sachin Tendulkar and Kapil Dev. This is the year when we host the cricket World cup. Can the Minister ensure that we rectify that anomaly so that all our counterparts in the Commonwealth are treated fairly and equally?

Harriett Baldwin: Madam Deputy Speaker, have you ever heard such a compelling application to Her Majesty to recognise more cricketers from around the Commonwealth? I am sure that it will have been heard by the relevant people. My hon. Friend is right; I mentioned Bangladeshi women's cricket. I am also thrilled that in Rwanda, which is one of the newer members of the Commonwealth, cricket is fast growing into a very popular, if not leading, national sport. He is right to make the link between the Commonwealth and cricket.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Minister is absolutely right to make a statement today, and I wish everyone a very happy Commonwealth Day. As part of our work in the Commonwealth, it is important to be a critical friend. I was privileged to visit Rwanda last November with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, and it is quite wonderful to see the progress that the country has made over the last 25 years, particularly in reunifying communities and advancing women's rights and equality.

The Minister has mentioned that Rwanda is hosting the Heads of Government meeting in 18 months' time. In our role as a critical friend, it is important to note that the country still has problems when it comes to press freedom and press regulation. What more can the Minister do to make sure that, for example, British journalists from the BBC, *The Guardian* and various other news outlets are allowed to go to Rwanda and report on that meeting? Press freedom must be a basic principle of all Commonwealth nations.

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman is right to mention the importance of press freedom. That applies to the Commonwealth as well as to other countries around the world, and it is a leading strand of our work in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office this year.

When it comes to Rwanda's progress, the hon. Gentleman will be aware that this year is the 25th anniversary of the genocide. I am hoping to visit Rwanda soon—it is 10 years since I last went—to see the remarkable progress that has been made. He is absolutely right that the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Kigali will be an important moment, and the world's media will want to be there. They will not just want to report on the progress that I have highlighted; media freedom is important to enable the reporting of things on which Ministers are not always thrilled to be scrutinised, and that is all part of being a healthy democracy.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I should like to echo the congratulations to the Queen on her more than 60 years' service to the Commonwealth. I am also pleased that the Commonwealth chose her son, Prince Charles, to take over from her. I note that the younger royals are taking an interest in the Commonwealth, which is a positive sign of the progression through the family. We have heard many people talking about the things that we are doing to help the Commonwealth, but we must remember that this is a two-way process. The Commonwealth helps us and we can learn from it, particularly through activities such as International Citizen Service. The young people who go out to help in Commonwealth countries come back with a much greater understanding of the wider world, and their activities also give them a lasting legacy in the form of all the things they have discovered while they were out there.

It shows them that they can be happy without looking at their iPhones and iPads every second of the day. It is also important to remember that people in the Commonwealth have tremendous family structures, whereas those structures have in many cases broken down in this country. It is a good thing that we are involved in International Citizen Service in the Commonwealth.

Harriett Baldwin: I am not sure that I caught a question in there, but I endorse everything that my hon. Friend has said. She rightly highlights the diversity of the Commonwealth as an organisation, the range of countries within it and the way in which we all benefit from that association and learn from each other. International Citizen Service is not specifically linked to Commonwealth membership, but many young people go out and benefit from that valuable programme in Commonwealth countries. At the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting last year, it was a great pleasure to announce an increase in the number of Commonwealth scholarships to enable young people to come to study in the UK.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Like my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins), I echo the sentiments that have been expressed on the importance of the Commonwealth. One important aspect of the Commonwealth relates to the strengthening of democracy, so can the Minister tell us which is the only other member of the Commonwealth besides Lesotho in which hereditary chieftains retain the right to make law?

Harriett Baldwin: Yes, I think it is eSwatini, to give it its latest name, is it not? [*Interruption.*] Oh, the hon. Gentleman meant here. Perhaps I should not be on his team next time he takes part in a quiz.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The Commonwealth accounts for one third of the world's population and half of the world's top 20 cities, so on Commonwealth Day, should we not celebrate the terrific economic growth in the Commonwealth? For the best part of the last three decades, the Commonwealth economy has grown by some 260%, its growth now averages 3.3% a year and we trade in surplus with it. The Minister might be interested to know that, in contrast, the economy of the European Union has grown by just 120% over the same period, that its average growth is just 1.4% and that we have a massive trade deficit with the EU. Is it not clear that the best future for this country will involve developing our economic ties with the Commonwealth?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend highlights the fact that there are some fast-growing, emerging cities in the Commonwealth. As he says, half of the world's top 20 emerging cities are in the Commonwealth, and many Commonwealth countries are growing much faster than countries in the EU, including the UK. However, it is important for us to trade not only with Commonwealth countries but with our European Union neighbours. I am sure he will agree that this is a question of doing both, rather than an either/or choice.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): International security co-operation can rarely have been more important, and GCHQ in my constituency already has close ties with certain Commonwealth nations through the Five Eyes relationship, but we need to go further. What more can be done to broaden and deepen security co-operation using the Commonwealth?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend rightly draws attention to the fact that GCHQ has great skills in the field of cyber-security. That is one of the topics that was discussed at last year's Commonwealth summit, and the communiqué had a particular focus on working with each other on cyber-security. In my statement, I drew attention to the further work that has happened since that communiqué through working with other countries and learning from each other in order to make the cyber-security realm safer for all Commonwealth citizens.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): As the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Ethiopia, I should like to express my sincere condolences to the families and loved ones of all those who have lost their lives, and to the Government and people of Ethiopia at this tragic time. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister will join me in that, because she was there in Ethiopia with me just a couple of weeks ago and knows a lot about that wonderful country. Turning to the Commonwealth, I am glad that she has mentioned the importance of the programme for jobs and livelihoods, particularly for young people. Will she talk a bit more about that, and also tell us where we are up to with the fantastic commitment that the Commonwealth made last year at the Heads of Government meeting in respect of malaria? The Heads of Government pledged to reduce by half the incidences of and deaths from malaria in Commonwealth countries by the middle of the next decade.

Harriett Baldwin: I would like to associate myself with my hon. Friend's remarks about Ethiopia. It was with great shock that we learned about the accident involving what is an excellent airliner. He and I are both frequent flyers on such airliners. We have obviously offered our condolences, but we have also offered to work with the Ethiopian Government and others to see whether any lessons can be learned for the wider aviation sphere. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend's work in that country. He also raised the question of malaria, which was identified at last year's summit as a serious health concern for many Commonwealth countries. We know that 90% of Commonwealth citizens live in malaria-affected countries. The leading role that the UK is taking has meant that we have been able to pledge £1.2 billion to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria over this three-year period. He also mentioned the announcements that were made on jobs, and he will be aware of the very young workforce that exists across the Commonwealth involving tens to hundreds of millions of young people. That is a huge strength, and it also points to the huge opportunity for inward

investment for trade among those countries to create the wealth that will sustain employment for all those young people.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): When I was out in New Zealand last year with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, I noticed not only an enthusiasm to remember the past links between our two countries but excitement at what the future might hold for them. It was also clear that people out there had much more consciousness of the work of the Commonwealth. What plans do we have to promote that work here in the UK, while making it clear that this is about the Commonwealth of today rather than some hangover from imperial times?

Harriett Baldwin: I thank my hon. Friend for his work on behalf of the CPA. He highlights the deep links between Parliaments that help to strengthen the Commonwealth. Having the opportunity to celebrate Commonwealth Day, with Her Majesty attending the service in Westminster Abbey and all the flags in Parliament Square, helps to follow what we achieved last year with the hosting of the CHOGM in focusing the minds of this country's young people on the range of ways in which we have strong links with our Commonwealth friends around the world.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): We have heard a lot about the connections between the United Kingdom and the rest of the Commonwealth, and on Commonwealth Day we look forward to some of the opportunities for renewable energy. In April, India will start its first geothermal energy plant, which provides a fantastic opportunity for India to showcase new technology. What are we doing to support such projects, what learnings can be used back here, and what knowledge can be shared between countries around the Commonwealth to strengthen renewable energy in India, the United Kingdom and the rest of the Commonwealth?

Harriett Baldwin: That is a great question, and I appreciate the update on the Indian project. I do not know what specific input the UK has had, but there may well be some expertise involved. My hon. Friend will be aware that the UK hosted an event last week for African Energy Ministers, some of whom were from the Commonwealth, about renewable energy investment. The City of London, as a leader in green finance, has already seen over 70 bonds listed on the stock exchange in seven different currencies, raising some \$25 billion towards green projects such as the one my hon. Friend mentioned.

Points of Order

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You may have seen today that NHS England announced the trialling of the abolition of the four-hour waiting time target in A&E departments. You will recall that the target allowed the previous Labour Government to deliver some of the lowest waiting times in history, but it has not been met under this Government since July 2015. Indeed, 2.8 million patients waited beyond four hours in A&E last year. Getting rid of the target should be based on clear medical evidence, not pressure from Downing Street. Would it not have been a basic courtesy for the Secretary of State to have come to the House today to offer a statement so that we could question him on our constituents' behalf? Have you had any notice that the Secretary of State intends to make a statement on getting rid of the four-hour A&E target?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice that he intended to raise that point of order. We have not received any indication that the Secretary of State intends to make a statement to the House, but it is obviously up to him to decide whether to do so. However, the hon. Gentleman will know that there are other ways of pursuing the matter. I am sure that the Table Office would assist him with any information that he may require, although I suspect that he does not require any given that he is quite well versed in such things. At the same time, those on the Treasury Bench will have heard his concerns, which I am sure will be fed back.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In wishing you and others a happy Commonwealth Day, I want to reference

the fact that it is now close to 50 years since the remarkable events that eventually brought large numbers of Ugandan Asians to these shores. The success of that generation has been quite extraordinary, and the philanthropy associated with their entrepreneurial success is almost as remarkable as their commercial achievements. For example, two of my constituents, Babu Odedra and Ash Chavda, bought a redundant theatre that they are in the process of helping to restore as part of their contribution to our city. I wanted to seek your advice, Madam Deputy Speaker, as to whether you think that a celebratory 50th anniversary debate about that generation of Ugandan Asians would be appropriate.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has clearly successfully raised an issue about which he feels strongly, making specific reference to his constituents. However, I am sure that the matter could be of wider interest, so he may want to gather colleagues from across the House to make an application for such a debate to the Backbench Business Committee.

BILL PRESENTED

ONLINE NEWS PLATFORMS (REGULATION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Damien Moore, supported by Eddie Hughes, Douglas Ross, Mrs Kemi Badenoch, Paul Masterton, Vicky Ford, Bill Grant, Ben Bradley, Esther McVey, Gillian Keegan, Luke Graham and Stephen Kerr, presented a Bill to regulate online news platforms; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March, and to be printed (Bill 355).

Children Act 1989 (Amendment) (Female Genital Mutilation) Bill [Lords]

*Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee, considered.
Third Reading*

7.35 pm

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Members will know that this is a private Member's Bill, so I will start by putting on the record my thanks to the Government and the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer), for giving it Government time and for their broader efforts to help tackle the scourge of FGM and to protect those at risk of it. The Bill has passed through the other place and received cross-party support in its Second Reading Committee a fortnight ago and again last week in Committee, and I put on the record again my thanks to the hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) for her words in Committee and for the cross-party manner in which the issue was tackled.

The Bill was initiated by Cross-Bench peer Lord Berkeley, who became aware of an omission in existing child protection law whereby family courts do not have the power to compel the involvement of a local authority in an interim care order relating to FGM. He decided to act and piloted this simple, two-clause Bill through the other place with passion, clarity and decency, and I am grateful to him. It has been my pleasure to work with the Government to attempt to get the Bill through this place, notwithstanding one or two hurdles earlier on.

I also want to place on the record my thanks to the FGM survivor and extraordinarily effective campaigner, Nimco Ali, who will be known to many Members. She is probably this country's best-known FGM campaigner, and using every opportunity at her disposal to push the issue right to the top of the political agenda. It was wonderful just three days ago to see on Twitter a picture of her standing in No. 10 next to the Prime Minister. Nimco has taken the issue literally to the heart of Government.

Nimco Ali's work has extended well beyond what she has achieved in this country. She famously persuaded all three contenders in the 2017 Somaliland presidential election to commit to legislating against FGM, and I do not think that many people thought that she had the slightest chance of succeeding. The election was won by President Muse and, good to his word, he introduced the legislation as soon as he took office. Incidentally, the vote itself was a model election, the first in the world in which iris-recognition technology was used to avoid electoral fraud. In one of the most troubled parts of the planet, we had the extraordinary scene of the contenders shaking hands and accepting the result without any fuss whatsoever—something that we could perhaps learn as we discuss ongoing Brexit problems.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend for his work on this matter. Given Nimco Ali's great powers of persuasion and advocacy, maybe a role in the Whips Office might be of use as we approach difficult times.

Zac Goldsmith: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Nimco is effectively my Whip. Most of what I do in this place in relation to FGM is down to her wagging finger

telling me exactly what and what not to do. At a recent event with her, someone described me as "Nimco's intern", but it is a great honour to be her intern. She is an extraordinary campaigner, and if I can help her in any way, it is an honour to do so.

Members will be familiar with the horrors of FGM, but I think they bear repeating to remind us why this issue matters so much and why it should matter to everyone here. According to the World Health Organisation, female genital mutilation includes

"all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons."

FGM is almost always carried out on very young children, rarely by medical professionals and rarely with pain relief.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): My hon. Friend says "very young children" and the information I have read—I do not know whether this is the case—says that FGM is, in some cases, carried out very soon after birth. Has he heard that?

Zac Goldsmith: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I believe that the average age is five, which implies that girls are subjected to FGM at a very, very young age. FGM is a practice that has absolutely no basis in medicine.

Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): FGM is completely shocking, and it is not something I knew anything about until it was raised up the political spectrum a couple of years ago. The House recently talked about sex and relationships education. Will FGM be a central part of that so that people in this country are educated about what is actually happening?

Zac Goldsmith: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Had we been having this debate two weeks ago, I would have said that I hope so. There have been subsequent announcements—I think we had an announcement from the Department for Education on the day the Bill was in Committee—that that is exactly what will happen, with education being introduced at the appropriate level so that children, both boys and girls, know that FGM is a practice we should not tolerate.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): My hon. Friend describes the horrors of FGM vividly. Does he agree that, in a way, it is a form of child abuse?

Zac Goldsmith: I could not agree more vehemently with my hon. Friend. FGM is not just a kind of child abuse; it is child abuse by any definition or metric.

I said earlier that FGM has no basis in medicine and, despite what we are often told, nor does it have any basis in any religion. The practice is often wrongly blamed on Islam—this can particularly be seen on social media—both by extremists who want to justify or, in some cases, even advocate FGM and by others who wish to use FGM as a stick with which to bash the religion itself. In fact, the practice predates Islam, and the Koran neither advocates nor justifies it in any way at all.

The consequences of FGM can be extreme. It can lead to severe pain, excessive bleeding, infection, menstrual problems, pain during sex and childbirth, and deep, long-lasting psychological trauma. In fact, the effects of

FGM can, and often do, last for the duration of a person's life. It is estimated that, around the world, at least 200 million women and girls alive today have undergone FGM. In England and Wales, shockingly, the figure is around 137,000, although not all of them were subjected to FGM in either England or Wales.

I apologise to those of a sensitive nature, but during a recent urgent question on this issue, after the Bill was blocked by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), a number of colleagues raised concerns about male circumcision as if there were some kind of comparison between the two. Whatever our views on male circumcision, it must be obvious that it does not compare to FGM. The male equivalent of FGM would not be circumcision; it would be the removal of the entire head of the penis and much of the shaft, too.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): We often hear this argument comparing the two, but male circumcision, in my experience, is rarely, if ever, done to subjugate the boy, whereas FGM is very clearly done to end women's sexual pleasure.

Zac Goldsmith: The hon. Lady is exactly right, and I thank her for her intervention. It is also worth saying that, were a culture to experiment with such an extreme form of male circumcision on a comparable level to what young girls are experiencing around the world, I suspect it would not last more than a single generation, and it certainly would not require legislation and a campaign of the sort that Nimco Ali and her colleagues have waged.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that such horrendous abuse and its lifelong effects cannot possibly be justified on the basis of cultural practice?

Zac Goldsmith: I could not agree more strongly. In fact, partly on the instruction of Nimco Ali, I am co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on female genital mutilation. Early on, the APPG took evidence from a wide group of people, all of whom had been through different degrees of FGM themselves, and it was clear talking to them that their lives have, in many respects, been defined by what they went through. They were all committed to campaigning to stamp out this practice, and none of them would have any truck with the argument that this is a cultural practice and that it would be insensitive for the British Parliament to try to legislate against it or for the Department for International Development to commit funds to try to prevent the practice.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for the huge amount of leadership he has shown on addressing this hideous crime. This is a busy night in British politics, but does he agree that the fact so many of us are present this evening is a real sign that this House says every single action must be taken to rule out this crime in our country?

Zac Goldsmith: I could not agree more, and I am grateful to colleagues for being here to take part in this debate. I do not want to jinx it, but I hope this simple Bill will go through without a Division, which makes the presence of so many Members even more valued.

The anti-FGM legislation in the UK is not insubstantial—we have actually done a fair bit. FGM has been illegal here since the Prohibition of Female Circumcision Act 1985, which was replaced by the Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003 that made it illegal to assist someone performing FGM or to commit FGM abroad. The Serious Crime Act 2015 amended the 2003 Act to introduce mandatory reporting of FGM and to create the FGM protection orders that courts can issue to protect girls who have been or may become victims of FGM, which could include, for example, forcing the surrender of a passport to prevent travel abroad.

In addition to those laws, we can collectively be proud that we have taken a lead globally. The UK was the first country in the world to create a dedicated anti-FGM aid programme, with an initial tranche of £35 million pledged in 2013. Only a few weeks ago, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development committed a further £50 million, which has yet to be allocated, for the one purpose of helping countries around the world, but mostly in Africa.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): My hon. Friend is right to emphasise the international nature of FGM, but does he agree that the Government have committed some £100 million-worth of funding to the ending violence against women and girls strategy in this country, too? We must ramp up these efforts.

Zac Goldsmith: I could not agree more, and I am glad my hon. Friend has raised that point. FGM is a form of extreme violence against women and girls.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): On the issue of young girls being taken abroad to go through the horrific experience of FGM, did my hon. Friend see the article by the campaigner Leyla Hussein in *The Sunday Times* over the weekend in which she described what happened to her aged seven? Does my hon. Friend think this extraordinary, powerful article is something that should be shared widely among other parliamentarians?

Zac Goldsmith: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing that to the House's attention. I know Leyla relatively well. In fact, she was one of the first people to give evidence to the all-party group, and we have had meetings subsequently. I have not read the article, but I can imagine how powerful it must be given the experience she has been through and given her advocacy on this issue. She is an extraordinarily powerful campaigner.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the work that he and this Government have done, but does he agree that the Home Office still has work to do on having a joined-up approach? I raised the case of my constituent Lola Ilesanmi on the Floor of the House, as her daughter was under threat of FGM. My constituent's violent ex-partner was trying to coerce her into going back to Nigeria to have her daughter cut, and the UK Government were unwilling to give her leave to remain. She has had her stay extended, but she still does not have indefinite leave to remain and there is still a threat to her daughter. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that more joined-up working is still required?

Zac Goldsmith: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention and I agree with it, as this is a cross-cutting issue. A colleague suggested earlier that this should form part of personal, social, health and economic education in this country, which it now will, but it is a Home Office issue and a health issue, too. It covers a lot of different Departments. If there is anything at all that I or the all-party group and my colleagues on it can do to help in the case the hon. Lady has just raised, we are at her service and will do what we can.

Despite the laws we have in place and the injection of funds to campaigning on this issue around the world, clearly there are gaps in the law and the problem has not gone away. In 2016-17, the NHS reported 9,179 cases of FGM, of which 5,391 were newly recorded cases. As hon. Members will know, there has been only one successful prosecution for FGM, after numerous failed attempts; this came to an end last week with a 37-year-old woman being sentenced to 11 years.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Does my hon. Friend look to the record in France, the approach the French take in dealing with FGM and their success as a source of ideas that we could follow to help cut down on FGM in the UK?

Zac Goldsmith: We have looked at that in the all-party group. The French engage in a much more interventionist approach, with, for example, inspections of young girls. Most of the people who have given evidence to our group feel that it would not fit this country; they feel it would be stepping over a line. However, another area where the French have been more robust than we have in this country has been in trying to identify people at risk. Certain people are at risk and others are not. Where someone has not been subjected to FGM and their parents were not either, the likelihood of their going on to subject their own child to it is very small, although it is not zero. In other families where it passes from generation to generation, a newborn girl clearly is at risk. The French are much more robust than we have been in this country on that.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and to his work on this, as well as that of our mutual friend Nimco Ali, who has championed this from the start. Does he agree that FGM has little to do with religious or racial sensitivities, and is straight-up child abuse and should be called out as such? Does he welcome the first successful prosecution of someone for FGM in this country only two weeks ago, the length of the sentence and the deterrent it can be in some of our communities, where some people will feel that there is no point reporting this because it will not be prosecuted? Does he agree that the length of the sentence sends a message and is encouraging in this fight against FGM?

Zac Goldsmith: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend on that. Indeed, I am going to take this opportunity to quote from what was said in response to the conviction by the National Police Chiefs Council lead on FGM, Commander Ivan Balhatchet:

“Female genital mutilation is a barbaric and violent crime—a violation of human rights—often with lifelong consequences, committed by the people children should be able to trust the most.”

He continued:

“Today’s sentencing will act as a deterrent and a warning that our society will not accept this child abuse, but prosecutions alone will not solve this problem.”

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Does my hon. Friend’s work on the all-party group and with campaigners reveal a reluctance on this among groups of people to whom children are presented, for whatever reason? We are all familiar in our constituencies with what happens when a child is discovered to have bruising or possible signs of maltreatment. Following cases such as that of Victoria Climbié, there is almost a lurch in the other direction to immediately assume that there is a child abuse problem, but perhaps that has not happened enough in respect of FGM. Is he confident that legislation such as this is going to make it increasingly easy for those cases to be presented as child abuse?

Zac Goldsmith: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. I cannot give him a scientific answer, but I can tell him that the evidence the all-party group received from those people who have been through FGM absolutely concurs with what he has just said: there are parts of the establishment and social services, and people within the education system, who are very nervous indeed about pointing the finger on FGM. There is a concern about trampling on cultural sensitivities. The view of the people we talked to, like my view and, I suspect, that of many in the House today, is that those sensitivities should be pushed to one side. This is a very direct form of child abuse; child abuse is child abuse, and it is our responsibility as adults and the authorities to stamp it out at every opportunity. That message has been unambiguous, in all the evidence we have taken from those people who have been through FGM.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I wonder how we can convince people who think this barbaric practice is decent, such as the families involved, that it is not. How do we get to those families? Does the all-party group have any answer as to how we stop mothers and fathers taking their children and allowing this sort of thing to happen?

Zac Goldsmith: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I know, because the evidence shows, that a shift is happening. I mentioned Nimco Ali’s campaign in Somaliland. It is not one where she is having to bash her head against a brick wall. Every member of the newly elected Somaliland Government is on board in a mission to eradicate FGM. In Hargeisa, the capital, huge posters have been put up and paid for by government, although they were designed by the campaign groups at the grassroots, telling people that FGM is not only illegal but unethical and immoral, and without any basis whatsoever in religion—this could not be clearer. I realise I did not answer an earlier intervention on that point.

Nimco is not the only person who has that kind of electrifying impact in individual countries. Another such person is Jaha Dukureh, who was originally from the Gambia, moved to New York and then went back to the Gambia. Like Nimco, she persuaded the Government not only to legislate against FGM, but to put resources into those people at the grassroots who are campaigning to change hearts and minds. By all accounts, she is succeeding on an extraordinary scale. I am going to come to this a little later when I wrap up, but there is

such an important role for the Department for International Development to play. We can be proud of what we have done, but we have to make sure the next raft of money, the £50 million that has been pledged, is invested in the right groups and the right campaigns.

Hannah Bardell: The hon. Gentleman mentions the Gambia. A friend of mine was, unfortunately, forced to move back there, having done a lot of work in Scotland on FGM and having helped to co-ordinate the FGM strategy in Scotland. She has now set up an NGO called Women in Liberation and Leadership, and she is supporting a young woman called Binta—that is not her real name, because we are trying to protect her—who was subjected to FGM, was raped by an older man, and has been subjected to terrible persecution by her own family and been cast out by them. We are now raising funds to try to get her into a safe house. Does the hon. Gentleman think that she is the kind of person we could do more to support and more to reach out to?

Zac Goldsmith: I absolutely do, and I strongly encourage the hon. Lady to link her friend up with Jaha, who is now a high-profile and significant figure in the Gambia. She is one of the world's most important FGM campaigners. Indeed, she was nominated for the Nobel prize last year. Again, I would be happy to talk about that after this sitting, to see whether I can do something to link the hon. Lady's friend up with the right people.

Clearly, there is more to be done, both here and abroad, but this Bill is part of that. I am not going to pretend that it will stop FGM—it will not—but it does provide another potentially crucial legal tool in the fight against it. I want to explain briefly what the Bill does and why it matters. First, let me point out that it has just two clauses, the second of which provides only for the Bill's extent, commencement and short title. I therefore wish to focus on the first clause, which is the only substantive one.

At present, the Children Act 1989 allows courts to make an interim care order—an instruction to a local authority to share parental responsibility for a child. Such an order can last up to eight weeks and it can be renewed, but that can be done only if there is a belief that the child in question is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm. The local authority would then be part of any decisions relating to where the child should live or how their welfare should be maintained. I do not think anyone would argue that a girl who has undergone or is likely to undergo FGM is not suffering or likely to suffer significant harm, but the 1989 Act does not currently allow interim care orders to be issued for FGM. A court may only direct an interim care order to be made in “family proceedings”. Section 8 of that Act defines what is meant by “family proceedings” for the purposes of the Act. It contains various statutes relating to domestic violence, forced marriage and so on, but it does not include proceedings under the Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003. The effect of that is that it is not open to a judge to issue an interim care order for FGM. Clearly, that is an omission in law—I do not think this is deliberate—but it means that our courts do not have the full suite of powers that they need to protect girls who are at risk.

As Lord Berkeley pointed out when he introduced the Bill in the other place, that means that although a family court can protect a girl who is at risk of forced

marriage or domestic abuse, it cannot protect a girl who is at risk of FGM. That needs to change. David Maddison, the family lawyer who raised this issue with Lord Berkeley, has pointed out that this is not an academic or abstract concern; it is a practical one. There have been occasions when the police have sought an FGM protection order in the family court and the judge has wanted to employ the powers of the local authority in an order but has not been able to. The Bill will grant the power that has been missing.

All the Bill does is to insert the proceedings for FGM protection orders from the 2003 Act in the section of the 1989 Act that defines which family proceedings constitute grounds for an interim care order to be made. To be clear, it inserts that part of the 2003 Act that relates to FGM protection orders in section 8 of the 1989 Act. That makes FGM a family proceeding for the purpose of issuing care orders under the 1989 Act. I hope the House agrees that this is a simple and uncontentious change. If the Bill passes, it is unlikely to lead to the issuing of a huge number of new care orders—they are rarely used—but it is important that judges have all the power we can give them to protect girls who are at risk. Currently, that is simply not the case.

I have no doubt that when some Members speak they will argue that the Bill is not enough to stop FGM entirely. I am not going to argue with that. Those Members are right that we need better support, particularly mental health support, for survivors. We need better education so that girls and boys grow up knowing that FGM is wrong. We need to get better at identifying at-risk girls, as in France where they do it better than we do.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who is making such a powerful speech. He mentioned the important role of education, and it is of course about education not only in the UK but internationally. On this Commonwealth Day, will he pay tribute to the work of the Commonwealth and the Department for International Development in ensuring that education is really having an impact worldwide?

Zac Goldsmith: That is the very next point I was going to make, so I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I have said it twice already but I shall say it a third time: I am proud of the work that the Department for International Development does. It is a Department that is often hammered by our newspapers, but it does really important work. The £35 million that it has already spent has changed lives and saved lives, and if the £50 million that has been committed is spent properly—I am sure it will be—it will go on to save lives as well.

I mentioned Nimco's work; I do not want to embarrass her, but I know that the amount of money that it took to get her to Somaliland to do the work that she did was so small as to barely qualify as a DFID grant. I know that the work of Jaha, whom I mentioned earlier, in the Gambia has cost so little that it would only just register or qualify as a DFID grant. There are so many people like that out there who could do with the kind of support that DFID can provide.

My hon. and learned Friend the Minister provided lots of reassurances when she spoke in Committee about what the Government are doing and how committed

[Zac Goldsmith]

they are to tackling FGM. I do not know whether protocol means she will have the opportunity to repeat those reassurances later—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer) *indicated assent.*

Zac Goldsmith: I see her nodding her head, so she will. I look forward to that.

If this tiny, uncontentious Bill protects just a handful of girls from undergoing the horror of FGM, we will have done something worth while and important in passing it into law. I close my speech simply by thanking all Members present for their support, which I hope the Bill will get at the end of the day. I particularly thank the Clerks, the Whips Office and the Ministry of Justice Bill team, who have been so helpful in getting us to this point. Finally, I thank Lord Berkeley again for winning the arguments next door and handing us a Bill in such good order.

8.3 pm

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith). The Bill passed through Committee with a large degree of consensus. Although I pressed the Minister on some issues, as I will today, it was pleasing that when something of this magnitude came before us we could seek consensus to bring about change.

Once again, we have an opportunity to discuss the Bill and what more we can do in the House to tackle female genital mutilation, because it is an abhorrent act, an abuse of children of all ages, and one we must endeavour to eradicate. The impact on women and girls is devastating and can still be felt long into later life. In the short term, there are risks of severe pain, infections and excessive bleeding. In the years following, there can be complications relating to childbirth, sexual intercourse, and menstrual and vaginal problems. I repeat the words of the World Health Organisation in saying that there is “no benefit, only harm”. Despite that, instances of FGM in the UK are occurring, which is where the Bill fits in, so I shall again outline Labour’s position on it.

To give further power to judges to intervene directly in instances of FGM with temporary care orders through a technical amendment to the Children Act 1989 is a reasonable and sensible action. Female genital mutilation protection orders are currently the best tool to tackle FGM, but allowing local authorities to provide interim care and ensure the safety of those at risk is a welcome extra step. The ability for local authorities to act in this way is currently present for cases in which a child is at risk of abuse, molestation, forced marriage or other abuses, so it seems only right and proper that it should also be present if girls are at risk of FGM.

As it stands, it is difficult to know the full extent of FGM in the UK and just how many people are affected. NHS Digital has produced experimental statistics, but many recorded cases are not necessarily newly committed instances of FGM. Estimates are significantly higher than the figures produced, and we know that, given the obstacles associated with reporting and recording FGM—for example, the act is likely to be committed by a family member—scores of cases go unreported. I therefore press the Minister to outline what the Government are

doing to provide more accurate data and recording of FGM occurring in the UK, to help us fully to understand the extent of the problem.

Just as the scale of FGM in the UK is likely to be larger than it seems initially, so the Government must do more to tackle it. Last month, we saw the first prosecution for FGM in the UK. With estimates of those affected in the tens of thousands, it seems staggering that that is the sole example of a prosecution for carrying out the act. The Minister has spoken in the past about strengthening the laws on FGM in a number of ways, to increase protection for girls at risk, but clearly such measures fall short when compared with the numbers actually prosecuted. Just as they identify who is at risk, will the Minister tell me what the Government are doing to identify the perpetrators of this barbaric practice and to bring them to justice?

