

**Tuesday
9 April 2019**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Tuesday 9 April 2019

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Fuel Duty: Hauliers

1. **Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): What estimate he has made of the average annual savings to hauliers from freezing the level of fuel duty since 2010. [910295]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): Fuel duty has been frozen for nine consecutive years, saving money for all those who regularly use our roads. I can confirm that the average road haulier has saved £23,300 per vehicle on fuel since 2010 compared with the pre-2010 escalator plan. However, the benefits to hauliers and motorists of freezing fuel duty must be balanced against the cost to the Exchequer in the context of our need to fund our public services, so we continue to keep it under review.

Maggie Throup: Hauliers have definitely been a major beneficiary of the duty freeze, but will my right hon. Friend consider helping the industry further by investing in a new motorway junction between junctions 25 and 26 of the M1 to help improve connectivity throughout the east midlands?

Mr Hammond: From 2020, all English road tax will be spent on our roads via a dedicated national roads fund—that will be £28.8 billion between 2020 and 2025, including £25.3 billion for strategic roads. We have spent £120 million on the recently opened smart motorway between junctions 23a and 25 of the M1, which will reduce congestion, but we will, of course, continue to take into account the need for connectivity in planning future roads investment in the east midlands.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The Chancellor says this needs to be balanced against the needs of the Exchequer, but what about the needs of the environment? What effects have we seen during the period of the freeze, with the failure to tackle emissions and with the road transport sector in particular failing compared with others?

Mr Hammond: We have an extremely good track record on decarbonising our economy. We have set extremely ambitious targets, and we are ahead of all our significant competitors in delivering them.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): The freeze in fuel duty has helped hauliers across Essex, but of course there is another measure that could help our hauliers and businesses even more, which would be to dual the A120. Will my right hon. Friend have a word with the Department for Transport to see how we can use the taxes raised to get this road dualled?

Mr Hammond: Never a Treasury questions goes by without my right hon. Friend raising the dualling of the A120. Of course we have a very large fund available, with £25.3 billion for strategic roads, and I am sure my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport is well aware of the compelling arguments in favour of dualling the A120.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What tax breaks is the Chancellor putting in place so that hauliers are able to continue through the uncertainty on contracts during the transition period as we leave Europe?

Mr Hammond: As I have already mentioned, hauliers have benefited very significantly from the freeze in fuel duty, but the hon. Gentleman asks a wider question. If we were to find ourselves leaving the European Union without a deal—a situation that I sincerely hope will not arise—we have a full range of tools available to us, including all the usual tools of fiscal policy. I have headroom within the fiscal rules of just under £27 billion, as I set out at the spring statement, and the Government will work closely with the Bank of England in those circumstances to ensure that fiscal and monetary policy are used to support the UK economy.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: As vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on fair fuel for UK motorists and UK hauliers, the voice of Kirstene Hair must be heard.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Of course, hauliers and motorists warmly welcome the fuel duty freeze, but they are concerned about the disparity in fuel costs across the country and the impact of the cost of oil—they are not seeing that at the pumps. Will the Chancellor, or a member of his ministerial team, meet me to discuss an independent fuel price regulator and to see whether we can sort out these issues?

Mr Hammond: We have a marketplace in fuel in this country, but I understand my hon. Friend's point. I am sure the Exchequer Secretary would be very happy to meet her to discuss it.

Mr Speaker: When she is not busy vice-chairing the all-party group.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I chair Labour's Back-Bench environment, food and rural affairs committee.

The Chancellor always impresses me. He is thoughtful, and I like him a lot. He is thoughtful on Europe and on the environment, but can I take him back to what my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) said? Is it not about time we had a modern taxation system that encourages sustainable transport? We are

killing kids and poisoning pregnant women. We know that air pollution is of the utmost importance. I appeal to the Chancellor's radical instinct: let us have a new form of sustainable taxation.

Mr Hammond: I am bemused by the disappearance of Mr Angry, who I am quite used to dealing with at the Dispatch Box. As I said earlier, we have a good track record on decarbonisation and addressing air quality challenges. We provide substantial support for ultra low emission vehicles, we have a highly differentiated vehicle excise duty and company car tax regime, which encourages the purchase of the cleanest and most efficient vehicles, and we will go on seeking to change behaviour through a carefully constructed tax system.

Manufacturing Output Levels

2. Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What recent assessment the Government have made of trends in the level of manufacturing output. [910296]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): Manufacturing output has grown by 8.3% since the start of 2010, having fallen sharply as a result of the financial crisis. The manufacturing sector has seen productivity increase more than three times faster than the UK economy as a whole over the past 10 years. It accounts for almost half of UK exports, and directly employs 2.6 million people.

Chi Onwurah: According to Make UK, we now have the highest level of manufacturing stockpiling of any country in the G7 ever. The chamber of commerce tells me that, in the north-east, stockpiling is putting huge pressure on warehousing and cash flow. That is a direct consequence of Brexit uncertainty. What additional support will the Minister offer to manufacturers? I asked a similar question of the Brexit Minister last week, and he did not seem to know what I was talking about. Will the Minister acknowledge the link between manufacturing output, stockpiling, cash flow and financial viability?

Robert Jenrick: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor and other Treasury Ministers are working with the banks, which tell us that they are making funds available to businesses that need support as their cash flow is under pressure and need working capital in the months ahead. Of course, the best service that any of us in this House can do for manufacturers and businesses across the United Kingdom is to support a negotiated exit from the European Union as soon as possible.

Sir Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): Building on the previous question, I am told that manufacturing output in Plymouth is holding up well, but that is partly due to customers purchasing to stockpile because of Brexit uncertainty. That may result in a lack of demand once we get Brexit over the line, if we ever do so. Have the Government given any thought to supporting manufacturing businesses through any short-term downturn that paradoxically might occur once we get Brexit over the line?

Robert Jenrick: The Treasury and other Departments have advanced plans to support the manufacturing sector should that be required in the event of a no-deal

exit. The evidence we see shows that, if we can secure a negotiated exit, there is a great deal of business investment waiting to go back into the economy. This year could turn out to be a strong one for the British economy, if only we can secure the deal.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Does the Treasury acknowledge the wisdom in the letter that the Engineering Employers' Federation, which represents 20,000 companies and 1 million workers, sent to the Prime Minister yesterday? It spoke of the renaissance of manufacturing in the earlier part of the decade, but is now expressing despair and is asking simply for the revocation of article 50.

Robert Jenrick: If the right hon. Gentleman wants to support this country's manufacturing sector, he and his colleagues should support a deal so we can leave the European Union in an orderly fashion. We are taking a number of important steps to support manufacturing, including increasing the annual investment allowance from £200,000 a year to £1 million, making research and development tax credits more generous, and backing schemes such as "Make Smarter", which help the manufacturing sector to embrace automation and digital technology and move forward with confidence.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Can the Minister confirm that, despite the Brexit uncertainty, Britain remains the second best country in the whole world for foreign direct investment?

Robert Jenrick: I can confirm that. The UK remains the European leader for foreign direct investment, venture capital investment and tech investment. Even in manufacturing, which is under a certain degree of strain, the UK remains the ninth largest manufacturing nation in the world.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): "Strain" is not the word. In the real world, production and manufacturing output remained 6.8% and 2.7% lower respectively in the three months to January 2019, compared with pre-downturn GDP in the first quarter of 2008. After nine years of policy failure, should the Chancellor and his team not stop throwing spanners in the manufacturing works and instead oil the machine?

Robert Jenrick: Not at all. Manufacturing exports are up 35% since 2010. We are investing in the manufacturing sector through our industrial strategy. We are creating a tax system that is pro-business. We are reducing corporate taxes to amongst the lowest in the developed world. The hon. Gentleman would do the opposite and reverse that. The very clear message that businesses give us, particularly international investors in this country, is that the threat of a hard left Labour Government dwarfs the risk of a Brexit outcome. We want to secure the future of the British economy in a resolutely pro-enterprise country.

Peter Dowd: What can I say? That old chestnut—and the Leader of the Opposition will be in No. 10 today as well. Anyway, I admire the Chancellor's perseverance in trying to get the Prime Minister to grasp the concept of compromise—a challenging task, I have to say. Perhaps a less onerous task would be to sort out the problem with production. In the three months to January 2019,

it fell by 1% compared with the same period last year, driven by a significant fall of 1.5% in manufacturing, which, of course, includes the beleaguered automotive sector. If the Government were a car, it would fail its MOT. The Chancellor has been putting manufacturing into reverse gear. Isn't it time for a new car with a new driver?

Robert Jenrick: The British economy is remarkably robust in its present state. We are seeing continued economic growth, record levels of employment and record low levels of unemployment. Businesspeople, investors and entrepreneurs the length and breadth of the country know that the greatest threat to our prosperity is a hard left Labour Government.

Renewable Energy: Public Funding

3. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What recent assessment the Government have made of trends in the level of public funding for renewable energy since 2010. [910297]

13. **Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What recent assessment the Government have made of trends in the level of public funding for renewable energy since 2010. [910308]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): The Government have increased support for low-carbon electricity generation through consumer-funded levies, from £1.3 billion in 2010 to over £7.3 billion today, spending £30.7 billion since 2010. This support has enabled the UK to become a world leader in clean growth, and the private sector has invested more than £92 billion in clean energy since 2010.

Kerry McCarthy: I think that is quite a selective answer. A coalition of 20 community energy projects and affiliated groups has warned that the Government's decision to axe the feed-in tariff incentive scheme could prove the final nail in the coffin for the sector. Since that warning was issued in February, at least 30 planned community energy projects have stalled. So what conversations has the Minister had with his colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to give proper support to community energy projects?

Robert Jenrick: I thank the hon. Lady for that question, but that is not our experience. The investment that I have just described that is going into the sector is very considerable. Renewable capacity has quadrupled since 2010. Renewables' share of electricity generation increased to 33% last year—a record high. The UK is decarbonising and we are meeting our climate change targets.

Afzal Khan: Members across the House recognise the importance of funding renewable energy policies to tackle climate change and improve air quality, but that does not go far enough. In Manchester, 126,600 children are growing up in an area with an unsafe level of air pollution. As the Mayor of Greater Manchester highlighted, further investment is needed to tackle the scale of the problem and protect the health of the most vulnerable—our

children. Will the Chancellor commit to providing the wider resources needed to protect our children from toxic air?

Robert Jenrick: The Mayor of Greater Manchester has the resources that he requires. The Government are supporting Mayors and urban areas across the country to take action on air quality, and we are providing money from national Government, for example through the £2.6 billion transforming cities fund, of which Greater Manchester has a significant share, to invest in the transport solutions of the future.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Although there is clearly more to do on climate change, surely action taken by this Government since 2010—we have reduced greenhouse gases, we have got more low-carbon jobs, especially in my constituency, and we are investing billions in renewables—must show our commitment.

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Last month, in the spring statement, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor was able to add to those policies by announcing a scheme to help small and medium-sized enterprises to reduce their carbon footprint; a new marine zone around Ascension Island; support for the renewables sector; the new future homes standard, to ensure that from 2025 homes are built with low-carbon heating and high levels of energy efficiency; and many other policies.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Tidal energy projects are powering ahead in Scotland and show substantial export potential. The Scottish Government recently announced support funding of up to £10 million to assist in commercialising its use. What support will the UK Government give the industry?

Robert Jenrick: The UK Government are supporting tidal energy. We have looked at any schemes that have become available to us. We have to balance the interests of the ratepayer, the taxpayer, to ensure that the schemes that we do support are the right strategic technology and the right value for money for the UK.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to one of this country's most successful publicly funded renewable energy programmes ever? I am of course talking about the last Labour Government's export tariff, the feed-in tariff scheme, the biggest single democratisation of energy that the UK has ever seen, cutting 700,000 tonnes of carbon. This month, however, in an act of supreme national and international self-harm, the Government killed it off—kaput, finito, game over. In the real world, how can anyone, anywhere believe that this Government take their climate change obligations seriously?

Robert Jenrick: The facts speak for themselves. The UK is on track to over-deliver comfortably on the first three carbon budgets out to 2022. The clean growth strategy sets out how we will meet our fourth and fifth carbon budgets, which take us to 2032, while keeping down costs for consumers, creating good jobs in the clean energy market and growing the economy.

Working-age Benefits

4. **Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): If he will end the freeze on working-age benefits. [910299]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): Thanks to our stewardship of the economy and the fact that wages are now rising above inflation, we are able to move on from the benefits freeze. From April 2020, we expect that increases will resume in line with inflation.

Alison Thewliss: That entirely misses the point. Research by the Resolution Foundation published last week confirms that the value of child benefit is at a record low, 40 years after it was introduced. Meanwhile, the shambolic Tory Government throw good money after bad in their botched Brexit plans. Is it not time for the Chief Secretary to speak to the Chancellor and ask him to get his priorities right and to give families a much-needed pay rise?

Elizabeth Truss: I would have thought that the hon. Lady would welcome the fact that unemployment in Scotland is at a record low level, thanks to our policies of getting more people into work and of making work pay.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Yesterday marked the beginning of the fourth year of the benefits freeze. Since it was brought in in 2016, the consumer prices index has increased by 6.6%, but working-age benefits have been frozen. That literally means that those in the most need can afford fewer necessities. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation says that by 2020, the benefits freeze will have pushed 400,000 into poverty. How can the Chancellor justify that?

Elizabeth Truss: I would have thought that the hon. Lady would welcome the fact that we are ending the benefits freeze. It is responsible to do so only when people in work's wages are rising. Thanks to our economic reforms, our reforms to employment law and our welfare reforms, we are now able to do that.

Kirsty Blackman: The benefits freeze is a political choice made by this Conservative Government and this Conservative Treasury; it is not a necessity. It is one of the biggest cuts to social security we have seen in recent times. The entire cost of the work allowance concessions over three years amounts to less than the benefits freeze takes away in one year. When FTSE 100 chief executive pay has increased by 11% in the past year, is it not now time that the UK Government got their priorities in order and protected those who need it most rather than giving tax cuts to the richest?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Lady obviously has not heard my answer that we are now moving to a situation in which benefits will rise in line with inflation, but let us be honest about the choices that the Scottish Government are making. Their choice is to raise taxes on people earning £50,000 by £1,500 a year, driving business out of Scotland and making the Scottish economy less successful.

Low-paid Workers: Take-home Pay

5. **Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase take-home pay for low-paid workers. [910300]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):

The Government are committed to making work pay and ensuring that people keep more of the money they earn in their pockets. Last week, we saw another above-inflation increase in the national living wage, meaning that a full-time worker on the national living wage would be earning £690 more over the coming year. This week, the personal allowance has increased to £12,500. A single person on the national minimum wage, working 35 hours a week, would have taken home £9,200 in 2010; this year, they will take home £13,700.

Alex Chalk: One way of increasing take-home pay is to create more high-paying jobs in the first place. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Cheltenham's Government-backed cyber innovation centre, which sees the country's finest cyber-security minds from GCHQ nurturing small businesses, is an excellent example of how the state and the private sector can combine to boost the economy and generate great jobs to boot?

Mr Hammond: I agree that the public and private sectors can work together to support digital businesses, including in the vital area of cyber, and that is why we have established the Cheltenham innovation centre as part of our £1.9 billion commitment to cyber-security.

18. [910313] **Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): Last month, Nottingham Trent University released a report mapping Nottingham's employment trends. It found that, in the 10 years from 2008 to 2018, earnings in our city rose by just 11.6%, compared with 19.9% nationally. Too many of my constituents are working hard, but are still in poverty and are reliant on benefits just to make ends meet. What specific action is the Chancellor taking to tackle low pay and economic insecurity in order to ensure that people in Nottingham do not just have work but have good work?

Mr Hammond: There are two parts to our approach. The first is a laser-like focus on raising productivity—investing in the infrastructure and skills that we need to raise productivity—because that is the only way to raise wages sustainably. We have also introduced the national living wage, and have increased it way ahead of inflation. We will have to set a new target for the national living wage from next year. I announced in the Budget that I have asked Professor Arindrajit Dube to conduct a survey of the literature on minimum wages and employment opportunities for people on low pay, so that we can address this issue and seek to raise the pay of the lowest paid as fast as we can without destroying their employment opportunities.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Further increases in the national living wage are vital to tackling the low pay culture, but does the Chancellor agree that as the rates increase, so does the risk of non-compliance? Does he therefore think that Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs is adequately resourced to be able to go after rogue employers who do not pay a fair wage?

Mr Hammond: Yes, my right hon. Friend is right. We have provided HMRC with additional resources, and wherever HMRC get reports, it pursues them. It also proactively looks for employers who are not meeting their legal obligation.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): A recent survey by the Centre for Labour and Social Studies showed that a third of workers struggle with the cost of living and two thirds of workers expect to get poorer this year, yet FTSE 100 CEOs have been seeing their wages rise six times as fast as those of the average worker. To me, that sounds like a laser-like focus on increasing inequality.

Mr Hammond: The Government are responsible for the productivity agenda and the setting of targets for the national living wage. As I have already set out, working in those two tracks is the way to deal with the challenge of low pay. I can tell the hon. Lady what will not help workers on low pay: having their personal allowance taken away from them.

Tax Paid: Reductions

6. **Stephen McPartland** (Stevenage) (Con): What progress he has made on reducing the total amount of tax that people pay. [910301]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): This Government have made very significant progress in reducing the burden of taxation on the low paid, including by recently increasing the personal allowance to £12,500—thus taking 1.7 million of the lowest paid out of tax all together since 2017.¹

Stephen McPartland: What the Treasury gives with one hand, local authorities are taking away with the other, with relentless rises in council tax, and parking charges and fees affecting households up and down the country. What are we actually doing to help families, instead of paying them lip service?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend makes the important point that there are many costs and taxes that bear down on the lowest paid. That is why, in addition to increasing the personal allowance, the Conservatives have introduced the national living wage, which has gone up well above the rate of inflation this April. We have frozen fuel duty for nine years in a row, which has saved the average car driver £1,000 cumulatively. We should also not forget that 28% of all income tax is paid by just the highest 1% of earners.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Minister can say anything he likes, obviously. In fact, he knows that the tax system is skewed in favour of richer people. The poorest 10% pay 42% of their income in taxes, whereas the richest pay 34%. Does he have any plans to achieve greater parity, particularly in VAT?

Mel Stride: I am surprised that the hon. Lady should mention the level of tax paid by the most wealthy, because under this Government, as I have just stated, the highest-earning 1% pay a full 28% of all income tax. Under the last Labour Government, that figure was substantially lower at around 24%.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Does the Minister agree that taxes could be lower if spending was better controlled, yet this House provides no scrutiny of spending whatsoever? The supply and appropriation Bill that he presented just over a month ago was not debated or

voted on. Is it not time that, like other Parliaments, we had a Budget committee and a parliamentary Budget office to scrutinise spending and hold Government properly to account?

Mel Stride: My right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary has just appeared before the Procedure Committee to address just the issue that my hon. Friend raises.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Given that our social care system is breaking, causing indignity, poverty and hardship to millions of people in their old age, might it be time to consider increasing fair taxes, so that we can live in a civilised society that looks after its most vulnerable people?

Mel Stride: As the hon. Gentleman may know, £400 million went into social care just at the last Budget. It is the mission of this Government to get taxes as low as possible so that we have a strong economy. Our record is good: we have about the highest level of employment in this country's history, more women are in work than at any time in our history, and we have halved unemployment since the mid-1970s. All of that is about creating the wealth and the money to make sure that we can afford the public services that the public expect.

Living Standards

7. **Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of his fiscal policy on living standards. [910302]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): Distributional analysis published by the Treasury at Budget 2018 shows that decisions taken by the Government on tax, welfare and spending on public services have benefited households across the income distribution, with the poorest households gaining the most as a percentage of net income.

Drew Hendry: The £1.7 billion announced yesterday for universal credit does not even touch the sides of the £12 billion of welfare cuts since 2015, nor does it contain provision to repay the debts that universal credit has caused for local authorities, such as the £2.5 million cost that has been borne by every highland household six years into the roll-out. Should Highland Council send the invoice for that debt for council tax payers directly to the Minister?

John Glen: No, it should reflect on the range of measures the Government took at Budget 2018, including the new energy price cap, the doubling of free childcare and the steps we have taken to reduce the burden on households by reducing fuel duty.

Pay Levels

8. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): What recent assessment his Department has made of trends in the level of pay since 2010. [910303]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): Pay has increased by 20% since 2010, we have a record number of people in work and wages are growing at their fastest pace for 10 years.

1. [Official Report, 11 April 2019, Vol. 658, c. 5MC.]

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank the Minister for that answer. However, the ongoing benefit freeze will result in those on very low incomes being more than £800 worse off by 2020. Meanwhile, tax cuts for the rich mean that those who earn more than £60,000 will be better off. The UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights said that UK poverty is a direct result of political choices, so when will the Government address the fact that their political choices have led to one in eight people who are in work living in poverty?

Elizabeth Truss: At the Budget in 2018, we put an extra £630 into the pockets of working families on universal credit. The way we will make sure that our country succeeds is by increasing economic growth, building more houses and cutting the cost of living, not by saying that business is the enemy and trying to crash our economy.

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): What assessment has the Minister made of the rather bizarre policy suggestion of removing personal allowances from the low paid?

Elizabeth Truss: I think it is an extremely strange idea. What we need to do is cut taxes for those on low incomes, and that is what we are doing: from this April we will cut taxes by £130 for those on basic rate taxes, meaning that they will be able to keep more of their own money.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): At this stage of the economic cycle there are many more people in employment, but many of them are in low paid or part-time employment. What steps are the Treasury and the Government taking to increase the level at which people earn a living to pay for the necessities of life?

Elizabeth Truss: Let us be clear about the statistics. Over the past year, 90% of the increase in employment has come from full-time workers, and 97% has come from high-skilled jobs. We are building an economy fit for the future.

Stamp Duty Land Tax

9. Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): Whether he plans to reform stamp duty land tax. [910304]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The Government have made substantial progress in reforming the stamp duty regime. At autumn statement 2014, SDLT was cut for 98% of those people due to pay it.

Greg Hands: Since we last spoke about this, the spring statement showed a further decline in receipts of an additional £2.7 billion over the scorecard. That was not due to changes in Wales and the welcome first-time buyer reforms, which were already in the October Budget numbers. What are the Government going to do to reform the system, protect revenue, grow social mobility, allow the elderly to downsize and get Britain moving again?

Mel Stride: The year-on-year changes to the level of receipts from SDLT have reduced recently, but that is due largely to the fact that we have put a great deal of

relief into first-time buyers' relief, which is already helping 240,000 first-time buyers get on to the housing ladder.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): However the Minister dresses it up on stamp duty land tax and other issues where the wealthy have seen their taxes cut, the impact on our economy is clear. Will he explain why stamp duty land tax reform is a priority rather than addressing the fact that in our country today one third of all families with a child under five are in poverty?

Mel Stride: It is most certainly not our priority to reduce SDLT for the very wealthy. In fact, the current levels—12% plus 3% if it is an additional dwelling—are high. I can also inform the hon. Lady that the amount we raised through stamp duty land tax in 2017-18 was twice the amount raised back in 2010-11.

Loan Charge

10. Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): What representations he has received on the introduction of the 2019 loan charge. [910305]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The loan charge was announced at Budget 2016 and was subject to public consultation. We have received representations, including from campaigners and the wider public. Disguised remuneration schemes pay loans in place of ordinary remuneration, with the sole purpose of avoiding income tax and national insurance.

Christian Matheson: I fully support measures to close loopholes for disguised remuneration, but not when they affect my constituents retrospectively. If the loans were illegal at the time my constituents took them out, why is it now necessary to introduce the loan charge?

Mel Stride: It is important that the House fully understands how disguised remuneration works. If, instead of paying an employee their earnings in the normal way, an employer pays them by way of a loan via an offshore trust in a low or no-tax jurisdiction—with no intention of ever repaying the loan and simply to avoid national insurance or income tax—that is wrong. As for the matter of retrospection, that model has never, ever complied with our tax code. The loans to which I refer are persisting today, not retrospectively. That is why it is right—and only fair on those taxpayers who pay the correct amounts at the right time, and on our vital public services, which rely on that money—that we collect it.

Lending to Small Businesses

11. Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): What further steps his Department is taking to regulate lending to small businesses. [910306]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): Loans of less than £25,000 to the smallest businesses are already regulated under the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000. The Government are committed to regulating only where there is a clear case for doing so, to avoid putting additional costs on lenders and businesses, and the Government welcome the recent expansion of the Financial Ombudsman Service and the establishment of a voluntary dispute resolution service.

Gill Furniss: A succession of small business lending scandals has come to light in recent months, including from Clydesdale, the Global Restructuring Group and HBOS. This has highlighted that small businesses are still struggling to get fair access to finance. Last week, Labour set out our proposals to fix this, including plans to set up a post bank that would offer relationship banking for small businesses to improve their access to finance. Will the Minister support Labour's proposition for a publically owned postal bank that will provide trustworthy finance for small businesses?

John Glen: I am sorry, but I cannot give the hon. Lady that undertaking. I really passionately believe that we need to resist additional Financial Conduct Authority fees, product reviews, increased compliance and monitoring costs for businesses, stifled product innovation and narrower product choice for small and medium-sized enterprises, which would be the consequences if we followed Labour's advice on this policy area.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. Question 22 will probably not be reached. If the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) were standing, I would call him, but he is not, so I will not—

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: But he does, so I shall—Mr Robert Courts.

22. [910319] **Robert Courts:** Mr Speaker, thank you very much. The scourge of late payments is a major problem for small businesses, as I know from my many small businesses in Witney, as a member of the Federation of Small Businesses and as the chairman of the all-party group on small and micro business. Is it not about time that we started celebrating those companies that support the small business supply chain by paying on time?

John Glen: My hon. Friend makes a very fair point. That is why the Chancellor announced at the spring statement that we will require company audit committees to review payment practices and report on them in their annual accounts. This is part of a range of measures that the Government will be setting out shortly when we make a full response after the call for evidence.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): The Government know full well that some deep-rooted corruption is taking place within major banking institutions when it comes to commercial lending. At the moment, there is nowhere near the type of protection needed to help cover our small businesses in such an eventuality. Will the Government take action now—eventually—to give small businesses that support?

John Glen: We have taken direct action so that small businesses can get a direct and quick response by expanding the authority of the Financial Ombudsman Service and having a retrospective review through the dispute resolution mechanism. What businesses up and down the country want is quick action to deal with disputes that are unresolved.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): High street banks are regulated, but the loans they provide to SMEs are not. There is not even a requirement to treat such a customer fairly and reasonably. In the absence of regulation, should there be a clearer warning about the lack of protection if things go wrong?

John Glen: As my hon. Friend knows through his excellent work with the dispute resolution service, there are some avenues for businesses to go down. Many—virtually all—lenders have now signed up to the standards of lending practice, and that, alongside the expansion of the Financial Ombudsman Service's jurisdiction, gives businesses the assurance they need.

Financial Services Sector

12. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve the performance of the financial services sector. [910307]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): UK financial services are globally competitive, and this Government are focused on maintaining that competitiveness. Leaving the EU with a deal will ensure that financial services businesses can continue to operate across borders into the EU. Through our global financial partnerships initiative, we will also build a new framework for rest-of-the-world cross-border financial services.

Sir Desmond Swayne: How will we ensure that those businesses do not end up being regulated from overseas?

Mr Hammond: We have always been clear that the UK must maintain control of the regulations governing one of its most important sectors and, crucially, a sector that the UK taxpayer stands behind. Those regulations have to be made in the UK. The agreement we have negotiated with the EU in the political declaration means that each side would make its own choices on regulation through its own legislative processes, and if any of these lead to our respective regulatory regimes no longer being equivalent, either side would have the right to withdraw market access.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): The financial services sector is not above the law. If I can take the Chancellor back to the loan charge, what steps is he taking against accounting firms that told my constituents, who are working in the IT sector with a Government Department, that these schemes were perfectly legal? My constituents now find themselves laden with debt from HMRC and paying these things back. What is he doing about those corrupt accountants?

Mr Hammond: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. As well as pursuing tax avoiders themselves, we have to pursue those who promote tax avoidance. My right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary has just told me that there are over 100 promoters of avoidance schemes who are currently under active investigation by HMRC.

Pension Savings

14. **Bim Afolami** (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to encourage people to save for their pensions. [910309]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

Automatic enrolment has reversed the decade-long decline in workplace pension saving. Department for Work and Pensions statistics show that since 2012 over 10 million people have been automatically enrolled into a pension. Minimum contributions increased this month to 8%, and everyone who is contributing at the minimum rate should see an increase in their overall remuneration package.

Bim Afolami: I thank the Minister for that response.

One of my constituents in Hitchin is a stay-at-home mother, and the maximum she can contribute to her pension is £3,000 per year, whereas if she were working, she could contribute up to £40,000 per year. I am sure the Minister will agree that we want to encourage people to save for their future. How can we increase the threshold so that stay-at-home parents can increase the amount they put into their pensions?

John Glen: The Government do offer generous tax relief on contributions to, and investment growth within, pensions. We also enable tax-free access to a proportion of savings. It is right that the Government control the cost of tax reliefs, and the £3,600 limit is one method of doing that. I can assure my hon. Friend that all aspects of pension policy and the tax system are kept under review in the context of the wider public finances.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): On Thursday last week, one of my oldest manufacturing companies, Dudson, went into administration. The average length of service is over 20 years, and we now have huge concerns about the pension scheme, as we do about everything else to do with the administration—there is no money left even for redundancy. Will the Minister arrange for me to meet the appropriate Ministers to ensure that we get Government support where we most desperately need it?

John Glen: I am delighted to give the hon. Lady that assurance. A ministerial meeting will be convened as quickly as possible.

FinTech

15. **Adam Afriyie** (Windsor) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential economic effect of the introduction of FinTech in the UK. [910310]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

FinTech revolutionises financial services, promoting innovation, stimulating competition and incentivising firms to deliver better outcomes for customers. FinTech firms directly contribute £6.6 billion annually to the UK economy, employing over 60,000 people across 1,600 companies.

Adam Afriyie: I thank the Minister for that answer, and I thank the Government for keeping us in the No. 1 slot for FinTech. I very much welcome the call for evidence on digital payments, but there is a danger that if the wrong type of payments are taken, particularly around the interchange fees, we could undermine the sector. I therefore urge the Minister to remain open-minded to charging a maximum fee per transaction, as opposed to a proportionate fee.

John Glen: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question and for his work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on financial technology over the last four years. The regulator is the UK's leading authority for interchange fee regulation, as he knows, and it is conducting a review into the fees that businesses face when accepting card payments. I acknowledge his concern, and we are open to hearing views on this issue, and on digital payments more broadly, as part of our call for evidence.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Can the Minister think of one independent trade expert who thinks FinTech in the UK will do better once Britain has left the European Union?

John Glen: As the hon. Gentleman knows, it is the Government's policy to have an orderly exit from the EU. However, we know that FinTech has proved to be very resilient in all circumstances. We had record investment of £15 billion last year. That is testimony to the creative power of that industry, working in the financial services sector in the City.

Residential Tower Blocks: Fire Safety Work

17. **Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on funding for remedial fire safety work on privately owned residential tower blocks. [910312]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss):

I meet the Housing Secretary regularly to make sure there are sufficient funds in his budget to address the issues.

Robert Neill: There is a particularly pressing need in the case of blocks such as Northpoint in Bromley, where the owner and the developer refuse to take responsibility, and intend to use legal powers to pass on the costs of aluminium composite material remediation to the leaseholders. That is a complete breach of the Government's undertakings. We need a fund specifically to provide funds for this—directly to leaseholders, if necessary. What is the Minister doing to advance that issue?

Elizabeth Truss: I know that my hon. Friend has been in touch with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government on this issue. We fully expect building owners in the private sector to take action to ensure appropriate safety measures are in place. We have written to all owners to remind them of their responsibilities. In addition, local authorities have the power to complete works and recover costs from private owners of high rise residential buildings.

Productivity Levels

19. **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What recent assessment his Department has made of trends in the level of productivity since 2010. [910314]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): Since 2010, UK labour productivity has grown by 3.9%, leaving it 1.9% above its pre-crisis peak. Slow productivity growth since the crisis is not a phenomenon

exclusive to the UK, but is common across the G7. We have created the £37 billion national productivity investment fund to tackle it.

Mr Sharma: The UK's productivity remains weaker than most other advanced economies. Does the Chancellor agree that the Government should lead the way in tackling the productivity crisis, starting with getting rid of the haphazard Transport Secretary?

Robert Jenrick: No. We are taking a range of interventions, including investing £600 billion in our national economic infrastructure. Over the course of this Parliament, investment in transport and other forms of infrastructure will be £460 million a week in real terms higher than under the previous Labour Government.

Sanitary Products: Funding

21. **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): Whether he plans to allocate funding for the provision of sanitary products beyond secondary schools and colleges.

[910317]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): The Department for Education is implementing this policy with the purpose of increasing attendance in schools. That is the factor it will take under consideration.

Janet Daby: The Chancellor's spring statement announcement of free period products in secondary schools and colleges was welcomed—very much so. However, he has failed to mention pupil referral units and other alternative education provision, as well as the fact that some children start their periods in primary schools. He has also failed to consider women and girls in vulnerable situations such as homelessness shelters, refugees and women refugees. Will he take a human rights approach to period poverty to ensure universal free access to sanitary products for all women, so we can put a real end to period poverty?

Elizabeth Truss: I know that the children's Minister has already said he will look specifically at primary schools and my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary is going to consult widely on the issue.

Topical Questions

T1. [910320] **Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): My principal responsibility is to ensure economic stability and the continued prosperity of this country. I will do that through: supporting our vital public services, such as the NHS; investing in Britain's future; keeping taxes low; and continuing to reduce the nation's debt. Securing an orderly departure from the EU will allow our mutual trade to flourish and encourage businesses to invest more in Britain's productive capacity.

Emma Hardy: Shoplifting crime is increasing, antisocial behaviour crime is increasing, violent crime is increasing. The Prime Minister said that austerity is over, so when

can we expect to see the Treasury give the Home Office the funding needed to replace the 20,000 police officers lost since 2010?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): In the Budget settlement at the end of the last year we made sure that there was extra money going into the police, increasing funding and increasing spending power in real terms. We have also allocated extra funding to deal with the scourge of knife crime.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): The Government claim that spending on education is higher than it has ever been. Does that take into account the extra costs the Government have put on schools?

Elizabeth Truss: We have provided schools with additional funding to cope with the rise in pension contributions. We will be looking at school funding as part of the spending review and I will take my right hon. Friend's representations into account.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): With the Brexit dialogue ongoing it is best to leave exchanges on that topic to the negotiations, although I hope we can all count on the Chancellor, if not everyone on his own side, to continue to insist that no deal is not an option.

Turning to Google, when will the Chancellor tackle the scandal of Google's tax avoidance? Google has an estimated taxable profit of £8.3 billion in the UK, so it should have a tax bill, according to the Tax Justice Network, of £1.5 billion. That would pay for 60,000 nurses, 50,000 teachers, seven new hospitals, 75 new schools. It pays £67 million. Why is the Chancellor, year on year, letting Google the tax avoider off the hook?

Mr Philip Hammond: As the right hon. Gentleman probably knows very well, the issue is a good deal more complex than he suggested in his question. We have announced the introduction of a digital services tax to begin to address the challenge of shaping our tax system to respond to the digital age, but the problem is that we have a set of international tax rules that we are obliged to follow, which were invented in the age when international trade was all about goods. Nowadays it is mostly about services, and much of it is about digital services. The international tax system is simply not fit for purpose and the UK is leading the charge in international forums—including the G20, which will be meeting later this week in Washington—in looking for a new way to allocate profits appropriately between jurisdictions where digital platform businesses are involved.

John McDonnell: After nine years in government, that smacks of an excuse, and let me say to the Chancellor that the Government's digital services tax has been roundly criticised as being too narrow and having artificial carve-outs. Let me move on from one scandal to another: the scandal of London Capital & Finance. LCF collapsed in January, leaving 11,000 investors in the lurch. They had £286 million invested in the company and most of them were not wealthy people. The Financial Conduct Authority was repeatedly warned of LCF's dubious structure and operations and failed to respond to those warnings. A decade on from the financial crash and

our regulatory system is still not fit for purpose. What action is the Chancellor taking to secure justice for the LCF investors and to reform our regulatory system?

Mr Hammond: We take very seriously the failure of London Capital & Finance. Last week, my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary directed the FCA to launch an investigation into the company. We will carry that investigation out and look carefully at the findings.

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): In Question 2 the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) told us how warehousing across the country was full to bursting point as businesses prepared for a no-deal Brexit. In a leaked letter last week, the Cabinet Secretary implied that business was not ready for a no-deal Brexit. Which is correct?

Mr Hammond: We know that manufacturing companies have been building precautionary buffer stocks of imported components to give them resilience against any disruption at our ports in the event of a no-deal Brexit—this tends to be larger companies. However, it is also the case, as my hon. Friend knows very well from his work as a Minister, that despite the Government's attempts to engage with business, there are still far too many businesses who have adopted the famous approach of the ostrich in the sand in relation to this eventuality and are not taking precautionary actions to prepare for the possibility of a no-deal exit.

T2. [910321] **Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab):** In keeping with the non-angry Yorkshire approach, as set out by my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), if, indeed, this Chancellor is thoughtful, he will know that, according to research by the Centre For Towns, Yorkshire's growing digital sector is being stifled by patchy broadband connectivity across the region, which is costing us money and jobs. Roles continue to flow down south and into London. With the roll-out of the next generation of 5G internet technology, will the Chancellor, in his thoughtfulness, commit to making funding available for the accelerated adoption of this in the Yorkshire region?

Mr Hammond: Rolling out full fibre is essential to Britain's digital future. That will be done largely by the private sector. The public sector's role will be to provide the appropriate support in areas where full fibre roll-out is not commercially viable, but supporting the urban centres in all our conurbations, including in Yorkshire, will be an early priority for the broadband roll-out programme. I should say to the hon. Gentleman—I hope this will cheer him up—that I recently met an Italian digital entrepreneur who has relocated his business from silicon valley to Sheffield and he said it was the best decision that he ever made.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Given that the people have already decided, presumably the Chancellor does not want a second referendum.

Mr Hammond: Contrary to some reports, I have never advocated a second referendum. I simply observed that it is a coherent proposition along with many others that have been discussed in this House.

T3. [910322] **Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab):** My borough of Enfield has seven times more households living in temporary accommodation than the national average, with 18% of people in Enfield classed as being low paid. I have no doubt that the two figures are related so how can the Chancellor defend the Government's record on in-work poverty, insecure work and zero-hours contracts, which have caused so much hardship for so many?

Elizabeth Truss: I think the hon. Gentleman should speak to his friend the Mayor of London about what he is doing to increase house building in London.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What plans are the Government making for a UK investment bank to take over the role of the European Investment Bank in the UK economy?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): In the spring statement, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor launched a review of our infrastructure financing, which includes that question on whether the UK would benefit from institutional arrangements. We have also made significant funds available to ensure that there is no shortfall for businesses that rely on the EIB.

T4. [910323] **Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab):** Last month's Office for National Statistics figures show that life expectancy for the poorest has fallen whereas for the rich, it has increased. Analysis into the key drivers of that, including Public Health England's investigations, shows that it is the result of cumulative tax and social security changes. I therefore ask the Chancellor, once again, what will he do about that, and particularly, will he stop immediately the benefit freeze that has such a devastating effect on people's lives?

Elizabeth Truss: As I have said, we are moving on from the benefits freeze. We are in a position now where real wages are growing and benefits will increase in line with inflation from 2020. However, the best route out of poverty and to helping people is ensuring that children get a good education and that more jobs are available in our economy.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Does the Chancellor agree that, in view of the failure of London Capital & Finance, of Premier FX, of individual police forces around the country to investigate economic crime, and of the Serious Fraud Office in yet another case, it is time we had a single economic crime police force in this country to deal with things properly?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): We have a single economic crime board, which was set up in January and chaired by the Chancellor and the Home Secretary, to look at how better collaboration can tackle those challenges more effectively.

T5. [910324] **Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Ind):** We all know that savings had to be made, but funding for schools, road repairs, social services, nurseries and youth clubs in Dudley has almost been halved because Dudley Council has been hit harder than councils elsewhere in the country. Will Ministers meet me and people from Dudley to discuss our case for fairer funding?

Elizabeth Truss: I was very pleased to visit the hon. Gentleman at Dudley College and see the fantastic work that it does. He put forward some interesting ideas about local transport. We are conducting a zero-based capital review as part of the spending review and of course we will look at proposals on all those fronts.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Does the Chancellor agree that the announcement that small shops will save up to £8,000 in business rates is a fantastic boost for our high streets? Will he please commit to supporting the bid from Redditch for the future high streets fund?

Mr Philip Hammond: Of course, the rates relief that we have offered over a two-year period to smaller independent retailers will help the high street, but retailers have to use that breathing space to adapt to the changing environment that they face. We cannot freeze the high street in aspic and we must face the reality of the digitisation of our economy. So let us work together to transform our high streets so that they are sustainable for the future.

T6. [910325] **Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab):** The Chief Secretary said in response to the right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin), who is no longer in his place, that schools would be funded for the additional costs of the teacher pension scheme, yet the Minister for School Standards wrote to me yesterday saying that he was still in the process of reviewing evidence. Schools have not been informed. They have not been given those costs within their budgets and they are having to decide whether to make redundancies because they do not have the information. Please will the Chief Secretary provide clarification?

Elizabeth Truss: As I have said, we have committed ourselves to ensuring that schools will be funded for that purpose.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Will the Chancellor explain why the customs union is the wrong policy choice for the future strength of the UK economy?

Mr Philip Hammond: The Prime Minister negotiated a deal with the European Union which gave us many of the benefits of being in a customs union, while preserving our ability to conduct an independent trade policy. We put that deal to the House effectively three times and it was defeated three times, so we have to pursue other options.

T7. [910326] **Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab):** Cuts in alcohol duty have cost the Treasury £4 billion over the last five years. What assessment has the Chancellor made of the impact of those cuts on public health and alcohol-related deaths?

Elizabeth Truss: I observe that the minimum alcohol price in Scotland has resulted in an increase in the consumption of alcohol.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Chief Secretary has said yet again that the Government think building owners should pick up the cost of aluminium composite material cladding remediation. Does she understand that there is no legal means of enforcing

that obligation? In the absence of such a means, will she please revisit the issue of direct funding for the leaseholders as a matter of urgency?

Elizabeth Truss: I note that a growing list of companies, such as Barratt Developments, Mace Group Ltd and Legal & General, are doing the right thing and taking responsibility for paying for remediation. The Government urge all other owners and developers to follow the leads of those companies.

T8. [910327] **David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP):** Housing associations in Parkhead, Tollcross and Shettleston have high levels of tenement stock, and the cost of maintaining it is prohibitive. Will the Chancellor agree to meet me to discuss the case for a modest reduction in VAT to preserve tenement housing, which is a key part of our architectural heritage in Glasgow?

Mr Philip Hammond: That is not an issue with which I am familiar, but I should be happy to hear more about it from the hon. Gentleman. Perhaps he would like to write to me in the first instance, setting out the details of his argument.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): In Chelmsford we love our high street. Does my right hon. Friend agree that giving nine out of 10 of our shops a business rates reduction of up to £8,000 a year will help to create a more level playing field between online and bricks-and-mortar shops?

Mr Hammond: Yes. As I said earlier, it is essential for the high street to evolve to respond to the digital age, but there is no doubt that smaller shops need a breathing space in which to do so, and reducing their business rates this year and next will help them in that regard.

T9. [910328] **Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab):** May I appeal to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to show some humanity to loan charge victims? They have been coming to me in tears, and we know that, nationally, some have committed suicide. Children are suffering because of tax arrangements made years ago. Will the Government please pause these punitive retrospective charges, and go after the providers with the same vigour with which they are going after the little people?

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): It is indeed incumbent on HMRC to take its duty of care towards customers—particularly vulnerable customers—very seriously, and I am confident that it does just that. There is a dedicated helpline for those who have been affected by the loan charge, and a vulnerable customers team provides one-to-one support. We recently announced that we would extend the needs enhanced support service to those who are subject to open investigations of their tax returns.

The hon. Lady mentioned promoters. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has already mentioned that more than 100 investigations of companies that promote tax avoidance are currently taking place. Other litigations in respect of offences relating to the disclosure of tax avoidance schemes have resulted in wins for HMRC. In the Hyrax case, which was concluded recently, it was

found that the promoter was not behaving appropriately, and about £40 million worth of tax is likely to be recouped as a consequence.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Will we continue to invest in the northern powerhouse, and, in particular, will we fully fund the Transport for the North plan for a TransPennine rail upgrade?

Mr Philip Hammond: As I said in my recent spring statement, the Government remain committed to the northern powerhouse and to Northern Powerhouse Rail, and I am working on the TransPennine rail upgrade with my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary.

T10. [910329] **Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): I welcome what the Chancellor said to my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) a few minutes ago about investigations into the promoters of some of the disguised remuneration schemes, but that will not do many of the victims much good. A business in Chesterfield is facing bankruptcy because of the charge. How might his review actually help the people who have wrongly taken advantage of this advice?

Mel Stride: It is largely companies that fall due to the loan charge, rather than individuals—of the 6,000 cases currently being settled, 85% by value relate to companies. HMRC has always been clear that appropriate payment arrangements will be in place to ensure that those outstanding amounts of tax, which after all have been avoided, aggressively and in a contrived way, can be settled sensibly.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): What priority will the Chief Secretary to the Treasury give to reducing the tax burden in the coming spending review?

Elizabeth Truss: I hope to follow in the footsteps of former Chief Secretaries who have been keen to keep a tight rein on public spending and ensure that people can keep more of their own money, because ultimately every penny of public spending is money that people have earned and that they could be spending on other things.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Some 55% of Scots pay lower income tax than they would pay if they lived in England. Does the Chancellor not agree that he should take inspiration from the SNP's progressive Finance Minister by protecting public services and the poorest, rather than the better-off?

Elizabeth Truss: The reality is that the SNP Government are putting people off relocating to Scotland and earning higher incomes in Scotland, because those earning £50,000 have to pay an additional £1,500 in tax every year.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What is the Chancellor going to do to help the WASPI women—Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—who have been denied their pensions? It has been going on for far too long and it is about time he did something about it.

Elizabeth Truss: We have had to take difficult decisions because of the state of the public finances that we were left with. We have already made improvements in relation to those women being able to retire, but it is right that we do not burden future generations as a result of our existing commitments.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I am sorry, but we must move on.

Rwandan Genocide: Alleged Perpetrators

12.42 pm

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Home Secretary if he will make a statement on the handling of the cases of the five alleged perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide in the United Kingdom.

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): None of us can forget the horrendous scenes of the Rwandan genocide 25 years ago. My colleague the Minister for Africa visited Rwanda only this week to share in the international recognition and remembrance of those horrific events.

I can confirm that the Metropolitan police's war crimes unit, within the counter-terrorism command, received a referral from the Rwandan authorities in January 2018 relating to five individuals in the UK and allegations of genocide offences in Rwanda dating back from around 1994. Relevant documentation was assessed by the war crimes unit and officers were deployed to Rwanda as part of our initial work to scope out the allegations. We subsequently commenced an investigation, which will initially involve a review of all the documentation transferred from Rwanda. Given the complexities involved, it is expected to be a protracted and lengthy process. Inquiries continue.

Mr Mitchell: As the Minister said, Sunday was the 25th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide. The hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) and I represented this House, along with the Minister for Africa, at ceremonies in Kigali, which were dignified and profoundly moving.

The House will recall that nearly a million Rwandans were murdered in frenzied killing over a 90-day period while the international community effectively did nothing to stop it. Once the killing was ended, those leaders who were responsible for the genocide fled. Over the intervening years, many have returned voluntarily to Rwanda to be processed through the Gacaca court system. Others have been extradited to Rwanda from the United States, Canada, France, Norway, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and Sweden. Britain, sadly, is a glaring exception.

Proceedings started here in the UK more than a decade ago in respect of five alleged genocide perpetrators, but in spite of ruling that there was a *prima facie* case of genocide made out against all five, the British courts declined to extradite. The British taxpayer has already forked out more than £3 million in legal costs, and four of the five are living on benefits, including housing benefit. The Rwandan authorities, having failed to secure extradition in Britain in the lower courts, have declined to proceed to the Supreme Court and have asked that the UK undertake the trial here. In spite of all the evidence already being available here in the United Kingdom, the Metropolitan police have indicated that it could take a further 10 years to process these cases.

The souls of those who were murdered in the genocide cry out for justice, but from Britain justice has at least been delayed and at worst denied. The Nuremberg trials commenced a mere seven months after the end of the war and were concluded within 10 months. In the

interests of those facing these dreadful allegations, as well as of the reputation of British justice, we should surely expect these five alleged génocidaires to be on trial at the Old Bailey by the end of this year. I end with the words spoken last weekend by the distinguished Rwandan Minister of Justice and Attorney General, Mr Johnston Busingye, who, when he came here to Britain, our Director of Public Prosecutions could not even find the time to see. He said this:

"Anyone who cares about British values and justice should be ashamed. The UK will go down in history as the only country in Europe that knowingly shielded alleged Rwandan génocidaires from justice."

Mr Wallace: My right hon. Friend is a strong supporter of Rwanda and knows the country incredibly well. I respect many of his views on the country and on the need for action, but I have to say that I fundamentally disagree with his last point. The United Kingdom has not shielded these people. He will know that on 28 July 2017 the High Court ruled that they could not be extradited, for fear of not facing a fair trial. He will know and respect the difference between the Government, the police and the judiciary. He will know that we have to follow the rule of law and that ruling.

This Government, and previous Governments, have been committed to bringing people to trial, which is why he has raised this issue. We have spent £3 million trying to get the right outcome, but when the Court ruled that these individuals could not be extradited, the United Kingdom, under its genocide convention obligations and after requests from the Rwandan Government, took on the investigation itself. We went out to meet officials in Rwanda and to gather evidence there, and there is a live police investigation into a number of individuals in relation to potential war crimes. My right hon. Friend will also understand that, as this is a live police investigation, there is no more I can say on this matter, for fear of prejudicing a fair trial here or anywhere else, and that is where we have to leave it. Those are the facts we find before us.

The Government are not shielding any war criminals, and nor should we. We would not do that. We are doing our best. I have raised the issue with the counter-terrorism police, and they say that the timescale for these investigations is not 10 years but more like between three and five years. I can assure my right hon. Friend that if the police require more resource or if they come up against an obstacle relating to international relations, the Government are standing by to help, to expedite and to ensure that those suspected of war crimes face full justice, but there is absolutely no case that this Government or any previous Government have shielded them from any war crimes trials that they might face.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) for applying for this urgent question on such an important matter, and I am grateful to you for granting it, Mr Speaker. The Rwandan genocide took place in 1994, and its recent 25-year anniversary was a haunting reminder of what happened. It was an atrocious act of violence, with hundreds of thousands of people being killed in just 100 days. That such a heinous act took place while the world stood by is a stain on the international community.

[Nick Thomas-Symonds]

Allegations have been made against five individuals whose extradition to Rwanda was not granted by the High Court in 2017. I will not comment specifically on the individuals themselves. It has, however, been reported in the past couple of days that Scotland Yard received a referral from the Rwandan authorities in January 2018, and that Scotland Yard officers were sent to help with the investigation regarding those individuals, as the Minister has confirmed today.

It is right that these allegations are investigated in this country. We believe in a rules-based international order. If that is to mean anything, a crime against humanity must be considered as a crime against us all; no matter where in the world it takes place, all efforts must be made to pursue justice for victims. Although the Minister must be circumspect about what he says with an investigation ongoing, can he reassure the House that all necessary resources will be put at the disposal of the investigation, that all possible efforts to gather evidence will be made and that, although it will of course be complex, the investigation will be carried out carefully and as speedily as possible?

Mr Wallace: I can give the hon. Gentleman that reassurance. At the beginning of this year, I got an update from the counter-terrorism police about the conduct of any investigations relating to people from Rwanda. In fact, I briefed my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) on that at about the same time to make sure he realised we are not forgetting this. We are not going to forget the genocide, and nor are we going to forget bringing those people to justice. I am very happy to keep the House posted, as we are allowed to. Nevertheless, with respect, we have to remember that this is a live police investigation and therefore all the safeguards apply.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): Other countries with very strong records of protecting asylum and the rights of individuals under criminal investigation, such as Canada, Norway, Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands, have seen fit to extradite suspects back to Rwanda. Why have we not?

Mr Wallace: If my right hon. Friend has a problem with the judiciary, I suggest he takes that up with the Lord Chief Justice. We have to respect the ruling of the High Court, which took the view in July 2017 that these people would not face a fair trial if extradited. We fought the case, we took it to the Court, the Court decided otherwise, and we have to respect that ruling.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) on securing this urgent question, and I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting it, as the 100 days of commemoration of the 25th anniversary begin. I was part of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association delegation to Rwanda last year—I think it was the first ever CPA delegation to Rwanda—and saw at first hand the efforts that are being made to achieve justice and build peace. However, the question of alleged perpetrators remaining overseas leaves a cloud hanging over those efforts. It is not fair either to those who are accused or to the victims that these accusations are left untested.

Building on some of the questions that have already been asked, and accepting the role of the judiciary, what discussions have been had with other countries about why they felt able to allow extraditions? If the justice system here has concluded that a fair trial cannot be conducted in Rwanda, a way has to be found to achieve justice here. Is the Minister confident that the Met police has enough resources to complete its inquiries? What is the planned timescale for the next steps once those inquiries are concluded? Can he assure us that those steps will be taken as quickly as possible so that justice is both done and seen to be done?

Mr Wallace: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I meet the head of counter-terrorism policing at least once a week, and we discuss a wide range of issues. If there is an issue with resource pressure in this particular case, or in other cases, we will no doubt discuss it and do what we can to solve it. Other courts and other countries have different statute books and different legislative arrangements. We go by our courts, and our courts made that ruling. That is regrettable. I am frustrated, and not just in this case; any Home Office Minister will often see their decisions and their attempts to extradite sometimes very dangerous people struck down. However, that is the rule of law—that is the rules-based system we are in—and, whether I like it or not, it is quite right that we follow it.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): With chain gangs labouring in uniforms of magnificent pink, like that worn by my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), is there not much we can learn from the Gacaca court system?

Mr Wallace: Well, I am not going to comment on that, but it is very clear that successive Governments have tried to extradite these people to face justice in Rwanda. The courts took a different view. We then stepped up to the plate, and the police, in an operational decision, had to investigate. I am not a learned gentleman with the ability to compare different legal systems, and nor will I attempt to.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I will not ask the Minister to comment on these particular cases, but given the decision of the High Court in 2017, can he assure the House that there is no obstacle in principle to anyone who is accused of war crimes, genocide or crimes against humanity facing justice in this country, provided the evidential test is met?

Mr Wallace: I can give the right hon. Gentleman that assurance. When it comes to war crimes, under our obligations in the convention there is no barrier at all.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Twelve years ago, I sat in on one of those Gacaca courts and saw some of these genocide suspects being put on trial. It was a rough and ready process, but does the Minister agree that a huge amount of work has been done over the years by the international community, including by British lawyers and experts, to help Rwanda improve its justice system? It has abolished the death penalty. Does he agree that there is no problem in principle with extraditing suspects to Rwanda to face trial?

Mr Wallace: It is our view—it was the Government's view—and that is why we contested the case. Unfortunately, it was not the view of the UK courts.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): May I plead with the Minister for a greater sense of urgency in this case? The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), whom I congratulate on securing the urgent question, talked about a 10-year delay. The Minister said there was a three to five-year delay. Three to five years is still too long. It is 25 years since the genocide in Rwanda. May we please have a sense of urgency from the Government?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman will have heard me say that it was not until 2017 that we started the investigation here at the request of the Rwandans, so it is not that we have not been doing it for 20-odd years. If there is a requirement for resources, that will be discussed every week with the counter-terrorism police, and I stand by ready to help with that. However, the hon. Gentleman will also want us to ensure that if these people come before a court, they are convicted and that we present the best case possible to ensure that the charges they face are upheld and stick.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I have spent time in Rwanda with Project Umubano and with the Select Committee on International Development. I have met people whose families were slaughtered. I have met people who have reconciled themselves to the fact that they no longer have families. They have gone a long way. I agree with the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) that it has been too long. These people have waited 25 years. Perhaps we have not been doing this for 25 years, but we should have been. We should have moved it on. People cannot come to peace until this is reconciled.

Mr Wallace: I hear what my hon. Friend says, and I understand that not only victims but supporters of the country want this matter to be closed and justice to be administered to the people responsible for the genocide. However, a police investigation is a matter for the police. How they conduct it is a matter for them, and how it is prosecuted is a matter for the CPS. We stand by ready to support them in doing that, but, at the end of the day, the police are operationally independent and the CPS is independent on many of these issues.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) on asking it. As he mentioned, it was very important for us to attend the Kwibuka 25 remembrance ceremonies in Kigali on Sunday. I must tell the House that the bravery of survivors was humbling. Our duty to them is to pursue justice.

I know the Minister knows that, so may I ask him a broader question? What conclusions has he drawn about the UK's current ability to act on crimes against humanity, and what discussions has he had with the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development about that? That matters not just to Rwandans but to other victims of grave injustices, such as those from Syria, and not just to direct victims of these heinous crimes but to every one of us in this world, all of whom rely on the rule of law.

Mr Wallace: While I recognise the understandable impatience of many colleagues on these particular cases, we should not lose sight of the fact that the United Kingdom, under successive Governments, has been a proud supporter of administering justice for war crimes around the world—in Bosnia, the former Yugoslavia, in Rwanda and other places. We should be proud of that.

We have not only often put our money where our mouth is, but we have used all diplomatic tools—the former Yugoslavia is a good example—to bring to trial people who thought they were always out of reach of justice. We continue with that enthusiasm and support. If it is a case of resources, the Department and I are standing by to continue the support. We are determined to see justice, and there is no resistance on this side of the House to doing so. We will continue to pursue the case to make sure that these people face the justice they deserve.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Having been on several trips to Rwanda with my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), I entirely share their comments. Does the Minister agree that it is vital that this case is prosecuted with the utmost vigour? If the 2017 High Court judgment leads people to think that the UK is a soft touch, people who commit these atrocious crimes will see the UK as a natural refuge. That should not be the case, and they should know they will face the full force of the law, whatever the views of the court system in the country from which they have come.

Mr Wallace: I agree with my hon. Friend that we need to send a strong message. I do not like, any more than he does, seeing in the newspapers that people are living freely in this country having had their extradition effectively turned down, which is why I would like to see, in general—I will not comment on this case—people in this country who have potentially perpetrated a war crime to be persecuted and prosecuted themselves.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The Minister is hearing from both sides of the House that we want action and that we want this investigation to happen promptly. We all know that he is not in charge of the courts and that the police are independent, but he does have the power to give extra money to the Met war crimes unit now, rather than waiting for a request. Will he not do that and send a signal from this House that we want the police to have the resources to get this investigation done soon?

Mr Wallace: The right hon. Gentleman knows full well that if the police require more money, for this or any other issue, they can come to the Home Office—either they internally prioritise or they come to us to see what we can do. We stand ready to do that. I know from my discussions with the police on this issue that this is not about resource; it is about the complexity of the case itself. Some of these cases are incredibly complex, and the challenge of untangling them is one of the reasons it takes time.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Along with my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), I have talked to some

[*Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown*]

of the families who witnessed some of these dreadful crimes. In the Minister's meetings with the Metropolitan police, he should urge it to proceed on this as urgently as possible. Three to five years is too long. If it were a terrorist outrage in this country, the public would be rightly outraged that it is taking so long. May I urge him to urge the Metropolitan police to get on with this? After all, most of the evidence has already been collected by the earlier court cases.

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend may like to reflect that some of the terrorist trials we are awaiting here in the United Kingdom have taken years. They take a long time. In cases that stretch across countries, it is often highly complex to get evidence that reaches the evidential bar in order that a case can be submitted to a court.

Under our system, as under the Rwandan system, the accused has a right of disclosure and defence, and we have to make sure we get that right. I hear the urgency of my hon. Friend and other hon. Members. I will continue to press this when I meet the head of counter-terrorism policing on Thursday. I will make sure the police are aware of the urgency, and we will have a further discussion about whether more resource is needed or whether it is the complexity that is taking time.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I, too, met survivors of the Rwandan genocide when I visited Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2006. I know this subject is very close to your heart, Mr Speaker. I thank you for granting the urgent question, and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) on asking it.

Mr Speaker, you will remember 10 years ago, when we were joint vice-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on genocide prevention, sitting in a meeting with Jack Straw on closing the impunity gap in the law and making sure that alleged war criminals could be prosecuted in this country. People will look at us today and say that our judicial system and our asylum system are supposed to give sanctuary to those fleeing human rights oppressors and atrocities, and that they should not be abused by the alleged perpetrators of war crimes. There is no time limit on justice, so why did the police not investigate these crimes in parallel with the extradition process? Will the Minister report to this House on a six-monthly basis so that we are not here still demanding justice for the survivors on the 30th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide?

Mr Wallace: On the hon. Lady's last question, of course I can update the House on the progress of war crimes investigations in general, and maybe specifically around Rwanda, but not on individual cases—I cannot come to the House on those cases, one by one. I spoke earlier about commenting on live police investigations.

It is obviously a matter for the police when they start an investigation, but it is clear from the chronology of this case that the Rwandan Government requested an extradition and we complied with that request. We were keen to see these people extradited to face justice in Rwanda. We had safeguards, and we were confident that Rwanda would be able to deliver a fair trial. Regrettably, that was not the view taken by the High Court in 2017.

Almost as soon as that decision was made, we took up the baton and started the investigation here. We will continue with that investigation, and hopefully we will get to a resolution sooner rather than later.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): When I visited Rwanda in 2002 I had the misfortune to see some horrific scenes as a result of the genocide, and it was made very clear to me then that justice has to be part of the reconciliation process. A lot of progress has been made in Rwanda—I visited again last year and saw some of that progress—but will the Government continue to work with Rwanda to ensure it can continue making progress while, at the same time, recognising that justice is an important part of that recovery process?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The Africa Minister visited Rwanda not only to remember the horrors of the genocide and to say, "You are not forgotten," but to continue to commit Britain's support for that country and the amazing progress it has made since 1994.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) on raising this issue. Were we talking about people who were allegedly involved in the Nazi holocaust, there would be a much stronger sense of urgency on the action that needs to be taken. In that context, I believe the Minister is defending the indefensible. During the extradition proceedings, there have been 10 years in which I assume information has been gathered by the authorities. To say that it will take a further three to five years, or probably closer to 10 years, to bring the matter to trial is just unbelievable. Complexity and thoroughness do not justify this level of delay, and I urge him to listen to the unanimous voices on both sides of the House and do all in his power—it is not about resources but about a will to act—to ensure that the police pursue this and that these people are brought to justice much more swiftly.

Mr Wallace: I hope the right hon. Lady does not think that because I have upheld the rule of law about the courts, there is no urgency. I would like to see those people off our streets. I do not want war criminals walking around this country. I do not want them here on a day-to-day basis. My strong view is that they should face justice, but police investigations are complex, and there is no magic wand that we can wave to force these things to happen at a quicker pace. We can allocate resource, offer to remove any barriers, whether international or not, and go to court—as we did—on behalf of the victims and the people of Rwanda to try to get this dealt with, but I can do no more than ensure the police know of the urgency. I can continue to monitor the situation and press them, weekly if necessary, to ensure we get a resolution. There is a determination on all sides of the House to bring war criminals to justice, and we will continue to press that.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I accept the Minister's good faith, and I recognise this country's good record on dealing with its international obligations. I welcome the fact that neither he nor anyone else in this House is seeking to go behind the decisions of this country's independent judiciary, but does he recognise that it is important in such cases to ensure that too

much time does not pass and that the testimony of witnesses does not fade? We are often dependent on eyewitness testimony in such cases, and those of us who appear in the courts know that the longer it is since the incident, the harder it is to ensure a fair trial and fair testing of the evidence.

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend knows better than anybody else about the judiciary and its relationship with the Executive. I absolutely understand the importance of urgency when it comes to evidence. It is important that we produce trials that are successful. All I can say is what I have said to many hon. Members: I will impress the need for urgency on the counter-terrorism police when I next see them. I promise to update the House on the progress of war crimes prosecutions. My hon. Friend and I know that we must respect the rulings of the judiciary. There has been too much bashing of the judiciary in the past 20 years, and that does not help our society. They made that decision, and we abide by it. We must now prosecute in this country, and we will do so urgently.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): Not long after my election, I met a constituent who had seen their family members brutally killed during the Rwandan genocide. Her story was heartbreaking. It is unbearable for her that one of the alleged perpetrators of those horrific acts of violence now lives in her town and is free to continue with his family life without fear of extradition. She is asking when she will see justice for her brothers.

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman will have heard my earlier answers. As the police progress whatever cases they have, we stand ready to support them. Subject to the complexities and the courts, I hope we will see prosecutions sooner rather than later.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Anybody visiting Rwanda will recognise a spirit of reconciliation and a real desire to move on from the absolutely horrific events of 1994. That is backed up by a sense of justice, often through the specially arranged local courts. If Rwanda has done the right thing, why cannot we?

Mr Wallace: Rwanda's doing the right thing has meant ensuring the rule of law, separation of powers, respect for the judiciary, successful prosecutions and fair trials. Those are the same principles that we believe in in this country. We must respect the judiciary and its rulings if we are to set an example around the world. The Rwandan courts seem to manage that. We will respect our judiciary's ruling and will seek to prosecute in this country.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I, too, have visited Rwanda, although it was with the all-party group on agriculture and food for development, so I saw a far more positive vision of the country. It is shocking to go round the stunning countryside and reflect on the fact that it was once steeped in bloodshed. Has the Minister had conversations with his colleagues in the Department for International Development? The number of survivors of the genocide is dwindling as the years pass. Between 250,000 and 500,000 women were deliberately targeted with rape, and many were deliberately infected with HIV. Working with the survivors can perhaps help us to gather evidence and eventually bring people to justice.

Mr Wallace: The hon. Lady makes some valid suggestions. I am obviously not the Minister for Africa or the DFID Minister, but I will write to my colleagues and ask them to write to her to explain what they are doing. I will seek any suggestions she has about how to build a better policy.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The alleged perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide are Rwandan citizens, are they not? The public in this country will view with disbelief the fact that we are not returning them to justice in their own country. For those people to be at large and in receipt of social security benefits just makes the situation even worse. If in 1970, 25 years on from the horrific events of the second world war, there were alleged Nazi war criminals in this country and the Government were refusing to extradite them for trial in West Germany, Poland and Israel, that would have been unacceptable, as is this.

Mr Wallace: Perhaps I can correct my hon. Friend. The Government are not refusing to extradite them; we sought to extradite them to Rwanda to face justice. The court took a different view and said that it did not feel that they would face a fair trial if we did so. We have to abide by the court's ruling, so we will instead seek to prosecute them in the United Kingdom. We think that is the best outcome. Whether they are citizens of the United Kingdom, Rwanda or anywhere else, we must abide by our article obligations under the European convention on human rights.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): In a few weeks' time, I will join Nottingham's Rwandan community to commemorate 25 years since the genocide. Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin), does the Minister appreciate the impact on survivors who have made their home in the United Kingdom of our country not being seen to be doing everything possible to ensure that those who are guilty of crimes against humanity are brought to justice?

Mr Wallace: I understand the hon. Lady's point. Can she communicate to her Rwandan community that the Government spent £3 million trying to extradite those people so they could face justice in Rwanda? That was not possible, so this country and the police are investing to ensure we seek justice in the United Kingdom. That is not being passive and doing nothing; it is doing something.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I was privileged to be on the first Commonwealth Parliamentary Association delegation to Rwanda last November. It truly is a glorious country. The theme across all the meetings we took part in, whether with the Foreign Minister, in reconciliation villages or with district mayors, is that no one will or wants to forget the genocide. Those people deserve justice. One of the Foreign Minister's concerns was our apparent unwillingness to investigate the allegations against the alleged perpetrators of the genocide. The Minister knows that in 18 months' time, Rwanda will host the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. How can the UK Parliament, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the UK Government sit with the Rwandans in Kigali talking about common

[Chris Elmore]

purpose around security and safety, when it appears that we do not take their concerns and their need for reconciliation and justice seriously in the UK system?

Mr Wallace: I dispute the picture the hon. Gentleman is painting about the Government's and Parliament's commitment to Rwanda. Plenty of friends of Rwanda who care about the consequences of the genocide in 1994 have rightly stood up to ask questions. This Government, the previous Government, the previous Labour Government and this House have been great supporters of the steps that Rwanda has taken since 1994. We are not doing nothing. We tried to extradite individuals so they could face trial. The court took a different view, and then we started an investigation. We have also been running other investigations into war crimes, and we will continue to do so.

Windrush Compensation Scheme

1.18 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Home Secretary if he will make a statement on the Windrush compensation scheme.

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): Righting the wrongs done to the Windrush generation has been at the forefront of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary's priorities. Last week, on 3 April, she made a statement to this House setting out the detail of the compensation scheme and announcing that it is now open to claims.

The Government deeply regret what has happened to some members of the Windrush generation and the launch of the compensation scheme marks a key milestone in righting the wrongs they have experienced. The scheme will provide payments to eligible individuals who did not have the right documentation to prove their status in the UK and suffered adverse effects on their life as a result. These could range from a loss of employment or access to housing, education or NHS healthcare, to emotional distress or a deterioration in mental and physical health.

Information on the scheme is now available. The claim forms and guidance notes can be found on the gov.uk website or requested from the freephone helpline. The scheme rules and caseworker guidance were also published online on 3 April. The helpline is already receiving calls and claim forms are being sent out. The Home Office has also started a series of engagement events. The first event was held in Brixton last Friday and the next event is scheduled for Southampton this Friday.

In due course, we will publish information on the scheme through our existing monthly reports to the Home Affairs Committee, including information on the number of claims submitted, the number of claims paid and the overall amount paid out by the scheme.

Mr Lammy: I should not need to remind anyone in this House that the Windrush scandal is a national disgrace. At least 11 people who were wrongly deported from the UK by their own Government have died. At least 164 British citizens were wrongly deported or detained. Home Office officials have told the media that 15,000 individuals may have been harmed by the contempt that their Department showed.

Last week, one year since the scandal broke, the Home Secretary finally announced the compensation scheme, to begin the process of reconciliation for the Government's grievous errors. The Home Secretary apologised again, on behalf of the Government, for the failings and repeated his promise to do right by the Windrush generation. Crucially, he told members of this House:

"There is no cap on the scheme"

and

"it will be based on people's needs".—[*Official Report*, 3 April 2019; Vol. 657, c. 1048.]

His words seem to have provided false reassurance.

In the response to the Windrush compensation scheme document that the Home Secretary brought to this House, there was no detail of caps. Instead, that was

quietly published online in a separate compensation scheme rules document, slipped out later on 3 April. MPs therefore had no chance to scrutinise or question the truth that his Department had set out incredibly strict caps to be awarded for different losses—a £500 payment for legal costs incurred; £500 for people who had been denied the chance to go to university; £1,000 for those wrongly obliged to leave the country under a so-called voluntary return scheme; and a mere £10,000 for people who were wrongly deported. Victims have correctly described these payments as “peanuts” and “insultingly low”.

I say to the Minister: £10,000 is less than one Secretary of State’s gross salary per month. Is that all that a person will have lost if they have been locked up, if they have been deported, if they have been made homeless, because £10,000 is all that they would get from her Department? Is this all it costs someone to be denied access to their family and friends for years or decades—to their own country? Is this the price that you put on my constituents being deported for no wrongdoing and nothing that they have themselves done? Is this how this Government value the lives of black Britons? I say to the Minister: you promised to do right by the Windrush generation, but quite rightly many of them think that they have been misled.

Let this be the final betrayal of the Windrush generation. Scrap the caps, and compensate them properly for the wrongs that have been done to them.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. He is of course right to emphasise how important it is that we right these wrongs. I would like to give some further explanation. It is important to reflect that while we have worked very closely with Martin Forde to establish both the tariff-based scheme and actuals, so where people could evidence specific losses, they would be reimbursed for those losses, actually these different heads of claim, which can be claimed for, need not be in the singular but can be cumulative. There is also a discretionary category, which will enable people to claim for other losses, not necessarily identified within the scheme, which is uncapped. *[Interruption.]* The detail is provided in the scheme online, but it is important to reflect that while there is a tariff set at £10,000 for somebody who was wrongly deported, of course that could be in conjunction with other parts of the claim, which could add up to significant sums in addition to that.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): In addition to the Windrush compensation, can my right hon. Friend say when we will see pay-outs for the Chagos compensation scheme, which was set several years ago at £40 million to that exiled community over 10 years?

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend will be conscious that this urgent question is about the Windrush compensation scheme, but he will no doubt be reassured to hear that last week, when I met high commissioners from across the Commonwealth, that issue was raised with me, and I will be working closely with Home Office officials to update him on that.

Mr Speaker: Ooh, it is very striking to see the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) and the right hon. Member for Sutton

Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) beetling off together. It is almost certainly a conspiracy—but probably a conspiracy in the public interest, I feel sure.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on securing this important urgent question.

The whole House knows that the Windrush generation was let down by successive Governments, Labour and Conservative, but with this derisory compensation scheme, the Windrush generation has been let down once again. I draw it to the attention of the House that although I did get early sight of the Home Secretary’s statement on 3 April, I was not provided with early sight of the scheme rules, and I appreciate the opportunity to question the Minister on them today.

This scheme compares very unfavourably with the criminal injuries compensation scheme, whose awards are aligned with compensation for loss under common law. Claimants are also allowed a statutory right of appeal of awards. They are also allowed legal aid for those appeals. None of that is true in any meaningful sense in the case of the Windrush victims. How can the Minister possibly justify that?

The Opposition believe that the Home Office must pay for losses actually incurred. For instance, claimants will be paid just £1,264 for denial of access to child benefit. It is easy to quantify what people would have lost altogether. Why cannot they get that exact sum of money back, plus interest? There is only £500 for denial of access to free healthcare. It is easy to quantify how much people had to spend when they had to access private healthcare. Why cannot they get that money back?

On awards, the scheme provides compensation for detention. However, in the false imprisonment case of *Sapkota v. Secretary of State for the Home Department*, the courts upheld three common law principles. First, detention is more traumatic for a person of good character. Secondly, a higher rate of compensation is payable for the first hour. Thirdly, historic damages awarded in precedent cases must be adjusted and uplifted to present-day values. The deputy High Court judge in that case awarded Mr Sapkota £24,000. This proposed scheme provides nothing like those common law damages.

The amounts offered for wrongful denial of access to higher education are pitiful. The scheme offers just £500, but all the research shows that the lifetime benefit of access to higher education is counted in tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of pounds.

This scheme is shoddy, unfair and unjust. Ministers did not make all the information available to Her Majesty’s Opposition when we were able to respond to the scheme. Some might say—I will not say it—that Ministers were attempting to conceal the reality of the derisory nature of their scheme. Above all, the Home Secretary said there was no cap. These tariffs are a cap. We are asking Ministers, even at this late stage, to review these unfair tariffs, remove the cap, and give this generation the justice they deserve.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the right hon. Lady for her comments, but given that the rules and guidance were published on the same day as the Home Secretary made

[*Caroline Nokes*]

the statement, it is somewhat unfair to suggest any attempt to conceal the scheme. Far from it: we have sought to publicise the scheme and to reach out to posts across the world with a selection of communication tools, and we invited high commissioners into the Home Office last Thursday to emphasise the scheme to them.

I will comment briefly on the published Home Office ex gratia scheme that was already in place and to which the Home Office and Martin Forde referred when considering this scheme. The ex gratia scheme provides a maximum £1,000 for someone who has been wrongfully deported. In arriving at the £10,000 figure for deportation, the Government considered that alongside the case law evidence of courts awarding a range of damages subject to individual case details. We regarded £10,000 as a more appropriate figure than the £1,000 in the existing scheme, which has been in place for many years.

The right hon. Lady mentioned the scheme of review. We have put in place a two-tier review: first, an internal review, whereby someone who is not content with the original decision can have it referred to a senior caseworker who was not involved in the original decision; and, secondly, independent of the Home Office, another tier of review will be considered by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs independent adjudicator.

With regard to caps on payments, this scheme is both tariff and actuals-based. The right hon. Lady raised the issue of those who might have been denied NHS care, where the tariff scheme involves an award of £500. However, if an individual incurred private healthcare costs, the actuals will of course be repaid. The Home Office is determined to work with its own information and with data held by other Departments and indeed by individuals more widely, so that we help claimants to establish their actual level of loss, where that is the most appropriate route.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on granting this urgent question, and the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on tabling it. I commend the Minister for her work on the scheme; it is one that I very much welcome. How accurate are press reports that up to 600 people may have made false or fraudulent claims to the scheme?

Caroline Nokes: It is absolutely right to reflect that the scheme has been open only for very few days so far, but we have received claims, registered them and sent out claim forms, which we are expecting back. I am not aware of any fraudulent claims to this scheme, and I am very conscious that we have put in place a rigorous process, which will enable all claims to be assessed fairly and indeed with full rigour. It is important to reflect that the Home Office is determined to work with individual claimants. There may be cases in which Home Office data enable us to assist people to determine the level of claim, and we are absolutely determined to do that.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on securing this important urgent question. It is imperative that the victims of the Windrush scandal are compensated justly for the terrible treatment that they endured.

I was a member of the Joint Committee on Human Rights which took evidence from two of the victims of this disgraceful scandal. Anyone who heard their testimony about the effect of wrongful detention, and of years of persecution and threatened deportation, would regard some of the amounts in this scheme as derisory. After a year-long wait for the compensation scheme, it is disappointing that it has serious flaws, some of which have already been enumerated by others. It seems to be a great deal more mean than was suggested by the Home Secretary at the Dispatch Box, when he said that there would be no cap on the scheme. A cap, however, has clearly been introduced through the back door by applying internal caps on pay-outs, which will equate in effect to caps on how much individuals receive.

As has been said, some of the pay-outs under the scheme are wholly unacceptable: £250 per month for people who were rendered homeless as a result of that unjust treatment; or a maximum award of £500 for legal affairs. The Home Secretary refuses to compensate people for the full cost of immigration law advice; he claims that they do not need legal advice to make an immigration application. Any of us who deal with immigration matters in our constituency surgeries knows that not to be the case. Those of us who study closely the Home Office files of the individuals who gave evidence to the Joint Committee on Human Rights will tell you that only with the assistance of lawyers did they manage to disentangle themselves from this mess.

Is it not time for the Home Secretary to admit that removing legal aid from immigration matters was a huge error? The Government must fully compensate those of the Windrush generation who had to pay out of their own pockets to defend themselves against that state injustice. Will the Minister accept that the minimal pay-outs under this scheme will achieve nowhere near justice for such people? Does she agree that, if the Government were truly serious about rectifying the wrongs of the scandal, they would look at this scheme anew and scrap the hostile environment, which already threatens to have the same impact on European Union citizens applying for settled status.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for her questions. She commented on the long wait for the scheme. She will of course recognise that not only did we appoint Martin Forde as an independent adviser to the scheme, but he came to the Home Office to ask for additional time, so that the consultation period could be open for longer. More than 1,400 responses were received to the consultation, and it was absolutely right to give adequate time for the responses to be considered carefully and thoroughly.

The hon. and learned Lady will be aware that the scheme includes both a tariff category and actuals. It is important to reflect that, where actuals have been accrued, the Home Office seeks to reimburse people through those fees. However, we recognise that it may be hard for people to provide evidence of actuals, which is why it was so necessary to put a tariff scheme in place as well, so that people would not be dependent simply on being able to provide the evidence.

The hon. and learned Lady made a wider point about the complexity of the Home Office's immigration scheme. She will no doubt welcome the consultation on that being carried out by the Law Commission. If she has

not already done so, I hope that she responds to that consultation before it closes, which I believe to be imminent.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Out of darkness can come light, and I therefore welcome today's announcement, which builds on the earlier announcement and progresses the whole issue of compensation for those badly affected in the Windrush immigration scandal. In the Immigration Minister's report, I particularly welcome paragraph 4.18, which clearly lays out compensation for employment, and 4.20, which does the same for benefits. I have one constituent—possibly two, but one definitely—who will deserve compensation in both those categories. Will my right hon. Friend the Minister confirm news about the telephone hotline and tell us how our constituents may access help with application forms, which can be a challenge, for the older generation especially?

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend is right to point out that claim forms can sometimes be difficult and onerous, for the elderly in particular. We deliberately designed the form after speaking to members of the Windrush generation, so that the language used was as simple and straightforward as possible. In addition, we made provision with Citizens Advice, so that it can assist people with their claims. Individuals from my hon. Friend's constituency of Gloucester need only make contact with the helpline—I understand that the average wait time for an answer last week was just 18 seconds. His constituents should make contact with the helpline and they might then be referred to Citizens Advice, which will be able to provide assistance with making a claim.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I too congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on securing this important urgent question. Compensation is just £1,000 for those individuals who were forced to leave this country under the so-called voluntary return scheme because they were unable to prove that they were justifiably able to reside here. Many people received letters from the Home Office warning them that they would need to leave the country because they were here illegally. How can the Minister justify paying compensation of only £1,000 to those who were forcibly removed from the country?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady is right to point out that serious wrongs were done to members of the Windrush generation. That is why we set up the Windrush taskforce and put in place a compensation scheme, which was designed with the assistance of our independent adviser, Martin Forde. I recognise her, but it is important that we reflect on the advice that we were given and seek to have a scheme that is fair.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I welcome the urgent question from the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), whom I congratulate. I understand why the scheme is in the form that it is, but does the Minister agree that what is most important is that the end result is seen to be fair, particularly to those mentioned by the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), the people whom we saw in the Joint Committee on Human Rights and who were detained unjustly for considerable lengths of time? Does the

Minister agree that the end sum—adding all these bits together—should be seen in the eyes of the public as fair for what people in those circumstances have been through?

Caroline Nokes: I commend my hon. Friend for his work on the JCHR; I certainly recognise the moving and compelling testimony that the Committee listened to during the course of its inquiry. It is absolutely right that we reflect on the advice that we have received, that we seek to make the scheme as fair as possible, and that we put in place a scheme that can respond quickly and efficiently to claims. That is why we will have a taskforce that will be 120 strong at full complement. We have also made provision for individual claims for compensation to be split, so that the quick and easy parts of the claims to assess can be split off and paid immediately.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The report of the Public Accounts Committee highlighted that this scandal does not stop with the Windrush generation, but that thousands of other Commonwealth citizens are affected, and my own caseload bears that out. When the Home Secretary came before the House to make his statement, he was not specific about whether the Home Office would go through the lists of people, identify those who could be affected and proactively contact them. Will the Minister either make that commitment today or acknowledge that the Home Office systems are just not fit for this purpose?

Caroline Nokes: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary did make it clear last week that the scope of this scheme is not limited to Caribbean nationals and that almost all Commonwealth nationals who arrived before 1 January 1973 will be eligible to apply. It is important that we are working across the Commonwealth to highlight and emphasise to the high commissioners and our posts the wide cohort of people who will be eligible to apply, so that they can work with those people and claims can be settled.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I have previously raised the issue of the role for those affected in helping to design the scheme. Now it is in operation, will there continue to be a place for that input?

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. Last week, the Home Secretary hosted an event for those affected, which was also attended by Wendy Williams, who is conducting the review, and Martin Forde. I was particularly struck by a number of individuals I spoke to who emphasised the need for continuing outreach, and that is why we are holding a programme of events across the country. Martin Forde has on many occasions reflected to me that this is about building and rebuilding trust, and I am particularly grateful to all those who have helped us to reach out to members of the Windrush generation so that we can try to do exactly that.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing this urgent question, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) for requesting it. Does the Minister feel that £1,000 is an appropriate minimum award for injury to feelings in order to compensate black Caribbean people who felt

[Janet Daby]

that they were forced to leave this country and, indeed, left this country? These people have experienced many emotional traumas, including the loss of sleep, anger, fear, trepidation, loss of appetite, loss of earnings, vulnerability, fear and ongoing feelings of depression. Is that minimum fee of £1,000 just compensation?

Caroline Nokes: As the hon. Lady pointed out repeatedly, that is the minimum amount. Of course, the table of actuals and tariffs very clearly emphasises that there are sections for impact on daily life, with a range of awards, and for discretionary circumstances, where there is no cap. It is really important that we work to ensure that we reflect the impact on people's daily life and on their mental wellbeing, and I believe that this scheme enables us to do that.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Will the Minister acknowledge that one of the causes of the Windrush scandal in the first place was the disproportionate level of documentation from many years ago demanded by the Home Office to enable individuals to exercise their rights? It is rapidly becoming clear that the same mistake is being made in relation to this compensation scheme, so will the Minister urgently review not just the compensation cap that we have heard about, but also the scheme's documentary requirements, so that no one is denied compensation due to missing documents from past decades?

Caroline Nokes: We have sought to have a scheme that is based on both tariffs and actuals, so that those who cannot provide evidence will be able to go down the tariffs route and not be expected to provide the evidence that those going down the actuals route would be able to provide. As I have already said, the Home Office wants to work with claimants to ensure that where evidence can be found—either from within Home Office records or from other Government Departments—we do exactly that, so that people are supported to get the compensation to which they are entitled.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Detaining innocent people and threatening them with deportation is not only wholly unacceptable; it is dehumanising. The treatment suffered by my constituent, Paulette Wilson, was absolutely appalling. Why did the Government not come clean about these caps last week when we were in the Chamber questioning the Home Secretary? And how on earth did the Government come up with the figure of £500 per 24-hour period for the first 30 days of detention and £300 per 24-hour period for the subsequent 60 days? How were these amounts arrived at?

Caroline Nokes: As I am sure the hon. Lady will have heard me say, the amounts were arrived at in consultation with our independent adviser, Martin Forde, and by looking at both the ex gratia scheme that was already in place at the Home Office and at case law. She is right to say that detention is absolutely wrong for those who have no reason to find themselves in that situation. I have apologised to her constituent, Paulette Wilson. One can only hang one's head in shame at the way in which the Home Office treated not just Paulette Wilson,

but too many individuals of the Windrush generation. We are still ashamed of what happened and are desperately trying to put things right via this scheme.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): My constituent kept close records; his loss of earnings is over £50,000 and his solicitors' fees run into the thousands. But this 59-year-old, who had previously worked all his life, has had his mental health so severely damaged by the failings of this Government that he now cannot hold down a job. First, will the Minister tell me exactly how people are supposed to provide actuals for jobs that they were not allowed to have? Secondly, given that my constituent is unlikely to work again, what provision is there within the compensation scheme for future loss of earnings?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady is right to point out the severe impact on individuals of the Windrush generation. As I said previously, the Home Office is determined to work alongside HMRC, which will have evidence of previous earnings and the earnings level at which her constituent would have been, and to work with him through his own evidence. She indicated that he had kept close records through HMRC to ensure that he is properly compensated. As I mentioned earlier, there is also a discretionary element to the scheme that in some instances may well provide redress that is not otherwise identified in the tables.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) and I are meeting constituents from Windrush families this Saturday, and I think there will be very considerable interest in the engagement events that the Minister mentioned, so it would be helpful to know whether she can provide local MPs with details of when these events might be coming to our areas. Due to the deep mistrust and scepticism about the Home Office, there may be reluctance to supply full information to enable a cost-based claim to be submitted, so will the Minister guarantee that there will be a firewall in place to ensure that any data supplied for the purpose of seeking compensation under this scheme is not used by the Home Office or any other Government Department for other purposes?

Caroline Nokes: Absolutely, I am happy to give that commitment. The hon. Lady makes an important point about the importance of outreach and of building trust. I am absolutely determined to do what she has asked and to provide information to hon. Members across the House of when there will be outreach events in their constituencies or close by. I recognise that, in the case of Manchester, a number of Members are close by. We will certainly provide that information.

As I mentioned, in many instances it is those from the community who can provide the greatest reassurance. I was struck last week when talking to two gentlemen from Birmingham by the emphasis they put on the work that their charity does in supporting individuals. I have taken a close interest in that and looked to see how the Home Office can provide additional assistance to such individuals, who provide such a useful bridge between Home Office officials and the community.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The first engagement event on the Windrush scheme took place on Friday in Brixton, just outside my

constituency. It was called at just a day's notice, it was not publicised systematically and I received an email late on Friday evening informing me of the event. That is simply not meaningful engagement and, frankly, it does not treat the community affected by the scandal with respect.

The application form requires a very high level of proof—for example, receipts from hostel accommodation used when someone was made homeless. That is comparable to the burden of proof that led many Windrush citizens to be wrongly denied their rights in the first place. Will the Minister agree to review the scheme to ensure that it works for Windrush citizens, is accessible to all and delivers the justice and recompense to which they are entitled? Will she undertake genuinely meaningful engagement, properly publicised, in the communities that are most affected?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady makes an important point about the publicity surrounding events and the importance of doing it in a meaningful way. I am conscious that we have a schedule of events planned, but I am never happy when I think that information is provided at too short notice. I will undertake to ensure that that does not happen and that not only Members but affected members of the community are given adequate information about when events will take place.

We designed the application form and scheme in consultation with members of the Windrush generation, and we sought to make the form as straightforward as possible. Of course, there are sections that will be relevant to some claimants and not to others. I certainly hope it is clear that people are not expected to fill in every single section of the form. Where they are asked for evidence, that is if evidence is available. The Home Office is determined to work alongside individuals to ensure that where evidence is not available, people are assisted either to find it or directed towards the tariff route, where evidence will not be required to the same extent. It is important that we get the balance right, but the hon. Lady has made some important points that we will certainly take on board.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I have been in correspondence with the Home Office for almost a year about the case of my constituent, Bobbi Vetter, who came to the UK as a baby 54 years ago and has lived nowhere else but the UK. Last year, she was offered a job in Oban but could not prove residency for a six-year period while she was here—a time when she was having and raising her children. Bobbi was unable to take that job and has been forced to live on universal credit. What compensation will Bobbi be entitled to? Will the Minister resolve to look at Bobbi's case urgently to right this terrible injustice?

Caroline Nokes: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would not expect me to stand at the Dispatch Box and indicate a level of compensation for his constituent, but I will very happily take away the details of the case, if he will provide them, and look into it.

Tobacco Companies (Transparency)

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

1.53 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require tobacco companies to publish sales and marketing data; and for connected purposes.

The UK has made remarkable progress over the past two decades in reducing smoking levels. In 2000, more than one in four adults in England smoked. By last year, that had declined to fewer than one in six. Since the last tobacco control plan was published in 2011, smoking rates in England have fallen by a quarter, from just below 20% to just below 15% in 2017, bringing the estimated number of smokers down to 6.1 million. At the same time, smoking rates among children have fallen rapidly. After two decades of little change, between 2000 and 2016 the proportion of 15-year-olds who were regular smokers fell from 23% to 7%—a decline of more than two thirds.

Those reductions, which have meant large consequential improvements in public health, have happened because of strict tobacco legislation, progressive tax rises, public education and the provision of support services for those who wish to quit. We have had a succession of measures including the launch of “stop smoking” services; health warnings on tobacco products; a ban on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship; a ban on smoking in enclosed public places; raising the minimum age of purchase to 18; pictorial health warnings on packs; the prohibition of cigarette vending machines; prohibiting displays of tobacco in shops; and prohibiting smoking in private cars carrying under 18s. We introduced larger graphic health warnings on packs and then became one of the first international adopters of plain standardised packaging for cigarettes. We have since had the ban on cross-border advertising of e-cigarettes.

However, smoking still accounts for approximately 79,000 deaths a year in England alone, and therefore remains the top priority for public health policy. It is the leading cause of preventable premature death and is responsible for half the difference in life expectancy between the richest and poorest in our communities. Smoking causes lung cancer, respiratory disease and heart disease, as well as numerous cancers in other organs, including the lip, mouth, throat, bladder, kidney, stomach, liver and cervix.

Although youth smoking rates have fallen to their lowest since surveys began in 1982, between 2014 and 2016 more than 127,000 children a year aged 11 to 15 started to smoke in the UK, according to Cancer Research UK. That amounts to about 350 young people a day, which is equivalent to 22 minibus loads of secondary school children. Once someone has started, it is difficult to stop, with two thirds of those who try smoking going on to become regular smokers.

The World Health Organisation framework convention on tobacco control, to which the UK is a party, obliges Governments to implement stringent control of the tobacco industry for the protection of public health to a greater extent than for any other legal consumer product. That includes the monitoring and surveillance of industry behaviour and ensuring that public policy is protected

[Bob Blackman]

from the commercial and vested interests of the tobacco industry. Article 20 of the framework convention sets out requirements for parties to carry out monitoring and surveillance of the industry, and provides for the collection and dissemination of such data.

It should be remembered that two of the four major transnational tobacco manufacturers, British American Tobacco and Imperial, are domiciled in the UK and are two of the largest companies listed on the London stock market, even though all cigarette manufacturing in the UK has ceased. The UK therefore has an international duty to ensure that the industry is as tightly regulated as possible, and that this regulation and the provision of information about the industry support tobacco control in other countries.

Publicly available data on tobacco sales, profits, marketing and research inform the development of tobacco control and tax policy, and aid the identification and understanding of illicit market trends over time at local level. For example, academic analysis of industry pricing strategies, using commercially available data purchased from Nielsen, was used by the Treasury and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to inform the decision to implement a minimum excise tax. However, commercially available data are not comprehensive and are often available only at extremely high cost.

World Health Organisation guidelines on the implementation of articles 9 and 10 of the framework convention state that

“information disclosed to governmental authorities in accordance with these guidelines, such as information on ingredients, product characteristics and the market, may also contribute to raising public awareness and advancing tobacco control policy.”

The Bill would therefore require the tobacco industry to provide the following information: at national and international level, and on an annual basis, the profits and taxes paid; at national level, and on a monthly basis, brand-specific price and sales data for all products, marketing spend by category, including spending on corporate social responsibility initiatives, and research spending; and at local authority level, and on an annual basis, sales data by product type for all products, including factory-made cigarettes, hand-rolled tobacco, heat not burn and e-cigarettes. It is already known that tobacco manufacturers collect that data, and some of it is supplied to HMRC. The Bill would require the data to be published, either by the industry or through HMRC.

It has been argued that the data cannot be published because of taxpayer confidentiality. However, that has not prevented similar legislation from being enacted in other jurisdictions. Regulations in Canada and New Zealand require publication of the data. In the United States, the Federal Trade Commission issues regular reports on the tobacco industry, covering that exact data.

Making such data available to UK researchers and policy makers would greatly help the development, implementation and evaluation of policy measures designed to reduce smoking prevalence. Such data at local level would also provide a useful insight into the illicit market; for example, significant reductions in local sales over a short period are likely to be an indicator of illicit sales activity.

It should be noted that tobacco manufacturers remain enormously profitable, in the UK and internationally, but a recent study shows that they pay virtually no corporation tax. In 2016, Imperial Brands, British American Tobacco and Gallaher together made UK operating profits in excess of £1 billion yet paid just £83.6 million in corporation tax. Over the past seven years, during which time corporation tax rates have varied between 20% and 28%—and often much less—British American Tobacco has paid virtually no corporation tax, including for four years in a row when it paid nothing at all. From 2014, Imperial Brands was permitted to stop reporting UK-adjusted profits. BAT and Philip Morris International have never done so, and none of the four transnational companies report profit before tax in the UK.

The provision and publication of data on sales and related information would support the development of tax policies that ensured that the tobacco industry paid tax at a level that properly reflected the damages it causes. The industry could easily absorb any additional costs of providing the information required under the Bill.

In summary, the Bill's benefits to the Government and to public health would include better understanding of market developments to inform the development of tobacco control and tobacco tax policy, for example on tax structure; enabling future academic research on the price sensitivity of tobacco consumption to support work already carried out by HMRC; better identification and understanding of trends in the illicit market over time at local level; the development of proxy indicators for smoking prevalence changes at local level to enable local authorities to determine the effectiveness of their tobacco control activities; better understanding of the marketing strategies of the tobacco industry; and more accurate assessment of whether tobacco companies are paying appropriate levels of corporation tax.

2.3 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I refer at the outset to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I do not intend to speak for long, because I know that many Members wish to get on to this afternoon's important debate, but the Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman)—in fact, I consider him to be my hon. Friend—should not pass by without some scrutiny.

The hon. Gentleman has been tireless in his campaigning to reduce the number of people who smoke and the harm caused by smoking. I applaud him and others for their commitment to such a good cause, but I am worried that the Bill misses the point and doubles up on what already happens under a European directive that effectively ceased the manufacturing of tobacco products in the United Kingdom.

Ever since the introduction of the European Union's tobacco products directive, tobacco companies have been required by law to provide the Government with all of their sales data and market research. E-cigarette manufacturers, which are now a significant employer in the United Kingdom, also have to submit the same information. Clearly, it is only right and proper that that information should be provided, and that is the kind of thing that we should keep in law after we finally win our independence from Brussels. The tax changes

mentioned by the hon. Gentleman are not, as far as I know, covered by the Bill and are a matter for the Treasury.

The European directive also requires that from May onwards, all tobacco products will be tracked, pack by pack, across the European Union, from factory to the precise retailer. That, of course, is to prevent a lot of smuggling and crime, which is incredibly important. That data will be available from May onwards, and the database will give the Government exact data about what products are where in the supply chain, so there is no need for the hon. Gentleman's Bill. The Government already have, or soon will have, all the data he suggests and, indeed, much more. The European directive goes even further and its provisions surpass the requirements suggested by the hon. Gentleman.

We know that vaping is 95% less harmful than smoking. There are already 3 million people in the United Kingdom who vape. More than half of them have given up smoking completely—and all without a penny of taxpayers' money. This is the free market solving a problem that previous Government campaigns have failed to solve. We should applaud that.

As a member of the all-party parliamentary group on vaping, I am pleased to welcome the House to the month of VApril—a month to celebrate the positive switch that smokers can make to vaping. The campaign is backed by businesses—both tobacco companies and independent e-cigarette businesses—and by consumers and retailers. I stress that the products are manufactured in the United Kingdom and keep people in employment in the United Kingdom, and that those people pay taxes in the United Kingdom. They are, therefore, incredibly important.

If the hon. Gentleman really wants to stop more people smoking, as I do, he needs to get behind vaping and work to tell more smokers about the difference and improvement it can make to their lives and health, with an approximately 95% reduction in harm compared with smoking. Far too many smokers have never even tried vaping, and far too many of them wrongly think that it is just as bad as smoking. As the Select Committee on Science and Technology was told just last year, we need to do more to set those people straight.

I do not want to divide the House. The hon. Gentleman deserves our respect for his years of campaigning to reduce smoking, but the Government already have all the information they need and the Bill is already out of date.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Bob Blackman, Alex Cunningham, Sir Kevin Barron, Ian Mearns, Dr Philippa Whitford, Norman Lamb and Caroline Lucas present the Bill.

Bob Blackman accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 12 April, and to be printed (Bill 377).

Exiting the European Union (Sanctions)

Mr Speaker: We come now to the intended debate on four motions—specifically, motions 2 to 5—and I suggest that, with the leave of the House, we will debate motions 2 to 4 on Sanctions and motion 5 on Exiting the European Union (Sanctions) together. To move the first of the motions in a debate on all four, I call Sir Alan Duncan.

2.10 pm

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I beg to move,

That the Burma (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 136), which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Motion 3—*Sanctions*—

That the Venezuela (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 135), which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

Motion 4—*Sanctions*—

That the Iran (Sanctions) (Human Rights) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 134), which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

Motion 5—*Exiting the European Union (Sanctions)*—

That the Republic of Guinea-Bissau (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations (S.I., 2019, No. 554), which were laid before this House on 15 March, be approved.

Sir Alan Duncan: As you have said and with your permission, Mr Speaker, I think the House will appreciate it if I consider the four statutory instruments together. In speaking to the Burma (Sanctions) (EU Exit) regulations, I will also speak to the Venezuela (Sanctions) (EU Exit) regulations, the Iran (Sanctions) (Human Rights) (EU Exit) regulations and the Guinea-Bissau (Sanctions) (EU Exit) regulations. These regulations provide the required details of these four sanctions regimes, but they do not set out which individuals or entities will actually be sanctioned under them. In a no-deal scenario, we will publish on exit day the full list of those we are sanctioning under our UK legislation.

Hon. Members will be well aware of the importance of sanctions. They are a key element of our approach to our most important international priorities. They help to defend our national interests, support our foreign policy and protect our national security. They also demonstrate our support for the rules-based international order. The UK has been a leading contributor to the development of multilateral sanctions in recent years. We have been particularly influential in guiding the EU's approach and, when we move the EU's sanctions regimes to the UK in a no-deal scenario, we will carry over their policy effect. I will say more about that in just a moment.

We are committed to maintaining our sanctions capabilities and leadership role after we leave the EU. Hon. Members will recall that the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 provides the UK with the legal powers to impose, update or lift sanctions after we leave the EU. This was the first major legislative step in creating an independent UK sanctions framework.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): I am pleased that the Minister has said that the EU sanctions list will, in effect, be rolled over. At this early point in his contribution, notwithstanding that we are talking about sanctions on three specific countries—plus the EU one at the end—will he give the House an assurance that there is no immediate intention to change the sanctions list from the one we will adopt from the EU?

Sir Alan Duncan: I can confirm that there is no such intention. Indeed, the intention and the expectation is that the existing regimes in the EU sanctions regime will be lifted and shifted, and put into ours. However, having scrutinised the individual elements of these, we will have to make sure that they all meet the threshold of evidence and justification that our own autonomous Act of Parliament requires. It is possible that something may not be carried over, but the expectation is that everything will be.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The Minister mentioned the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill. While we are talking about specific countries, that Bill, which is now an Act, did include the Magnitsky amendment. He referenced a list should the United Kingdom leave without a deal, and that general list would no doubt include other countries as well. In that regard, what is the current position of the Government on individuals named on a sanctions list in relation to the Magnitsky amendment, which is now part of an Act?

Sir Alan Duncan: I say to my hon. Friend that I will come on to that in just a second. I will answer the question raised in his intervention, but let me complete the introductory logic of what these four statutory instruments are intended to do.

While the Act set out the framework needed to impose our own independent sanctions, we need statutory instruments to set out the detail of each sanctions regime within that independent framework. Such statutory instruments set out the purposes of our regimes, as well as the criteria under which the Secretary of State may designate individuals and entities within the framework, and the types of restrictive measures imposed. I am grateful to the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments for its close and helpful scrutiny of these and other statutory instruments relating to sanctions regimes.

On the Magnitsky element of the Act of Parliament passed last year, that sanctions Act provides powers for the UK to impose sanctions to provide accountability for or to deter gross violations of human rights, and to promote compliance with international human rights law and respect for human rights. These powers are what is colloquially known as the Magnitsky amendment. The Government's focus so far has been on ensuring that we have the necessary secondary legislation in place to continue to implement existing EU and UN sanctions should we leave the EU without a deal. The statutory instruments we are debating today are part of this preparation.

Mark Pritchard: Will the Minister give way?

Sir Alan Duncan: No. Let me just take my hon. Friend through this, and then he can come back again if he wishes. I need to explain quite where the Magnitsky element fits in.

As a member of the EU or during an implementation period, EU sanctions will apply in the UK. We will look to use the powers provided by the sanctions Act to the fullest extent possible during this period, but there will be some limitations on the measures that we can impose autonomously. In order to impose national sanctions for human rights—the Magnitsky element—we will need to design and draft a statutory instrument and ensure the associated processes and structures are in place to be able to implement and manage a sanctions regime.

It is important that we set up a regime correctly to ensure sanctions meet the legal tests set out in the sanctions Act. As soon as the secondary legislation and associated structures are in place to ensure the continuation of EU and UN sanctions in the UK, we will turn to the consideration of UK national sanctions, including for human rights.

Mark Pritchard: The Minister is being very generous. May I ask him why not a single individual Russian is on any sanctions list at the moment? It is rather odd that the Government's position seems to be that the justification for no Russian being on any list is that we cannot do this until we leave the European Union, despite the fact that all the Baltic states have individual Russians on a sanctions list. If we are going to remain *de facto* within the European Union, surely the justification for taking action is going to continue.

Sir Alan Duncan: First, I say to my hon. Friend that this is not just against Russians. If people have violated human rights anywhere in the world, they could come within the scope of the Magnitsky clause I have been describing. I say again that the reason why we have not yet applied the Magnitsky elements of the sanctions Act is that the statutory instrument making it a bespoke part of that Act within UK autonomous law has not yet been made, and it that was done too rapidly—he will appreciate that we have had about 3,000 statutory instruments to get through this House because of EU exit—there would be a high risk of constant legal challenge, which we would like to avoid.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I am a bit confused about the Government's attitude. The permanent under-secretary gave one reason why we could not have these sanctions in place already, the Foreign Secretary has given three different versions of why it could not happen and now the Minister has given yet another version of why it could not happen thus far. Part of it seems to be that the Government are not yet ready, which feels a bit like foot dragging to me, because I remember that the Government did not want this amendment in the first place, but the House insisted on it. The Government still seem to be arguing that we cannot do this because we are still a member of the European Union. In fact, Estonia and Lithuania have exactly those provisions, and nobody has thought to strike them down. There are 49 Russians listed in both those countries. Why can we not do it?

Sir Alan Duncan: What the hon. Gentleman says is not consistent with our legal advice. We have to make sure that any application of the Magnitsky legislation fits legally and properly within any implementation period that might exist. It would be easier and quicker, as it happens in this case, if we were to leave with no

deal—that is perhaps the only advantage of so doing that I can think of straight off the top of my head, but we will not go down that route.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Ind): Can the Minister therefore confirm—this is what I think he is saying—that all the individuals and entities currently sanctioned by the EU will remain sanctioned by the UK under these regulations? Given that the UK has less capacity than the EU collectively, what resources are being put in place to ensure that the UK continues to update the list of sanctioned individuals and groups, or will we simply mirror any updates made by the EU?

Sir Alan Duncan: I perhaps feel a little prime ministerial when I say that I refer the right hon. Lady to the answer I gave some moments ago, but the answer is the same: our intention is to transfer the EU sanctions, but because we have our own autonomous regime, the evidential threshold must be met. Therefore, everything is being studied closely to confirm that it fits within the evidential requirements of the sanctions Act.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Ind) *indicated dissent.*

Sir Alan Duncan: The hon. Gentleman is shaking his head. He is welcome to intervene and say why, but I can assure him that that is exactly the position as I understand it at the moment.

Mike Gapes: I did not seek to intervene, but I am happy to. I am unclear. Is the Minister saying that, where there are currently sanctioned individuals, all of them without exception will continue to be sanctioned in the event of a no-deal Brexit, or that because the evidential requirements of the UK, acting autonomously, may be different from those that apply while we are in the European Union, some of those individuals will no longer, or could no longer, be sanctioned?

Sir Alan Duncan: As I said earlier, it is possible that, in exceptional circumstances, a person or an entity might not be transferred, but we do not expect that to be the case often, if at all. The intention is, wherever possible, to transfer the operation of the existing regime into our own autonomous legislation.

Chris Bryant: I think the Minister is saying that one reason why it will not be possible is that there are so many SIs that it is difficult to get the SI in place to deal with Magnitsky. I just wonder when he hopes the provisions will be available to the House and be able to be implemented.

Sir Alan Duncan: All I can say is that the timeline of many things at the moment is difficult to forecast, so I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I do not attempt to say exactly.

Chris Bryant: Just say when.

Sir Alan Duncan: As soon as we are practically able to do so.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Our American allies have a disagreement with our European allies about the extent of sanctions against Iran and how best to handle the difficulties with Iran. What thinking has

the Foreign Office given to an independent UK policy on this? Are there any merits in the American approach, or are all the merits with the European approach?

Sir Alan Duncan: If we are looking at individual cases such as that, we are straying slightly outside the terms of this debate, which is about the framework for the operation of sanctions in these four areas. We work closely with our European allies on the operation of the joint comprehensive plan of action, and we will continue to do so. However, we will of course look at all sanctions under the terms of the Act that we passed last year.

The four statutory instruments under consideration transfer into UK law the EU sanctions regimes on Burma, Venezuela, Guinea-Bissau and Iran—the human rights element of Iran, rather than the anti-nuclear side. In each case, the instruments seek to substantially mirror the measures in the corresponding EU regime, which include financial, immigration and trade measures.

These SIs were laid on a contingent basis to provide for the continuation of sanctions should we leave the EU without a deal. This would ensure that we have the necessary powers to impose sanctions on the countries in question from the date of exit. If we reach a deal, sanctions would continue to apply under EU law during any implementation period, and these SIs would not immediately be needed.

As I said at the beginning, should we leave the EU without a deal, we will publish the list of those sanctioned under these SIs and all our new sanctions SIs on exit day. We will seek to transfer EU designations in each case, but as I said earlier these decisions will be subject to the legal tests contained in the sanctions Act. Any EU listings that do not meet the tests would not then be implemented.

Hon. Members may recall that review and reporting requirements were incorporated into the sanctions Act. Hence, alongside these statutory instruments, we have published reports on the purposes of each regime and the penalties contained in them—these are known respectively as section 2 and section 18 reports. These reports, plus an explanatory memorandum for each SI, are available in the Vote Office should Members wish to read them in detail. The Government will also review each sanctions regime on a regular basis.

I would now like briefly to describe the purposes of each regime. The Burma sanctions regulations seek to encourage the Burmese security forces to comply with international human rights law and to respect human rights. The corresponding EU sanctions were established in their present form in April 2018, in response to systematic human rights violations by Burmese security forces since the summer of 2017.

The EU sanctions regime designates members of the Burmese security forces who were involved in human rights violations or abuses, or in the obstruction of humanitarian assistance activity or an independent investigation into the atrocities in Burma.

Mike Gapes: I am extremely grateful to the Minister for giving way. Is there any evidence that, since the imposition of those sanctions in 2018, the behaviour of the Burmese military towards the Rohingya or other minorities in the country has in any way improved?

Sir Alan Duncan: Again, I think that is straying into detailed analysis of the working of the sanctions, which is not the subject of these statutory instruments.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. He will know that, since the implementation of those sanctions, the International Criminal Court has launched an investigation into the Burmese atrocities. What does he know about the status of that investigation? Does he anticipate an increase in the sanctions on Burma when this instrument comes into effect?

Sir Alan Duncan: Again, the purpose of this debate is not to look at the way the sanctions are working; it is merely to set up the legal framework in which they can be allowed to work under our autonomous regime.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I do not think we are straying too far. I think it will help people to make up their mind and make a good judgment. Just opening the envelope a little does not take anything away from what we are trying to achieve.

Sir Alan Duncan: I am not as keen as you, Mr Deputy Speaker, to open the envelope quite so far, because I do not actually deal with Burma. However, if the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) has a really good question on Venezuela, I can give her chapter and verse. The responsibilities of Ministers are geographical in some respects and thematic in others. As she knows, I am in charge of sanctions law, rather than the operation of all geographical sanctions. I do not want to risk in any way giving the House information that is inaccurate or ill-informed.

Jo Stevens: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Perhaps he could ask his colleague who is in charge of Burma relationships whether he could write to me to let me know the answer to my question.

Sir Alan Duncan: I would be delighted to put that obligation on him—it causes me no difficulty whatever. Of course I will do that. In Foreign Office questions and in Westminster Hall, we have many discussions about issues of that sort—indeed, I encourage them, and we like to participate in them by giving as much information as we possibly can in response to any motion moved.

Chris Bryant: In relation to the situation in Venezuela, there has obviously been massive concern on both sides of the House about the massive number of people fleeing from Venezuela to other countries in Latin America. How does the Minister feel that the sanctions regime is working now, and is it likely to produce significant change?

Sir Alan Duncan: The answer is that we wish there was clearer evidence that they are working. I was at the meeting of European Foreign Ministers yesterday in Luxembourg, where Venezuela was the main topic over lunch. The hon. Gentleman is quite right that 3.6 million people have fled Venezuela. The latest forecast is that the collapse in Venezuela's economy will exceed that of Zimbabwe's economic collapse all that time ago and that it will collapse by over 25% this year. We are being

very careful to make sure that we target individuals around President Maduro and President Maduro himself, rather than the people who are suffering enough. He will appreciate, as I think the whole House does, that it is a massive challenge to design sanctions that hit the right people and do not hit the wrong people, who are, as I say, suffering enough. Any brilliant ideas he has would be willingly received, but we are working very closely with the EU and the Lima Group to ensure that any properly targeted sanctions we can possibly apply will be applied at the earliest opportunity.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab) *rose*—

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab) *rose*—

Sir Alan Duncan: At the risk of turning this into a general debate on Venezuela, I will give way to both hon. Gentlemen.