I welcome the Minister’s previous comments on the cross-departmental approach that the Government are taking to tackling FGM. Such an approach is necessary and appropriate for a problem that must be tackled not only through prosecutions, but through education and by tackling the culture and assumptions that lead to FGM, as Members have said. Will the Minister tell us more about what the Government are doing to increase education and awareness of FGM, and about the ways in which schools and local groups in at-risk communities are being involved?

Does the Minister recognise that it is cuts to other Departments, much like those to the Ministry of Justice, that have ruined the vital provisions on which many vulnerable women at risk of FGM depend? Our NHS is strained at every level, after years of underfunding; schools are under-resourced and understaffed; local authority budgets have been slashed to the bone; and there is a catastrophic shortfall in the provision of children and women’s services. These frontline services are best placed to identify, intervene and prevent FGM, but they have been decimated by the Government’s near decade of austerity. What assessment, if any, have the Government made of the impact of the austerity agenda on the tackling of FGM? What extra provision are the Government affording the services tasked with addressing it?

Ultimately, this is a welcome Bill. Despite the efforts of a certain Member on the Government Benches, we are pleased to see it brought before the House again. It provides an extra tool for local authorities and judges to fight FGM and prevent its occurrence. As my colleague Baroness Massey said in the other place, at the very least it

“adds to the armoury of those who hear these cases, and that can only be to the good.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 20 July 2018; Vol. 792, c. 1420.]

Alone, though, it will not be enough to protect the many girls throughout the UK who are at risk of this barbaric abuse. It must be met with greater action by the Government, and I hope the Minister commits to just that this evening.

8.9 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I am proud to take part in this debate today. I would like to commend not only Lord Berkeley in the other place and my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) for the work that they are doing, but the Government

for realising that legislation in this place can be improved and that FGM has absolutely no place in society. We have a great deal of legislation in place at the moment to try to prevent FGM, but it is not working as well as it should. I am proud to take part in a debate where that is acknowledged. I am proud, too, that we are supporting those who, clearly, have done a huge amount of work to identify ways in which we can improve the legislation on our statute books. Making existing legislation more effective by enabling care orders to be issued in connection with girls who are at risk of FGM will help to save some girls. It will also help to outlaw this abhorrent practice in some communities. As hon. Members said earlier in this debate, the number of Members who are here this evening shows the strength of feeling on this issue across the House.

The Bill in front of us today comes at a timely point, following as it does the first conviction in the UK for female genital mutilation. I applaud the Government for being so gracious with their support for this Bill. I am sure the Minister will come on to talk about that later. FGM has been illegal in the UK since the Prohibition of Female Circumcision Act 1985, which was then replaced by the Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003, and extended by the Serious Crime Act 2015. Successive Governments of all colours have wanted to try to act on this issue, but today's Bill shows that we have not gone far enough and that we do need to go further, and I hope that it enjoys wholehearted support across the House.

If we are to have really effective legislation, then as legislators we should acknowledge that law alone is not enough and that there is a much broader context: how society views these issues; how our schools deal with things such as relationships and sex education; and how the Government put this issue into a much broader strategy on violence against women and girls. We should be encouraged by the current situation where, as has been said, we have not only relationships and sex education, but, for the first time in more than a decade and a half, guidance on how an issue such as female genital mutilation should be dealt with in our schools. The small point I would make is that it is not enough to have guidance and to make it mandatory that schools deal with the issue; we have to make sure that it is being implemented in practice on the ground.

These are not easy issues for schools to deal with, and sometimes they can get the wrong message from this place—for example, that schools can allow parents to withdraw their children from such lessons. That is a “get out of jail free” card in communities where these issues are difficult, and we cannot send that message out from this debate today. We must not only encourage schools to engage with parents on the issue of FGM, but ensure that they are doing so. It is important that schools ensure that parents do not withdraw their children from relationships and sex education. We need to do all we can to ensure that schools see their responsibility in this area. It is, of course, right that we not only give parents the respect that they deserve in terms of their views on relationships and sex education, but respect the rights of children to get the education that they need to live in a modern society, and that must include understanding the appalling impact that FGM can have on women's lives.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) on opening this Third Reading debate. I have just come from a meeting in the Boothroyd Room of Sierra Leonean women who are discussing their attempts to eradicate FGM in Sierra Leone. The First Lady has recently sent rather mixed messages about FGM and has relied on cultural practice as a part justification. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need to send out a very clear message that religious and cultural sensitivities cannot and must not be used as a shield to hide behind when practices such as this are being discussed either in school or in this place?

Mrs Miller: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that point. We should not allow anybody to hide behind religious or cultural practices when it comes to relationships and sex education. Every child in this country deserves to understand how these issues affect them, and the Government are absolutely right to have made it mandatory for children to attend relationships and sex education. It is particularly important that relationships education has been made mandatory among primary school aged children; it is only by teaching children what a good relationship looks like that we can hope to be able to give them the wherewithal to tackle the online world in which they live. That is a very important enabler that the Government need to ensure is in place. It is not enough for them simply to pass this Bill today, to put it on to the legislative books. They need to ensure that parents are engaging with it and that teachers are confident about the issues so that they can talk to parents.

It is also incredibly reassuring that the Government are looking at this issue as part of their wider cohesive strategy on violence against women and girls that crosses Government Departments. On the Women and Equalities Committee, we do not always encounter cross-departmental strategies on issues to do with discrimination. We have been extremely impressed with the commitment of the Government to have not only a strategy in this area, but a refresh of the strategy on a regular basis, which I was pleased to see will also happen when it comes to sex and relationships education as well. If we are to make this particular piece of legislation work as it should, it needs to be seen alongside the other issues that are covered in the violence against women and girls strategy—issues such as the link between pornography and violence against women, online abuse, and the impact of alcohol on violence against women. The Government are right to have this sort of comprehensive strategy in place. Again, I think they will find extremely strong support from all parts of the House for their very collaborative and cohesive approach.

Eddie Hughes *rose*—

Mrs Miller: I give way to my hon. Friend and fellow Select Committee member.

Eddie Hughes: I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way, not least because the purpose of my rising was to commend her for the excellent work that she has done. This piece of legislation is part of a jigsaw that plays into how the Government have served to deal with violence against women and the equalities agenda more

[Eddie Hughes]

generally in society. These are very valuable pieces of work that she and her Committee have done, and I just wanted to commend her for that work.

Mrs Miller: I thank my hon. Friend for doing that. He is right to say that it is a jigsaw of issues that must fit together. I see Members sitting on the Front Bench from three different Departments, working seamlessly together on these issues. This Government have a lot to be commended for, especially with regard to the cross-departmental working on these issues, to the way in which they have characterised these sorts of acts against women as cowardly acts, and to making sure that the right support is in place for victims and for bringing perpetrators to justice.

In any of those issues—I am sure that those Ministers sitting on the Front Bench will be very aware of this—there is a need to have support in place, as the pressure that additional legislation brings, particularly on our colleagues in local government, cannot be ignored. I am particularly grateful to the Government for making sure that additional resources will be available to local authorities to deal with any extra pressures that this amendment to legislation imposes. When it comes to issues to do with children, where pressures are already acute, we cannot expect local authorities to be effective unless they have the resources to put the necessary support in place.

Sarah Champion: I completely agree with the right hon. Lady on the need for additional resources for local authorities. Does she share my concern that the National FGM Centre—a collaboration between Barnardo's and the Local Government Association—is having its Government funding stopped in 2020, especially given that it is the main resource that local authorities are using at the moment?

Mrs Miller: The hon. Lady raises an important point about specialist provision and resources. I hope that the Ministers on the Front Bench will take that point away and consider how we can ensure that very specialist resources are available to local authorities, because it will be difficult for them to have that sort of expertise in-house. The hon. Lady makes an extremely valuable point, as somebody who has campaigned vigorously and with incredible compassion on these issues.

I want to underline the important role of the Department for International Development, which other Members have referred to in interventions. We should be proud that our country is the first country to have a dedicated anti-FGM programme, working across the globe. It is important for the House to underline that the Department has supported 8,000 communities to abandon, or campaign to abandon, FGM.

The Government have supported the Girl Generation programme—the largest ever global work on the issue, with over 900 organisations working to end FGM. The work that is happening outside the UK is not only important for women in those countries, although that would be justification enough to do the work; it is also invaluable in underlining the human rights of those women in their own countries. Last but by no means least, this work helps to change attitudes that can still influence communities in the UK. The importance of DFID's work has to be acknowledged. Those who may

be naysayers about our contribution to this global world should reflect a little on their views when they consider how this work can so enormously change the lives of millions of women across the world.

This is not a debate in which we will be thinking about internal processes too much, but it would not be right not to point out at least that the reason that we are here today is because of our private Members' Bills system, whereby an individual Member—quite unrepresentative of the majority feeling of the House—can block a Bill. This is not just a Bill that will do something very small and day to day; it is so important to women's lives. The whole House has to acknowledge that the need for reform of our private Members' Bills system is long overdue, and we need to find a way of giving priority to that reform of this place. If we do not, we continue to run the risk of this House being brought into disrepute by individual Members exercising what might be a very principled point of view on the procedure of this place—although I am not sure that this particular objection was as principled as that. We need to acknowledge that this place can look prehistoric from the outside. If we are going to regain the trust of people in Parliament, this sort of reform has to be given priority at some point in the parliamentary calendar.

Zac Goldsmith: I could not agree more strongly with my right hon. Friend on the need to reform the process. Does she agree that this kind of small, technical amendment—which is effectively what this Bill is—is exactly where the PMB comes into its own, because there is no natural legislative hook on which the Government can hang it?

Mrs Miller: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. If we are going to have a Parliament that works correctly, not just in a post-Brexit world—which is probably more of a challenge than we are thinking about at the moment—but in a modern, transparent and media-literate world, we have to look carefully at the way in which our systems work to enable Members to make such small but important changes in a timely manner, without the need to go through the parliamentary procedures that this Bill has had to go through simply because of the views of one individual.

I very much wish this Bill well. It is a great example of making good legislation even more effective. It will amend the Children Act 1989 to make female genital mutilation protection orders available, and to ensure that we can protect more children who find themselves in a situation where the adults around them may not have their best interests at heart, and who may be at risk of this appalling practice. This Bill should receive support from every single Member in the House.

8.25 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): It is a great honour and privilege to be present in this debate because I really think that this House works best when we come together to protect the most vulnerable. I hugely congratulate the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith), who has done so much to secure the safe passage of the Bill. I add my support to the recommendations made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) on how we can better protect all children from female genital mutilation.

As has been mentioned, FGM is not a cultural practice and we should not be seeing it as such; this is child abuse and it must be dealt with harshly, as child abuse. FGM has been illegal in the UK since 1985, but the lack of prosecutions has enabled people to come up with the myth that it is a cultural practice, rather than a crime against a child. I am very pleased that last week the strong sentence of 11 years was given to someone who facilitated FGM. That is the sort of message that needs to go out—that we will act, prosecute and jail people for this crime against children.

FGM is a big issue in this country. NHS Digital statistics from April 2017 to March 2018 show that there were 4,495 newly recorded cases of women and girls where FGM had been identified, that 6,195 individual women and girls had an attendance where FGM was identified or a procedure relating to FGM was undertaken and that there were 9,490 attendances reported to NHS trusts and GP practices where FGM or a procedure relating to FGM was identified. These figures, though, will be a massive underestimate of the actual problem of FGM in this country because of the hidden nature of the practice. Research has shown that there is no local authority in England and Wales where there is not a woman living with FGM. It is estimated that 103,000 women between the ages of 15 and 49, and 10,000 girls between the ages of four and 14, have undergone FGM, and there are a further 60,000 girls at risk of FGM in the UK.

I would like to bust the myth that this is just about UK girls being taken abroad for this practice. It is not—it is happening in this country as well. In recent years, there has been a phenomenon of cutting parties where people have figured out that it is cheaper to bring the cutter into this country and invite girls round—well, invite their parents round—for them to be cut. This is a UK problem.

That is not to say that girls are not taken abroad. Yes, this happens to young girls, but the most horrific case that I heard of was of a woman from London, born and brought up here. When she was 15, her parents asked if she would like to go back to the country that they grew up in to see what it was like. Of course, she welcomed this opportunity, and, at 15, went back. Literally as she came off the plane, she was introduced to the lady who was going to take her back to the village. At 15, this Londoner was taken back to the village, pinned down and cut. How does someone get over something like that? To be honest, she has not got over it.

Since 2015, health professionals, teachers and social workers have had a mandatory duty to report known cases of FGM to the police, but that is when it happened to people under the age of 18. I would like there to be consideration of support for women over the age of 18 once the crime has been committed. I had a meeting with a dozen women. Between them, they had about 20 children, so they had been to at least 20 GPs, 20 midwives, 20 nurses, 20 consultants—20 health professionals. Almost all the women had been advised to have caesareans because they had been stitched so closely that the damage it would have caused to even try to give birth naturally meant that it was not going to happen. The health professionals recognised that, because of their FGM, they could not give birth naturally. Not one of those women had that raised with them, ever, by any of those health professionals.

No one offered them support or the chance for a prosecution—and that is just a group of 12 women that I met.

We talk about what is happening in France. I have only recently discovered that in the French health system, someone who has been subjected to this crime gets reconstructive surgery as an adult. A friend of mine, Marie-Claire, said that after having her reconstructive surgery, she felt like a proper woman—a sexual woman. She felt able to have sexual relations with her partner for the first time. That literal rebuilding of someone's self-esteem as well as their body is something we need to be doing in this country. If someone was in a car crash and needed facial rebuilding, we would see that as something that the NHS would do, so why do women not automatically get that right for this crime?

This is also about justice. We need these women to know that they can get justice. As I said, it is great that the prosecution has happened, but there are many historical cases where justice has not even been mentioned to these women because what they have been through has not been recognised.

Having undergone FGM is a real barrier for women in coming forward for things like cervical screening. Many women do not want to go to a GP to report gynaecological issues because they are concerned that it will be raised and there may be prosecutions against family members. We need to get the reality of what is going on out there so that people can access the proper health support they need. If a woman is repeatedly missing her smear, rather than just writing her off and seeing her as someone who is not engaging, we need to be asking questions: “Are there reasons why you don't want to come for your smear, and is there a way we can help and support you to overcome that?”

Hannah Bardell: The hon. Lady might be aware of the project My Body Back, set up by an incredible woman called Pav. It has a clinic in London and one in Glasgow, providing services for women who have suffered sexual violence or, indeed, FGM. I would commend those services to any woman who needs that specialist care.

Sarah Champion: I have heard of it but not visited. However, that is two centres for an estimated 160,000 women and girls. We need to have more and it needs to be statutory.

When we talk about prosecutions and mandatory reporting, the crime has already been committed and the damage, both physical and psychological, has already been done. We need to be doing much more about prevention. I would like to speak in support of the National FGM Centre, which is a collaboration between Barnardo's and the Local Government Association. It receives funding from the Home Office, the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care. None of those Departments is continuing its funding beyond 2020 because it is deemed that the centre ought to be generating its own income. I understand that. However, its main support services go via local authorities, which are already suffering under huge cuts and do not have additional resources to start buying in specialist support for FGM.

The National FGM Centre does great work. It embeds FGM specialist social workers within multidisciplinary safeguarding teams. It works from the bottom up,

[Sarah Champion]

empowering communities to tackle this crime themselves and to get the word out that it is a crime and it should not be happening. The centre also does amazing training for professionals and provides a knowledge hub so that all local authorities can share the information. With the best will in the world, if the funding stops, the prevention work will stop with it.

Mrs Miller: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. We agreed earlier that it is important for local authorities to have the funding, but I am not sure whether I agree that we should not encourage local authorities to take on this responsibility, because surely getting them to prioritise funding of facilities such as the one she mentioned is a great way to try to raise their awareness of this issue.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We have 13 Members waiting to speak, and the Minister needs to wind up the debate. I do not want someone to miss out on the opportunity to make a speech. Can we all look after each other in this important debate?

Sarah Champion: I thank the right hon. Lady for her intervention, but I disagree. We need a centre of expertise. When resources are tight, we need to be able to push and make local authorities prioritise. If the Minister wants to do that and guarantee that all local authorities will make provision and ring-fence that money, I will be happy, but there still needs to be that centre of expertise.

The other area that I would like to touch on is relationships and sex education. I welcome the fact that children will now be taught about FGM at secondary school, but we need to teach them about it at primary school as well, because the majority of the crime happens to primary age children. They need to be empowered to understand what is going on and that it is a crime so that we can get ahead of this. All that said, I am hugely grateful that we are taking forward this amendment to the law.

8.36 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), who is a bright beacon when it comes to this issue and the safeguarding of children—the most vulnerable in our communities up and down the land. I am tempted to say in passing that, at a time when our politics and this House are so divided on other issues, debates such as these remind us of one of the benefits of this job, which is the coming together of the House to discuss in a united, informed and respectful way an issue that matters to the future of our country and can certainly be deemed to be for the public good.

I listened with the most careful attention to the speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller). It was interesting that she used the term “prehistoric” to describe the way that this House can often look. It is not the first time that I have made this comment: I am the Member for North Dorset, and not everything that comes out of Dorset is Jurassic.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): You are!

Simon Hoare: I can assure the House that I am not.

I echo entirely the comments that my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke made about the all too demonstrable need for reform of how we deal with private Members’ legislation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) said, this is a simple Bill of just two clauses, but it is terribly important, and it beggars belief that a Bill of such importance was blocked for no particular apparent reason. It reminds me of the dictum of the late Ronald Reagan—if the 11th commandment is, “Thou shalt not speak ill of a fellow Conservative,” my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) stretches that almost to the point of breaking.

My hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park rightly praised the work of Nimco Ali. I do not want to interject a moment or two of partisanship, but I will pause to make this point. I thought it was heart-warming—absolutely heart-warming—to see the pictures on social media last week of Nimco and our right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, at the very heart of Government, discussing FGM and other women’s issues. For my party, which all too often allows itself to be painted as out of touch or not interested in such issues, if we wanted a startling picture showing why that is not the case and how our party is able to deal with these important issues, that was the picture. The fact that my hon. Friend has taken up this issue and run with it with such passion and so authoritatively—he is too modest, I know, and he may blush—is so important. He has added not only to a public health issue, but, I suggest, to the profile of our party on this issue.

I rise to speak in this debate as the father of three daughters: Imogen who is 10, Jessica who has just turned nine and Laura who is six. At least, that is what Laura’s birth certificate says; from the way she talks to me, she is six going on 26. When a parent sees the little, fragile bodies of small children, we do have to wonder where on earth somebody came up with the idea of FGM. As others have said, this is not a medical procedure and it is not the religious requirement of one faith or another; it is quite simply child abuse. If it was a practice in which a young girl’s arm had to be broken or some fingers or toes removed, we would have been in a state of uproar. However, over the years, there has been a squeamishness among politicians about dealing with some of the issues that have masqueraded or hidden under the cloak of cultural sensitivity. I could not care less who, if anybody, is offended by this Government and this united Parliament standing up and saying, “It is wrong, it is abuse, it has got to stop, and if you do not agree with us in that analysis, then the full weight of the law will be brought to bear upon you.”

Eddie Hughes: My hon. Friend mentions that this is not a medical procedure. One of the problems is that the medicalisation of the procedure can sometimes be seen to give legitimacy to it, and that is far from being the point. It is frequently the case that the procedure is carried out where there is no antiseptic, so it is incredibly dangerous with the possibility of future infection for the woman and of ongoing medical problems.

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It carries all the concomitant health risks of the backstreet abortionist and of the barber surgeons of the 18th century,

but things have moved on so much since then. That is why it is extraordinary, when we pause to think about it, that this debate or this Bill is even required.

A number of right hon. and hon. Members have spoken, perfectly properly, about awareness. This debate and the Bill, the event at No. 10, the work of the all-party group on female genital mutilation—my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park leads it with such conviction—and the work of people such as Nimco Ali are so important in raising awareness. As the hon. Member for Rotherham intimated in relation to smear tests, raising awareness of such an issue will obviously involve certain personal issues—about personal health, or perhaps about embarrassment—and I think this is frightfully important. Those women who have been genitally mutilated should in no way be made to feel ashamed or reluctant to seek medical advice and help or to turn up for smear tests. Let the House say clearly, “It is not your fault.” We are focused properly on blaming the perpetrators and on arresting the practice in this country and—I say on Commonwealth Day—hopefully throughout the Commonwealth and elsewhere.

I say to those who have been mutilated, “Do not hide in shame or embarrassment. Something horrid was done to you and, as a civilised society, we are here to help.” If this debate helps to raise awareness among community leaders throughout the local government family, in sports clubs, in law enforcement and in our GPs’ surgeries, that is good. A problem, which FGM clearly is, ceases to be as much of a problem when it is talked about frankly, openly, honestly and with no sense of shame.

I have to confess to the House that, much to my wife’s amusement, I cannot watch “Casualty” because I do not like the sight of blood, which makes me feel a little wobbly. My hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park explained in typically gentle terms what the male equivalent of FGM would be. He rightly made the point that the linkage between or coalescence of FGM and circumcision is erroneous. When he described the male equivalent of FGM, several hon. Members, including me, put a handkerchief to their eyes and clenched their knees a little tighter. If this was a male issue, it would not have been tolerated for as long as it has been. The fact that it has affected little girls is all the more shaming and should prompt, as it is doing, greater action and attention.

I welcome the prison sentence that was handed out recently and the fact that anyone who commits FGM now faces a prison sentence of up to 14 years. It is also important that anyone found failing to protect a girl from the risk of FGM will face up to seven years’ imprisonment. That takes away the protection for aunts, cousins, grannies—or grandfathers, for that matter.

It is perfectly proper that the Bill is an amendment to the Children Act 1989 because, as has been pointed out, the issue affects children.

In making my final point, I will breach the ministerial code as it relates to Parliamentary Private Secretaries—the Whips are on duty; they can sack me at their leisure—by speaking, albeit briefly, about the work of Departments, starting with the Home Office. I commend my hon. Friend the Minister for Crime, Safeguarding and Vulnerability for her violence against women and girls strategy. The Department for Education is doing very important work. I am delighted to see my right hon.

Friend the Secretary of State for International Development on the Treasury Bench and I commend the Department’s work. This is a collective, governmental approach to stamping out child abuse. The Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer), who will reply to the debate, looks at me with a squint in her eye. Indeed, I have neglected to mention the Ministry of Justice, which is putting in the sentences that will ensure that the Bill will be a deterrent.

In a small way, this small Bill takes a huge step for the rights of women and girls. It seeks to end a terrible example of child abuse and I am delighted to speak in support of it.

8.49 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): I would like to start by belatedly wishing everybody a happy International Women’s Day. I am sure Members across the House took part in events in their constituencies. It is an honour to be here on the Labour Benches discussing a subject of the utmost importance with Members from across the House. It is worth remembering that while International Women’s Day on Friday saw so many fantastic events celebrating women and young girls from across the globe, there were children being violently abused not just in far flung lands that we have never visited, but right here in the UK. That is why we are all here tonight.

Women and girls face unimaginable pain through the abhorrent crime of female genital mutilation. They also face a lifetime of medical problems as a result. And those are the lucky ones: the ones who do not die from the procedure. As Governments across the world begin to crack down on this horrific crime, there are reports that younger and younger girls are being targeted—girls as young as three. Despite more women coming forward to recount the harrowing ordeals they have experienced, to date there has been only one successful prosecution in this country. As Members have so eloquently articulated tonight, if this were happening to young boys or if this were little girls’ toes or fingers being cut off, we would be doing something.

I stand here with colleagues from across the House tonight and say that this is not done in the name of any religion—certainly not any religion I know—and nor is it acceptable cultural practice in any culture that I know. It must be stamped out and we must take a lead. Together, we must say, as we are doing, that we will not accept it. We must say that the people who are found guilty of committing this barbaric act, and those who know about it, should pay, and pay heavily. It is clear that more needs to be done to prosecute perpetrators far more effectively. That includes ensuring that Members do not block Bills that seek to stamp out this crime and provide victims with justice. Just as we look to support teachers and medical professionals to flag any concerns that a child may be being abused, the Government should provide frontline services with the resources they need to detect the tell-tale signs of FGM and to stamp it out.

I have two young daughters, aged four and five. When I think about them going to school in the morning and standing in line with their friends waiting to go into their classroom, it breaks my heart to think that in our children’s classrooms there are children who are being

[Dr Rosena Allin-Khan]

taken and forcibly mutilated: mutilated without any say in what happens to their bodies; and mutilated without any consequences for the perpetrators of this abhorrent crime. People who commit such barbaric acts need to know that tonight we are saying, “We are watching you and you will be punished.” We need to tackle this at its core and show that people will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

All women and girls need to be valued equally. I hope that by next International Women’s Day, the young girls and women who have been victims of this brutal and horrible crime will have found justice.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): May I just suggest about five minutes each to give everybody equal time?

8.54 pm

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) on bringing forward this addition to the Children Act. I remind him that, although he has been working with Nimco Ali, who is a fantastic campaigner, and Jaha, who has had fantastic success in Gambia, this all started with Jane Ellison, a former Member of Parliament for Battersea, when she formed the all-party group on female genital mutilation. She did some amazing work to bring this issue to people’s attention and she was devastated that there was no prosecution during her time here.

We have just had a prosecution, but it is hard for young people to testify, sometimes against family members, or, if not family members, against people who are friends of the family. It is really difficult for relatively young girls to go through with the prosecution. Although we have had only one prosecution—and it is incredibly important that we have had one—I can understand why we have not had more, but now that we have had that prosecution, I would like to see people feeling less frightened to come forward.

I also believe that teachers need more training to recognise the signs of when girls are going to be taken abroad. I know that it does not happen all the time and that a lot happens here, but some are taken abroad, just as they are for early marriage and forced marriage. Teachers need to be trained to recognise the symptoms of what is happening. Doctors and nurses also need additional training to make them report what they see. Many doctors in the past have seen this but have never done anything about it to protect people, because they believed that it was not their job to do so and that they should let sleeping dogs lie. That really should not be the case, because what is happening to young girls is brutal. There is the risk of bleeding to death. There is a huge risk of infection. Somebody earlier likened this to abortion in the 1950s. It is no better than the knitting needle and the gin, because there is no protection for these girls and absolutely no pain relief for them either. The perpetrators need to realise that we are serious about catching them and stopping FGM in this country.

I congratulate the Secretary of State for International Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), who is sitting on

the Front Bench. She has put an enormous amount of work and funding behind trying to stop FGM in other countries around the world. I commend her for her work because it is really important that it is not just us who are doing this; we have to help other countries to stamp it out as well. As was said earlier, we have seen the success in Gambia, which is incredibly important to this campaign. It can be stamped out once we get over the barrier that it is not cultural and not religious—it is just sex abuse for these young girls. We must get that over, and I commend the Secretary of State for the work she has done and the huge amount of resources she has put into this issue.

I also commend the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), who made a very passionate speech, a lot of which I was going to say but I cannot, because she has already said it. What has been really good about this debate is that it has united both sides of the House. We work better when we work together. There are things that divide us, but on issues such as this, we can all work together, just as we can on raising the age of marriage and forced marriage.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mrs Latham: Yes, of course.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The hon. Gentleman has only just walked in. It would be rather unfair on the other people who have been here. I think he should wait a little while.

Mrs Latham: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I think I know what my hon. Friend was going to say, because he was talking about something that we worked on together to try to bring this issue to the fore some years ago. We have to recognise that what has happened in this country has not been as successful as it could have been. We need people in this country to really go for the perpetrators, and anybody who knows anything should report it to the police. As I said, however, it is very hard for young girls to testify in court against family members or friends of the family, and we have to work together to try to make it easier for these cases to come to court and to have successful prosecutions.

8.59 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) on his work on this issue, particularly the progress of his Bill, and I pay tribute to Lord Berkeley, in the other place, who originally brought this measure forward, and to the vocal and courageous campaigners, such as Nimco Ali, who several Members have mentioned. It is the work of brave women such as her that is making a difference and turning the tide against FGM.

I am going to read out the story of a 14-year-old girl who now lives in the UK and who I will call Aminah, although I warn hon. Members that it might not make for very comfortable listening. She says:

“I was six years old when it happened to me. I knew what was going to happen, I knew they were going to cut me because a lot of my friends had had it done. My friends had told me that it was really painful, that it was horrible, so I was terrified. I was at school, when they told me it was ‘my time’. My uncle and aunt came to take me from the school. It was my sister’s time too - she was eight years old. The woman who cut us was my grandmother’s sister - and she was going to cut us in a tent near a huge tree.

They used ropes to tie our legs apart and there were lots and lots of girls there. I could hear screaming, lots of horrible screaming and there was so much blood. Girls were crying. Then they said it was my turn. I ran away - I ran as fast as I could but they sent boys after me and they caught me. They took my legs and my arms and carried me back. One of them was my older brother - he helped carry me back to the cutter. They tied me down, I was fighting as hard as I could, but they were stronger. I was screaming. The old woman, my great aunt, used a razor blade - it was clean and new, but there was no anaesthetic when she cut me."

Members can find out more about her story on the website of the sexual health charity, Brook. I read it because although we talk about FGM—we normally just use the acronym—it is the stories that really bring home how disgusting and completely abhorrent the practice is.

One of the most harrowing aspects of Aminah's story is that it was done to her by people she trusted: her uncle, aunt and great aunt. FGM is carried out on girls by people who love them. It is done out of fear that uncut girls will not find husbands and will be ostracised or considered unclean by their communities. Some communities believe it can be used to control female sexuality and increase male pleasure, and it is done supposedly for these girls' own good, but it can kill. For the majority who survive, the short and long-term health consequences are appalling: there is the immediate pain of being cut without anaesthetic, followed by a long, painful healing process; the risk of haemorrhage; the risk of infection from contaminated instruments; and, in the long-term, very serious health consequences from repeated urinary tract infections, difficulty menstruating and problems with childbirth, not to mention the trauma and psychological damage.

At least 200 million girls and women worldwide have undergone FGM. No religion endorses FGM, but myths and deeply ingrained traditions perpetuate it. In every society where it is practised, it is a sign of deeply entrenched gender inequality, and FGM is happening here in Britain too. According to the NHS, between April 2017 and March 2018, 6,195 women and girls were treated by the NHS for FGM, and in 85 of them, the FGM was known to have taken place in the UK, although the NHS is clear that this data is not complete, so the true figure could be substantially higher. The National FGM Centre estimates that 60,000 girls are at risk of FGM—either of being cut in the UK or being taken abroad to undergo the procedure—and that 137,000 girls and women in the UK are living with the consequences of FGM.

That is despite the fact that FGM has been illegal in Britain since 1985, that the Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003 created an offence of taking a girl abroad to undergo FGM and that the Serious Crime Act 2015 further extended the law by introducing an offence for failing to protect a girl from the risk of FGM and providing for the anonymity of FGM victims. Currently, anyone who commits FGM faces up to 14 years in prison and anyone found guilty of failing to protect a girl from the risk of FGM faces up to seven years in prison. As we know, last week, the mother of a three-year-old girl was sentenced to 11 years in prison. This was the first FGM conviction in the UK. It is awful, in some senses, that that can be considered a success—a success that a conviction was secured—but it has proved very difficult to secure convictions, and the fact that one

has been secured sends, I hope, a strong message that FGM is not okay, and there will be consequences under UK law.