Conor McGinn: Given what the Minister has said, does he envisage an increase or a reduction in sanctions in relation to Venezuela when the UK has full autonomy over its sanctions policy?

Sir Alan Duncan: It is possible that we could do some things on our own and increase sanctions in that way. We have particular focus, through the City of London, on financial matters where we might have, if you like, the lead. However, it would be our wish and our intention to work in close harmony with the EU and the Lima Group of countries, the immediate neighbours of Venezuela, to make sure we all speak with one voice, rather than President Maduro being able to take advantage of there being a number of different voices around the world acting against him or commenting.

Matt Rodda: The Minister speaks very eloquently about the discussions that are currently under way. How does he feel the UK's very important traditional leadership role in pressing for sanctions against human rights abusers would be harmed by the prospect of a no-deal Brexit?

Sir Alan Duncan: It is a very fair question to ask whether, given the influential role we have had within the EU by being part of it, it will have a detrimental effect on the united front that sanctions offer to the world against those who need to be sanctioned. I think that because of our diplomatic network and diplomatic reach, and our dominance of financial markets through the City, instead of wanting to turn their back on us, should we leave the EU in that way members of the EU27 will still want to work with us very closely. I think we will continue to share in common the objectives we hold to bring the worst people to book through the workings of sanctions. We have made it very clear to the EU that we really hope that whatever happens we can continue to work together, hence our wish to fold existing EU sanctions regimes into our own legislation after we have left the EU. I will give way one more time and then I will just rattle on, if I may.

Joan Ryan: I am not in any way opposing the regulations, but if we are going to continue, and we should, to work closely with the EU—I agree with what the Minister said about a united front on sanctions, otherwise they

are pretty useless—we need to be clearer for the EU to understand where we will just be rolling forward its sanctions and where we might be doing something different. The question has been put two or three times, but I do not think the answer is very clear. I am worried that we hear a lot less about the purpose and the way in which they will be applied. I do not see how we can be expected to make a fully informed decision when we cannot have full information about the countries in question.

Sir Alan Duncan: I think the right hon. Lady may have misunderstood my answers. She is right that the question has been asked three times and I have answered three times, but this is not actually the moment we are announcing individual designations or decisions. What we are looking at today in the four statutory instruments is, in lay language, the framework within which any such designations can fit. I say once again, I think for the fourth or fifth time, that it is our intention to lift the EU sanctions regimes that exist at the moment and put them into our own regime once it is up and running, but we will follow the law to ensure there are no issues where we could unnecessarily be taken to court and be challenged. We will have rigorous standards, but we do not envisage our not transferring EU regimes. We do not envisage that happening very much, if at all. It would be quite rare.

I should just answer one point about whether the Foreign Office will have the resources to manage this regime. I think the answer is yes. We have increased the number of staff working on sanctions quite considerably, and we are confident that we will retain and increase the UK's capacity and capability after Brexit.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Will the Minister give way?

Sir Alan Duncan: I will let the hon. Gentleman slip through the net.

Gavin Robinson: I am very grateful to the Minister. I do not want to flog the issue, but in circumstances where there is an EU sanction proposed and it does not fit with our legislative test—that is quite right, given the framework he outlines—does he envisage those issues being brought before Parliament through a report or a ministerial statement? Will there be parliamentary engagement around that decision to not comply or follow through with the sanction that has been agreed at EU level?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am not sure it would quite work in that way, but I am very happy to write to the hon. Gentleman with our understanding of what we think the parliamentary engagement would be in any such decision to either list or not to list. Given that this is the early stage of our implementing the Act, I hope he can accept that as my commitment to him for the time being.

Having mentioned the Burma sanctions, the Venezuela sanctions, which we have been debating a bit, will: encourage the Venezuelan Government to abide by democratic principles, if only they would; respect human rights and the rule of law; refrain from the repression of civil society; and bring about a peaceful solution to the political crisis in Venezuela. The Iran human rights regulations are designed to encourage the Government of Iran to comply with international human rights law

and to respect human rights. The EU sanctions regime emerged partly in response to the Iranian Government's treatment of protestors in demonstrations against election fraud in 2009. The EU sanctions regime targets those who have been involved in the commission of serious human rights violations or abuses in Iran. The EU sanctions regime on Guinea-Bissau was established in 2012 and targets those who played a leading role in its 2010 mutiny and 2012 coup. It is designed to curb actions that undermine the country's peace, security or stability.

Hon. Members will note that human rights are a significant focus of the sanctions regime under consideration today. I hope I have adequately explained how the human rights element of the sanctions Act, the Magnitsky clause, will fit into the statutory instruments before us today. The four statutory instruments transfer into UK law well-established EU sanctions regimes that are in line with the UK's foreign policy priorities. They encourage human rights compliance, the rule of law, and security and stability in very difficult environments. I re-emphasise the importance of putting them in place. If this does not happen before exit day in a no-deal scenario, the UK would not be able to continue to properly implement the measures they contain. Therefore, Mr Deputy Speaker, I commend the regulations to the House.

2.38 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Mr Deputy Speaker, I am afraid I have taken the exact contrary interpretation to the Minister of what this debate is about. I wish to comment in detail on all four regimes, rather than go over again the debates we had on the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill a year ago.

To start with Burma, I do not quite understand why the Burma sanctions are called Burma sanctions, not Myanmar sanctions. Anyway, they are called Burma sanctions. On behalf of Her Majesty's Opposition, I want to say that we agree it is right to roll over the EU sanctions. The human rights abuses perpetrated by the Myanmar regime are terrible. It is only 18 months since 700,000 Rohingya Muslims fled the country, subject to an attempted genocide and systematic terror. We have debated that on several occasions but the more representations that I hear from Burma, the more it becomes clear that this is one of several problems. The Myanmar Government have simply not come to terms with the fact that they are in a multicultural, multi-ethnic country and they are perpetrating abuse in Rakhine, Kachin and Shan states against several minorities.

Fundamentally, we want to see the implementation of the Annan commission's recommendations on citizenship law. There will be elections in 2020, so there is not much time for that. On sanctions, when the Minister or the Foreign Office come to look at how an independent British regime might operate, we would suggest strengthening of two kinds—first, by extending the trade sanctions to the significant part of the Myanmar economy that is controlled by the military, and secondly, by introducing Magnitsky-style sanctions for key military figures, including, in particular, Min Aung Hlaing and Maung Soe.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Does the hon. Lady not agree that until the fact that the Tatmadaw retains a fixed percentage of the Parliament is addressed, we will see continuing oppression from the military, because it has such control over the rest of Government?

Helen Goodman: The right hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. One of the general problems has been that we were so pleased to see some reform in the country that we were not tough enough and sharp enough about what was going on.

On Venezuela, too, we agree that it is right to roll over the EU sanctions. The record of the Maduro Government since the collapse of the oil price has been one of significant and serious human rights abuses. As the Minister said, the fact that 3.6 million people have left the country and that we have starvation and medicine shortages is extremely serious. It is shocking to see that food aid has been blocked at the Colombian border. The first speech that I made when I was given this portfolio was in September 2017, and I condemned then the closing down of the legitimate National Assembly and the setting up of the fake constitutional Assembly. The elections in May 2018 were not free or fair. Political opponents have been jailed. There are reports that people who are in prison are being tortured. The National Assembly leader, Juan Guaidó, has been stripped of political immunity. We believe that 40 people have been killed in protests since the beginning of this year. All of that is unacceptable and reasonable justification for the continuation of sanctions.

Chris Bryant: I agree with everything that my hon. Friend just said. Is there not a further reason why this is not just a matter of Venezuela putting its own house in order? The truth is that the Colombian peace process will manage to move forward only if it does not have 1.5 million or 2 million people crossing the border and destabilising a process on which it was already difficult to get traction.

Helen Goodman: That is true as well. I was going to go on to say what, more positively, we would like to see. We would like to see free elections. We support the position of the Lima group of neighbouring countries, and we want to see dialogue between the parties who are in conflict in the country.

Sir Hugo Swire: On the Lima group, what pressure does the hon. Lady think that we can all bring to bear on Mexico? President Obrador has, very regretfully, withdrawn from the Lima group. We have invested a lot in relations with Mexico and we have good relations with it, but he really must come back and play a leading role in the Lima group.

Helen Goodman: It would not be helpful to go along with American calls for, or the suggestion that there might be, military intervention. I suspect, although I do not know because I have not discussed this with the Mexican embassy, that Mexico was reacting adversely to the hints that were being given by the American Government in the last few weeks.

I have a couple of questions for the Minister specifically on the sanctions, but he might need to write to me, because I think that the way in which the debate works means that he does not get another go at the Dispatch Box. May I seek your guidance, Mr Deputy Speaker? Does the Minister get another opportunity to speak in this debate?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Sure. If we have time, we will allow him to come back—of course we will—but it is in your hands as well.

Helen Goodman: I am very grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

First, why was £80,000-worth of weapons material, which could be used for internal repression, authorised by the Government in 2016-17? That seems to be a breach of the current sanctions regime. *[Interruption.]* To Venezuela. Secondly, we do not believe that the oil sanctions that have been imposed by the Americans have been helpful in the current situation. This is precisely the point that hon. Members made earlier: the object of the sanctions should be to punish the politicians who are in charge of creating a bad situation and not the whole population.

I also want to ask the Minister about the gold that the Bank of England holds for the central bank of Venezuela. It was reported in November last year, before the Government had recognised Juan Guaidó as the leader of Venezuela, that the Bank of England had frozen 1,125 gold bars. I asked Her Majesty's Treasury through a written parliamentary question what the legal basis for that was. It told me that it was a matter for the Bank of England, so I wrote to the Governor to ask what the legal basis for the decision was and his response was somewhat opaque. I have read suggestions in the press that the American Government put pressure on the British Government, who leant on the Bank of England directly not to release these gold bars when the bank of Venezuela requested them. I would like to know from the Minister whether that is true.

Sir Alan Duncan: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way, because this deserves an immediate answer. The Foreign Office has not at any stage put any such pressure on the Bank of England. Any decision about whether or not to transfer gold that it holds is entirely a matter for the Bank of England, and it does so without political pressure from us.

Helen Goodman: I am interested to hear the Minister's response, because if the Government wish to tighten the sanctions regime, he and the Foreign Office will have the opportunity to do so, and they might well succeed in that. However, what is not acceptable is pursuing a tighter policy without a clear legal base; I suggest that that would not do much for our reputation.

I want to pick up on the point that was made about Iran by the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood). EU sanctions were introduced in the case of Iran in 2011, in response to violent crackdowns against street protests. In view of the continued serious human rights abuses in Iran—notably, extensive use of the death penalty, including for juveniles; torture; the repression of women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender activists; and the detention of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe three years ago and the denial to her of access to medical treatment—we believe that these sanctions are justified. They cover in particular goods and technology used for repression, and we believe that that is right.

However, we believe that the American decision to lift the trade sanctions against Iran, which was taken as part of the international community's joint comprehensive plan of action—JCPOA—nuclear deal, was also right. Sanctions have been an effective tool and they will continue to be effective if we impose them when things go badly and lift them when things go better. The Trump Administration's decision to reimpose those trade

sanctions and to withdraw from the JCPOA is mistaken. The JCPOA does not cover ballistic missiles or regional aggression—the arguments the Trump Administration put forward for reimposing sanctions. The decision further destabilises the region. That is a problem in foreign policy terms—it is unhelpful.

I would also be interested to know what the Government have done about the impact on European and British businesses and banks. Our businesses and banks are in an extremely difficult situation, whereby trade and investment under European law is completely legal, but under American law is completely illegal. There is an extraterritoriality effect of American law. I therefore have two questions for the Minister. First, will he hold to the current position in a post-Brexit scenario and not shift to the American position? Secondly, what has been, is and will be Government action to support British businesses and banks that wish to trade with and invest in Iran?

Finally, I come to Guinea-Bissau. The European Union imposed sanctions, which cover 20 individuals, in 2012 following an attempted coup. Guinea-Bissau is an extremely poor country with a lot of cocaine trafficked through it. There were some elections in March, and I ask the Minister what the Government are doing to improve governance in Guinea-Bissau. What are they doing to reduce drug trafficking via Guinea-Bissau? Does the Minister anticipate the UN Security Council changing its posture on sanctions?

John Redwood: The hon. Lady has made a powerful case about the things we are trying to put right in the countries we are discussing through sanctions, but it is worrying that they have been in place for a long time and not a lot of favourable change has occurred. Does she see any way of strengthening what we do once we have our own policy? We all share the aim of trying to improve Venezuela and Iran.

Helen Goodman: That was going to be my concluding point.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): The hon. Lady made the point about extraterritoriality, but the UK Government, at the same time as introducing the statutory instruments, are rolling over the EC blocking regulation into UK legislation to stop UK citizens being subject to US extraterritoriality. I think that that is sensible, notwithstanding my worries about where they might go in future. May I check, given what the hon. Lady said, what Labour's position is? Does the Labour party believe that tying the statutory instruments with rolling over the blocking regulation makes sense, or would it do something different?

Helen Goodman: There was a lot of conversation about having some euro vehicles to facilitate trade and investment from Britain and the other European countries and I do not quite know why that has run into the sand. Perhaps the Minister will enlighten us.

Let me come back to the general question that the right hon. Member for Wokingham raised, because it is important. On the one hand, everybody can have their idea of the perfect sanctions regime to get the particular policy objective they want. The problem with that lone ranger approach is that shared regimes are needed for sanctions to be effective. The statutory instruments

cover sanctions that were introduced at European level. The European Union is a large, significant group of countries that can have a significant impact when it imposes sanctions. Separately from that, we have legal obligations to impose any sanctions that are agreed at UN level. Because of the difficulty of doing anything that works, I want to know from the Minister how he intends to co-ordinate and co-operate in a post-Brexit world.

From the perspective of British business, there is already an awkwardness if the European regimes are not absolutely in line with the American regime, and a proliferation of different legal regimes would cause significant problems for British banks and businesses. I therefore personally do not believe that that is the right route to follow, so I come back to a question that I asked the Minister during the passage of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018. If he would like to intervene again, will he explain to the House how the Government intend to co-ordinate and co-operate with other European countries on sanctions policy post Brexit?

2.56 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I draw hon. Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, including attendance at the annual Iran Freedom rally in Paris. I speak in support of the statutory instrument to carry over the Iran sanctions regime. I urge hon. Members to support it to enable those sanctions to remain in place.

Sadly, abuse of human rights has been prevalent in Iran for many years. I was deeply saddened to learn that one of my constituents lost his wife in the mass killings that took place in 1988. Iran still has one of the worst human rights records in the world. As we have heard, it executes more people than almost any other country and it is estimated that as many as 273 people were executed in 2018. Despite vocal international condemnation, Iran continues to execute children.

Press freedom is heavily constrained in Iran and many journalists and bloggers have been jailed. Reporters without Borders described the country as "the Middle East's biggest prison for journalists."

Gay men face the death penalty and there was widespread revulsion in the international community when a gay teenager, Hassan Afshar, was executed in August 2016.

Women routinely face sanctions if they fail to observe Iran's compulsory dress code. Married women cannot travel abroad without their husband's permission, their rights in relation to divorce are heavily limited, and they can be sentenced to death by stoning.

Religious minorities such as Christians, Baha'is, Jews and Sunni Muslims are subject to discrimination and significant constraints on their ability to practise their faith. For example, many members of the Baha'i faith have been subject to unwarranted arrest and imprisonment.

President Rouhani was hailed as a moderate when he was elected, but I am afraid that the human rights situation has worsened under his leadership. At least 30 people were killed and more than 4,900 arrested in protests between December 2017 and January 2018. Those demonstrations illustrate the discontent many feel about the regime and the frustrations about the severe economic hardship that many are suffering. I note the work of the National Council for Resistance of Iran in making the case for democracy, freedom and reform.

[Theresa Villiers]

It is not just at home that Iran's theocratic regime does great harm. Its malign involvement in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen and Gaza is a cause for grave concern. The United States Vice-President, Mike Pence, described Iran as

"the single biggest state sponsor of terrorism in the world".

It has engaged in a massive arms build-up in Syria and Lebanon, where it is stockpiling thousands of missiles. Hezbollah's arsenal of short and medium-range rockets supplied by Iran is now estimated at 150,000, and there are believed to be more than 10,000 Iran-linked militia fighters in Syria. In Gaza, the terror group Hamas has boasted about the support that it receives from Iran. The regime continues to help al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Iran is believed to be responsible for multiple cyber-attacks on UK institutions, including what was described as a brute force attack on this Parliament.

I hope that the House will note the decision by the US Administration a few days ago to designate Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard as a terrorist organisation. A Government spokesman in Washington explained that the step had been taken because the IRGC

"actively participates in, finances and promotes terrorism as a tool of statecraft."

Mark Pritchard: My right hon. Friend has rightly outlined the malevolent influence of Iran across the world, including Europe. Does she agree that Iran must stop exporting terror to European capitals such as Vienna, Paris and Tirana, among many others? If it were not for the security services of the United Kingdom, the United States, the European Union and the Israelis, many other people would have sadly died.

Theresa Villiers: My hon. Friend, who is very well informed about these matters, makes an entirely valid point about the involvement of Iran in terror plots in this country and the rest of Europe. We should never even think of loosening the sanctions regime unless we have real clarity and certainty that that will come to an end.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): In her powerful speech, my right hon. Friend referred to the nefarious activities of Iran throughout the middle east. There have also been allegations that it has been meddling in Bahrain's internal affairs.

Theresa Villiers: That is a serious problem. Iran is the single biggest threat to stability in the whole region, and it is concerning to hear from my hon. Friend that that extends to Bahrain as well.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I do not want to turn this into a geography lesson, but does my right hon. Friend agree that the part that Iran allegedly plays in sanctions-busting with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is also very concerning?

Theresa Villiers: My right hon. Friend makes an important point that further strengthens the case for supporting the continued imposition of sanctions on this brutal regime.

The IRGC and its notorious al-Quds force are responsible for multiple human rights abuses both in and outside Iran.

I hope that our Government will consider following the example set by Washington and list the IRGC as a terrorist organisation.

I believe that there is the strongest of cases for retaining the sanctions regime against the Government of Iran. There is arguably a case for making it tougher, and reversing some of the changes that were made to relax the regime after the nuclear deal was agreed. The regime of the mullahs in Iran is responsible for horrific human rights abuses, it is a major sponsor of terrorism, and its involvement in conflicts around the middle east and beyond, as we have heard, make it the biggest single cause of regional instability. It is an evil regime.

I hope very much that one day we will see reform and change in Iran, so that the people there can live in freedom and democracy in a society based on equality and respect for their human rights. I commend the motion to the House.

3.3 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I support all the motions, because it is important that the sanctions that have been in place through the good offices of the European Union continue, at least in the immediate future. It would be a serious mistake for there to be seen to be any weakening of the United Kingdom's commitment to use its economic powers to encourage, persuade and, if need be, apply intense pressure to Governments overseas to comply with the simple, basic principles of human rights.

Obviously, we would much prefer these decisions to continue to be made in full partnership with the European Union. Even if we reach a stage when they are not, in practice it will be very difficult for the United Kingdom to depart significantly from the policies pursued by the EU. If we try to impose sanctions that it does not impose, all that will happen is that the trade will be displaced to the much bigger economic power that is the EU. It is clear that if we do not adopt sanctions that significantly depart from those applied by either the EU or any other major economic power, there will be a danger that we ourselves will be sanctioned, having been accused of sanctions-busting. Notwithstanding the triumphalism about the fact that we can now have our own independent sanctions regime, the reality is that sanctions regimes must be co-ordinated by a wide range of countries and economic entities, because otherwise they simply will not work.

Before I deal with the specifics, let me say that the general principle that we would adopt is that sanctions should be targeted at the cause of the problem, and not at the victims. They should be targeted at senior figures in Governments, in the military and in corrupt businesses. People who are making money out of human rights abuses should find it extremely difficult to gain the benefits of that money. We therefore support the principles of asset-freezing, travel bans and bans from participating in contracts with UK businesses. We should target sanctions at those who cause the problems, while, as far as possible, trying to avoid making the plight of people in these countries even worse than it already is.

Let me deal first with Burma/Myanmar. There has clearly been an extremely disappointing change from what we all expected. During those heady days when Aung San Suu Kyi was released from prison, it looked as if the country would be able to retake its place as a

democratic society, but since then it has all gone horribly wrong. In particular, the persecution of the Rohingya makes it clear that significant groups in Myanmar's population are simply not recognised as citizens, and denial of citizenship effectively means denial of humanity. I know that I am not the only one who was seriously disappointed by the President's complete failure to take any action, and her apparent inability, or unwillingness, to clamp down on what has properly been described as a genocide committed by her armed forces against her own people.

In Venezuela, we are also seeing a serious and worrying deterioration in standards of democracy, and the unwillingness of the rulers—whether recognised or not—to uphold the rule of law and principles of human rights. We support the fact that the sanctions will target arms sales as well as individuals who are known to be personally responsible for the most serious violations of human rights. However, we cannot support the heavy-handed United States-style sanctions which appear to have been designed to punish people simply for being Venezuelans. I find it hard to avoid the suspicion that they are Trump's revenge on the people of Venezuela for exercising their democratic right to choose a Government who happen to be openly critical of the United States. It is important for us to recognise the rights of people in other countries to choose their own Governments, even if we disagree with them.

It must be said that it has not been among the finest moments of this Government when Members have openly cheered with delight the news that people in Venezuela have been facing starvation, simply because that starvation has been caused by failed policies that could then be thrown back at the Leader of the Opposition. To make cheap political points out of human misery—

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): Can the hon. Gentleman give an example of anyone in this House “cheering with delight” when people in Venezuela are starving? Let him give me one example. That was an outrageous comment.

Peter Grant: I shall be happy to get back to the hon. Gentleman, but if he is saying that there has never been a time when a Conservative Front Bencher has made fun of the Leader of the Opposition for the failure of the Chávez economic project and been met by cheers from Conservative Members, all that he needs to do is check the record. I am happy to do it for him if he cannot be bothered to do it himself.

Mark Pritchard: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. An accusation—a very serious accusation—has been made by the hon. Gentleman about the Government Front Bench, and, indeed, about Conservative Back Benchers: that we have gloated at the suffering of the people of Venezuela. If he is going to make such a statement—an outrageous statement—he should at least back it up with evidence, or withdraw it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I think that the hon. Gentleman has made the point that he wished to make.

Peter Grant *rose*—

Sir Alan Duncan: I refer the hon. Gentleman, courteously but firmly, to the speech I made at Chatham House outlining what I believe to have been the real reasons

over the past 30 years for the collapse of the Venezuelan economy. It was an attempt to be as impartial and intellectual as possible. I think that he should withdraw the suggestion that we have no concern for the people of Venezuela, as that is what motivates our entire policy, which I am pleased to say is very much a cross-party policy, and it is one that he should support rather than criticise.

Peter Grant: I stand absolutely by my statement that there have been occasions in this House when Members on the Government Benches have used the failure of the economic policies of the Chávez Government as a direct jibe against the Leader of the Opposition, and those comments have been welcomed on the Conservative Benches. [*Interruption.*] I will now move on.

Sir Hugo Swire: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The hon. Gentleman may well wish to move on, but he has just changed what he originally said. Can you inform the House how we can stop the Scottish National party making these wild accusations and get the hon. Gentleman either to substantiate his wild claims or to apologise to the House?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman has put forward his view and corrected the statement. The fact is that it is up to the hon. Gentleman to decide whether to withdraw the comment; he has chosen not to and he wishes to carry on.

Peter Grant: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will move on to the plight of Guinea-Bissau, which we have heard described as one of the world's poorest countries. It is not actually a poor country. If we look at the value of drugs trafficked through that country each year, we see that the GDP per person is massive. Unfortunately, that money comes from a trade that causes havoc and distress everywhere else. Guinea-Bissau is ranked 178th out of 188 countries according to the UN human development scale, making it one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world. The average male life expectancy is now just 47 years, in a country that was once seen as a beacon for the future of African development. It has been beset by attempted military coup after attempted military coup; almost no Head of Government has held office for more than a few years before being removed, sometimes forcibly.

The European Union, with the United Kingdom's support, has made strenuous and sustained attempts to help Guinea-Bissau sort out its economic and governance problems, but all too often those efforts have had to be abandoned because it was simply not possible to ensure that aid was going to the correct people and places, because governance had collapsed to such a degree. That is particularly tragic for a country that is already one of the poorest in the world. It is impossible to apply sanctions that do not have some knock-on effect on citizens, but we have to support the imposition and continuation of those sanctions. The sanctions themselves are not enough. They are a necessary part of what has to be a much more concerted and ongoing attempt to give the 2 million people living in Guinea-Bissau at least a decent standard of living. In the 21st century, we do not want to see life expectancy continue to be just 47 years.

[Peter Grant]

I fully support many of the comments that have been made about Iran. Not that long ago, there seemed to be grounds for optimism. It looked as though that country was moving towards greater openness and democracy, with participation by all citizens, but over the past few years the situation has gone backwards very severely indeed. Iran has now gone back to the old days on human rights abuses, some of which have just been catalogued for us. We know of the desperate plight of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who has now been in prison in Iran for a number of years, and her treatment there has been utterly shocking. We can only guess at the plight of who knows how many other Iranian citizens who do not have Members of Parliament or Government Ministers, either here or elsewhere, to speak on their behalf. It is worth remembering, however, that until the 1970s Iran had a brutal dictator with whom the United Kingdom was quite happy to trade.

I want to finish by saying that although we support the use of economic sanctions in these countries, there are other countries with similarly appalling human rights records but for which to date there has been no suggestion that sanctions will be applied. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) can chunter away from a sedentary position, but I am not making a party political point, because this has been a characteristic of successive Governments of all parties. Saudi Arabia has the death penalty for homosexuality, yet the United Kingdom trades arms with that country. Israel, according to the UK Government, is in breach of international law, yet there is no proposal for sanctions against the Government of Israel.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. These other countries are not part of the debate. I have allowed the debate to be opened up a little, but I cannot allow us to go on a world tour.

Peter Grant: I conclude simply by saying that we support the continued imposition of economic sanctions against those countries that would oppress their citizens and deny basic human rights to the citizens of Myanmar, Venezuela, Guinea-Bissau and Iran. We would also like to see the UK Government applying similar sanctions and restrictions on those who oppress their citizens in other countries with which the United Kingdom seems quite happy to trade arms by the billion.

3.15 pm

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): I rise to support the Government's statutory instrument on sanctions on Venezuela. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Latin America, and as the Prime Minister's trade envoy for a number of countries, including Colombia, I have seen at first hand the brutality and human rights abuses that the Maduro regime has inflicted on its own citizens. Some 3.6 million of them have now fled, largely to Colombia, Peru, Chile and Argentina. I have visited all those countries over the past 12 months and seen at first hand people living in abject poverty.

I take real exception to the claim made by the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) that Conservative Members have in some way celebrated the misery of the Venezuelan people and the human rights abuses taking

place in that country, which is a grotesque and untrue allegation. It is grotesque and untrue because Members on the Government side of the House know the need for this sanctions regime—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that the point has been made, but we need to get back to the debate. A very good point has been hammered home, but we now need to move on.

Mark Menzies: Let us move on with the need for sanctions against Venezuela. That regime has not entered hardship as a result of the oil price collapse; it has entered hardship because, not just under Maduro but under Chávez—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) shakes her head, as though it is all down to the oil price collapse. It is not; it is down to the fact that Maduro and Chávez played fast and loose with the constitution. They both abused their positions in order to suppress opposition, including within the press. To suggest that all this misery has been brought about by the oil price collapse is to be economical with the actualité.

Mike Gapes: Is it not a fact that the richest person in Venezuela is the daughter of former President Hugo Chávez, a billionaire with about \$4 billion US dollars, which has been systematically stolen from the people by this so-called socialist regime?

Mark Menzies: The hon. Gentleman is 100% on the money. That is the inconvenient truth that many Opposition Members fail to recognise, because massive abuses were committed well before the collapse in the oil price, and it is one of the reasons why sanctions are needed.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): In support of my hon. Friend's case, has he noticed that this is shown not just in the oil price, but in the volume of oil produced, because they so trashed their industry and failed to invest in it that it now produces a fraction of its potential capacity? That is why Venezuela is so poor.

Mark Menzies: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Not only has the volume of oil produced collapsed, but many of the oil workers who would have produced the oil have fled the regime. Their families are living in absolute penury as a result of years of neglect and economic mismanagement. The hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) was quite right to point out the extreme wealth that is being accumulated corruptly by members of the Chávez and Maduro regimes and by the military. Much of that money is offshored, including vast amounts in Spain. This is not a new phenomenon: for many years, the property market in some areas of Madrid was red hot with money that was flowing out of Venezuela and being used to buy office blocks and residential properties galore in order to cleanse the money out of Venezuela.

Any robust sanctions regime should not only ensure that money is prevented from leaving the country now but take into account the money that has been leaving for years, including at massive rates under Chávez. [Interruption.] That is clearly uncomfortable for the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland, but that money was stolen from the people of Venezuela and it needs to be taken back in as part of any sanctions regime.

[*Interruption.*] If we are talking about laughter, we have seen great amount of laughter from the hon. Lady. This is either something she finds funny or something that she fails to understand.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Following the intervention the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), a fact that I find most harrowing is that aid lorries are now being turned away from the Venezuelan border because the Government are worried that they will lose their grip. That and the point he made exactly define an absence of humanity.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. May I just remind the House that we have quite a lot of other speakers?

Mark Menzies: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I hear your guidance and I know that there is much pressure on our time.

I encourage the Government to enact this statutory instrument on sanctions for Venezuela and to ensure that, while we are still a member of the EU and while we have reach through the United Nations, we ensure that the sanctions regime targets those in the military and the senior members of the Maduro and Chávez regimes who have stolen billions from Venezuela, in order to get that money back to the people where it belongs.

Sir Hugo Swire: I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend does in Latin America. Does he agree that Petrocaribe provided another way for Venezuela to launder its money and that it caused absolute mayhem in many vulnerable countries of the Caribbean?

Mark Menzies: Absolutely. That point stands well on its own.

This should be an opportunity for the House to come together and send a message of solidarity to Juan Guaidó and the democratically elected members of the Congress, which Maduro has now sought to supersede with his own puppet arrangements. The suffering in Venezuela is something that no one should ever have to experience, and any sanctions must be clearly targeted on the instigators of this corrupt regime.

3.22 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The main issue that we are considering this afternoon is what our independent system of sanctions will be like if and when we leave the European Union. That is the key point. I must confess that I am somewhat sceptical about the value of having an independent sanctions regime, because the whole point of sanctions is that when we work in concert with our closest allies, we are far more likely to achieve success than if we simply try to go it alone. This is nowhere writ more large than in relation to Russia.

For many years, individual countries of the European Union resisted adopting a shared sanctions regime in relation to Russia because some countries wanted to continue to take gas and oil from Russia, some wanted a strong political relationship with it, and Mr Berlusconi in Italy wanted to go to parties with President Putin. It was difficult for us to achieve a shared sanctions regime in relation to Russia. Indeed, it was only when Russia started using gas and oil as a means of oppressing

Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia that the European Union decided to act in concert. The UK then went to European Council meetings where Prime Minister Cameron and then our present Prime Minister repeatedly said, "It's been great, we've been able to persuade the European Union to adopt the sanctions that we wanted." As a united body in Europe, we have been able to achieve far more than the United Kingdom will be able to if we go it alone.

I welcome the Minister's comments that in the future we will, in the main, adopt the same kind of measures that the European Union adopts. My anxiety is that it might be difficult for us outside the European Union, unless there is some manner of working with the EU, to persuade it to adopt the kind of sanctions regime that we are interested in.

Mr Duncan Smith: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. It is always worth hearing him on these subjects. I would simply point out that it is not all sweetness and light. For example, the Germans' behaviour over Nord Stream 2 is going to break the whole sanctions regime, yet nothing seems to happen from the Commission.

Chris Bryant: The right hon. Gentleman has virtually stolen the words out of my mouth. He is absolutely right, but my anxiety is that when we are no longer in that room, it is going to be much more difficult for the UK to secure the outcome that we want in relation to Nord Stream 2. I hope that the Government will manage to find some means of establishing a strong relationship with the European Union in that regard.

I also worry about the Magnitsky process. I hear what the Minister is saying, but I have heard two Ministers speak on this subject since the House unanimously passed measures that the Government did not really want to include in the legislation—[*Interruption.*] I know that the Minister put them in in the end, but I am not sure that he was the most enthusiastic Member to adopt them. He can puff out his chest as much as he wants, but he is still not going to persuade me that he was quite there with the rest of us. The point is that we still do not have those measures in place. As he has referred to the Magnitsky process, I hope that we will now manage to sort this out very quickly, not least because Bill Browder has today been told that the Russians intend to press a seventh charge with Interpol—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I did say that we could open the envelope, but I did not mean that we had to open every page of what was inside. Today's debate is not about Russia. I have allowed a little bit of movement, but we need to get a lot more speakers in.

Chris Bryant: You are quite right, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I am very close to finishing.

In making my last point, about Venezuela, I want to defend my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman). The hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) and I agree on nearly every aspect of our relationship with many different countries in Latin America, including Venezuela. That country is perpetuating poverty for its people and its politicians have completely let the people down. They are also risking civil war and war across the whole Andean region, which is dangerous.

[Chris Bryant]

However, in all honesty, my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland was agreeing with the hon. Gentleman, not disagreeing with him, so I very much hope that they will kiss and make up later. With that, I shall finish.

3.27 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I shall be brief, and I shall not take interventions, because others wish to speak. It is disappointing that these orders do not have this week's date on them. We have let the public down once over leaving the EU on 29 March, and we should be leaving this week. I am grateful that planning is still going on for us to leave, and the sooner the better.

I want us to have a more ambitious foreign policy once we are an independent country again. There is a huge opportunity here for us to do good in the world by promoting the right kind of sanctions policy. I agree with all those colleagues who say that sanctions are more effective if we get more countries to buy into them. There are a number of areas, most notably Iran, where our US ally is very much at variance with our European allies, and that is surely where the United Kingdom—by adopting a distinctive approach and perhaps working more directly through the United Nations, freed of the constraint of belonging to one side in the two-sided row—could make a direct contribution, influence the world for the better and create a more united sanctions regime.

There are those who are very worried about sanctions targeting the wrong people. Of course it is best to target the guilty men and women at the top of evil regimes, but we need to recognise that they need access to hard currency. It is often by exploiting commodities or other hard currency generators in their economies that they perpetuate their evil and buy the things we do not want to sell them from others around the world who will. It is not easy to target just a limited number of people, so we have to find our way through.

I hope we can do that with Venezuela, where we need to back all the initiatives to try to get food and other aid in and to support the forces for democracy. Above all, we need to work with the opposition in Venezuela to show how they could restore their economy with the colossal oil wealth that is there beneath their feet but is deliberately not exploited by the evil incompetents of the regime. Let us have our own policy, and let us get on with it.

3.29 pm

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Ind): This debate is probably unnecessary, because we have not yet left the European Union and we almost certainly will not leave with no deal if we do leave, so many of the things we are debating will be dealt with over a long period in transitional arrangements, or not at all. However, given that the House is spending a great deal of time at the moment debating things that are not about to happen, that is par for the course.

In January, I asked an urgent question about Venezuela and there was extensive discussion. The situation has got worse since then. There are now serious threats to Juan Guaidó, the president of the National Assembly and the person who is recognised by many countries and Governments, including our own, as the legitimate leader of Venezuela.

I was pleased that the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), used the phrase, "We welcome this sanctions proposal." I hope she was referring not just to "we" in general but specifically to the shadow Justice Secretary, the shadow Home Secretary, the shadow International Development Secretary—he sits alongside her—the Leader of the Opposition and all those who have been apologists for or supporters of the Chávez and Maduro regimes. I hope she was referring to members of the Venezuela solidarity campaign, members of the Stop the War Coalition and all those organising rallies and events today to say, "Hands off Venezuela." I hope she was referring to all those who are acting in this country to undermine the sanctions regime and the action being taken by the Bank of England and others against the corrupt, kleptocratic regime in that country. I praise her for what she said—I have no disagreement with her at all—but I hope she was speaking for everybody on the Labour Benches in that respect.

We need to discuss the wider question of the impact of sanctions. What is the purpose of sanctions? Is it to change the behaviour of a regime or to bring about some kind of punishment for bad people? Punishing bad people is a good idea, but a better idea is to change the behaviour of the regime so the people in the country benefit. We know from history that sanctions regimes are often not successful in changing Governments' behaviour.

It could be argued that the Iranian regime has changed its behaviour and signed up to the JCPOA in respect of its nuclear programme because of the sanctions imposed on it, and that is at least partially true. However, a bigger reason for that change in behaviour might be that the regime has adopted a long-term view and, thinking 10, 15 or 20 years ahead, wants to take the heat off now while secretly doing what it did in the past with covert facilities at Qom and various other programmes to get around those international sanctions.

Joan Ryan: Does my hon. Friend agree that Iran's desire to wipe out the state of Israel is based on an ideological hatred? Iran and Israel are a thousand miles apart. They have no regional material competition, nor does Israel have any significant effect on the lives of Iranian citizens. In the long term, sanctions against an ideological regime are unlikely to succeed.

Mike Gapes: Iran was sanctioned not for its generalised foreign policy, or for its abuse of human rights internally, or for the terrible things it has done to support the murderous Assad regime in Syria, or for what it has done in respect of the situation in Lebanon, or for what it is doing to support the Houthis in Yemen, or for its hostility to and visceral hatred of the idea of self-determination for the Jewish people and the state of Israel, but for its nuclear programme. There may be arguments for extending sanctions on Iran, but we have to recognise that, so far, this is about the current sanctions regime.

The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) is right that successive British Governments have played an important role when other Governments wobbled, or when other Governments, such as the Hungarian Orbán Government or the Italian Government—he mentioned Berlusconi, but the current Salvini Government

are doing the same thing—have been complicit in being friendly to the aspirations of Putin in weakening sanctions regimes. We have stood firm, and we, France and a few others have led the way on tough sanctions.

Sometimes our EU partners have been divided and we have tipped the scales towards a more robust regime. If we are outside the European Union, that EU regime is likely to be weaker than it would otherwise have been. We would also find ourselves facing all the economic problems that come from being outside the EU, and we would be susceptible to pressure from other countries to go soft on sanctions because we would not have the collective weight of the European Union behind us.

3.35 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I want to let the Minister wind up, so this is a perfect time for you to come back into the Chamber, Mr Speaker, and for me to talk about Burma for just one minute, because I know it is dear to your heart.

We are obviously still concerned about oppression in Rakhine, Karen, Shan and all the other ethnic states. Everyone welcomes the ceasefires called by the military since last year, but there are still concerns that those ceasefires allow the military to build up its defences and militarise areas of those ethnic states.

In my role as trade envoy, I am only too aware that there is a holistic approach. I am glad the Minister talked about targeted sanctions, because for the ordinary people who are being oppressed, persecuted, raped, mutilated and killed, we know that the only way through this, apart from our action with the international community, is through growth and prosperity. We must give them that growth and prosperity through trade, support and infrastructure building, which is why we need to target the sanctions at the military. Let us make sure that we do not leave the ordinary people of Burma behind in a fuller set of sanctions.

3.37 pm

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): I am vice-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on Venezuela.

If we ever manage to leave the EU, one benefit will be greater flexibility on our application of sanctions to countries acting outside the law and actively persecuting their own people, such as Maduro's Venezuela. We already have some flexibility, but the UK will have much more if we leave the EU properly, although we will still be able to choose to align with the EU when it is not held back by the particular concerns of one or two member states.

Beyond the statutory instrument, one direct action the UK could take right now to demonstrate its determination to tackle the massive theft of funds from Venezuela by corrupt Chavistas would be to declare Maduro's ambassador to the United Kingdom persona non grata on account of the arrest warrant issued against her by the state of Andorra for the theft of \$4 million. The details of the case are well known to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, not least through me, and have appeared in *El País* as well as in official documents.

The suffering of the Venezuelan people is immense, and my words can hardly do it justice. We have heard others capably underline the shame of the very senior

leadership of the Labour party and its active support for the Maduro regime, including entertaining its mouthpieces on our soil.

I know Venezuela is not a Foreign Office priority, but the Government need to do more to help bring democracy back to that wonderful country, and the statutory instrument is a step in the right direction. I welcome recent comments by the Minister in that direction, but I think more can be done. Action towards the ambassador would also help.

3.38 pm

Sir Alan Duncan: I am grateful to hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions, which spread quite widely but show the passions raised by this topic.

I take my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) to task for saying that Venezuela is not a Foreign Office priority, which I find difficult to swallow, to put it politely, when it is very much a priority. I went to the United Nations Security Council, at a few hours' notice, for an emergency debate, and I went to the Ottawa meeting of the Lima group. I spoke yesterday at the meeting of European Foreign Ministers, and I have given a considered lecture on Venezuela at Chatham House. So I would politely ask him to revise his view of where he thinks our priorities sit.

On the issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer), the IRGC is already sanctioned by the EU, but it comes under the EU's Iran nuclear sanctions, rather than the ones that we are discussing today. When it comes to giving notice of who we might include in any EU sanctions that are transferred—

Mr Speaker: Stick to 3.40 pm and you will be all right.

Sir Alan Duncan: Very good.

We will do that at the eleventh hour, as it were, to avoid asset flight by not giving prior notice to those who might be affected. As I said, the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 enables sanctions to be imposed for a variety of purposes, including responding to or deterring gross violations of human rights, or otherwise promoting compliance with human rights law or respect for human rights. After we transpose existing EU sanctions regimes into UK law—that must be the first priority—the UK will continue to take action against human rights violators and abusers. There is already a strong human rights element in all our sanctions. *[Interruption.]* Do I take it, Mr Speaker, that you are urging me to speed up?

Mr Speaker: Yes.

Sir Alan Duncan: In which case, having covered so much already, I commend these regulations to the House.

3.40 pm

One and a half hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the motion, the Speaker put the Question (Standing Order No. 16(1)).

Question agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Burma (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 136), which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

SANCTIONS*Resolved,*

That the Venezuela (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 135), which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.—(*Sir Alan Duncan.*)

SANCTIONS*Resolved,*

That the Iran (Sanctions) (Human Rights) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 134), which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.—(*Sir Alan Duncan.*)

**EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION
(SANCTIONS)***Resolved,*

That the Republic of Guinea-Bissau (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations (S.I., 2019, No. 554), which were laid before this House on 15 March, be approved.—(*Sir Alan Duncan.*)

**Section 1 of the European Union
(Withdrawal) Act 2019**

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that I have not selected either of the amendments.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Shocking!

Mr Speaker: Well, it is essentially a negating, but the hon. Gentleman can expatiate on the matter if he is successful in catching my eye. It is always a pleasure to call Mr Peter Bone. To move the motion, I call the Minister—the Solicitor General, no less.

3.42 pm

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): I beg to move,

That this House agrees for the purposes of section 1 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2019 to the Prime Minister seeking an extension of the period specified in Article 50(3) of the Treaty on European Union to a period ending on 30 June 2019.

I will endeavour to be brief in my remarks. I will, of course, take interventions, but please allow me to make three points by way of introduction. First, the Government did not want to be in this position. I do not say that in the spirit of seeking to attribute blame to people, but in a moment of solemn reflection it is important that we acknowledge where we find ourselves.

It is of great disappointment to me and many others that this House has not felt able to approve the withdrawal agreement. The Prime Minister said last week that any plan for the future must include the withdrawal agreement. It is what we negotiated with the EU, and it remains the Government's position that leaving with a deal is the best way for this country to leave the EU. Although I understand that certain right hon. and hon. Members have not found themselves in a position to support the withdrawal agreement, if we are to leave the EU in a smooth and orderly manner, we must find a way to find a plan for the way forward that includes it. Furthermore, the Government have already been clear that we are seeking an extension. As such, we continue to be of the view that the Bill passed last night was, with respect to its movers, unnecessary.

Secondly, it is clear that the House is not willing to leave without a deal. Thirdly, nobody who respects the outcome of the referendum could wish the UK to participate in the European Parliament elections, nearly three years after our country voted to leave the institutions of the European Union. However, if the UK remains a member state on 23 May, that is what it will be legally required to do. That is because the EU treaties provide that European Union citizens have the right to be represented in the European Parliament, and that the European Parliament needs to be properly constituted, with duly elected MEPs from all member states, for it to perform its functions.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): When my hon. and learned Friend says that we need to have left by 23 May, that is the date the election actually takes place. Will he inform the House of the latest date possible for the returning officer to publish the notice of poll and start the process of those elections?

The Solicitor General: In the letter that was sent to colleagues in the names of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General, I think reference was made to the necessity of allowing a suitable time between the bringing into force of the order that allows the elections to proceed and the elections themselves. My recollection is that that is a 25-day period. However, I will say also say, with regard to the process, that, of course, the new European Parliament does not meet until early July, and therefore it is important for us to distinguish between the need to hold elections and the requirement for British MEPs to actually sit in the European Parliament, if we are indeed to leave the European Union before early July.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Solicitor General: I give way first to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant).

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I think the Solicitor General said earlier that what we have to do is find a way to find a plan to find a way forward. That sounds just a little bit nebulous, if he does not mind me saying so; it seems quite unlikely that that is going to be very concrete by 30 June. So if the European Council says, “Actually, we think you need to have an extension to the end of the year,” will the Government be open to that?

The Solicitor General: As the hon. Gentleman knows, negotiations will carry on in the Council tomorrow, and I think it would be idle speculation for me to try and anticipate what might be agreed. Some people take offence at the word nebulous; I do not. [*Interruption.*] I really do not. What I have tried to do, at all stages of this process, is to find a way forward and to seek a solution. It is in all our hands, and I say that in a spirit of friendship and co-operation to all hon. Members.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It seems to me that the Solicitor General is simply giving the House a reality check as to the position that we have been put into by Members who voted in various ways. But is not the situation in law that, although it might be necessary to participate in elections—which neither he nor I nor, I think, most of us want—as a matter of law, the outgoing European Parliament exists until the moment that the new Parliament is created, and therefore there are certain things that could take place, such as ratification of any agreement, until the point that the new Parliament meets; also, the argument that British presence might impugn the new Parliament would not exist if we have left by that time?

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I think he is absolutely right about the way in which the European Parliament is constituted. It is due, I think, to rise on 18 April, but it does not cease to exist—it does not dissolve in the way that we do. That is important in terms of ratification, because section 13 of the withdrawal Act that we passed obviously includes that requirement as well.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I just want to clear up something that I heard my hon. and learned Friend say. I think I heard him say at the Dispatch Box that it was wholly feasible that the Government may actually end up fighting the

European elections, then only after that not allow its MEPs to take their seats—say they had been given an extension, but somehow we had managed to ratify the deal. Is that correct? Is it Government policy that we would go as far as to fight an election but not take our seats at the end of it?

The Solicitor General: My right hon. Friend is right to ask about that detail. I think that we are obliged, as a matter of law, to prepare for European elections, but if we have exited the European Union by the end of June, we are no longer a member but a third country. Therefore, the requirement to take our seats in the European Parliament would have ended.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Further to the point made by the right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin), will the Solicitor General give the House an assurance that, bearing in mind that postal votes will be cast before polling day, no one who casts a vote will find that the election in which they have cast that vote is cancelled after they have marked their cross on the piece of paper?

The Solicitor General: The ingenuity of the right hon. Gentleman knows no bounds. He is right to ask detailed questions such as that, but we have a solution to all these vexed questions: to agree a deal so that we can get on with leaving.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): That goes to the very heart of the issue. I have no objection to supporting this afternoon’s Government motion for extension, but I am mindful that we cannot go on lurching from one cliff-edge crisis to another. Unless the Government are able to craft a deal that commands a majority of this House, we must bear it in mind that 22 May or 30 June are not very far away. That concerns me. I would much prefer an opportunity, if necessary, for a longer and fungible extension, which enables us to make some decisions without the pressure we are under. Finally, with respect to the Bill passed through this House yesterday, I make the point that, like the nuclear deterrent, it works because we do not have to use it.

The Solicitor General: My right hon. and learned Friend tempts me on to a path of anticipating what might or might not be the outcome of the summit. I hear his point about the need to avoid regular cliff edges. He will forgive me if I remind him politely but firmly that there is an option for us all to take, which is to agree a way forward and an orderly exit.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the point made by the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) and by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), I appreciate that the Solicitor General will not get into what might or might not be discussed at the European Council, and I appreciate his sincerity about wanting to get a deal agreed as soon as possible, but the reality is that many of us will support the motion conditional on our expectation that the Prime Minister will listen seriously and consider any longer options suggested, such as flexextension, fungible extension or whatever we want to call them. I ask for his assurance that the Prime Minister will listen carefully to any offers put forward by other European leaders.

The Solicitor General: I think it is axiomatic that the Prime Minister will indeed listen carefully to any constructive suggestions made by the Council and the Commission on such matters. That is what she has always done—she has borne the brunt of some criticism for doing so, but her painstaking approach is the right way to go.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Is there little point to the British Government setting their red lines for the extension of the extension, because the decision on its length and the conditions attached will be made tomorrow by the European Council, with the British state outside the room?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman is right to characterise the decision of the 27, but before that there will have been active and proper negotiation and discussion between the United Kingdom and the Council. The reality is that we can end all of this here, in this House, by coming to a sensible agreement and making those compromises that many of us have had to do, me very much included.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): In the event of a whole swathe of MEPs being elected but not taking their seats, will they be entitled to compensation? Will the Solicitor General assure us that that compensation will be paid for not by our constituents but by the EU?

The Solicitor General: My right hon. Friend makes an intriguing point. I will not get into any discussions about the question of liability. Everyone who might put themselves up as a candidate for that election would know the likely outcome.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): The Solicitor General talks about compromise, but he overlooks the fact that certainly most of us on the Opposition Benches voted for every single one of the four options before us last week; the problem was that most Conservative MPs and the Government did not vote for any of them.

The Solicitor General: Well, that did not include me.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): My hon. and learned Friend is chopping about with various dates that he would prefer, and he keeps making the obvious point that article 50 can come to an end if and when we have support for a withdrawal agreement, which I have supported all the way through. Would not the best thing be to take some far distant date and give us a proper extension—saying, of course, that it will end forthwith, as soon as any withdrawal agreement is passed? I think that is being proposed in Brussels at the moment, and I cannot think of the slightest sensible reason against it. We cannot keep having these ridiculous cliff-edge debates, moving the date forward by a fortnight or a month every now and again.

The Solicitor General: My right hon. and learned Friend is right to talk about the need to avoid cliff edges. To that extent, I can agree that today we are seeking to create a situation whereby we will have the flexibility to leave if ratification takes place. That aspect of his intervention is a very important one to remember. The negotiability of the position is simply that the talks

between the parties are ongoing and if there is something fruitful as a result, we can proceed to use the provisions of section 13, with which all of us are notably very familiar. Those stages can then be passed and ratification will be deemed to be complete.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): What advice would my hon. and learned Friend give me to pass on to council candidates for the forthcoming local elections? For two years, they have been telling constituents that we were leaving on 29 March; then it became 12 April. We now have a wipe-clean board in my office so we can fill in the current date that we are leaving. What should our candidates be telling people on the doorstep?

The Solicitor General: Just like my hon. Friend, I am an assiduous canvasser and I am having those conversations myself. The message that I would give to my constituents is that we are doing our part and trying our very best to resolve this situation, but we now need all elements—all Members of Parliament—to come together in a spirit of compromise, so that we can get on with the job that we were mandated to do.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Is not the point that whether the delay is two weeks, two months or two years, it is not time that is needed, but political will to come to a deal? People such as me have made compromises—there is much in the withdrawal agreement that I do not like—to move to a position to support the withdrawal agreement. Is it not about time that other Members of this House were willing to do the same?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend makes an extremely powerful point. I pay tribute to him and to all hon. and right hon. Members who were faced with a very difficult decision and took what I would regard as the statesman or stateswomanlike approach by deciding to support the withdrawal agreement. It was absolutely the right thing to do, and I pay warm tribute to each and every one of them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Solicitor General: Let me just make a little bit of progress, and then I will of course take more interventions.

Mr Speaker: There is only time for one or two more interventions because lots of people want to speak—move on.

The Solicitor General: I will obey your strictures and move on, Mr Speaker.

I turn to the question of what might happen with regards to the further extension. Before the House considers the motion, as the Prime Minister said last week, we should all be very clear what the extension would be for. It is all about ensuring that we leave the EU in a timely and orderly way, and that means leaving with a deal. That is why the Government have engaged in a constructive process with the Opposition to seek to agree a plan—either a unified position that could command the confidence of the House, or a series of options upon which it could decide. As we know, that process remains ongoing.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): Six times now, the Solicitor General has said that the best way to move forward is to agree a deal and that, if we are to have a Brexit at all, that is self-evidently true. The problem is that we are not being offered a deal; we have been offered the deal—the Prime Minister’s deal. Is this not the time to concede that it is a bad deal socially and economically, and that that is the reason why the Government are in the position they are in?

The Solicitor General: With the greatest respect to the hon. Gentleman, I disagree with his analysis about the deal. I did not note much opposition, certainly from certain corners of the House, to the detail of the withdrawal agreement. The focus of the debate has been on the nature of the future relationship and the declaration that accompanies the agreement. I therefore take issue with his characterisation of the current position.

It is our desire to pursue this process with expedition. Our intention is to secure the House’s assent to the deal and we have been clear, as I have just said, that that could include making changes to the political declaration. That would meet the necessary preconditions for ratification by 22 May, so that we could leave the EU without the need to hold European Parliament elections. While all sides recognise the urgency with which we need to make progress, given where we are and that it will be challenging, we cannot be certain that an extension until just 22 May would provide us with sufficient time.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Just to support what my hon. and learned Friend says, business says very clearly to us that the deal is good enough for it. Is he aware that the mini-extensions are really difficult, particularly for manufacturing? The car factories are shut down at the moment in anticipation of disruption. They cannot just open up and shut down on these cliff edges, so flexibility is essential.

The Solicitor General: My right hon. Friend makes a powerful point. As a Member of Parliament, she represents car manufacturing interests very proudly. I care very deeply indeed about the future of that important industry and will do everything I can to secure it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Solicitor General: I will not give way, because I need to move on and wrap up, as Mr Speaker said.

For the reasons I have given, we have sought an extension up to 30 June, which as I said earlier is before the new European Parliament will be constituted in early July.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): This is a point we have been debating among ourselves here. I gather that the European Parliament has already divvied up the seats, so to speak. What will happen if we take our seats and then do not take our seats? Surely what is being proposed will throw the whole thing into confusion.

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right that the European Parliament has had to make contingency plans for constitution with the UK and without the UK, and there is no doubting the complications of that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Solicitor General: Tempted as I am to take further interventions from right hon. and hon. Members, I must finish.

I think most colleagues would agree that it would now be odd to leave on 22 May, when just a few additional weeks would allow for the finalisation of the ratification of a deal. I should explain why we cannot seek to extend only to 22 May and then ask for a further extension to 30 June. To put it simply, we must all recognise that we cannot assemble and reassemble the European Council every few weeks.

The Government have committed to deliver on the result of the referendum, and we in this House must now come together to find a way forward, rather than seeking to further extend the process. It is up to us to chart a course for this country beyond the EU and to agree a plan that can deliver what I hope and believe will be a bright future, with the close and meaningful partnership with the EU that we all want to see. That is what the Government’s extension will provide time for, and that is why I urge all right hon. and hon. Members to support it, to support the Prime Minister at tomorrow’s Council, and to support a plan that will deliver on the referendum and take the United Kingdom out of the European Union. I commend the motion to the House.

4.3 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): The motion before us is a straightforward one. I note the Solicitor General’s remark that he did not want to be here, but the more pertinent point is that we should not have found ourselves here. When Parliament voted overwhelmingly to give the Prime Minister the authority to trigger article 50 and begin the negotiations, we never expected that we would be in this position two years later.

The Government should be mortified that they have been forced to ask once again for the House’s approval to seek an extension to the article 50 process, not only because the fact that another extension is required is a damning indictment of their mishandling of the negotiations and their failure to secure a deal that commands the confidence of the Commons, but because the very fact that we are being asked to approve the motion before us, pursuant to an unconventional Act of Parliament spearheaded by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) and passed last week in the face of Government opposition, is testament to the serious erosion of trust between the Executive and this legislature. If right hon. and hon. Members are weary, it is first and foremost a weariness of the undeliverable promises made by this Government and the false expectations that have consistently been raised, whether it be the Brady amendment or the Malthouse compromise.

Even this morning, contrary to all the available evidence and the constancy of the EU position, the Leader of the House chose to give credence to the fantastical notion that the EU, at the same time as considering another extension request, might also entirely shift its position and agree to reopen the withdrawal agreement. It is long past time that Government Ministers stopped peddling myths to indulge the hardliners on their own Benches and advance their personal agendas.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be preferable to have a longer extension to get this right without cliff edges? Has he noticed that the European Research Group has been doing its best to stymie a long extension by threatening that the UK will cause havoc in EU institutions if there is one? Will my hon. Friend take this opportunity to condemn absolutely that view and that method of working?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Conservative Members tell us that we have had no influence whatsoever throughout the duration of our membership but that if we stay in we will be able to exert influence in a way that is wholly irresponsible for the functioning of the Union.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Ind): This is a genuine question. If Her Majesty's Opposition had tabled an amendment seeking a much longer extension, I think it would have won support, certainly from most of us sitting over in this quarter of the Chamber. Is there a reason why the Opposition did not table an amendment to get a long extension, which would do the job for manufacturers in particular?

Matthew Pennycook: The honest answer is that we all know that 30 June is not a particularly realistic proposition and that the Prime Minister was forced to propose that date more for reasons of party management. She has, in a sense, contracted out the decision to the EU. We would expect the Government to accept any reasonable extension that goes beyond 30 June, with the proviso that if this House approved and ratified a withdrawal agreement we would exit at that point.

Mr Bradshaw: Will my hon. Friend also take this opportunity to reassure our European partners, some of whom may feel nervous about granting or asking for a long extension because of the threats made by the ERG, that our own Prime Minister has finally stopped kowtowing to the ERG, so the European Union does not need to start kowtowing to it, too?

Matthew Pennycook: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend. Events have clearly overtaken us since the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2019 was first conceived, with the Prime Minister having already written to the President of the European Council indicating her intention to seek an extension until 30 June. As I have said, we wholeheartedly support the Government's efforts to secure one; indeed, that is vital if we are to avoid a disastrous no deal. We would expect the Government to agree to any reasonable extension beyond 30 June, and the Opposition would support accepting that proposition.

As we have argued consistently, however, any extension must be for a worthwhile purpose, and the length of the extension must flow from that purpose. The public will not forgive the Government if an extension is sought and agreed under the pretence of efforts to secure cross-party compromise, but for Ministers then to use the time secured in a vain attempt to find a way to force this House to accept the same flawed deal that has been voted down on three occasions.

Mr Sam Gyimah (East Surrey) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Matthew Pennycook: I will give way one final time, because I know that many Members wish to speak.

Mr Gyimah: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making the right decision to give way. Is it not about time that we accepted that the strategy the Prime Minister has pursued up until now is a failed strategy, that there is no majority in this House for the deal, and that being pressured at the last minute to cobble something together that is divisive in the House is not the right approach either, given how irreversible and momentous the decision in front of us is? We should embrace the opportunity of a longer extension to pause and reflect and to get the right deal for our country.

Matthew Pennycook: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman that this is a failed strategy. As I will come on to say, for any viable proposition to be accepted, there has to be real movement from the Government. It was on that basis that the Opposition agreed to substantive talks with the Government in the national interest.

As you will be aware, Sir, a further round of talks is taking place as we speak, and we will continue to engage with them in a constructive spirit. However, the talks will inevitably fail if the Government are not willing to countenance fundamental changes to their deal. It is futile and, frankly, patronising to right hon. and hon. Members across the House to be told that if we only understood the Government's deal properly, we would realise that the concerns we have expressed to this day are unwarranted.

If a stable majority is to coalesce around a single unified approach, it will require genuine compromise, as the Solicitor General said. It will also require honesty from the Government about where legitimate differences exist, how they might be bridged in an overhauled political declaration, and how this House would entrench any changes that might be agreed so that they cannot simply be ripped up by whichever of the expanding field of candidates eventually succeeds the Prime Minister, as well as about the requirement for seeking public approval for any agreement that might emerge at this late hour by means of a confirmatory referendum.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Ind): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Matthew Pennycook: I am not going to give way again.

Finally, honesty is also required about the obligations that any extension beyond 22 May might entail. That includes being honest with ourselves and the public about participation in the European Parliament elections, abiding by a duty of sincere co-operation, and any other reasonable conditions that the EU might set. There is no question but that the House should approve the motion before us, so that we can secure the necessary extension to the article 50 process. We must then use that extension not to prolong the misery of recent months, but to recalibrate and to forge a different way forward.

4.11 pm

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow the shadow spokesman, the hon. Member for Greenwich

and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), some of whose points I actually agreed with. I will be brief because I know a large number of Members want to speak.

In simple terms, to get the message across, this is a bad motion spawned from a bad Bill. Going right back, I have said this many times, and Members of the House yawn and look tired at the fact—I am looking at the Chairman of the Exiting the European Union Committee, the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn)—but 17.4 million voted. This is a constitutional first because the people went against the voice of the establishment. The Father of the House and others have long sat here believing in parliamentary democracy, but this time, for the first time in history, the people were given the right to decide very clearly and to the horror of the establishment—political, commercial and legal—they went against it.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman talks about what the people wanted, but were the people told in 2016 that they would be leaving the EU on 29 March 2019?

Mr Paterson: They were told that we would leave and take back control, and then, in the ensuing general election, the two main parties and the Democratic Unionist party confirmed that leave meant leaving the single market, leaving the customs union and leaving the remit of the European Court of Justice. That was confirmed by 498 and 494 Members on the Second and Third Readings of the withdrawal Bill triggering article 50, which triggered departure on 29 March.

Opposition Members just must understand the anger outside this House; and the frustration will turn into something that I would not like to quantify. People approach me the whole time and I get letters, emails and calls because it is very clear that this House, perhaps stunned by the immediate impact of the referendum, voted to trigger article 50 and has since done everything it can do to stymie it, culminating in the Bill that went through last night in ridiculous circumstances. The Second Reading went through by a majority of one, and it was then rammed through with hardly any procedures here.

Anna Soubry: I suggest to the right hon. Gentleman that insulting the majority of people in this House is not exactly a great way to win an argument. However, will he confirm that he himself said we would be wrong to leave the single market? Will he also confirm that the leave campaign made it very clear that we would not leave the European Union before a deal on trade—a long-term relationship—had been established with the EU? That is right, isn't it?

Mr Paterson: The right hon. Lady has done a very good job of infuriating the 17.4 million people out there and insulting them on a daily basis because of her stand. She and I were elected on a clear platform of leaving the single market, the customs union and the remit of the European Court of Justice.

Anna Soubry: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Paterson: No, I am going to move on, because others want to speak.

I am aware that such views do not go down well in this House, but I really do appeal to Members to think of the reaction outside it. The anger is touchable. People expect us to leave. At the moment, there is a real,

existential threat to both the main parties. The first 100 marginals that the Labour party must win include 78 for leave, and we know that a similar number of the marginals that we on the Conservative side must win are strongly for leave. At the moment, we have a free market in terms of leave votes—UKIP has disappeared, and there is no one else. If we are so stupid as to pass this motion tonight and to go for a European election—I appeal to my colleagues on the Front Bench—we will singlehandedly give a new party an opportunity to emerge, funded with European money, and that would be a great mistake.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I say with the greatest of respect to my right hon. Friend that this is about getting it right for our country—for businesses and employees. It is not about grubbing around for votes.

Mr Paterson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Very helpfully, he has moved me on to my next point. I am looking at the clock, and I will be quite brief.

The biggest danger to business at the moment is uncertainty. Last week, sadly, we had the resignation of my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris)—or “Dane-tree”, as it was pronounced when I used to work in Northampton. He said to the Prime Minister:

“whilst I would have preferred to leave the European Union with your deal, I truly believe our country would have swiftly overcome any immediate issues of leaving without a deal and gone on to thrive.”

It is absolutely clear that there has been a relentless campaign by “Project Fear” against no deal. There is no such thing as no deal; there has already been a succession of mini-deals. We were told that aeroplanes would not fly; that has been sorted out. We were told that drugs would not arrive; my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health has fixed the drugs problem. We know from Monsieur Puisseuseau, who runs the port of Calais, that people there are relaxed. Looking at the World Trade Organisation terms, the WTO facilitation treaty, and the sanitary and phytosanitary terms, it is clear that it is illegal for our partners to arbitrarily stop the shipment of goods that conformed the day before we left. This whole issue of no deal has been blown up out of all proportion; it is a last stand for remain.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend seen the excellent article in the business section of *The Daily Telegraph* today, in which several very senior German people, including Mr Verheugen and others, have made it categorically clear that the failure of these negotiations is the fault of all the participants, including the EU itself?

Mr Paterson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and neighbour for mentioning Mr Verheugen, who quite rightly warned about the dangers to the German economy, which, as we know, is sadly moving into recession. We will be doing the whole European economy a service if we resolve the wretched wrangle about Brexit now.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Paterson: I am going to move on, because I know others want to speak.

[Mr Paterson]

Under the legal position at the moment, unless the Government and particularly the Prime Minister take an executive decision, we will leave at 11 pm on Friday. That is the legal position, so all the pantomime we have had with the Bill over the past few days and last night is actually irrelevant. There has to be a Government decision. I appeal to the Government at this late stage to recognise the extraordinary anger outside this House at the fact that it is not listening to the 17.4 million people who voted to take back control. This issue could be resolved by leaving on Friday evening at 11 o'clock. Lo and behold, we would see that all these fears—there might be some interruptions, there might be some disruption—would be nothing like the damage to the integrity of our democratic institutions. People have said to me, “Mr Paterson, I voted all my life. I am never voting again because they”—all of us in this House—“are not listening.” That will be profound. That is a much bigger danger than a few small interruptions, which will be sorted out in the next few weeks.

4.20 pm

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): May I wish everybody, not just the Brexiteers, a very happy National Unicorn Day?

I pay tribute to Members across the House, from all parties, who have made today's votes possible and who have tried to find a meaningful way through. In a Parliament of minorities, we will, increasingly, have to do that. I find it astonishing that we are still debating whether to rule out a no-deal Brexit. Even today, this most simple of moves—our amendment asks that the delay should be at least three months—seems like a measure that we should not even be discussing or debating, so straightforward and common-sense does it seem. Yet we are having this debate. I want to make it clear that from the SNP perspective we are nowhere near being any closer to finding a solution, and that means we need a lengthy extension to sort out the mess that the Conservative party has created for everybody in the UK. Ministers know that a no-deal Brexit would be devastating for jobs, the economy and public services. Ministers know that, yet there are still a number of them who would like to see us crash out on Friday night. That is, plain and simple, a case of putting party above country.

I pay particular tribute—I do not do this often—to those Conservatives who have sought compromise. They will disagree with me strongly and legitimately on a regular basis, but I pay tribute to the courage they have shown. The way that they are treated when they seek to reach compromise and reach out, as we all must in a Parliament of minorities, is an outrage. They find themselves being deselected and called all sorts of names that I will not repeat in this House. This is a party that has been taken over by its most extreme elements who want to crash out of the European Union: for trade deals that never materialised; for parliamentary sovereignty that disrespects the devolution settlement; and for democracy, as they call it, in a place where somebody can make laws due to an accident of birth. What kind of democracy is that?

We are in this mess because the Brexiteers could not even agree what kind of Brexit they wanted. They never even bothered setting it out. [Interruption.] I notice some chuntering from a sedentary position. Not one of them can defend that position.

Sir Hugo Swire: Am I not right in thinking that the referendum vote was the biggest expression of democracy this country has ever seen?

Stephen Gethins: There was a higher turnout in the Scottish independence referendum, when things were set out. There have been higher turnouts in general elections before. The right hon. Gentleman needs to recognise that democracy did not stop on the day of the EU referendum—nor will it stop on that day. I notice he did not bother to defend the point I was making about the Brexiteers not setting things out. He did not have the courage or decency to tell us why they did not set anything out. They had no plans and they are in a mess of their own making. President Tusk, who stood up for democracy and went to jail for democracy, was right to say that there is a “special place in hell” for those who wanted to leave the EU but had not even thought about how to do it. The particular hell that he referenced seems to have come early in a House of Commons that is blocked up by Maastricht rebels of a quarter century ago who are still fighting the same fights. We do not get time to debate the impact of Tory austerity on public services. We are not debating climate change, the biggest challenge of a generation. We are talking about process in Parliament—a Parliament that is increasingly failing.

On that point, we are being told by the Tories who backed Brexit that we have to leave now, with the disasters that that will bring, because of the European elections. Just think of that! A Parliament that is fully elected, with no appointed Members in sight. Imagine elections that give people decisions over their futures. We are told, however, that we should not participate in those elections because of what it will do to the Conservatives in electoral terms. I do not give a stuff about what it will do to the Conservatives in electoral terms, but I do care what a disastrous no deal will do to my constituents, and so should each and every Member of this House. When we have a Government who are talking about medicine and food shortages and unrest on the streets, that needs to concern each and every one of us.

Ultimately, I want to live in a Scotland that is not beholden to the extremists who are currently calling the shots in this place; that is comfortable with giving citizens and businesses the opportunities of all four freedoms that the EU has provided; and that welcomes the world and seeks to work on an equal basis with our neighbours. I want to live in a country that is happy to share sovereignty and resources over issues such as protecting the environment and medical research, rather than having nuclear weapons in Governments we do not vote for imposed upon us. But for now, just for today, getting to the end of the week without crashing out with a disastrous no deal is going to have to do.

4.26 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): We find ourselves in an extraordinary position, and we really cannot go on like this. It is exasperating our constituents, our businesses and our farmers, and it is exasperating this House and all its Members. This issue has to be resolved and not just kicked down the road even further. It is difficult to envisage how we could be in a worse position than we are now—except, of course, if the Leader of the Opposition was running things officially—so it is time for a few home truths.

This Act is a catastrophe. It is the culmination of weeks and months of attempts to obfuscate the single largest manifestation of the democratic will of the people of our country—for the Government and this House to deliver Brexit—yet I fear that that clear instruction appears as elusive as ever. This Act is the latest demonstration of remain-supporting MPs who think that they can overrule the will of constituents in the 406 parliamentary constituencies that voted to leave in the referendum, and who, in telling us constantly what they oppose and what they want to thwart, have rarely come together responsibly to find a solution that we can rally behind to fulfil the will and wishes of our people.

What we have witnessed is no less than a conspiracy of chaos to undermine Brexit. Saboteurs from the Back Benches and some Front Benchers have been trying to hamstring the Prime Minister's hand in trying to negotiate a workable deal by increasingly restricting the alternatives available to her. We have a Labour party whose policy has been to oppose everything and to fuel the chaos and indecision, and whose prime objective is just party political advantage.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Given that Conservative MPs voted en masse against just about everything in the indicative votes, where does the hon. Gentleman place his colleagues on the Government Benches in the hierarchy of chaos that he is outlining?

Tim Loughton: Let us remind ourselves of what has happened when it comes to voting for something that would take us through Brexit and end this chaos. On the Friday before last in the third meaningful vote, 89% of Conservative Members voted for the Prime Minister's deal. That included something like three quarters of members of the ERG, who compromised hugely to back that deal. Of the Opposition, all but seven Labour MPs voted against the deal and delivering Brexit and for continuing the chaos. That is the truth of the matter. The hon. Gentleman should not blame the Government for the lack of a deal; it is his side that has consistently voted against any deal on offer. That includes Labour Back Benchers who are in the difficult position of having constituencies that voted to leave by 60% and 70%, but who now think they know better.

The conspiracy of chaos includes the Independent Group Members, who have a strong vested interest in continuing the chaos and debate on Brexit—

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Ind): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tim Loughton: I have not finished criticising the hon. Gentleman yet. If he will wait for the criticism, I will take the rebuff. Those Independent Group Members have a strong vested interest in continuing the chaos and debate on Brexit, because the minute it is resolved—and it will eventually be resolved—their common purpose is gone. They will have to come up with some non-Brexit policies that they can all agree on. Now I shall give way.

Mike Gapes: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I say just one thing to him. Members of the Independent Group voted the way they did because we recognise, along with many Members of all parties, that leaving the European Union will be a disaster for our country and that therefore we should put any proposed deal back to the people to give them the final say.

Tim Loughton: Yet page 24 of the manifesto of the hon. Gentleman's former party and page 36 of my party's manifesto, on which Members of the Independent Group held themselves up to their electorate, pledged that Brexit would become a reality—no second referendum, no thinking about it again; they put themselves forward for election to make Brexit a reality. The remarks of the hon. Gentleman therefore just do not wash.

Then we have the SNP, which is interested only in Scotland in isolation. *[Interruption.]* SNP Members are at least consistent in ignoring the results of referendums.

A conspiracy of chaos across the House has used every tool at its disposal to frustrate the Brexit process, however at odds with previous commitments on the record to honour Brexit, and tried to induce us all to believe that it has all become so complicated that we should just call the whole thing off. That should not and must not happen.

Despite my having argued and voted for a solution to Brexit by supporting the Prime Minister's deal on the last two occasions, as I am duty bound to deliver for my constituents who voted for me to do that, those who have consistently voted no to any solution now hold sway. The Act simply enshrines that conspiracy of chaos in law to extend the uncertainty.

The Act is an unprecedented abuse of parliamentary procedure, steamrolling the will of the minority through Parliament to change the rules of the game midway.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tim Loughton: I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman—no.

Faced with that abuse, with the Prime Minister's inability to control her Cabinet, her Government or indeed Parliament, and with the determination of some Conservative colleagues, who should know better, but seem hellbent on flouting the instruction of the people who voted them in, I see no obvious way out of the mess that the House will rally behind.

My biggest fear is the continued uncertainty that further delay will bring to business in particular, whether it is weeks or months—and we are now talking years. We have not just kicked the can down the road; we have kicked it into the cul-de-sac and are now kicking it round and round the cul-de-sac, getting nowhere.

I therefore want to make a plea directly to the EU. We hear that European leaders have increasingly bypassed the Government and Ministers and appealed to individual Members to gain some idea of what is going on. So I now make a plea to President Macron and Chancellor Merkel and her colleagues in particular: "Please put us out of our misery now, as this House and the Government appear incapable of doing. At tomorrow's EU Council, please vote against further extensions to article 50 and oblige the UK to leave the EU on Friday on World Trade Organisation terms, given that you previously said you would honour any application for an extension only if there was a credible reason to do so. That credible reason does not exist. It is, after all, the default position that the Prime Minister always promised when set against a bad deal, and which all of us who voted to trigger article 50 and to pass the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 wanted to achieve, as the vast

[Tim Loughton]

majority did. If you agree to extend yet again, be in no doubt that you will unleash a further tsunami of chaos and uncertainty from which none of us will benefit. If the EU elections go ahead, it is highly likely that the UK will elect an army of Nigel Farage “mini-mes”, who, I am afraid, will wreak havoc with the European Parliament and wreck your calculations about the balance of power within the EU.

Let us be realistic: there is no prospect of any agreement between the Government and the Leader of the Opposition in the current talks, and there is certainly no prospect of an agreement that will carry the majority of Conservative Members with it. Moreover, it is likely that in a matter of months you will be dealing with another Prime Minister, with whom you may find it less easy to negotiate. If an extension runs for another year, you will have to resign yourselves to a further year of disagreement and obfuscation in the House of Commons, with the knock-on effects of chaos and the undermining of regular EU processes such as budgets and other measures to be negotiated.”

This is my appeal to the EU: “If you value your future, you do not want us to remain an integral part of it in the current circumstances. Do yourselves a favour, do this House a favour, do this country a favour, and say that the UK is out.” Then, armed with that certainty, let us all sit down constructively and pragmatically to decide what our future relationship will actually look like. Let it be one that works to our mutual benefit and sets a course on which we can remain friends, allies and trading partners in years to come, working together for a common purpose, but not as part of the same prescriptive organisation that this country, like it or not, voted to leave—and leave we must.

4.36 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and I were elected at the same time and sit together on the Home Affairs Committee, and we agree on many things, but it will not surprise him to hear that we strongly disagree on this Act and the risks of no deal. Let me gently say to him, and to other Members, that I think it would be really bad for manufacturers in my constituency to suddenly face customs checks, tariffs and delays if we end up with no deal, and I think it would be really bad for overstretched families in my constituency to suddenly face food tariffs and an increase in food prices. I also think it would be really bad for West Yorkshire police to suddenly lose, overnight, the policing and security co-operation on which they, and other countries, depend in order to be able to investigate the most serious criminals.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Will the right hon. Lady also take into consideration the 14-page letter that was sent to Cabinet Ministers recently by the Cabinet Secretary, Mark Sedwill? It details some serious concerns about the impact of leaving. This is a letter from the country’s senior civil servant, who is not part of any conspiracy but who has responded to the duties that he feels he owes to the country. Is it not a salutary piece of literature to be put before anyone who would lightly advocate leaving with no deal for the sake of it?

Yvette Cooper: I think that that advice was very important. The job of the civil service is to attempt to do everything it can and strain every sinew to deliver the will of the Government of the day. The fact that Sir Mark Sedwill has given such advice shows quite how seriously that is taken. It is particularly significant that Sir Mark is also the Government’s national security adviser and the former permanent secretary at the Home Office: he will be well aware of the security and policing issues that we face.

I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister has tabled this motion as a result of the Bill that we passed, which is now an Act. I think it shows that the Cabinet has taken that advice seriously, but also that Parliament as a whole has consistently opposed the damage and the chaos that no deal would cause. That is why we have reached this point, and it is why we should now support an extension. The purpose of the motion is to provide that parliamentary safeguard and a legal underpinning for the Prime Minister’s negotiations, so that she is not under pressure to slip backwards from the course she has decided upon.

We are here because the Prime Minister ran down the clock. She put forward a motion in December, although it was clear even then that her deal would be rejected, and then pulled the vote the first time. Instead of reaching out at that point, she simply ran down the clock, using the threat of an imminent deadline to try to force decisions. She has tried that process of brinkmanship in decision making repeatedly, but it simply has not worked. I just think that approach, like a continuing game of chicken, is a really bad way to make decisions. We have heard different concerns from different perspectives on the Prime Minister’s deal, but none of the assurances get any better simply because it is 10 minutes to midnight. Running down the clock was the wrong way to address those concerns. It would have been far better to have the kinds of debates and conversations that have now started in order to try to find a way forward. This is incredibly frustrating for people across the country, who are tearing their hair out about the way this has all happened. We should be honest about that. That is why we all have a responsibility to come together and try to find a way forward. The problem is that there are different views about different kinds of Brexit, and about different ways of reaching public consensus and consent. We have to be honest about those different views, tease them out and debate them, rather than thinking that the ticking clock will provide all the solutions.

Ms Angela Eagle: Was my right hon. Friend as surprised as I was to hear that the betrayal narrative is already up and running across the country, with claims about any kind of Brexit not being pure enough? We have today heard members of the Conservative party suggest that somehow the disaster of no deal is now the only desirable outcome.

Yvette Cooper: I think that there is a problem with the way in which everyone has been approaching the debate. Like my hon. Friend, I think that a no-deal Brexit would be deeply damaging to our constituents, but I also think that the continual attempts to suggest that there are betrayals and conspiracies make it harder for people to come together and reach a sensible and sustainable outcome.

One of the reasons we are in this situation is that there has been no attempt to build a consensus since the referendum. That is why I argued for a cross-party commission at the very beginning of this process, and for a process that would bring together leave and remain voters to try to work out the best way forward. Frankly, if we do not do that, nothing lasts. If everyone thinks only about winning in the short term and getting what they want straightaway, rather than about how we can build consensus for what is effectively a constitutional change, even if they win in the short term it will not last and whatever we get will end up unravelling.

Stephen Doughty: My right hon. Friend knows that I completely support her proposal for such a commission—indeed, that may still be necessary, whatever conclusion we reach. Does she agree that the danger for our European partners of lurching from one cliff-edge deadline to another is bad news for the negotiations overall? The longer flextension that has been proposed would be very sensible for the whole negotiations, on both sides.

Yvette Cooper: The idea of a flextension is a very interesting proposal. As I understand it, it would allow us to conclude the article 50 process at any point, if agreement is reached but, equally, we could take longer if we needed to. I hope that the Prime Minister will seriously consider that approach, because one of the reasons we are now in this situation is the focus on the date, whether 29 March or 12 April, and it is a situation of her making. None of those dates was in the original referendum in 2016; they are dates that she created. It reminds me of the debate we had on the Government's net migration target. The Prime Minister chose to make the net migration target a big focus, even though everybody knew that she had no plan to deliver it. However, that focus on the target ended up creating more anger, more confusion and a greater sense of betrayal. It is my fear now that again, in suggesting that it will be a betrayal if everything is not solved by a particular date, the Government and particularly the Prime Minister have made it harder for us to reach consensus. They have created more alarm and anger across the country instead of adopting a practical focus on the way forward.

The proof of that is the fact that we are here again without having reached agreement. The Prime Minister has tried to focus minds by using brinkmanship and creating dates and deadlines, but it simply has not worked. That is why we have to try to do this in a different way. We have to try to bring people together. We now have a process of indicative votes and cross-party talks—which, to be honest, should have started some time ago—but we also have to recognise that we do not have the same consensual political and parliamentary traditions that other European countries have been able to draw upon. I understand that, from the other member states' point of view, we can look very adversarial. We are having to do something that we have no tradition of doing in this House, but I hope that our attempts to do it now will be effective and will lead to a conclusion. I certainly hope that the cross-party working that we have managed to achieve to get this Bill in place and to get this motion to go forward will be an indicator that it is possible for us to draw on more consensual traditions when it comes to this kind of constitutional change.

Mr Bradshaw: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Yvette Cooper: I ought to finish, because other Members want to speak.

I shall conclude where I started by saying that, when we have constitutional change such as this, we need people to try to come together and reach agreement. No matter how we have voted over the past few months—and certainly the past few weeks—we have all had threats and abuse, including to our constituency offices. That is damaging to our democracy and to our debates, so I hope that we will be able to come together and find a way forward, and to support the Prime Minister's motion today.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. There are 25 minutes to go and five people wanting to speak, so there will be a five-minute limit.

4.47 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): It is very nice to follow the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), because she talked about taking a consensual approach to this. The consensual approach of this House was to trigger article 50 and to decide on the date of 29 March. The extension that is being requested today is very open-ended, and I find this incredibly concerning. The rhetoric in the media surrounding the extension has been, as the Attorney General said today, that we might not have to take up our seats in the European Parliament if we end up taking part in the European elections. However, if the extension were to last a year or longer, those European parliamentarians might well be in their seats. I find it bizarre that we are talking about good behaviour and not interrupting a budget—in other words, trying to bind those people who might have stood on a manifesto of their own making or perhaps a Conservative manifesto, and expecting them to behave themselves and be good. I find that very worrying. If those discussions are indeed taking place, it would be even more worrying if a similar agreement were extracted from the Prime Minister of this country that she and the British Government should also behave themselves and not give due scrutiny to or make any criticism of the budget.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I am following carefully what the hon. Lady is saying. Does she agree that it seems really humiliating for this country to have our Prime Minister going over to the European Union to beg for an extension? What does this say about our country when we know that 17.5 million people said very simply that they wanted to leave? That was very simple.

Mrs Main: I completely agree with the hon. Lady.

I should like to refresh the memory of those in the House who think that there is no problem in having this flextension. In 2002, a decision by the European Council stated:

“Members of the European Parliament shall vote on an individual and personal basis. They shall not be bound by any instructions and shall not receive a binding mandate”.

The article also stated:

“Members shall exercise their mandate freely and independently, shall not be bound by any instructions and shall not receive a binding mandate”.

[Mrs Main]

The loose talk about what we may or may not expect of our MEPs if we stand candidates in the next elections is extremely worrying. We have to take that seriously. People who stand in those elections should have every right to take up their seats as MEPs. It is likely that the House will not reach any form of agreement or consensus. It needs restating that only five Members of the official Opposition agreed to the separated withdrawal agreement. The political declaration has always been open for discussion, yet Labour seem to want to bind any future leader of the Conservative party. When people seek to bind the hands, the voices and the opinions of duly elected MEPs, who speak on behalf of their constituents, or of this Government, that is not democracy.

It is appalling that we may seek an extension with no real sense of purpose. If the Labour party gave an undertaking that it supported the withdrawal agreement and that its disagreement was simply with the political declaration, perhaps our Prime Minister could go along in the sure and certain knowledge that some sort of deal could be done fairly quickly.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Not only will there be no sense of purpose, but there is no certainty. My hon. Friend's constituents, my constituents and business are crying out for certainty, but there are Labour Members who will vote for this extension secretly hoping that it will not end on 30 June but that there will be further extensions. Does that not cause further uncertainty?

Mrs Main: As my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) admirably said, the can has been kicked down into the cul-de-sac and it is now being kicked around the cul-de-sac.

My point is that there is no sense of purpose from the Labour party. Labour does not even want to get past first base of the withdrawal agreement, which would be absolutely necessary, and whatever political declaration it wishes to try to bind our Government's hands with. Our Prime Minister cannot go and seek any extension in the knowledge that she can give the European Union any form of assurances.

I would rather the Prime Minister did not seek an extension. We are becoming a laughing stock because we cannot stick by our words, by our manifestos, by undertakings that have been given in this House or by our vote to trigger article 50. I do not know why anyone would turn out for any future referendum, or even election, when they cannot believe a word of what goes on in here.

Labour Members need to look at themselves. They cannot get past first base. They need to say what a flexextension would be for. The withdrawal agreement would certainly be part of it. There is real unhappiness among the public that people say, "We need to be consensual," but only five Opposition Members reached across to be consensual with the Prime Minister. That says a lot.

I changed my position and voted for the withdrawal agreement, not because it is perfect but because I can see where the House is going. The House is doing its level best to bind the hands of the Prime Minister and potentially of any MEPs who are elected. It is trying to get them to play nice and to remove any scrutiny of the

EU budget. Taxpayers in this country have a right to expect their MEPs to conduct scrutiny, not to go and play nice because we happen to be leaving the club at some unspecified point.

I am against this extension, because I am not sure what conditions will be extracted for it and I am not sure that Labour will ever be prepared to withdraw from anything. They could not even agree to the withdrawal agreement. From what I can see, the whole point of this extension is to ensure that we are bound in our agreements with the EU and stymied by staying in, and that the can is kicked so far down the road that people argue, "Well, probably half the people who voted in that referendum are dead, so we need to bring it all back again." That is no way to treat the British public.

To those who say they want certainty, I say there is no certainty in a flexextension. There is no certainty in an open-ended agreement in which we say, "Let's keep chatting about it." This is the worst of all worlds, and I sincerely hope that all those Members who could not even bring themselves to support the withdrawal agreement, forgetting all the other things they were unhappy about, because they did not trust the Prime Minister, ask themselves how consensual that was. The right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford is busy on her phone, but I say to her that consensus works both ways. Five Labour Members, and no Independent Group Members, voted for the withdrawal agreement. That is how consensual the Opposition are. They are holding our Prime Minister, our country and this Brexit to ransom, and it is time they worked out that they will rue the day they did so.

4.54 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I begin by acknowledging that the Prime Minister, for the second time now, has decided to put the national interest before taking this country over the cliff of a no-deal Brexit. I say to Conservative Members who have argued for a no deal that at no point did the leave campaign suggest that it was proposing to the British people that we should leave without a deal.

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) and others for their role in encouraging the Prime Minister to act in the national interest because of this Act.

I will vote for the Government's motion seeking an extension to 30 June. We will not know until the end of tomorrow whether that date or a different date is granted, but there seem to be two truths here. First, the Prime Minister will have to take whatever date is offered to her. Secondly, having been granted a date—I hope we are granted a date—we will have to decide what on earth we are going to do with the additional time.

I welcome the fact that the Government have reached out to the Opposition and that the talks are taking place, but I gently say to the Government that the talks will require some flexibility and a willingness to compromise if we are to make progress, and I think that that should include a compromise on how we finally take the decision.

Why are we in this state today? The House has been very clear that it will not accept leaving without an agreement. We are also here because it has become clear that the promise that we could somehow, on the one

hand, bring back and retain all our sovereignty and, on the other hand, keep all the economic benefits of European Union membership was not true. The Prime Minister's deal lays that bare, which is why some Conservative Members cannot bring themselves to vote for her deal, because it confronts them with a choice that they are not prepared to make. We have heard their criticism, but the irony is that if all the Conservative Members who campaigned most passionately for leaving the European Union had voted for the deal, we would be out by now. But this is not a choice that the nation can continue to avoid. We must confront it.

The Attorney General spoke wisely when he told Nick Robinson the other day that, on Brexit

"we have underestimated its complexity. We are unpicking 45 years of in-depth integration. This needed to be done with very great care...It needs a hard-headed understanding of realities."

That is why I would argue that the situation today is different from the situation in June 2016.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that part of the shame of this process is that the Government could ever have underestimated the impossibility of unpicking 46 years of close co-operation?

Hilary Benn: The right hon. Gentleman points to one of the other truths about this process, which some people were sadly unwilling to acknowledge in campaigning to leave. The fact that they never had a plan has been exposed for all to see. I have learned over two and a half years just how much the complexity of these relationships means to businesses, companies and individuals the length and breadth of the land.

I think people knew why they voted in the way they did—no one is saying they did not—but what they were offered did not and does not exist. Therefore, is it not time for us to put that truth back to the British people? Especially as the more time that passes, the more the mandate from the referendum of June 2016 will inevitably age.

I do not know whether the British people have changed their mind, but I have come to the conclusion that we should now ask them whether they wish to confirm their original decision in light of the real choice that confronts the country, and not the fantasy that was offered three years ago. If we agree to do that we could move on because, however long the extension that is granted, and we must hope and pray in the national interest that we get one tomorrow, the continuing drama, the anger referred to by Conservative Members—I acknowledge that anger, which the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) spoke about with real passion—and the uncertainty could finally be brought to a conclusion in the capable hands of the British people.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. It would help if Members confine themselves to three minutes each.

4.59 pm

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Ind): As ever, it is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn). I agree with everything he says. Every time I hear a right hon. or hon. Member on the

Government Benches making the case for a no-deal, off-the-cliff, hardest-of-all Brexits, I grow stronger in my belief that I did the right thing by leaving that party. The fact that people who claim to be the party of business are doing the one thing that British business does not want—it would be "ruinous", in the words of the Business Secretary—fills me with absolute astonishment, but that is the future of the Conservative party. The direction of travel is towards a far-right, extreme version of Brexit. It is not acceptable.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): May I put on the record that not everybody on this side of the House shares that view? The right hon. Lady knows from our conversations that my constituents and I do not share it.

Anna Soubry: I do not doubt for one moment that the hon. Gentleman does not share that view, but the reality is that the majority of members of the Conservative party, as we heard in earlier speeches, are travelling in that direction. The next leader of the Conservative party will be exactly the sort of person who believes in the most ruinous version of Brexit—a no-deal Brexit.

I was heartened to attend a rally at lunchtime today in central London organised by People's Vote. What a rally it was. People from all backgrounds, of all ages and from all over the United Kingdom came together in support of sending this matter back to the British people. The star of the rally was undoubtedly the brilliant Baroness Boothroyd, who got a standing ovation before she even spoke. After she spoke, she got another rousing standing ovation, and rightly so. She reminded everybody in the audience that she is in her 90th year—I do not think she wanted that broadcast. The point that she made so beautifully, compassionately and passionately is that this issue is not about her generation. Indeed, it is not about my generation either—I am 62. It is about our children and grandchildren. The overwhelming message from that rally was that many young people have spoken to their parents and grandparents, who are now in turn increasingly saying, "Yes, we voted leave, but now we have listened to our children and grandchildren as we have seen the reality of Brexit unfold. We have changed our minds." It is profoundly ironic that there are right hon. and hon. Members on the Government Benches who have changed their minds and voted for the Prime Minister's withdrawal agreement, but they deny the people of this country, two and a half years on, the right to a final say and to change their minds too.

People talk about the will of the people, but the evidence is clear that the will of the people is changing. In any event, 63% of people in this country did not vote to leave the European Union, and the 52% who voted for it did not vote for this Brexit chaos and this Brexit crisis. As they see Brexit unfold, they are increasingly demanding a final say and a people's vote. I will vote for this motion, but I want a longer extension so we can have a confirmatory vote—a people's vote—because that is the only way out of this crisis.

5.3 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I thank the right hon. Members for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) and the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for getting us as far as we have got today.

[Tom Brake]

On the extension, I certainly would not want our friends in the European Union to think that 30 June is, by any stretch of the imagination, ideal or leaves us satiated, because it does not. It is clearly not long enough for a people's vote, although it clearly is long enough for the European elections to take place, which the Liberal Democrats and a number of other parties will fight very hard and positively.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the June date would not allow enough time, not only for the people's vote, but also for some kind of process, like citizens' assemblies, that might just have a chance of bringing the country back together again, by addressing some of the very real reasons that people voted leave in the first place?

Tom Brake: Absolutely, and clearly an extension could be used for that purpose, or indeed for expanding on the process that is already taking place, with all the parties in this place—with the exception, I am afraid, of the DUP—working across parties to try to find a way forward. What the hon. Lady suggests could be part of that process.

The extension is not long enough for a people's vote, which would probably require 20 weeks or thereabouts for planning and for campaigning, so we need an extension until September at the very least. I want to help the Prime Minister. She should accept the flexextension that we hope will be offered to her tomorrow, because that will save her from embarrassment in the future. Members will recall that she said there would not be a general election, and then there was; that she was going to stand by the withdrawal agreement that she had spent months negotiating with the European Union, which she then did not; and that she said there would not be an extension to the article 50 period, and then there was. So she could save herself a lot of embarrassment by simply accepting that there is going to be a people's vote, so a long extension is required to deliver one.

We are assuming, of course, and I think it is a safe assumption, that we will be granted an extension by the European Union, but if we are not, we need some clarity from Ministers as to what exactly will happen—what the next steps that the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), who is now in his place, referred to actually include. Will those next steps include, if we do not get an extension to the article 50 period, revoking article 50 by the end of this week? If the Minister wants to intervene to confirm that that is the case, he is welcome to do so. He has a frown on his face, but I think he is reflecting intensely on that.

I shall conclude by saying again that the Prime Minister must face up to the truth. She will need a long extension. She should grasp it tomorrow, to avoid humiliation a few weeks later when she would have to go and ask for it.

Mr Speaker: I call the hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) to speak very briefly; I also want the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) to get in.

5.7 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): People who voted leave in Swansea voted for good things. They voted for more money, more control, more trade, control over immigration. Now they finally see that they will not be getting any of those things. They are having to pay more money. There will not be more trade. We will have an open border in Northern Ireland. So they are saying to me that they have been let down, and they want to vote on whether the deal stacks up to what they were promised—and it will not.

I very much hope that we will get a long extension, so that there can be a proper collaboration between the parties to put a Labour-Tory mixed deal to the country so that people can decide whether they are better off in or out of the EU.

Everyone who talks to me in Swansea is saying, "This is taking longer; it is costing more; it is much more complicated than we were told before." The French are now saying that, in the event that we do not agree a deal and we do not have a long extension, the default position that we have chosen is no deal; but frankly, the people who voted leave do not even like what they are seeing with the deal, let alone no deal, which would be a complete calamity. Given that the House has now voted several times to say no to no deal, it is important that the default—

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Geraint Davies: No, I will not.

It is important that the default position is not no deal, but revocation. I introduced a Bill, the European Union (Revocation of Notification) Bill, to that effect. It is important that we remember that we should stay where we are.

I had the great privilege of opening an exhibition in memory of Henry Richard, who, as people will remember, was the "apostle of peace" who was an MP in this place until 1888. He put forward the arbitration in the treaty of Paris that ended the Crimean war. He was very much of the opinion that the canvas for future peace and prosperity should be across Europe. Obviously, we saw the bloodshed of the first and second world wars, but now we have a situation where Europe is in jeopardy of breaking apart. At last people are beginning to think that we have made a mistake, and a lot of older people are saying to me now, "I voted to leave, but I have concerns, I have guilt, and I want to make things better. I want to vote on whether we do in fact remain in the EU." So I very much hope that we will have a flexextension, and that we will have an opportunity to talk again about a possible deal, and put that to the people. In my mind, we should stay where we are, with the best deal—in the EU.

5.9 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The Jaguar plant lies at the heart of Erdington, which is rich in talent but one of the poorest constituencies in the country. The plant was turned around from closure in 2010, doubling in size to 3,300 jobs. It has transformed the lives of thousands of workers locally. It has now lost 1,000 jobs. It would be unthinkable to put it at risk.

The voice of the world of work could not be clearer—to the CBI and the TUC, we are facing a national emergency, so they say no to no deal. The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders on building cars, the ADS on building planes and Make UK, the former Engineering Employers' Federation, all say that a no-deal Brexit would be a catastrophe. The Food and Drink Federation says that prices would soar and that no deal would be a disaster. Our farmers would face immense problems with our biggest market, on the continent—no deal would be a disaster. The Investment Association is talking about the billions in money now flooding out of the country, rather than being invested here in our economy. The British Ceramic Confederation warns that household names will close in the next stages—the quintessentially English product of the Potteries.

There are those who believe that they know more about building cars than those who build cars, more about building planes than those who build planes and more about national security than the head of national security, who has warned against the catastrophe of a no-deal Brexit. Those people are wrong. They talk about a managed no deal, but that is like a managed parachute jump without a parachute. Were we to plunge over the cliff into a no-deal Brexit, our country would be the poorer in every sense of the word for a generation. The task now is for us to come together in Parliament to find a way forward and a better deal for Britain.

In conclusion, I pay tribute to Tory colleagues with whom we have worked, the right hon. Members for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) and for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) for her outstanding leadership—all working together to prevent a no-deal Brexit. Why? Because it would be a catastrophe that our country would take a generation to recover from. We cannot go over the cliff.

5.12 pm

One and a half hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the motion, the Speaker put the Question (Standing Order No. 16(1)).

The House divided: Ayes 420, Noes 110.

Division No. 413]

[5.12 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane	Benyon, rh Richard
Abrahams, Debbie	Beresford, Sir Paul
Afolami, Bim	Berger, Luciana (<i>Proxy vote</i>
Aldous, Peter	<i>cast by Mr Chris Leslie)</i>
Ali, Rushanara	Betts, Mr Clive
Allen, Heidi	Black, Mhairi
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Blackford, rh Ian
Amesbury, Mike	Blackman, Kirsty
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Argar, Edward	Blomfield, Paul
Ashworth, Jonathan	Boles, Nick
Atkins, Victoria	Bottomley, Sir Peter
Baldwin, Harriett	Bowie, Andrew
Barclay, rh Stephen	Brabin, Tracy
Bardell, Hannah	Bradley, rh Karen
Barron, rh Sir Kevin	Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Bebb, Guto	Brake, rh Tom
Beckett, rh Margaret	Brennan, Kevin
Bellingham, Sir Henry	Brine, Steve
Benn, rh Hilary	Brock, Deidre

Brokenshire, rh James	Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Brown, Alan	Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Brown, Lyn	Eagle, Ms Angela
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Eagle, Maria
Bryant, Chris	Edwards, Jonathan
Buck, Ms Karen	Efford, Clive
Buckland, Robert	Elliott, Julie
Burden, Richard	Ellis, Michael
Burghart, Alex	Ellman, Dame Louise
Burgon, Richard	Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Burt, rh Alistair	Elmore, Chris
Butler, Dawn	Esterson, Bill
Byrne, rh Liam	Evans, Chris
Cable, rh Sir Vince	Farrelly, Paul
Cairns, rh Alun	Farron, Tim
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Fellows, Marion
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Field, rh Mark
Carden, Dan	Fitzpatrick, Jim
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Fletcher, Colleen
Cartlidge, James	Flint, rh Caroline
Chalk, Alex	Ford, Vicky
Champion, Sarah	Foster, Kevin
Chapman, Douglas	Foxcroft, Vicky
Chapman, Jenny	Frazer, Lucy
Charalambous, Bambos	Freeman, George
Cherry, Joanna	Freer, Mike
Churchill, Jo	Furniss, Gill
Clark, Colin	Gaffney, Hugh
Clark, rh Greg	Gapes, Mike
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth	Gardiner, Barry
Cleverly, James	Garnier, Mark
Clwyd, rh Ann	Gauke, rh Mr David
Coaker, Vernon	George, Ruth
Coffey, Ann	Gethins, Stephen
Coffey, Dr Thérèse	Gibb, rh Nick
Cooper, Julie	Gibson, Patricia
Cooper, Rosie	Gill, Preet Kaur
Cooper, rh Yvette	Glen, John
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Glindon, Mary
Costa, Alberto	Godsiff, Mr Roger
Cowan, Ronnie	Goodman, Helen
Coyle, Neil	Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Crausby, Sir David	Gove, rh Michael
Crawley, Angela	Grady, Patrick
Creagh, Mary	Graham, Luke
Creasy, Stella	Graham, Richard
Cruddas, Jon	Grant, Bill
Cryer, John	Grant, Mrs Helen
Cummins, Judith	Grant, Peter
Cunningham, Alex	Gray, Neil
Cunningham, Mr Jim	Green, rh Damian
Daby, Janet	Green, Kate
Dakin, Nic	Greening, rh Justine
Davey, rh Sir Edward	Greenwood, Lilian
David, Wayne	Greenwood, Margaret
Davies, Geraint	Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Davies, Glyn	Griffith, Nia
Day, Martyn	Grogan, John
De Cordova, Marsha	Gwynne, Andrew
De Piero, Gloria	Gyimah, Mr Sam
Debbonaire, Thangam	Haigh, Louise
Dent Coad, Emma	Hair, Kirstene
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan	Hall, Luke
Docherty, Leo	Hamilton, Fabian
Docherty-Hughes, Martin	Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Dodds, Anneliese	Hammond, Stephen
Doughty, Stephen	Hancock, rh Matt
Dowd, Peter	Hanson, rh David
Dowden, Oliver	Hardy, Emma
Dromey, Jack	Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Duffield, Rosie	Harrington, Richard
Duguid, David	Harris, Carolyn

Hart, Simon
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayman, Sue
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Healey, rh John
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hermon, Lady
 Hill, Mike
 Hillier, Meg
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hosie, Stewart
 Howarth, rh Mr George
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurd, rh Mr Nick
 Hussain, Imran
 James, Margot
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, Diana
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, Darren (*Proxy vote cast by Kerry McCarthy*)
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham P.
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Kane, Mike
 Keegan, Gillian
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kerr, Stephen
 Khan, Afzal
 Killen, Ged
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Laird, Lesley
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, rh Norman
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lancaster, rh Mark
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Lee, Karen
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leslie, Mr Chris
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lewis, Mr Ivan
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Linden, David
 Lloyd, Stephen
 Lloyd, Tony
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline

Lucas, Ian C.
 Lynch, Holly
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Mann, John
 Marsden, Gordon
 Martin, Sandy
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
 McMahon, Jim
 Mearns, Ian
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Moran, Layla
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, David
 Morris, Grahame
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Ian
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Newlands, Gavin
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norris, Alex
 O'Brien, Neil
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opperman, Guy
 Osamor, Kate
 Owen, Albert
 Pawsey, Mark
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Penrose, John
 Perkins, Toby
 Perry, rh Claire
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Philp, Chris
 Pidcock, Laura
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Pound, Stephen
 Pow, Rebecca
 Powell, Lucy
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Quince, Will
 Qureshi, Yasmin

Rashid, Faisal
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reynolds, Emma
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
 Rodda, Matt
 Rowley, Danielle
 Ruane, Chris
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Rutley, David
 Ryan, rh Joan
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Scully, Paul
 Selous, Andrew
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Alok
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip (*Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft*)
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Eleanor
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Laura
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Snell, Gareth
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spellar, rh John
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stevenson, John

Stewart, Rory
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Streeting, Wes
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sweeney, Mr Paul
 Swinson, Jo
 Tami, rh Mark
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tredinnick, David
 Trickett, Jon
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 Twist, Liz
 Umunna, Chuka
 Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
 Vaz, rh Keith
 Vaz, Valerie
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Walker, Thelma
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Watson, Tom
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitfield, Martin
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Williams, Hywel
 Williams, Dr Paul
 Williamson, Chris
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, Phil
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Woodcock, John
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr Alister Jack and
Jeremy Quin

NOES

Afriyie, Adam
 Amess, Sir David
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baron, Mr John
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bradley, Ben
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Braverman, Suella
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Bruce, Fiona
 Burns, Conor
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Campbell, Mr Ronnie
 Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chishti, Rehman

Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Dodds, rh Nigel
 Double, Steve
 Drax, Richard
 Duddridge, James
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Eustice, George
 Evnnett, rh Sir David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Field, rh Frank
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Girvan, Paul
 Goldsmith, Zac
 Gray, James

Green, Chris
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
 Hoey, Kate
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Hughes, Eddie
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Johnson, rh Boris
 Johnson, Gareth
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Little Pengelly, Emma
 Lopez, Julia
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mann, Scott
 McPartland, Stephen
 McVey, rh Ms Esther
 Mercer, Johnny
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Mills, Nigel
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Paisley, Ian
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti

Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rowley, Lee
 Shannon, Jim
 Simpson, David
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Royston
 Sturdy, Julian
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Thomson, Ross
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Watling, Giles
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wragg, Mr William

Tellers for the Noes:
Dame Cheryl Gillan and
Mr Simon Clarke

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House agrees for the purposes of section 1 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2019 to the Prime Minister seeking an extension of the period specified in Article 50(3) of the Treaty on European Union to a period ending on 30 June 2019.

Housing

5.30 pm

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): I beg to move,

That this House has considered housing.

As we forge a new relationship with the European Union, building the homes our country needs is a mission more important than ever, because a home is so much more than a roof over your head; it speaks directly to your hopes and dreams—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The Minister is speaking about an important subject, and we must hear what he is saying.

Kit Malthouse: As I was saying, a home speaks directly to your hopes and dreams and gives your children a good start in life. It is about moving to take up a better job and anchoring yourself in a strong and confident community. However, for too many, particularly young people, a decent, affordable and secure place to live can feel out of reach. We remain determined that that must change.

Housing is this Government's chief domestic priority, and our progress is already clear. For the first time in 10 years, home ownership among 35 to 44-year-olds is up. We have helped over 500,000 people into home ownership since 2010 through Government schemes such as Help to Buy and right to buy. Last year, we built more homes than in all but one of the last 31 years, bringing us closer to our ambitious target of 300,000 new homes a year. However, there is much more to do if we are to meet people's aspirations.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Will the Minister apologise to all those sat waiting and languishing on homelessness waiting lists across the country?

Kit Malthouse: I have many times, at this Dispatch Box and elsewhere, accepted the fact that Governments of all stripes over the past three or four decades have failed to build the houses that the country needs, and we all share some culpability in the housing crisis we are now facing. The question is not how it came about, but what we are doing to address it.

When I took on this role last year, I made my task a simple one: more, better, faster homes. I will begin with "more", because we are taking bold action on a number of fronts to increase supply. We are putting billions into housing and infrastructure—at least £44 billion over five years. We are reforming planning and we have empowered Homes England, our new national housing agency, to take a more strategic and assertive approach to increasing supply. We have recently announced the award of £1.2 billion of grant funding from our £5.5 billion housing infrastructure fund. The seven successful schemes have the potential to unlock up to 68,000 new homes, and we look forward to announcing further awards in the coming months.

We are not looking only to the market to deliver; we have paved the way for a new generation of social housing by removing the Government cap on how much councils can borrow, so that they can start to build a new generation of community homes.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the Minister on staying in post for as long as he has, which I should say is quite unusual for Conservative Housing Ministers. What, however, can he say to Greater Manchester, which has apparently been told that the Government are withdrawing their offer of £68 million to remediate brownfield sites?

Kit Malthouse: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we are in ongoing discussions with Manchester about its housing ambition, but one of the frustrations in that conversation is the unwillingness of the Mayor of Manchester to take responsibility for housing figures in that city. As I say, if he is willing to be ambitious, we would be willing to support him as well.

Jim McMahon: On that point, will the Minister give way?

Kit Malthouse: No.

In addition to our affordable homes guarantee scheme, which gives £3 billion of guaranteed support, making it cheaper and easier for housing associations to raise funds and get building, we are increasing supply as the means to make the most of the space we already have, including land that has already been built on. With that in mind, the planning proposals and consultations announced in the autumn statement aim to give people more flexibility to build upwards on existing buildings and in converting commercial properties. This is a positive step that ensures we conserve precious land, accelerate supply and help to revive our high streets.

We are also looking at how we can close the gap between planning permissions and homes built, and we will be taking action on the back of the review by my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) to do just that.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I want to take my hon. Friend to one particular issue. One of the big problems we have had is that the building regulations are set against a new type of homes—prefab homes made of wood or steel—which can be built throughout the year, which would accelerate the whole building programme and which are ecologically far better than brick-built houses. Yet people always tell me that they have to make all sorts of adjustments just to meet the building regulations. Will my hon. Friend undertake to look at that, because these homes would accelerate the whole process of house building and make it much more affordable too?

Kit Malthouse: My right hon. Friend, with his usual wisdom, has prefaced the part of my speech I am moving on to. He is quite right: we believe that modern methods of construction hold enormous potential not only to produce more homes but to produce them faster and better. I recently visited a factory in Walsall, in the west midlands, where Accord is building 1,000 homes a year using modern methods of construction. So good are the environmental standards that those homes for social rent have lower arrears, because people can afford to heat them.

That is something we are backing through our £4.5 billion home building fund, £2.5 billion of which is to champion small and medium-sized enterprises, custom builders and more diverse builders to get modern methods of construction and other cutting-edge tech into the mainstream. The fund has already allocated all of the

original £1 billion of short-term funding. Over 94% of the funding contracted to date has gone to SME builders. We expect the fund to deliver more than 30,000 homes—around 5,000 more than the original target.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Minister is quite right that we are going to need a whole variety of different types of houses and tenures to hit the 300,000 target. How many homes does he think will be built for social housing—not affordable housing—in the rest of this Parliament? What is his plan?

Kit Malthouse: I am constantly asked what targets might be for particular types of housing.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): 12,500.

Kit Malthouse: Well, 12,500 is the minimum amount that is due to come out of the affordable homes programme. We hope and believe that the aspiration may be more, not least because we have taken the cap off the housing revenue account. It is therefore up to the ambition of councils whether they do this. As the Chairman of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), knows, I would love to sit in my office in Whitehall and plan the country—the Malthouse period of planning. I could plan in his constituency, as I could in mine, and decree what all these targets might be. However, as he knows, there are numerous housing markets in the UK—there are probably 30 or 40 in the capital alone—and they all operate in a different way, with lots of variable sites that all have their own issues and problems that need to be dealt with, so we are setting a standard target across the country as an aspiration. However, by setting councils free to build a new generation of social homes and investing enormous amounts of money in the affordable homes programme, which can also be for social homes, we hope and believe that that tenure will advance and increase to play its part in the 300,000 homes that are, we hope, coming in the years ahead.

I am mindful that, with such a dramatic increase in supply, the more we build, the more important it is that we get it right. That is why we are focused on building better. A key part of that is communities having a bigger role in shaping the future of the places they call home. We are making changes to our planning system, and in particular the planning rule book, so that they can do this. We are providing greater clarity and certainty for developers and communities alike, by giving local areas more options and the freedom and flexibility to make effective use of the land they have. That is crucial if we are to reassure communities that promises made on the provision of affordable housing and infrastructure will be promises kept. Keeping promises is the only way to ensure that communities will continue to have faith in new developments.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): In March last year, the Secretary of State wrote to 15 local authorities that had not submitted local plans. I understand that, as of now—a year later—10 of those have done so. Should the Government not be doing more to pressurise all local authorities to make sure they submit local plans to plan housing for their areas?