The 2015 Act also introduced FGM protection orders, which give courts powers including the power to remove children's passports to prevent them from being taken abroad. The Bill will close a small gap in the law to make the process of issuing protection orders a little bit easier.

I will wrap up now, Mr Deputy Speaker, because I can see that you would like me to do so. Let me simply say that ending this barbaric practice, and overturning the misogyny that underpins it—as well as the cultural practices that have enabled it to continue—will not be easy, but the Bill brings us a small step closer to doing so, and every step that can save a child like Aminah from suffering as a result of FGM is a step worth taking.

9.5 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Some powerful speeches have been made tonight, none more so than those of my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) and my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), whose description of FGM was truly horrendous.

As public awareness of the abhorrent practice of FGM increases and the momentum swings firmly behind positive action which will ensure that women and girls are fully protected, we as legislators have a duty to strengthen existing laws to ensure that the courts have all the necessary powers not only to prosecute those whose facilitate FGM, but to safeguard victims and those at risk. This is a simple Bill, but it gives us an opportunity to protect members of our society who have no voice and cannot speak for themselves, namely children.

The campaign against FGM in British society is not, as some advocates of the practice have suggested, a war against religious groups or cultural practices. It is simply about doing what is right, so that women and girls can lead normal, healthy lives and have control over what happens to their bodies. We must recognise that in the case of nearly all victims of FGM it is not their choice to be cut, because they are too young, while older victims find themselves being coerced into the procedure, heavily influenced—as we have already heard—by dominant family members, or by people who play central roles in their communities. As we have also heard, last Friday, 8 March—International Women's Day—a 37-year-old mother was jailed for 13 years for this and other offences. The judge described the crime as "barbaric and sickening", and also made it clear that FGM was against the law and a form of child abuse. That single piece of evidence perhaps best highlights why the Bill is required.

The Children Act 1989, as amended, allows a judge to grant an interim care order if there are reasonable grounds to believe that a child has suffered significant harm, or is at risk of suffering significant harm. However, the Act does not currently include the Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003 in the list of statutes under section 8(4), and that therefore does not constitute "family proceedings". Had the Bill been on the statute book, a judge might have had the opportunity to grant an interim care order in the case that I have mentioned, thereby protecting an innocent victim from the irreversible pain and trauma

[Maggie Throup]

with which she will have to live for the rest of her life. The National FGM Centre has estimated that, in England alone, 60,000 girls are currently at risk of FGM. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has said:

“we will not tolerate FGM and not rest until perpetrators of this horrific crime are brought to justice.”

There are some pieces of new legislation that appear to be merely adjuncts to existing laws, but whose long-term consequences may be profound. The Bill definitely fits into that category, and it has been a pleasure to sit on the Committee that has brought it to this stage. However, during proceedings on the Bill, I received emails from academics and lobby groups raising several issues. One individual made a good point when they highlighted the need for community-led educational information, and more support for dialogue with FGM-practising communities. I know from listening to other speakers that that is definitely happening.

It has also been highlighted to me that data may have been misinterpreted. For example, in 2016-17 it was reported that 9,179 cases of FGM were identified in England, of which 5,391 were newly recorded. It is important to note that that does not mean that 5,391 girls had recently been subjected to FGM; that was the number of cases that had been newly identified. Of course, it follows that those new cases may not have occurred in this country.

We must use every tool in our armoury to stamp out FGM, not just here in the UK but across the world. We celebrate Commonwealth Day today, and it is incumbent on our Commonwealth friends to play their part in stamping out this practice. Many countries where FGM is prevalent have laws against the practice, but, as we have found in this country, the enforcement of the law is often the problem.

To eradicate FGM, we need community groups and individuals who are passionate about campaigning to stop it. We need the legislation in place to secure prosecutions, and we need the powers in the Bill to protect those who are at risk. FGM is a human rights issue, a gender equality issue—or, I should say, a gender inequality issue—and a health issue, but justice should always remain our focus.

It is surely not right—indeed, it is shameful—that in our civil society, where the number of at-risk girls is so high, only one person has been successfully prosecuted since the practice was first outlawed in 1985. If this Bill, which clearly commands cross-party support, allows the courts to safeguard a handful of girls who are at risk, I believe it will have done its job. I look forward to its speedy passage on to the statute book.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Can I just remind people to stick to five minutes, please?

9.12 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) on introducing the private Member's Bill to deal with this important issue.

Last week we celebrated International Women's Day, a joyous occasion on which women and girls came together to celebrate their achievements, the women who helped them to realise those achievements and our victories on the long road to equality. Today's debate reminds us of not just how far we have come, but of how far we still have to go.

FGM is a barbaric practice that has no place in the world today. It is often, as other Members have said, performed by a local cutter—not by someone with any medical skills—in a barbaric way without pain relief. The affected women have their genitals cut into such a state that they end up with significant long-term consequences. As well as the short-term consequences of pain, trauma, shock and bleeding—in some areas of the world where there is little access to medicine, such bleeding can lead to serious infection, sepsis and death—women may experience difficulties passing urine that can go on into the long term, incontinence, frequent and chronic urinary tract infections, pelvic infections, problems with menstruation, kidney failure, cysts and abscesses, difficulties with sexual intercourse and complications with childbirth.

Complications with childbirth are particularly prevalent among those who have had the procedure of infibulation, which is where the vaginal opening is made much smaller. There is the possibility of reversing or undoing that procedure during pregnancy in advance of labour, if midwives and surgeons are aware of it, but women may be left with significant mental health problems afterwards. Some women feel very uncomfortable about the fact that the procedure has been undone, and their family may treat them differently as a result. Indeed, as other Members have suggested, some women will have been sewn up by the time the next pregnancy occurs.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Lady has clearly outlined what needs to happen legislatively in relation to such physical and emotional abuse. Does she not agree that it is also time for a cultural change in the societies in which it occurs? If a cultural change comes into play, methods and habits will change, so it has to start there.

Dr Johnson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He is absolutely right, and I will say more about that later in my speech.

Given how barbaric this practice is, it is surprising how common it is, with more than 200 million women in the world said to be affected by it. Recent statistics show that 150 British-born women were identified by NHS Digital as having had the procedure, and that 85 of them had had it here in the United Kingdom. It is estimated that around 130,000 women in the UK are at risk, and 1,000 new cases have been identified by the NHS this year.

While researching for this debate, I read about the case last month of the first person to be convicted of FGM in this country. It involved a mother who was found guilty of FGM. Her daughter was only three years old. That young girl was pinned down in her north London home and had her genitals cut and partly removed. Her mother claimed that this had been due to her falling on to a cupboard door. In my work as a paediatrician, I have heard some tall stories about how injuries to children might have occurred, but it was clear that the jury did not believe the woman in that case.

Children of that age do not have enough strength to escape the knife or to escape their attackers. That is why we need laws to protect these vulnerable children from a harm that is sadly often perpetrated by those who are closest to them and who should be protecting them the most. I am proud that the UK is a world leader in introducing legislation in this area. Since the passing of the Prohibition of Female Circumcision Act 1985, it has been illegal to mutilate the clitoris or the labia, or to help someone to do that.

The Government improved things further in 2003. Recognising that girls and women were being taken abroad for these procedures, they increased the territorial reach of the legislation so that UK nationals or UK permanent residents taking someone overseas or allowing or helping the procedure to happen overseas would also be guilty of a crime. This was widened further in 2015 to ensure that people who failed to prevent the procedure from happening were also guilty of a crime, and to provide anonymity for victims. The FGM protection order was also created at that time.

Updating these laws is a continuous process to ensure that children are protected. It is right that we have strong sentences of up to 14 years for those found guilty of FGM and up to seven years for failing to protect a child from it, but it has been difficult to get convictions. We need to look further into the reasons for that, and particularly, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) says, into how we can change the culture in society so that FGM does not happen in the first place.

So what does the Bill do? It puts in place a crucial amendment to the Children Act 1989 that adds children's powers into family proceedings. The Act gave powers to the courts to impose an interim care order, a care order, an interim supervision order or a supervision order. What do these orders do? Essentially, they allow the courts to share parental responsibility and allow local authorities to take children into care. The test that is applied is that there should be reasonable grounds to believe that the child has suffered or is at risk of suffering significant harm. I do not think that any Member in the House would doubt that the risk of FGM would meet that threshold. At the moment, however, if an FGM protection order is being applied for and there is also a desire to apply for an interim care order, they need to be applied for separately, which takes time and creates increased procedure. The Bill will ensure that both can be dealt with in a single process.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I know that the hon. Lady has a great deal of experience in the medical profession. Does she agree that FGM is nothing but pure cruelty to young children, and that any parent allowing it, no matter what their culture is, should face the full rigour of the law?

Dr Johnson *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I asked people to speak for only five minutes, and I am concerned that some Members might not have a chance to speak. It is only Conservative Members who are waiting to speak, so they are actually cutting into each other's time.

Dr Johnson: Thank you for that guidance, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will aim to wrap this up quickly.

My final point is that the law is useful, but we also need education. There is a cross-Government strategy to prevent violence against women and girls, and that includes health professionals, identification, mandatory reporting, teachers who are in a trusted position keeping children safe, charities, the work of Nimco Ali and others, international work, DFID's flagship programmes, UN resolutions and so on. Children need to be educated so that they develop key skills, not necessarily just about FGM in isolation, but self-esteem, social and emotional skills. They should also be taught where to get support if they are worried. All that will empower our young women.

In summary, this amendment to the law will make it easier to protect children from FGM, which is a dreadful form of child abuse. I congratulate those who have successfully campaigned to get the Bill through the House.

9.20 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friends, including my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith), and I will keep my remarks to the indicated time limit, Mr Deputy Speaker. Other Members have made many points already, so I want to make just three further points.

This weekend, I was reading the account of Waris Dirie, one of the world's premier supermodels, and if we need to remind ourselves of how horrendous FGM is, just listen to what happened to her when she was five years old. Her genitals were completely cut off and then she was stitched closed, because she had to undergo the practice of infibulation, whereby not only were her genitals cut off, but she was left with only a patch of skin, completely smooth except for a scar down the middle, which she describes as being like a zipper. The procedure leaves a miniscule hole, meaning that on a woman's wedding night—this is quite horrific—the husband has to cut her open or force his way in. No one can read or think about that without finding it horrific. The practice also means that some girls actually pass out during menstruation.

How do we tackle the issue? We must take an international approach, because we know that the desire for social acceptance and the avoidance of ostracism is one of the underlying roots of FGM. Like many Members, when I talk about the international aid budget, I am sometimes challenged on whether it is being spent in the right way, but when we hear stories like Waris's and those of the other women about whom we have heard tonight, the general public will be behind what DFID is doing.

We must also consider the Bill's broader cultural context, which includes child marriage. Over 700 million women and girls alive today were married as children, which is why I welcome DFID's wide-ranging work to reduce FGM, including spending £50 million to support African-led movements to end FGM by 2030. So far, DFID has supported 78,000 communities, amounting to 24.5 million people, and has helped more than 3 million girls. The Department is also supporting the UN to the tune of £12 million to end violence against women and practices such as child marriage and domestic and sexual violence and to help 750,000 women and girls. I think that the general public would agree that that money is well spent when it goes towards stamping out the root causes of such horrific acts.

[Rachel Maclean]

My final point is about why the problem is so hard to eradicate. We have heard that it is a broad cultural issue, that people are frightened to report it and that it comes with stigma and shame in some communities. The women who carry out the act do so from a place of love. They do it because their ancestors did it to them, so they are doing what they think is right. This is about education, so we need to examine how we teach not just victims and young children, but also the women who carry out the act. We must therefore consider the new sex and relationships education that is being introduced into schools on a compulsory basis, and we must ask ourselves some searching questions as a society. Do we think it is right that parents can withdraw their children from such lessons? How do we tackle the difficult issue of some communities protesting outside schools because they do not like what the Government are trying to teach children when that education involves precisely the issues that we are debating tonight?

We must eradicate the horrific mutilation of young women and girls. I look forward to supporting the Bill and seeing it progress through the House tonight.

9.24 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I am delighted to support the Bill tonight. FGM is a hideous crime that has no place in our society, and I am pleased it has been illegal in the UK since 1985 when a law was introduced by the then Conservative Government. The law was tightened up again in 2015 by a Conservative-led Government, which is why it is completely correct that this Government are leading the work again tonight.

It is estimated that 200 million girls and women across the world, over 130,000 of them in the UK, have been subjected to FGM. It has been independently suggested that some 60,000 girls and women in this country are at risk today. We know that, for many of those girls, FGM often happens in another country, which is why it is crucial that we continue to support the work of DFID to make sure our young girls and women are protected not only in the UK but overseas.

I want to use my time to give a strong shout out for DFID's work. People often ask us on the doorstep what we get from the DFID budget, so I will set out some of the things we are doing with it. Since 2013, DFID-supported programmes have helped more than 8,000 communities—that is 24.5 million people—pledge to abandon FGM. We have helped to make the practice illegal in Gambia, Nigeria and Mauritania, and we have helped Burkina Faso, Egypt and Uganda to strengthen their laws. More than 3 million girls and women have received FGM protection and care due to the work of DFID-supported projects.

The new £50 million programme in Africa will go to projects that seek to change attitudes by supporting grassroots activists, youth initiatives, doctors, midwives and nurses to help end FGM all over Africa. A total of £15 million is going into Sudan to reduce the social acceptance of FGM, and another £12 million will go to the UN trust fund to help protect women and girls in some of the world's poorest countries from practices such as FGM, child marriage and domestic and sexual violence.

In our debate on Thursday for International Women's Day, I pointed out that girls in developing countries are two and a half times more likely than boys not to attend school and three times more likely than boys to be a victim of modern slavery. Through DFID, the Government are supporting work across the world not only to reduce and stop FGM but to stop violence against women and to help all girls get the education they deserve. I am thankful for this Bill.

9.28 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I rise briefly to support this much-needed amendment to the Children Act 1989. I will chiefly focus my remarks with reference to the sentencing remarks of Mrs Justice Whipple in the central criminal court on 8 March 2019, following the first successful conviction in the UK of the offence of FGM. I understand there is no appeal, so I am not contravening the sub judice rule.

The circumstances of this particular incident have been described as “barbaric” and “sickening,” and they were indeed that. A 37-year-old mother was found guilty of mutilating her three-year-old daughter, and by way of highlighting the gravity and horror of the offence, I hope colleagues will forgive me for some of the graphic description I will relate from the court remarks. The conviction led to an 11-year sentence. During the proceedings, the jury heard a recording of a 999 call in which the mother said that her daughter

“had been trying to get some biscuits and had fallen on metal and the metal had ripped her private parts.”

This was a few hours after she had clearly been mutilated. Mrs Justice Whipple said that by the time the girl got to hospital,

“she had lost a lot of blood, so much so that consideration was given to transfusing her.”

The consultant operated on her that evening. The next remarks are graphic, but they show the reality of the injuries on a child just three years old:

“He observed three separate cutting injuries...one to the labia minora on the right side which was missing; one to the labia minora on the left side which was hanging by a sliver of skin; and one to the clitoris in a curvi-linear shape, with a clot formed beneath it which, when removed, caused the wound to bleed. In his view, there were three separate cuts each of which had been deliberately inflicted by a sharp instrument.”

The judge referred to those injuries having probably been inflicted by a knife, scissors or a scalpel. Four consultants, expert gynaecologists and paediatricians, separately agreed with the view that this must have been deliberately inflicted injury by a sharp instrument and that this must have been part of a joint plan—in other words, at least one other person was involved. The commission of this offence would have required the participation of more than one person. It is particularly offensive therefore that the offence was premeditated by the child's mother, the person whom this three-year-old should have looked to most in the world for protection, and that it was carried out in her own home, where she should have felt safe. Who is to say how this will affect her ability to trust and form relationships in the future? As the judge said, there were physical consequences, but the “true significance” may become apparent only “in puberty or adulthood” when

“she recognises that her body is different, and that may cause her embarrassment or inhibition in forming intimate relationships.”

In other words, there is a “significant and lifelong burden” for this child to carry.

Many colleagues have said that religious and cultural sensitivities should not be used in any way to justify FGM, and that of course is right. This was a terrible offence. I would go so far as to say that it was evil. It was interesting to note that in the evidence given to the police in a recorded interview this three-year-old referred to a “witch-lady”. Witchcraft objects were found in the home of the convicted individual by the police. This little three-year-old girl has been traumatically harmed, as was her nine-year-old brother, who witnessed his sister’s distress immediately after her injuries. They are both now in foster care, but after the event. It would have been far better if, under the Children Act 1989 as is now proposed, an order could have been made before to protect them from the risk of such gratuitous physical and psychological injuries.

9.33 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce). It was also a pleasure to have been in the Chamber for the start of the debate to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) move the motion. It is particularly important, or relevant, that a male MP should be taking this Bill through, because men have so much responsibility for the fact that this practice exists in any form at all. My understanding is that there are examples of FGM in Egyptian mummies, so the practice has been historically prevalent for a very long time. If we ask ourselves why, we see that it is frequently at the behest of, or for the pleasure of, men. Men feel that it is an opportunity to subjugate women by controlling their sexual drive, controlling and containing their sexuality—what an incredible indictment that is. We would think perhaps that that was representative of some historical, barbaric practice that is no longer prevalent in the 21st century, but, as we have heard so many people say in this debate, 200 million women who are alive today could have been affected by FGM, and 135,000 of them are in this country.

Let us think about the stories we have heard. Members should imagine that they are a five-year-old girl who is just starting to feel comfortable in the world and safe and secure in the family and extended family group, when, all of a sudden, for no apparent reason, she is taken to a room, held down and subjected to this incredibly barbaric practice. Depending on where in the world a girl is when she experiences this, it could be done, perhaps if she is lucky—a dreadful use of the word—under some sort of medical circumstance in which at least antiseptic is involved and some sort of anaesthesia administered. But that might not be the case. It might simply be carried out by an old, probably female member of the community with a razor blade or, I have even heard, under incredibly barbaric circumstances, with a broken piece of glass. This is the 21st century—it is not a history lesson—and these things are happening now, on this planet. It is incredible and, as I said, frequently done as an example of how men like or choose to subjugate women.

Is it important that we address FGM? It is essential. It sends out a strong message that Parliament is debating FGM and projecting that message right across the world, in our work through DFID and the Commonwealth,

to help others to understand just how seriously we take this issue. It is great to read reports that the Government have invested in the training of 70,000 staff in this country through an e-learning programme, to make sure that people in all areas of Government business understand what the effects could be and implications are, so that they can look out for signs of FGM. For example, people processing passport applications and things like that might understand that young women are being shipped abroad in order for this practice to be carried out.

As men, we should realise that we have a particular duty to speak out on this subject. It has been a pleasure to be part of the debate and to hear other male MPs making the case this evening. It is so great that Members on both sides of the Chamber are standing together.

9.37 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) and his insight into this severe problem and the historical context of the evils from so many years ago still being visited on children and women to this very day.

So many of the points that I would have made have already been made and I am conscious of the limitation on time. I send my appreciations to the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for her insight into this problem and the points that she made, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) for his insight into the French system, which is very different from the one in the UK. It is perhaps not right that we look to the French when thinking about what system to adopt in the United Kingdom.

It is a significant problem that FGM was first made a criminal offence in the United Kingdom in 1985 but to date there has been only one successful prosecution. I understand that there have been three unsuccessful prosecutions in the UK. Successful prosecutions, and significant sentences to go with them, would form a deterrent. That would contribute to deterring people from engaging with and supporting FGM. We are right to have a zero-tolerance attitude to FGM and I welcome this amendment to the 1989 Act, but will my hon. and learned Friend the Minister say what more can be done to deliver a zero-tolerance approach to FGM?

9.39 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I shall speak only briefly because at least one more Member still wishes to speak. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) on bringing the Bill back to the Chamber—back from what almost seemed like the dead—and I congratulate Lord Berkeley in the other place on piloting it so effectively.

As has already been said so clearly, and as was concluded by the Home Affairs Committee in its 2016 report, female genital mutilation is an horrific abuse. It is not justified by any religious requirements. There are no medical arguments for it; quite the contrary. Beyond the immediate pain and suffering caused by the procedure, there is ongoing risk of medical complications and lifelong psychological effects for many women many, many years after they suffered the procedure. There can be no question of trying to justify the procedure on the basis of any cultural practices. It is abuse, plain and simple.

[Mike Wood]

It is child abuse. It is evil and it is wrong, whether it happens here in the United Kingdom, or anywhere around the world. It is right that we do everything that we possibly can to prevent it from happening. It is also right that, where there is proof of female genital mutilation, we do everything that we can to bring those responsible to justice and make sure that they receive the very, very severest of penalties that are available.

Securing a criminal conviction for FGM is notoriously difficult. Despite the fact that this has been an offence in the United Kingdom since the 1980s, it is only in the past few weeks that a successful prosecution has been brought. The difficulties in collating evidence to a standard that is high enough to secure a criminal conviction mean that, even now, it is often very difficult to persuade witnesses to come forward. Often, by the time cases are uncovered—whether it is by doctors, hospitals, social workers or other agencies—the time for medical proof of who could have been responsible, or even the time that the procedure could have been carried out, makes it very difficult to pin it down to even a location, let alone a specific offender. Therefore, it is particularly important that we do everything that we can to stop it happening in the first place. That is really where these orders have a particularly important role to play, which is why this Bill is so vital in closing one of the loopholes that makes it difficult to secure an order for those children who are at increased risk of being subject to female genital mutilation.

It is perverse that the care orders under the Children Act, which allow for orders to be made in cases where children are at risk of forced marriage or of domestic violence, cannot be used effectively to protect those children from the severe abuse of female genital mutilation. By closing that gap in the law, it means that agencies that go through the courts to take care of children at risk only have to make the single application to secure protection against the full range of risks. That will make girls and women far, far safer.

This is an extremely short Bill. It is a fairly simple change to our legislation, but it could make an absolutely massive difference to far, far more girls and women in this country and around the world than we might be able to imagine.

9.44 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I rise briefly to support this excellent Bill and to make two very simple points.

First, as many hon. Members have said, there is no excuse—be it cultural, religious or medical—for any of the practices that are labelled under the broad-brush bracket of female genital mutilation. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) said, these are often things that are done to young girls by those who love them most. There is an enormous challenge in that, because we should not claim that the people who do this do not love their own children, but they are committing acts of child abuse.

I hope that this law sends out a very clear message that, in this country and hopefully in many others that will follow the lead set by my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith), FGM is not an acceptable practice in the 21st century, and nor should

we have allowed it to persist for as long as it has. That is a profoundly important cultural point in a landscape where there is no cultural excuse for a practice that many have quite rightly described as barbaric. I know that this point is not within the Minister's purview at the Ministry of Justice, but I hope that we can tackle this aspect of FGM in the strongest possible terms, as part of this Government's and other Governments' good work on FGM; we need to address an issue that goes beyond simply the legally prosecutable, into a wider set of complex international and cultural dynamics on which we have a duty to lead the way.

My second point is only just within the scope of the Bill, and that is to say that we could have addressed this issue some time earlier were it not for the arcane procedures of this House. It shames us all that this issue had to be taken on in this way. I know that the Minister has stepped into the breach with great enthusiasm because, as both sides of the House have agreed, it is absolutely the right thing for this Government to be doing, but it is not right that the procedures of this House allow us to be in this position. When times are perhaps a little calmer and we are not starting statements at 10 o'clock at night, rather than finishing the business then, I hope that we may be able to address that issue because doing so will allow us not only to deal with such matters with greater speed, but to take on many other issues. I hope that this Parliament can be just as modern as this Government have been in getting with the 21st century.

9.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): The Government are pleased both to support this Bill and to give it Government time. It is a very short piece of legislation. With two clauses, it is a simple Bill intended to fill a small and unintended gap in the law. It will further protect women and girls, and will allow our courts to make orders and to do so quickly—in a single proceeding—to protect children who are at harm. I thank all Members from across the House who have taken part in this important debate.

Many points have been made in the debate, and I will try to draw them all together. As my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) started by saying, there has been a cross-party effort to bring this legislation through the House swiftly and with some consensus. I thank the hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) for her helpful comments. My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), in her powerful speech, drew attention not only to the cross-Governmental approach to addressing FGM, but to the presence of so many Departments on the Treasury Bench during this debate. I thank Ministers from the Home Office, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Government Equalities Office, the Department for International Development, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Department for Education, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Wales Office and the Ministry of Justice for taking part in this debate through their presence today.

A number of Members have highlighted the importance of this Bill because of the effects on the victims. My hon. Friends the Members for Richmond Park, for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), for Dudley

South (Mike Wood), for Stevenage (Stephen McPartland) and for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), and the hon. Member for Ashfield, all highlighted these effects. My hon. Friends the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) and for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), and the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), said quite rightly that FGM is child abuse.

That point was made in the sentencing remarks of the judge in a recent conviction for FGM. Perhaps those who marked the terrible effects most closely were those who told stories of the impact on the victims, such as the terrible story of Aminah told by my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) and the horrific story told by my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), showing us so graphically the terror of the girls who are experiencing this crime and the impact on their lives for ever.

So what are we doing, as a Government, to address FGM? My hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park mentioned the legislation that goes back several decades to ensure that we are taking steps on FGM. In 2015, we strengthened the law to improve protection for victims by, for example, introducing a new offence of failing to protect a girl from FGM, and allowing for protection orders. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) asked what more can be done. I am very pleased to say that we are taking steps across Government to ensure that we wipe out this dreadful crime. The Home Office's FGM unit has participated in over 100 outreach events to raise awareness of FGM. The Department of Health and Social Care has provided £4 million for the national FGM prevention programme, in partnership with NHS England. The Department for Education has announced its intention to reform the curriculum in schools to teach children about the effects of the emotional damage, and has provided nearly £2 million for a national programme to improve the social care response to FGM.

However, as my hon. Friends the Member for Redditch and for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) pointed out, it is not just about tackling FGM in this country but tackling it overseas. DFID has done a significant amount of work. In addition to a £35 million package to end FGM across 17 countries in Africa, at the end of last year the Government announced a £50 million package to support an African-led movement to end FGM by 2030. That is the single biggest investment by an international donor.

Many Members referred to the statistics on those who have experienced this horrific crime. As the hon. Member for Ashfield rightly identified, we do not know the precise figures on those who are suffering from FGM in this country who have had that crime perpetrated here, but, as the hon. Member for Rotherham stated, we know that it is happening and that, as the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) said, it is happening to children at a very young age.

It is very, very difficult to prosecute this dreadful offence. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), I would like to refer to the powerful speech that the judge made in a recent conviction of a perpetrator of FGM who committed an offence against her daughter. I will read a few of the words from that judgment, which are incredibly powerful. The judge said to the perpetrator:

"You were convicted following a trial of female genital mutilation... The person mutilated was R. R is your daughter. She

was just 3 years old when you cut her. FGM has long been against our law. Let's be clear: FGM is a form of child abuse. It involves deliberate physical mutilation. It is a barbaric practice and a serious crime. It is an offence which targets women, typically being inflicted on women when they are young and vulnerable. It is often done with the collusion of family members. And then it is hidden. This case contains all those features."

For that particular crime, although there were convictions for other crimes, the judge sentenced the woman to 11 years. As my hon. Friends the Members for Faversham and Mid Kent and for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) rightly mentioned, what is so terrible about this crime is that it was done by someone the victim trusted and in a home where the victim should have felt safe. Those were both aggravating factors in the sentencing.

We are tackling this issue by increasing the protections that we offer to victims of FGM. The Bill will define FGM protection orders as family proceedings for the purposes of the Children Act 1989, which will provide for a simplification in the court process. That is a sensible and practical change, which will allow our courts to make orders quickly, in a single proceeding, to protect children at risk of harm.

I would like to answer a number of the points put to me in the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West rightly referred to the different procedures and medical examinations that take place in France and elsewhere, but those take place in a different social and legal framework from the UK so are not directly comparable. Frontline medical staff have a mandatory duty to report known cases of FGM in under-18s to the police. As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) said, there is a need for medical staff to report it.

The hon. Member for Ashfield asked what we are doing to get more prosecutions. There is now an FGM lead prosecutor for each area who liaises with the police. She also asked what we can do to educate more. The Home Office's FGM unit has participated in more than 100 outreach events and is raising awareness of FGM across the country. As I mentioned, the Department for Education is reforming relationships and sex education and health curriculum guidance, to stipulate that secondary schools should address the physical and emotional changes caused by FGM.

The hon. Member for Rotherham rightly mentioned local authority funding. She is right to say that the Department for Education made more than £1.6 million available to run the National FGM Centre for three years. As she acknowledged, the centre hopes to become self-sustaining from April 2020. The University of Bedfordshire is evaluating the centre, and that evaluation is due to be completed by July this year. The Secretary of State for International Development mentioned to me that DFID and the NHS are looking at co-funding specialist expertise, to help deliver services such as those at Queen Charlotte's Hospital, and she is happy to speak to the hon. Lady about that.

This is a small change, but it will add to the measures that the Government have brought forward to tackle FGM. No one who has spoken in this debate, and neither my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park nor the Government, has suggested that the Bill will end FGM. We cannot be complacent about the threats to women and girls. The Government will continue to work to prevent FGM here and abroad, to support

[Lucy Frazer]

the victims of FGM and to pursue those who cause or allow this terrible practice to continue. I am happy to make the commitment that my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park asked me to: we will continue to ensure that victims are protected. My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset and the hon. Member for Tooting referred to their children. We need to continue to protect the children of others across the world.

I would like to end by thanking those who have taken part in the debate. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park, who has not only steered the Bill through the House so ably but, as we heard in his speech, has done so much to campaign so well with individual campaigners and cross-party to help solve FGM issues here and across the world. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North, who rightly pointed out that we need to thank both men and women who have taken part in this debate. This is not just a female issue solved by females; it needs a co-ordinated approach, cross-party and cross-gender. I congratulate Lord Berkeley on identifying the issue that a small change in the law could solve and on introducing the Bill in the other place. I thank the Members who sat on the Bill Committee, and I thank my Bill team yet again for the tremendous job they have done. It has been reassuring and heartening to see such solid cross-party support and clear commitment to the Bill. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed, without amendment.

Exiting the European Union

10 pm

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the Government's negotiations to leave the European Union.

May I start with an apology to you, Mr Speaker, and to the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) and other Front-Bench spokesmen that we have not tonight been able to follow the usual courtesies, which I would have wanted to do, and give them advance notice? The reason for this, as hon. Members who have been following the TV coverage will know, is that negotiations are still taking place in Strasbourg, and anybody who has taken part in EU business on behalf of this or any previous Government will know that it is far from unusual for deadlines to be stretched and for talks to be going on late.

I would emphasise to the House that the intention of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is to secure a deal that works for the national interest of our country, and she will persist in those negotiations until she is satisfied that that is what has been achieved. However, I can provide the House with an update tonight on what has been agreed so far, and clearly the Government will update the House at the earliest opportunity tomorrow should there be an outcome to the continuing talks in Strasbourg that will have an impact on tomorrow's debate.

This evening in Strasbourg, the Prime Minister and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union have secured legally binding changes that strengthen and improve the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration. The House spoke clearly on 29 January when it voted in favour of honouring the decision of the British people and leaving the European Union with a deal that works for the UK. The primary issue of concern then was the Northern Ireland backstop. This House said it needed legally binding changes, and today that is what the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State have achieved.