Kit Malthouse: Yet again, my hon. Friend shows his legendary impatience to build the homes that the next generation needs. He is quite right that we are urging,

cajoling and pushing councils across the country to get their plans in place. We hope and believe that a plan-led system will produce more and better homes across the country, and also that, when a local authority puts its weight behind a plan and starts to think in decadal terms, perhaps, about how its area should look and how it should plan for homes, we will be able to help it with infrastructure. We have seen that in parts of the country from Carlisle, to Exeter, to Oxfordshire, where forward-thinking civic leaders are able to think 10, 15 or 20 years ahead. They are then able to come alongside us for big infrastructure asks, assistance, and, frankly, large cheques to assist them with that sort of ambition.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): On neglected areas of housing that do not get much ministerial airtime, can I first ask the Minister about new homes for people who are elderly? What further funding does his Department intend to allocate? Also, housing co-operatives rarely get any attention in this House. Does he—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. That intervention is too long. Before the Minister answers the hon. Gentleman, I must point out to the House that, for obvious reasons, this is a very short debate. We have to finish in an hour and 20 minutes. Fifteen people have indicated to me that they want to speak. At present, that gives each Backbencher three minutes. If people who do not intend to stay for the whole debate and do not intend to speak make interventions of more than one minute, there will be people at the end of the list who will not get to speak at all. It is not up to me; it is up to the House as a whole to decide how we will conduct this debate.

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Gentleman raises a pertinent point. As I tour the country, I go to lots of places in all parts of the country with significant brownfield land. One of the cries I hear from people in meetings is, “Where have all the bungalows gone?” That is a proxy for: where is the move-on space for older people whose children have left home and feel they need to downsize? We are keen to try to stimulate and encourage an, if you like, less than prime market that provides the kind of homes that older people would like to occupy. Key to that will be encouraging more participants in the house building market, as well as giving local authorities, as we have in the National Planning Policy Framework, the power to devise in their plans the type of housing that they need. It is perfectly possible for the hon. Gentleman’s local authority to signal in its plan that that is the kind of housing it requires.

We have also seen how community support increases when we build homes that grow a sense of place, rather than undermine it. It is why we are championing design and quality through the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission. We reinforced that in February when we hosted a second national design conference. It is increasingly important as we create new settlements across the country, such as garden communities. Last month, we announced support for a further five garden towns with the potential to deliver up to 65,000 homes, in addition to the 23 locally led garden communities we are already supporting.

It is not just about getting numbers up, however. We are determined to put fairness back at the heart of the housing market. Our commitment to restore the dream of home ownership remains as strong as ever. That is

why we have committed to a new Help to Buy scheme, which will run from April 2021 to 2023. We have cut stamp duty for first-time buyers and put a call out for evidence on innovation in shared ownership. We believe that the private rental market can be a stronger platform for those aspiring to home ownership, turning “generation rent” into “generation own”.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): When I met the Minister recently, he assured me that Government housing estimates were not a target. Yet within hours of that meeting his own Department informed the Greater Manchester Combined Authority that its housing deal was being scrapped because the new housing estimates were not sufficient. How does the Minister justify that contradictory statement?

Kit Malthouse: I think the hon. Gentleman is confusing two things. He is quite right that the standard assessment of housing need is meant to be a starting point from which councils assess, plus or minus, what they think they can address, subject to constraints and their other duties in the planning system. That, however, is separate from the Government’s housing deal. We are using the money available for those deals to stimulate ambition. Local authorities should deliver more than would otherwise be delivered in their plan and can justify the need for infrastructure on that basis. We have done successful deals, for example with Oxfordshire, and we are having a number of conversations. Critical to that is stimulating and encouraging every part of the country to play its part in building the homes the next generation needs by being ambitious about their targets.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The Minister talks about being ambitious and setting targets. Does he accept the figure, published by the Shelter commission in January, that we need to build 155,000 social homes a year for the next 20 years?

Kit Malthouse: I accept that we need to build a hell of a lot more homes of all types and that is exactly what we are trying to do. We are in the process of creating a situation where everyone who wants to build can build and can seek assistance from the Government to do so, if they are willing to be ambitious—from the private sector to housing associations, councils or anybody who wants to build. We think that this problem is so acute that we cannot be partial about who gets to build the homes.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am sorry that I came into the debate a bit late; I was held up. On encouraging local authorities to build, exactly what help can the Government give local authorities to build social housing? I have had a number of people who are homeless—I have had families—coming to my surgeries desperate for accommodation. The local authorities do not have the resources. How is the Minister going to provide them?

Kit Malthouse: As I hope the hon. Gentleman knows, we lifted the borrowing cap on local councils so they can now borrow to build a generation of new homes. We have opened up the affordable homes programme to councils to bid in for Government money—grant funding—so that they can seek to build social homes. I am more than happy to write to him with details of how his council can access that.

[*Kit Malthouse*]

Turning back to ownership, as I said, I wanted to turn “generation rent” into “generation own”, but we also believe that fairness should not stop once people get the keys. That is why the Secretary of State unveiled a new industry pledge last month to bring an end to onerous lease terms, such as the doubling of ground rents. More than 40 leading developers and freeholders have signed that pledge and I encourage others to follow the lead. We are bringing forward legislation to require developers to belong to a new homes ombudsman to champion the rights of home buyers and to ensure that they get the quality build that they rightly expect. We will soon consult on how this will work so that we can ensure that consumers’ problems are resolved faster and more effectively.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): On behalf of Members on both sides of the House, I welcome what my hon. Friend has said, and I thank the Secretary of State and my hon. Friend for their work on this. Will he or one of his colleagues make a statement as soon as Homes England approves commonhold houses for the Help to Buy scheme, and will he make a statement on when the Land Registry can easily register commonhold associations? At present, there is one development on the way, but it is being blocked because the Land Registry has forgotten how to do it.

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend, in his customary manner, has raised an important but detailed point. I will go away and ascertain what the timetable might be and keep him posted about where things might go next.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Ind): Does the Minister accept that “generation own” is particularly challenging in areas such as South Hams in my constituency? It has the highest property price to earnings ratio in the south-west—11.7—and part of that is driven by second home ownership. Will he touch on what can be done where the impact of second home ownership is particularly high to make this an affordable dream for young families?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Lady raises an issue that, in certain parts of the country—including in my constituency—can have an impact, albeit that I think it is sometimes overstated. Having said that, the Government have taken steps, such as giving councils the power to charge premium council tax on empty homes and second homes, which should help with that issue. In the end, however, in areas such as the hon. Lady’s, most of the problem will be solved by increasing supply. I recently attended a meeting with the Campaign to Protect Rural England down in her part of the world, where I tried to explain to 240 people who were not best pleased at the idea of having a significant number of homes in their area that this was their moral duty to the next generation and that they needed to accept the homes, control them, design them well, and make them fit in and enhance their local communities. We have a growing population and in popular areas where people want to live and from which young people are often driven out, the solution will be to build more homes.

Happily, the picture is also improving for renters. We are cracking down on rogue landlords and from 1 June, the Tenant Fees Act 2019 will come into force, banning

unfair letting fees and capping deposits. These vital steps will protect tenants and save them millions. We will also set out our position shortly on longer-term tenancies, because those in the private rented sector can face a high degree of insecurity. It is time that we put that right. Indeed, landlords could also benefit from more stability. As well as feeling more secure, nothing is more important than people being safe in their homes, so we will also be implementing a new regulatory framework for building safety. It is no small task but it is the debt we owe to those who suffered so terribly from the Grenfell fire, because everyone must be safe and feel safe in their home, no matter where they live.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): The Minister knows that I have residents in New Providence Wharf who are being pressured by Ballymore to pay for the removal and replacement of defective cladding. He has kindly looked at that issue. Will he assure us that the Government will continue to press companies to accept their responsibility and the cost? Can he tell us anything about progress, particularly in New Providence Wharf?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Gentleman has met me to press his constituents’ case. In turn, I have raised the matter face to face with the representative of Ballymore. We continue to put pressure on the industry generally to do its duty to leaseholders and critically, to remediate to ensure that everybody is safe in their homes. However, I am more than happy to write to the hon. Gentleman in the next few days about the progress we are making generally on the issue.

Catherine West: I thank the Minister for taking a further intervention on Grenfell. Can he confirm that every single tenant who was made homeless as a result of the terrible fire in the Grenfell block has been housed?

Kit Malthouse: Sadly, I cannot quite confirm that. We are very close to completing the rehousing of everybody who was involved in the Grenfell Tower fire. At the moment, the numbers remaining are small and the cases are often complex, and we are making significant progress.

I am also mindful of those without a place to call home. When I reflect on what we can do better, I am clear that we must do everything possible to confront rough sleeping and the broader challenges of homelessness. Our cross-Government, £100 million rough sleeping strategy is helping our rough sleeping initiative reach more parts of the country—now more than 75% of local authorities in England. As part of that, we announced £46 million to support people off the streets and into accommodation in 2019-20, because we have already seen how that can work and make a real difference. Recent figures have shown the first fall in the number of people sleeping rough in eight years. However, we should make no mistake: one person sleeping rough is one person too many and we remain more determined than ever to end rough sleeping for good. That means combating homelessness, and our ambitious £1.2 billion package of support will help tackle it in all its forms, giving some of the most vulnerable people in our society the security and dignity they deserve.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): While the Minister is on the subject of homelessness, will he urgently review permitted development, which allows

some homeless families, including those who live in Terminus House in Harlow, to be housed in wholly inappropriate accommodation and bring up their children in a new slum? The permitted development regulations need to be looked at urgently.

Kit Malthouse: We have made a commitment to review the implementation of the permitted development rights policy. However, alongside that, I urge local authorities to use the maximum power available to them through their building regulation powers and other forms of inspection to ensure that the homes people inhabit are suitable. I also urge local authorities that place people in those homes to reassure themselves that they are suitable for occupation. We have often found that people in unsuitable homes are placed there by councils that frankly should know better and should seek higher quality accommodation for their residents.

As I hope I have shown, we are making every effort to get everyone on board to deliver not just more homes but stronger communities. My triple challenge—more, better, faster—is the key to the country's happiness, health and prosperity and the work is starting to pay off. The number of homes built is up, rough sleeping is on the turn, there is greater fairness in the rented sector and more beautiful and innovative places to call home should start to appear. We have every reason to be confident and optimistic as we look forward to our future outside the European Union. A stronger, fairer, more diverse housing market can be the bedrock of our future success—a way to spread opportunity and ensure that no one is left behind. We remain focused on delivering that and fulfilling the basic promise that each generation must make to the next: that their life will be better than ours.

5.54 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I am glad that so many Members are keen to speak in the debate, which has been delayed for too long and is unfortunately too short. It has been almost a year since we had a housing debate in Government time. The Secretary of State told us in December:

"Housing remains the Government's top priority".—[*Official Report*, 10 December 2018; Vol. 651, c. 18.]

It is a pity that he has not made it the top priority in his diary today.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

John Healey: No.

It is good to see the Housing Minister speaking for the Government today. He not only told the House that housing was the Government's chief domestic priority, but told an industry conference in February that

"once we get beyond Brexit, housing will be the Government's priority."

Given the mess that the Government have made of Brexit for more than two years, and given that the Prime Minister is in Europe today begging for an extension just so that we can move on to the next stage of the negotiations, that bodes badly for the Government's future focus on housing. I have to say to the Minister that Brexit is a very feeble alibi for a totally non-Brexit Department with six Ministers and 2,000 civil servants.

I enjoyed the Minister's speech, but the story that he tries to tell is so at odds with the experience of millions of people up and down the country that he and his colleagues risk sounding complacent. They risk sounding as if they just do not get it. They do not get the public's anger and frustrated hopes of a housing market that they feel is rigged against them. They do not get the despair at being one in a million on council housing waiting lists when the number of new homes for social rent built last year was just 6,453. They do not get the lives blighted by bad housing—children growing up in temporary accommodation hostels, renters too scared to ask landlords to do repairs, young couples stripped of the hope of home ownership and prevented from starting a family or putting down roots—and they do not get the fact that a systematically broken housing market demands wholesale change and cannot be fixed without big action from Government.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): Is the current situation not ridiculous? In Hartlepool, for instance, we have in-house poverty. There are people who have lived behind boarded-up windows for more than a year, just because they are scared of raising the issue with the local authority or their landlords.

John Healey: Unfortunately, although there are good landlords and many tenants are satisfied with the homes that they rent, my hon. Friend has described the experience that too many of the country's now 11 million renters face from day to day. After nine years in office, the Government just cannot carry on talking about what they are going to do. What they are doing at the moment simply is not working.

Kevin Hollinrake: The right hon. Gentleman has mentioned nine years, and what we are going to do. Does he not accept that the number of housing starts is roughly 100% higher than it was at the lowest point under a Labour Government in 2009? If he is not sure about that, he need only speak to any brickie, chippy or sparky. They will tell him that they are a lot busier than they were back then.

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman has a very short memory. In 2009 we were in the direct aftermath of a global financial crisis and recession. It was the action that the Government took then that kept house building going and helped to pull the country out of the crisis. More than a decade on, under this Government, the level of house building has still not reached the pre-crisis peak. We have seen a pitiful performance over the past nine years. The public have lost patience with a Government who, nine years on, try to blame their Labour predecessors.

The Government's record is now very clear. The rate of home ownership is lower, with almost 900,000 fewer under-45s owning a home now than in 2010. The level of homelessness is higher: the number of people sleeping rough on our streets has more than doubled since 2010. Private rents are higher, with the average tenant paying £1,900 more than in 2010. The rate of social house building is lower, and in the last two years it has been the lowest since the second world war. Let me say this to the Minister. If the Government had only continued to build homes for social rent at the same rate as Labour did in 2009, there would be 180,000 more of those homes—more than enough to house every family in

[John Healey]

temporary accommodation, every person sleeping rough on our streets, and every resident in every hostel for the homeless.

The Minister said, in response to an intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), “We are very close to completing the rehousing of everybody who was involved in the Grenfell Tower fire”. I have to say that, nearly two years on from that shocking national tragedy, the Government’s action is still on go-slow. He would not give the House the figures, but one in 10 of the residents from the tower and one in three of the residents from the wider estate who were involved in the fire still do not have a permanent new home. Eight in 10 residents of other high-rise blocks across the country that are covered in Grenfell-style cladding have still not had it removed and replaced. Those are residents in 354 high-rise blocks across the country, nearly two years on from the fire.

Kit Malthouse: I want to correct the right hon. Gentleman on the rehousing numbers for Grenfell, not least because I hope he would never seek to use it as a political football. We are putting enormous efforts into rehousing residents. Of the 202 households from Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk that required rehousing, every one has accepted an offer of either high-quality temporary accommodation or permanent accommodation, 196 have moved in, 181 have moved into their permanent home, and 15 remain in temporary accommodation. Six households remain in emergency accommodation—two in hotels, three in serviced apartments, and one living with family or friends. There is a constant and ongoing conversation with those people about their needs and requirements. We are taking this very slowly and sensitively. We cannot compel anyone to do anything. We are working closely with them to try to ensure that they get the homes they need. It is unfair of the right hon. Gentleman to try to make out that we are being dilatory in that effort.

John Healey: The Minister does himself, the Government and the Grenfell survivors a disservice when the story he tries to tell with those figures is so at odds with the experience of the people affected by the fire.

Catherine West: Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is a fundamental imbalance when the Persimmons of this world are gaining all the benefits of being involved in the housing market, while tenants in places such as Grenfell are getting a really rough deal?

John Healey: It is the most obvious sign of a broken market, when house builders are making bumper profits and bumper bonuses building homes that ordinary workers cannot afford to buy. These are the fundamental facts. These are the hard truths about the Conservatives’ record on housing, which Ministers cannot deny or disguise, and which, come the next election, the Conservative party will not be able to dodge.

Given that record over nine years, it is little wonder that, when asked, three in four people say that they believe the country has a housing crisis. They are right, of course. Everybody knows someone who cannot get the home they need or desire. They say that the crisis is getting worse, not better, and they are right. Even many

Conservatives have lost faith in the free market fundamentalism about housing, because it is failing on all fronts. That is why the Conservatives have been losing the argument and have been forced to cede ground to Labour, from legislating to outlaw letting fees, to banning combustible cladding on high-rise blocks and lifting the cap on council borrowing to build new homes.

However, those are baby steps. The biggest roadblock to the radical changes needed to fix the housing crisis for millions of people is the Conservative party itself. It is largely the same ideologically inflexible Conservative culprits who are making the Prime Minister’s life so difficult over Brexit who will not countenance the Government action that is needed to deal with the other big challenges our country faces: social care, falling real wages, deep regional divides and, of course, housing. So after nine years, we must conclude that the Conservatives in government cannot fix the housing crisis, and that it will fall to a Labour Government to do that.

Here is the plan. We will build 1 million genuinely affordable homes over 10 years, the majority of which will be for social rent, with the biggest council house building programme in this country for nearly 40 years. We will reset grants for affordable housing to at least £4 billion a year. We will scrap the Conservatives’ so-called affordable rent and establish a new Labour definition linked to local incomes and not to the market. We will stop the huge haemorrhage of social rented homes by halting the right to buy and ending the Government’s forced conversions to affordable rent.

We will end rough sleeping within five years, with 8,000 new homes available to those with a history of rough sleeping and a £100 million programme for emergency winter accommodation to help to prevent people from dying on our streets. We will legislate so that renters have new rights: to indefinite tenancies; to new minimum standards; to controls on rents; and to tougher enforcement. We will give young people on ordinary incomes the home ownership hope that they deserve, with first-buy homes, with mortgage costs linked to a third of local incomes and with first dibs on new homes in their area.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I am sure this is already on my right hon. Friend’s radar, but disability groups in Bristol are worried about the shortage of accessible homes in the UK. They say that something like 1.8 million households require some sort of adaptation or the addition of access features to their homes, but very few of them get that at the moment. Is it part of the future Labour Government’s plan to build more accessible homes?

John Healey: It is indeed, and if my hon. Friend looks at the big Green Paper plan that Labour has published, “Housing for the Many”, she will see that we talk not only about building more but about building better. We talk about doing what the public sector has often done in the past—namely, building to better standards. We want these to be the highest standards of design, accessibility, energy efficiency and high tech, so that in future, Labour’s affordable homes will become people’s best choice, not their last resort. Finally, we will create a fully fledged new Department for Housing, both to reflect the scale of the crisis and to drive our national new deal on housing. This will be Labour’s long-term

plan for housing that will help to fix our country's housing crisis. Where this Government have failed, a Labour Government will bring in the radical change that so many millions of people now want and need.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. There will now be a three-minute limit, and if anybody would like to drop out, that will help others.

6.7 pm

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): This Minister does get it; he works day and night to ensure that he delivers the homes that the nation needs. He knows that I am a champion of community-led housing, and I was delighted that the Government responded so positively to the campaigning of myself and colleagues for the establishment of the community housing fund. It was first announced in the 2016 Budget with a commitment to invest £300 million over five years, with the money coming from the proceeds of extra stamp duty on second home sales. Money was allocated to 148 local authorities, roughly in proportion to the number of second homes and affordability issues.

I believe that the fund will transform the community-led housing sector. It is expected to deliver 10,000 homes by 2021. However, the fund ends with the end of the current spending period. With more than 3,500 homes now in the pipeline, it is essential that the fund is extended to the next spending review period so that those homes can be delivered. Because of the delay in the spending review, there will now be a significant period of uncertainty for groups. Money must be spent by March 2020, so few bids will come forward from this point on. The spending review will not conclude until the autumn statement, at the earliest, and there could be further delay and indecision following that. So groups, including those in Cornwall, face an invidious choice. Should they continue to work on their projects and hope that funding will come through, or should they wait and potentially stall and collapse?

In the social housing Green Paper, the Government acknowledged that housing associations could deliver more if they were given more time. That is more true for this sector than for any other. To illustrate my point, the Cornwall Community Land Trust, a well-respected enabler of community-led housing, estimates that the discontinuance of the community housing fund could put up to 230 community-led homes in jeopardy.

I am sure we all agree that we need to deliver more genuinely affordable homes for local people in beautiful coastal communities where there are very high house prices, such as those in Cornwall, where it is so attractive for people to buy second homes. We need those affordable homes to sustain communities for generations to come, so I urge the Minister, who I know wants to ensure that my constituents and people all over the country have high-quality homes to live in, to make an urgent statement about the continuity of the much-supported and much-needed community housing fund.

6.10 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Thank you for calling me, Mr Deputy Speaker; it is a wee bit sooner than I had expected to be called, but I am glad to speak for the SNP in this debate. Our record on housing in

Scotland is excellent and far outstrips the record of the Conservatives in England. I am sure there is much the UK Government could learn from what Scotland has done.

Part of the problem with the Conservatives' approach is its ideological underpinning. They insist on the dream of everyone owning their own home, totally undermining the fact that many people can live long, happy and productive lives in social rented housing. For many of my constituents, a social rented house is an aspiration, and they are perfectly happy to live in one. Indeed, my gran lived in social rented housing her entire life and never owned her home.

The Tories' record on housing is one of their failed promises. The UK Government talk big but deliver very little, with flagship manifesto pledges disappearing almost as soon as they are made. House building in England has fallen to its lowest level since the 1920s, while evictions are at a record level, the lead cause of people becoming homeless is the end of a tenancy, and a mere one in five council homes is replaced when it is sold.

Contrast that with Scotland, where we have ended the right to buy for social rented housing, securing social rented housing stock for the future. No longer do houses disappear from the social rented sector and reappear almost instantly in the private rented sector at inflated rents that people cannot afford to pay. We have secured that investment, which has meant a huge amount to many of my constituents and to people right across Scotland.

In England in particular, hundreds of thousands of people are stuck on social housing waiting lists because new stock just is not being built and houses that are sold off are not replaced. All the while, homelessness is up by 50% and rough sleeping has risen for seven consecutive years. I note that the Minister said rough sleeping has fallen recently, but that is on the back of huge spikes.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady talks about the great things happening with housing in Scotland, but what does she make of the fact that the target of delivering 35,000 homes between 2007 and 2016 was missed by 50%? Only 16,000 of the planned 35,000 were delivered.

Alison Thewliss: The Scottish Government's house building record has been excellent. We have a target to build 50,000 new homes during this term of the Scottish Parliament, and houses are being built right across the country. The hon. Gentleman will remember from our time together on the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee how well the Scottish housing sector was spoken about by those who came to give evidence to us. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) should pay no attention to his colleague the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who, as he often does, has his own axe to grind on all this.

It is widely recognised that the Scottish Government are leading on housing policy. Our legislation on secure tenancies and in other areas has given renters in the private rented sector huge security. Ensuring that everyone has a safe, warm and affordable home is central to the Scottish Government's vision of a fairer and more prosperous Scotland. People cannot get on in life if they do not have a secure tenancy, a warm home and a roof over their head.

[Alison Thewliss]

The SNP remains on track to deliver on our target of building 50,000 affordable homes during the lifetime of this Scottish Parliament, which is backed by more than £3 billion of investment in the sector. There were 18,750 new build homes completed across all sectors in the year ending September 2018, an increase of 4%, or 635 homes, on the previous year. The latest statistics show that the Scottish Government have delivered nearly 82,100 affordable homes since 2007, which is significant. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire chunters from a sedentary position, but things are not going nearly as well in England. We are building proportionately more homes, more quickly, and he would do well to listen to us about this.

That is all in the face of the challenges of austerity. Housing associations tell me they are deeply concerned about the Government's social security policies. For example, the roll-out of universal credit has negatively affected both tenants and landlords due to the major increase in rent arrears. I hear that from housing associations in my constituency and across Scotland, and my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) could tell the House how housing debt has soared astronomically and how the Government have not learned the lessons.

A report this month from the Scottish Government shows that in East Lothian, for example, 72% of social housing tenants claiming universal credit are in arrears, compared with 30% of tenants overall—that is happening across England, too—and with a trebling of evictions for non-payment of rent over the year since universal credit was rolled out.

Some 88% of local authorities expect an increase in homelessness as a result of welfare reform over the next two years, and 75% expect that the roll-out of universal credit will increase homelessness. We are doing what we can in Scotland, and we have introduced a full mitigation of the bedroom tax, which people in England still have to pay. Without that, 70,000 individuals would lose, on average, around £650 a year. We also provide additional funding for direct mitigation of welfare reforms, direct support for those on low incomes and advice and other services.

Further, concerns remain on the UK Government's right-to-rent scheme. There is a lack of clarity on what will happen with the scheme, and the Scottish Housing Minister, Kevin Stewart, has been in touch in light of the recent High Court ruling. What is actually going to happen with the right to rent? We need to know for the security and safety of our tenants in Scotland.

We are still waiting on the courts to see whether Serco's lock change policy in Glasgow of August 2018 is unlawful. The policy has led to huge distress among those in the city of Glasgow with insecure immigration status, and we need to know the answer so that those affected have some certainty.

In Scotland, we are also taking a range of actions to bring empty homes back into use. There are many empty homes that could provide people with good housing and a secure future. Since 2010, the Scottish empty homes partnership has been instrumental in bringing more than 2,800 empty homes back into use, each and every one of them hugely valued both by communities that do not want empty homes and by

those now living in them—the homes are no longer going to waste. Empty homes partnership funding is to double from £212,500 in 2018 to over £400,000 in 2021 to bring those empty homes back into productive use and to make homes for people who need them very much.

We have also created an ending homelessness together fund of £50 million over the five years from 2018-19 to support the prevention of homelessness and to drive sustainable change. Scotland has some of the world's strongest rights for homeless people, but we are not resting on our laurels.

We are doing much more to tackle rough sleeping. We have a national objective to eradicate rough sleeping, and we have established a homelessness and rough sleeping action group chaired by Jon Sparkes, the chief executive of Crisis. The group has developed 70 recommendations on the actions required to end rough sleeping and transform the use of temporary accommodation. The Scottish Government accepted those recommendations and are now taking them forward. Jon Sparkes has said he is

“very pleased the Scottish Government has given in principle support to all of the recommendations on ending rough sleeping from the Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Action Group. The members of the action group have gone above and beyond to dedicate themselves to bringing forward the right recommendations that will have the biggest impact on the way people sleeping rough can access and receive services.”

In that light, we have been piloting Housing First. This is hugely important, and it will have a huge impact on reducing homelessness.

The Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), has been to Scotland to hear about what is happening, and she has noted that she is pleased with what Scotland is doing—she said so at Question Time, so I assume she still is.

A recent documentary visited various cities, and the connectedness of services in Scotland—different services speaking to one another and taking action—was well commended, but we do not rest on our laurels. When there are still people sleeping on the streets of Glasgow, we must do more to ensure rough sleeping is ended, and ended soon. The Scottish Government's strong direction of travel is key. We need to prioritise that, but it takes a lot more than warm words and things said in statements and manifesto pledges to make that happen.

Before coming here, I was reflecting on the number of housing developments in my constituency in the past few years. Off the top of my head, new houses have been built for social rent in the Gorbals, Pollokshields, Govanhill, the Toryglen transformational regeneration area, Oatlands, Calton, Bridgeton, Dalmarnock, the city centre, Anderston, Kinning Park and the Laurieston transformational regeneration area. None of them happened by accident. They happened because of the work of community-based housing associations, which strive to develop, build more and house their local communities. That comes on the back of the Scottish Government supporting them in everything they do and ending the right to buy to ensure that their investment is sound and can continue. The UK Government would do well to learn from what has happened on housing in Scotland, because our record is a good one.

6.20 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): The residents of the Witham constituency are concerned about a wide range of housing matters. Ministers might be familiar with some of them, but I want to pick on three examples.

First, the issue of how the five-year land supply is calculated affects communities across the country. In planning applications and appeals, we see developers trying to pick apart the declared pipelines in councils' local plans. To be frank, highly paid consultants and advisers are producing lengthy reports for applications and appeals, and the public struggle to contest them because they do not have the resources. I have seen many cases in my constituency of developers trying to pick apart the council's supply pipeline and go against local community planning and the council's planning objectives. That is not good enough.

We all recognise that the delivery of land and housing can sometimes be beyond councils' framework and mandate. I urge the Government to look again at how much weight is applied to the five-year supply. We must ensure that councils and communities have more protection. Developers think that by ripping apart five-year supply calculations, they can develop almost anywhere. That is a major issue across the board.

Kit Malthouse: I hear what my right hon. Friend is saying. She is making a strong point. I hope she agrees that part of the solution is to encourage neighbourhood plans, particularly in her constituency.

Priti Patel: I thank the Minister for that point. I will come on to that. Like all Members of Parliament, I want to see my communities empowered in planning decision making. In Witham town, there was recently an application for Gimsons—a site at River View in Witham—which is deemed a visually important site and is highly regarded by everyone in the community. The current local plan protects it from development. The draft local plan, which could be two years away from adoption, recommends approximately 40 dwellings, but an application for 78 came along and was granted permission. The residents were appalled that their views were ignored.

I am a great believer in neighbourhood plans and I encourage all my parishes to develop them. We want much more support for community-based planning and neighbourhood plans, particularly with parish councils. I urge the Minister and his team to give more resource to parishes and communities so we can ensure that they are protected from developers, who sometimes come along wanting to rip up the five-year land supply and to challenge councils and communities. Importantly, we must ensure that there are resources and that place-shaping can happen. The Minister has already spoken about that.

My final point is about the ways in which we can support housing and development. The Minister spoke about garden settlements. We have had many conversations and I urge him to ask the Secretary of State to reply to me—we have some outstanding correspondence. There is a huge opportunity for all Departments to work together to ensure we have integrated planning. That means that we have the right infrastructure, including road and rail, health, schools, and public amenities and services. That is a great programme that our Government could take forward. I urge the Minister and his colleagues

across Government to work in an integrated way so we can drive the right kind of local community outcomes on housing and planning.

6.24 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I take the Minister back to my intervention about social housing. Let us go back to 2010. The biggest cut in expenditure that the coalition Government brought in was a 60% cut in social housing capital funding. If we are to build the 300,000 homes that I think both the Government and the Opposition are now committed to building, we shall not get them built unless at least 100,000 or more come from the public sector. Just look at the figures since the war. We have built 300,000 homes a year in this country, although quite a long time ago, but in no year when 300,000 homes were built were fewer than 100,000 built by councils and housing associations—and mostly by councils. That is the reality. The Minister says that the housing revenue account cap has been lifted. That is really welcome and I applaud the Government for that, but that of itself will not get the houses built.

The Minister should not sit back and say, "I sit in my office and I cannot tell councils what to do." It is about not just borrowing the money but being able to fund the borrowing. The Government will have to look at more revenue support for councils and housing associations to get those numbers up. Of course, there will have to be developments such as modern methods of construction, which the Select Committee is examining at present but, in the end, revenue funding is crucial.

I also say to the Minister, in terms of the HRA, the funding does not only go to build new homes; it is vital to make sure that existing homes are properly maintained. In 1997, when the Labour Government came in, there was a £19 billion backlog of disrepair in the social housing sector, which the decent homes programme had to deal with. So councils have that responsibility. They will need extra revenue support to build the homes.

I shall make a couple of points about the private rented sector. There are now more people living in the private rented sector than in the social housing sector. Hopefully, we might reverse that in future by building more social housing. I say three things to the Minister. First, let us have some more tough powers to deal with bad landlords. The Select Committee recommended, in extremis, confiscating the properties of landlords who put the health and safety of tenants at risk. Let us go for that. Secondly, let us give councils more freedom: selective licensing can work. If councils want to do it in their area, they should be free to do so. The Minister reviewing the whole process of selective licensing—I hope that is where we get to—but, in the end, selective licensing works where councils can go into properties proactively and seek out the problems and the problem landlords, and deal with them. Thirdly, the difficulty for councils is that selective licensing needs resources. Since 2010, the funding for private sector housing teams in councils has been cut by 60%, and it is not possible to deal with bad landlords proactively, constructively and properly without more money.

I say to the Minister, therefore, that there is a major financial challenge, both in terms of building social housing and of properly dealing with the problems in the private rented sector.

6.27 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak after my Select Committee Chair; we agree on much, although I am not sure about selective licensing, which is too often a licence to print money for some local authorities. It is also a pleasure to speak with the Housing Minister on the Treasury Bench. I feel, from my short time in Parliament, that he has got at least as good a handle on these issues as anyone I have seen.

We need to build more truly affordable housing, both to rent and to buy. We cannot simply do what Labour would do—put more pressure on an overburdened taxpayer. We must do it in different ways. The best way to do it is to cut out the middlemen or middlewomen; I speak as a middleman who has been involved in the property market for 30 years. There are a couple of simple ways we could do that that are simply too good to miss. The Housing Minister is familiar with some of my ideas on this, particularly on delivering more affordable homes to purchase through the section 106 system.

Every year, we deliver around 25,000 affordable homes through section 106 requirements. They are typically sold to housing associations at 50% of market value. The housing association then rents them out at 80% of market value and puts them on their balance sheet at 100% of market value; nice work if you can get it. Why, instead of doing that, do we not simply sell those properties—or half those properties—to first-time buyers on low incomes, at 50% of market value? That would be in perpetuity and those first-time buyers could pass the properties on to the next person. There is no cost to the taxpayer whatsoever. It is good for them. It is good for the developers, who are dealing direct with their customers. The only people who probably will not be too keen on it are the housing associations, but that is not who we are here for; we are here for real people.

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend has raised this issue with me a number of times. I am keen to promote it with him. Will he meet me to discuss how we might promote it to councils?

Kevin Hollinrake: I certainly will.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I will just say to the Minister, you took 27 minutes or more, and every time you intervene puts another minute on. In fairness, I want to try to get everyone in.

Kevin Hollinrake: This proposal is also good for the community because people are buying those houses rather than renting them, which is very popular locally. To give a local example, in the town of Easingwold where I was born and brought up, 656 homes are being delivered, 279 homes affordable, all for renting, and only eight are two-bedroomed properties for young first-time buyers. That dynamic could be changed, and tens of thousands of homes delivered for first-time buyers on low incomes.

The second way to cut out the middlemen is through the pension system. Currently, residential property cannot be put in a pension. If we change that rule, lots of empty or unconverted space above shops could be changed overnight. We should allow those properties to be put in a pension, as long as—this would be the catch,

but it is a fair one—those properties were made available at a social rent. We would widen the pension system to allow people to buy property to put it into a pension, as long as they let it out at a social rent. That would be good for the owner as a tax break and great for the tenant, and great for the taxpayer because the burden of housing benefit is reduced. Everyone wins, apart from the middleman.

6.31 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I was staggered to hear the Minister's complacency about homelessness, which is wholly misplaced. In my region of the west midlands, which is under a Tory Mayor, homelessness or rough sleeping is up by 333%. Homeless people are dying at the rate of one a fortnight. I want this House to hear, to know and to remember the names of those who have died in the past 15 months alone: Paul Williams, Laura Cairns, Steve, Daniel Hutton, Alain Simmonds, Daniel Clements, Terry Taylor, Jayne Simpson, Michael Hill, Peter Mbugua, Simon Holmes, Linda Grimes, Remigiusz Boczarski, Peter Corker, Joby Sparrey, Julie, Thomas Pulham, Kane Walker and two men whose names are known only to God.

The homeless people I see on the streets of Birmingham often live in medieval conditions. I have met people in subways in their hospital gowns and people with rat bites fighting and fearing sepsis, and yet the homeless people in Britain's second city, in the sixth richest economy on earth, face a health system that is rated inadequate and a mental health service in which the caseload is rising four times faster than funding, and where only 1% of the money promised to the West Midlands combined authority for housing has actually been paid over to build new homes.

That roll of names is a roll call of shame. I hope that in our city, if not elsewhere, we build a permanent memorial, so that we are confronted every day with the names of those who died, the names of those whom we have collectively failed. The best memorial of all, however, would be to end this scandal for good and to sweep the disgrace of homelessness into the history books once more.

6.33 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): On no issue save housing is the chasm more evident between the platitudes we heard from the Dispatch Box and the reality that MPs experience every week in their constituencies. One in seven homes in my borough is overcrowded, and housing conditions are the worst I have seen in 30 years, in particular in the private rented sector. That is why we needed the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018 of my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), to call out those absolutely disgusting and appalling conditions in which families are living every day in my constituency.

As for affordability, for the bottom quartile of homes—that is, the ones that should be most affordable—the average price is more than £500,000 in my constituency. Average monthly rent is over £2,000, and the ratio between house prices and earnings is over 20:1. And yet, because of the way in which the Government implement policies like the benefits cap, the reality is that people simply cannot afford to live in areas where they, their families and their communities have lived for decades. The only remedy is the sort of radical programme that my right hon. Friend the shadow Housing Secretary has set out.

It is possible to make a difference locally. We do not have local elections in my area this year, but for those who do, I will just outline the difference between having a Labour council and a Conservative one. My council was Conservative until 2014. In its last four years, it sold off more than 300 empty council properties because they had become vacant. That included three and four-bedroomed houses, and many two-bedroomed houses and flats. These properties were sold off on the open market, putting them out of reach of families forever and a day. Cynically, that council then took a housing waiting list of over 8,000 families and reduced it to over 1,000, simply by knocking families off the list. In many cases, the council did not even have the courtesy to tell them. That degree of cynicism and that type of social engineering has gone on not just in my borough, but in many boroughs across London and elsewhere—and it is a moral crime, not just bad policy.

I contrast that situation with the position of my council under Labour. This issue is one of the reasons that Labour was elected in Hammersmith and Fulham, and was then re-elected with a landslide last year. Labour-run Hammersmith and Fulham Council stated this month that it

“has recently secured more than 1,600 genuinely affordable homes in the borough at zero cost to taxpayers after negotiating a series of deals with developers.”

That is the difference that Labour makes in local government, and I believe that in national Government—with this sort of programme of housebuilding, and the crackdown on poor landlords and poor conditions—we can actually tackle this crisis. It is not just that this Government are complacent; as my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) said, they simply do not care to solve the housing crisis in this country.

6.36 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Land Registry figures estimate that 19% of property sales in my constituency in 2017 involved leasehold homes. That is nearly one in five homebuyers who are experiencing the injustices of the leasehold process. I have received 54 responses to a consultation that I launched on this matter, and there was an overwhelming sense of injustice and frustration with the leasehold process, in line with the findings of the Select Committee. Constituents made comments such as:

“I feel stuck in a loop”,

and said that they felt that they were “being held hostage”. Others said:

“I’ll have nothing to leave for my children”.

One of the most common situations I have heard about is when homeowners wish to move home in order to downsize before retirement, but no company will offer a mortgage on the property because the lease is not long enough. Those people either have to find someone to buy the property cash in hand, or extend the lease. But extending the lease costs at least £10,000 and is frankly not an option for many of my constituents, who want to use that money to live on for the rest of their retirement.

The Minister has stated many times that at least there is choice in the property market for those who may not wish to buy freehold, but the evidence collected by the Select Committee and the heartfelt responses I have received suggest that this so-called choice is anything but.

It is not a choice if there is a lack of information about what leasehold means, and 36% of the responses to my survey indicated that people were unaware of what leasehold meant at the point of sale. It is not a choice when homebuyers are not told that the property is leasehold until the very day that they are signing for their new home, which is what three of my constituents told me had happened to them. It was also not a choice for 13 of my constituents who told me that, after saving up and wishing to buy the freehold, and paying numerous administrative fees—in the hundreds of pounds—the freeholder simply said that they were not willing to sell at that point. It is not a choice for those families.

Another injustice is that of leases being sold by the freeholder to third-party companies, without any consultation, correspondence or notice given to the leaseholder. Where is the accountability? My constituents are telling me of their increased anxiety at the fact that their property does not “feel like their own”, and saying that “outside people control their destiny”.

Does the Minister agree that this is not a healthy situation for any family to go through? This is the home that people have worked for, saved for and are paying for. I hope that she understands that this is not just a case of a few people feeling a little disgruntled at the system. I hope that she will really take into consideration the well-researched Select Committee recommendations, and specifically consider an investigation into the widespread mis-selling of leases.

6.39 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I urge everybody here to have as the backdrop to every single decision we make the emergent climate change emergency that our country and our world face. In the short time available, I will make a plea to the Minister to look specifically at modular homes, which offer an environmental and energy-efficient solution. The Labour Front-Bench team has committed to build 1 million affordable homes, and we should make sure that we build them in a way that does not harm our environment any more than it has already been harmed.

Because of its affordability and its green footprint, I think the future should be modular. In my constituency, I have had the pleasure of watching modular social housing coming up just outside my office. They are some of the most energy-efficient homes in the country. Not only are they providing people with a beautiful place to live, but they are helping them save money.

As I am sure the Minister is aware, Hull is the caravan building capital of the country. We have fantastic skills in my constituency, with an industrial base and knowledge that have developed over generations. I urge the Minister to look seriously at the businesses in Hull and to give them a secure funding stream and stability, so that these modular building companies have the capacity to develop and invest. These are uncertain times and there is uncertainty for business investment, but having a promise from the Government that they see modular homes as the way forward and are willing to invest in innovation would give those businesses the security they need.

Finally, the Minister or anyone else is always welcome to come and see the beautiful modular social homes in my constituency, because I really think we need to look at them again if we are serious about protecting our planet.

6.41 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The Minister spoke of the difficulty of quantifying Government targets for different types of housing. This is what can be quantified: the 1.25 million people on the waiting list for social housing, the 123,000 children living in temporary accommodation, and the fact that more than 99% of homes to rent in the private sector in Lambeth and Southwark have rent that is above the local housing allowance cap.

This Government are failing, as the coalition did before them, by cutting the subsidy for new social housing, redefining affordable housing to make a mockery of the word “affordable”, penalising residents with the bedroom tax, and lining the pockets of shoddy developers such as Persimmon and unscrupulous private sector landlords. The Government are also presiding over the disastrous relaxation of the rules on permitted development rights. In the time left available to me, it is this policy that I will focus on.

The expansion of permitted development rights is delivering poor quality homes in former office buildings up and down the country, resulting in children playing in industrial estate car parks, poor fire safety standards, and homes that are not homes but essentially hotels by the back door that are let out through Airbnb and other platforms for short-term lets. Most shockingly, having introduced this major planning reform, the Government have undertaken no evaluation of its impact and propose further expansions that would enable developers to demolish and rebuild office buildings without planning permission.

This policy is removing quality control and democratic accountability from housing delivery. Councils and communities have no say, and the developers who profit from these developments make no contribution to local community needs or the delivery of genuinely affordable housing. In many areas, the expansion of permitted development rights is delivering the slums of tomorrow and the fire safety horrors of tomorrow. This is happening on the Minister's watch.

I therefore urge the Minister to do one small practical thing: to halt the expansion of permitted development rights while a full evaluation of its impact is undertaken, and to restore housing delivery to the full democratic control of local authority planning departments, which can decide where their communities need new housing, say where it should be built, and secure affordable housing contributions and funding for community facilities, so that we build not the slums of tomorrow but the high-quality, sustainable, affordable communities that this country so desperately needs.

6.44 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I am sure we all welcome debating a subject other than Brexit. If I was to use the issues that constituents come to see me about in my surgery as a guide to what else we should be talking about, housing would come at the top of the list every time. From the parent facing eviction from their private tenancy with no permanent housing options on the table, to the tenant coming back to me for the fifth time because the damp still has not been fixed, to the young couple whose kids have to share a box room totally unsuitable for them, it is very clear that we do not have enough housing at the right prices or of the right tenure.

On a positive note, my local council, Chester West and Cheshire Council, is now building council housing, the first for nearly 40 years. I am delighted about that, but we still have less council housing than we had a couple of years ago, due to a huge increase in right-to-buy applications. Who can blame people for wanting to take advantage of 70% discounts? The policy, however, is short-term in the extreme. It is, of course, the Government's stated aim that every council property sold under the right to buy should be replaced, but the reality is that, rather than one-for-one replacements, it is more like one new property for every four sold. The situation is clearly unsustainable.

There needs to be a wholesale change in the culture of and approach taken by developers. There seems to be general agreement across the political spectrum that we need to build more homes, but those good intentions are at risk of failing because there is an over-reliance on the market to deliver those aims. To date, the private sector has shown itself incapable of working in a way that chimes with the needs of the country. To put it mildly, I remain to be persuaded about the altruism of the house building industry; one need only look at the £100 million Persimmon bonus to see where its priorities lie. Plc house builders that help themselves to more than £8 billion of taxpayers' money through the Help to Buy scheme show their true colours when they rip off their own customers through “fleecehold”. They have a lot to answer for.

The reliance on a small group of developers has been a very poor deal for the taxpayer, and that is the backdrop against which the leasehold scandal emerged. I look forward to the Government's response to the excellent report by the Select Committee on Housing, Communities and Local Government. I hope concrete action will be taken soon.

Many in the industry have signed a pledge to move away from onerous leases, but to be frank I think that has happened only because there has been so much bad publicity against the people guilty of this wholesale scam over the years. The pledge also seems hollow to those of my constituents who have been notified in the past couple of weeks that their freehold has changed hands again, from one opaque company based in Guernsey to another opaque company based in Guernsey. The industry pledge intends to make the whole process “cheaper, easier and more transparent”,

but actions such as those in my constituency will make it more expensive, more difficult and less transparent for people to buy out their freehold. The only way these rapacious people will be brought to order is through changes to the law, and the sooner the Government get on to that, the better.

The biggest developers in the country have not just ripped off millions of homeowners; they have ripped off all of us. We should not rely on them to solve the crisis we face. The housing market is broken and needs radical intervention, and it certainly needs a Labour Government.

6.47 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I was delighted to hear the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). She spoke about the damage that right to buy caused in Scotland, so I will not focus on that in my short speech. Instead, I will focus on investment in new socially rented stock.

After years of under-investment in social house building, work is now under way to deliver 50,000 affordable homes in Scotland by 2021. People around the east end can now see the tangible results of that investment—whether on Cranhill's Bellrock Street, Easterhouse's Auchinlea Road or Shettleston's Wellshot Road—because work is under way to invest in new housing, which will go some way towards meeting the demand we face.

That 50,000 target, though, should only be a starting point. I have been very clear with the Housing Minister, Kevin Stewart, that we need to keep up our investment in new build social housing. I was encouraged to hear him say at a recent Tollcross Housing Association event that, for so long as associations can keep up the house building, he will be happy to sign the cheques.

The reality, however, is that we will quickly run out of space to build those new properties, which is why we must also protect and preserve our existing tenement stock housing. As the MP for Glasgow East, I am acutely aware that about one third of my housing stock is made of tenement properties. A quick drive along Tollcross Road, Baillieston Main Street or Westmuir Street will demonstrate that. The fact is that Glasgow's tenements have become a rich part of the city's architectural heritage, and my local housing associations genuinely understand the importance of maintaining them to meet the demands of their waiting lists. They want to invest in and preserve those buildings for generations to come, but that comes at great cost and there is a role for the British Government to assist with that.

This morning I suggested to the Chancellor of the Exchequer that VAT could be reduced on tenement repair work. Currently, an association wishing to undertake costly works to preserve tenement properties will have a 20% VAT charge slapped on to the invoice. If the Chancellor was willing to look sympathetically at a reduction in VAT for that type of work, it would allow associations to invest in tenement stock and simultaneously provide a fiscal stimulus for the construction industry.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): In Glasgow, the city council, Scottish Canals and housing associations are working together to promote self-build, not least along the banks of the Forth and Clyde canal. This is affordable self-build, which is another way of helping to stimulate investment in the local economy, as well as providing suitable housing.

David Linden: Absolutely. I am conscious of the constraints on time, so I will just conclude by saying that Glasgow is a city bursting with ideas about how we can progress housing and meet the challenges head-on. I urge my hon. Friend to take that forward, and I urge the Minister, in summing up, to touch on the point about reducing VAT, particularly on tenement properties.

6.50 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): On average, house prices are 10 times wages, and we know this skews our local economy but also drives the housing poverty that is so damaging to my city of York. The Lib Dem-Tory council has presided over this housing failure, with a fall in social housing when there is such desperate need, while at the same time developers have made their millions building luxury apartments that our city just does not need. City of York Council should be getting

to grips with what is happening in housing, but it has failed, and I am glad the Government have rejected its local plan.

Just last Monday, the council failed again when it signed off a 72 acre brownfield site for over 2,000 luxury apartments that our city does not need. I would juxtapose that with the 11 homeless people who lost their lives in our city last year, and with the people I see in my surgeries who are living in box bedrooms—whole families are in that situation—with adults and children sleeping on sofas. That is the reality of York, as so many people in housing poverty know. Not only that, but the council has handed over its influence over the future of that site, through a commercial agreement, while contributing £35 million to the site. This must be stopped and reviewed. Residents are rightly angry. They are being driven into deeper housing poverty, while the elite moves in on their space. They are being driven out of their city, and they are being ignored. While people invest in their assets and purchase their commuter and second homes, my local families are cooped up in unsuitable, cramped and damp housing. York, which calls itself a human rights city, is the most inequitable city outside London, and this latest development will simply make it worse.

The Lib Dem-Tory council's plan just supports corporate greed over local need, and it must be changed. That will start with a Labour council, which will build the housing that our city desperately needs. It will put right the local economy by ensuring that we have the skills our city needs. We need 500 people in the NHS, and there are also those needed in the care workforce, but they cannot afford to live in our city. We will relive the dream that Joseph Rowntree planted in our city as he built the houses fit for heroes and the housing developments that set the agenda for the garden villages and sustainable green homes that will ensure people across our city can live in and enjoy our city. Labour will make the difference in York: it is time for change.

6.53 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): This has been a short but good debate—quality not quantity. We have heard from Members across the country from the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) to the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). To pick out a few, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) spoke with great authority, as always, about the need for real revenue funding and for a substantial change in the private rented sector. The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) was absolutely right that we should look at locked-in discounts for first-time buyers. He will be pleased to hear that this is indeed a Labour policy, and if he votes Labour at the next election, his idea may well come to fruition. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) talked about the need to tackle climate change through housing and how important the role of modular housing is.

The Government are not just failing to address the housing crisis; they are actively making it worse. I do not know whether it is incompetence, mismanagement, complacency or deliberate policy, but this Government are wilfully exacerbating the housing crisis. Whether it is homelessness, private renting, leasehold, home ownership or fire safety, the story is always the same: things are getting worse, not better. The problems can be traced to

[Sarah Jones]

bad Government policies. In government, Labour managed to successfully tackle these issues. As a Government in waiting, Labour is the party with the solutions to these problems.

Things are getting worse, not better. Rough sleeping has doubled. We heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) that rough sleeping has gone up by 333% and that someone is dying every fortnight. Only 6,500 homes for social rent were built last year. Home ownership is supposed to be the thing the Conservative party cares about, but nearly 1 million young people are unable to access it. My hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) was absolutely right to talk about the overwhelming sense of injustice felt by leaseholders.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) talked eloquently about the plight of permitted development—something the Government want to increase. The problems can be traced right back to the Government. Ministers have stretched the term “affordable housing” to breaking point, to include homes that are let at up to 80% of market rents. We are building the wrong homes, as my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) said.

The Government have repeatedly ignored fire safety advice that sprinklers are essential. They have also ignored advice following the Lakanal House and Grenfell Tower fires and refused to intervene in other blocks with aluminium composite material cladding. We have 40,000 people still trapped in deadly buildings. We have also lost more than 170,000 affordable council homes through poorly designed policies.

In government, Labour managed to successfully tackle these issues. As a Government in waiting, Labour is the party with the answers to solve these problems and the ability to deliver the change we need. It is the Government's job to solve the housing crisis, and it is the Government's shame that they have failed. This country has a right to expect better, which it will get under a Labour Government.

6.56 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): This has been a really excellent debate. I have this wonderful speech here, which is obviously way too long, so we are not going to worry about that. The contributions made by so many people in the House make it clear why housing is the No. 1 domestic priority for the Government. We all want Brexit done, so please vote for the deal, and then we can get on with dealing with this stuff.

The important thing to me is talking about community land trusts, as my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) did, and sorting out what we are going to do in the private rented sector, with the changes to electrical standards and carbon monoxide—

John Healey: We were speaking about that three years ago.

Mrs Wheeler: That is why it is important that it is coming through. The important thing here is that the guidance is coming through now, and there has been great respect for that, which I am very pleased about.

I am appalled at the way in which issues are turned into political footballs. There is no stronger Department in trying to deal with such issues one by one, in a logical way, so that nobody ends up sleeping rough or dying on our streets. The important thing is that the Government totally get this. We are spending an awful lot of money to change things around, because that is what is important. People out there realise that changes are being made in the private rented sector, changes are being made for tenants, and changes are being made to professionalise the professional services—the letting agents and managing agents. Leasehold changes are on the way. There are all sorts of things in our country that are wrong; they need to change, and it is this Government who are going to change them.

I am delighted that our ministerial team is on the case, looking at how many houses we need to build in the year; looking at giving councils the freedoms to build more council houses; encouraging social housing to grow; encouraging first-time buyers; encouraging veterans to get on the housing ladder once they leave the armed forces; making sure that veterans are not sleeping rough and that they get the help they need; and looking after people in Scotland, where there are innovative ideas—I looked at rough sleeping issues and Housing First in Glasgow. All these ideas are very important to the Government; no one should be left under any illusion about the fact that only the Government are making the changes that will get these things right.

People's lives are at risk. People's happiness is at risk. We want to make sure that fairness is sorted out for the future. I pay huge tribute to the teams of civil servants that are going round the country making sure that people get the help they need. In Medway and Cornwall, there has been a 40% reduction in rough sleepers. These are huge changes, and I am very proud of what the Government are doing.

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Business without Debate

SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL

Ordered,

That, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 10, there shall be no sittings in Westminster Hall in the week commencing Monday 15 April.—(Mike Freer.)

Mental Health Support: Young People

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Freer.)

7 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I applied for this debate because of the cases of young people struggling to receive mental health support in my constituency of High Peak and in the county of Derbyshire. However, since last week, when the debate was announced, hundreds of parents, support workers, teachers and young people themselves have contacted me from across the country with heartbreaking stories of young people suffering with little or no support.

Their families suffer, too: like the mum of an 11-year-old boy in my constituency who has been severely mentally ill since last September. He suffers from panic attacks and his mum says he hardly eats or sleeps. He is unable to leave the house. He is very depressed and anxious all the time, and has been destructive and suicidal on many occasions. Mental health services will not support him, in spite of a referral from the GP, because they will not do home visits for a boy who is too ill to leave the house.

There is the six-year-old who is at risk of being excluded from school due to his behaviour. He has suspected attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or autistic spectrum disorder, but 18 months after referral the family are still waiting. Without a diagnosis, he can get neither the health nor education support he so desperately needs. His mum is trying online courses in child behavioural psychology, but she cannot help him without a diagnosis to access the medication and/or therapy he needs. The stories are similar from around the country and I thank all the people who have contacted me on this issue.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): Does my hon. Friend agree that young people with autism who have mental health problems and their families have particular challenges in accessing appropriate services? Does she agree that Ministers need to look specifically at the needs of young people with autism who also have mental health problems? My experience in my constituency is that access to emergency support when there is a real crisis is often non-existent or inappropriate. There is then the question of transition for young people from being a teenager to being an adult. Does she agree that that needs a distinct approach?

Ruth George: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. There are so many areas of children's mental health where support is needed, but with ASD a diagnosis is needed as well, which can delay the support they so desperately need.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. I did seek her permission to do so beforehand. I congratulate her on bringing this issue to the House today for an Adjournment debate. It is a critical issue and we are all very aware of it. Does she agree that the world young people face today, in which they have little privacy and so much exposure, is just so difficult? There is no place to go to get out of the reach of bullies or social media. This pressure sees so many young people struggling with self-esteem and self-worth. There must be more early intervention support for these

young people to provide affirmation and tools for parents to help at an early stage and not let self-harming or suicidal thoughts begin.

Ruth George: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I will come on to some of the additional stresses that young people are facing at the moment.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I met the Teenage Cancer Trust, which talked about young cancer victims who have mental health problems. They, too, do not have enough support, so I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate.

Ruth George: I agree.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab) *rose*—

Ruth George: I have personal family experience of this, as does my right hon. Friend.

Mark Tami: Does my hon. Friend agree that with cancer, we cannot treat just the physical illness? We need to treat the mental side of dealing with it. That needs to be part and parcel of treatment and not just some sort of add-on that people seek afterwards.