Tonight, we will be laying two new documents in the House: a joint legally binding instrument on the withdrawal agreement and the protocol on Northern Ireland; and a joint statement to supplement the political declaration. The first provides confirmation that the EU cannot try to trap the UK in the backstop indefinitely, and that doing so would be an explicit breach of the legally binding commitments that both sides have agreed. If, contrary to all expectations, the EU were to act with that intention, the United Kingdom could use this acceptance of what could constitute an explicit breach as the basis for a formal dispute, through independent arbitration, that such a breach had occurred, ultimately suspending the protocol if the EU continued to breach its obligations.

On top of this, the joint instrument also reflects the United Kingdom's and the European Union's commitment to work to replace the backstop with alternative arrangements by December 2020, setting out explicitly that these arrangements do not need to replicate the provisions of the backstop in any respect. By including this commitment in the joint instrument, this provision

on alternative arrangements will be legally binding. I hope, too, that that legally binding commitment that the alternative arrangements do not need to replicate the backstop in any respect will go some way to reassuring hon. Members that the backstop does not predetermine what our future relationship with the European Union should be.

The joint instrument also puts the commitments set out by Presidents Juncker and Tusk in January on to a legally binding footing, underlining the meaning of best endeavours, stressing the need for negotiations on the future relationship to be taken forward urgently and confirming the assurances we made to the people of Northern Ireland—for example, providing a United Kingdom lock on any new EU laws being added to the backstop.

The second document is a joint statement that supplements the political declaration and outlines a number of commitments by the United Kingdom and the European Union to enhance and expedite the process of negotiating and bringing into force the future relationship. For example, it refers to the possibility of provisional application of such a future agreement and sets out in detail how the specific negotiating track on alternative arrangements will operate.

As I said, negotiations are continuing and the Government will provide an update to the House at the earliest opportunity should there be further changes. I completely understand that hon. Members of all parties will want to have the opportunity to study the documents in detail and analyse their import. Clearly, there will be an opportunity during the debate scheduled for tomorrow for Members to question the Prime Minister and other Ministers and to seek answers.

During Law Officers' questions last week, my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General made a commitment from the Dispatch Box to publish his legal assessment, which will be available to all Members in good time before the debate. [HON. MEMBERS: "When?"] Hon. Members ask "When?" Since my right hon. and learned Friend has just seen the outcome of the negotiations in Strasbourg so far, hon. Members would want him to consider carefully the implications of those documents rather than rush out an opinion to meet the deadline for this evening's statement.

This evening, we shall table the motion that the House will debate tomorrow. We have already published the withdrawal agreement and political declaration and the other papers required of us under the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, and they will be supplemented by the documents that I have drawn to the House's attention. Tomorrow, the House will vote on the improved deal.

I believe that the deal we have already secured represents a good deal for the whole country and delivers on the result of the referendum. When I knocked on doors during the referendum campaign, the clear message I got from people who voted to leave the European Union was that they wanted to take back control, particularly of our borders, but also of our laws. The deal ends free movement and allows us to deliver a skills-based immigration system, and ends the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice in the UK. Under the deal, we will also take back control of our money, no longer sending vast sums to the European Union. We will

leave the common fisheries policy and the common agricultural policy and take back control of our trade policy.

I also found in 2016 that, whether people voted to leave or to remain, they wanted us to have the deep and special partnership with the European Union that my party's manifesto committed us to delivering. The political declaration—the framework for the future relationship—allows for that. In the meaningful vote tomorrow, the House will face a fundamental choice. We said that we would negotiate a good deal with the EU and I believe that we have done so. The EU has been clear that, with the improvements that have been announced and continue to be negotiated, this will be the only deal on the table. Tomorrow there will be a fundamental choice: to vote for the improved deal or to plunge this country into a political crisis.

If we vote for the improved deal we will both end the current uncertainty and deliver Brexit. The House was clear on the need for legally binding changes to the backstop. Today, we have secured those changes. Now is the time to come together to back this improved Brexit deal and to deliver on the instruction of the British people. I commend this statement to the House.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I do not complain for not having had advance notice of the Minister's statement. I am not sure that he has got advance notice of it. [*Laughter.*]

What an absurd situation the Prime Minister has got herself into. Having lost the meaningful vote on 15 January by an historic majority, on 29 January the Prime Minister stood at the Dispatch Box and told this House that she would seek legally binding changes to the backstop. Her precise words, standing at the Dispatch Box, were this:

"What I am talking about is not a further exchange of letters but a significant and legally binding change to the withdrawal agreement."

Let us see what document is put on the Table tomorrow. I did not hear the words from the Dispatch Box that the withdrawal agreement is being changed. She said:

"It will involve reopening the withdrawal agreement...I can secure such a change in advance of our departure from the EU."—[*Official Report*, 29 January 2019; Vol. 653, c. 678-9.]

She then voted for an amendment in the name of the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady), which called for the backstop

"to be replaced with alternative arrangements".

It sounds as if none of that has happened, nor is likely to happen.

Turning the joint letter from President Tusk and President Juncker of 14 January into an interpretation tool—a legal interpretation tool it may be—adds nothing. The statement that there is no duty to replicate what is in the backstop is here in the letter of 14 January. That is not new. That is not today; that was in the letter. If all that is happening is to turn this letter into an interpretation tool for legal purposes, I remind the House what the Prime Minister said on 14 January about the letter. She said that she had been advised that this letter would have "legal force in international law". To stand here today and say that this is a significant change, when she is repeating what she said on 14 January, is not going to take anyone very far.

[*Keir Starmer*]

We will look at the detail. We will look at whether the withdrawal agreement has been changed. [*Interruption.*] I am looking forward to the reaction tomorrow when the withdrawal agreement, unchanged, will be on the Table. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I appeal to Members on both sides of the House to calm down. I say to very senior Members who, from a sedentary position, are chuntering really very inanely, do try to grow up.

Keir Starmer: I will wait to see the detail, but as I understand it the withdrawal agreement is being placed on the Table tonight for a vote tomorrow—this agreement unchanged. If I am wrong about that and the document has been changed, I am sure I will be corrected in just a minute.

That cannot be described as legally binding changes to the backstop. Nor could the steps outlined—we will have to see what they are in full—allow the Attorney General to change his opinion that under international law the backstop would endure indefinitely until a superseding agreement took its place in whole or in part. Members of the House will recall that in the Attorney General's advice last time, he focused on the fact that the only remedy under the withdrawal agreement for breach of the good faith or best endeavours obligations is a temporary suspension of obligations unless and until the parties return to the negotiating table in good faith. That was announced just now as part of the breakthrough new agreement. It is there in article 178(5) on page 292, and has been since the document was signed off on 25 November. So that is not new either.

It sounds again as if nothing has changed, and if that is right, the Prime Minister is left with a pile of broken promises. It is as much a matter of trust as of substance. I am sure that many tomorrow on the Government Benches will be disappointed when they look at the detail. They should be disappointed, but not surprised. We have repeatedly raised questions about the Prime Minister raising expectations that she could not meet. The whole approach has been misguided and the fault lies squarely at the Prime Minister's door, so can the Minister now please confirm: does the whole Cabinet support the position as it now is? When will the House receive the Attorney General's updated legal advice? And I ask for a straightforward answer to the question: is a single word of the withdrawal agreement different now from the document that was agreed on 25 November?

This has been a wholly unsatisfactory 24 hours, but symptomatic of the last two years. Tomorrow, the House will express its view. These Benches will reject it. We expect the House to reject it and then we can move on and break the impasse.

Mr Lidington: When the right hon. and learned Gentleman got to his phrase about how the Opposition Front Bench was going to reject it, I thought that was the one that had been prepared a very long time in advance. I completely understand that he—like other Members of the House on all sides—is going to want to study the detail of the texts, but I want to make a number of things clear in response to his questions.

First, the joint instrument has equal status in law to the withdrawal agreement itself. Therefore, the withdrawal agreement and the joint instrument that has been negotiated today have to be read alongside each other; they have equal legal force. Secondly, the Government were chided over the question of alternative arrangements. Actually, it is a significant advance to have written into a legal text now a date of the end of 2020, because working actively to achieve that now becomes a legal obligation on both the United Kingdom and the European Union.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman also questioned the point of putting the promises made by Presidents Juncker and Tusk in January into law, and yet the thrust of his critique had been that we needed to put things into law rather than rely upon promises, so I think, again, there is a definite advance in line with what this House had wanted.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman asked me specific questions on the Attorney General. I did say in my opening statement that he is obviously reflecting urgently, but also with due consideration by proper analysis, on the documents that have been negotiated today, and he will provide his assessment to the House, as he has promised to do, as early as he can tomorrow and ahead of the debate.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman asked me about the Cabinet. The entire Cabinet endorsed and voted for the deal when it last came before the House. What we have today are improvements upon the deal which the Cabinet has supported, so the whole Cabinet is supporting these improvements.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to the Dispatch Box at this late hour. His statement is of the greatest interest to many of us who want to know whether this is a genuine improvement to the problems that existed, and my vote will be based on what I interpret from this. Given the number of issues here—the joint legally binding instrument, the interplay with the UK's unilateral ability to revoke the backstop and then refer it to an independent tribunal—would it not be better to have a statement from the Attorney General? Would it not be better for him to appear in the House to explain his findings and be questioned and then, if that takes longer, for us to push back the vote to the following day? It would be better to know what we are voting on than to rush the vote and repent.

Mr Lidington: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his comments and for the work that he and others have done in developing ideas for alternative arrangements and for trying to make sure that they really are built into the mainstream of the work we do and embodied in legally binding and enforceable commitments. I will ensure that the Attorney General is aware of the request for him to appear tomorrow. On the timing of the debates, obviously the business for tomorrow has already been announced in the normal way, and I emphasise that the Prime Minister made a clear commitment from this Dispatch Box last week to the timetable for this week. She was pressed by right hon. and hon. Members from different parts of the House to provide clarity, and it is her clear intention to stick to the timetable she announced.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful to the Minister for his statement. I can understand why the BBC was the best source of information—we could not have it in advance—but it is disappointing that no arrangements appear to have been made for the statement to be circulated to Members. I hope he will confirm that before we finish tonight it will be available to all Members.

The Minister has given us bold words about changing the peace process guarantee. That is what the backstop is—a peace process guarantee—and we should not let it be called anything else. Despite the spin, that guarantee remains in place, and must remain in place, so can he confirm that the Government are still bound by exactly the same political guarantee that they entered into in December 2017 and that it is the UK Government's responsibility to come up with a way of managing the Irish border that complies with their red lines and with the Belfast agreement in its entirety?

For those of us for whom the peace process guarantee was an advantage, not a problem, nothing has changed: we still have the same rotten deal taking Scotland out of the European Union against the express wish of 62% of our sovereign national citizens; we still have the same sell-out of Scotland's fishing fleet—exactly the kind of sell-out that the Secretary of State for Scotland promised to resign over and still has not; and no doubt in tomorrow's debate and possibly later in the week, we will get the same condescending answers to questions about the impact on Scotland. The answer is simply: "Scotland, get back in your box", "Scotland, this is the price you have to pay to be part of the United Kingdom". *[Interruption.]* I hear hisses from the Conservative Benches. I have lost count of the number of times Cabinet Ministers have responded to questions about the impact on Scotland by saying, "Can I remind the hon. Gentleman that Scotland is part of the United Kingdom?" Tonight, we are seeing more clearly than ever the price of being part of this increasingly dis-United Kingdom.

There have been intensive briefing sessions for the European Research Group—taxpayer-funded but representing themselves—and a briefing for Arlene Foster, First Minister of nowhere, so can the Minister confirm at what time tonight the First Ministers of the national Governments of Scotland and Wales will be briefed, or will they be left to hear it on the news while others who hold no national Government positions are given preferential treatment? Will he not accept that the mood of Parliament and the four nations is that this deal cannot go through and that the only legitimate choice to give Parliament and the people is not between this deal and no deal but between this Brexit and no Brexit? May I ask him to ensure that the Prime Minister and her Cabinet colleagues are fully aware that if the Government continue to insist on dragging the people of Scotland out of the European Union against their will, on these or any other terms, the people of Scotland should be given the chance to decide which of the two Unions matters more to us? The answer to that question will not be the answer that the smiling right hon. Gentleman on the Government Front Bench expects or wants.

Mr Lidington: The Prime Minister is still engaged in the talks in Strasbourg, but it is certainly her intention to speak personally to the First Ministers of both Scotland and Wales at the earliest opportunity once those talks have concluded.

I must say to the hon. Gentleman that I take exception to his insinuation that the Government are in some way resiling from their support for the difficult and challenging process of peace building and reconciliation in Northern Ireland, which ought to unite members of all parties in the House. As has been said repeatedly by the Prime Minister and others, our commitment to all the undertakings that were given in, and flow from, the Belfast/Good Friday agreement continue undiminished, and will always do so while this Government are in office.

Finally, let me say that I thought the hon. Gentleman painted a caricature of the Government's attitude to Scotland and the Scottish people. I will not go into the political knockabout, although I am sorely tempted to do so, but I will say this: it is a bit rich for him to give lectures about respecting the results of referendums, given that when what his then party leader—now airbrushed out of history—described as a "once in a generation opportunity"

to vote for Scottish independence was put to the people of Scotland, it was rejected decisively. I only wish that the hon. Gentleman would accept that mandate from the Scottish people.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): My right hon. Friend said that the documents would be available and on the table tonight. When will they be laid, and can we see them this evening? May I also ask whether the whole set of documents is at treaty level? The documents will be examined extremely carefully by many Members throughout the House and by my European Scrutiny Committee, and we shall need as much notice as possible. Will the Minister tell me at what time the Attorney General's opinion will be available tomorrow, having regard to the timing of the debate, and whether the Attorney General will come to the House to explain his opinion on the documents before the debate and in good time?

Mr Lidington: It is certainly our intention to lay the documents as early as possible this evening. They must be laid before the House concludes its business tonight if they are to be formally taken into account during tomorrow's debate and votes. I would expect nothing other than that my hon. Friend and his Committee would want to consider them very carefully. The Attorney General will make his assessment available as soon as possible, in line with the commitment that he gave the House from the Dispatch Box last week.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Minister referred in his statement to the possible suspension of our obligations in respect of the backstop. As he will know, however, under article 178 of the withdrawal agreement that can happen only after the arbitration panel has ruled on the question referred to it, and after a whole process has been followed if one party has failed to comply with the ruling of the arbitration panel.

If consideration of the issues raised by the arbitration panel in relation to the backstop involves questions about the interpretation or application of EU law, can the Minister confirm for the House that any such questions would have to be referred by the arbitration panel to the Court of Justice of the European Union, and that any ruling of the Court—despite what he has said tonight—would be binding on the arbitration panel, on the European Union and, crucially, on the United Kingdom?

Mr Lidington: I will say a couple of things in response to the right hon. Gentleman. First, he is right in this respect: the treaties themselves, as he knows, make it clear that the European Court is the final arbiter of the meaning of European law. We have seen that affect, for example, the ratification of the trade agreement with Canada and the agreement with Singapore. The withdrawal agreement is not part of European law, however; the withdrawal agreement and the joint instrument that is now associated with it have the status of treaties under international law, not European law.

Secondly, the right hon. Gentleman referred to the question of arbitration. Frankly, we would not want the EU to have the right to act arbitrarily against us without regard to some due process, so I do not think it is unreasonable for there to be a process.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): On 29 January, this House set a bar for the Government of replacing the backstop. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that meaningful commitments have been secured to replace the backstop with alternative arrangements?

Mr Lidington: There have been, certainly, meaningful changes that affect, in the way that the House required, the operation of the backstop. I believe that what has been agreed in the joint instrument tonight delivers on what the House requested in January.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I commiserate with the Minister on the latest stages of his retreat from his happy days as Europe Minister, when he managed to make my then party leader, Nick Clegg, sound positively Eurosceptic. Is not the fundamental problem that this agreement, with or without a legal codicil, does not reduce uncertainty, but merely postpones the whole question of what kind of long-term relationship we have with the European Union?

Mr Lidington: The only way in which we can get certainty about the long-term relationship is to get on with negotiating it. We can only do that once a withdrawal agreement has been implemented and we have formally left the European Union. If the right hon. Gentleman wanted to join those Government Members who are anxious to get on with the negotiations as rapidly as possible, I would welcome that.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): As the Attorney General rushes out his advice early tomorrow on this latest development, will he also share with the House his views on other very worrying features of the withdrawal agreement, including the open-ended financial provisions determined by the EU against us; the EU's ability to legislate against our interests without our being able to stop them; and the continued very large role of the ECJ, an aspect of which was mentioned in a recent question?

Mr Lidington: It will be for the Attorney General to decide what he puts in his assessment. I am sure that not just he but many other legal authorities will want to comment on the documents. The matters contained in the new documents that I have described to the House, as well as the other matters to which my right hon. Friend referred, are likely to fall within the scope of the withdrawal implementation Bill when it comes before the House.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has clearly come to the House tonight with a partial statement. He has outlined two documents that the Government are going to publish but, as he has told the House, the negotiations are still under way. Can he give us an indication of when that element of these extremely important negotiations is likely to be concluded, and when the House is likely to be updated on this? Clearly, all of this will need to be taken together and analysed carefully, because at the moment we are speaking without having had sight of the precise texts. We will certainly analyse them very carefully.

Mr Lidington: I completely understand the right hon. Gentleman's wish for detailed analysis. He asked about the other matters that are still under negotiation. I hope that those talks will conclude before the end of our exchanges on my statement, but if not, I would expect there to be a conclusion overnight.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): If the alternative arrangements are now effectively going to be written into the treaty in a legally binding manner and with a legally binding date, that is good news. However, should the negotiations not go well, or should we not meet the date of the end of December 2020, would this sovereign country be able unilaterally to leave the arrangements in the withdrawal agreement in a legally binding manner?

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend is tempting me to go beyond the subject matter of the statement that I have been able to give the House this evening. I have said that the talks are ongoing, and I am sure that the Prime Minister will personally want to address the points that he has raised tomorrow.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): If this is a fig leaf, it does not cover very much. It certainly does not cover the Government's desperation to give the European Research Group and the Democratic Unionist party an excuse to come in off the ledge. So when it comes to arbitration, can the Minister confirm that article 174 of the withdrawal agreement will still stand? It states:

"Where a dispute submitted to arbitration...raises a question of interpretation of a concept of Union law...the arbitration panel shall not decide on any such question. In such case, it shall request the Court of Justice of the European Union to give a ruling on the question. The Court of Justice of the European Union shall have jurisdiction to give such a ruling which shall be binding on the arbitration panel."

Does that still stand?

Mr Lidington: I think I answered that question earlier—[HON. MEMBERS: "No, you didn't!"] The key point is that the withdrawal agreement, and the obligations that are incorporated within it and within the joint instrument, are obligations binding on both parties in international law.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): In my memory, all-nighters in EU negotiations were perfectly normal. I was in the one on the future of the eurozone and the one on the banking crisis, and I think we had an all-nighter on mobile roaming. We even had one on loft insulation. I congratulate the negotiating team on getting so much agreed. If this House approves the withdrawal agreement tomorrow, how soon can the negotiations on the future partnership start?

Mr Lidington: The preparatory work on those substantive negotiations can start immediately after agreement has been given to the withdrawal agreement and the associated documents. The legal negotiations proper can commence only once we have become a third country, but what is included in the documents that I have described to the House this evening is more detail on the early programme of work, so those substantive legal negotiations can progress at an accelerated pace once we get to them.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Ind): I am a little concerned, because I have to say that I agree with the concerns of the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash). It may be a first, but I think we would all agree that he made an important point.

Mr Speaker, this may be a question more for your good self than for the Minister, who as ever does a good job in difficult circumstances. A press conference is about to be held by the Prime Minister and Mr Juncker, and the BBC's Brussels reporter says that the EU is adamant that there has been no change at all to the backstop position. Most importantly, we will need the advice of the Attorney General—[HON. MEMBERS: "Question!"] There will be a question. This is meant—[HON. MEMBERS: "Get on with it."] The more you interrupt, the more I will continue.

Mr Speaker: Order. The right hon. Lady has rather a good point. I suggest that people show some patience and some manners. The right hon. Lady will be heard, and if there are people who have not the basic tolerance to hear her, perhaps they can repair somewhere else.

Anna Soubry: Thank you, Mr Speaker—I cannot think why I left. In any event, the point is that tomorrow is in effect a short day, and there is a lot to be considered and debated, so can the Minister for the Cabinet Office assist us? When will we get the motion, when will we get the Attorney General's advice, and what opportunities will we have to question the Attorney General and then move to having a proper debate on the matter—the most important since our decision to enter the second world war?

Mr Lidington: The documents and the motion will be published, I hope and believe, later this evening—

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It's on Twitter.

Mr Lidington: There are many things for which I take responsibility under this Government, but Twitter accounts are not one of them. The Attorney General is preparing his legal assessment as we speak. He is as conscious as anybody of the commitment that he gave to the House last week, and if I know anything about my right hon. and learned Friend, it is that he will do his utmost to provide that assessment at the earliest opportunity, as I am sure will many other legal experts.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): If the Government's motion is on Twitter, could the Minister not just read it out?

With regard to the legal advice, which really is the crux of the whole issue, we are in an extraordinary situation, because the Attorney General has been involved

in negotiating the deal, and therefore to some extent he will be marking his own homework when he advises the House—[HON. MEMBERS: "No."] He will. It is inevitable. Given that, can I ask two questions? First, how early will we get the legal advice? In answer to the urgent question earlier, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), implied that we would get the advice by the time the House sat tomorrow, but it sounds as if that has already slipped. After all this, it would be suboptimal to get the advice a few minutes before the actual debate begins, and I am sure that the Government can appreciate that. Secondly, as the advice is so critical, will the Attorney General be speaking in tomorrow's debate? If not, how can Members of this House ask him questions about the advice that he has provided?

Mr Lidington: The Attorney General is as keen as anyone to provide that assessment to the House, but clearly he would have been wrong to do it without sight of the final versions of all the documents that have been the subject of negotiations. The House would have had every reason to complain were he and the Government to have come forward with an assessment based on draft documents that subsequently changed. The course of action that the Attorney General is taking is completely reasonable, and I reiterate that it is his intention and the Government's intention for the documents, and for all the advice on those documents, to be provided as soon as possible.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I have a copy of the Government's motion here, and paragraph (3) says clearly not that the backstop is removed or that the withdrawal agreement is changed but merely that it

"reduces the risk the UK could be...held in the Northern Ireland backstop".

That is the Government's own motion, which they have not bothered to share with the rest of the House, although it was shared on Twitter about half an hour ago. We still do not have the document, which is quite frankly contemptuous.

It is my understanding that there was an agreement with the EU over the weekend but that it was rejected by members of the Cabinet and the Attorney General, which is why we are in this impasse tonight—it is why the Prime Minister's trip was cancelled. Will the Minister for the Cabinet Office please tell me what has changed since what was being discussed on Saturday, which was rejected by the Attorney General and members of the Cabinet?

Mr Lidington: What has changed is that there has been a successful outcome to the negotiations. When I came into the Chamber, the talks were still ongoing and I was not in a position to say precisely when the Government's motion would be tabled. I am now advised by the business managers that the motion is in the process of being tabled, and the documents to which I have referred will be deposited in the House for the information of all Members as rapidly as possible thereafter.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I start by thanking my right hon. Friend for confirming that nothing in this evening's statement indicates in any way a desire on our part to shirk our obligations under the

[Stephen Crabb]

backstop, which are based on solemn promises to the people of Northern Ireland. Does he agree that tonight underlines again that, if this House is to implement Brexit in a smooth and orderly way in any shape or form, the deal before us remains the only show in town?

Mr Lidington: This has been a long and hard-fought negotiation, and the EU has made it clear that the deal now on the table is it and that there are no further negotiations. The House—that means every Member of the House, whichever side they are on—has a responsibility to take decisions so we can move forward in the national interest.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): What we have learned this evening is that the withdrawal agreement is still intact, the backstop is still in place and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) pointed out, the Government have given themselves little or no real extra powers in this whole process. It is clear that there will be no agreement that satisfies many Conservative Members and that the only way out of this Brexit mess is to find consensus across this House, would the Minister not agree?

Mr Lidington: I think that the hon. Lady is underrating the content of what I announced earlier. The joint instrument that has been agreed has precisely the same status in law as the withdrawal agreement itself, so it should be read as a protocol to the withdrawal agreement. It is also the case that placing the end of 2020 date for alternative arrangements into legal text takes us a considerable way forward. I am not normally averse to looking for consensus where that can be achieved, but I do think that that means, for one thing, that we need to have clarity from the Labour Front-Bench team about exactly what they are prepared to support.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): Notwithstanding the laudable desire of the Government to adhere to their timetabling commitments, does the Minister understand that it is essential that this House has an opportunity to question the Attorney General on his advice before tomorrow's debate starts? Will the Minister also have a word with the Leader of the House, who is sitting very near him, to make sure that that happens?

Mr Lidington: As my hon. Friend said, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House is in her place this evening, as she is on many occasions during this House's proceedings. As I undertook earlier, I shall also make sure that the Attorney General is aware of the comments of my hon. Friend and others.

Mr Speaker: May I say to the hon. Gentleman, pursuant to earlier points of order this afternoon, that I entirely understand what motivates him—the matter has been raised with me by other Members, and I listened with courtesy to what the Minister just said—but the resolution of the matter is really quite straightforward: there can either be an oral statement tomorrow or in lieu of that, or in fear of there being no such, an urgent question can be submitted. It is really very simple.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Ind): I am not sure that the Minister's statement is necessarily helping to win over the room this evening. In fact, I have just heard that President Juncker has said that this announcement will complement the withdrawal agreement “without reopening it”. Is the fundamental problem not that the promise to leave the single market and the customs union was never going to be compatible with having a frictionless, open Irish border? I feel embarrassed for the Minister, who is trying to spin this thinnest of gossamer threads for 80 of his European Research Group to try to climb down. Is it not already clear that it is not going to bear their weight?

Mr Lidington: The joint instrument is an addition to the withdrawal agreement and has equal and equally binding legal force, so I think the hon. Gentleman's assessment of the legal impact of what I have announced today is simply mistaken.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend update the House on the state of the legal challenge by Lord Trimble, who believes that the backstop and the future partnership are in breach of the Good Friday agreement, as do many others in this House?

Mr Lidington: I can understand the interest in this. The last thing that I can do is comment on either the timing or the content of live legal proceedings. That is entirely a matter for the courts and it is outside the jurisdiction of Ministers.

It might be helpful to the House, as I have just received word from Strasbourg, if I say that in addition to the two documents I outlined in my statement, I can confirm that the Government will also be laying a unilateral declaration that will form part of the package the House will vote on tomorrow. This declaration is focused on the temporary nature of the backstop and we would make it formally, alongside signature of the withdrawal agreement. Once made, the declaration would have legal status in international law, and such declarations are commonly used by states alongside the ratification of treaties. The declaration clarifies what the UK could do if it were not possible to conclude an agreement that superseded the protocol because the EU had acted contrary to its obligations. In these circumstances, the UK's understanding is that nothing in the withdrawal agreement would prevent it from instigating measures that could ultimately lead to the disapplication of its obligations under the protocol. Were the UK to take such measures, it would remain in full compliance with its obligations to avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): We understand—it is clear that we should be looking at Twitter rather than listening to the Minister—that the Irish Government have said that the unilateral statement is the UK “talking to themselves”. Given that it is a unilateral statement, will the Minister confirm who else would possibly agree to it? Otherwise, it really is just more hot air. This country deserves better.

Mr Lidington: I can understand that the hon. Lady will want to look at the text when it is available, but as I have just said, such declarations are used frequently by states when they come to ratify international treaties, and they do have legal status in international law.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that those of us who wish to respect the result of the referendum and deliver on Brexit should be comforted by the comments in the statement that my right hon. Friend has made, because they appear to provide the reassurances that we were seeking on the backstop? Not unsurprisingly, some who do not wish to implement Brexit appear to be uncomfortable with the reassurances he has given this evening, for a variety of understandable reasons. Nevertheless, when we vote tomorrow, should we all not remember what we promised the electorate at the general election?

Mr Lidington: I do agree with my hon. Friend. Many of us in this House and many people outside the House who voted and campaigned to remain in the European Union have said that we accept the majority verdict of the British people but want to deliver that in a way that secures jobs, living standards and investment in the United Kingdom and the integrity of our Union.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Will the Minister confirm whether the unilateral declaration to which he is referring is indeed a so-called conditional interpretive declaration? If it is, what is his response to the fact that in a debate a few weeks ago secured by the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), said:

“I must stress that it is not entirely clear...that a conditional interpretive declaration would have the effect that he seeks in allowing the United Kingdom unilaterally to put an end to the backstop”—[*Official Report*, 21 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 1703-1704.]

Mr Lidington: I have to advise the hon. Lady to look at the detailed text as soon as it becomes available. I am sure there will be opportunities for her to seek that kind of detailed answer tomorrow.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I have no legal training whatsoever—apart from, perhaps, a brief passing acquaintance with libel laws as a journalist—so I cannot give any tedious lectures on legal jiggery-pokery, but I do go door knocking, and every weekend people say to me that we need to leave the EU in an orderly fashion. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if what he has announced satisfies Government Members over the backstop, we need to take the leap of faith? Let us get out and forge a new future. We promised that to the British people; let us deliver it.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is right. I refer again to the fact that our party's manifesto two years ago said that our aim was to negotiate a new deep and special partnership with the European Union. That sits alongside our commitment to leaving the European Union in line with the verdict in the referendum. The negotiations that have concluded tonight enable us to get on with those twin objectives, which is what I believe the majority of British people now wish us to do.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I refer the Minister to a sentence in his statement, when he said:

“The first provides confirmation that the EU cannot try to trap the UK in the backstop indefinitely”.

There are two interesting words there. First, the word “confirmation” is a simple affirmation that there is not any change—it is confirmation, so there is no change. Secondly, the word “trap” implies unreasonable and deliberate action by the EU, so is the Minister saying that if the EU behaves reasonably and there is simply a genuine failure between the UK and the EU to agree on a way forward, the UK could remain in the backstop indefinitely?

Mr Lidington: First, of course, all parties agree that the backstop, were it ever to be used, is temporary. Indeed, article 50 is not a legal basis for any sort of permanent relationship between the European Union and a third country of any kind. On the specific points that the hon. Gentleman made, the language that I used in the statement reflected the concerns that have been expressed often inside and outside this House that there would be an effort by some countries within the European Union to keep us in the backstop because, such critics argued, they would see economic advantage or leverage in so doing. What the joint instrument makes very clear is that any such action would be a breach of the EU's formal international legal obligations.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) has alluded to the Adjournment debate that I had a few weeks ago on this issue of the conditional interpretive declaration, which I have been pressing the Government to use for some time. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that, under international law, such an interpretive declaration does indeed have the full force of international law, it is legally enforceable, it has exactly the same weight as the withdrawal agreement and the advantage of it is that it allows us to make a statement that the backstop is indeed temporary, or has a time limit, and it is now up to the EU if we have made such an interpretive declaration to refuse to ratify the treaty? A mere protest is not good enough, so this has full legal force. It is a very useful instrument and the House should pay the closest attention to it.

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend has been a consistent advocate of this approach and I have heard him speak and intervene a number of times in this Chamber on that theme. I am happy to confirm that the description that he has given is accurate.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Can the Minister tell us when the history books on this Brexit shambles are written, what will he and his Conservative Government be most proud of: destroying the futures of our young people; decimating the economy of the UK; or, my personal favourite, supercharging the case for Scottish independence?