Ruth George: I absolutely agree with both my right hon. Friend and my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney). I know that even long after the physical experience of cancer has left young people, children and adults, the mental scars can linger, particularly for families.

The number of children and young people overall with a mental health disorder has increased to nearly one in eight, according to the children and young people prevalence survey in November. That is around 1.25 million young people, yet only one in four young people with a mental disorder is seen by a mental health specialist. Over 400,000 children and young people are not getting any professional help at all in England—that is almost 1,000 young people and their families suffering in every one of our constituencies. The lack of support leads to their condition worsening.

In 2017, 46.8% of young people with a mental health disorder had self-harmed or attempted suicide at some point, and over a quarter of 11 to 16-year-olds. The threshold to access child and adolescent mental health services has become so high that local teachers in my constituency are asked to provide evidence that a child has sought to take their life before a referral will be accepted. It is not enough to be told that they have tried to take their own life—CAMHS wants evidence, and these are schools with children up to the age of 16. Even when young people are accepted, the waiting time for treatment from CAMHS in my constituency is over 12 months, and sometimes 18 months. That is not unusual. It is no wonder that children are driven to more and more desperate measures just to get heard.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The hon. Lady is making some powerful points in a powerful speech. I speak as the father of four children between the ages of 22 and 11. Any family in the modern era has to face these problems. Does she agree that parents need more support to understand these issues and to learn how to deal with them more effectively to try to help our children?

Ruth George: As a parent of four children aged between nine and 27, I agree that there are strains from modern life, but when parents need support, they find it far too difficult to access.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The waiting times in York are also horrendous. The funding, which has, in fact, gone down in the last year, is just £40 per child. Is not that so insufficient to match need?

Ruth George: Absolutely. It will not surprise my hon. Friend to hear that I will come to the issue of funding later, but that is a chronically low figure for the number of young people and children who are suffering.

The number of suicides of teenagers has risen by two thirds since 2010. I pay tribute to my constituent, who says that she is too scared to leave her 14-year-old daughter alone anymore. Having seen her daughter try to take her own life using paracetamol, my constituent is campaigning for the sale of paracetamol to under 16-year-olds to be banned. I ask the Minister to look into that.

We should do what we can to prevent access to the means for young people to take their own lives, but even more, we should look at stemming the reasons why they are driven to such desperation and making sure that treatment can reach them far earlier. Our children are suffering under the weight of demands at the same time as the people who have always been there to support them are disappearing.

Young people suffer from exam pressure, driven by school league tables. An 11-year-old in my constituency, who had always been perfectly happy and is incredibly intelligent, had a panic attack before his standard assessment tests. He said that the children knew that if they did not do well in their exams, their small village school could be driven to close through a lack of parents applying for places. Pressures on children aged 10 and 11 are just too much. My secondary schools say that children come to them in year 7 bearing such a weight of emotional stress that it is almost impossible to support.

There are higher numbers of children with special needs at our schools and less support for them as school cuts bite. There are exclusions from schools, with thousands of children taken off the roll. With fewer support staff in our schools, there is more opportunity for bullying. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, social media enables the continuation of that bullying throughout the day and the night.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): My hon. Friend will be aware of the work that I have been doing—indeed, with the Minister—on social media and the need for more research into it to gain understanding. She mentioned the data on increased self-harm and suicide. Another correlation is that, in the past decade, social media use has rocketed and that is having an impact on our young people. The Government and the devolved Administrations need to conduct more research on the impact of social media so that we can look at early intervention and, where possible, prevention, to support young people who are addicted to social media platforms.

Ruth George: Absolutely. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his work on the matter. I hope that the Government will take up the recommendations in the

report that the all-party group on social media and young people's mental health and wellbeing, which he chairs, has produced.

We are seeing not just online but physical bullying, and rising violent crime, especially among young people. I spoke to teenagers at a college yesterday who told me that they are actually scared of the gangs of 13 and 14-year-olds who roam the streets in my area. Of course, young people are more likely to be victims of violent crime than anyone else.

Even in quiet rural areas such as mine, county lines gangs put pressure on more and more teenagers to become involved in crime. When I visited my local youth centre and talked to teenagers there, they said that, for one night a week, it is the one place they can go to escape the gangs and their peers who put pressure on them to get involved in drugs, aged just 13 and 14.

Jim Shannon: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ruth George: I really need to make progress—I am sorry.

At the same time, more parents are working longer hours and spending more time travelling to work. We have the longest commuting times in Europe. Those parents have less time to spend with their children. There are more demands for flexibility from employers, especially at weekends, in the evenings and in school holidays—the times that parents most need to spend with their children.

There are new demands from the state for parents to be in full-time work, whether to access free childcare places from age three or through the demands of universal credit from age 12. At the same time as parents are working harder and longer, there is an increase in child and family poverty. Increasing numbers of parents face money worries and debt and have to visit food banks—strains that their children all too often see.

Alongside all those pressures on families and our young people, the number of professionals who are there to support them is reducing. Class sizes in schools are increasing and there are fewer teaching assistants, so school staff have less time for each child and growing pressures to prove academic achievement. Our schools do a fantastic job and I pay tribute to the staff who go above and beyond to support the young people in their care, but they cannot help with the sustained, one-to-one counselling and professional support that is so often needed. On top of that, child and adolescent mental health services have huge waiting lists and are still underfunded.

Our clinical commissioning groups spend 14% of their budget on mental health, but just 0.9% on children's mental health. Even when the Government put additional funding into CCGs, it was not ring-fenced and, too often, not spent. Although an extra £250 million a year was allocated to CAMHS, in the first year only 36% of CCGs increased their spending by as much as that allocation. In the following year, 2016-17, only half of them did so, and last year, 2017-18, the spending stayed roughly the same. In 2018-19, it increased by just £50 million. Only a small fraction of the £1.25 billion that the Government had invested in children's mental health services and CAMHS actually reached the front line.

CCGs are under huge pressures. Derbyshire's CCGs have had to cut their spending by £51 million this year, and, despite the promised extra £20 billion for the NHS, they face further spending cuts of £270 million over the next four years. Mental health services are on the target list. The number of psychiatrists working in CAMHS at all levels fell by 3.7% between 2011 and 2018, although the number of referrals has almost doubled, as has the number of children admitted to A&E with mental health problems. At the same time, councils are cutting their spending.

School nurses spend a great deal of time supporting families and young people on the CAMHS waiting list who are going through the agonising wait of 12 to 18 months while experiencing suicidal thoughts, but they too are being subjected to cuts because of cuts in public health spending. We are losing half our school nurses in Derbyshire. As for "early help" support for families, 200 staff are being made redundant, and there is nowhere for families to turn for support. At all levels, support services are being underfunded. The Government have made a commitment to providing more counsellors in schools, which is often the right place for them, as children may need access to support. However, the target of extra provision in just a quarter of schools in five years' time is not good enough. Our children are being failed, and their families are being failed.

Investment in mental health support for young people would actually save the Government money—not just in the health service, which would be able to nip mental health problems in the bud, but in the education, social services and criminal justice sectors. Our young people are crying out for help. The Government have some laudable aims in the 10-year plan, but they have not enough concrete plans to implement those aims, to fund CCGs to deliver them, or to invest in the training of the staff who will be on the front line.

The huge number of people who have contacted Parliament, and me personally, about this debate shows how much concern exists out there about the terrible cases of young people who are driven past the point of despair and the families whose lives are turned upside down. This is a cry for help on behalf of all of them. I ask the Minister please to listen, and to tell us how the Government will act.

7.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): I thank the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) for her speech. She spoke with characteristic passion and sincerity about an important matter that concerns many Members, which is why so many are here tonight. I have personally engaged with a number of them on these issues.

Let me say at the outset that I am not complacent about the challenges that confront us when it comes to children's mental health. It is true that many young people find it difficult to obtain help when they need it. I readily acknowledge that we face the challenge of decades of underfunding of treatment for mental ill health, in addition to the societal challenges that have made the problem more acute. It is clearly a priority for the Government, but unfortunately we cannot solve it with just a click of the fingers. We need to reinvest in the workforce if we are to deliver the services that are needed.

However, I hope to give the hon. Lady some reassurance about the direction of travel. I hope to reassure her that we will tackle the most acute needs while at the same time investing in the upfront prevention which, as she rightly pointed out, will save the Government money—and not only in the NHS, where there will be less demand for acute mental health services. She is right to highlight the savings that could be made in the criminal justice system. We must achieve the earliest of early interventions if we are really to make a difference, and not just for those people who need support, but for society, and that lies at the heart of my approach.

Mark Tami: Does the Minister not realise that young people actually have to try to kill themselves before they become a priority? Surely that is wrong. Early intervention is the key and we must not wait until young people reach that terrible stage before intervening.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will be reassured to hear that I do not think that is good enough. I have heard anecdotal evidence that that has been said to a number of people. Clearly it is a matter of clinical judgment when people are referred to mental health services; we just need to ensure that happens. If he has specific examples, I would be happy to investigate them.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Mental health is raised with me time and again by my constituents, both young people and parents, in Clackmannanshire and in Perth and Kinross. Can my hon. Friend explain to the House how we can help champion the 111 crisis line, which is available UK-wide? It can be pre-emptive, because a young person can dial it on their mobile phone and get immediate support. Sometimes that pressure release valve is exactly what is needed.

Jackie Doyle-Price: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Just as we have the 999 service for physical health emergencies, we need the same provision for mental health emergencies, and that is what we intend to deliver through the 111 service. That is a clear ambition articulated in the forward plan.

Rachael Maskell: The Minister said that this is a matter of clinical judgment, but clinicians are unable to make those choices if they lack the necessary staff and resources.

Jackie Doyle-Price: There will be cases when it comes down to a clinical decision on whether a referral to a mental health professional is needed. However, we need to ensure that mental wellbeing is embedded throughout our health services.

Ruth George: In my area CAMHS are supposed to accept referrals from some of the young people on level 2—that indicates their level of need—and all of the young people on levels 3 and 4. As it is, they do not have time to accept even those children on level 4, which has the highest priority. That is a result of resources, not clinical judgment.

Jackie Doyle-Price: That is not borne out by the figures from the Derby and Derbyshire clinical commissioning group, which show that 31% of children

[Jackie Doyle-Price]

and young people with mental health needs were seen by NHS-funded mental health services. I come back to the point that it is not acceptable for children to be told that they are not yet ill enough to receive treatment, which is why we are investing in more provision. We expect at least an additional 345,000 children and young people aged 16 to 25 to be able to access more direct support.

Mr Ivan Lewis: I have to say to the Minister that in this area there is a massive gap between the rhetoric and the reality on the frontline. I urge her to reconsider the whole concept of ring-fencing resources. When we have Cinderella services such as CAMHS, unless the Government decide to ring-fence that funding and insist that local commissioners give it to frontline services, they will never achieve the changes they are seeking.

Jackie Doyle-Price: In the past we have treated ring fences as a ceiling and set CCGs the clear objective that they need to increase investment in CAMHS by more than what we have been giving them. [Interruption.] However, acknowledging the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), we will look at what more control we can give, and NHS England is keeping a very close eye on how that money is being spent. As I said at the outset, I am not complacent about the challenges we face. I have to say that we are on it. Direction of travel is one thing, but we have to make sure that we are managing expectations and that we can deliver the services that people expect. That includes investment in the workforce to deliver on very clear expectations.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): My hon. Friend is being characteristically generous in giving way. I would like to give her some feedback from Cornwall, where our CCG is spending more money on mental health services and I am seeing those services grow. Does she agree, however, that simple organisational changes can sometimes help? I have two universities in my constituency, Exeter and Falmouth. When young people leave home for the first time and arrive at university, it can take months for the NHS to get their records and services sorted out, but young people with existing poor mental health conditions need those services to be in place when they arrive.

Jackie Doyle-Price: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Transition is clearly an area that we need to address, and she is right to highlight the importance of this in universities.

The hon. Member for High Peak made a number of points in her speech. She referred to people with ADHD and ASD, and I could not agree with her more that there is a real issue with the failure to diagnose people with those conditions early enough. We know that those people are more likely to suffer from mental ill health, so early diagnosis is absolutely crucial if we are to equip those young people with the tools to look after themselves. I am pleased that that has been a target in the forward plan that we will roll out. The hon. Lady also rightly highlighted the issues surrounding county lines and knife crime, and there is no doubt that the increased incidence of trauma in communities will bring with it more demand for mental health services. That is something that we are very much tackling as part of the Prime Minister's summit, which took place just last week.

I have been very pleased to work with the hon. Member for Ogmire (Chris Elmore) on this, and I welcome his all-party parliamentary group's report on the impact of social media. The impact of social media brings with it a whole new set of pressures on children's and young people's mental health. It brings greater intensity to relationships, for example. We think our children are safe in their bedrooms, but they are not necessarily, and we need to be vigilant about how we hold social media and internet providers accountable for the content that they host on their sites.

Jim Shannon: The Childline charity has reported a 30% increase in referrals in the past year. That is an indication of the pressure being put on our children. Has the Minister had an opportunity to speak to Childline?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I have not had that opportunity yet, but I am sure I will.

I could say an awful lot more, but I do not have much time remaining. It is clear from hon. Members' contributions to the debate that we all recognise that this is perhaps one of the biggest challenges facing our young people right now. It is heartening to see that so many people are really seizing those challenges, whether by demanding better services or by asking for changes to Government policy to deal with some of the threats. That is all very welcome, and I have no doubt that all Members will continue to challenge me on this important issue.

Question put and agreed to.

7.28 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 9 April 2019

[MR CLIVE BETTS *in the Chair*]

Devolution of Welfare

9.30 am

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered devolution of welfare.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating this debate and to my colleagues who are here to participate. We are of course meant to be in our constituencies this week, but events have overtaken us, so I am pleased that we are able to use our time in Westminster to discuss an issue that affects many of the people whom we represent. Indeed, the devolution of welfare is set to impact more than 1 million people in Scotland. That is why it is so important that the process is got right.

I want to make it crystal clear that I enthusiastically support the devolution of the welfare powers to the Scottish Parliament. The Scotland Act 2016 fulfilled a promise made by the United Kingdom Government—the so-called vow—that voting to remain part of the United Kingdom, as Scots did so overwhelmingly in 2014, would not mean an end to devolution. The Conservative Government established the cross-party Smith commission to look at what should be devolved. The Conservative Government then passed the 2016 Act, which devolved a significant tranche of welfare powers, and my Scottish Conservative colleagues in Holyrood voted for the Bill that has paved the way for Scottish Ministers to take over the powers.

No one can question this Government's or the Conservative party's commitment to this process. Devolution of welfare allows the Scottish Parliament to try different approaches, to learn from and build on experiences in other parts of the United Kingdom and to deliver welfare more locally in a way that is more tailored to Scottish needs. That is a good thing.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman refers to how things work in other parts of the United Kingdom. The Northern Ireland Assembly is not functioning at the moment as it should be, but when it was, we had a very good relationship with the Conservative party and Government that enabled us to bring in some changes in relation to the Department for Work and Pensions that helped us in Northern Ireland. That involved taking some money out of our block grant. It meant that we were able to help the more vulnerable people. We have very large numbers of disabled people who are in receipt of benefit, whether it be disability living allowance or personal independence payments, across Northern Ireland. A relationship between the Government—our Government, the Conservative Government—and the devolved Administrations is the way forward, and the way to make things happen.

John Lamont: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point about the importance of different Governments within the United Kingdom working together.

Ultimately, and in this policy area in particular, we are helping some of the most vulnerable people in society, and it is imperative that we get it right. That is why this debate is so important.

I think it a good thing that more control over welfare is coming to Scotland, but it is clearly a challenge, and it is obvious that the Scottish National party Government in Scotland have significantly underestimated the challenge. Under the 2016 Act, 11 DWP benefits are being devolved to Scotland. The power to legislate for that has already been transferred. On 1 April next year, the Scottish Government are due to gain “executive competence”, which is essentially administrative control over the benefits. Those are significant new powers. Launching Social Security Scotland, the First Minister described it as an “historic moment”.

Although some of the benefits to be devolved are less substantial—they are of course hugely important to those who receive them—significant benefits will be taken on by the Scottish Government. They include PIP, carer's allowance and DLA and, as a package, they account for about £3 billion, or just over 15% of total social security spending in Scotland.

The Department for Work and Pensions has been working with the Scottish Government to allow the change to take place. The Scottish Government have previously promised that they will be fully delivering these benefits by the end of the Scottish Parliament's current term, which ends in 2021. In fact, the Scottish Government previously indicated that they hoped to complete the process by 2020, so the timetable had already slipped slightly. Given that the Scotland Act was introduced in this place in May 2015, the Scottish Government could have got ahead of the game and begun preparing for this process much earlier than they did.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I compliment my hon. Friend on securing the debate. He has mentioned the investment that the DWP has already made in helping the Scottish Government to prepare to assume the devolved powers for these benefits. Does he know how much that has cost the DWP in addition to its usual expenses?

John Lamont: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, and I am going to come on to that shortly. Clearly, there is a cost implication of the Scottish Government's failure to keep to the timetable that they have anticipated.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this incredibly important debate to this place. Does he agree that, in fact, the blame lies firmly at the door of the SNP Scottish Government? I asked a question in the Chamber, and have met the Secretary of State about this matter as well. The DWP did all it possibly could to ensure the Scottish Government were ready to take on these powers. The blame lies firmly at their door, because this UK Government have done everything they possibly can.

John Lamont: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point; I am going to expand on that a little further. Despite all the rhetoric we hear from the SNP about taking on these powers and many others, it has absolutely failed to fulfil those promises on the delivery of welfare.

[John Lamont]

By the end of February, the Scottish Government announced that they expected it to take until at least 2024 before this process would be completed. They also said they would not be taking on competence for the severe disablement allowance, instead leaving that controlled by the Department for Work and Pensions indefinitely. The issue is important for this place, because these powers were due to be devolved. It therefore now falls on the Department for Work and Pensions to step in and ensure that the people of Scotland—our constituents—receive the support they need.

All of this is perhaps understandable. Delivering a welfare system is a complex matter that we need to get right. I acknowledge that the UK Government have needed to delay the roll-out of universal credit, which is a much more complex undertaking. The SNP has spent the past decade criticising the UK Government for their welfare policies and demanding these powers, so the people of Scotland expected the Scottish Government to be keen to take them on as quickly as possible. Instead, it will take the Scottish Government nine years to build a social security system, despite one of the benefits being handed back to the Department for Work and Pensions here at Westminster. This is from a party that tried to con the voters of Scotland by saying that they could set up an entire independent country, with all the apparatus that this would have entailed, in just 18 months. This is from a party that is demanding the devolution of all welfare powers to Scotland, as well as a whole range of other powers.

There is not really any disagreement about why this has happened. I am sure the Minister will be tactful in his closing remarks, because the Department for Work and Pensions wants this process to be done properly and these powers to be devolved in a smooth way. However, the fact remains that these delays are entirely the fault of the Scottish Government and their failure to build capacity to deliver a new social security agency.

Department for Work and Pensions officials have been working hard to devolve these powers since the Scotland Act 2016 was passed. Indeed, they were working towards the 2021 timetable right up until the delay was announced by the Scottish Government. There had been warning signs long before, which should have made the Scottish Government think they had to improve progress. Last year, Audit Scotland warned that Scottish Ministers had not done their homework and had no idea how achievable the plans for Social Security Scotland were. It is already costing more than the Scottish Government thought it would, and plans for local benefits agencies are well behind schedule. It is very clear that the Scottish Government underestimated how complex and expensive it is to deliver a social security system, which is why they have caused these delays.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this debate. I hope he agrees that it is very unfortunate that SNP Members have chosen to laugh at elements of what he is saying about an extremely serious issue, rather than focus on the debate. He mentioned the Audit Scotland report. Does he agree that it is wrong of the SNP to claim that it was prepared for this, when Audit Scotland said it had not even worked out how much a new benefits system would cost?

John Lamont: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. It is quite telling that there are only three SNP Members here, given the number of Scottish Conservatives and Scottish Labour party Members. I sense that on this issue, they feel a deep sense of embarrassment about how their Scottish Government colleagues have delivered. They are not bobbing up to make interventions to challenge the points that are being made; instead, they sit and they laugh. The reality is that it is our constituents, the people of Scotland, who are being let down by this Scottish Government failing to deliver.

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

John Lamont: I just want to make a bit more progress. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] Fine, on you go.

Neil Gray: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and commend him on securing this debate, as it will give us an opportunity to set out the positive things that the Scottish Government are doing on social security, as I will when I make my speech. The hon. Gentleman is laying all the blame at the Scottish Government's door. Can he advise the Chamber on how many occasions the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has met with the Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People in Scotland, or with the joint ministerial committee, and how often those meetings have been cancelled as a result of the Department for Work and Pensions' failure to engage?

John Lamont: The hon. Gentleman is doing his best to try to justify this, but the Secretary of State for Scotland regularly meets officials from the Scottish Government about the devolution of welfare powers.

Neil Gray: Officials.

John Lamont: The Secretary of State and other Ministers in this Government have been working hard, because we recognise how important the continuation of welfare support is to our constituents and the people of Scotland, and that the Scottish Government have failed to deliver as they have promised. These delays are of huge concern to our constituents, because they raise doubt about the Scottish Government's ability to take on functions of the Department for Work and Pensions and to deliver benefits in Scotland. People are looking at those delays and are rightly asking whether the Scottish Government are up to the job.

Although the Department for Work and Pensions has stepped in to ensure that benefits will be paid notwithstanding the delay, how long can that go on for? It is far from satisfactory for the DWP and Scottish Government to be working to a presumption that social security will be devolved by 2021, only for the Scottish Government to suddenly announce a three-year delay. Perhaps in his closing remarks, the Minister could provide some clarity about whether his Department was made aware of the new timetable, and whether any further delays are anticipated.

Neil Gray: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous with his time. Does he acknowledge the comments that have been made by Inclusion Scotland and the Scottish Commission for Learning Disability about the timetable

for the delivery of Scottish social security powers? Given that those organisations speak for the people who will rely on those powers being delivered effectively, why is the hon. Gentleman so willing to challenge what they have said in welcoming the timetable set out by the Scottish Government?

John Lamont: I am grateful for that point, but it is astonishing—it is a Scottish Government timetable that has slipped. The hon. Gentleman's colleagues in Edinburgh—the Scottish Government, the SNP—said that they would try to put the new welfare system in place by the end of 2020. That deadline then became 2021, and then became 2024. It is an absolute failure by the SNP Scottish Government to deliver and match their promises, and I think supporters of Scotland will judge them when the next election comes.

In the event of any further delays, I am confident that the DWP stands ready to step in, but perhaps the Minister could provide my constituents with some reassurances that that will be the case. There are also questions about the additional cost of these delays. Given that the Scottish Government are meant to be taking on these powers, and are spending considerable money on setting up Social Security Scotland, any extra spending by the DWP is an additional, duplicate cost to the public purse. The welfare system is crucial to the life of many of our constituents, and it is vital that these powers are devolved in an orderly fashion so that nobody falls through the cracks. It is important that a new timetable is developed so that the Scottish Government get ready to take on these powers, and there are no further unexpected delays.

One issue that is unique to my constituency, I think, is about the devolution of cold weather payments. In the Scottish borders, the TD12 and TD15 postcodes include homes on either side of the border. For the purposes of cold weather payments, other postcodes in Northumberland use a weather station in Scotland. Some properties will get their cold weather payment from the Department for Work and Pensions, while others in the same postcode should get theirs from Social Security Scotland. If cold weather payments are eventually to be taken on by the Scottish Government, could the Minister confirm whether there have been any discussions about how those payments will be delivered where postcodes are split across the border?

One final issue concerns other welfare powers devolved to the Scottish Parliament by the Scotland Act 2016. As well as delays to taking on devolved benefits, the Scottish Government seem less than enthusiastic about accepting these powers. The Scotland Act devolves the ability to top up reserved benefits, provide short-term payments and create new non-reserved benefits. UK Ministers have repeatedly made their view clear that these powers allow the Scottish Government to compensate women affected by the equalisation of the state pension age. The Scottish Government do not often accuse the UK Government of giving powers away, so the fact that UK Ministers say that these powers have been devolved is a compelling reason to believe this to be the case.

A more detailed look at the legislation clearly shows that the Scottish Government could act in three ways. First, section 24 provides the Scottish Government with the ability to top up pensions and, therefore, compensate

women affected by this change once they reach the new pension age. This may not be an ideal solution; none the less, the Scottish Government accept it as possible.

Secondly, section 26 allows for payments to provide help with short term needs if payment is required “to avoid a risk” to the person's wellbeing. The Scottish Government claim this requires each case to be individually assessed, but this is simply not true. The legislation allows payment merely to avoid a risk of harm. That is a low threshold. If the Scottish Government's language about the impact of these changes is accurate, the threshold is clearly met.

Thirdly, section 28 allows the Scottish Government to create new non-reserved benefits, except to provide a pension or provide assistance merely by old age. This does not prevent the Scottish Government from taking action, because compensating Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign women before they reach pension age does not amount to a pension nor to assistance due to old age, which, in the context, clearly means the state pension age.

A letter from the then Minister for Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), in 2017 made the Scottish Government aware of this point. My hon. Friend wrote about section 28:

“Whilst this power cannot be used to provide pensions to people who qualify by reason of old age, many of those affected by changes to the state pension age will not have reached state pension age. As a result, this broad power does offer the Scottish Government the possibility of introducing financial support to help this group.”

Clearly, this is another way in which the Scottish Government could step in but fail to do so.

I have huge sympathy for the women affected by this change and I have been working with a number of them in my constituency to help them manage the process. However, I have no time for the SNP's position on this matter, which is completely inconsistent. The SNP might not want to take action to compensate these women; that would be a perfectly legitimate position. The SNP might want to take action but feel it would be too costly; again, that is an entirely legitimate position. It is not legitimate to try and make political capital out of a group of women who clearly feel wronged, and mislead them about the Scottish Government's ability to help.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a very eloquent argument as to why the Scottish Government can pick up the WASPI problem, but this matter also rests with the Government. In his view, is the Government's decision not to compensate the WASPI women legitimate or is it democratic?

John Lamont: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that point. I support equalisation of pension age. This is how devolution works. Just as we have different policies on prescription charges and university tuition in Scotland, potentially, you could have a different policy in Scotland about how women of a certain age are supported. I support the UK Government's position, but there are options open to the Scottish Government to take a different approach. However, they are exploiting these women for party political purposes and for no other reason.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman has been making great play of the fact that he has the border near his constituency. Why does he believe that women south of that border do not deserve to be compensated because of his Government?

John Lamont: I support the equalisation of the pension age. It is quite astonishing for the hon. Lady to almost deny the devolution settlement. This is how devolution works. Different parts of the United Kingdom can pursue different policy objectives. The hon. Lady is almost arguing for the abolition of the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government's ability to take different decisions and pursue different policy objectives. Why not accept that they have the power and ability to take action to compensate those women and support the Scottish Government in taking a different approach if they choose to do so?

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Given that the hon. Gentleman is advocating his support for 1950s-born women, is he in favour of the UK Government's pension credit changes, which will go through in May, which are being referred to by WASPI women as a toy boy tax?

John Lamont: I support the changes. I have supported a number of my constituents. As I have said, the equalisation of the pension age is right. People are living to be older, and it is right that men and women are entitled to their pension at the same age. This is another example of the Scottish Government's failure to take action when it has the power to do so. Despite all the rhetoric demanding more powers, they have an inability to use those powers.

Devolution of welfare by this Conservative Government has made the Scottish Parliament one of the most powerful devolved Parliaments in the world. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that the Scottish Government have found taking on those powers such a challenge. The latest delay is surprising, given the SNP's criticism of the system they are inheriting. It is important that the Department for Work and Pensions continues to do all that it can to ensure the orderly transfer of welfare powers and to ensure that the recipients—the people of Scotland; our constituents—continue to receive the support they need.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Seven Members wish to speak, so that is about five minutes each. That is guidance, not an absolute rigid time limit, but please stick to it, otherwise colleagues will not get their fair share.

9.52 am

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): It is great to see you in the Chair, Mr Betts. If the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) will allow me to refer to him as the hon. Member for Berwickshire, that might save us a little time.

This is a strange debate, because we have two parties—the Conservatives and the SNP—arguing when they are both culpable for why we are here. Since 2010 the social security system has been completely and utterly discredited by a deliberate narrative from the then coalition Government that welfare was a bad thing. They completely

changed the narrative in this place, and indeed in the country, from social security being a safety net to welfare being bad. That is part of the problem we have today.

Between 1997 and 2010, the previous Labour Government created a system that lifted millions of pensioners, and millions and millions of children, out of poverty. We should be incredibly proud of that. Since then, most of that has gone backwards in the name of austerity, which has been a political choice rather than a necessity. Before Conservative Members, if they wish, pop up and go on about the employment statistics, which are welcome, most of the decline in terms of poverty comes from in-work poverty—people actually in work.

Stephen Kerr: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Murray: I am happy to do so just once.

Stephen Kerr: Surely it is a good thing that there are now fewer children in workless households than ever before. That is good, isn't it?

Ian Murray: It is a fantastic thing, but it is bad that most of those children are in poverty when they were not before. Social security is a sensitive subject, and we must be careful about the language we use.

I want to reflect on what the Smith commission has done. In response to the 2014 independence referendum, a commission was put in place that allowed all the parties to come together to find consensus about what the next stage of devolution to the Scottish Parliament should be in the devolution journey.

I am glad that Members across the House now extol the virtues of sections 24, 25 and 26 of the Scotland Act 2016, because while the Conservatives and SNP argued about the minutiae of what was not in the Bill, Labour were promoting changes at the Dispatch Box. We proposed amendments to put stuff into the Bill that could have been there, such as my amendment 31. The amendments that went through in the House of Lords gave Scotland the power to create its own social security system. The Scottish Government can top up any reserved benefit and create a new benefit in any devolved area; that is incredibly important. That is why it is so frustrating that the devolved powers have been delayed. I am delighted that the hon. Member for Berwickshire mentioned the WASPI issue, because it is a key aspect of the way the whole issue has been dealt with.

Neil Gray: The hon. Gentleman will understand the difficulty and complexity of delivering a combined social security system—one that has to interact with a Department that is putting roadblocks in the way of some of the flexibilities and changes that the Scottish Government are looking to achieve. Can he outline an area where the Scottish Government could have gone more quickly, such as the passage of the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018? Could that have been quicker? Is there any area where he thinks things could have moved more quickly than they have?

Ian Murray: That is an interesting intervention. I admit I am not an expert on social security, and I would not claim to be. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response to the intervention. However, is it not interesting

that, whereas the Scottish National party social security spokesperson was telling everyone in 2014 that an entirely new state could be set up in 18 months, the matters we are discussing have been delayed not twice but three times, in 2016, 2018 and 2019? That was with respect to benefits that the SNP claimed had to be in the Bill and had to be devolved immediately, and that it would be able to deal with.

John Lamont: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Murray: I will not, because the Chair has said we have only five minutes.

I wanted to mention the WASPI issue. The WASPI women in my constituency are beside themselves that the issue has not been resolved. Both parties, and both the Scottish and UK Governments, are culpable of robbing WASPI women of the pensions they have worked hard for. Scotland could use the powers at its disposal to take a different course, but its Government refuse to do so, because they would rather create grievance than deal with the issue.

It is important that the people of Scotland know we have an inhumane welfare system across the UK at the moment. Scotland can make a different choice and create its own welfare system. The UK Government have created a situation that means Scotland has the ability to do something different. The SNP Government of Scotland refuse to do so. They have delayed it until 2024—eight years after the passage of the 2016 Act. At the same time, disabled people and WASPI women in Scotland, in particular, are suffering. The SNP Government should hang their head in shame.

9.57 am

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Betts. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for securing this important debate.

We have already heard about the foundation Acts of 2016 and 2018, enacted by the UK and Scottish Governments respectively to devolve various welfare powers to the Scottish Parliament and facilitate delivery of the new social security benefit scheme in Scotland. The Scottish Government's website states that

"the benefits we will deliver may be different in nature but there is one common thread which binds them—an investment in the people of Scotland".

I am afraid that that common thread is fraying. Delivery is delayed. The Scottish Government's investment to date is not timeously delivering the promised benefits for the people of Scotland. The Scottish Government will, over time, take on only 10 of the original 11 devolved benefits. The severe disablement allowance remains with the UK's DWP. The transfer of responsibility for a number of other devolved benefits, such as personal independence payments, is on hold—not until tomorrow or next week but until 2024.

Neil Gray: The hon. Gentleman mentioned severe disablement allowance and he will be aware that no new recipient has been admitted to that benefit for 19 years. Can he describe what changes, and what difference, the Scottish Government could make to that area of benefits?

Bill Grant: That is entirely up to the Scottish Government. It is devolved. It is another ball that they have dropped and are not prepared to pick up.

The state of preparedness of the Scottish Government's social security agency is such that it is unable fully to administer and make its annual payments of circa £2.9 billion. The Scottish social security system is apparently failing to fulfil, at least in part, one of its own stated principles, which is

"to be efficient and deliver value for money".

I understand that Audit Scotland is due to report on a further audit, of how effectively the Scottish Government are managing the delivery.

The Scottish Government's stated aim of improving benefits for disabled people and people with ill health is laudable, and I applaud it. However, I note that assessments may not be carried out by the private sector, so there is potential for an already overstretched public sector to inherit that significant, important responsibility. In an earlier debate, I acknowledged previous concerns about the DWP assessments that are carried out by the private sector, and those concerns are being addressed. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions advised in February 2019 that the average wait for an assessment had been reduced by nearly four fifths since July 2014, while the average end-to-end claim journey had been significantly reduced.

Chris Stephens: Would the hon. Gentleman be so kind as to give way?

Bill Grant: No. My concern with the Scottish plan of action is that constituents complain about the public sector, for both the length of time that they have to wait for an NHS appointment and the shortage of specialist medical staff. That said, I fear that either the waiting time for those constituents could increase or the decision-making process for benefit claimants could take longer. I note that the Scottish Government, in response to recent questions, have proposed to do away with some assessments and re-assessments unless there is no other way to obtain information.

In future, constituents need clarity. Will the Minister consider enhancing public awareness of the revised timetable for the Scottish Government—assuming that that is much wanted and desired—in their responsibilities to devolved benefits? The current situation is not good for the people of Scotland who rely on those benefits; it is not good for the Scottish devolution settlement; and it is not good for Scotland. It lies firmly and squarely at the door of the Scottish Government.

10.1 am

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate both the Backbench Business Committee and my near neighbour, the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), on securing this most timely debate. We find ourselves discussing the devolution of welfare, and I shall start by echoing some of the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray).

What is welfare? It is the bottom line below which we feel that people, as part of our community, should not fall. Somehow in the last 10 years, however, that argument

[*Martin Whitfield*]

has changed to looking at the most vulnerable people, as they are described—rather than people who are in the most vulnerable positions—as being something less, and possibly unworthy. They are certainly seen as a group who should pay for the problems, errors and omissions of the parts of society that led to the economic disaster. That is an appalling state to reach.

Our communities are being fractured enough, with the closures of banks and GP surgeries and the collapse of the high street, but they are now also being asked to turn against themselves and look down their noses at a group of people who find themselves in desperate situations. That is a truly appalling position to be in. I find it disingenuous when I listen to arguments, both in the main Chamber and in this one, in which those people are held up as those who should suffer most for the faults of others.

The Scotland Act and the devolution settlement in Scotland opened up the opportunity for something more. It opened up the opportunity for a fairer and kinder system, and to tailor welfare to the people who are closest to those who make the decisions. We find ourselves arguing over delay and postponement. That is an appalling situation, because those individuals, families and single mothers and children cannot wait for a more humane situation. They come to my surgery on a weekly basis and contact me almost daily. I find it appalling that the set-up of a system has been postponed until 2024.

I ask both the Minister, out of respect—he kindly asked for a civilised debate, which I think that we should have—and the SNP spokesperson: what went wrong? Was it the responsibility of those who advised the Scottish Government, or were flippant statements made with a level of enthusiasm for welfare that could not then be fulfilled? People in Scotland deserve an apology for the situation that they find themselves in. So much was promised and, at present, so little has been delivered.

I know that I have little time, and I would like raise the matter of PIP and epilepsy. Earlier this year, I lodged early-day motion 2124 on epilepsy and PIP payments, particularly in Scotland, where 55,000 people suffer from debilitating seizures, which seriously affect their mental health. Those people had hoped that the PIP system would become fairer and kinder, but they are now looking far into the future for that to occur. Will there be an apology in respect of those people and the situation that they suffer?

I want to ask both the Minister and the Opposition spokesperson about Motability. The Scottish Government have indicated they do not want to take it on, yet it is a benefit that individuals have come to me about. A constituent who suffers from spinal issues fears that the approach of the Scottish Government will be the same as the DWP's and that she will lose the opportunity to use Motability to manage her condition.

Lastly, I seek reassurance on the people who have found themselves falling foul of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000. Originally brought in to help deal with terrorist activity, it is now being used to decide whether people are fit to work or are less disabled than they say they are. I met a constituent only last week who was still awaiting a decision so that she can

appeal it. She is trapped in a circle; there are no responses from the DWP, so she cannot appeal a decision. There are no responses from the investigation unit to decide whether any criminal procedures will take place. Locked into that labyrinthine nightmare, she looks to the Scottish Government and asks genuinely whether things will get better. On the evidence that we have heard about the two delays, I fear that that will not be the case.

10.7 am

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts, and to follow the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), who made his usual thoughtful speech. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for securing this Westminster Hall debate.

I remember the conversation back in September 2014. The SNP had produced its blueprint for an independent Scotland, which it claimed was a White Paper, but, as it has transpired, was a work of pure fiction. Events have proven that beyond doubt. On page 339 of the document there was a timeline for independence, and it put independence day in March 2016. That is a total of 560 days from the date of the referendum to the date of independence: 560 days to set up an entirely new country from scratch. The timeframe would include all the negotiations on how Scotland would withdraw from and have a future relationship with the rest of the United Kingdom. On reflection, how extraordinary those dates and numbers now seem, and how ridiculous, particularly in the light of what has transpired in relation to Brexit.

Today's debate is about the establishment of the devolved Scottish social security system. The Scotland Act devolved the powers and they passed into law on 23 March 2016. The Act delivered on the promise made to the Scottish people about devolving more power to our Parliament. It fulfilled the commitments of the Smith commission, to which all the parties in Scotland contributed and agreed. The noble Lord Smith of Kelvin has confirmed that all the commitments made in the commission's report have been delivered, so the powers in relation to social security should be transferred to the Scottish Government on 1 April 2020, but the SNP will not touch them. It will cost more than £308 million to set up Social Security Scotland. The SNP claimed, just five years ago, that it would cost £200 million to set up the new Scotland that it falsely promised the people of Scotland. In February, the Cabinet Secretary for Social Security announced that the Scottish Government would not be in a position to introduce and own the devolved powers until at least 2024.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): My hon. Friend is right that the Scottish Government have not touched the powers. The nub of the issue is this: their only desire is to have the constitutional change of independence, which means using any mechanism at their disposal to attack the UK Government, bash Westminster, and use the politics of grievance rather than come up with solutions to help people.

Stephen Kerr: My hon. Friend is correct; there is no issue that it is beyond the SNP's powers to politicise and use for its own nationalist agenda. Clearly, these things

are more complex than they seem, and I accept that. I do not really want the SNP taking these powers and using them if it cannot handle them, because we are talking about the lives of the most vulnerable people in Scotland, who deserve to be protected from any possible incompetence on the part of the SNP. The SNP's track record on IT systems alone is a horror story, and the farm payments fiasco is a warning.

Neil Gray: The hon. Gentleman warns of the problems that his constituents could face if this system is not delivered effectively. To his credit, he has been a critic of this Government on universal credit, so does he not think it a tad ironic to be speaking about the potential incompetence of the Scottish Government who are delivering a safe system when his Government have presided over the shambles of universal credit and personal independence payments?

Stephen Kerr: The hon. Gentleman is someone I respect, but we are talking about the Scottish Government's willingness to accept powers that have been devolved to them, and their unwillingness to touch those powers speaks volumes about them. They will now take until 2024 instead of 2020. That is more than 3,000 days' notice—six times the number of days the SNP told us it would need to set up the new Scotland that it promised the Scottish people in 2014. This is the sad state of affairs of the SNP.

The fact is that the SNP does not want to have to handle these powers, because they are difficult powers to handle. Welfare and benefits are expensive and complex; they need politicians to be grown up, to make difficult decisions and to show leadership. Let us be clear: the next time we hear SNP politicians in this place or elsewhere deriding welfare reform or bemoaning a decision that they view as disadvantageous to their constituents, they will be complicit. The SNP Government could have set up a social security system; they could have grasped the nettle and dealt with this, but, through either political cowardice or sheer incompetence, they have failed the challenge.

The people of Scotland are sick and tired of the SNP and its excuses. Devolution works. The powers are there. It is simply the nationalists who, through their wilful negligence, are leaving Scotland to stagnate.

10.12 am

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts.

I thank the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for calling this debate, which is timely and important, particularly for me. When full transition happens, I will have the largest number of constituents claiming universal credit of any constituency in Scotland, so it is something that particularly affects my constituents.

I suppose this debate leads us to reflect on why we are in politics and what our purpose is as Members of Parliament. For me, it is about building a country that has the capacity to ensure that the maximum number of its people are able to work, sustain themselves in a dignified way and achieve their opportunity. Enabling everyone to have that opportunity will improve our

collective function as a society and our capability as a country. That is, in essence, what I want to achieve in Parliament and in politics and why I am a member of the Labour party.

Let us look at the record of the last Labour Government on child poverty. In 1998, there were 3 million children in poverty. By the end of the last Labour Government, that had been reduced to 1.6 million. Sadly, under the coalition and pure Conservative Governments since, that figure has risen to 3.7 million. That is shameful; and before there is any hubris from the Conservatives on welfare or social security, I just want to make clear that that is a shameful stain on their record.

That is a function of a society that has seen the narrative of removing the shame from need and the creation of a floor below which none can fall and everyone can rise completely destroyed. The ideal of the Attlee Government in creating the social security foundation that built the welfare state has been thoroughly damaged by this Government. That is the main take-away from this debate and one that cannot be dismissed.

However, I also reflect on 20 years of devolution and the great opportunities that we saw from it. I still remember, as a nine-year-old, watching the opening of the Scottish Parliament and that parade down the Royal Mile, and the great optimism in the immediate aftermath of a Labour Government coming to power, as well as the great opportunities sensed by people. The Parliament was built not just for the inherent right to have a Scottish Parliament, but as a functional thing that would achieve objectives. In my opinion, one of the key objectives was to have an effective bulwark against a future Tory Government that might attack the fundamentals of our social security system and welfare state.

The Scotland Act 2016 was passed in that spirit. That was due in no small part to the efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), who fought valiantly to ensure key amendments to the Bill, in particular the power to top up reserved benefits, which gives the Scottish Government a significant measure of autonomy. That autonomy is combined with the great opportunity of the United Kingdom's fiscal union, which each year delivers £10.2 billion extra for Scotland—£1,900 per person—to invest in the economy and public services. That would not be achievable under independence. Therefore, the Scottish Parliament has been pump-primed with a great measure of financial capability to achieve change in the face of an onslaught by the Conservatives, who wish to cut the fabric of our society and our public services.

With this delay we have seen a huge failure to live up to the expectations of devolution. Around 60% of all social security has now been devolved, with the exclusion of the state pension, which is an automatic stabiliser. That is a huge opportunity for Scotland. There have been some improvements, such as the ban on private sector involvement in assessments, but that was thanks to Labour's campaigning efforts in the Scottish Parliament. There was a commitment to reduce face-to-face assessments—that was a Green proposal—and short-term assistance is now paid if an award is reduced and the applicant subsequently asks for a review or appeal.

However, we have also seen the Tories and SNP unite in Holyrood to vote down a £5 per week top-up to child benefit, by using the Social Security (Scotland) Bill and the budget processes. There has been an endorsement

[Mr Paul Sweeney]

for the uprating cuts, which has blocked Labour's move to revert to the retail prices index when uprating carer's allowance. The 2011 cut based on the consumer prices index has cost carers £1,000 since 2011, while Tory uprating cuts have cost Scots £1.9 million in the past decade. Those are just some examples of a complete failure to live up to expectations. We need radical and effective measures, which is what we seek to propose, and we encourage all parties to live up to the expectations that people had when devolution was first delivered 20 years ago.

10.18 am

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) on securing this debate.

Government figures illustrate that 1 million people in Scotland now live in relative poverty, which equates to one in every five Scots. They also highlight that 240,000 children in Scotland are living in poverty, two thirds of whom come from working households. The Independent Food Aid Network found that more than 480,000 crisis food parcels were distributed by Scottish food banks between April and September 2018, which included 27,000 parcels in North Lanarkshire and in my constituency. The Government are presiding over a crisis of in-work poverty, child poverty and food poverty, and their policies are directly contributing to that with the failing roll-out of universal credit and the unjust benefits freeze.

The central purpose of devolution is to give the Scottish Government a chance to take different decisions, yet the SNP Scottish Government are far too timid in their ambitions for a devolved social security system. Eleven benefits have been devolved, including PIP and DLA, which are worth more than £3 billion to Scots every year. The Scottish Government have shown no sign that they are prepared to take responsibility for those benefits, having twice asked the DWP to delay devolving them. Scottish Government Ministers now admit that the full devolution of benefits will not be completed until 2024, leaving hundreds of thousands of Scottish claimants to languish under the welfare reforms of this Tory Government.

I should stress that I welcome some of the positive changes that the Scottish Government are seeking to make to the devolved social security system. I am pleased that the responsibility for evidence gathering for assessments will be shifted away from claimants. I am glad that short-term assistance will be paid to those who find their awards reduced or who are challenging decisions through the appeals process, and I welcome the commitment to reduce the number of face-to-face assessments. However, I continue to have concerns that much of what is wrong with the current UK welfare reforms will remain in place in the new devolved social security system. There will be no changes to the rate of benefits. The current points-based system and assessment indicators for PIP will be retained, and the mandatory reconsideration process will not be reformed in any meaningful way.

Mr Sweeney: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the PIP points-based system staying the same. In many constituencies the change from DLA to

the PIP-based system has meant huge losses for people. In my constituency, it amounts to £2 million a year. Does he not agree that that is shameful? Surely the Scottish Government could take action immediately to resolve it.

Hugh Gaffney: That is indeed something that the Scottish Government could do. They want to be the Scottish power. They talk down here about "owning Scotland". Well, start owning Scotland and start making changes to help people—our constituents.

The SNP has voted against topping up child benefit by £5 a week and against reverting to uprating carer's allowance by RPI, and failed to mitigate the two-child limit. In the Scottish Parliament, Labour has already secured legal guarantees that the devolved social security system will have automatic split payments for universal credit and a ban on private sector involvement in assessments. We have committed to using the full powers available to take action, such as topping up child benefit, mitigating the two-child limit and bringing forward the income supplement that families across Scotland so desperately need. While I welcome the devolution of welfare, there is little point if the Scottish Government are not prepared to use their powers. That is why a Scottish Labour Government, committed to using those powers, are so desperately needed. If we are to tackle the crisis of poverty, make Scotland Labour.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I am going to start the winding up speeches at 10.28 am.

10.22 am

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in this debate and to be the first woman called. Although we have had some interesting perspectives from men, it is important to note that welfare affects women disproportionately. We have women who are still mainly carers, women in low-paid jobs, who will often be working all the hours they can get while also caring for their children or perhaps elderly relatives, and also women affected by Government pension decisions, which have again been squabbled over. It is women who are affected by many of these policies, so I am glad to be able to speak.

I thank the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for securing this debate. It is encouraging to see many of his colleagues here. However, when I listen to much of the arguments, I think about my constituents who come to my office every week, some of them in dire situations. They need support and advice, and often they need help. I think about one constituent, a young woman called Kelly, who is a fantastic woman. She is a working single mum in education who is currently on universal credit. She told me that she was once left with £6 in a month, which was supposed to support her and her young son. She was not sure why that had happened; it was not explained to her. She did not come to me and say, "Who should I point the finger at? Is this the Tories or the SNP? Which Government should I be angry at?" She just wanted it to be sorted out. She just wants a welfare system that works, so when I sit here and hear this blame game, it is very frustrating, because it is not really helping her.

We have heard a lot about the delay in devolving welfare powers that the Scottish Government have presided over. I will not go into that, because it has been well

covered, but we have also heard about some of the changes that are not actually changes. We hear that the SNP wants more powers, but what is the point if it will not use them to improve things?

The recent consultation on disability assistance in Scotland and the position papers published just last month showed that the Scottish Government's plan is to replicate much of the existing Tory-designed benefit system. Given that we hear criticisms of that system from SNP spokespeople, why do they want to keep much of the same? Severe disablement allowance is being devolved in name only and then outsourced back to the DWP, which is mind boggling.

I always call for more working together, and there has been some on this issue; however, I fear it has not been very positive. As some of my Labour colleagues mentioned, the SNP and the Tories have worked together in the Scottish Parliament to vote down a policy that would have supported 4,000 families and lifted 5,000 children out of poverty, yet cost the Scottish Government only 0.2% of their budget. There has to be a better way.

Labour has been leading the fight to improve social security for people in Scotland. For example, Scottish Labour pushed the Scottish Government to accept automatic split payments of universal credit—something that the SNP has now embraced and often takes credit for, despite voting against the initial move to amend the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 at stage 2, voting with the Tories. It remains unclear how split payments will be administered in Scotland. Will the Minister update us on that? What is the current timetable for implementing them in Scotland, and have the Scottish Government proposed a split formula?

The Minister and the SNP spokespeople in Westminster and in the Scottish Government need to work together to find a genuine way forward. I want to see less blame and more action to deliver for Kelly, my constituent, and the people who come to my office in need of help and a better system, because there is a better way.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): We move on to the Front Benchers, who will each have 10 minutes. That will leave a couple of minutes for the mover of the motion to wind up. I call Neil Gray for the SNP.

10.27 am

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Thank you very much, Mr Betts. It is a pleasure to speak in this debate with you, my Finance Committee colleague, in the Chair. I congratulate the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) on securing the debate, as it gives us an opportunity to talk about the great work being done by the SNP Scottish Government—

Stephen Kerr: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Neil Gray: At least let me get started.

With support from other parties and brilliant stakeholders in Scotland, we are working to build our new social security system. I welcome the fact that the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk has a newfound interest in this area. Until now, he does not appear to have had much of an interest in the work and pensions brief since arriving in this House. A quick look at his speaking record shows that he has

never mentioned universal credit or employment support allowance, and has raised personal independence payments—[*Interruption.*] I will not be shouted down, Mr Betts. The hon. Gentleman has raised personal independence payments just once, which, given the case that I and other colleagues have in this area, I find surprising.

If other search terms are entered, however, the number of mentions made by the hon. Gentleman rockets up. “The Scottish Government” gets 242 mentions, “the Scottish National party” gets 37, “the SNP” gets 116 and “independence” gets 43. That is quite the contrast. Those speaking records perhaps speak not just to his intentions today, but more to what he regards as his purpose in this place: not so much being part of a bloc of Scottish Tories holding this shambles of a British Government to account, but trying to do the job that he left as an Opposition Member of the Scottish Parliament.

I will tackle some of what the hon. Gentleman said and highlight some of what he conveniently forgot to say. I note that he did not once mention how the Scottish Government could safely deliver the new system any faster. I think we were right, having learned from the unsafe and disastrous delivery of universal credit and the personal independence payment, to take our time, do this properly and deliver it safely for our constituents who depend on it.

Douglas Ross: The hon. Gentleman speaks about delivering functions in Scotland. Could he perhaps advise Westminster Hall how the SNP has done when it has tried to deliver things in Scotland—for example, paying our Scottish farmers, delivering i6, the IT system for Police Scotland, or delivering a social security system? Is it not the fact that it is failure, failure, failure under the SNP?

Neil Gray: I wish to put on record my congratulations to the hon. Gentleman and his wife on the safe delivery of their new born—I think this is the first chance I have had to put that on record. He has a bit of cheek when he talks about farmers, given the way that the Tory Government robbed Scottish farmers of their convergence uplift money. I do not think that is a safe area of ground for him to be campaigning on.

The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk described the timetable that the Scottish Government have come forward with as a failure, despite it being welcomed by Inclusion Scotland and the Scottish Commission for Learning Disability. I challenge him to point out the areas of contradiction with those organisations, which speak for those who depend on the safe delivery of this system.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) was right that the Scottish Government can do something different, and we are. We are creating a system that is based on dignity and respect, which I think is something that the Scottish Government and the Labour party agree on. We are looking to do something different in Scotland, which is why we have been working together in Holyrood on so many areas, in order to deliver that system. However, the hon. Gentleman did not answer how the system could have been delivered more quickly and fairly, so I am happy to allow him to intervene and describe that.

Ian Murray: The narrative from the SNP Scottish Government has always been, rightly, about generating a new system that is more respectful of its claimants. Can the hon. Gentleman lay out why the Scottish Government are completely refusing to do anything about the WASPI women?

Neil Gray: That is not actually true, and the hon. Gentleman knows it. We have been campaigning very hard in Westminster for the problem faced by the WASPI women to be sorted across the United Kingdom. He constantly talks about not having any differences between people in Livingston and people in Liverpool; we are in agreement on that. This issue should be sorted out for those women across the United Kingdom, and his ire should be directed at the Minister to resolve the situation.

The hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) asked why there was a delay. Again, we have been working hard to deliver the system as quickly and safely as possible, but sadly there has been intransigence on the part of DWP Ministers. There has been good engagement—*[Interruption.]* No, it is not nonsense. There has been a good level of engagement at official level, but successive Secretaries of State have missed joint ministerial working group meetings and refused to allow the Scottish Government to utilise some of their powers, such as separate payments, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned. There are areas where we are looking to make changes and develop new policy, but sadly the DWP is putting roadblocks in the way of that progress.

The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), who to his credit has been critical of this Government on the roll-out of universal credit, has not quite taken his concerns in that area to their logical conclusion when it comes to the safe delivery of a new devolved system. We have learned from the shambles of the poverty-inducing roll-out of universal credit and the problems with personal independence payments, and we are determined to deliver the new system safely. It benefits and supports the people of Scotland.

John Lamont: Last year, my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) secured a debate on the delivery of welfare. In criticising that debate, the hon. Gentleman said:

“Of course, the Scottish Government are proceeding quite nicely as they build the new Scottish social security agency.”—*[Official Report, 20 March 2018; Vol. 638, c. 119WH.]*

Does he stand by his comments in last year’s debate?

Neil Gray: Yes, I do. The hon. Gentleman is a former Member of the Holyrood Parliament, so he knows how quickly legislation can progress through Parliament, and he knows the steps that need to go through in order—*[Interruption.]* I will not be shouted down. The hon. Gentleman knows how legislation goes through Holyrood, and knows that these things take time. Sadly, we are now, thanks to the intransigence of DWP Ministers, in a position whereby certain things are being delayed. I go back to the point that the hon. Gentleman had never mentioned universal credit and had mentioned PIP once before today’s debate. I am very surprised at that. He does not seem to have a problem with the delay—

Stephen Kerr: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Neil Gray: No, I am answering the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk first. He does not appear to have a problem with the delay or the problems in the roll-out of universal credit or the roll-out of PIP. He has never mentioned those before, despite the constituency case load that I imagine he has in those two areas, yet he uses this place as a battering ram to criticise the Scottish Government. That says more—*[Interruption.]* That says more about the hon. Gentleman’s intentions than it does about the Scottish Government’s.

Chris Stephens: I have listened to this gang of Trumpists shout and bawl and try to shout people down. Does my hon. Friend agree that the main issue, the real issue, is that the DWP and Social Security Scotland will truly share clients? Not once have we heard from a Conservative in this debate about clients—about people, about the poor—and what that means. The Conservatives have completely ignored the fact that universal credit is being delayed to 2023, which will have a real impact on all claimants.

Neil Gray: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He serves on the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, so he knows these issues well. Of course, what the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk and some others in the debate forgot to talk about was the fine work that the SNP Scottish Government, as a minority Government, have achieved by gaining cross-party consensus to protect the people of Scotland from the worst damage being inflicted by this poverty-inducing Tory Government. The hon. Gentleman’s constituents do not need to pay the bedroom tax and can still receive council tax benefit. If they are in receipt of carer’s allowance, they will have had a significant uplift in their payments. They can still get access to education maintenance allowance. Some 316,000 low-income households in crisis in Scotland have been helped to buy essential items, such as nappies, food and cookers, through the Scottish welfare fund—a local crisis grant system almost completely abolished elsewhere by the Tories. And we have set a clear path to deliver a new—sadly, it is limited to just 15% of spend—social security system based on dignity and respect. That is all with 55% of taxpayers in Scotland paying less than they would elsewhere in the UK. It is a more progressive tax system that sees those at the top paying a little more and those on the lowest incomes paying a little less.

Ian Murray: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Neil Gray: I am concluding.

The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk also forgot to mention the catastrophic introduction of universal credit and PIP, which has literally ruined lives. He calls a debate to attack a responsible Government making responsible progress to deliver a fairer social security system, but ignores the tragedy of his own party’s disgusting attack on low-income families. He ignores disabled people having their Motability cars removed. He ignores people on universal credit left in poverty. He ignores a freeze on benefits that is predicted to plunge 400,000 more children into poverty. So forgive me, Mr Betts, but the Scottish Government, the Scottish Parliament and the people of Scotland will take no

lessons from the hon. Gentleman or any other Tory party member preaching about how to deliver a social security system.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I call Mike Amesbury for the Opposition. *[Interruption.]* Order. Calm down a bit, please.

10.38 am

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. It was almost a “Get the popcorn out” moment there.

I thank the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for securing such an important debate. He is on record as saying:

“Devolution has been a good thing for Scotland”

because it has

“the potential to bring power and decision makers closer to the people.”

That principle is a rare example of something that I can agree on with him. It is a historical reality that the Labour party and the late Donald Dewar were the architects of this landscape—a legacy that has strengthened the voice of Scotland and democracy in the United Kingdom. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) made me realise my age when he pointed out that he was just nine years old at that time.

To Labour Members, two things are clear from this debate. First, devolution of powers alone is not enough; we need an Administration willing and able to use the powers available to them, with a defining mission to reduce poverty and the political drive from the centre to get on with it and not to delay, delay and delay. Secondly, while devolution of particular policies may be a positive step, as we can all agree, it does not absolve the Conservative party, which conceived, developed and delivered a poor, failing policy here in Westminster, of responsibility for its effects elsewhere.

The Tory Government, as has been pointed out by Opposition Members, have used social security as a vehicle for cuts, with more than £37 billion taken away from UK citizens since 2010—£3.7 billion taken away from Scottish citizens. The effects and consequences of universal credit, as was rightly pointed out by most Opposition Members who have spoken, are a direct result of the Conservative party’s designing and pressing ahead with a policy that is deliberately under-resourced, cruel and unfair. That policy is causing hardship across the United Kingdom, and Labour Members are all too familiar with the effects on our constituents.

Those effects continue to be felt strongly in Scotland, but they have not been mitigated by the SNP-led Scottish Government, even though they have the power to do so. That is a cause for great regret and disappointment for Scotland’s Labour Members of Parliament and Members of the Scottish Parliament.

Stephen Kerr: It is a great disappointment that in a debate on such an important topic, the SNP Members—who are the Scottish Government—did not even bother to turn up. Only the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), their spokesman, has been here for the whole debate. They have come in and out like a

magic roundabout, but they have not stayed for the debate. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is a shame on the SNP?

Mike Amesbury: The hon. Gentleman has made his point.

Mitigation is essential, and a lack of it is a cause for unnecessary hardship and continuing poverty. It certainly shames both the Westminster and Holyrood Governments that that continues. Although legal powers to run benefits in Scotland will pass to the Scottish Government in April 2020 as a result of the Scotland Act 2016, the SNP-led Administration have wilfully delayed using those powers in full until 2024.

The spend accounts for some 16% of welfare, or £3 billion. As has been pointed out by Government Members, the SNP is a party that claims it can create an independent state in 18 months. Twice, SNP Ministers have asked the Department for Work and Pensions to delay devolving social security, in 2016 and 2018, which means that, over the next five years, we will have a ludicrous situation in which SNP Ministers will, effectively, send millions of pounds down south to pay the DWP to run social security provision in Scotland.

Mr Sweeney: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point about the absurdity, if the DWP is so evil and malevolent, of the Scottish Government’s effectively paying it to continue to administer the system. Even after the full transition has happened under the revised timescale of 2024, severe disablement allowance will still be outsourced to the DWP and still visiting harm on the Scottish people. Surely that is an absurdity?

Mike Amesbury: Yes; it is another failing of fine and warm words but nothing happening in reality.

While those agency arrangements are in place, SNP Ministers are blocked from making changes to any of the benefits the DWP delivers. They are not able to intervene in aggressive debt recovery or even to change the inflation measure to uprate benefits. While the SNP dithers and sits on its hands, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) has pointed out, thousands of families are falling into poverty every year. Both parties are concentrating on avoiding responsibility, rather than using what levers of power are available to change the failing policy.

Neil Gray: The hon. Gentleman rightly talks about the high poverty levels that we have throughout the United Kingdom. However, will he reflect on the fact that the poverty rate in Scotland—although far too high—is significantly lower than elsewhere in the United Kingdom, and that that might have something to do with the different policies that are being pursued in Scotland to ensure that we eradicate poverty as quickly as possible?

Mike Amesbury: I know the hon. Gentleman will agree that a million people in poverty in Scotland is still shameful—

Neil Gray: I just said that.

Mike Amesbury: If I may continue, when we have seen SNP and Tory politicians working together, they have done so in an alliance, preventing any significant improvements to social security in Scotland.

Mr Sweeney: My hon. Friend is being very generous with his time, and is making an excellent speech. We have talked about mitigating factors in the Scottish Parliament, but some of the key mitigating factors, such as mitigating the bedroom tax, were implemented only after significant and persistent Labour pressure. Indeed, John Swinney, who was finance Minister at the time, said that he did not want to let the Tories off the hook; he would rather the Scottish people suffered to make a political point.

Mike Amesbury: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the excellent record of Labour in Scotland, campaigning to change things for people on the ground.

Together, SNP and Tory politicians repeatedly voted down a £5 a week top-up to child benefit during the passage of the Social Security (Scotland) Bill and the budget process. In February, they endorsed George Osborne's uprating cuts, blocking Scottish Labour's move to revert to RPI uprating of the carer's allowance. During the recent budget, the SNP refused to mitigate the two-child limit—a policy that would have supported 4,000 families and lifted 5,000 children out of poverty, and would have cost just 0.2% of the Scottish budget. After years of warm words and claims that it will build a system based on human rights, the SNP relied on the Tories to block the international covenant on economic, social and cultural rights from being included in the social security Bill.

Labour Members know the effects of Tory welfare policy all too well, wherever in the United Kingdom we represent. We have heard about those effects today: my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian argued that we need bold action for women born in the 1950s, and was right to highlight the woeful response of the Tory Government. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) argued that in-work poverty is a major problem in Scotland, as well as out-of-work poverty, with over a million people in Scotland living in poverty. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) attacked the political choice of austerity, and called for a social security system that draws on the founding principles of the Attlee Government: security, opportunity and dignity. My hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley) correctly pointed out that she needs to be the champion of women in this place, because women are disproportionately affected by that political choice of austerity—a choice made by this Tory Government.

Labour believes that the Tories' approach to welfare is flawed and failing. It is a story of failure that begins with the Tory Government in Westminster's cruel and unnecessary welfare policies, but has been worsened by the decision by the SNP Government in Holyrood not to use their powers to effectively mitigate those policies. As a result, it is a story of hardship and hunger, wherever in the UK a person is affected.

My questions to the Minister are simple. First, will he accept that universal credit is failing? It is cruel in design, it is under-resourced, and its roll-out needs to be halted. How about scrapping the benefit freeze, the two-child limit and the five-week wait? Hardship is hardship, wherever we are in the UK. Finally, will the Minister confirm whether the devolution of welfare to Scotland could have happened earlier, had the Scottish Government not asked the Department for Work and

Pensions to delay the process twice, in 2016 and 2018? The only way we will change things is by having a Labour Government.

10.49 am

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) on securing this important and timely debate. He spoke with great passion. He cares deeply about his constituents and he wants an effective welfare system in Scotland that leaves no one behind, which is something that we all want to see. We have heard passionate speeches. If I have time I will refer to some of the points raised. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) and for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) for their contributions today.

To reiterate the context of where we are—colleagues have set this out—the Scotland Act 2016 provided a significant shift in the way that welfare would be delivered. As has been said, we are transferring responsibility for an estimated £2.8 billion of welfare powers to the Scottish Parliament, which currently support around 1.4 million people in Scotland. That will of course have a major impact on people living in Scotland as we move into a shared welfare space for the first time.

We should not underestimate the significance of the task. We recognise that responsibility for many vulnerable claimants will be transferred to the Scottish Government, and it is vital that both Governments get it right. The DWP has been instrumental in the Scottish Government's delivery to date of certain benefits, and we will continue to support them to achieve their plans. We must ensure that the transfer of the welfare powers proceeds in a safe and secure manner with the claimant at the heart of what we do. That is why we have established strong Government structures, including a joint ministerial working group on welfare and joint working practices to oversee the transfer of powers and to ensure that we work together to identify and mitigate any issues that arise.

The hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) raised points about the ministerial working group. As he knows, there was a recent meeting that was both cordial and constructive. In terms of the support from DWP, we have approximately 80 DWP staff working exclusively on the Scottish devolution programme. Between 2015 and October 2018, DWP managed more than 2,297 requests for information from the Scottish Government. I gently point out to him that I do not think there is any intransigence on our part. He knows that I am happy to take up cases, and we are meeting later today to discuss a constituency case that he has.

Following Royal Assent to the Scotland Act 2016, the DWP has worked hard to support the Scottish Government in the transfer of powers. We have given them access to DWP payment and customer information systems to support their delivery, as well as providing training and knowledge transfer as they build up their capability. We have provided support to enable them to deliver their new employment support programme, Fair Start Scotland, with DWP work coaches making the majority of referrals.

As we approach the first anniversary of the programme, the Scottish Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills has recently written to me to praise our staff in Jobcentre

Plus for the work that they have done to date. It is important that politicians talk not only about the challenges. Of course we should challenge each other to get things right, but we should also praise and acknowledge good joint working when it takes place.

Since 2017, we have also delivered Universal Credit Scottish Choices, giving people in Scotland a choice over the frequency of their payment and whether their housing element is paid directly to their landlord. We supported the Scottish Government to deliver their first new benefit, the best start grant, and we are on track to support delivery of their replacement for funeral expenses payments later this year. Critically, since September 2018, we have been paying carer's allowance on behalf of the Scottish Government, enabling them to pay a six-monthly supplementary payment to carers in Scotland.

Neil Gray: The Minister is setting out well some of the areas where there has been good working between the Scottish and UK Governments, particularly at ministerial level, as I said in my speech. I should put on the record that there have previously been problems at ministerial level between the two Governments, but in the most recent exchange of letters the Secretary of State appears to make a more conciliatory and helpful suggestion for work going forward. So I hope that the two Governments will be able to work together constructively, whereas previously that has not happened.

Alok Sharma: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Over the past few years we have been working constructively, and we want that to continue. My hon. Friends definitely want that. They come in to see me and the Secretary of State regularly to raise issues, and it is right that we continue in that spirit.

Many lessons have been learned in the first wave of devolution, such as in the transfer of accountability of carer's allowance, where the DWP continues to pay carer's allowance on behalf of the Scottish Government but under the same rules and rates as for people in England and Wales. It is vital that we consider these lessons as we move forward with the next wave of delivery.

Stephen Kerr: Will the Minister give way?

Alok Sharma: I will not, if my hon. Friend does not mind, because time is short.

The hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) criticised the Government's delivery of universal credit. I believe it is working, and we have put in an extra £6 billion to support the most vulnerable in the past two Budgets, which unfortunately he has not been able to support in votes. I point him to the summary of a Public Accounts Committee report from 2005 on tax credits, which says:

"In April 2004, the Committee reported on the severe problems following the introduction of the New Tax Credits, which meant that several hundred thousand claimants were not paid on time."

I gently point out that we all want to get the system right, and I am not sure that constantly criticising is the best way forward.

As colleagues have noted, the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People recently announced the Scottish Government's delivery timetable for their replacements to the current disability, carer's and industrial

injuries benefits, as well as replacements for winter fuel and cold weather payments. The timetable proposes that the Scottish Government will progressively take over responsibility for delivery from April next year, with the final cases being transferred by 2024. That reflects the pace that the Scottish Government believe that they can commit to and is achievable.

On timing, it will be for the Scottish Government to keep it under review. The Scottish Government's plans involve considerable work for DWP in both supporting them to achieve their ambition and, as necessary, continuing to deliver benefits on their behalf. We share the Scottish Government's commitment to a safe and secure transfer, and our priority is as seamless a transfer as possible from the person receiving the benefit's point of view.

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk raised a number of issues in his remarks. He spoke of his concerns about the Scottish Government's delivery plans, the continuity of provision for his constituents and the cost to the public purse from the DWP continuing to deliver devolved benefits on behalf of the Scottish Government. We will, of course, continue to work with the Scottish Government, and costs arising from the DWP's delivery of services on behalf of the Scottish Government will be reimbursed by the Scottish Government.

Many other points were raised, and if colleagues want to write to me I will be happy to respond to them. A number of colleagues mentioned WASPI. It is for the Scottish Government to determine how to use their powers to make further payments, including to fix issues for those individuals.

The devolution of welfare powers represents a significant constitutional change that will require substantial work by both Governments to ensure that the people of Scotland are well served. We are committed to working constructively with the Scottish Government. I look forward to the future and seeing the Scottish Government successfully delivering their new social security benefits for the people of Scotland.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I thank the Minister and other colleagues for keeping within the time limit. John Lamont has a minute to wind up.

10.59 am

John Lamont: I am grateful to all hon. Members who contributed. It is telling that we had only one substantive speech from the Nationalist benches; the other 34 SNP Members obviously find it very uncomfortable. I have a lot of respect for the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), but it is telling how much time he spent in preparing for this debate counting off how often I have spoken in this place and how many words I have mentioned; never mind trying to defend the Scottish Government's record. It is more about a social media clip than anything else. The Scottish Government are always pleading for more powers and control over welfare, but it has taken them nine years to get 15% of welfare, so it would take 60 years for them to get full control over the welfare budget.

I am grateful to the Minister for his response. Our job is to ensure that our constituents—the people of Scotland—are getting the welfare support that they

[John Lamont]

deserve, and I am pleased that the UK Government are taking action to deal with the failures of the Scottish Government.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered devolution of welfare.

Waste Incineration: Regulation

11.00 am

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the regulation of the incineration of waste.

It is particularly pleasing to open this short debate this morning for three reasons. First, it is good to talk about anything other than Brexit. Secondly, it is good to have a fellow Yorkshireman in the Chair and as Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, which is looking at the Government's waste strategy in a short inquiry. Thirdly—I hope we can reach some consensus across the Chamber—this debate is inspired by two rising stars. I am glad to see one of them, my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin), in his place. He is the first ever shadow Minister for Waste and Recycling combined. The second, who not in his place as he has other business today, is the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. When I pointed out at Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions recently that new incinerators could divert waste that might otherwise be recycled, he said I had a good point. That is perhaps the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me during questions. I am particularly glad for those three reasons.

I wish to put three propositions to the Chamber. First, there is a case for a moratorium on incineration. We have quite enough incinerators to deal with residual waste at the moment. Secondly, the Environment Agency should be more robust in its approach in enforcing the waste hierarchy. Thirdly, the Treasury should continue to look—as it has been doing publicly in recent months—at whether a tax on incineration should mirror the landfill tax.

I acknowledge at the beginning that there are many Members in the Chamber today and I will happily take interventions. There is an organisation called the UK Without Incineration Network that is to be commended on the quality of the information it provides. Indeed, in reporting on an industry conference, an industry paper said that if Paul Davidson, who is a strong lobbyist for incinerators,

“wanted technical and other details”

about individual incinerators,

“he went to the website of implacable opponents UKWIN.”

Mr Davidson was reported as saying

“It's a great website. It's a disgrace that that is the best source of information.”

When I form my first Administration, the organisation's chief co-ordinator, Shlomo Downen, will be the first person I will recommend for a peerage.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. There is no doubt it will be lively. He has just hit the nail on the head. When incinerator operators apply for licences from the Environment Agency, a lot of bureaucratic and complicated paperwork goes with that that prevents local residents from scrutinising some of these applications. Does he agree with me that more needs to be done to unpick that information to make it more accountable and transparent for local residents?

John Grogan: I agree. Many residents feel that the Environment Agency's job seems to be to try and do everything possible to nod through the application rather than rigorously interrogate it. Indeed, as I pointed out in my opening remarks, the Environment Agency has responsibilities under the Waste Regulations (England and Wales) 2011, passed by the coalition, to enforce the waste hierarchy, which puts reuse and recycling at the top. It fails to do this.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): In my constituency of Swansea East, in the very pleasant community of Llansamlet, Biffa is currently attempting to get permission to build one of those incinerators and 2,500 members of the local community have come together to object. Does my hon. Friend agree that placing such a facility in the middle of a community is detrimental to its health, schools and homes and that we should be looking at other ways of disposing of our waste?

John Grogan: I am quite shocked by that application, but it mirrors an application in the centre of Keighley, to which I will refer in my closing remarks.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene in this brilliant debate. I agree with his propositions, particularly on the waste hierarchy and the likelihood that incinerators will reduce both the amount that we recycle and our attempts to reduce waste in the first place. Does he agree that there is a risk, through so-called gasification, that we may have incineration by another means, and that it is absolutely right that applications should be considered—if they are to be considered at all—only if they are away from centres of population, on the precautionary principle?

John Grogan: I agree absolutely with the hon. Gentleman on the precautionary principle. However one defines incineration, it is true that the more of it there is in a local authority, the less recycling there is.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Some 7,000 constituents in Carnbroe rejected this for 11 years, and the council fully backs the community. The Scottish Government keep overturning that decision, however, and keep coming back. Will anyone listen to the communities who actually have to live with the incinerators?

John Grogan: My hon. Friend makes a point and in a moment I will briefly set out the case for a moratorium on new incinerators, which I think is definitely needed.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): At the moment, my constituents are very worried about proposals for a new incinerator the size of Battersea power station in the Hampshire downs countryside, which is a rural location, not an urban one. It would be in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), whom it is good to see in her place. Given that incineration is not recycling and the proposals would lead to countless lorry movements just to feed the machine, does the hon. Gentleman agree that it would be good to hear from the Minister about where the Government see incineration in the hierarchy of waste management in England today?

John Grogan: I, like the hon. Gentleman, am looking forward to the Minister's remarks. As I said, I do not think that the Environmental Agency has done nearly enough to enforce that waste hierarchy, to which all parties are committed.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend knows that I have a long-term interest in the sector. Indeed, he can check the Register of Members' Financial Interests—I have always been interested in energy from waste. He should be very cautious about calling it "incineration". Energy from waste is at its best—looking at Sheffield or the new power plant in Leeds—when, for most of the town or city, it not only feeds into the electricity supply, but is a large contributor to it. On the other hand, if the heat is retained and heats the whole of the centre of Sheffield, as it does, it is a very valuable part of the balance that we need. We can never recycle everything, and if we do not have that balance between good quality energy from waste, recycling and minimising throwing stuff in holes in the ground, we are lost. I would love that sort of facility in my constituency, where we have an old-fashioned incinerator, but all the heat goes out into the atmosphere.

John Grogan: I say to my hon. Friend that I used to chair the last but one coalmine to close in this country; Hatfield Colliery, in Yorkshire. Incinerators actually emit more CO₂ per megawatt-hour generated than any other fossil fuel source, including coal. On CO₂ and global warming grounds alone, we must consider that.

I will go back to my remarks about whether we have enough incinerators. Only one independent analysis is widely respected: Eunomia's. It is an environmental consultant with expertise in this area that has issued 12 reports, the last of which was published in July 2017. The analysis clearly demonstrates that operational incineration capacity has grown rapidly, from 6.3 million tonnes in 2009-10, to 13.5 million tonnes in 2017. Additional capacity is assessed to be 4.8 million tonnes.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): I appreciate that many councils and local authorities are entering contracts relating to providers of incineration. In doing so, they are diverting waste that should be recycled, because of those contractual agreements. That is creating a big problem.

John Grogan: The hon. Gentleman hits the nail on the head. It creates a perverse incentive for local authorities which, on the one hand, have a duty to recycle, but on the other must fulfil a contract that they have entered into. That means that when Eunomia did the analysis it looked at a series of projections, assessing the capacity of the incinerators against the availability of the feedstock of waste. In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), I would point out the assumed levels of recycling to which we are committed in Yorkshire in particular. We are committed to a recycling rate of 55% by 2025, 60% by 2030, and 65% by 2035. Eunomia and, indeed, the Government have accepted that we will have enough incineration capacity to meet the residual waste, given those recycling targets. Tom Murray, the deputy head of resources and waste policy at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, said this year:

"Our evidence is suggesting that, when we meet recycling targets...recycling will leave no capacity gap" with respect to incineration.

Mr Sheerman: Before my hon. Friend moves on from recycling, will he give way? He is a good friend of mine.

John Grogan: Just because my hon. Friend is a very good friend: I have only a few minutes left, so I can take a short intervention.

Mr Sheerman: My hon. Friend knows that his local authority's recycling is pathetic, as is mine. My challenge for him is, if energy from waste is stopped, what will we do with the non-recyclable plastics that are pouring into every town and city in the country?

John Grogan: The way I would help local authorities to recycle more would be to tax incinerators, just as landfill is taxed, to give them the money to increase recycling rates. That is being considered by the Treasury at the moment. The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury said recently that the Treasury

"would be willing to consider a future incineration tax once further infrastructure has been put in place to reduce...the amount of plastics that are incinerated, further improving the environment and reducing the amount of throwaway single-use plastics."—[*Official Report, Finance (No. 3) Public Bill Committee*, 6 December 2018; c. 299.]

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): On the point about incinerator tax, does the hon. Gentleman agree that in situations where, as in my constituency, there is a proposal for a major incinerator yards outside the constituency boundary, and local people feel they have no ownership to enable them to affect the outcome, whether through their MP or councillors, it is particularly important that any tax that might come in should be shared broadly with neighbouring communities, and not just in the council area where the incinerator is?

John Grogan: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. There are precedents that can be looked at, such as the landfill tax. However, I hope that the Government—any Government—will rapidly bring the matter to a conclusion, to give certainty. Instead of just flirting with the idea of taxation it is now time to act on it.

If the House will indulge me, in my remaining couple of minutes I need to refer to the outstanding application in the Keighley area. I commend the work of Aire Valley Against Incineration, which has campaigned hard on the issue. There is planning permission. It is quite unusual to apply for planning permission and not to apply at the same stage for an environmental permit. I do not know whether the Minister would have a comment to make on that. The application for an environmental permit bears little resemblance to the original planning application. Fifty per cent. more waste is envisaged. There is planning permission for 100,000 tonnes, and an extra 48,000 tonnes is now being added. The layout of the buildings and chimney stack has changed. The nature of the waste that might be burned has changed. The planning committee was told that only residual waste in the form of refuse-derived fuel would be included. Now the Environment Agency is being told that the facility will accept residual, commercial and industrial waste of a similar nature to unsorted municipal solid waste.

There is therefore great concern in the community. We hope that the Environment Agency will do a rigorous job. There is even more concern because of the nature

of the company involved—Endless Energy, which is not even a member of the trade association. It is based in the Isle of Man. It has two directors who have been named by the Environment Agency. One of them, Rajinder Singh Chatha, was the controlling force behind Oddbins, which has recently gone into administration. A tax tribunal recently found that he was

"intentionally misleading about some of the explicit lies that the tribunal has found were told to HMRC".

It decided that he was not a fit and proper person to be allowed to sell or distribute duty suspended alcohol. He is not a fit and proper person to sell alcohol! Despite the pleadings of my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) that this industry should be given a fair chance, these people are cowboys. Until recently cowboys were running Keighley Cougars, our proud rugby league team, but they have now gone. I will be writing to the chair of the Environment Agency to ask how it can possibly trust a man who the tax authorities say cannot be trusted.

Mr Sheerman: Will my hon. Friend give way? He did mention me.

John Grogan: I will not give way to my hon. Friend for a third time, but I look forward to having a cup of tea with the chair of the all-party group for Yorkshire and Northern Lincolnshire, and restoring our friendship. In the meantime, I hope the Front-Bench speakers will be robust about this. Obviously the Opposition Front-Bench speaker cannot speak on this occasion, but there is a chance that we could reach agreement on incinerators, perhaps even before we reach agreement on Europe across the House.

11.16 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan) on securing this important debate. It has clearly attracted a lot of attention from Members across the House.

The hon. Gentleman has particular concerns about the growth of incineration and the potential for overcapacity, and the negative impact that that might have on the drive for increased recycling. In the waste hierarchy, incineration is only above landfill, and we want to ensure that we reduce, reuse and recycle. Whether that involves promoting resource efficiency and moving towards a circular economy, the actions taken will allow us to extract maximum value from resources, and recover and regenerate products and materials at the end of their lifespan. We set that out clearly in our resources and waste strategy, which also set higher recycling ambitions. Those include delivering a 65% municipal waste recycling rate by 2035, and a minimum 70% recycling rate for packaging waste by 2030.

Hon. Members will know about the increase in recycling rates between 2001 and 2017-18, and local authority recycling has more than tripled, increasing from 12% to more than 42%. Over the same period, waste sent to landfill has gone from 79% to 12.5%. Policies aimed at diverting waste away from landfill have meant that the volume of waste being treated at energy-from-waste plants has increased, but that growth must not hinder

recycling ambitions. Even after delivering higher recycling levels, there will still be waste that we cannot recycle or reuse, either because it is contaminated or because there are no end markets for the material. Our overarching ambition is to manage that waste in a way that maximises its value as a resource, while minimising the environmental impact of its management.

We currently deal with such waste in three main ways: landfill, incineration with energy recovery, or export as refuse-derived fuel. Landfill is the least favoured option for waste. We have been clear in our strategy that we wish to reduce the level of municipal waste that is sent to landfill down to 10%—or less—by 2035.

Mr Sheerman: Will the Minister give way?

Dr Coffey: I was about to answer the hon. Gentleman's point so I will not give way. He has already contributed twice to the debate.

Energy from waste or incineration with energy recovery should not compete with greater waste prevention, reuse or recycling. England currently has enough capacity to treat around 36% of residual municipal waste, and the projected increase in recycling thanks to our resources and waste strategy measures will reduce the future level of residual waste treatment infrastructure that is required. However, energy from waste will continue to have an important role in diverting waste from landfill—that is the point that the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) tried to make clear.

Mr Sheerman: The Minister has just mentioned me. Will she give way on that point?

Dr Coffey: I will not. That is the best management option for most waste that cannot be reused or recycled, in terms of environmental impact and getting value from waste as a resource.

Energy-from-waste plants are regulated by the Environment Agency in England and must comply with the strict emission limits set by the industrial emissions directive. Every application for a new plant is assessed by the Environment Agency to ensure that it uses the best available techniques to minimise emissions, and that it will not have a significant effect on local air quality. The Environment Agency will not issue an environmental permit if the proposed plant will have a significant impact on the environment or harm human health. Once operational, energy-from-waste plants are closely regulated through a programme of regular inspections and audits carried out by the Environment Agency, which also carefully checks the results of the continuous air emissions monitoring that all plants must do.

Hon. Members should also note that Public Health England's position remains that modern, well-managed incinerators operated in accordance with an environmental permit are not a significant risk to public health. The Government have been clear that we want to maximise the resource value of waste, including residual waste. That is why we are working to drive greater efficiency of energy from waste plants by encouraging the use of the heat those plants produce.

Mr Sheerman: Will the Minister give way?

Dr Coffey: I am trying to respond to the hon. Member for Keighley, who brought this 30-minute debate. I am conscious that other people have made points, but I will deal with his points first. He specifically referred to the Aire Valley incinerator; I am aware of what is being proposed, and I understand that City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council has granted Endless Energy, formerly known as the Aire Valley Energy from Waste facility, planning permission to develop such a facility for the recovery of energy from non-hazardous waste, to be built on the site of the former gasworks east of Keighley. The proposed facility will use standard incineration technology to generate electricity.

Endless Energy has also applied to the Environment Agency for an environmental permit, which it will need to operate its facility. The agency is carrying out a full technical assessment of Endless Energy's proposals to determine whether a permit can be issued. The Environment Agency has consulted the public as part of its determination and has received more than 2,000 responses. It also consults Public Health England and the local government director of public health on every energy from waste plant application that it receives, and takes their comments into account when deciding whether to issue a permit.

Mr Sheerman: Will the Minister give way?

Dr Coffey: I am trying to respond to the questions that have been posed already—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Order. The Minister has made it clear she is not giving way.

Mr Sheerman: On a point of order, Mr Betts—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I hope it is a point of order, Mr Sheerman.

Mr Sheerman: On a point of order, I have never been in a Westminster Hall debate where a Minister has refused to give way, even when she has mentioned the person who wants to intervene. I have never known a Minister fail to give way and just read her speech and ignore the fact that this is a debating Chamber.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): The hon. Gentleman has been here long enough to know that that is not a point of order.

Dr Coffey: As I say, I am trying to answer the points made by the hon. Member for Keighley, whose debate this is. He referred to a planning application, but he will be aware that it will not be a matter for the national Government in this instance to determine whether the changes to the planning application are appropriate. My hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) have a planning application that is under way as a nationally significant infrastructure project, I believe. They will be aware that again, I cannot comment specifically in that regard.

However, it is important that we recognise that one of the things we are doing in the resources and waste strategy is effectively removing this condition, which I believe is where the hon. Member for Keighley has a problem, of TEEP—technically, environmentally

[*Dr Thérèse Coffey*]

and economically practicable—exemptions, which allow exemptions based on technical, economic and environmental differences. Under the proposals that we have put out in the consultation, which we hope to include in the Environment Bill in the next Session of Parliament, there is a specific removal of that TEEP exemption on what councils will be required to collect for recycling. It will determine not how they collect it but what they collect.

Therefore, that situation will no longer arise; if the responses to the consultation agree with what the Government believe is the right policy to take forward, councils will no longer have the ability to simply say, “It is not economically viable for us to do this anymore.” That is quite a revolution in the resource and waste strategy.

Returning to the point about the Environment Agency’s being more robust, there are some challenges relating to how the EA can implement the TEEP exemptions with councils in its considerations. That is an important part of why we are pushing forward that proposal in our consultations, which I hope will be in the future Bill.

Mr Sheerman *rose*—

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Order. We need a bit of order in this debate. The Minister has made it absolutely clear that she is not giving way to the hon. Members. Can we please get on with the debate? She has made that absolutely clear.

Dr Coffey: I am very conscious of the quality of people being considered. That is another reason why we are starting to make changes, which I hope the Environment Bill will strengthen, that will allow the Environment Agency to assess the different offences that people may have committed. At the moment, it is restricted specifically to issues surrounding waste. We are broadening that out.

I do not know how that would apply to the issue to which the hon. Member for Keighley referred about somebody not being licensed to sell alcohol. I do not know what that would mean with regard to offences, and whether such a condition would be introduced. I assure him that the industry is fed up of cowboys taking this on, but it is important that the district council and the Environment Agency have different roles in the assessment of energy-from-waste plants—one is about the planning, the other is about the environmental impact and keeping in line with the industrial emissions directive.

Mr Sheerman *rose*—

Dr Coffey: The hon. Member for Keighley has suggested an incineration tax previously. As he pointed out, tax policy is generally a matter for the Treasury. Although energy from waste can play an important role in reducing the amount of waste going to landfill, in the long term we want to maximise the amount of waste used for recycling. Again, wider policies are set out in our resources

and waste strategy. Changes that we will introduce to the extent of producer responsibility will effectively incentivise the design of products that are much more straightforward to recycle.

That is an opportunity, but I am also aware that industry and the Environmental Services Association are concerned that, if we do not reach 65% in that time or do not make progress more quickly, there will be a lack of incineration. In effect, that will be a commercial decision for them to consider, but, as was mentioned earlier, we want to encourage the use of the heat that plants produce, and to work closely with industry to secure a substantial increase in the number of energy from waste plants that are formally recognised as achieving recovery status R1. We will ensure that all future EfW plants achieve recovery status.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) rightly talked about transparent information for residents. I am conscious that some environmental assessments are very technical. That is why we have the Environment Agency to make that judgment. However, there is still an opportunity for residents to table questions either directly to the developer or to the Environment Agency during its consideration.

Priti Patel: Will the Minister give way?

Dr Coffey: I am just trying to get through all the different points. My hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) rightly talked about the local community, but he should be aware that most such plants are dealt with through local planning. They tend to be in the local plan, so it is important that we challenge those different elements during the consideration.

I am conscious that two people want to intervene. I invite the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) to do so first.

Mrs Hodgson: That is really kind of the Minister. May I apologise for my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) on behalf of us all?

Dr Coffey: I was just about to invite him to intervene.

Mrs Hodgson: He has gone, thankfully. The Minister will be aware that there has been an application for a gasification plant in my constituency. The key bone of contention is that no decision was made on what form of technology would be used before the application was put in. Does she agree that in order for people to campaign and scrutinise such applications properly, those making them should say up front what form of technology they will use?

Dr Coffey: That is an important consideration. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) mentioned pyrolysis or gasification. Different technologies will have different environmental impacts. There is starting to be a trend towards that, possibly because it is then easier to generate heat. However, I am not an expert in the individual technologies. It is worthy of consideration, but the hon. Lady’s constituents should be assured by the industrial emissions directive-tough regulations that are already in place, and will be carried over in the event of an EU exit.

I was going to invite the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) to intervene, but I had not realised that he had walked out of the debate. I am sure that he will write to me anyway. I will finish by saying that it really matters that we transition to better designed products, and make more of recycling, reducing and re-using the waste that we generate. The Government are introducing very strong parts of our resources and waste strategy, and I am confident that that will lead to better environmental outcomes. I want councils to use every lever possible, including the ACE UK recycling site in Halifax, which has offered, through Costa Coffee, to do a lot more recycling of coffee cups; it is the only place that recycles Tetra Paks. Overall, I believe that we are making good progress.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Jallianwala Bagh Massacre

[DAVID HANSON *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered the Jallianwala Bagh massacre.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for two reasons, Mr Hanson. First, I have not served under your chairmanship before and secondly, as I will allude to later on, you and I have shared some of the memories of this terrible event.

It is worth remembering what happened 100 years ago—in fact, it began 100 years ago today. Amritsar is a holy city that is immensely crammed, as it was 100 years ago. It is a place where people live on top of one another. Thousands had gathered at the Bagh in the days before 13 April 1919. British Army officers greatly feared an uprising in or around May, which is when the Army changed its positions for the summer months in India.

On 10 April, a protest took place at the home of the deputy commissioner of Amritsar, calling for the release of two independence movement leaders. The protests spilled over, protestors were shot and some were killed. Bear in mind that this is three days before the massacre itself. That sparked rioting, during which British banks and people were targeted and British lives were lost. On 11 April, a British schoolteacher, Marcella Sherwood, was attacked and left for dead when cycling home. She was saved by local Indian men who recognised her from the school.

Between 11 and 13 April, civil disobedience and protest rang out across the Punjab. By 13 April, the Army had implemented martial law, and the measures included the prohibition of mass assembly. Any gathering of more than four people could be dispersed by the military. On 13 April, 100 years ago, approximately 15,000 people were gathered in the square. It was a common meeting place for people of all religions. They were not just people of the Sikh faith; there were Hindus, Christians, Muslims and Sikhs, present to celebrate and coincide with the Sikh new year festival of Baisakhi. They were gathered in the square. The crowd was peaceful and unarmed. The location, date and time had been set the day before so citizens could register discontent with the political situation, but on a peaceful basis.

On the morning of the massacre, General Dyer had paraded his troops, flexing his power and authority. With martial law on its side, the Army knew it could break up any large groups. However, the scale of the gathering exceeded the Army's expectation and it was outnumbered by an astonishing margin. The square where the gathering took place is approximately 200 yards by 200 yards. It is surrounded by high walls and has a deep pit in the space. Those present were hemmed in with no shelter and no means of escape.

On the day, the reports say that the massacre took place with 50 Sikhs and Gurkhas under General Dyer's command. They shot 33 rounds each—a total of 1,650 rounds. The official estimate was that 379 people had been killed and more than 1,000 injured. The reality was that the crowd was so dense that one bullet would kill three, four or even five people as it passed

[Bob Blackman]

through them. The death toll is therefore believed to be far higher, with more than 1,000 people killed and many thousands injured.

I am sure colleagues will want to relay stories about the massacre. I will talk also about my personal experience, having been to the site. We have to remember this was 100 years ago, when there was no 24/7 news coverage and no mobile phones to take pictures of what had happened and the atrocity that had occurred. It took the British Government until October 1919 to open an inquiry under the direction of the then Home Secretary, Edwin Montagu, led by Lord William Hunter. The inquiry became known as the Hunter Commission, after the Government of India had originally called it the disorders inquiry—talk about an inapt name. The inquiry called witnesses from across the region, which spanned what is now Pakistan, as well as India. At the time, and importantly, those questioned were not put under oath when giving their evidence. In November, after the key eye witness accounts had been taken, General Dyer himself was called to give evidence. For reasons unknown to us—or to anyone—he refused legal counsel or advocacy and represented himself. Almost immediately, he made trouble for himself. Reports of the inquiry suggest that:

“Again and again, Dyer convicts himself out of his own mouth. As his friend Major General Nigel Woodyatt later told him, ‘he was bound to get the worst of it; not so much for what he had done, but for what he had said.’”

That is a particular view.

The report published by the commission found, in summary, that notice to disperse was not issued to the crowd at all, which should have been done by the Army, under its normal terms of engagement, and that Dyer had exceeded his authority—note that he was, temporarily, a brigadier, was really not qualified and had had his own uniform made in his own guise. It also deemed that the time for which the shooting went on, for 1,650 rounds, was an error, although I think that “an absolute atrocity” would be an accurate perspective. The inquiry found no evidence that supported the Army’s theory that a conspiracy was in motion to overthrow British rule in the Punjab.

There have been various different visits to the region since. Her Majesty the Queen visited in 1961, 1983 and 1997. Up until 1997 she made no comment, but in that visit she said in her speech:

“It is no secret that there have been some difficult episodes in our past—Jallianwala Bagh, which I shall visit tomorrow, is a distressing example. But history cannot be rewritten, however much we might sometimes wish otherwise. It has its moments of sadness, as well as gladness. We must learn from the sadness and build on the gladness.”

I think that if Her Majesty the Queen had made that speech later, she would have used different words.

Asquith, leader of the Liberals and a former Prime Minister, said it was

“one of the worst outrages in the whole of our history”,

and I agree with him. Winston Churchill, who was Secretary of State for Air at the time, said:

“The crowd was unarmed, except with bludgeons. It was not attacking anybody or anything. It was holding a seditious meeting. When fire had been opened upon it to disperse it, it tried to run away. Pinned up in a narrow place considerably smaller than Trafalgar Square, with hardly any exits, and packed together so that one bullet would drive through three or four bodies, the people ran madly this way and the other. When the fire was

directed upon the centre, they ran to the sides. The fire was then directed upon the sides. Many threw themselves down on the ground, and the fire was then directed on the ground. This was continued for 8 or 10 minutes, and it stopped only when the ammunition had reached the point of exhaustion.”—[*Official Report*, 8 July 1920; Vol. 131, c. 1729.]

If they had had more ammunition, they would probably have carried on shooting.

General Dyer commented—though I cannot give the date—that,

“I did not know the city very well. It was no longer a question of merely dispersing the crowd; but one of producing a sufficient moral effect, from a military point of view, not only on those who were present but more especially throughout the Punjab...I think it quite possible that I could have dispersed the crowd without firing, but they would have come back again and laughed.”

That he shot people in such a fashion condemns him out of his own mouth.

He then apparently commented to women at the consulate that evening:

“I’m for the high jump but I saved you women and children.”

No one was under threat. It was a peaceful religious gathering, and we should hang our heads in shame at what was done in the name of Britain.

General Dyer went on to receive a hero’s funeral. He gave the order to shoot, and in my judgment, having read about this topic, he was unfit to hold the position he held. He showed no remorse at any stage for the deaths he had caused, or the damage he had done to the Indian people and to India-UK relations. He remarked to his underlings at the height of the firing:

“Do you think they’ve had enough? No, we’ll give them four rounds more.”

That was outrageous. In spite of that, General Dyer was vigorously defended by—I say this with shame—the Conservative party, as well as most of the military establishment. He evaded any penalties post inquiry, as his military superiors advised that they could find no fault with his actions, his orders, or his conduct otherwise. However, during debate in the Commons, Asquith made his appropriate comments.

At the time of the massacre, O’Dwyer was the lieutenant general of Punjab, and it was understood that General Dyer was his man in the military. Dyer did his bidding and followed his orders closely. A theory has been repeatedly floated that O’Dwyer approved the order to open fire, and was the chief architect of the plan. O’Dwyer, like many of his ilk, was paranoid about a plot to overthrow British rule in the region. The regional British rulers were convinced that the increasingly popular independence movement would involve violence against Brits on a large scale, and would lead to humiliation for the empire—note that the commission found that suspicion without merit and completely untrue.

In March 1940, O’Dwyer was shot by Udham Singh outside a Westminster venue. Singh had been at Amritsar that fateful day, and the story goes that he himself had been shot and wounded. That led to a life of activism that resulted in him fatally shooting the man who, alongside Dyer, many in the Raj held responsible for the massacre. Udham Singh was hanged for taking his revenge.

You and I visited the site of the massacre in August 2016, Mr Hanson, and prior to seeing it at first hand, I expressed ignorance about what had happened there.

Nothing can prepare people for seeing the site and imagining what it must have been like for the 15,000 people trapped within that arena—literally in a shooting gallery—by the soldiers who were present. The atmosphere must have been incredible; it must have been horrendous for the people who suffered that massacre. Remember, not only were they shot: some threw themselves down the well to try to escape the bullets, and many were crushed to death while trying to get down that well and out of the troops' firing line.

Mr Hanson, we saw at first hand the museum that is being created on the site of the massacre, and the fact that India will never forget. We owe it to the victims and their families to never forget what happened in our name. I hope that there will be an apology from the British Government, not just an acceptance of a terrible crime. When the Minister replies, I look forward to him not explaining away what happened, but apologising for our involvement and for what was done in our name. That would be a start; it would clear the air. Equally, I hope that Ministers will go to commemorative events in India: one is to be held later this month, but I particularly hope that Ministers will attend in July, when I understand the museum will be formally opened.

Those who follow these things will know that I have asked for an apology before. I signed two early-day motions—413 in October 2017 and 1868 in November 2018—and last night I tabled another one, 2281, calling on the British Government to apologise and to attend the commemorative events. I encourage colleagues from across the House to sign that early-day motion to demonstrate our cross-party support.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I certainly support the hon. Gentleman in asking the British Government to apologise, because what he has described—we have all read about it in the history books—is horrendous. Although he mentioned that 1,000 people could have been killed, the Indian Government say the figure is much higher, so the figure is disputed, although I do not contradict what he has said. I certainly support him, and many people in my constituency feel very strongly about it. Also, the area was known as the Indian subcontinent then and people from Bangladesh and Pakistan could equally identify with the massacre. Does he agree with me that they too should be involved in any apology?

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. He is right to say that the number of deaths is disputed. The Indian Government estimate more than 1,000 and the official report at the time stated 379. Because of the absolute disaster on the day, the figures are disputed and we do not have further records. People had gathered from across the Indian subcontinent for the Baisakhi. They came from what we now know as Pakistan and Bangladesh and from India itself, so other countries were involved, as well as citizens and families of other countries. Clearly, they should be remembered, and other Governments will no doubt have a view.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I simply want to add my endorsement. I have a significant Sikh population in my constituency—more than 3,000 people—and I was delighted to attend a Baisakhi event at the weekend

to parade with them. The topic often comes up when I visit the gurdwara, so I want to endorse the comments made by my hon. Friend and I wish him well in his pursuit of the apology.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. This weekend gurdwaras across the UK and across the world will remember the massacre with sadness and anger, and we should recognise that.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Should it not be reinforced to the Minister and the Foreign Office that the 100th anniversary is the most pertinent time to make an apology? With Baisakhi festivals taking place all over the country in the next couple of weeks, it would be good if the Minister were able to give good news to those gatherings today.

Bob Blackman: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention. The centenary of such an event is the right time to apologise and own up to what happened, as opposed to simply acknowledging the dreadful event and atrocity that took place. The British Government at the time accepted responsibility, but did not issue an apology, and one should be issued, particularly at this time. Although a mixture of people of different faiths were massacred, it was predominantly people of the Sikh religion who suffered.

I classify myself as a firm friend of India. I am a devout patriot of this country, but it makes me sad and ashamed that the massacre was perpetrated in our name. It is time to own up to it and make an apology and time to make suitable reparations for the damage it caused not only to people present and their families, but to the relationship between India and the United Kingdom.

Several hon. Members rose—

David Hanson (in the Chair): I have eight hon. and right hon. Members who wish to speak. The Front-Bench speakers have to be called at 3.30 pm, so we have 40 minutes, which allows four to five minutes maximum per Member.

2.50 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for securing this important debate and I declare my interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for British Sikhs. As we approach the 100th anniversary of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar on 13 April 1919, it is clear that there needs to be a formal apology from the United Kingdom Government that accepts and acknowledges their part in the massacre. We heard from the hon. Gentleman about the events that transpired. I will not go into much further detail. Instead, I will focus on what should happen now and how we can seek to ensure that such a tragedy helps us to better understand our history and shape our future.

The outrage and the shocking nature of the attack, even 100 years ago, can be seen in comments and condemnation of the massacre, including from former Prime Minister Asquith, who called it

“one of the worst outrages in the whole of our history”.

[Preet Kaur Gill]

Churchill called it

“an extraordinary event, a monstrous event, an event which stands in singular and sinister isolation.”

Under the command of Colonel Reginald Dyer, the British Indian Army fired rifles into a crowd of people, who were predominantly Sikhs but also Hindus and Muslims, gathered in Jallianwala Bagh to celebrate Vaisakhi. When the firing finally ended, the public place had turned into a garden of the dead. Even children, some as young as three, were not spared.

It is not enough to condemn the incident and express shame. The UK Government must show respect to the worldwide Sikh community and have the courage to make a full apology for the deeply shameful massacre of innocent, unarmed civilians in Amritsar 100 years ago.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on all the work she does as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for British Sikhs. I join her and others in calling for an outright apology. It is frankly shocking that we have not had that, after a number of calls for it in Parliament. Does she agree that we need a further apology for the findings of the Hunter commission, which concluded that General Dyer committed a “grave error”? It was not a grave error; it was a massacre of innocent men, women and children, and we need an apology.

David Hanson (in the Chair): Order. I say gently to hon. Members that interventions must be short. A significant number of Members wish to contribute to the debate, so there are only four to five minutes each. The longer Members speak in interventions, the shorter that time will be.

Preet Kaur Gill: My hon. Friend raises a good point about the Hunter commission, which I am sure the Minister heard.

Regrettably, the massacre came within months of the end of the great war, in which tens of thousands of turban-wearing Sikhs from Punjab had sacrificed their lives for our freedom in Europe. The formal apology should include the victims of the massacre, their families and descendants, the people of Punjab and, given the location, timing and identity of the massacre, the worldwide Sikh community. That is the least that the UK Government can do on the 100th anniversary of the Amritsar massacre. Will they take this opportunity finally to do the right thing?

That is not enough. The apology should mark the start of learning of teaching our children about the massacre in history lessons in our schools and learning about the context of the British empire, which through imperialism and colonialism had exploited and subjugated people around the world. According to polling in 2017, 44% of people were proud of Britain’s history of colonialism, and YouGov polling in 2014 showed that nearly half believed that countries were better off for having been colonised. The Amritsar massacre was not the only brutal act carried out, and we need to teach our children about it, the shared history that it creates and the backdrop of what the Commonwealth is and means. In that, children will learn where they came from and why they are where they are today.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Preet Kaur Gill: I will not take any more interventions as I am conscious of time; my apologies.

By othering or writing certain people out of British history—casting them simply as pawns or as a means to an end rather than individuals with their own histories—can we really be surprised that hate crime continues to exist or that racism continues to fester? The question therefore remains whether an apology without a genuine understanding of the past can ever provide the closure that so many Sikhs need.

2.54 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): It is a great privilege to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill). Her speech touched many chords that echo with us all.

I was going to speak about the history of the massacre, but that has been very well covered by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), and I was going to speak about some of the cries for justice, but that has been very well covered by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston, so I will cover what I think the massacre says to us today.

It is important to remember that this massacre, this crime—because that is what it was—does not just speak to the past. It speaks to the future; it speaks to us as people in this House, in this country, in this world, because it reminds us that the responsibilities that we hold today have consequences going forward for generations. It reminds us of the significance of the decisions that we take today—whether, like the House of Lords 100 years ago, to celebrate a man so guilty of an extraordinary crime or, like the House of Commons then, to condemn him. Those decisions will echo on the children and grandchildren of those people. It reminds us also that the divisions that we once saw—British soldiers on one side and Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus on the other—are not as stark today as they once were.

For me, that is the message of hope in this. In all great tragedies—this is undoubtedly one of the greatest—there is a message of hope, and the message of hope here is that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston and I, whose peoples have been victims of different massacres in different parts of the world over the last century, are sitting here as equals, representing communities that are equal, in a country that really does understand what it is to come together, to bring together communities of many distinctions, many differences, many creeds and colours.

That is why I think the moment for honesty is here. I thought the hon. Lady spoke beautifully when she said this. The moment for honesty is here, because an apology is not the undoing of an act that ended 100 years ago with the deaths of almost 1,000 people. An apology cannot bring them back to life; it cannot right that wrong. But what it can do is turn a page and say to a generation of Indians today and to a generation of British people today: “Neither of us are those people any more. Neither of us were there on that terrible day in Jallianwala Bagh. But we both recognise that the shared history that binds us, the shared history that brought us together at that point in time a century ago,

unites us today.” An apology would allow us to move forward, to look to the future and to build the future that the people of the UK, the people of India and people around the world really want to see.

2.58 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing this timely and important debate.

The massacre at Jallianwala Bagh stands out as one of the most appalling and significant episodes in colonial history, not only because of the brutality of what happened there, but because of the context and its huge and long-lasting effect. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) said, the context is that it was just after the first world war, when Indian soldiers had made huge sacrifices in fighting side by side with British soldiers. Many of those Indian soldiers came from the Punjab, which has a long and proud military history. However, when they went home, they were not treated as heroes, but found themselves subject to harsh colonial laws such as the Rowlatt Acts, which were passed in March 1919 and deprived people of their liberty—they sanctioned indefinite detention and incarceration without trial. All of that is the backdrop to the protests that were happening in the Punjab at the time.

The hon. Member for Harrow East read out the horrific details, and I will not dwell on them, because we now know them: a peaceful crowd of thousands; the attempt to bring in an armoured car that was foiled only by the narrowness of the alleyway on the approach to the Bagh; the lack of any warning or any attempt to disperse the crowd by peaceful means; 50 soldiers, armed with Lee-Enfield rifles; 10 minutes of firing; 1,650 rounds fired; people vainly jumping into the well to try to escape the bullets. Official estimates were that 379 people were killed and three times that many injured, but other estimates suggest many, many more of both.

The rounds fired were indiscriminate—Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus were all among the dead. We know of Churchill’s verdict that it was a “monstrous event”. Those horrific details ensure that it is remembered 100 years later. Many see Jallianwala Bagh as the moment when the movement for Indian independence became unstoppable—the moment when many people in India gave up any hope for colonial rule—and perhaps even as the beginning of the end of the empire itself. The episode was not only outstanding in its brutality; it achieved the very opposite of the intention of General Dyer.

Let us turn to the question of an apology. When Prime Minister David Cameron visited the site in 2013, he described this as a

“deeply shameful event in British history”,

but stopped short of an apology. Now, as we approach the 100th anniversary, there are growing calls for an apology, as we have heard in this debate. I add my voice to those calls. I am currently co-ordinating a cross-party letter calling for an apology, which has been signed by the hon. Member for Harrow East, the hon. Member

for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), who chairs the Foreign Affairs Committee, and many of my hon. Friends.

Some people ask why we should apologise for one atrocity, when there have been many more in history. “Why should we judge the past by the standards of today?” The crucial point is that this massacre was not judged by the standards of today; it was widely condemned at the time by Churchill, Asquith and Josiah Wedgwood. In response to what happened, the first Asian Nobel laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, returned his knighthood in disgust. The exceptional horror was there for all to see in 1919 and 1920, and not just today. In any case, what kind of argument says that, as we cannot do everything, we should do nothing? This demands far more than a cycle of whataboutery in an attempt to change the subject. It was a particularly heinous and appalling act, and had enormous historical as well as human significance. A lack of an apology has continued to be a thorn in the side of the relationship between the UK and India, even though great progress has been made—today we are friendly and cordial diplomatic powers with good relations.

The Jallianwala Bagh atrocity still lives on in memory. As we approach the 100th anniversary this weekend, the time is right for an official apology. It should not take 100 years to say sorry for such a terrible crime, but saying sorry 100 years on is better than not saying sorry at all. I hope that the Minister will heed the calls made in this debate—on a cross-party basis—for an apology. If he cannot personally issue the apology today, I hope the Prime Minister makes one soon on behalf of the Government and the country, 100 years on from this terrible crime.

3.4 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hanson. I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for securing this afternoon’s debate. He set out the background very well. It is clear from the *Hansard* transcripts of the time that there was uncertainty about the events as they happened, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned. As the truth emerged, some of the things that people had said at the time did not reflect what had actually happened on the ground.

The Jallianwala Bagh massacre is a particularly awful event to read about, because it was a methodical and disturbing mass murder of innocent people who were peacefully protesting in a public square. Many of them had come on their way back from worship at the Golden Temple, and there were also children there. The exits were blocked and unarmed people were shot at over and over, as we heard, until the ammunition was all but exhausted.

The incident changed the course of history, but as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) said, it certainly was not an isolated crime by the British empire. The massacre came in the context of the repressive Rowlatt Act 1919, which permitted political cases in India to be tried without juries and included internment of suspects without trial. That in turn led to protests and an escalation of violence, to martial law and the forbidding of gatherings. The massacre was followed by other events, such as public floggings and

[Alison Thewliss]

forcing people to crawl in the streets just to humiliate them. Mahatma Gandhi said that he had no doubt that “the shooting was ‘frightful’, the loss of innocent life deplorable. But the slow torture, degradation and emasculation that followed was much worse, more calculated, malicious and soul-killing, and the actors who performed the deeds deserve greater condemnation than General Dyer for the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. The latter merely destroyed a few bodies but the others tried to kill the soul of a nation.”

India is a country that has contributed greatly to the world in culture and faith, despite enduring such horrific events in its formation. The Indian diaspora, of all faiths and none, who I have known in my constituency show compassion and kindness to others. The Scottish Sikhs who I marched alongside in Saturday’s Vaisakhi celebrations have made a huge impact on their community, providing free meals, running soup kitchens and providing education services for people both at home and abroad. They stand up for human rights abuses and show solidarity for persecuted people around the world. They have invested time, energy and money in Scotland—they are Scottish. They are building in Glasgow two purpose-built and beautiful gurdwaras. We owe it to them to ensure that their legacy is acknowledged and this is not just swept under the carpet.

Of course, it was not just Sikhs who were killed that day; there were Hindus and Muslims, as we have heard, and a peaceful gathering of a cross-section of India’s peoples, who were indiscriminately murdered. A poster featured in a book about the atrocity by London historians Amandeep Singh Madra and Parmjit Singh reads:

“Those who sacrificed their lives for their country, live forever. Brutality crossed all limits at Jallianwala Bagh, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh—everyone cried in grief.”

The Minister knows, as we all do, that there is no justification for what happened. Even 100 years on, that flame of injustice still burns brightly in people’s minds.

Burns said:

“O wad some Power the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!”