Mr Lidington: It is always dangerous for anyone to speculate about what the history books will say, but I hope that, when those come to be written, they will acknowledge that this Government delivered on a clear referendum verdict in 2016, but did so in a way that made it possible successfully to complete the negotiation of a new partnership on trade, security and political co-operation with countries that are our fellow democracies and our closest neighbours and that will remain our friends and allies.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): As I understand it, negotiations are ongoing. Indeed, bits have been added by my right hon. Friend as he has been on his feet. The documents, we understand, are yet to be finalised, and the Attorney General has yet to opine. If it is such a great deal, why the rush? Why bounce the House into a vote tomorrow? If it is such a good deal and if this is truly a victory, why do we not take a few days to cogitate, reflect, look at the detail and then come to this House and have the vote when we have gone across the detail and have had that chance for full and frank consideration?

Mr Lidington: The House has considered these issues on a number of occasions and has passed various amendments. In particular, on 29 January, it passed the amendment tabled in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady). That made specific requests. What the Government have done is to negotiate, and negotiate successfully, for changes that respond to the views that the House expressed that night. In many debates, and certainly outside this place, the sense I get is that people want decisions taken. We need, on behalf of our constituents, to decide on the future of this country, get on with delivering the referendum result and with the negotiations that then follow.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): This afternoon, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), who came to make a statement in response to the urgent question of the Leader of the Opposition, repeatedly told the House, very clearly and in terms, that the Attorney General's advice would be available before the start of play tomorrow. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has not repeated that; indeed, I think he has been careful not to repeat that tonight. Can we believe anything that is said from that Dispatch Box anymore?

Mr Lidington: I had hoped to be able to come to the House and give this statement a lot earlier this evening, but the reality is that the international negotiations went on longer than they had been expected to, which in my experience frequently happens with international—particularly European Union—negotiations. The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), made his comments in good faith, as he always does, on the basis of the information available to us at the time. The Attorney General will be deeply conscious of his obligations to the House and will not want to delay.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I am grateful to the deputy Prime Minister for coming to the House at this very late hour to give us as much information as he has. Both sides of the House have complained that there will not be enough time to consider the motion. We do not actually know what the motion is, but I understand that it will be taken at 7 o'clock tomorrow and there will be no protected time. We will not have had time to have considered the legal advice, so may I make a suggestion to the deputy Prime Minister? In his previous answer, he said that negotiations have been going on until the last minute. Would it not be better to have a statement from the Attorney General tomorrow, a statement from the Prime Minister tomorrow and the

debate the following day? This is one of the biggest votes that we will have, and it is ridiculous that Parliament should be bounced into it.

Mr Lidington: The texts of both the political declaration and the withdrawal agreement have been available to all right hon. and hon. Members since November last year, so Members of this House have had many weeks to acquaint themselves with the detail of those documents and the arguments that surround them. The new material comprises the documents that have been negotiated today. This House has to face up to the need to get on and take decisions. We cannot just have a further delay in making the decision about whether or not we accept this package. The EU has been clear that this is the deal on the table, and it is asking us to make our choice.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): It has been well over two and a half years since 17.4 million people voted to leave. Has the Minister noticed that we now have a situation where the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) and the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) actually agree? I also agree that we should be leaving this for 24 hours; we should have all these statements tomorrow and then the vote on Wednesday. Why are we rushing? Will the Minister also answer one question that someone asked me when I was on my way here today: why on earth do we need an international treaty to leave the European Union?

Mr Lidington: Mr Speaker, I am informed that the text of the motion and the documents are now available to right hon. and hon. Members. It is only a few days since this House voted by an overwhelming majority for the sequence of debates and contingent debates that have been set down in the business statement and in commitments by the Government, and which should govern business this week. It is the House that has wanted us to stick to this timetable, and I think that the public want us to get on with this and get back to focusing on the national health service, housing, crime and the other subjects that concern them.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): While the Minister has indicated tonight that he does not have the full details to give to the House and he is going to put the documents down for further study, does he recognise that it is important that there is the ability to fully consider these important documents, since the most important decision we are going to make will be based on them? He has talked about legal changes throughout his statement, but does he understand that those legal changes will be judged on whether they give the Government control over any backstop, whether they ensure that we have the ability to decide on our future trade, laws and money, and whether they maintain the integrity of the Union—and that that is how this agreement tonight will be judged tomorrow?

Mr Lidington: I believe that the package of measures does deliver on the changes that this House has sought. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman, when he has had the chance to consider the actual text in detail, will agree with that conclusion and will be prepared to support it.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The Minister has said repeatedly tonight and in the statement that is being handed round that these are legally binding changes

to the Northern Irish backstop issue. If that is the case, could he tell the House and the country why, then, the Attorney General has been quoted directly tonight as saying that he is “agonising” over his legal advice?

Mr Lidington: I am not commenting on what might or might not have appeared on social media. I listed in my statement a number of illustrative cases where the legal status of the backstop had been changed by what has now been agreed. I hope that when the hon. Gentleman studies that, he will come round to that point of view as well.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): My issue with this withdrawal agreement is that it will leave every country and region of this nation poorer as a result of it than we would be otherwise, and nothing the Minister has said tonight changes anything. But given that he is focused on the backstop, will he not just admit that nothing has changed in respect of that either? There is still no fixed end date to the backstop and there is still no unilateral right of the UK to withdraw from it.

Mr Lidington: I am not sure whether the hon. Lady was saying that she had objections to the backstop, or not, because there have been mixed messages from her side of the House. The risk with what she said about the economic consequences is that she is seeking to re-fight the referendum campaign of 2016. Whether we liked that result or not, the result of the referendum was as it was. No European leader has questioned the democratic legitimacy of that referendum result, and I do think that there would be some serious damage to what is already fragile public confidence in our democratic institutions were we simply to disregard it.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): On a slightly different matter, the Hansard Society says that 485 Brexit statutory instruments have been tabled but only 247—some 52%—have completed their passage through this House. I have here one of the ones for tomorrow. It is ridiculous in its level of detail—and all of this is supposed to be done by Brexit day. How much are the Government hiding in these SIs, and how can we in this House possibly hold them to account?

Mr Lidington: To judge by the size of that document, it is probably a combined statutory instrument which brings together identical changes in regulatory arrangements that have to be reflected in changes to different secondary legislative instruments. The Committees that deal with statutory instruments in this House and the House of Lords have expressly called on the Government to use combined SIs in that manner.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): The Prime Minister has said tonight that the UK can unilaterally withdraw from the backstop. Which court will the European Union and the arbitration panel go to if they choose not to accept our unilateral departure?

Mr Lidington: The normal international legal procedures would have to be followed were either party wanting to challenge whether the other had failed to carry out its obligations. What the Prime Minister was describing in her comments this evening is how the United Kingdom would give effect unilaterally, if it came to it, to a situation in which the backstop had in practice become

permanent, which is not supposed to happen either under article 50 or in the terms of the solemn legal commitments that the EU is entering into.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Gentleman has made it clear that an arbitration panel will supersede in international law the European Court of Justice and be empowered to rule out the backstop. Who will appoint the arbitration panel—the World Trade Organisation? Will it be a group of independent judges, like those who impose investor-state dispute settlements in commercial trade? Why should we trust the panel? I want to see the backstop continuing with the peace process.

Mr Lidington: The arbitration panel and the arbitration process will exist to judge whether the parties have delivered on their legally binding obligations under the withdrawal agreement, which will have the status of a treaty in international law.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Is it not the case that, despite this statement, the major problem for many of us is that supporting the British Government's Brexit policy tomorrow would mean leaving the EU without any detail on the future relationship—a blind Brexit, which would be completely irresponsible?

Mr Lidington: I would dissent from that. The Government made it very clear in the White Paper published last summer what their objectives in that negotiation would be. The political declaration shows the extent to which there are shared objectives for that deep and special partnership. As the political declaration says, there is a spectrum, and this House and the Government have to choose the degree of alignment that we prefer. There will be opportunities in the withdrawal implementation Bill and subsequent legislation for Parliament to express its views. Of course, if, as I hope, we agree on a new partnership treaty with the European Union 27, it would be an international treaty that would have to go through ratification processes, including consideration by this House in the normal way.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is ridiculous that we are here at this time of night trying to work out what on earth is going on, based on Twitter rumours and bits of paper that are being passed to the deputy Prime Minister and read out in dribs and drabs. Can we focus on what will actually happen if the deal is voted down tomorrow; all the indications are that it will be? When will we get a chance to decide on ruling out no deal? When will we get a chance to decide whether we need to extend article 50, to try to sort out the mess we are in?

Mr Lidington: The straight answer to the hon. Lady is as set out in the resolution of the House last week about what, under such contingencies, would take place on Wednesday and Thursday of this week. I would say to her that I think she and many in the House would have complained had I or another Minister not come forward with any kind of statement this evening. I did acknowledge at the start of my remarks that I would have preferred to have given a complete and thoroughly prepared statement. I have done my best to update the House, as I thought was right and as the House would expect, on the basis of the state of negotiations as they stood when I came into this Chamber.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Evidently, the UK Government and the parliamentary process is in absolute chaos tonight. It seems, as far as they have got, that the EU will be legally bound to good faith, and the UK Attorney General is agonising. Meanwhile, from Dublin we learn that the withdrawal agreement remains unchanged, and the joint statement is a legal interpretation of what is in the withdrawal agreement. It is all calm in Dublin, in utter contrast to what is happening here. It should be remembered that this is a debate between damaging the UK economy by 6% and by 8%. Given that, and with 18 days to go, we surely must be able to lay amendments tonight, so I hope this motion has now been tabled and that amendments can be laid to save people's jobs, to save the economy and to save business. That is the damage the right hon. Gentleman's Government are trying to do by deciding on the two points they are putting forward.

Mr Lidington: I am advised that the motion has been tabled. It is of course a matter for you, Mr Speaker, to determine which amendments are selected for debate tomorrow.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Will the ECJ have a role in the independent arbitration referred to in the right hon. Gentleman's statement?

Mr Lidington: The arbitration panel will have people appointed by each side—the European Union and the United Kingdom—with an independent chair.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): When the Brady amendment was pushed to a vote, I abstained to give the Government the opportunity to seek the changes they were hoping to get in the withdrawal agreement. It seems this evening that those changes will not all apply. However, the Labour party opposed that change. In the letters that were exchanged between my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister, we sought changes to the political declaration. Unless I am mistaken, every amendment that we have tabled so far has sought changes to the political declaration. I find myself confused this evening that we are now talking about changes to the withdrawal agreement, which we opposed, that we have not asked for previously. However, may I ask the Minister about the political declaration? At what point will the political declaration reflect the will of the House in terms of what deal is acceptable, and will he consider legislating to underpin that deal so that any change of Prime Minister does not change the outcome of our Brexit?

Mr Lidington: If I may, I will deal with some of the points that I know the hon. Gentleman and others—on his side and on my side of the House—have been concerned about. Obviously, the withdrawal agreement Bill will provide an opportunity for the House not just to debate, but to consider amendments and come to a view about how we should approach future negotiations and, in particular, what the role of the House of Commons should be in those negotiations.

On two of the specifics, we have guaranteed protections for workers' rights and workplace health and safety. There will be a legislative commitment in the EU withdrawal Bill that we will not let our standards fall in these areas, alongside a guarantee that Parliament will have a vote on whether to adopt new EU rules in the future.

On environmental standards, our environment Bill will ensure that, where future laws could affect environmental protections, the Government will explain how they do not weaken them, and we will create a legal duty for the Government to monitor any strengthening of EU laws in this area and to report to Parliament on the Government's intended course of action in those areas. There will be no reductions in our already high environmental standards. We are committed to maintaining them.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): This seems nothing more than smoke and mirrors from a weak Prime Minister, struggling to hold it together after two and a half years of negotiations. With no changes to the withdrawal agreement—just on best endeavours and the protocol—will the deputy Prime Minister tell me how we unilaterally leave the backstop, and where this would leave Northern Ireland?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Lady should first read the document, which has either been laid before the House or will be laid shortly. It is absolutely clear that, in all the Government do, the document will fulfil the United Kingdom's obligations in their entirety under the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. At the risk of repeating myself, it is simply not accurate to say that the changes in the joint instrument have no legal force. They have the same legal force as the withdrawal agreement itself.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah, Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown has come among our number. *[Interruption.]* Somebody sneezed. I think it is in excited anticipation of the hon. Gentleman's contribution.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): This is an exciting moment. My right hon. Friend gave an answer to the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) that if the deal is not voted through tomorrow, we will vote on no deal on Wednesday and an extension of article 50 on Thursday, in accordance with the Prime Minister's statement last week. Will the converse apply? If we vote for the deal tomorrow, will there be sufficient time before 29 March to get the necessary legislation through the House?

Mr Lidington: We would do whatever we could to achieve that. In that happy eventuality, discussions will open immediately through the usual channels to seek agreement on the swift passage of the Bill.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Everything has changed but nothing has changed. Will the Minister explain why, of all the information published this evening, the only unilateral declaration was the UK's opinion about its ability to remove itself from the backstop?

Mr Lidington: I am advised that that is either being published as we speak or will be published imminently.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), the Government are clearly reluctant for the Attorney General to come before the House. Is that because the rumours are correct that he has strong reservations about tonight's agreements?

Mr Lidington: I do not think that any Minister is shy about coming before the House. The Attorney General is doing his job, which is to look at the texts that have been negotiated during the course of this evening and form a view on them.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster will know the story of the emperor's new clothes. We hope that tomorrow morning the emperor's clothes will not reveal something embarrassing for the right hon. Gentleman and the Prime Minister. The Irish Cabinet met tonight and will meet again after the EU Brussels summit. Have the Republic of Ireland and the EU agreed to a legally binding, time-limited backstop? We need to ask for a definition of "legally binding". Who has the Prime Minister met who has that power, without ratification?

Mr Lidington: It is clearly for the Irish Government to make any statement about their view on what has been agreed. However, my understanding is that the documents have been agreed by the Prime Minister and President Juncker, acting as the head of the Commission, the appointed negotiator for the 27 member states.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has asked us to consider the joint instrument, which seeks to replace the backstop by December 2020. Will we know in December 2020 whether the customs border will be on the border of Northern Ireland, in the Irish sea, or whether there will be no border at all? Is it not true that the joint instrument is not worth the paper it is not yet written on?

Mr Lidington: No. The arrangements on alternative measures are an important element, but not the only element of the joint instrument. The joint instrument supplements and has equal force to the withdrawal agreement. The objective of the work to which not just we but the European Union are committed, and which, if the agreement is approved, we will be legally obliged to undertake, is to replace the backstop or any need for it with other arrangements. I would have thought that the entire House would welcome that.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Ind): Even if this monumental fudge is enough to satisfy the ERG and just about manages to scrape through the House tomorrow, what happens next if it is not ratified by the European Parliament?

Mr Lidington: It is for the European Parliament to take its decision on this, just as it is for the House of Commons to take our decisions on this matter. The Prime Minister is due to meet President Tajani of the European Parliament in Strasbourg this evening, so I am sure she will be wanting to explain to him what has been agreed with the Commission.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): This feels like neither democracy being done nor democracy being seen to be done. I cannot imagine that anybody watching thinks it is anything other than a shambles. The statement is taking place incredibly late at night. It is being added to as the Minister stands on his feet. The motion has only just been laid. We are being asked to deliberate on and debate legal advice and documents that we have not yet seen. Worst of all, there is no protected time for the

debate tomorrow, so if Members have the ability to question the Attorney General on the legal advice he has provided, that will eat into the time for debate. It is absolutely necessary that the Government change the programme motion before the rise of the House so that tomorrow we have protected time, rather than having to make a choice between questioning the legal advice and having time for debate.

Mr Lidington: Happily, business management is no longer a matter for me. There was something surreal about the hon. Lady's description of a plot to come to the House late in the evening, as if I had somehow been in touch with President Juncker to urge him to keep the talks going for as long as possible because I wanted to delay getting to my bed and delay the hon. Lady getting to hers. The reality is that this has been a continuing difficult international negotiation and it was right that I made a statement to the House this evening about the progress that had been achieved in so far as those discussions had been concluded. I think that is better than the alternative, which would have been not to come to the House and leave hon. Members completely in the dark about what had been taking place in Strasbourg.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): May I first thank my right hon. Friend and the Prime Minister for the enormous efforts they are going to on behalf of all our constituents? My constituents are particularly frightened of the backstop because it locks us into the European Union in a way they do not want and because it hamstring negotiations on a trade deal, which is what we all really want. Can he tell me, therefore, if the changes that have been negotiated will make those fears go away?

Mr Lidington: I certainly hope that the fears of my hon. Friend's constituents will be thoroughly assuaged when the people of Leominster come to study these documents in detail. What is very clear is that any attempt by the European Union to gain trade leverage by manipulating the backstop or trying to delay were it ever to come into force would amount, under what has been agreed today, to a flagrant breach of the European Union's solemn legal obligations. We would have a right to redress in the relevant tribunal were that to take place.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): The Minister's language in his statement implied both a significant and meaningful change to the withdrawal agreement, yet President Juncker's letter in relation to the negotiations uses very different language and has a very different tone. Why is that?

Mr Lidington: If the hon. Lady is referring to a letter that has been issued today, it is not one I have seen, so I cannot easily comment on that. People will pick their own tone to express what has been agreed. That is not unusual in international negotiations. We are clear that the changes that have been negotiated today are significant, and I have described a number of ways in which that is the case.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm whether the Government have a legally binding agreement or merely a legally binding assurance?

Mr Lidington: As I have said repeatedly, it is a legally binding agreement because the joint instrument has precisely the same status and force in international law as the withdrawal agreement.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I think the Minister has comported himself well tonight. I feel sorry for him, because in answers to my right hon. Friends the Members for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) and my hon. Friends the Members for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) and for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), he has been unable to say, in the event of a dispute between the UK and the European Union, who in the process would be the arbiter of that dispute. If he does not know that, why on earth should we vote for the Prime Minister's deal tomorrow?

Mr Lidington: I encourage the hon. Gentleman to re-read the withdrawal agreement, because the process for resolving and arbitrating in cases of an alleged breach are very clearly laid down there. This is the sort of system that exists in most international treaties for dispute resolution and arbitration.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Jean-Claude Juncker has apparently said recently in Strasbourg that there will be "no third chance" and that MPs must back the reworked deal tomorrow or "there may be no Brexit".

My question is this: where do I sign up?

Mr Lidington: Well, that was not a question I expected from the hon. Gentleman. What I say to him is that I believe that the interests of his constituents are best served by our delivering on the outcome of the referendum and then negotiating at pace the ambitious deep and special partnership with the European Union that I think the great majority of people in every part of the United Kingdom want to see.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Among the other documents that the Minister referred to that are going to be published in the next few hours, will he confirm whether the Government's economic impact assessment on the withdrawal agreement will finally be published, or will Members of this House once again be asked to vote blind on the economic consequences of the Prime Minister's deal?

Mr Lidington: The withdrawal agreement does not of itself form part of an economic impact assessment. I think the hon. Gentleman is referring to the political declaration, and there, the Government have published a range of analyses to explain the predicted economic impact of a number of different potential future relationships with the European Union. Because the approach set out in the political declaration is capable of reaching resolution at different points in the spectrum described in that document, we have taken the nearest proxy for it. We have explained our methodology completely, and I think that any reasonable questions that the hon. Gentleman has are answered in the document that the Government have already published.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): People flicking through their TV channels will be forgiven for thinking that this is like Sky Sports' transfer deadline day show

given the amount of late-night horse trading that is going on. On a serious point, how many times today have Downing Street or senior officials from the Prime Minister's office spoken to Arlene Foster, and, if this is a United Kingdom of equals, how many times have the Government spoken to the First Ministers of Wales and Scotland?

Mr Lidington: The Prime Minister personally has tried to make sure that the First Ministers of both Scotland and Wales have been updated on all significant developments during the negotiations. The negotiations are an ongoing process, and no Prime Minister will give a running commentary on them, but the Belfast agreement itself mandates the United Kingdom Government to keep all the main political parties in Northern Ireland briefed about what they are doing, and we discharge that duty.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Oh, very well. I have some remarks to make in a moment that I hope will be helpful to the House, but pending that, let us hear the hon. Gentleman.

Sir William Cash: We understand that the media have been in possession of these documents for some time. We have not had the same opportunity, but, as far as I understand, they are in the Table Office now. Could we be assured that they will be put on the internet so that the public at large can be guaranteed an opportunity to see these documents in full?

Mr Speaker: They are Government documents, so really it is for the Government to make that arrangement, but I see the Minister for the Cabinet Office champing at the bit, so let us hear from the fella.

Mr Lidington: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. My understanding is that all the documents are in the Table Office now—[HON. MEMBERS: "The Vote Office!"] In the Vote Office, Mr Speaker. The motion has been tabled and I can give a clear assurance that, when I came to the Chamber and for a fair part of my statement and response to questions, the talks between the Prime Minister and President Juncker were continuing in Strasbourg. As far as I am aware, the Government have not given any prior copies to the media, and in fact could not have done so because talks were still taking place. I do not know what was happening at the Strasbourg end, because of course there was a negotiation going on when texts were being circulated between the two sides.

Sir William Cash: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I asked for a guarantee that they would be on the internet, because the public, as well as Parliament and the Vote Office, want to see them.

Mr Lidington: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. If they are not already there, they will be published on gov.uk as rapidly as possible.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that confirmation. I have also been advised by the senior Clerk at the Table—aided, abetted and reinforced by another distinguished ornament of Chamber and Committee Services sitting immediately to his left—that the documents are on the website of the Department for Exiting the European Union. That is

characteristically up to speed and helpful of the Clerks, and I thank them for that service, as I am sure the House does.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Ind): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Yes, yes. The hon. Gentleman is not hailing a taxi, but nevertheless I am happy to hear his point of order.

Mike Gapes: While the Minister was speaking, the journalist Paul Waugh had on his website some of the documents. I went to ask in the Vote Office whether the documents were available. I was told no. They had been received electronically, but they had to be printed by the Journal Office. I seek your clarification, Mr Speaker, as to when in this House copies of those documents were available, given that journalists clearly had been given them and that they were in printed form and put out by Mr Paul Waugh on Twitter.

Mr Speaker: My understanding—there was some earlier huddled consultation about this matter between me and the Clerks at the Table—is that the documents were laid at 10.58 pm. I say that for the benefit of the hon. Gentleman and the House. I would not want, particularly when engaging with someone of his seniority and distinction, to be imprecise, and I certainly would not want to say 10.57 pm or 10.59 pm, subsequently to be corrected by the hon. Gentleman, who is a stickler for precision at all times. I gather they were laid at 10.58 pm and then distributed more widely thereafter. I hope that that is helpful in a factual sense. It may not be as satisfactory as he would like—that is qualitatively a different point—but it is the factual answer.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I do not want to over-egg the point, but it is important for what Ministers say to the Chamber from the Dispatch Box to be accurate, and for there to be a procedure whereby, if there is a change, they can inform the House about that change and the reasons for it. Earlier today, we were given assurances about the timing of the legal advice from the Attorney General in a ministerial statement, and as far as I am aware, no statement was given to the House altering the information that was presented to Members. What is the procedure that Ministers should follow in such circumstances?

Mr Speaker: The short answer is that if someone inadvertently gives incorrect information to the House, it is a matter of honour for that Member to take the opportunity to correct the record at the earliest possible opportunity. I do not know whether that will prove to be so in this case, for it is as yet uncertain when the legal advice will be published. To be fair to the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), I think that, in responding to questions, he gave the House his honest assessment, at the point at which he gave it, of when he thought that the material would be provided. I know that the hon. Gentleman is every bit as honourable as his late and distinguished father, and I think that if he were subsequently to discover that he had given incorrect information to the House, he would literally be rushing—“rushing” is not too strong a word—to the Dispatch Box to correct the record.

I trust that the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) will be in his place tomorrow to discover what the situation is. I think that there is a premium on early discovery of this advice, but we have already been through the question of how the views of the Attorney General can be established and how he can be probed before the debate if Members are so inclined. *[Interruption.]* Somebody is muttering something about codpieces from a sedentary position—and not just somebody: no less a figure than the Solicitor General. I am sure that the chuntering is eloquent, of a fashion.

Let me say, before we proceed, that I hope it will be helpful to the House if I indicate an advisory cut-off time of 10.30 on Tuesday morning for manuscript amendments to tomorrow's motion. Amendments that reach the Table Office before the rise of the House tonight will appear on the Order Paper in the usual way. The Table Office will arrange publication and distribution of a consolidated amendment list as soon as possible after 10.30 am on Tuesday, including all the manuscript amendments. I will announce my selection of amendments in the usual way at the beginning of the debate. I hope that that is helpful to colleagues.

If there are no more points of order, we will proceed with the motions on the Order Paper. *[Interruption.]* That is very helpful, and I am genuinely grateful, but I was proposing in any case—partly for the reason hinted at by the adviser at the Chair—to take the motions separately.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES)

That the draft Financial Services (Gibraltar) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 22 January, be approved.—(Andrew Stephenson.)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES)

That the draft Gibraltar (Miscellaneous Amendments) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 7 February, be approved.—(Andrew Stephenson.)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (MEDICINES)

That the draft Human Medicines (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 23 January, be approved.—(Andrew Stephenson.)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (CONSUMER PROTECTION)

That the draft Medical Devices (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 24 January, be approved.—(Andrew Stephenson.)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

PUBLIC PROCUREMENT

That the draft Public Procurement (Electronic Invoices etc.) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.—(*Andrew Stephenson.*)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION
(ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION)

That the draft Waste (Miscellaneous Amendments) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 18 February, be approved.—(*Andrew Stephenson.*)

The Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 13 March (Standing Order No. 41A).

COMMITTEES

FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Motion made,

That Ian Austin and Mike Gapes be discharged from the Foreign Affairs Committee and Conor McGinn and Catherine West be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

Hon. Members: Object.

Mr Speaker: Order. I was going to put the Question, but the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin)—just as in our Essex University days—was such an eager beaver that he was ahead of himself.

Hon. Members: Object.

Mr Speaker: I think that I heard it the second time—not as loudly as the first, but it will suffice.

PROCEDURE COMMITTEE

Motion made,

That Dan Carden be discharged from the Procedure Committee and Gareth Snell be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.*)

Hon. Members: Object.

WELSH AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Liz Saville Roberts be discharged from the Welsh Affairs Committee and Jonathan Edwards be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.*)

Offshore Wind Substations:
East of England

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Andrew Stephenson.*)

11.50 pm

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): In the immortal words spoken by my Whip each evening, may I ask colleagues please to stay for the Adjournment? It is a great privilege to be able to rise to speak in this House on behalf of our constituents, and it is no less a privilege for me to do so tonight for one of my smaller villages, the village of Necton. Until tonight, the village was famous for being mentioned in the Domesday Book, where it appears as “Nechetuna”, the name meaning town or settlement by neck of land; for All Saints church, in the benefice of Necton; and for a magnificent 14th-century grade II listed tomb, which is reputed to be that of the Countess of Warwick. As of this year, Necton becomes famous for something else: being the home of the world's largest concentration of substation infrastructure for the transmission of offshore-generated electricity to connect to the grid.

Tonight, I want to use the privilege of speaking in the House for Necton to raise some important issues about the lack of proper strategic planning to deal with the bringing onshore of the infrastructure necessary for connection. That links to the statement that we have just had, because the slogan that has fuelled the Brexit revolution was: “Take back control.” For what have we taken back control—to be overrun by unaccountable quangos, or to act on behalf of the people whom we are here to serve?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Northern Ireland meets the east of England.

Jim Shannon: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Does he agree that tidal energy is not being used to its full potential? The power that tidal turbines can bring to my constituency—in Strangford lough, in particular—proves beyond doubt that substantial amounts of energy could be harnessed and diverted, and further consideration should be given to perfecting the offshore and renewable energy sources in our constituencies. We think we could do more with it, as he has done.

George Freeman: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. Had I been in charge of energy policy at the relevant time, I would have doubled nuclear capacity when we could have got it cheap and invested more in long-term research on a whole range of renewables, including tidal. But we are where we are, and tonight my constituency faces the enormous challenge of hosting this national infrastructure.

I want to make it clear that I am a strong supporter of renewable energy. Indeed, if the wind is to be used, I would rather it were used offshore than onshore. Investment in offshore wind in East Anglia is phenomenal, and it will generate a large number of jobs. Much more importantly, it will reduce our dependence on fossil fuels and dramatically accelerate our work on climate change; it will lessen our dependence on energy from

Russia and the middle east; and it is generally a very good thing. I do not want anything I say to be taken as in any way against the offshore wind generation revolution.

East Anglia is now the global hub of offshore renewable energy, and many of the points I am raising tonight impact on Norfolk as well as Suffolk. I am delighted to be joined tonight by my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), and to have the support of the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) and the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith). My hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal is here on the Front Bench, muted by virtue of her high office but present and supportive as ever—with a thumbs up for the camera.

I want to raise three questions tonight. First, what strategic options have not really been debated properly in Norfolk, Suffolk or East Anglia, and have the Government looked, or required the relevant agencies—in this case, National Grid—to look properly at those options and do a proper cost-benefit assessment and environmental impact assessment? Secondly, what guidance and provisions cover small communities such as Necton when they have to host national infrastructure on the scale that we are talking about? When I talk about a substation, I am not talking about something the size of a container that hums in the rain behind a hedge; these are the size of Wembley stadium, and I shall have two of them outside one village. Thirdly, what can a community that is being asked to carry that kind of infrastructure expect in the way of proper consultation and community benefit?

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): The offshore wind sector deal, which was launched by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth in Lowestoft and Yarmouth last Thursday, provides for the Government and the industry to work together to maximise the benefits of offshore wind to the UK and to regions such as East Anglia. The sector deal makes specific reference to the need to ensure that the impact of onshore transmission is acceptable to local communities such as Necton. Does my hon. Friend agree that this provides the framework for the Government, the industry, National Grid, the Crown estates, councils and MPs to work together to put in place a sustainable solution to the problems that he is quite rightly highlighting?

George Freeman: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that excellent point, and I hope that the Minister will pick up on it in her closing comments. He has pointed to something very important.

The key question that is being asked in our part of the world is: if we are to host this incredible investment—there is up to £50 billion of investment already in the pipeline; I have two wind farms connecting through my constituency and there are 10 more coming—what voice should the people of Norfolk and their elected representatives have in shaping the way in which that infrastructure is connected? At the moment, it looks very much like a free for all. Each wind farm applies for its own cabling and its own substation, with the result that we waste energy, we waste huge amounts of land and we massively increase the environmental impact. This leaves Norfolk powered by renewable energy but disempowered when it comes to the democracy of those

decisions and without any benefit. In our part of the world—I say this as a supporter of renewable energy—it is beginning to feel as though the applicants are using the national significant infrastructure planning regulations to bypass and circumvent the need for any meaningful conversations at all. This explains why I have had such strong support from other colleagues in the area.

I have taken an interest in this, and I have been a Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Department, so I was quite surprised that I first heard about the scale of this infrastructure in my role as a constituency MP, when I was confronted by the application for the Dudgeon wind farm. At the time, the proposal was to put it close to Necton. I did not particularly have a problem with that, but I did have a problem with the siting. It was proposed to put it on the top of a hill in an area of natural beauty with environmental protections. Anyone who had actually been to that area would have said that it was a daft place to put a substation. With the active co-operation of the then applicant company, we sat down with the parish councils and were able to agree that it should be put in the low-lying land next to the village of Necton.

A few years later, in 2013, it became clear that the Vanguard and the Boreas wind farm applications were coming, and that they would need another substation. That was my first surprise, because I felt that the first substation would have been big enough for all those wind farms. However, it turns out that each wind farm will have one. The process of consultation, led by Vattenfall, has led to increasing levels of concern not just for me but for the local community. Throughout all the consultation phases, no one is actually listening to the voices of the people on the ground. We have ended up with this enormous structure placed on top of the hill, visible to five villages and raising all sorts of environmental impacts, including light pollution and impact on the landscape. This has happened in the teeth of a howl from the local community. They do not mind having a substation, but could it not have been put out of sight in the low-lying land next to the previous substation? You could not have made this up.

What has been shocking in this process is the absolute lack of interest from the applicant in the voice of local community representatives, from the parish council to councillors to the MP, because it seems to have been led to believe that it is able to circumvent that local representation under the nationally significant infrastructure planning rules.

The more that one looks into the process by which we have ended up here, the clearer it has become that there has been no proper consideration of the strategic options for taking this scale of energy offshore. Indeed, a number of people in both Norfolk and Suffolk have suggested at various points that it would be rather more efficient to have an offshore ring main to collect the electricity and then have it brought onshore at one or two points with a major substation, instead of requiring each individual wind farm to have its own cabling and substation. You might think that a sensible proposal, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I see you nodding, which is encouraging—neutral though you are—but at no point in the past three, four, five, six or seven years has there been a strategic discussion in Norfolk or Suffolk to which the elected representatives at council or parliamentary levels could contribute.

[George Freeman]

It appears that the National Grid has merrily gone through the national planning process and has responded to applications, but we are in danger of having hugely unnecessary levels of cabling and substation infrastructure, all of which involve high-security installations that represent something of an energy security challenge to the UK in these dangerous times. To illustrate that point, the two wind farms coming to my constituency are responsible for 2,500 acres of land over which 115 km of cabling will run, and reasonably sophisticated local projections have shown that if the cabling were unified for just those two, it could be reduced by 80 km, but there seems to be no basis upon which that conversation could be had. Therefore, what consideration has been made of such options? If there has been none, what consideration should be made of not only the cost and benefit, but the environmental implications? I know that the Minister, as a passionate activist and campaigning Minister, takes such matters seriously.

In the event that little villages such as Necton end up carrying major substation infrastructure—hopefully on the right site—what benefit should such communities expect? It has always seemed fair that if a village should host a wind turbine, for example, it should benefit in a small way locally. Where a village takes a massive piece of national infrastructure, perhaps the benefit might be proportionate. The people of Necton would be happy if something flowed back into the village by way of some community facility. Given the scale of the infrastructure, that could perhaps come as a transport upgrade to the dangerous junction with the A47. Normally, I would relish sitting down with the applicant to try to broker something sensible, but the way that the regulations appear to have been drafted means that there is a no conversation to be had, which seems wrong.

It is late at night, and I have made my points, so I will invite the Minister to reply. However, I close by saying that the applicant should not be able to plead that because this is national infrastructure—although understandably that may bypass the minutiae and the eddies and currents of the local planning system—then somehow the voice of the local community and elected representatives should be cut out. That is important not just for Necton and Mid Norfolk, but for trust in our planning system and for the sense that this energy revolution will work for everybody's benefit. At the moment, however, it looks horribly like it will be for the benefit of a few energy companies and very few people in our part of the world, so I welcome the Minister's interest in this matter both offline and in her comments now.

12.3 am

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): Some might say that it is drawing the short straw to do a late Adjournment on such an important evening, but this debate on an incredibly important topic is far from it. It is also extremely timely, because it was only last week that we launched the offshore wind sector deal. I was lucky enough to fly over part of the developing East Anglia ONE wind farm and then to track the entire cable array back to the substation, and I should add that I offset the emissions.

I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) on securing the debate and allowing me the chance to think a little more about the subject, and perhaps to give him some reassurance. I also thank the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), who is here with me. She is unable to participate, but she has concerns about the proposal in Friston.

It is great to see my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) who, along with his constituents, made me and many others so very welcome last week. It is good to hear the value of the offshore wind sector deal to the community in Lowestoft, in addition to all the exciting opportunities for the fishing industry, about which he has been very clear.

The Norfolk and Suffolk coast is becoming a centre for low-carbon energy generation, which is an exciting prospect that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk points out, comes with some concerns. One of the reasons for wanting to focus on offshore wind is that it avoids the landscape impairment of giant wind turbines, which can be controversial from a planning point of view and can yield a lot less power. People describe offshore wind as better quality wind, as it blows 55% of the time in the North sea, compared with only 30% of the time onshore.

It is astonishing that we can build 197 wind turbines on one offshore farm, which would be very difficult to achieve onshore. That is why the sector deal states that we intend to triple generation from offshore wind over the next 11 years. We think offshore wind will contribute about 30% of our total energy consumption in 2030, at which point 70% of our energy consumption will be from low-carbon sources. Offshore wind will create thousands of jobs: 6,000 or so in the Lowestoft-Yarmouth area, and 27,000 across the UK. We think offshore wind can also help us capture about £3 billion of export opportunities, which is fantastic.

I emphasise that we have the largest market for offshore wind in the world, which is one of the reasons we have been so successful in decarbonising. Of course, in order to bring the power back, we have to join it to the grid at some point, which gets to the heart of my hon. Friend's speech. We want to make sure that, as we develop this resource, we continue to bring communities with us—offshore wind should not be imposed on them.

We have to be clear that the two things to which my hon. Friend alluded, community involvement in planning and the integration of connection infrastructure, will be adequately addressed. Most of the proposed applications in Suffolk and Norfolk are at the pre-application stage, but the applications for Hornsea Project Three and Norfolk Vanguard are currently undergoing examination, and I understand my hon. Friend has been eloquent in his written and oral representations to the examiners on those projects.

My hon. Friend will understand that the final decision on applications for nationally significant infrastructure projects, including onshore connections, is made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, so I am unable to comment on the specific merits of those particular applications, but I emphasise that NSIP projects stress the importance of pre-application consultation. Developers

have to prepare a consultation strategy, and they have to carry out a pre-application consultation with the local community in line with their plan. When they finally make their application, the report must show that they have addressed any concerns raised in the plan.

Of course, the Planning Inspectorate writes to local authorities to ask whether a plan is adequate. If the application is accepted, local people can, of course, continue to make their views known on the proposals. I understand that, in the case of the Suffolk proposals, the Planning Inspectorate is considering what measures it may be able to put in place to limit the need for local people to make the same points over and over again. The inspectorate can basically build up a body of evidence and deliver on that. Within the current framework of the planning system, the message to developers is clear: they must consult local communities and ensure that they give serious consideration to their concerns before any decision can be made by the Secretary of State.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk pointed out, the system may have been inadequate when we had several connections coming onshore. As we continue to build up this resource, we could be dealing with dozens of applications and, in many ways, he represents the optimum point. We have the best resources for offshore wind in the world in the North sea, particularly in the southern North sea, because it is shallow and the wind blows a lot of the time. So we have historically had a point-to-point connection, and that has been a basis on which planning applications have been considered. A series of spokes have brought power onshore. That power is then taken some considerable distance inland in order to connect with the national grid and because the pathway of the cabling has to respect boundaries—it is a process of negotiation—the cables often do not go straight like motorways, but instead follow crooked pathways.

This point-to-point approach is considered to have represented a saving for consumers, with an estimate being at least a £700 million saving so far having been delivered by this connection. Of course, we are still in the infancy of developing these wind farms, so it is right that as the sector matures we consider the potential to connect adjacent projects offshore, linking them up as a ring main, as my hon. Friend said. The developers recognise that this is an important opportunity, as we could be bringing onshore one connection, perhaps a larger oversized connection, that brings in the power of many other wind farms across different development portfolios. Of course, we can also explore the possibility of interconnection with mainland Europe. Some exciting proposals have been made to have interconnectors that run through the middle of some very large wind developments going forward.

The system operator has a key role to play in determining this, working out the way to implement those projects and considering a charging regime for them. My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney has obviously read the sector deal with great interest, because as he said it contains a specific work strand to explore the way the connections are planned and developed. I want to emphasise how very exciting the sector deal is; for the first time, we

have the developers and the supply chain in this extremely important industry working together, thinking about the opportunities and the need for co-working. In this space, there is a real appetite to sort this out and have a plan for the future.

As we develop those plans, my door is of course open to my hon. Friends who represent these important constituencies, and indeed to others who may wish to comment on this. It would be helpful to have scrutiny by the representatives sent to this place. It is clear that our approach needs to evolve if we are to maximise the potential that this fantastic resource delivers to provide us with low-carbon energy at the best value for consumers. I would like to finish by saying two things. The first is a big thank you to the local communities who are going through these processes right now, as they are really helping us to deliver a world-leading energy system. If we get this right, it will have far less of an imprint on the landscape than building the equivalent in terms of onshore scale.

George Freeman: I am grateful to the Minister for agreeing to meet me and other MPs. I particularly wanted to mention the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who, although happy with the current proposals, shares our view that we need a different proposal going forward. In the remaining moments, will she tackle the issue of what should be the approach for the benefit of a local community carrying national infrastructure? The people of Necton are feeling as though they are going to carry this and receive nothing. Is there any guidance or Government thinking to say that a community should benefit?

Claire Perry: If I may, I will take that point away, because my hon. Friend does raise an important question. Obviously, it is similar to others that have come up in respect of energy developments. Perhaps he and I can agree to meet to discuss that a little further. It is right that we make sure that the local communities who host these connections feel that it is worth their while to do so and that they have a minimal physical and environmental impact from allowing these connections to come through their precious space.

I wanted to say two other things. The first is that I am disappointed that we did not manage to work the pedlar of Swaffham into our remarks tonight, as we did so many years ago—perhaps we will be able to try again next time. Lastly, a very appropriate reason for having this debate is that the green heart hero awards were held in our wonderful House of Commons this evening. I am proud to wear my heart, and it was wonderful to see so many people, ranging from babies a few weeks old to people in their later years, absolutely committed, with full enthusiasm, to the sort of low-carbon future that we want to deliver. This is such a timely opportunity to talk about how we deliver that in a way that intelligently uses the grid and minimises the impact on the communities affected.

Question put and agreed to.

12.14 am

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 11 March 2019

[SIOBHAIN McDONAGH *in the Chair*]

Leaving the European Union

4.30 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 239706 relating to leaving the European Union.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. When the Petitions Committee scheduled this debate, we were not entirely sure where we would be in the Brexit process when it happened. As we start this debate, I am still not entirely sure. We are where we are. There are opportunities for Members to discuss the issue in the main Chamber as well, so I suspect we will not be overwhelmed by the numbers coming to speak here today. I will say a little bit about what is happening this week and then go on to interpret the petition's text and discuss possible ways forward.

As I said, we are not entirely sure what is happening this week, but we understand the Prime Minister will probably put what she describes as a deal to Parliament again. I have said on numerous occasions that the one word I would like to eliminate from the English language is "deal". She has said many times that the options are her deal, no deal or no Brexit. The third option is generally presented almost as a threat, perhaps to her own side. It is suggested that it is an idea not to be taken seriously, but it is worth remembering that at the referendum almost three years ago, in a very different pre-Trump world, out of a population of some 65 million people in this country, just under 17.5 million voted to leave, which means that almost 50 million did not. Today I speak up for that forgotten 50 million, the 48% who did not vote for this mess and whose voice has too often not been heard. The debate has been constantly about the first two options, but the petition concerns the third, and it deserves proper consideration.

In December last year, which seems an age ago now, I asked the Prime Minister to revoke article 50 in the national interest, not least to allow those who claim to speak for the 52% to sort out what they actually want. She told me that revoking article 50 would mean staying in the European Union. Well, I and many others are fine with that. The petition, which now has more than 135,000 signatures, including, it will not surprise Members to hear, more than 1,100 from my own constituency of Cambridge, calls on Parliament to

"Revoke Art.50 if there is no Brexit plan by the 25 of February".

That date was passed two weeks ago and we still do not appear to have a plan that can be agreed by the House. It is therefore fair to say that the petitioners would like us to revoke article 50 now.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): By the hon. Gentleman's own logic, if 135,000 people have signed the petition, does that not mean that about 65 million have not? We should therefore treat it with the contempt with which he has treated the referendum result.

Daniel Zeichner: I do not treat the referendum result with contempt. It has not been able to escape our attention and has dominated our lives for the past three years. The Petitions Committee should be treated with respect, and 135,000 signatures on a petition is not to be disregarded.

The petition text states:

"On the 25th of November both the UK Government and the European Union came to an agreement on the proposed departure from the EU. After an historic defeat in the House of Commons on the 15th of January, 2019 by a majority of 230 votes the PM has now decided to go back to the EU over the backstop."

That is a statement of fact. On 25 November, the EU 27 leaders met for a special meeting of the European Council and endorsed the withdrawal agreement as presented by the negotiators of the EU and the UK. They also approved the political declaration on future EU-UK relations that accompanies the withdrawal agreement. The scale of the defeat in January was, I think, unexpected for most of us, and it is useful to consider why.

The petition mentions the backstop, which certainly accounts for part of the group of Government Members who voted against the deal, but there were many significant and substantial further concerns. For many of us, it was the imprecise nature of the political declaration that caused concerns; it looked like a wishlist of aspirations, rather than anything settled. Other concerns included the danger of a further cliff edge in two years' time; the likelihood that at best we would pay to be part of programmes in which we no longer had any influence in terms of a vote; and the near certainty that we would still be subject to European Court of Justice jurisdiction. In other words, far from taking back control, we would, in the words of some, become "vassals". Frankly, that had been obvious from the outset, and it was a pretty silly vassal that did not see that coming.

The second paragraph of the petition text states:

"Under section 5 (ii) of the Belfast agreement, 1998, there is agreement to 'to use best endeavours to reach agreement on the adoption of common policies, in areas where there is a mutual cross-border and all island benefit'".

Essentially, the Irish backstop is an unresolvable issue: it is a position of last resort that prevents a hard border on the island of Ireland by providing an EU-UK customs relationship if a suitable trade relationship has not been reached by the end of the transition period. Some are concerned that we cannot withdraw from it unilaterally, which of course is the whole point. It is a protection mechanism for both the Republic of Ireland and the UK as well as the rest of the EU, and thus it must apply to all of us.

Reams and reams have been written about the issue and months have been spent arguing about it and discussing it. The contents of the Attorney General's codpiece continue to attract both speculation and consternation. Frankly, I suspect there is little that I can add to all the learned verbiage, other than the conclusion that it does not appear to be getting anyone very far. The technological solutions that some who fear being trapped inside a de facto customs union advocate to manage customs do not currently exist. Realistically, the backstop cannot change, or the protections that it offers will not be cast iron. Whatever codicils, clever words, Star Chamber tests or anything else are offered, a fundamental problem remains and is unlikely to be resolved.

[Daniel Zeichner]

Skilful negotiators are able to build confidence and create constructive ambivalence, allowing everyone to believe what they need to believe. It is a matter of politics, not law, and the Government's failure to appreciate that is yet another in a long list of failures of basic competence. Brexiteers need to be honest: if they want to allow a position where a hard border becomes possible, they are accepting the potential break-up of the United Kingdom. By neglecting Northern Ireland in that way, it is possible that Brexit could result in the fracturing of our United Kingdom. For the Conservative and Unionist party, that is quite a price to pay. The border of the European Union will be the Irish border, as the Republic of Ireland is our only land border with Europe. The basic facts of geography are undeniable. Ireland is an island, and there is no way around that fact.

The third paragraph of the petition text considers the economic impact, noting that:

"The Government's own economic analysis published in November 2018, shows that a no deal scenario will have roughly a 10% decrease in GDP."

Again, volumes and reams have been written about the potential economic impact, particularly of no deal. Members will be delighted that I do not intend to re-rehearse those reams this afternoon. Like all economic predictions, it is of course contested, but we are in a curious place when the Government's own economic predictions are treated with derision by their own supporters.

I will simply add to the already well-known data some information from last week, when the OECD published its regular economic outlook on the global economy. It predicts that a disorderly no-deal exit would probably spark a UK recession. The OECD shows that the UK economy has been weakening since the 2016 referendum.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am sure that my hon. Friend is aware that MPs for constituencies in the west midlands are very concerned. We have consulted universities and with Jaguar Land Rover, and they are all concerned about the situation that the Government find themselves in, because it means they cannot plan for the future. There are 800,000 jobs at stake in the motorcar industry alone, so we have to get it right.

Likewise, universities may have problems recruiting staff from abroad unless that issue is sorted out. More importantly, the Government will not guarantee funding for universities beyond 2020. People in the west midlands are concerned. The universities rely on the motorcar trade and vice versa, so it is a very serious situation that should not be treated lightly by anybody.

Daniel Zeichner: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who speaks with great knowledge about the west midlands and the motor industry. As a member of the Transport Committee, I have met with many motor manufacturing organisations, and I have watched aghast as the situation has unfolded over the last few months. It is very serious. Of course, the university sector is very important to my city. I have just come from a meeting with the University of Cambridge. My hon. Friend's point about the uncertainty of future funding is very serious indeed.

Mr Jim Cunningham: To reinforce my hon. Friend's point, Jaguar Land Rover has already made about 1,000 people redundant; it hopes to secure its future. Ford has made about 300 people redundant. Then there is Nissan and other such companies. The concern is very real. It is no good the Brexiteers treating lightly things that have serious implications for the country.

Daniel Zeichner: I agree entirely. Just the other day, I was calling on people when canvassing in Cambridge, and was struck by the number of people I was coming across who were raising personal experiences. Very senior engineers were telling me that they were applying for jobs in Switzerland because the research funding upon which they rely through the Europe Research Council will be going there. They have no desire to go and previously had no expectation that they would ever seek to leave such a wonderful place as Cambridge, but if that is where the research money is going, that is where scientists will go. It is a global set-up, and we risk doing huge harm to our industries and our universities.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that the OECD forecasts show a general slowdown around the advanced world, particularly on the continent of Europe, and show that the UK will grow faster this year than either Germany or Italy? Will he also confirm that there has been a general hit to the car industry because of diesel, which has nothing to do with Brexit.

Daniel Zeichner: The OECD says all those things, but people in the motor industry are very clear that the uncertainty is an absolute killer when it comes to long-term investment. Of course, many of the decisions are not being made here, but in Japan. Those decisions are already being made, and are doing us huge harm. Of course there is a range of factors, but it is hard to imagine such instability not causing problems to our industries and universities.

The Government's no-deal impact assessment, published two weeks ago, states that

"food prices are likely to increase"

and that customs checks could cost business £13 billion a year—an extraordinary sum of money. I have just come from an event that was about how our maintained nurseries are facing closure for want of a fraction of that amount. Why on earth are we doing it?

The Government's report also said that the worst-hit areas economically in a no-deal scenario would be Wales, losing 8.1%, Scotland, losing 8%, Northern Ireland, losing 9.1%, and the north-east, losing 10.5%. It is no comfort to those of us in the west midlands and the east that it would be marginally better for us. Reportedly, even the most enthusiastic Brexiteers acknowledge that there could be problems in the short term. At least on that we can probably all agree.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Is not part of the challenge that we had all these debates in 2016? The fact is that all the doom and gloom of the economic predictions regarding a vote to leave did not materialise. Most people chose to ignore them, and had the courage to vote on the basis of sovereignty.

Re-rehearsing the economic arguments does not seem to be having any effect on the views of the British people.

Daniel Zeichner: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman is very confident. I am sure that he is so confident that he is keen to see that tested in a further vote—I will come to that in a moment. One of the good things that has come from the process is that we all know so much more than we knew three years ago, not just in the country but in this place. As people begin to lose their jobs, and as the people of Cambridge begin to up and go elsewhere, it has become increasingly clear that it is no longer about possible projections, but what is actually happening on the ground.

I will pay the petitioners the tribute of finishing their petition before going further. In its final paragraph, the petitioners explain their view of the European Union's perspective on the deal and the backstop. They say:

"The issue is that EU have firmly stated that they will not re-open negotiations with the UK over the agreement and remove the backstop."

One of the most dismal aspects of the last three years has been a consistent failure on this side of the channel to understand how any of this looks from outside. The narrative of the evil European Union trying to punish Britain has, of course, been carefully burnished by some pursuing the Brexit cause, and their friends in certain newspapers, and will certainly continue to be promoted vigorously. Of course the European Union has its own interests, and it will fight for them. Why would it not? It has plenty of problems of its own to worry about.

The European Union has always been pretty clear that it would prefer that we had not decided to leave, but it has also been consistent and clear in its arguments. The UK has offered no workable solutions to the backstop issue. The EU has implored us to suggest something that would be fit for purpose, but the UK Government have suggested no mechanism that provides strong enough protections on the island of Ireland. It can hardly be a surprise that there has been so little progress.

I will try to bring the four paragraphs together, and summarise the petitioners' case, which I take to be that years of work by officials, politicians, campaigners and more led to the withdrawal agreement and political declaration, but despite all that work it was overwhelmingly rejected by the House of Commons. On the issue of the public mood, interestingly, Professor John Curtice—one of the highest authorities on polling in this country—told an event just last week, hosted by the Economic and Social Research Council in a room adjacent to this Chamber, that that lack of confidence in the Prime Minister's arrangements is shared by the public. Apparently just 30% of leavers support the Prime Minister's proposals, and 22% of remainers, which I find slightly surprising, but there we go.

The 1998 Belfast agreement must be respected. That creates a near insoluble problem on the island of Ireland if the Prime Minister is going to continue opposing a UK-EU customs union. A no-deal option is economically highly dangerous, and the EU will not move further, given that it feels that it has already made substantial concessions, and the Prime Minister refuses to change her red lines. That, in substance, is the case being made by the petitioners.

Members will note that this has been a very brief account of some of the most complicated and contentious issues that this place has dealt with in many years. Many hours have been devoted to arguing about every aspect; before the debate started, we reckoned that the Petitions Committee has already brought six or seven such debates to this Chamber. I have chosen not to re-rehearse every argument in depth, because I am not sure that it would add much of value.

We are where we are—at the beginning of a week in which the whole country hopes that we can make some progress; in which the millions of non-UK EU nationals living in the UK, and the millions of UK citizens living in the EU, desperately hope that the uncertainty that blights their lives will end; in which the businesses desperately making plans for the uncertainty that risks wrecking their hard-earned investments in just a couple of weeks could see that uncertainty also come to an end; and in which the long-term sick, worried about security of supply of their vital medicines, could see an end to their anxiety. All that and much more could be done this afternoon—this very hour—were the Government finally to listen to the 48%, who voted for something achievable, rather than those who voted for a vague, wild and sometimes imprecise set of aspirations.

The petition sets out a compelling case. We have exhausted the first two of the Prime Minister's options: the deal is dead, completely rejected by Parliament, and a no-deal exit would be irresponsible, plunging the country into chaos and hitting the most vulnerable hardest. It follows logically that we should go for what the majority of the country now want. If that is disputed, I say we put it to the test: have the vote on the work done by the Prime Minister and her Ministers. To finish with the Prime Minister—finish with her, not finish her—her deal, no deal, or no Brexit? Frankly, there is no contest. Simple: revoke article 50 now, and let the country move on.

4.50 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): The public who are listening to this and similar debates cannot believe that this Parliament so lacks confidence and courage that, two years and eight months on from the great people's vote, it is still considering forgetting the impact of that vote and ditching Brexit altogether. The public are saying two things to us: "Get on with it!" and, from the majority who voted to leave, "What part of 'leave' did you not understand?"

Leave voters deeply resent how too many Members of Parliament and smart commentators look down on them and pretend that they did not understand what they were doing or know what they were voting for, or that they were in some way muddled about their aims. We have heard that again today from the Petitions Committee representative, the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner): he says that we did not know what we were doing, that it was all fanciful and that we all had a mixed idea. We knew exactly what we were doing—voting to take back control. We voted to take back control of our laws, our money and our borders, and that is exactly what this Parliament has to get on and do.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I appreciate what the right hon. Gentleman is saying, but he cannot possibly say that two and a half years ago people knew

[Ronnie Cowan]

precisely what they were voting for, when a few hours away from our vote, we do not know what we are voting on.

John Redwood: Well, I know exactly what I am voting on. I am sorry if the hon. Gentleman has not prepared or read anything and does not understand what is going on, but I am voting to leave the European Union. The only way that we can now leave the European Union, because of the way in which the negotiations have been mishandled, is to leave on 29 March without signing the withdrawal agreement and to offer a comprehensive free trade agreement—which, if there were nothing else on the table, the EU would be well advised to accept.

Ronnie Cowan *rose*—

John Redwood: If the hon. Gentleman wants to try again, he can try again.

Ronnie Cowan: Okay, what about haulage companies whose drivers need European Conference of Ministers of Transport permits? The UK can give out 984 permits, but there have been 11,300 applications. What does the right hon. Gentleman say to the 90% of hauliers who cannot get permits? Is that just a minor detail?

John Redwood: Well, the Government will make sure that haulage will work, and of course that is something that the Government can and will do. I have every confidence that roughly the same number of lorries will come through Calais and Dover on 30 March as on 28 March. I am sure it will work fine. I know of no reason why the Government would stop lorry drivers moving through Calais and Dover.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Chris Heaton-Harris): I thank my right hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene at this unusually early stage; I know that he was just coming to the point that, back on 19 December, the Commission issued a no-deal notice to say that lorries can travel as they do now until December 2019, so there is no issue.

John Redwood: Exactly. That is another way of putting my reassurance that of course things are going to work, because it is in the interests of both sides.

I find it almost unbelievable that MPs elected to this place, who are meant to be serving the interests of their constituents, take delight in spreading false rumours about how everything will go wrong, like this nonsense about how drugs will not arrive in this country on 30 March. I know of no pharmaceutical companies on the continent that currently supply drugs to the NHS but have notified it that they no longer wish to do so. I have seen very clear documentation from the French side that it knows how it will handle the transit of trucks containing drugs, and there is very clear evidence that the UK Government wish all those drugs to carry on coming in with no new barriers. So what is the argument about drugs, other than a deliberate scare story to make the most vulnerable people in our country think that there is something wrong with Brexit? It is a disgrace, and we are fed up with it.

Ronnie Cowan: If there is no fear whatever, why are the Government telling people to stockpile? Why are pharmaceutical companies telling me, “There is one key ingredient in the entire process, and if we do not get it, we will run out of that product”?

John Redwood: The hon. Gentleman got the lorries thing wrong, and now he has got the drugs thing wrong. The Government are not asking people to stockpile drugs. People will buy their normal drugs in the normal way, or be offered them free on the NHS in the normal way. There is no need to panic, as I have just explained. The hon. Gentleman has not named a company or a drug that will be deliberately withheld from the British market; unless he can do so, I do not think that he has a case at all.

Ronnie Cowan: The pharmaceutical company Martindale tells me that it needs sugar to manufacture methadone, because it is a syrup. It has stockpiled three months’ worth, but then it will run out. If sugar does not come into this country, it will run out of methadone.

John Redwood: Why would somebody mount an economic blockade of Britain and not sell us their product? That is complete nonsense. This is a competitive world. When the scare stories were first put round that Calais would be blocked by deliberate action, I and others made inquiries and were told that Zeebrugge, Ostend, Antwerp and Rotterdam would love to have the business and were making very competitive offers against Calais, but Calais immediately said, “No, of course we don’t want to lose that business, and by the way we still have the shortest crossing, so it should still be the easiest way.”

Such malicious and unpleasant scare stories are why this Parliament is losing the trust of the public generally. The public expect us to be grown up and manage these things. If there are issues that need managing on our exit, it is our job to manage them, not to scaremonger or try to make them worse.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman says that the public are losing trust in this Parliament. I put it to him that the reason the public—and indeed the people of Scotland—are losing trust in this Parliament is that, even at this late hour before our meaningful vote tomorrow, we have a Prime Minister jetting off to Strasbourg and trying to get last-minute concessions. This place is in absolute chaos. Is not that the reason people are losing trust in this Parliament?

John Redwood: I think the main reason people are losing confidence and trust is that all Labour and Conservative MPs, as far as I am aware, were elected on manifestos—[*Interruption.*] The SNP MPs clearly were not, but Labour and Conservative Members dominate the numbers in this Parliament, and we were all elected on manifestos that made it very clear that our parties fully respected the decision of the British people. We knew it was a decision; that was what the Government leaflet to all homes said, and what Parliament accepted in the debates on the referendum legislation, so we must honour that pledge. Our Conservative manifesto went further and explicitly said that we would leave the European Union, the customs union and the single market. There was no doubt about that; we were not

muddled; we did not have different views; we did not want Norway plus or a Swiss model; we would leave every aspect of the EU, as described.

Mr Nigel Evans: I find the situation bizarre, because it was this Parliament that gave the people the chance to have a referendum. It put the question that people voted on, but people did not vote in quite the way that it wanted. For possibly the first time, it is not that politicians have let the people down, but that people have let politicians down.

John Redwood: Yes, indeed. My hon. Friend makes his point very well: Parliament gave people the decision and people took it.

The Conservative manifesto was very clear that we would leave on 29 March. It also said, clearly and correctly, that

“no deal is better than a bad deal”,

so that if it appeared that the deal on offer after the negotiations was a bad deal—as it clearly is at the moment—the preferred option should be no deal. It further said, very wisely, that negotiations on the future partnership should proceed in parallel with the negotiations on the withdrawal agreement. I accept that the Government have made mistakes; their mistake of not keeping the two negotiations in parallel has led to a withdrawal agreement that most MPs could not possibly accept, because it is a surrender document and a disgrace—it is not Brexit as Brexiteers want it, and it is not something that remain voters want either.

The Labour manifesto was also crystal clear that the Labour party accepted the verdict as a decision. It did not offer a second referendum, nor did it think that the public had got it wrong. It set out a very imaginative and different United Kingdom independent trade policy at some length; I did not agree with all the detail, but I was delighted that the Labour party wanted a completely independent UK trade policy. Such a policy would be completely incompatible with staying in the customs union and/or the single market, because it would require all sorts of freedoms to negotiate higher standards and negotiate different deals with the rest of the world, which would not be compatible with staying in the EU's version with lower standards and the customs union arrangements.

We are told that the petitioners think we should now revoke article 50 because we have not reached an agreement that Parliament can accept. That means no Brexit—turning down the views of the majority. The hon. Member for Cambridge tried to put the best possible spin on this by coming up with these specious numbers and saying that 50 million people did not vote for Brexit, therefore it cannot carry. That figure includes all the children in the country—I am interested to hear that, in his view, two and three-year-olds have a view and should have a right to a view. It also assumes that everybody who did not vote in the referendum would, if they had bothered, have voted against Brexit, although there is absolutely no reason to presume that. On samples and polling, one would assume that the people who did not vote had exactly the same split of views as the people who did vote. There was nothing in the referendum to say, “If you want to remain, you might as well stay at home.”

If people wanted to remain, there was every point in going to vote, just as there was clearly every point in voting if they wanted to leave.

Steve Double: If the view is to be taken that 50 million did not vote to leave, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is therefore also true that 51 million people did not vote to remain in the European Union?

John Redwood: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. It is also a question of understanding how representative democracy based on elections and referendums works. In all other cases, Members of different parties in the House accept two things. First, they accept that when we have had an election, it is the votes that were cast that determine who gets to govern. We do not say, “Oh well. Many millions of people didn't vote, and they wanted a different Government.”

Secondly, we also accept that it was the voters' decision. We do not say, “Oh deary me. I'm still in Government. You tried to throw me out of Government—I'm sorry, electorate, you're too stupid to understand. I'm doing a wonderful job and I'm actually going to carry on in Government, because I don't agree with you. I might give you another vote in two three years' time if you still haven't come round to my point of view, but we're just going to ignore the vote.” No right hon. or hon. Member would dream of saying that—not even members of the SNP, who have bitter experiences of referendums. They say they love referendums, but every time they hold one, they lose it. Every time they lose one, they then say, “That one didn't count. Can we have another one?”

David Linden: As usual, the right hon. Gentleman is speaking with complete consistency on these issues—it is normally tripe. On democratic mandates and referendums, I have listened to him talk about how the majority of people voted. He has not once made reference to the fact that 62% of people in Scotland voted remain. What does he have to say about that? What does he have to say about the people in Scotland who spoke with one voice and said that they wanted to remain? Sixty-two per cent. is a rather large number, yet he seems to be ignoring that.

John Redwood: It is a United Kingdom matter and it was a United Kingdom referendum. As someone who believes in the Union, but believes in the politics of consent above all, I am very proud that our country offered the people of Scotland the opportunity to leave our Union. I hoped they would stay, but I thought we were right to offer them the vote. Just look at the dreadful mess in Catalonia, where the Spanish state will not offer people a democratic choice.

We were right to say that only the people of Scotland should determine whether it stayed in the Union or left. We did not ask the people of England, Wales and Northern Ireland; we let the people of Scotland determine their own future. They decided—I am very pleased and think they made a good decision—to stay in the Union. The next thing the Union did was have a referendum on whether the whole Union should stay in the EU. They had full opportunity to participate in that referendum and explain why more English people should have agreed with them, but they did not succeed. Under the rules of the Union, they have to live with the Union's judgment.

David Linden: The right hon. Gentleman is genuinely being very generous in giving way, and he has hit the nail on the head with that point. He is right to say that in 2014 the people of Scotland voted to remain in the United Kingdom on a prospectus of leaflets that were put out by the Better Together campaign and stated:

“The only way to secure Scotland’s membership of the European Union is to remain in the United Kingdom.”

We did that: we voted to remain in the United Kingdom and now find ourselves being dragged out of Europe. Does the right hon. Gentleman even begin to see—even through his Unionist-tinted glasses—just how difficult it is to reconcile that with a Unionist argument in Scotland?

John Redwood: Not at all, because that was an entirely truthful statement at the time. Clearly, Scotland had no right to independent membership of the European Union, which was the issue. It was already clear in 2014 that my party would campaign for a referendum. I always thought that we would win both the general election and the referendum—I was about the only person who thought that we would win both, and I am very pleased that we did. It was an entirely democratic process. Scottish voters could see that might happen when they made their decision to stay in the Union. As very welcome full members of our Union, they then had every opportunity to make a decisive intervention in the debate we had together on whether we stayed in the European Union.

I want to finish on the economic issues, of which much has been made. It is a strange debate, because most leave voters voted on the issues of democracy, independence, sovereignty, making our own decisions and spending our own money. I am someone who thinks that we will be better off—not worse off—by leaving the European Union. I have consistently argued this before and after the referendum. The case is very easy to make. I would like us to have a Brexit bonus Budget as soon as we leave the European Union at the end of this month. Such a Budget should boost our economy by between 1% and 2% of GDP.

Let me take the more modest version—a 1% boost from a £20 billion stimulus, which would provide a mixture of increased money for much-loved public services. It would also include tax cuts. The kind of thing I have in mind is more money for our schools budgets and teachers. We need more money for our armed forces and security, and for our police and the work on gangs, knife crime and so forth. We need more money for our social care, where the shoe has been pinching. The Government have already found prospectively large sums for the health service, and the challenge is to ensure that—where we vote those sums through—we get good value for money and are buying something that really does provide a higher quality service, which is what the public expect.

There should also be a series of tax cuts, firstly on VAT—the tax that we are not allowed to cut or reduce in so many ways, because it is an EU tax. I would take all VAT off green products, because it is wrong that people have to pay rather large taxes on better boiler controls, insulation and various other green measures they can take in their homes to cut their fuel bills. I would like to get rid of VAT altogether on domestic fuel. The budgets of people on the lowest incomes have

the highest proportion of expenditure on fuel—there is fuel poverty. Why do the Government contribute to it by adopting an EU tax on domestic fuel? It would be good to get rid of that.

I would like stamp duties to be put back to the same levels as before the big hikes. I would not put back stamp duties that have been cut, but those that have been increased—it has clearly done a lot of damage to the property market by stopping transactions and stopping mobility—so that people can afford to live in the right-size property that is appropriate for their stage in life.

I would also like quite a big reduction in business rates. There is definite unfairness for high street retailing by comparison with online retailing, and now would be a good opportunity to reduce business rates. It is eminently affordable. The Government have provided their estimate of £39 billion, which is largely to be spent in a couple of years over the period of further negotiation. I think it will be much more than that in the long term—there are no numbers in the withdrawal agreement. Quite a lot of that money falls in the first couple of years, and I would like us to spend it in the next couple of years in the way I have described, with a £20 billion increase in the first year to get things going. There is a running saving of £12 billion a year or more from the saving of the net contribution, leaving aside any special payments under the withdrawal agreement.

The Chancellor has already let it be known that there has been a big overshoot of his fiscal tightening: we are borrowing far less than he was expecting, so he has a bit of leeway. We might learn more about that later this week. Putting it all together, the package I suggest is very modest, but it would give a very welcome improvement to our public services and give quite a good economic boost through targeted tax cuts. Our GDP would go up in the first year after we left the European Union, rather than go down on what it would have been otherwise.

Ronnie Cowan: I am just curious how a national debt of £1.7 trillion can be serviced with all these tax cuts.

John Redwood: As I just explained, my measures would not increase the build-up of public debt, but would be financed out of the amounts that are already in the Budget to go to the European Union.

The public find it extremely odd that many Members of Parliament want to give any amount to the European Union without challenging or probing what bill it is sending to us and why, and yet begrudge us spending that money on our priorities at home. One of the winning themes of the vote leave campaign was that we want to control and spend our own money. There is absolutely no legal obligation to pay that money to the European Union after 29 March, when we have left. Indeed, the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 repeals the European Communities Act 1972, so I do not think the Government will have any powers to send money to the European Union after 29 March, given the admirable legislation now on the statute book that means that we will leave.

Many people who are interested in these affairs want us to get on with it and leave the European Union. Many share my optimism that we will be better out, trading and developing free trade agreements with the rest of the world and cutting tariffs where that makes

sense and does not damage our home industry. Above all, we will spend the money that we will spare because we are no longer making a huge tribute to the European Union through these very large sums of money. What's not to like? How do MPs who got elected to implement Brexit think they will get away with telling the British people that they were wrong, and that they will delay or stop Brexit?

5.11 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), a fellow member of the Petitions Committee, for introducing it.

Although I fundamentally disagree with the premise of the petition, I absolutely understand some of the frustrations that people feel. I admit that there have been many times over the past few months that even I—somebody who is passionate about leaving the European Union—have wondered whether it is not too much hassle, and whether saying, “Let’s call the whole thing off,” might be the easiest course of action. However, I believe that if we did that, we would be fundamentally wrong, and would be making a huge and damaging mistake. It would be hugely damaging to our democracy for us to seek to undo the democratic decision that the British people made in the 2016 referendum.

This House was absolutely clear at that time that we were allowing the British people to make the decision in that referendum, and that we would carry out the instruction that they gave us. If we do not deliver on that commitment, we will further damage, and perhaps destroy for a long time, the last bit of trust in this place and our democracy. We all accept that trust in politics is at a pretty low ebb. Given the way that this House and many Members and former Members have behaved in recent months, we can hardly blame people for having a very low opinion of it. It is sad to say that none of the main political parties comes out of this process with any credit, given the way we have gone about things. Ignoring the result of the referendum would do lasting damage, and I believe that there would be a significant backlash from the electorate.

Mr Nigel Evans: Does my hon. Friend agree that one reason why people in every constituency in Lancashire, and people in the north-west, the north-east, the south-west and the south-east, voted to leave was that for far too long they had felt as if they did not have a voice? This Parliament suddenly gave them a voice via the referendum, but it now wants to reinforce the view that their voice does not matter. It would be hugely dangerous not to carry out the wishes of the British people.

Steve Double: I am not sure whether my hon. Friend has been looking at my notes, but that was going to be my next point. He has made it very well for me. Many thousands of people up and down the country, particularly in the parts that he highlighted, voted for the first time in their lives, or certainly for the first time in a very long time, in that referendum for the simple reason that they thought that, because it was a nationwide referendum, their vote would count and their voice would be heard. It would be an absolute denial of that if we did not deliver on the referendum.

Not delivering on the referendum would not just damage our democracy. We should think about what message it would send to the EU if, having gone through all this for almost three years, we turned round and said, “You know what? It’s a bit too difficult. I think we’ll reverse this, because it’s a bit too hard for us. It’s too tough a decision for us to make.” It would be a national embarrassment if, having gone through this process, we do not actually deliver on the referendum. It would weaken our position in the EU. Let us not pretend that, by revoking the triggering of article 50 and pretending that none of this ever happened, somehow we will go back to pre-2016 times as though nothing had ever happened. It would undermine and damage our position in the EU in a way that would be massively damaging to our country.

If the conclusion is that it is too difficult, too complex and too politically challenging ever to leave the EU, that would be the final confirmation, if one were needed, that we have surrendered our national sovereignty and are trapped in a political union that will inevitably lead to further integration with the EU. That would be the only conclusion that could be drawn if, after voting to leave and spending nearly three years trying to get out, we cannot do that. Clearly, we would never leave the EU. It would show the EU that we are too weak and timid, and that we lack the courage, faith and optimism in our nation to leave.

Let us be clear that many people feel frustration because we are not where we want to be. We should never have been in this position. It is clearly an understatement to say that we are not where we wanted to be. This close to the deadline, we should not still be debating whether we will actually leave. It is absolutely ludicrous that, after all this time, the question of whether we will actually leave the EU is still on the table. That issue was settled when this House voted to give the people of this country a referendum, and when, after people gave us their decision, a huge majority of this House voted to trigger article 50. The decision was made then that we will leave. It should not be in any doubt. This matter should have been settled once and for all. It is a failure of leadership—of politics—that we have not been able to settle this issue clearly and finally.

Many people up and down the country—particularly some of those we were referring to earlier—who voted in that referendum because they wanted their voice to be heard do not believe that we will ever leave. I speak to them in my constituency every weekend that I go back. They come to me and say, “Please tell me that we are actually going to leave.” I say, “Well, as far as I’m concerned, and if I have anything to do with it, yes we will.” They go on to tell me that they genuinely believe that we are in the midst of an establishment stitch-up that will somehow find a way to ignore the referendum result—some clever parliamentary shenanigans to undo it—and we will not actually leave. Thousands of people across the country think that. If we prove them right and allow Brexit not to happen, we will reinforce their view. That will be hugely damaging to our society.

Adam Holloway (Gravesend) (Con): I do not know whether my hon. Friend’s constituents are aware—I am sure that many of mine are not—but under the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration, our defence and intelligence would be subordinate to Europe, after

[Adam Holloway]

40 years of our trying very hard to avoid that. Are we not a tier 1 military power? We have some of the best intelligence services in the world. We are now signing up to EU defence structures “to the extent possible under EU law”. That is a massive change that mortally threatens our relationship with the United States and damages the Five Eyes.

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Member, who did not have the decency to arrive when the debate started, is making an intervention, not a speech. Can he get to the question?

Adam Holloway: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Five Eyes and our relationship with the United States are mortally threatened? The British people do not realise that.

Steve Double: I am deliberately trying to avoid being drawn into a debate about the withdrawal agreement because I am not sure that that is what the petition is actually about, but my hon. Friend makes a good point. There are many serious concerns about the content of the withdrawal agreement, and he has highlighted one about defence and security. My fundamental problem with the withdrawal agreement is that it puts our country in a worse and weaker position than now, which is why it does not have my support as it stands.

Part of the problem is that this House has been gripped by fear. Far too many people in positions of responsibility in Parliament and in Government seem paralysed by the fear of the unknown. Let us be clear: that is what this is partly about, because some argue that we do not know what Brexit is going to mean. Yes—that is the point. We do not know because we are breaking free of the security blanket of something to which we have belonged for 40 years, and we cannot answer every question. But do you know what? The British people had the guts and courage, and the faith in our country, to vote for it anyway.

David Linden: I reflect on my experience in 2014, when the Bank of England and all the establishment figures whom the hon. Gentleman is currently railing against told the people of Scotland how difficult things would be if they broke away from that security blanket. Does he not understand that there is a bit of an inconsistency in that argument?

Steve Double: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but no, there is not, because despite all those arguments, a majority of the people of the United Kingdom had the courage to vote to leave anyway. That is exactly the point.

We have to ask: what has happened in our politics when, it appears to me, the average voter in the United Kingdom has more courage and more faith, confidence and optimism in our nation's ability to get through Brexit, to make it a success and to thrive than the political and business leaders and the establishment? I ask myself: what has happened to put us in a place where the British people have more confidence in our country than many of our leaders?

Ronnie Cowan: To paraphrase the hon. Gentleman, the people of Scotland did not vote “Yes” in the 2014 referendum because they were cowards.

Steve Double: I say to the hon. Gentleman that those who promoted leaving the Union clearly did not sell their positive message enough to get people to vote for it. In the European Union referendum, however, that clearly did happen.

John Redwood: In truth, the independence movement in Scotland did not want to be independent, because they would not say that they would have an independent currency or that they would leave the European Union. We really do want to be independent and that is why we won.

Steve Double: It is well documented that I have not been the biggest fan of our Prime Minister during this process. I believe that many mistakes have been made that have led us to where we are today, such as the lack of a clear starting position for negotiations, allowing the EU to dictate the timetable and nature of negotiations, and not preparing properly and early enough for a no-deal Brexit, to name a few. Clearly, we could have done so much better and, with better leadership, we could have been in a better position.

I am also very clear that not all the blame rests with the Prime Minister. Many Members of both Houses—and former Members of this House—have played a part in undermining her negotiating position almost every step of the way. Every one of them must share responsibility for our position. It is now quite clear that members of the Cabinet and other senior members of Government have publicly and vocally said that they support the Government's position of “no deal is better than a bad deal”, while crossing their fingers behind their backs the whole way. When it appears that no deal might actually arise, they make it clear that they do not support that position and threaten to resign if it happens. To find out that those people, who supposedly supported a Government position, did not really mean it, is enough to undermine trust in our politics.

Mr Nigel Evans: Does my hon. Friend agree that, in any negotiation, being able to walk away makes our position stronger? If the person who we are negotiating with knows that we ultimately have to accept a deal under whatever circumstance, the deal is not going to be very good.

Steve Double: My hon. Friend makes the point very well. If we say that we can only leave the EU with an agreement, we are actually saying that we can leave only on the terms that the EU dictates. If it knows that we will not walk away without a deal, it will dictate the terms—as in any negotiation—and that has been part of the problem all along. Too many people in this House—those on the Opposition Front Bench have certainly contributed to this position—have told the EU, “We will not allow Parliament to take the UK out of the EU without a deal,” and it has believed it. The EU has not been willing to come to the negotiating table in good faith and negotiate a good deal because it has known all along that Parliament was very unlikely to allow us to walk away without a deal.

Too many Members of this House have also said publicly “We respect the referendum result”—some even stood on manifestos that said so—while working tirelessly behind the scenes every week to undermine the result and find a way to prevent it from happening. That has also been hugely damaging to trust in our politics.

We will find out only in the years ahead, when all this is over and the history books about this period have been written, exactly how damaging those who have sought to undermine the Prime Minister’s negotiating position have really been to our country. I believe they have been hugely damaging and have largely contributed to where we are today. Only when the history books have been written will we really understand all that has gone on behind the scenes to give the message to the EU that we will stop the UK leaving if we can, in any way that we can. That has been massively damaging to our chances of getting a withdrawal agreement and future deal that this House can support.

Ronnie Cowan: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that another part of the problem is that, at the outset, the UK Government stated that nothing was agreed until everything was agreed? Had we gone to the negotiating table, had some debate and arranged something, we would have created a working relationship between us and the EU27, which we could then have built on, implemented and fine-tuned over time. We started off on the wrong foot, where we have stayed for two and a half years.

Steve Double: I agree with the hon. Gentleman; as I said earlier, many mistakes were made, and some of the serious ones were made right at the start of negotiations, when we started negotiating from a very weak position without really knowing what we wanted from all this. His point falls in that category. We should have been much clearer and much stronger.

Those who seek to promote a second referendum, and have done so for a very long time, have also massively undermined the Government’s negotiating position. Those people have given a message to the EU that the referendum result can be overturned. That has encouraged the EU to give us a bad deal. Everything points to the fact that if there is to be a second referendum—I will do everything I can to stop that happening—and the deal on the table is bad enough, no one will vote for it and we will stay in. Clearly, some of the unguarded comments by leading members of the EU have betrayed that. They think that if they give the UK a bad enough deal, we will reject it and eventually reverse the decision and stay in. Those calling for a second referendum have contributed to our being where we are today.

I do not know whether the Prime Minister will come back from Strasbourg with something. I genuinely wish her well, and I hope she can come back with something substantial and a genuine change to the backstop that is legally binding, which hopefully we can get behind. I hope that happens, but if it does not, it is imperative that we leave the EU on 29 March, as we voted for and time and again have said we will.

Everyone talks about uncertainty. Let us be clear: virtually every business I talk to says that uncertainty is killing them. They would rather know what will happen, even if they do not particularly like it, to have certainty rather than drag this out for months or years to come.

Any extension of article 50 will do no more than prolong the uncertainty, the agony and the debate, with no clear answers for business.

I have come to the conclusion that unless the Prime Minister can get substantial changes to the backstop, the only way to deliver on the referendum result—to keep our commitment to the British people and deliver what people voted for—is to leave on 29 March with no deal. That is what I will be working to achieve.

5.31 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a great pleasure, as ever, to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I thank those who initiated the petition, which has secured over 130,000 signatures, including many from my constituency. I must also thank the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) for eloquently opening the debate.

I have the privilege, pleasure and displeasure of summing up the debate on behalf of the Scottish National party. Having listened to the previous speeches, I feel a bit like I am in a European Research Group support group meeting. The hon. Member for Cambridge made an excellent contribution; he spoke passionately in favour of the European Union and reflected on his experience of representing a university town. There is no doubt that our universities will be worse off as a result of our pulling up the drawbridge and adopting the isolationist approach that the Brexiteers seem to advance.

We had an incredibly consistent speech from the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood). He outlined his fantasy Budget if he was in the Treasury. Unfortunately for him, his party has moved away from that. He rightly spoke about investing more in social care, but he omitted to mention that we have an ageing population and we will need people to look after them when we limit free movement of people. I am not sure that was factored into his economic analysis.

The hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), who is a friend, spoke about our turning into a national embarrassment. I fear that point may have come already. Legal action is being taken against us for contracts with a ferry company with no ferries. We may have already arrived at the point of national embarrassment—a view shared even by Brexiteers.

The clock is ticking towards leaving the European Union in just 18 days. I cannot believe that this close to Brexit we still do not know what will happen. When I speak to my constituents I find that incredibly embarrassing. Even as a remainer, I find it embarrassing to go round my constituency and explain to folk that we still do not know what will happen. People look to me as a Member of Parliament and say, “You must know what is happening because you are in the House of Commons.” The reality is that the vast majority of us are still getting our information on Twitter about when the Prime Minister is flying to Strasbourg, when we might get updated legal advice from the Attorney General, and when or if at all we might have meaningful votes this week. That is a national embarrassment that brings this place into disrepute.

Ronnie Cowan: The latest Twitter update is that there will be a statement to the House at 9 pm. The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green

[Ronnie Cowan]

(Mr Duncan Smith) has said, “We may have reached a point where there might be an agreement, and we will keep an open mind.”

David Linden: I am grateful for that update at 5.34 pm. A statement is expected at 9 o'clock but it may change a couple more times, so I will take that with a pinch of salt.

The Prime Minister has spent the last two years trying to placate her own party while its members peddle their almost impossible visions of a post-Brexit future to the public. After the referendum, the SNP attempted to extend an olive branch and said we would back a deal that offered to keep Scotland in the customs union and the single market. As the right hon. Member for Wokingham said, that fell on deaf ears. Instead, the Prime Minister opted to lead the country towards the hardest of Brexits, simply to pursue her personal vendetta against immigration. She has done so without a plan or a roadmap of what this Brexit will look like; instead she goes around with meaningful words such as “Brexit means Brexit” and “I’m going to make a success of this.” Ms McDonagh, if you know what that means, I would be delighted to know. For the last two and a half years we have been told that Brexit means Brexit, but what does that mean?

With days to go, we still do not know what Brexit will look like. The Lords EU Energy and Environment Sub-Committee heard last week that the Government still have no idea whether the UK can remain in EU food safety systems after Brexit. Yesterday, Simon Fraser, the former Foreign and Commonwealth Office official, described the state of affairs as

“a shocking failure of our government and our parliament, and a national humiliation”.

I could not agree more. The Conservative Government in Westminster have shown they are institutionally incapable of acting in the best interests of the Scottish people.

I have described this chaos without even touching on the effects that Brexit will have for Scotland, its people and our business community. As I said in my earlier intervention, people in Scotland voted 62% in favour of remaining in the EU—higher than anywhere else on these islands. It is estimated that more than 100,000 Scottish jobs are under threat from a no-deal Brexit. The right hon. Member for Wokingham often talks about economic analysis. That analysis is not from the SNP but from the independent Fraser of Allander Institute, which has outlined that 100,000 jobs would be at risk as a result of a hard Brexit.

Adam Holloway: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

David Linden: I will—it is nice of the hon. Gentleman to drop in on us.

Adam Holloway: The hon. Gentleman is having a go at my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham, but is he aware of my right hon. Friend’s extremely distinguished career in finance and his knowledge of economics?

David Linden: I am—unlike the hon. Gentleman, I was here when the right hon. Member for Wokingham spoke earlier. I am indeed aware of his expertise in

finance and some of the advice he has given people, including recently when he advised them to take their money elsewhere.

John Redwood: That is completely untrue and I hope the hon. Gentleman will withdraw that false allegation.

David Linden: No, I will not. I will continue with my speech.

The equivalent of the entire working population of Dundee stands to lose their jobs. The economic effect on Scotland is expected to be even worse than that of the 2008 recession. Businesses, institutions and notable leaders are up in arms over this dereliction of duty. The CBI, the Scottish and Welsh Governments, the National Farmers Union of Scotland, car makers and manufacturers are all united in their opposition to a no-deal Brexit advocated by some speakers in this debate. On top of all that, we face the loss of the free movement of people, which has helped to grow and support our ageing population.

The SNP has been consistent—not a popular position in Parliament—in supporting calls for the extension of article 50 and a people’s vote. That is the only sensible course of action left. The UK Government cannot continue to attempt to strong-arm Parliament into accepting their deal by threatening a no-deal scenario. In his dystopian novel “Nineteen Eighty-Four”, George Orwell described “doublethink” as

“holding simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them”.

Instead of reading the book as a cautionary tale, the Prime Minister seems to have taken it as an instruction manual. She has expected the Scottish people to accept three conflicting opinions at the same time: first, we would leave the customs union—a promise made to appease the European Research Group. Secondly, there would be no hard border in Northern Ireland—a promise made to appease Dublin and adhere to the Good Friday agreement. Thirdly, there will be regulatory alignment between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK—a promise made to the Democratic Unionist party. There is no world in which all three are simultaneously possible. The Prime Minister knows that, but instead of showing real leadership and working to reach a compromise, she hopes to placate different groups with promises she cannot deliver on, and scare them into voting for her deal by threatening us with no deal.

I will be absolutely clear: we must not crash out of the European Union with no deal. To allow that to happen would be a complete failure of governance and an abdication of responsibility. The Conservative party might be happy with that, but we in the SNP are committed to building a fairer and better future for the Scottish people. Our preferred option is for the whole of the UK to remain in the European Union, but, failing that, our compromise is that the UK should remain in the customs union and the single market. I believe there would be a majority for that in the House. It is clear that further negotiations are needed to find an outcome that works for everyone, so we support the extension of article 50 and a people’s vote.

The Prime Minister is content to lead the country down the garden path with no idea what waits at the end. That is utterly unacceptable. The Scottish people deserve a Government that have their best interests at

heart, but Westminster has shown repeatedly throughout this Brexit mess that it does not have our interests at heart. It is for that reason that many Scots, including many of those who voted no in 2014, are rapidly concluding that the only way to have a Government with our interests at heart is to have an independent Government and to rejoin the family of nations.

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. This is the first time I have had to deal with an issue of whether to ask a Member to withdraw a comment about another Member, so bear with me. Will the hon. Gentleman make it clear that he was imputing no bad motive in his comments about the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood)?

David Linden: Can you clarify what I am being asked to withdraw, Ms McDonagh?

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): As I heard it, your comments were that the right hon. Member for Wokingham had earned money as a result of giving advice about the EU and the withdrawal negotiations.

David Linden: That is absolutely on the record. The right hon. Gentleman's declaration of financial interests shows that he does give advice for financial planning. Indeed, that was pointed out by the hon. Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway). I said on the record what is already in the public domain about advice that has been given by the right hon. Member for Wokingham, and I stand by those comments.

John Redwood: Ms McDonagh, I think what was at issue was the accuracy of the statement. The hon. Gentleman said that I have urged people to take their money out of Britain because of Brexit. I have never said that, it is completely false, and I wish it to be withdrawn.

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Does the hon. Member for Glasgow East wish to withdraw his comments? The right hon. Member for Wokingham has not, in his view, advised people to take their money out of Britain because of Brexit.

David Linden: I am not willing to withdraw those comments. Indeed, I will be very happy to place a copy of the evidence in the Library before the close of business today.

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): The advice to me is that I cannot force the hon. Gentleman to withdraw his comments. I call Jenny Chapman.

5.42 pm

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): It is good to see you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) talked about soundbites. We have heard, "Brexit means Brexit," "No deal is better than a bad deal," and—my personal favourite—"Red, white and blue Brexit". I remember when soundbites were good—I know you do too, Ms McDonagh. I remember, "Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime"—soundbites that actually meant something. Those were the days.

I congratulate the petitioners and my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on bringing forward this debate. The fact that thousands of people signed a petition that asks us to put a stop to this whole process speaks to the frustration that is clearly present in many communities up and down the country. I would observe, though, that that frustration, and the petitioners' preferred solution to it, is not equally shared around our country. Some 100 of my constituents signed the petition, I notice that 1,100 of my hon. Friend's constituents signed it, and there are other places, which voted more heavily to leave, where I do not think anybody thought it was a very good idea.

It is pretty clear that what started off as a division within the Tory party has spread across the country, and we find that we now have a nation divided. I hope you are proud of what you have done. I am not. I deeply regret the state we have got ourselves into. I voted remain, but I said the day the result became clear and the moment I found my constituency had voted to leave that I would respect that result.

I voted to trigger article 50. My party supported that position, and we supported starting negotiations, but what a mess you have made of it. I never, ever thought, even in my—[*Interruption.*] What a mess the Conservatives have made of it. I correct myself, Ms McDonagh—I would never suggest that you would have made such a bad job of this negotiation. If only you were leading it, I am sure we would be in a much better place by now. It could hardly be worse. That is clearly what is in the minds of the petitioners, who just want it to stop. They have had enough. I know exactly where they are coming from, but I do feel, even at this stage, that I must continue to honour the decision my constituents made.

Revoking article 50 is clearly possible. The European Court of Justice, in its ruling on the matter, said we could revoke article 50 should we want to. I think it was the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans), who is no longer in his place, who said that that would be seen very negatively, particularly by communities in which people voted very strongly to leave. If we revoked article 50 unilaterally, without the consent of the British people, he would probably be right.

It seems to many people who think we should be looking for a way out of this situation that the only way to do that is to have another vote. That is not something I would ever enter into lightly or, I have to say, with any enthusiasm, but given the way the Government have mishandled this process, I find myself wondering whether only two options remain. One is to have a different deal that could get through Parliament. I will talk a little about what that might look like. The other may be to have another vote. I cannot over-emphasise my reluctance about that. I agree with most of the arguments against having another vote—arguments about division and trust in politics—but, even so, that may be the only option that remains if we are stuck in this impasse and we need to break the deadlock. Given where we are today—it looks like, in 24 hours' time, we will be voting again and rejecting the Prime Minister's deal, probably in almost the same way we did only a few weeks ago—we need to agree a way forward.

Government Members spoke at length about the backstop. The backstop is not really the fundamental problem. The best way to deal with the backstop is to have a clear vision of the future, to know where we are

[Jenny Chapman]

going and to know what kind of relationship we are going to have with the European Union. That is how we would avoid ever having to use the backstop. The problem we have is that the Prime Minister has been unable to be clear—in her own mind, perhaps, but certainly with Parliament—about where she intends to take the country after we have left. I can only imagine that is for reasons of party management, which, given what we have seen today, I think we can all understand. Because she has not been clear—because the political declaration is incredibly vague and could imply two very different visions of Brexit—we have been forced to focus on the backstop.

That really has not worked very well for the Prime Minister, if I can put it like that. She is now having to try to negotiate something that she hopes will be legally binding and will satisfy the needs of the Government Members who have spoken in the debate. I somehow doubt it. Perhaps it will be a form of unilateral mechanism. Perhaps it will be an end date. But even if either could somehow be negotiated, I doubt whether that would do the job that she needs to have done. We would still be lacking the fully-formed vision of the future direction of our country. I do not think that will be enough for MPs to be able to walk through the Lobby and say, “Yes, we support this,” because we care deeply about what happens to our constituents. We were all elected on manifestos and promises that said that we wanted to make our constituents more prosperous, to secure their jobs and to bring more employment to our constituencies. I said that the three times that I have been elected, and that is the promise that I would never, ever break.

Adam Holloway: I greatly appreciate the hon. Lady’s thoughtful speech, but just because the political class has messed it up, does that mean we have to ignore the will of the British people and go back to them to get what the political class thinks is the right answer?

Jenny Chapman: It is not the political class that has messed it up; it is the Tory party. I do not think even somebody as unsympathetic to my side of the House as the hon. Gentleman can lay this at Labour’s door.

Adam Holloway: I totally agree with the hon. Lady. It is an appalling spectacle to see Conservative MPs going against the will of their constituents. I quite agree with her.

Jenny Chapman: I am grateful that the hon. Gentleman agrees with me. I do not see how this could have gone much worse. It is appalling to see businesses spending millions of pounds—which they should be investing in their workforce, their sites and their products—on consultants and preparations for a no-deal departure, because the Government have refused to rule it out. The Conservative party will be judged on that very dimly in the future. Businesses in the north-east in the automotive, chemical and pharmaceuticals industries are clear with me that they are spending vast amounts on preparing for the idea that we will leave without a deal in 18 days. Even though Parliament has rejected that outcome, the Prime Minister dare not face down her own party and be clear that that is not what she intends to do.

Steve Double: Is the hon. Lady’s experience the same as mine? When I have asked businesses in my constituency if they would prefer a no-deal Brexit or a Labour Government led by the current leader of the Labour party, every single business I have spoken to said, “I will take a no-deal Brexit every time.”

Jenny Chapman: The hon. Gentleman is cheap. We are 18 days away from leaving the European Union. His party does not have a negotiated deal that could get through this Parliament. That is where he is; it is his party that has done that, not my party. Businesses ask me what a Labour Brexit would look like, and I can tell them. They say to me, “Yes, that is a future I can work in. That is an economic framework that I can keep my business thriving in.” They look at what is happening now, with the hon. Gentleman’s party in power, and they are horrified. I am horrified, and he should be horrified. It is nothing to be proud of. He can make cheap comments about my party leader if he likes—everyone knows my views about this—but it is his party leader who has misled and mismanaged this process, not mine.

We now have two options. My party leader, who the hon. Gentleman so derides, has written to the Prime Minister outlining a sensible deal that is negotiable. It has been well received by colleagues in the European Union, and is actually quite well received by Members on the hon. Gentleman’s Benches. The options set out in that letter ought to be put to the test of a vote in Parliament. Why is the Prime Minister too afraid to do that? It is because when we put a customs union to the vote in June, and the Prime Minister whipped against it as hard as she could, we lost by a grand total of six votes. I suggest that that is something that could find support in Parliament, and I would like to get it before the House of Commons so we can test it.

Such a deal would be supported by businesses, trade unions and the CBI, as well as in Northern Ireland—the Ulster farmers have been crying out for it. Everybody who has any real interest in this issue and has looked at it carefully has come out and supported that proposal. It is a real shame that the Prime Minister is so cowed by her own party that she will not put it before the House of Commons.

The Labour party wrote to the Prime Minister. We asked for a

“comprehensive UK-wide customs union...Close alignment with the Single Market...Dynamic alignment on rights and protections...Clear commitments on participation in EU agencies...Unambiguous agreements on the detail of future security arrangements”.

The right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) is never going to agree with that; it is not his vision for Brexit. I am not going to attempt to persuade him that it should be, because we would be here a long time. I accept that. He is entitled to vote for a different vision of Brexit, if that is what he feels is right. Surely, Members are entitled to vote for what we think would be the right outcome, if, as we believe, it is negotiable even at this late stage. If the deal does not get through tomorrow, it behoves the Minister and his colleagues to work out how it would work and what the process would be to enable us to have a vote on a different type of deal, which we could negotiate with Brussels.

Whatever happens, we cannot have a border in Northern Ireland; everybody accepts that. However, nobody has provided a credible means of achieving that. We have had suggestions about “alternative arrangements”—whatever they are—and there has been talk about technology. Our team visited the border between Norway and Sweden, which is the most technologically advanced in the world. There is infrastructure there to make checks, take payments and provide security, because it is a border between two different customs territories. There is nowhere on the planet where there is a border between two different customs territories and no infrastructure. Try as we might to find a different solution—and we did try—we have been unable to do so. It seems as if no one else has been able to find one either. It is impossible not to have border infrastructure if there is no customs union. It cannot be done. For that reason, as well as all the benefits to manufacturing that are important to me in north-east England, we have concluded that we need to be part of a customs union after we leave the European Union.

[STEWART HOSIE *in the Chair*]

The other thing I hear all the time from businesses is that they do not want us to leave at all without a deal. It seems odd that the Government are persisting in keeping that option open. I note that a couple of weeks ago—the last time she was confronting heavy defeats—the Prime Minister said that, should her deal not succeed tomorrow, Parliament would have the opportunity to vote against leaving without a deal. I know the Minister does not have a crystal ball, but it would be helpful to colleagues if he could clarify exactly what we will be voting on tomorrow. Who knows? Will this be a straightforward vote on the Prime Minister’s deal, whether it be the same deal we voted on previously or an amended deal? When will we find out what we will be voting on? If it is a different deal, will we be given an opportunity to examine that deal prior to the debate tomorrow? When will that motion be laid before the House? Will there be opportunity for colleagues to amend it? That is something we have discussed at length previously, and it is only fair that Members are given that opportunity.

That is tomorrow. What about Wednesday? Assuming that the deal does not go through tomorrow, we were promised by the Prime Minister that there would be an opportunity to vote on leaving without a deal. Will that still be the case on Wednesday and, if it is, what position will the Government take? Will Wednesday be the day when, finally, the Government of this country say to businesses, the public, communities such as mine and their own colleagues that they do not intend to take the UK out of the EU without a deal? We need to know. Do the Government still intend on Thursday, as the Prime Minister promised, to have a vote on whether we need more time? If that promise is kept, how much more time does the Minister intend we should have, and what does he intend to do with it? What form will the motion on Thursday take? I am not asking him to foretell anything very far ahead; just the next three days will do. We need to know what MPs will be asked to decide on this week, on behalf of our constituents. These are probably the most important decisions that we shall ever be asked to make. We were promised by the Prime Minister that they would be taken this week, but we have not had confirmation of that or information about what the votes will look like.

The chaos we have seen, the way the negotiations have been mishandled, and the situation we are in, just days away from 29 March, make me embarrassed for Parliament. Unfortunately, the blame can only be laid at the door of the Prime Minister, because of the way she has led the process. The Minister is a decent person, and it falls to him—

John Redwood: The hon. Lady is asking good questions about what our business will be, but I fear our ministerial friend cannot answer tonight. We shall probably find out later from the Prime Minister, who will be controlling those things.

The hon. Lady said she thought a second referendum might be a good idea. Can she tell us what the question would be? If it is “Accept the withdrawal agreement or stay in,” there is no option for leave. If it is “Accept the withdrawal agreement or leave without a deal” there is no option for remain; so what would the question be?

Jenny Chapman: I do not think I have ever said that a second referendum would be a good idea. It is something I should be incredibly reluctant to support, but I have to recognise, if I do not want to leave without a deal, that the only thing that stands between leaving with a deal and leaving without one may be to put the issue back to the country. It is not something I want to happen, at all. Because I am not enthusiastic about it I have not thought through what the questions should be. That is one of the problems with the proposal for another referendum. Those who propose it have not made the matter clear. It is deeply problematic and risky. Who knows where it might lead, and what the experience might do to our country? I am not enthusiastic about it at all; I want to make that clear—but I have to accept, given that I do not want to leave without a deal, that it may be necessary.

David Linden: One thing that I have been finding difficult in Scotland is Labour’s position on a people’s vote. Is the hon. Lady saying that, 18 days out from Brexit, and possibly looking over the cliff edge, the British Labour party and Scottish Labour party have not really thought through what the fall-back option is when 100,000 jobs could be lost from the economy? Does she understand that that is why Labour in Scotland is in such a perilous position—because 18 days out it does not have an answer on a people’s vote?

Jenny Chapman: We do. We would accept a people’s vote, but we would also accept a deal along the lines that I have outlined. I know that being able to back either option might be a little complicated for some colleagues who like a nice single answer, but Brexit is not like that, and never has been. The position that the Labour party adopted is not where we wanted to be. The situation is not of our making. However, the situation we are in now, with just 18 days to go, means that we would be prepared to accept either one of those options in preference to the deal that will probably be rejected tomorrow, or leaving without a deal. I should hope that the hon. Gentleman could understand what I have just explained to him.

I shall conclude now, Mr Hosie—it is good to see you in the Chair. However, I should like the Minister to explain clearly and precisely, if he can, what we shall be voting on tomorrow.

6.4 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Chris Heaton-Harris): This is the first time I have served under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie, and I have been looking forward to it. I hope I do not get into as much trouble as the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) did earlier, when he was very much out of order. If you would pass on our thanks to Ms McDonagh for the way she chaired the first part of the sitting, it would be much appreciated.

I thank the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) for opening the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee in his normal courteous manner. He and perhaps the hon. Member for Glasgow East will remember, as I do, that there are people with principled positions on both sides of the argument. I know that the hon. Gentlemen are wrong and they are convinced that I am wrong, but in our own principled ways we go about our debate in the most courteous fashion, and I am sure that the altercation we had earlier can be sorted out in a generous way.

It is a pleasure for me to be responding this afternoon because I am a big fan of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), and I have never answered a debate in which he has spoken. Obviously, I tend to agree with a huge amount of what he said, and especially his comments about why most leave voters chose to vote as they did. He also made a number of economic points, and they were well made. He pointed out that there are plenty of arguments available to people who voted leave, beyond the important matter of democracy.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) made an excellent speech. He and the hon. Member for Cambridge are a good double team. They do not necessarily need an Opposition or Government spokesman to deal with any of the business, because they seem to cover the bases fairly well on each side. There were also some good interventions in the debate. The hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) mentioned her reticence—although not about her own position on Brexit, which, as she said, has been fairly clear from the moment the votes were in. She is on the record saying:

“The public is in Brexit driving seat. MPs won’t block Article 50 and we shouldn’t be planning 2nd referendum.”

She has said she is not a populist but is respectful of the referendum result—and she said so again today; and that if Labour ignored the referendum it would get what it deserved: wipeout. She has talked of supporting Brexit as a consequence of the referendum, because Labour can influence the deal, but not if they are wreckers. However, by taking no deal off the table that is exactly what Labour becomes—a wrecking party in the negotiations—and I know that the hon. Lady knows that.

I want to congratulate the petitioners on their achievement, before completely disappointing them in my response. It is quite something to get over 100,000 signatures on a petition. We were talking briefly before the sitting about how many Brexit-related petitions there have been. I am led to believe that the referendum has stimulated the Petitions Committee and tickled its tummy like no other subject, and it will probably continue to do so. The petition is headed:

“Revoke Art.50 if there is no Brexit plan by the 25 of February”.

I suppose I could be pedantic and say that the Prime Minister has a plan. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham has a plan. There is a plan called the Malthouse compromise A and there is a Malthouse compromise B plan. I think that the Opposition have a plan of their own, although it changes rather. So we are not short of plans at the moment. We are, however, short of a plan that can get the support of Parliament.

I could just answer the petition by saying that there are plenty of plans about, but I will not. I will outline the position that the Government continues to hold on the question of revocation. It remains a matter of firm policy that we will not revoke the article 50 notice, a position which the Prime Minister reminded the House of as recently as two weeks ago, when she stated:

“I have been clear throughout the process that my aim is to bring the country back together... This House can only do that by implementing the decision of the British people”.—[*Official Report*, 26 February 2019; Vol. 655, c. 167.]

I will outline some of the reasons the Government have chosen to take this position. First, we will not revoke article 50 because of the clear and decisive result of the 2016 referendum. In 2016, the Government held a referendum on the question of our membership of the European Union. When we held that referendum, the Government pledged to respect its result, whatever the outcome. As the Prime Minister recently said in the House,

“Parliament gave the choice to the people. In doing so, we told them that we would honour their decision.”—[*Official Report*, 26 February 2019; Vol. 655, c. 168.]

Almost three quarters of the electorate took part in that referendum to have their say about the future of the United Kingdom and its relationship with the European Union. Almost three quarters of the electorate—millions of British people—took part in that referendum trusting that their vote would count, that their voices would be heard and that their will, democratically expressed, would be respected. With that in mind, 17.4 million people voted to express to the Government that their democratic wish was for the UK to leave the European Union. As I have highlighted a number of times before, that is the highest number of votes and the biggest democratic mandate for any course of action ever directed at any UK Government. My right hon. and hon. Friends will see that if we move to revoke article 50, we would be breaking the trust that the British people placed in their Government when they cast their votes.

Further to that point, not only did the Government make a commitment before the referendum vote to uphold the result, but the Government, and indeed Her Majesty’s loyal Opposition, made express commitments to the British people after the referendum result to both endorse and uphold it. Parliament—encompassing both Government and Opposition members—endorsed and validated the 2016 result by voting with clear and convincing majorities in both Houses in favour of the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act 2017. That is, Parliament voted to implement the instruction delivered by the 2016 referendum by voting to trigger article 50 and exit the European Union.

Next, Members of both major parties stood in the 2017 general election and were elected on manifestos in which they committed themselves to upholding the referendum result. I know that is uncomfortable for

many hon. Members in both major political parties, but it is something our electorate will not forget. For those of us in leave-voting areas, it is something that they do not let us forget and remind us of heavily on a daily basis. We all risk breaking that promise made to the British people in our election manifestos by revoking article 50.

The British people must be able to trust in Government and in democracy to act on their will and to keep promises. The Prime Minister has made clear in recent statements the very real concern that undoing the 2016 referendum result

“could damage social cohesion by undermining faith in our democracy.”—[*Official Report*, 21 January 2019; Vol. 653, c. 26.]

Instead, as she emphasised, our “absolute focus” should be on agreeing a deal and leaving the European Union on 29 March, as instructed and as promised.

The hon. Member for Darlington asked me what is likely to happen in the next few days. She is quite right; I am not Mystic Meg and I do not have a crystal ball. However, I did listen to the urgent question and the answer given to it on the Floor of the House today, where commitments were made along the lines that the hon. Lady outlined earlier. We will find out more, because I believe the Government will be making a statement later today, updating the House on the progress of the discussions that have been happening throughout the day.

I will not try to pre-empt what on earth the conclusions might be, but as soon as there is a conclusion to those negotiations, the House will be updated, and a meaningful vote will take place tomorrow. The motion will be tabled today, ahead of that debate, and if the hon. Lady cares to read the rest of the statement given by my fellow Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), she will get all the answers she requires in great detail.

I reiterate that it remains our position not to revoke article 50. We will not frustrate the outcome of the 2016 referendum. It is the responsibility of this Government to deliver the exit that people voted for, and that is what we shall do.

6.15 pm

Daniel Zeichner: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. On behalf of the Petitions Committee, I thank everyone for their contributions to the debate. Passions run deep, and I think our constituents would expect us to speak with passion on these issues. There are strongly held differences of opinion.

One of the things I wanted to use this debate for was to remind people that the 48% feel strongly too, but I am disappointed that during the debate I got no sense that the other side understand how people in the 48% feel. I am not sure there will be a successful resolution until solutions are brought forward that respect both sides of the debate. On that note, I must say how very impressed I was with the contribution from my colleague on the shadow Front Bench, my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman). If the negotiations had been conducted in that spirit and with such care, we would be in a very different place today.

We frequently hear about “getting on with it”. I do not think people quite realise where we will be standing on 29 March if we go out either with no deal or with the Prime Minister’s deal. It will be not a matter of getting on with it, but the start of it—the start of an endless period of negotiation and rancour in the years ahead. That is one of my great fears. As for fear of the unknown, there is a reason to fear the unknown; it is sometimes quite sensible to fear that. I caution against a leap into the dark.

Finally, I will slightly disagree with my hon. Friend, because it seems to me that we have learned so much more in the past few years that it is not unreasonable to say, “The position is now very different from where we were in 2015, and the sensible thing would actually be to go back to the people to ask them whether this is what they want.” I do not see anything remotely undemocratic in that, and my guess is that that is where we will end up.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 239706 relating to leaving the European Union.

6.17 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 11 March 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Financial Reporting Council: Independent Review

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The Government have published their public consultation in response to the independent review of the Financial Reporting Council (FRC).

The UK has always been a world leader in audit and accounting services, with world-class frameworks for corporate reporting, corporate governance and regulatory oversight. Our modern industrial strategy sets out our vision to ensure that the UK is the best place to start and grow a business and is an attractive place to invest. The Government see a tough and robust regulator, and an audit sector with the highest standards, as a key part of that strategy. Stronger regulation of audit will benefit all, giving shareholders, investors, and the wider public every confidence in company reports and audited accounts.

In April 2018, I commissioned Sir John Kingman to undertake a root and branch review of the FRC to ensure the UK continues to stand as a beacon, with a first-class regulator of audit and corporate reporting. The review published a comprehensive set of challenging recommendations in December 2018, designed to transform the regulation of these important functions which underpin the economic life of our country.

The Government welcome and shares the review's vision for a new regulator with a new mandate, leadership, and stronger statutory powers. The Government intend to move swiftly to implement these reforms, replacing the FRC with a new regulator called the "Audit, Reporting and Governance Authority". This new body will build on the UK's status as a great place to do business and will form an important part of strengthening public trust in businesses and the regulations that govern them, ensuring that the UK maintains and advances its status as a place of the highest standards in audit. In the interim period, until the new regulator is in place, we will be working with the FRC taking forward 48 of the review's recommendations.

Through the consultation the Government also seek views on how more complex recommendations should be taken forward; note where further detailed policy development will be undertaken, and a further consultation will be published; and confirm where matters are for other authorities to consider.

There is a range of important work going on in relation to the audit market, and we also look forward to receiving the findings of the competition and markets authority's market study of the audit sector and of Sir Donald Brydon's review of the quality and effectiveness of audit. That work, taken together with the independent review of the FRC, will enable us to deliver a major set of reforms of company audit, accounting and reporting which will ensure the UK's corporate regime is of the highest quality.

The consultation document will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and available on the www.gov.uk website. The consultation will run for 12 weeks and I look forward to the continued contribution of interested parties.

[HCWS1397]

EU Emissions Trading Scheme

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): Today, the Government will publish legislation for a short extension to the deadline for UK operators participating in the EU Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) to surrender their emission allowances for the 2018 scheme year.

The Government remain committed to meeting their target to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by at least 80% by the year 2050, relative to 1990 levels. The UK also remains strongly committed to achieving the climate goals of the Paris agreement. This includes our commitment to carbon pricing as an emissions reduction tool, while ensuring energy and trade intensive businesses are appropriately protected from any detrimental impacts on competitiveness.

Our participation in the EU ETS has shown the benefits of carbon pricing, which gives emitters a choice to reduce their emissions where it is economic to do so, achieving our environmental goals in the least-cost way to society. The EU ETS covers around 1000 installations and approximately 140 aircraft operators in the UK. Across the EU ETS, the scheme covers around 45% of the EU's greenhouse gas emissions.

EU ETS participants are required to monitor their emissions during each calendar year, and at the end of each reporting year, surrender one emissions allowance for every tonne of carbon dioxide equivalent (CO₂e) they have emitted, to meet their EU ETS obligations.

This legislation would extend the deadline for UK operators to surrender allowances from 15 March 2019 to 26 March 2019. The deadline for UK operators to report their 2018 emissions to their regulator remains 11 March 2019.

This short extension to the deadline to surrender allowances would allow all UK operators additional time to meet their EU ETS compliance requirements. UK operators would still be able to surrender allowances to meet their 2018 compliance obligations on any date before 26 March 2019.

This extension does not change the requirement for all UK operators to comply fully with their obligations under the EU ETS.

[HCWS1393]

DEFENCE

Recruiting STEM Graduates into Defence

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): The Ministry of Defence is strongly committed to recruiting and developing the brightest and best young people it can to support our armed forces and wider defence requirements. In an increasingly complex and technologically driven world, the need for talented

individuals with a wide variety of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) skills has never been greater. They will be central to developing, maintaining and exploiting our current and future military capabilities, to help defence stay at the leading edge of technological change. Through their contribution to innovation and experimentation, to harness new technologies, we will be better prepared to meet the challenges and threats of today and tomorrow.

Defence has been reviewing its STEM graduate requirement and will put in place a new, targeted scheme to recruit undergraduates in related subjects; the STEM graduate inflow scheme (SGIS). This scheme has been designed to significantly increase the number of STEM graduates brought into defence and the variety of STEM disciplines they are from. It will be open to undergraduates across all UK universities and be supported by a competitive financial package. The new scheme will also be more flexible and enable defence to adapt quickly to future changes in requirement.

The new scheme will replace the current defence technical officer and engineer entry scheme (DTEES), which has produced some excellent young graduates but is not meeting defence's requirements or providing sufficient value for money. Ending the current scheme will also mean that the Defence Sixth Form College (DSFC) at Welbeck will close, with a final intake in September 2019. The DSFC was set up in 2005, providing STEM focused education opportunities for 16 to 18-year-olds prior to going up to university as defence bursars. But defence needs to increase numbers well beyond the current scheme's ability to deliver, and it needs to be more responsive and agile to succeed in an increasingly competitive market for STEM graduates in the UK and globally.

Full transition to the new scheme will take place incrementally over the next five years, during which the current intake of students will be fully supported. For the final two years Welbeck remains a going concern. That time will be used productively to work with local authorities and stakeholders to seek the best possible future use of this impressive school, including within the education sector or an alternative use within defence.

[HCWS1396]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Implementation of International Humanitarian Law at Domestic Level: Voluntary Resort

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I am delighted to inform the House that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) has today published the United Kingdom Government's first "Voluntary Report on the Implementation of International Humanitarian Law at Domestic Level".

The publication of this report reflects the UK Government's determined commitment to the proper implementation of, and compliance with, International Humanitarian Law (IHL). This is a vital responsibility of all States. IHL is the manifestation of the long-standing determination of the international community to limit the effects of armed conflict. In an age where IHL continues

to be violated frequently by both States and non-State parties to conflict, it is critical to reinforce these fundamental humanitarian rules that form an integral part of the international order in times of conflict. We are proud of our strong record of IHL implementation and compliance.

The voluntary report aims to explain in a single document the key steps that the United Kingdom has taken at a domestic level to implement IHL. Publishing specific examples of our practice to implement IHL is intended to help improve understanding of IHL, and encourage and inform dialogue on IHL issues both at home and abroad. We hope it will encourage other States to publish details of their activities to implement IHL at the domestic level, to better identify best practice and ultimately to improve implementation and compliance with IHL.

I am grateful to the United Kingdom National Committee on International Humanitarian Law for leading the compilation of this voluntary report. The British Red Cross, in its capacity as an auxiliary to the UK Government, deserve special thanks for assisting the FCO with the production of this voluntary report.

The voluntary report will be available on the: www.gov.uk website. I will also place a copy in the Library of the House.

[HCWS1394]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Dental Charges

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): Dental charges remain an important contribution to the overall cost of the NHS budget. We have taken the decision to uplift dental charges for those who can afford it, through a 5% increase this year.

This means that the dental charge payable for a band 1 course of treatment will rise by £1.10 in 2019-20, from £21.60 to £22.70. The dental charge for a band 2 course of treatment will increase by £3.00 in 2019-20, from £59.10 to £62.10. The charge for a band 3 course of treatment will increase by £12.80 in 2019-20, from £256.50 to £269.30.

The uplift continues with the aim of finding an appropriate balance between the costs paid by service users and those met by the NHS through the contributions of taxpayers.

Those who qualify for free dental treatment will remain entirely exempt from charges. Those under the age of 18, those under the age of 19 and in full-time education, pregnant women or those who have had a baby in the previous 12 months, and those on qualifying low income benefits will not be impacted by these changes.

Even those not entitled to exemption from dental charges, but who are on low incomes, are eligible to receive full or partial help with dental charges through the NHS low income scheme.

This policy will allow us to continue to protect the most vulnerable through exemptions and the NHS low income scheme. We therefore consider that the proposed uplifts in charges are fair and proportionate and will support NHS front-line services.

Details of the revised charges for 2019-20 can be found in the table below;

Band	Description	2019-20 (proposed patient charge)
1	This band includes examination, diagnosis (including radiographs), advice on how to prevent future problems, scale and polish if clinically needed, and preventative care (e.g. applications of fluoride varnish or fissure sealant)	£22.70
2	This band covers everything listed in band 1, plus any further treatment such as fillings, root canal work or extractions	£62.10
3	This band covers everything in bands 1 and 2, plus course of treatment including crowns, dentures, bridges and other laboratory work	£269.30
Urgent	This band covers urgent assessment and specified urgent treatments such as pain relief or a temporary filling or dental appliance repair	£22.70

[HCWS1395]

PRIME MINISTER

Exiting the European Union

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): This is a statement, for the purposes of section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, that political agreement has been reached. I am of the opinion that an agreement in principle has been reached in negotiations under Article 50(2) of the Treaty on European Union on the substance of:

- the arrangements for the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union, and
- the framework for the future relationship between the European Union and the United Kingdom after withdrawal.

This agreement reflects the result of further discussions with the European Union subsequent to the debate in the House of Commons on the motion under subsections 13(6) and (11) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 on 29 January 2019. This statement therefore supersedes the statement of 26 November 2018 made in my name.

A copy of the draft withdrawal agreement which, in my opinion, reflects the agreement in principle so far as relating to the arrangements for withdrawal, including provisions for the implementation period, has been laid before the House of Commons on Monday 11 March 2019 with the title "Agreement on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community".

Two additional documents relating to the withdrawal agreement which were not included in the documents laid before Parliament under section 13 on 26 November 2018, have also been laid as annexes to the statement that has been laid before the House of Commons on 11 March 2019.

These are:

A legally binding joint instrument relating to the draft withdrawal agreement, with the title, "Instrument relating to the agreement on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community"; and a unilateral declaration by the United Kingdom in relation to the operation of the Northern Ireland Protocol, with the title, "Declaration by Her Majesty's Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland concerning the Northern Ireland Protocol".

At this stage, the withdrawal agreement represents a version of the text which has been agreed, but has not yet been formally signed. As set out in my statement of 26 November 2018, the withdrawal agreement laid before Parliament following political agreement being reached in November represented "a version of the text which has been agreed, but has not yet been formally signed. Before this formal signature takes place, the agreement must complete the European Union's jurist-linguist translation process. During that time, minor technical corrections will be made to the text, though these changes will not affect the substance of the agreement".

In line with that, the text has since been subject to minor technical corrections, for example to correct stylistic or grammatical errors. In addition, it has been put on to the EU's standard template for international treaties as part of its publication in the EU's Official Journal which has led to further formatting changes. The Government's intention is to sign the agreement after it is approved by the House of Commons under section 13(1)(b). The laying of the withdrawal agreement before Parliament at this stage does not trigger any procedures under the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010.

A copy of the framework for the future relationship which, in my opinion, reflects the agreement in principle so far as relating to the framework for the future relationship between the EU and the United Kingdom has been laid before the House of Commons on Monday 11 March 2019 with the title "Political Declaration setting out the framework for the future relationship between the European Union and the United Kingdom".

In addition, a further document which was not included in the documents laid before Parliament under section 13 on 26 November 2018, a supplement to the framework for the future relationship, with the title, "Joint statement supplementing the Political Declaration setting out the framework for the future relationship between the European Union and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland" has also been laid as an annex to the statement that has been laid before the House of Commons on 11 March 2019.

This statement, and the associated documents, will also be laid before the House of Lords on 12 March 2019.

The documents associated with this statement are also available online at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/11-march-withdrawal-agreement-and-political-declaration-laid-before-parliament-following-political-agreement>.

[HCWS1398]

Petition

Monday 11 March 2019

OBSERVATIONS

TREASURY

Closure of St George's Cross branch of the Bank of Scotland

The petition of Residents of Glasgow North,

Declares that proposed closure of St George's Cross branch of the Bank of Scotland in Glasgow will have a detrimental effect on local communities and the local economy.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges her Majesty's Treasury, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Bank of Scotland to take in account the concerns of petitioners and take whatever steps they can to halt the planned closure of this branch.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Patrick Grady, *Official Report*, 4 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 134.]

[P002323]

Observations from the Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

The Government thanks the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), who has recently submitted a petition opposing a bank branch closure on behalf of his constituents.

The Government are sorry to hear about residents' disappointment at the closure of the Bank of Scotland branch in St George's Cross.

All banking service providers need to balance customer interests, market competition, and other commercial factors when considering their strategies. Decisions on opening and closing branches and agencies are taken by the management team of each bank on a commercial basis, without intervention from the Government.

However, the Government do believe that banks should act in the best interests of their customers and are committed to increasing competition to deliver better financial products and services for all bank customers. The Government continue to engage actively with the banking industry and consumer groups on these issues on an ongoing basis.

Since May 2017, the major high street banks have been signed up to the Access to Banking Standard, committing to work with customers and communities

to minimise the impact of branch closures and put in place alternative banking services. The Standard commits banks to ensure customers are well informed about branch closures, the bank's reasons for closure and options for continued access to banking services. These options should include specialist assistance for customers who need more help. The operation of the Standard is monitored and enforced by the independent Lending Standards Board, ensuring that banks are held accountable for the way they treat their customers when a branch closes.

In addition, since January 2017, the Post Office has had an agreement with the banks that allows more banking customers to access a wider range of services at the Post Office than ever before. The arrangement allows 99% of personal and 95% of small business customers to withdraw money, deposit cash and cheques and check balances at more than 11,500 Post Office branches in the UK. While the range of services offered by the Post Office may be more limited than that offered in a traditional bank branch, the services provided through the Post Office's extensive network ensures that essential banking facilities remain available in as many communities as possible. Since 2010, branch numbers have been at their most stable for decades and 99.7% of the national population now lives within three miles of a branch. Furthermore, almost 93% of the national population live within one mile of their nearest post office branch. Almost 98.7% of the rural population lives within three miles of a post office.

Both initiatives have the Government's full support, and banks are aware that the Government expect their involvement to be genuine and unqualified.

Should constituents wish to switch banks, the Government have made it easier to do so than ever before using the Current Account Switch Service (CASS). The switch service is free to use, comes with a guarantee to protect customers from financial loss if something goes wrong, and redirects any payments mistakenly sent to the old account, providing further assurance for customers. This means that customers are more able than ever to hold their banks to account by voting with their feet, and that banks are incentivised to work hard to retain their existing customers and attract new ones. More information about CASS is available at: www.currentaccountswitch.co.uk.

The Government cannot reverse the changes in the market and in customer behaviour; nor can they determine firms' commercial strategies in response to those changes. However, the Government will continue to take positive action to maintain access to vital banking services and ensure banks support communities across the UK when their local branches close.

ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 11 March 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
EDUCATION	1	EDUCATION—continued	
Disadvantaged Children: Attainment Gap.....	7	Support for Pupils with Special Educational	
Free Schools.....	3	Needs and Disabilities.....	11
Mental Health and Wellbeing: Support in Schools.	14	Teachers' Pension Scheme Costs: Effect on	
Northern Powerhouse Schools Strategy	16	Universities	15
Post-18 Education and Funding Review	10	Teaching and Support Staff: Recruitment and	
School Funding: Distribution	12	Retention	18
School Standards	5	Technical and Vocational Education and Training.	16
Sixth Form Curriculum.....	1	Topical Questions	19

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Monday 11 March 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL		FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE	3WS
STRATEGY	1WS	Implementation of International Humanitarian	
EU Emissions Trading Scheme	2WS	Law at Domestic Level: Voluntary Resort.....	3WS
Financial Reporting Council: Independent		HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	4WS
Review	1WS	Dental Charges	4WS
DEFENCE	2WS	PRIME MINISTER	5WS
Recruiting STEM Graduates into Defence	2WS	Exiting the European Union	5WS

PETITION

Monday 11 March 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>
TREASURY	1P
Closure of St George's Cross branch of	
the Bank of Scotland.....	1P

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CONTENTS

Monday 11 March 2019

List of Government and Principal Officers of the House

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Education

EU Withdrawal Agreement: Legal Changes [Col. 25]
Answer to urgent question—(Mr Robin Walker)

Shamima Begum and Other Cases [Col. 45]
Answer to urgent question—(Sajid Javid)

Syria [Col. 58]
Statement—(Alistair Burt)

Commonwealth Day [Col. 75]
Statement—(Harriett Baldwin)

Online News Platforms (Regulation) [Col. 90]
Bill presented, and read the First time

Children Act 1986 (Amendment) (Female Genital Mutilation) Bill [Lords] [Col. 91]
Not amended, further considered; read the Third time and passed

Exiting the European Union [Col. 128]
Statement—(Mr Lidington)

Exiting the European Union (Environmental Protection) [Col. 155]
Motion—(Andrew Stephenson); Division deferred till Wednesday 13 March

Offshore Wind Substations: East of England [Col. 156]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Leaving the European Union [Col. 1WH]
e-Petition debate

Written Statements [Col. 1WS]

Petition [Col. 1P]
Observations

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