At this particular time in history, with the UK leaving the EU, amid the radicalisation of right-wing extremists and the pompous rhetoric about the rebuilding of the British empire, we need a meaningful acknowledgement of the horrific legacy that that empire left behind. It must be for schools everywhere to learn of that legacy, not just for gurdwaras to teach it when people choose to come and visit. Everybody should learn in school of how the peoples of the empire were treated.

Martyn Day: I find myself in full agreement with everything that has been said today, and I echo the calls for a formal apology. It has been said that if we do not learn from history, we are destined to repeat the mistakes of the past. We cannot allow those mistakes to ever be repeated, so we need a clear and unequivocal apology from the Government on behalf of us all.

Alison Thewliss: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. As elected Members of this Parliament, if we allow notions of empire to go unchecked and unchallenged, we fail to acknowledge the pain of that past—the pain for countries all around the world, but particularly in this case for the people of India. It is beyond time for

Her Majesty’s Government to apologise and take responsibility for one of the worst crimes of colonialism. An apology for those events is a very good place to start.

Opportunities for apologies or acknowledgements of the events at Jallianwala Bagh have been missed in recent times. As hon. Members have said, David Cameron visited the site and described the incident as “deeply shameful”, but did not use that ample opportunity to make a formal apology. A visit from Her Majesty and Prince Philip in the 1990s managed to create even more ill-feeling, when Prince Philip said that the Indian Government’s figure for the death toll at the site was over-exaggerated. William and Kate chose not to visit the site on their official tour of India. Those are all opportunities missed, adding to that sense of pain.

It is well beyond time to stop side-stepping the issue and to show some humility and regret for the horrors of the past. I ask the Minister to go back to the Foreign Secretary and encourage him to take the steps that successive Governments have not been brave enough to take.

3.9 pm

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson.

One hundred years ago, the lives of 1,000 men and women were ended and the destiny of millions was changed. I thank my dear friend the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for his work and congratulate him on securing the debate. It has been an opportunity for him and everyone here to discuss and commemorate a historically distant, yet important and emotive subject, and I thank him for his emotional contribution to the debate.

The murders at Jallianwala Bagh are almost unknown in Britain outside the Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities, but to this day they shape the relationship between those countries and the UK. For millions of people across my home state of Punjab, the event is their defining cultural memory of British rule. The massacre finally crystallised in the minds of the intellectual and wealthy middle classes of British India what millions of working-class people already knew: ultimately, imperial rule was neither enlightened nor benevolent, but rather it was brutalising, dehumanising, and murderous. It set in motion the forces that ultimately secured independence.

At the time, the actions of General Dyer were roundly decried by many Members of the House, and the Labour party unanimously passed motions at a national conference, denouncing the killings. As the hon. Member for Harrow East said, there was no majority for support for Dyer in this country, yet a Conservative newspaper, which later merged with *The Daily Telegraph*, raised funds for General Dyer and collected for him the modern equivalent of £1 million—perhaps that was the origin of the hostile environment.

What was not forthcoming was a formal apology from the Government for what had happened, for the lives taken away, or for the injuries to thousands more. I hope that there is agreement today—including among those Members who have been unable to contribute to this debate—that although a formal apology would not undo the hurt and pain, it would send a signal. I do not believe, however, that an apology would be the be-all

and end-all of the matter. I wrote to the previous Prime Minister, David Cameron, demanding an apology, and in 2007 I tabled an early-day motion that was supported by Members from all major political parties and called not just for an apology but for education and commemoration. Last March I asked the Prime Minister whether she would lend her weight to the campaign for remembrance of that brutal day, and I thank the Minister for the communication between us on that subject.

I want children across the country to benefit from learning about the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, and to learn not just about 1,000 years of British success and innovation, but also about the human cost across the world of expedition, exploration and exploitation. This is not just an act of flagellation; it will help British people to understand better our own place in the world, and not to repeat the mistakes of the past. It means that we will know our own history, and how we are seen by people in other cultures and countries. We should also take steps to remember those who were killed, not just through those actions, but by actions that were repeated around the world and perpetrated on communities large and small. Acts of barbarity and cruelty pepper the history of the British empire. Such acts must be remembered, and a monument in central London—the heart and capital of the empire—would be a fitting tribute.

The speeches made today have been emotive. Such emotion runs through the communities of all the countries of British India, and even today the views of millions of people about the United Kingdom are derived from that. Members of the Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Indian communities are meeting this week, in halls, religious places and civic buildings, to commemorate and remember those family members and their friends who lost their lives on 13 April 1919.

I thank the Jallianwala Bagh centenary commemoration committee and the Shaheed Udham Singh Welfare Trust in Birmingham for leading the campaign in this country and supporting us all. I hope that this place will do them and those who were affected 100 years ago the honour of respecting their loss, and that the Prime Minister will officially apologise for what happened and take action to ensure that we do not fall into old behaviours.

3.15 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I, like so many others, take this opportunity to thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for securing the debate and for expressing so eloquently the horror of that day; what it must have been like; and how he appreciated that horror for the first time. That is something that we should all take away from the debate.

I will move on to why, 100 years on, I feel that it is almost inconceivable that we are still discussing whether we should apologise for the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. In this place, we so often pride ourselves on calling for action by others—other countries and Governments—to end injustice. In the last week, we have railed against injustice in Brunei; we have talked at length about injustice all over the world; and we have pondered the 25th anniversary of the horrors of Rwanda. Yet here we are, 100 years later, with this crime and horror on our national conscience, debating whether to apologise.

For me, there is no question; there is no other action but to apologise. It is important that we do so for many reasons. The horror of the massacre, the injustice of it and the mistakes that were made at the time must be acknowledged or we will—as hon. Friends have said—be condemned to repeat them. It is time that we expressed the respect that we feel for our Sikh communities throughout the country, in my Edinburgh West constituency and beyond, and for what their community has suffered at the hands of the British empire. It is important that our constituents feel that respect and know that we do not just acknowledge the massacre, but apologise for what was done 100 years ago.

As the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) said, it is also important that we do not just apologise and walk away, but that we see that as a beginning to highlighting that moment and using it to educate our own children about a past that was not as perfect as is often portrayed in our schools. It was not as wonderful to be part of the British empire as we often claim. We must acknowledge that, although we should not be trapped in the past as some say, we need to recognise the crimes that were committed and the people who were affected. Although we can never change that, we can at least go some way to alleviating the pain that is felt, simply by saying two words that sometimes seem so difficult: “We’re sorry.”

3.18 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for securing the debate. I very much look forward to the Minister’s response and I thank him for his tireless efforts on behalf of our great country, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This morning, I signed the latest early-day motion tabled by the hon. Member for Harrow East, as well as his previous early-day motions, and I will be on the record tomorrow morning as having supported him the whole way through.

Yesterday, there was a story in the provincial press about the massacre and, unfortunately, about the role played by some with Irish ancestry who were in the Army at the time. I am very privileged to represent Strangford and Northern Ireland. Other hon. Members have referred to communities coming together. In Northern Ireland, our two traditions have two different histories, but if we dwell too much on the history that divides us rather than the reasons for being together, we would find ourselves unable to move forward. I am very pleased that we have managed to do that.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I apologise for not being present at the beginning of the debate. Those of us who have visited Jallianwala Bagh have seen the well where people scrambled for their lives, and the bullet holes still in the walls, and realise that just around the corner from that place, where some of the worst that humanity can do happened, is some of the best that humanity can do, at the Golden Temple. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, as Rabindranath Tagore said, that was the end of the British legitimacy in India? The end of the raj was April 1919. I should like, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) suggested, a physical memorial, but should schools not

[Stephen Pound]

teach about it far more? Jallianwala Bagh was not just a crime against humanity. It was the end of British India.

Jim Shannon: I agree. As has been said, it was clearly the turning point for the empire. As others have mentioned, on Sunday 13 April 1919 the British military opened fire on thousands of unarmed civilians in Jallianwala Bagh, leaving somewhere between 379 and 1,000 people dead, and perhaps as many as 1,500 wounded. That terrible tragedy represents an extremely dark chapter in British history, which stands in stark opposition to the modern-day British values that we hold so dear, and particularly the respect for human rights that I have spoken about often in the House and in Westminster Hall. I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary groups on international freedom of religion or belief, and on the Pakistani minorities. I have a deep interest in the issue.

What started as a celebration turned into a scene of carnage—a graveyard and the murder of innocents. On that fateful day in the Punjab, the rights to freedom of expression, assembly, and religion or belief, to name but a few, were violated in one of the most violent ways imaginable. Peaceful protestors, Sikh celebrants of the major religious festival of Baisakhi, and indeed many Muslims, were cut down that day for exercising their human rights as they should. We are rightly proud of the stance that the United Kingdom has taken in support of human rights across the world, including work to advance freedom of religion or belief. If the British Government are to continue to stand up for those rights, as I believe they will, and to be taken seriously, we must call out violations wherever they happen and whoever carried them out, even if that means looking at our past and perhaps recognising our errors.

It is not a sign of weakness to acknowledge mistakes—even one as egregious as the one we are discussing. In fact, it is much easier to live in denial or to blame mistakes on something or someone else. What is difficult and truly requires courage is to stand up in front of the world and say that the UK is fully committed to human rights and that we therefore fully accept we should act, in relation to the violation of the rights of those killed in Jallianwala Bagh 100 years ago.

Failure to issue a formal apology is harmful to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, because the value of recognising a mistake and owning up to it is not a matter of self-flagellation or wallowing in the error—it is to ensure that such mistakes are never made again and to create room for stronger relations built on the basis of shared humanity. If we bury our heads in the sand and refuse to take responsibility we will be refusing fully to learn the lessons of the past and develop stronger bonds, and putting an asterisk beside any statement about the UK's commitment to human rights. However, if we face up to our past, accept our role and teach our children, as the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) said, not only about our glories but about our mistakes, we will create a stronger, more compassionate nation and a stronger, more compassionate world.

A true test of the morality of the action is to ask what we would want if the situation were reversed. I dare say that if the shoe were on the other foot, everyone in this

Chamber and indeed everyone in this great country would demand that the Indian Government take responsibility. I believe that commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and apologising for our role in it gives us an enormous, powerful opportunity to announce to the world that that terrible event does not represent modern British values, and that Britain will stand up for the rights of anyone, anywhere, be they Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Sikh, or of any other religion, belief, nationality or race. I sincerely hope that the Government will seize the opportunity with both hands and I look to the Minister for that much needed apology.

3.24 pm

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing this timely debate. As we approach the centenary of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre I also thank my parliamentary neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), for organising a letter to the Government asking them to issue an apology. That letter and today's debate demonstrate the strength of cross-party concern and support for such an apology.

The horrific events of 13 April 100 years ago in Amritsar, when thousands of innocent people were killed or injured on the orders of a British officer and at the hands of British soldiers, are a source of deep pain among the British Indian community, particularly the Sikh community. I know the strength of feeling among my own constituents in Wolverhampton about the atrocity.

On that April afternoon in 1919, people came to the Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar, the Sikh holy city—home of the Golden Temple, the holiest site for Sikhs—for a peaceful gathering during Baisakhi, the most significant Sikh religious festival. The crowd was unarmed. They were in an enclosed space, a walled garden, with only a few entrances. Thousands of people were crammed into a space that Churchill later described as

“considerably smaller than Trafalgar Square”.—[*Official Report*, 8 July 1920; Vol. 131, c. 1729.]

Therefore, when the firing began they were trapped; there was nowhere for them to escape to. Many of those present were women and children.

The gathering presented no threat to British troops. It was a peaceful gathering. As many hon. Members have mentioned, no warnings were issued, and there was no order for people to disperse. Instead, the British commander had the exits blocked and ordered his soldiers to fire into the crowd. As the hon. Member for Harrow East so eloquently described, the firing did not stop until the soldiers ran out of ammunition, and the bullet holes in the walls are visible to this day.

The official inquiry concluded that 379 people were killed that day, with many more injured, but many sources dispute those figures and claim that the death toll was much, much higher. It is important to remember that that massacre came after hundreds of thousands of Indians had fought alongside British troops in the first world war. At the time of the massacre, Winston Churchill, the then Secretary of State for War, described the atrocity as a “monstrous event” that was

“without precedent or parallel in the modern history of the British Empire.”—[*Official Report*, 8 July 1920; Vol. 131, c. 1725.]

I welcome the fact that David Cameron, when he was Prime Minister, visited the site in 2013 to pay his respects. He called the massacre a “deeply shameful event”, but stopped short of making an apology. Now is the time for the Government to go much further. The Mayor of London also visited the site in 2017 and asked the Government to make an apology. The journalist Sathnam Sanghera who comes from Wolverhampton—he grew up in Park Village in my constituency—has recorded a documentary about the Amritsar massacre that will air this Saturday on Channel 4. In a recent article, he put his finger on it when he wrote:

“As a country, it’s about time we invested some emotional energy into facing up to what happened in Britain’s name.”

I hope that the Government will recognise the strength of cross-party support in today’s debate and in the letter organised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East. I hope that the Government, if they cannot do so today, will see fit to issue a formal apology, perhaps later in the week of the actual centenary. As my right hon. Friend said, it should not take 100 years to say sorry, but it would certainly be better late than never.

3.28 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for introducing this poignant debate, nearly 100 years to the day since the tragic events of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre.

In 1919, during one of the first debates in the House of Commons discussing the massacre, Colonel Josiah Wedgwood commented:

“This damns us for all time.”—[*Official Report*, 22 December 1919; Vol. 123, c. 1232.]

He was correct. With 379 people officially recorded as dead—although, as we have heard today, local sources say that more than 1,000 people were killed—the British Army in India committed an indefensible atrocity in Amritsar. It had a profound effect on the Indian independence movement, and has had a lasting impact on the psyche of the people of the Punjab, and across India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Yet despite the enormity of this deplorable incident, too few of us in the UK are aware of what happened at the Jallianwala Bagh 100 years ago. Not enough of us are willing to engage with our unedifying past and the legacy of the British empire. Astonishingly, no British Government have issued a formal apology for what unfolded. When David Cameron visited the memorial in 2013, why did he stop short of apologising? It is imperative that we take this opportunity to reflect today on the devastating nature of the massacre and acknowledge unequivocally that this was one of the many shameful episodes in British history and a symptom of the colonial mindset that had been developed. Crucially, the Minister must set out the Government’s plans to issue a formal apology for what happened in Amritsar. No ifs, no buts, no whataboutery or rhetorical gymnastics—Britain must say sorry.

I have been to Jallianwala Bagh several times. It is an enclosed garden with high walls, accessible only through five narrow passages. I first visited in the early 1990s and last in 2012. Every time I have been there, I have

been struck by what a tranquil, peaceful place it is—a place to remove oneself from the hustle and bustle of the streets of Amritsar, or to relax following a visit to the Golden Temple.

Let us picture the scene: it is 13 April 1919. It is a hot day, with temperatures in the mid-30s. The city is busy with pilgrims visiting to celebrate the Vaisakhi festival and farmers, traders and merchants attending an annual horse and cattle fair. Thousands of Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims have gathered in the garden. What happened next is almost unspeakable. With a relatively small group of soldiers, Colonel Dyer arrived at the Bagh late in the afternoon. The entrance to the garden was blocked by some of his men. He had also brought armoured cars with machine guns. The only reason those guns were not used was that they could not get through the passageways.

On Colonel Dyer’s orders, 1,650 rounds were fired over a 10-minute period. The soldiers only stopped because the ammunition had run out. There was no warning, the crowd was not told to disperse and shots were not fired in the air but directly at the crowds. When the bullets ran out and the shooting stopped, Dyer and his soldiers left the scene. No aid was given to the wounded.

Dyer is reported to have said:

“I think it quite possible that I could have dispersed the crowd without firing, but they would have come back again and laughed, and I would have made, what I consider, a fool of myself...I fired and continued to fire until the crowd dispersed...It was no longer a question of merely dispersing the crowd, but one of producing a sufficient moral effect...not only on those who were present, but more especially throughout the Punjab.”

That should send a shiver down all of our spines.

This was not an accident. This was not a reaction to imminent danger. This was not an officer making a poor judgment in the midst of chaos. This was cold and calculated. This was purposeful slaughter. This was meant to send a message to the Indian population to remain obedient to the colonial master or face the consequences.

When reading Shashi Tharoor’s book, “Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India”, which was published last year, the following words particularly struck me:

“The Jallianwala Bagh massacre was no act of insane frenzy but a conscious, deliberate imposition of colonial will.”

Even Winston Churchill, a man hardly renowned for his concern for the welfare of those under colonial rule, as Indian people later experienced when millions died during the Bengal famine, condemned the massacre as “a monstrous event”.

If we were able to acknowledge back then the wrong that had been committed, there is no reason why Britain should not take this opportunity on the 100th anniversary of the massacre to finally apologise. Many continue to show support for Dyer. One of them was Rudyard Kipling, who believed that Dyer

“did his duty as he saw it”

and hailed him as

“the man who saved India.”

That is illustrative of many people’s views of the empire and its subjects at the time. They considered others lesser beings than themselves. Whatever one had to do

[Chris Law]

to keep the population in check was what was necessary. In their eyes, Britain was always on the right side of history.

By refusing to apologise and engage in debate that is critical of the British empire or historical figures who played their part in it, and by embellishing the past or looking at it through rose-tinted glasses, we perpetuate that colonial mindset. While the Jallianwala Bagh massacre was shocking, the brutality exhibited that day was sadly not unique in India or, indeed, across the empire. That brutality continued.

In 1920, during the debate on Government policy on Ireland, one MP commented:

“We may have an Amritsar there.”—[*Official Report*, 9 August 1920; Vol. 133, c. 138.]

Kenya's tortured by British colonial forces during the Mau Mau uprising in the 1950s will now receive pay-outs totalling £20 million. In Iraq, our American allies tortured and abused prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison, while today we are complicit in the sale of arms to others who commit atrocities in Yemen.

We cannot pick and choose our history. The Jallianwala Bagh massacre was an atrocity that must be recognised and apologised for. Concluding his speech in 1919, Colonel Wedgewood said:

“By this incident you have divided for all time races, races that might otherwise have loved one another...It has destroyed our reputation throughout the world. You know what will happen. All the blackguards in America when they lynch, will say, ‘Oh, you did the same in India.’ When butcheries take place in Russia, whether it be by White or Red Guard, they will say ‘We never did anything like what you did in India;’ and when we tell the Turks, ‘You massacred the Armenians,’ they will say, ‘Yes, we wish we had the chance of getting 5,000 of them together, and then of shooting straight—[*Official Report*, 22 December 1919; Vol. 123, c. 1232.]”

Again, he was correct that the past comes with a price. The Jallianwala Bagh is now a memorial garden, and its walls are scarred by the bullets fired by Dyer's men.

Minister, let me put this on record, as someone who carries a British passport when I travel. On each and every visit I have had to India over many years, I carry a personal sense of shame in the knowledge that the places I visit, such as Amritsar, have a history that Britain has yet to come to terms with and apologise for. I offer my sincerest apologies here today as a beginning, and I urge the Government, on this anniversary, to set in motion from this debate a formal apology on behalf of all British citizens, who live with the legacy of what happened in India 100 years ago, and to consider all our other colonial legacies that we choose to forget.

The UK cannot lecture others until it faces up to, accepts and remedies the baggage of its colonial past and acknowledges the role it has played in conflict throughout the world. If the UK is to be serious as a major global player now and in the future, our foreign policy must reflect a moral and ethical standing that takes action on atrocities both past and present, whomever they may have been committed by. On this atrocity we must formally apologise.

3.36 pm

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your stewardship, Mr Hanson. I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman)

for ensuring that the debate came to the Chamber. I thank him for the detailed historical perspective he gave of the events that took place and for his words on behalf of us all about the huge grief felt at the lives that were lost. He described that in much detail and with sincerity.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) for the calm and collected way in which she presented this issue. She is of Sikh heritage and is the first Sikh woman in Parliament. She has campaigned on this issue for a long time, and particularly in this Parliament. She is right that this is an important issue for the generations who came after those who were brutally murdered in that arena, with no way to escape and no exit but to drop themselves into a well. That was absolutely horrendous, and those who went in first were killed, if not by bullets, then by the people who fell on top of them. It was a difficult position for people of that origin.

My friend—I keep calling him that, because that is what he is—the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) has served in the military and understands full well the onerous conditions placed on military personnel in the battle arena. He has written about that in “The Fog of War”, and understands those issues deeply. It is important that he is part of the debate to ask for that apology. It is important to bringing back the professionalism and integrity of our armed forces that, when such mistakes have been made, we must now look forward and try to accept them. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) said, the apology is important, because it allows people closure and to move forward. That is essentially the issue here.

The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) made an impassioned case and wanted to know how to move forward, as did the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law). The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has been a champion of religious rights and human rights across the whole of the world for as long as I have known him, and I have been here since 2001. He is always a strong advocate of those who cannot represent themselves. I thank him for his contribution. I also thank my mentor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar), who has been taking up the case for the 30 years that he has been in Parliament. I thank him for the way in which he has supported the Sikh community. He has supported every single event and moved forward the issue of representation in the Sikh community. He has worked strongly in that community and I thank him for the great work that he does.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) has done a huge amount of work on the matter, and his letter is a considered and respectable way of trying to deal with the issue. It is time for the Government to deal with it. That is important, because it gives closure and allows people to move forward in their relationship with the United Kingdom. I say that as someone whose maternal great-grandfather was in the British Indian Army. My right hon. Friend done tremendous work for his Sikh community, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds), has for hers; she spoke eloquently today.

Every speaker today has spoken about the need for the apology, which is important. The Minister needs to be able to see that. The apology, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East has said, is long overdue. The anniversary is the right time to apologise, so that we can move forward. Also, there is another instance that we should look at while looking at the Jallianwala Bagh massacre: the massacre at the Amritsar Golden Temple in 1984. I link them because of the involvement of a security services officer who was there. On this occasion we are trying to address some of the wrongs committed by our Government, and it is important to look at that instance as well. Advice was given to the Indian Government's military in relation to that.

I have a huge Sikh community in my constituency and across the whole of Birmingham, and I have heard about those two episodes from Sikhs in other parts of the country where I regularly go to events and meet people. The numbers at the Jallianwala Bagh massacre were far greater, but the massacre at the Amritsar temple was hugely devastating to people. It is important for the Minister to address both issues. An apology now is absolutely necessary to allow the generations who continually look at the issue to move forward.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall, mentioned the Shaheed Udham Singh Welfare Trust, which is based in my constituency and has worked for a long time on these issues. A lot of organisations do, but let us get them to move forward. I want them to look at the work that they need to do in this country and move forward the heritage of the Sikh community. Rather than looking at what has happened, I want them to look forward to the future.

Mr Virendra Sharma: I thank my hon. Friend for his passionate speech. I am from Punjab originally and I know the psyche of the Indian community in general. This is the right time for the Prime Minister to publicly apologise. I mean no disrespect to the Minister. He is passionate and he has expressed in his communications how he sees the issue, but I am sure he will agree that the Prime Minister should apologise.

Mr Mahmood: My hon. Friend is right: the Prime Minister has to apologise. That is where the apology should come from, although I know that the Minister is a studious man who works hard and understands the issues. He continues to do that, and I thank him for it.

Finally, I reiterate my thanks for the great work that my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East has done in relation to this letter. We need to get a conclusion; we need an apology. That apology has to be made so that we in the Sikh community, both in the United Kingdom and in Punjab, and the Muslim community and the Hindu community that were involved in the Jallianwala Bagh can have some sort of closure.

3.45 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for securing this debate, for his long-standing work on the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government, and for his tremendous commitment to south Asia. This has been a compelling debate, and in my reply I will go into some

detail. As I think hon. Members recognise, it would not be appropriate for me to make the apology today that many wish for, and I am glad that the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) and the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) recognised that in their contributions. However, I will say a little bit about the path that we are on.

It is fair to say at the outset that I have slightly orthodox views on these matters; I feel a little reluctant to make apologies for things that have happened in the past. Obviously, any Government Department has concerns about making any apology, given that there may well be financial implications to doing so. I also worry a little bit that we debase the currency of apologies if we make them in relation to many, many events. However, if the House will bear with me, I have found almost all of today's contributions extremely compelling. They were made in the right tone—one not of anger but of regret—and with a keen eye on the future. That is my view on this matter, and I assure the House that it is a work in progress. An active debate is taking place among Ministers and senior officials, not least our excellent high commissioner in New Delhi, Sir Dominic Asquith—who is of course related to Herbert Asquith, quotes from whom have come up in today's debate.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East has rightly said, later this week we will mark the centenary of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. I recognise the enduring, very deep feelings and emotions that this incident continues to raise, not just in the House but across the world. I thank my hon. Friend for setting out the full context of the events of Sunday 13 April 1919. Brigadier-General Dyer had received news that a 15,000-strong peaceful crowd had gathered in the Jallianwala Bagh—the walled public garden in Amritsar, in the heart of the Punjab. Brigadier-General Dyer entered that walled garden that afternoon with 50 rifle-armed and 40 other British Indian Army soldiers. Without warning, he ordered those soldiers to fire into the large, unarmed crowd that was gathered there, killing hundreds of protestors from the Sikh, Hindu and Muslim faiths in the space of just 10 minutes.

Let me be clear: this was a tragedy, and a shameful episode in British history. The British Government of the day rightly condemned the incident, and there was strong criticism on the Floor of the House from some unexpected quarters. Members have referred to the former Prime Minister, H.H. Asquith, and as others have pointed out, Winston Churchill—then Secretary of State for War—described it as a “monstrous event”. One century later, we as the successors of that Government recognise that people here and in India continue to feel very deeply about this issue.

There is increasingly strong recognition that a formal acknowledgement of deep regret is important to help frame the modern bilateral relationship that increasingly thrives in a wide range of globally significant areas of mutual interest in which Indian and UK values align. I have been taken by the contributions that Members have made, including what the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) rightly said. I hope that we do not preach in the world, but I think we stand up for what we regard as the rules-based international order. We stand shoulder to shoulder with India in so many of those areas that, when we state these things, we perhaps do

[Mark Field]

not entirely recognise the sense of hypocrisy arising from our colonial past. It is important that we make those acknowledgements.

We are committed to ensuring that what took place in Jallianwala Bagh on 13 April 100 years ago should not be forgotten. That is why I welcome the tabling of this debate by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East. It is right that we continue to pay our respects to the victims, and we shall strive to learn from and appreciate the passions that arise from these events.

We also recognise how important it is that, during the course of this year, we mark this sombre anniversary in the most appropriate way. In India, I have asked representatives from our High Commission in New Delhi to visit the site to lay a wreath on behalf of the British Government, and there will be further acknowledgement of those terrible events in the months ahead. I also reassure all hon. Members that the Government will publicly acknowledge the centenary closer to home in the United Kingdom, looking back with the deepest regret on what occurred, but also looking forward to the strong bonds that both our countries are building for the future. I hope that hon. Members will forgive me if I look a little bit at some of those bonds, which are worth putting into context.

John Spellar: The Minister has heard the very strong feeling from both sides of the Chamber on this particular issue. In the light of that, will he be reporting back to the Foreign Office and to No. 10 to ask them to reconsider giving an apology for this awful event?

Mark Field: May I just say to the right hon. Gentleman that there have been many compelling speeches, and I will touch on them towards the end of my comments? He should recognise that it is not an issue of reconsidering; there is an ongoing sense of consideration that is happening in that regard. It is worth pointing out that we must always remember that issues such as this frame our history, and we expect them to do so. I believe that we have, and we must continue to do so, but it is also right that, in focusing on the future, we work to build and sustain a flourishing partnership that benefits all our citizens. It is evident that that ambition for the future was shared in the discussions that took place between Prime Minister Modi and Prime Minister May at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting here in London last April.

Today, as my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) rightly recognised in his compelling contribution, we have a thriving and respectful partnership of equals. It is important to recognise that. That is why I think my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made New Delhi her very first port of call after her appointment, and why she was so pleased to welcome Prime Minister Modi to London last year. It is also why I have been to India no fewer than three times in the past 18 months, visiting Mumbai, Chennai and Hyderabad, as well as, of course, visiting New Delhi on each occasion.

As a result, I have experienced our dynamic relationship first hand, in many different ways. We share a proud parliamentary tradition, a global outlook and a commitment to maintaining the rules-based international

system, which is coming under threat from unexpected quarters, but remains the bedrock of global security and prosperity. I can testify to the fact that our relationship is characterised by close collaboration and mutual respect, and is focused on enhancing the prosperity and security of our people. That is why India and the UK signed our first framework agreement on cyber co-operation, which will help to write global rules on cyber.

We have launched our ambitious technology partnership, marrying Indian and British skills and ingenuity to drive forward the fourth industrial revolution. We also, of course, welcome many talented Indian workers to this country; indeed, we issue more skilled work visas to India than to all other countries combined. The numbers of Indians coming to visit and work and study in the UK are all on the rise, with a 35% increase in student visas, a 6% increase in work visas and a 10% increase in visit visas in the year 2018.

Stephen Pound: Will the Minister give way?

Mark Field: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I want to finish, because I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East will want to say a few words right at the end.

The Indian diaspora is the UK's largest, at over 1.5 million, contributing not only to UK prosperity but to our national culture. All that activity is underpinned by what Prime Minister Modi has rightly described as a "living bridge" between us in the form of personal, professional, cultural and institutional ties, which have shaped each other's countries and give our relationship a unique depth and created a panoply of people-to-people links.

It is right that we mark the centenary of the tragic events in Amritsar in the most appropriate way and that we never forget what happened. It was a shameful episode in our history and one that we deeply regret to this day. In the intervening years, we have learned lessons. Everything that we do today is in order to try to prevent such tragedies occurring again elsewhere in the world. Importantly, our modern relationship with India is focused on the future—on pooling our strengths, sharing our skills and knowledge, and enhancing the prosperity and security of our people. We are working together to deal with some of the greatest challenges of our age, such as climate change and infectious disease.

However, I recognise that this relationship is framed in part by the past. Although it would not be appropriate for me to apologise in the context of this debate, I have found many of the speeches very compelling. I will take up with the Foreign Secretary and No. 10 Downing Street a sense that we need to do more than set out very deep regrets, as I have done today. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling, the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma), the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) and the Labour spokesman, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood), have all made a strong and compelling case that we need to do more.

I am very aware of that with my own work on the future relationship. At the back of one's mind, there is always a sense—not just when one looks at the figures on trade and investment, although that is an aspect of it—that something is holding us back from fulfilling the full potential and a flourishing relationship. In all honesty, I would take a more orthodox and different view of our colonial past, but I accept that the Jallianwala Bagh massacre grates particularly strongly in the relationship between India and the UK.

In a funny way, Pakistan and Bangladesh feel that they come from the yoke of a different country, and therefore there is perhaps a stronger day-to-day relationship with those two countries than there is with India. These issues are an important way of trying to draw a line under the past. Therefore, this is work in progress and I cannot make any promises. I feel that we perhaps need to go further. As I say, I came to this issue when it was discussed some months ago. Obviously, I discussed it when I was out in New Delhi, but with a more orthodox view. I have now been persuaded—not just by this debate—to take a different approach.

So I believe that the best way to honour the memory of the people who suffered and died in Jallianwala Bagh 100 years ago is for us all to do our best to build a new partnership between the UK and India that will work for both our countries, and to recognise that such a partnership can be an important force for good in the world at large.

3.57 pm

Bob Blackman: I thank my right hon. Friend for answering this debate, and I thank all hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions. There have been three key messages. The first is that children should be taught about the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in our schools, because people should know what happened in our name.

The second message is that, in taking forward our relationship and friendship with India, saying sorry—apologising for this massacre—is the right thing to do. I hope that the Government, who I am very proud to support, will take that action. Finally, if this massacre were to happen today, the people responsible would be indicted for war crimes and held to account for what they did; they would not have been buried with full military honours. We should recognise that fact, say sorry and ensure that the memories of what happened will be preserved. We should own up to what was done in our name.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Jallianwala Bagh massacre.

Age-related Macular Degeneration: NHS Funding

[MR CHARLES WALKER *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered NHS funding for age-related macular degeneration.

I begin by welcoming the Minister to her place. I am very pleased that she is now a Minister and I look forward to having many more interactions with her.

Sight is a wonderful gift. Sight allows us to witness and experience the world we live in. It is not surprising that, in survey after survey, the fear of losing one's sight comes top in comparison with other conditions. It is remarkable that we do not hear more about the leading cause of blindness in adults, which is age-related macular degeneration or AMD for short.

AMD is the breaking down of the macula, which is the sensitive and small tissue at the centre of the retina. It is responsible for processing central vision and allows us to see colour, detail and sharpness in objects. There are two types of AMD: dry and wet. Dry AMD, which affects 90% of people with the condition, is caused by thinning of the under-layer of the macula, which can lead to blurred vision. Thinning of the under-layer of the macula is caused by small white or yellow deposits called drusen. They may at first not affect vision all that much, but as they build up over time, they can lead to blind spots in someone's central vision and can later become wet AMD.

Wet AMD is usually caused by new blood vessels growing underneath the macula that bleed and leak into the macula, which can cause blindness and distort vision in that eye. The onset of wet AMD is more rapid and can be more damaging, leading to irreversible vision loss. According to the charity Fight for Sight, AMD is the leading cause of sight loss in the UK, predominantly affecting people aged over 65. It accounts for 50% of severe sight impairment and 52% of all Certificate of Vision Impairment registrations in England and Wales.

AMD progressively damages a person's central vision, which in some cases can leave them unable to read, drive or recognise faces, although they may retain their peripheral vision. It is estimated that 600,000 people in the United Kingdom are living with late-stage AMD. Industry data suggest that by 2026 there will be 9.7 million people in the UK affected by all stages of AMD and 800,000 of them will have late-stage disease that affects their vision. Projections suggest that by 2050 the figure for people with late-stage AMD could rise to 1.3 million unless measures are taken now to address this issue.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this very important debate and I, too, welcome the Minister to her place. Significant numbers of people will potentially lose their sight. My hon. Friend has cited some of the figures. By 2050, the number of people living with sight loss will be in excess of 4 million. Does my hon. Friend agree that, given the numbers, it is time that we had a UK-wide vision strategy on eye health and sight loss?

Bambos Charalambous: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point; I will come to that matter later in my speech.

AMD is an ever increasing public health issue, presenting as one of the number of long-term conditions that can lead to an increased risk of morbidity in patients. AMD costs the economy an estimated £1.6 billion a year and hits the productivity of society. There is a strong correlation between AMD and decreased quality of life outcomes, including an increase in depression, impaired ability to do everyday tasks, feeling more socially isolated and being 1.7 times more likely to suffer falls. Twenty-one per cent. of the annual medical cost of falls, which is £56.5 million, is attributed to those with visual impairments. The loss of independence resulting from sight loss can also be incredibly debilitating because systems are not set up to deal with it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate, and I offer the Minister all best wishes in her new position. It is well deserved, and we look forward to working with her regularly in Westminster Hall and elsewhere.

My father suffered from AMD, although he did not know he had it until it had reached a late stage. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that early diagnosis is important for all matters of eye care that affect us, as is visiting an optician at least once if not twice a year? That is one positive thing we can do.

Bambos Charalambous: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. Early diagnosis is so important, especially for wet AMD. The target requires people to be seen within 18 weeks of diagnosis, but that is unacceptable for people with wet AMD who should be seen within two weeks. Otherwise, their vision could suffer serious damage.

One concern is that the NHS has insufficient eye clinic capacity, due to delays and cancelled appointments that the British Ophthalmic Surveillance Unit has identified could lead to up to 22 patients a month losing their vision. The all-party group on eye health and visual impairment—I am pleased to see two members of the group here today—is supported by the Royal National Institute of Blind People, and in its inquiry, “See the Light”, published in June 2018, it identified 16 recommendations on which the Government should take action.

Three recommendations on which the APPG is still waiting to see progress include: the urgent need to increase the number of trainee ophthalmologists to keep pace with increasing demand; the need to ensure that sustainability and transformation partnerships—STPs—address current and future need; and the need to establish a national target to ensure that patients who require follow-up appointments are seen within a clinically appropriate time to prevent delayed and cancelled appointments.

According to statistics from the Industry Vision Group, last year three out of 44 STPs identified ophthalmology as a priority service, and only seven out of 44 met the 18-week referral target every month between January 2017 and January 2018. Early intervention for wet AMD is crucial to avoid blindness, and even the 18-week target that I mentioned to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is not suitable for people with wet AMD, which requires treatment within two weeks. There is still a need to collect robust data on ophthalmology at

clinical commissioning group level in order to assess performance and learn from best practice. Some of the issues relating to delay or the cancellation of appointments may be due to systems and processes, and not necessarily to funding.

Ophthalmology has the second highest outpatient attendance of any speciality, with 7.6 million appointments in England in 2017-18 accounting for 10% of all outpatient appointments. As we are all living longer, that figure is projected to increase by up to 40% over the next 20 years. The Government could do a number of things to help improve the situation for people with AMD and other sight-threatening conditions. First, we need a national eye health strategy—that point was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova). Unlike Scotland and Wales, England does not have a national eye health strategy, but one is needed to address workforce capacity issues and health inequalities, and to enable better care and improvements to the quality of life for those with AMD.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a good point. In my community the Kent Association for the Blind has done a lot of work on this issue, and I was proud to visit it recently. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister on her new appointment, and on her liberation in finding her voice again and being able to express her own views, albeit of course measured through those of the Government.

Bambos Charalambous: I am pleased to hear of the excellent work taking place in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency.

Contained within the strategy should be a minimum commitment to research similar to that given in the Government’s dementia 2020 challenge, which committed £60 million a year to dementia research, resulting in significant advances for those suffering with dementia. It is unclear how much funding has been set aside for ophthalmology from the £20 billion announced in the Government’s NHS long-term plan. I would be curious to hear from the Minister whether it is part of the plan or not.

There is also a need for the establishment of a national ophthalmology database to collect and analyse data for the purpose of improving outcomes, better decision making, and allocating resources. At present, there is fragmented data collection, such as that by the health quality improvement partnership, administered by the Royal College of Ophthalmologists, which covers only cataract surgery. A database that routinely collects information on AMD would greatly assist research and the planning of clinical care for those with AMD.

All STPs and integrated care schemes should be held accountable for developing and implanting integrated ophthalmology plans. Three years ago, the Department of Health commissioned a number of “Getting It Right First Time” reports into a series of areas, including ophthalmology. Unfortunately, that report is yet to be published, but hopefully when that happens it could inform the integrated ophthalmology plan, along with other sources such as the Royal College of Ophthalmologists’ “Way Forward” reports.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is very gracious. As I should have said earlier, I declare an interest as the chair of the APPG for eye health and visual impairment.

He is right that it is important to visit an optician to have a test for AMD, but such a visit can have other benefits. Through a person's eyes, an optician can get an idea of what that person's body is like, and can diagnose other things that are wrong. There are other benefits to visiting an optician for an early AMD test, in terms of everything that goes with it.

Bambos Charalambous: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. We should all visit opticians on a regular basis, because they can detect a whole series of other eye conditions.

My second ask is for the publication of a workforce development plan for ophthalmology. That should also be a priority. There is already a shortage of eye care specialists who can diagnose and treat AMD. The number of ophthalmologists in the UK is the second lowest in Europe. The numbers are expected to reduce further, while the patient population is likely to increase significantly. The Department of Health and Social Care should commit to producing a workforce development plan that addresses the current situation and assesses future demand and provision need.

NHS RightCare should also develop guidance and a workstream for AMD, and data packs that can be shared as a resource and inform improvement in treatment for AMD. An IT platform that allows better integration of services is needed—for example, from primary care to hospital-based ophthalmology—so that a more joined-up approach can lead to better outcomes for patients with AMD.

Finally, it should be remembered that there is a link between sight loss and mental health, depression and frailty. The secondary effects of sight loss should also be considered when making both national and local policies on commissioning services.

Marsha De Cordova: My hon. Friend is being very generous. On that point about the impact of sight loss and the link to mental health, does he agree that a clear strategy would enable all services to be more joined up, so that when somebody is diagnosed with losing their sight all the relevant support would fall into place because there is a clear pathway?

Bambos Charalambous: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The impact of sight loss can lead to depression and other mental health issues, so they should form part of any strategy related to sight loss. I agree with her 100%.

I ask the Minister to recognise the need for more attention to the needs of people with AMD, and to set about taking on board and implementing the suggestions that I have raised.

4.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): It is a particular pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker, as I respond to my first debate as the new Public Health and Primary Care Minister. I thank all hon. Members for their good wishes and reassure my officials that, although I have found my voice again, I will try not to alarm them too much.

I thank the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) for bringing this important matter forward for debate. Age-related macular degeneration—AMD—is a devastating disease that

seriously affects the lives of many people, particularly older people. It is the leading cause of sight loss in the UK and affects over 600,000 people. As the hon. Gentleman outlined, the two main types are dry, or early, degeneration, and wet, or late, degeneration.

Around 75% of people with AMD suffer from dry generation. For most of them, it causes milder sight loss or even near-normal vision. Although there is currently no effective treatment for that form of AMD, its impact can be reduced with vision aids. A minority of those with dry degeneration, however, will progress to wet degeneration, which can be far more serious and threaten their vision. A number of treatments for it are available, including regular eye injections or a light treatment called photodynamic therapy.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has recommended a class of drugs, anti-VEGF therapies, as the clinically appropriate and cost-effective treatments for wet AMD. Currently, there are two licensed options: Lucentis and Eylea. As such, NHS commissioners are legally required to fund those treatments for patients where necessary to comply with NICE's recommendations. NICE is currently considering whether to examine a further drug, brolucizumab, for treating AMD and recently consulted stakeholders on the suitability of referral to its technology appraisal work programme, and a decision will be taken shortly.

There is some dispute about whether nutritional therapy and a healthy diet high in antioxidants, or the prescription of supplements, can assist with the management of AMD. NHS England has advised me, however, that it has informed CCGs not to prescribe lutein or antioxidants to patients with AMD, as evidence suggests that those treatments have low clinical effectiveness.

Although we have some effective treatments for AMD, we do not rest on our laurels. Medicines continue to evolve, and we continue to look for better treatments to improve outcomes for people living with AMD. The Department provides significant funding for medical research, mainly through the National Institute for Health Research. NIHR welcomes funding applications for research into any aspect of human health, including AMD. It is important to set out some of the ways in which NIHR engaged in advancing learning in that area and is funding research.

In 2017-18, the total spend by NIHR for eye-related research was just over £20 million. That covered a wide range of studies and trials, including research relating to AMD. In that year, the NIHR clinical research network supported 38 clinical studies and trials related to the treatment and care of people with AMD and other retina-related conditions. Since 2014, NIHR has provided £9.6 million for seven research grants and awards related to AMD, including five health technology assessment studies.

I pay tribute to the excellent work of the NIHR Moorfield Biomedical Research Centre, which is a partnership between Moorfields Eye Hospital, with its unique clinical resources that support over half a million patient visits per year, and the University College London Institute of Ophthalmology, which is one of the largest and most productive eye research institutions. The partnership was awarded £19 million over five years from April 2017. It is now conducting a wide range of ground-breaking biomedical research on AMD through

[Seema Kennedy]

several of its research themes, which will ultimately translate into significant improvements in the treatment, diagnosis and management of people with eye diseases.

Prevention is an absolute priority, both for me as the new Minister for Public Health and Primary Care, and for the Secretary of State, as we prepare to publish our prevention Green Paper later this year. At the heart of the NHS long-term plan that was published earlier this year is the idea that prevention is better than cure. AMD is one of the top four causes of sight loss, alongside glaucoma, diabetic retinopathies and cataracts. All of those conditions are most prevalent in older people and we know that, once lost, vision is especially hard to restore. The Royal National Institute of Blind People suggests that 50% of cases of blindness and serious sight loss could be prevented if they were detected and treated earlier. Research shows that almost 2 million people in the UK are living with sight loss, which is vision less than six out of 12. As the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate and the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) mentioned, by 2020 that number is predicted to increase by 22% and to double to 4 million people by 2050. Those increases are due mainly to an ageing population. Eye health will be particularly relevant to these matters, given that more than 80% of sight loss occurs in people aged over 60.

I pay tribute to Galloway's, a charity in my constituency that does amazing work with people on sight loss. My hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), who is no longer in his place, also mentioned the Kent Association for the Blind in this capacity.

Marsha De Cordova: I thank the Minister for giving way. She is picking up on some really important points. She talks about prevention, but there is a national need for a vision strategy. We cannot have prevention in isolation, nor living with sight loss in isolation. Everything needs to be joined up. Does the Minister agree that it is now time for a vision strategy to be part of the long-term NHS plan?

Seema Kennedy: I will respond to the question that the hon. Lady raised in her intervention later on in my remarks. We know that regular sight testing can lead to early detection of these conditions. In his capacity as chair of the all-party group, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) referred to the importance of regular eye tests, given that, combined with early treatment, they can prevent people from losing their sight. That is why we continue to fund free sight tests for people over 60 and, alongside NHS England, are fully supporting the aims of the UK Vision Strategy to improve the eye health of people in the UK. A mark of the priority that the Department places on eye health is the inclusion in the Public Health Outcomes Framework of an indicator of the rate of avoidable blindness, both as a headline measure and by main cause, to highlight and track the direction of travel at national and local level.

The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate has raised a number of wider important issues for the eye care sector. Many of those were highlighted in the report from the all-party parliamentary group on eye health, "See the Light", which was published last summer. The Department welcomes this report and, along with NHS England, is carefully considering the key recommendations.

The hon. Gentleman said that eye clinic capacity was insufficient. I of course share any concerns about delays to treatment. National guidance is clear that all follow-up appointments should take place when clinically appropriate, and patients should not experience undue delay at any stage of their referral, diagnosis or treatment. To help address that issue, two key initiatives—"Getting it Right First Time", led by NHS Improvement, and the elective care transformation programme, led by NHS England—have been set up to consider what can be done to ensure that patients do not suffer unnecessary delays in follow-up care. My Department is following that work closely.

The hon. Gentleman also asks that we establish a national target to ensure that patients requiring follow-up appointments are seen within a clinically appropriate time. As I am sure he will appreciate, the intervals for follow-up appointments will vary between different services or specialties, and between individual patients, depending on the severity of their condition. That is why all follow-up appointments should take place when clinically appropriate. For patients who require further planned stages of treatment after their "referral to treatment" waiting time clock has stopped, treatment should be undertaken without undue delay and in line with when it is clinically appropriate and convenient to the patient to do so.

The hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Battersea both raised the matter of a national eye health strategy. The Department takes sight loss very seriously. We are working with NHS England to ensure that the commissioning and development of eye services are of high quality and sustainable. I look forward to meeting the hon. Lady to discuss all matters relating to vision and sight loss.

CCGs are responsible for commissioning all secondary care ophthalmology services, and are also available to commission primary care services such as minor eye services and monitoring, in the community, to meet identified need. It is therefore right that the planning and commissioning of high-quality eye care services that meet the needs of the local population should happen locally, not at a national level.

The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate, also referred to the national ophthalmology database, and asked that it be expanded to collect data on AMD. Data is currently collected on cataracts as part of a five-year programme funded by NHS England. I understand that at an earlier stage the programme funding panel considered expanding the focus, but decided that the focus should remain on cataracts in that time-limited audit.

I recognise the hon. Gentleman's concerns and thank him for raising the matter. We are working incredibly hard, alongside NHS England, Public Health England and other partners, to ensure that eye care policy is focused both on preventing disease and, where disease develops, on ensuring that there are high-quality, sustainable eye care services for people across the country. I hope that the significant focus on effective treatment, prevention and AMD research that I have outlined means that he can reassure his constituents that we take AMD incredibly seriously. Maintaining good vision throughout life is of the utmost importance, especially as we grow older.

Jim Shannon: It might be helpful to give the Minister the report of the inquiry by the all-party parliamentary group on eye health and visual impairment. Perhaps

she would agree to meet the officers of the all-party group, so that they can advance that case.

Seema Kennedy: I very much look forward to reading the report of the APPG that the hon. Gentleman chairs, and to sitting down with him in due course.

My Department remains committed to preventing sight loss and to ensuring that anyone and everyone living with AMD has access to the very best treatment and support.

Question put and agreed to.

World Health: 25-Year Environment Plan

4.28 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of the 25-year environment plan on world health.

I am grateful for the opportunity to lead this debate. It is only right that following World Health Day on Sunday we put time aside for an issue that I believe presents significant challenges and opportunities for Great Britain. The Prime Minister, who arguably is in a stressful job, takes time to go on walking holidays. A walking holiday I particularly remember was in 2017 but, if we put that to one side, what an endorsement that is of our countryside, and what a reminder it is for us to ensure that everyone has access to the natural environment.

I am greatly privileged as a west Cornwall MP. Some show pity that I have to travel such a distance to Westminster, but they forget that I go home to one of the most beautiful natural environments in the UK, which lays claim to areas of outstanding natural beauty, sites of special scientific interest, marine conservation zones, national nature reserves and special protection areas, to name just a few. My constituency attracts tens of thousands of visitors who flock to appreciate and soak up the good that comes with that largely unspoilt natural environment.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I notice that the Government are planning a nature recovery network. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that should include in law the protection of nesting sites of returning migratory birds such as swallows, swifts and martins, rather than the current law as it stands, which is just about bird nests with live birds in them?

Derek Thomas: I welcome that intervention and I am grateful for it. I shall come on to that point later on, particularly because I am the species champion for the Manx shearwater, a bird that is recovering faster than any other species and is rare to the UK, nesting only on Lundy island and the Isles of Scilly. I will talk about that very point in a minute.

I invite the Minister to come on holiday to west Cornwall—she would be welcome—and to really get the benefit of the natural environment by going on our open-top buses. At speed, people get an awful lot of fresh air, but they also come close to the vegetation that is all around—sometimes too close. It is a great way to see west Cornwall's natural environment in all its beauty, so I ask hon. Members to come and make use of our open-topped buses, which are also better for the environment in that they take cars off the road.

I understand why people come to west Cornwall to enjoy our natural environment. I can give testament to the fact that after recent weeks, and after last week in particular, time in nature can bring clarity of thought, perspective and resolve.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making a very good point. Does he agree that the value to our mental health of the environment and of time spent in it is clearly proven? In my constituency, Growing Well at Sizergh does a wonderful job, saving the NHS thousands of pounds a year by keeping people well. Does he regret, as I do, that there is no social

[Tim Farron]

prescribing in Cumbria to allow local people such as those at Growing Well to support more people and keep them well?

Derek Thomas: Again, I welcome that intervention. Social prescribing has proved to be a fantastic way of treating people that hopefully moves them away from medicine and drugs. In my constituency, we have a proud record of social prescribing, particularly at the Stennack surgery in St Ives, which has been doing that for some time, based primarily on the national environment and woodland, with people benefiting not only from company, but from the environment we live in.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I know the hon. Gentleman is a keen walker, like me, but does he also watch television? Did he see “Countryfile” on Sunday, which celebrated the birth of the national parks? The only thing I resented about that programme this week was that it never mentioned Clement Attlee or the Labour Government, the people who campaigned so strongly for national parks. Does he agree that there is an interesting balance between access to nature and protecting the very nature that people go to see?

Derek Thomas: Yes, and I will address both that and the earlier point about social prescribing later. We have an amazing national park on the Lizard, which we are hoping to extend, and there are things there that predate modern crops. We have the potential to gain access to very early cropping, which we could use again if something happened and we ever needed to return to it. National parks are hugely important for science, research and our wellbeing.

The role of nature goes much further than just somewhere to go for a walking holiday when we are considering the future of the country. Evidence suggests that living in greener environments is associated with reduced mortality. There is strong and consistent evidence of mental health and wellbeing benefits, as has already been said, arising from exposure to national environments. Those benefits include reductions in stress, fatigue, anxiety and depression. Exposure to natural environments has been linked with improvements in heart rate, blood pressure, vitamin D levels, recuperation rates and cortisol levels. Green space may also help to reduce the prevalence of type 2 diabetes.

Respected and influential bodies have made bold claims in support of the benefits of the national environment for our health. For example, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, in its own environment plan, claims:

“Spending time in the natural environment...improves our mental health and feelings of wellbeing. It can reduce stress, fatigue, anxiety and depression.”

I think we could all do with going out in the countryside more. It continues:

“It can help boost immune systems, encourage physical activity and may reduce the risk of chronic diseases such as asthma. It can combat loneliness and bind communities together.”

That is something we really must prescribe at the moment.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. He has outlined the benefits of the countryside, but does he also recognise that the foundation for any 25-year environment plan must be sustainability in the countryside? Does he agree that countryside management through country sports,

for example, as promoted by notable projects such as Green Shoots, links members to local biodiversity plans and wildlife management that the countryside cannot survive without? Landowners and those who have a love of the countryside make it available for everyone else.

Derek Thomas: Two things come to mind. First, the environmental plan talks about protecting and enhancing the natural environment. Secondly, in our part of the world, we are seeing the roll-out of the coast path as we speak, which gives far greater access to people to get around the coast and enjoy all that is around us.

To continue with the theme of people supporting this agenda, the Office for National Statistics produced a 2017 report: “The UK environment—fighting pollution, improving our health and saving us money.” It set out the role that the environment plays in tackling air pollution and improving health. The ONS website states:

“Overall, an estimated 1.3 billion kg of air pollutants were removed by woodlands, plants, grasslands and other UK vegetation in 2015”,

saving about

“£1 billion in avoided health damage costs.”

The study by UK Natural Capital states:

“Trees in particular provide a wide range of services and account for most of the volume of air pollutants absorbed by natural vegetation in the UK”.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case and I thank him for securing the debate. I have tried to get one for ages, so many congratulations to him. On trees helping with pollution, soil is brilliant at combating climate change because it can hold so much carbon. Although we are talking about how soil management should be better, soil health is not listed as a headline indicator in the 25-year environment plan. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should try to get it in there as an indicator because the payback to society would be considerable, given that we pay £1.2 billion a year to combat soil erosion?

Derek Thomas: The Minister is best placed to respond to how we get that into the plan, but my hon. Friend is right. I have been to see scientists in my constituency who work to improve the soil not only to produce food but to protect our environment and improve and enhance natural habits. She is absolutely right to raise that point.

Public Health England states:

“There is a very significant and strong body of evidence linking contact and exposure to the natural environment with improved health and wellbeing.”

I will continue with these influential bodies. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence encourages local authorities to put pedestrians and cyclists first when designing roads, ensuring our local areas have safe and well-maintained open spaces and that everyone can get around the local area easily.

If the benefits to our physical and mental health are not enough to convince the Treasury of the importance of investing in our natural environment, the Natural Capital committee estimated in its 2015 annual report that well-targeted investment could generate large economic returns: for every £1 invested, the return was between £3 and £9. It stated that

“carefully planned investments in natural capital...will deliver significant value for money”

and generate large economic returns. It is vital that we get the Treasury on board in this debate, as well as the many other debates that happen in this place.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Ind): My hon. Friend is making important points about natural capital and health, and I agree with all that he has said so far. However, does he agree that the real elephant in the room is the issue of climate change and its impact on human health not only in this country, but globally? Would he like to see the Government go further and faster in planning for the long-term goals on carbon reduction targets? Although we are currently meeting our carbon budget for this period, we will not meet it for the fourth and fifth carbon budget.

Derek Thomas: I am concerned now, because people have clearly read my speech. I was about to move on to that subject. I have the great honour of being a Cornish MP, as Members might have noticed. The Duchy of Cornwall was first to proclaim a climate change emergency. On Friday, my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) and I worked with the council on its plans to be carbon-free by 2030.

It is right that we need to up our game. It is about caring for our environment, but it is also about spreading wealth around the country, improving the quality of our homes, improving attainment for young people, using whatever renewable means of energy we can and providing a healthier, happier environment for all of us who live on this great planet. We can be a global leader, because we have real influence to help support other countries to take this issue seriously.

Mr Sheerman: The hon. Gentleman is being generous in giving way. The 25-year plan is tremendous and wonderful, and I think everyone in the Chamber would applaud it, but as yet it has no teeth and no sense of urgency about climate change, the degradation of the environment or how we get young people to visit the natural world and fall in love with it. If they do not love it, they will not protect it. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Derek Thomas: That is right. We had a beautiful day this week—I think it was Sunday—when I banned my children from going in the house, but I still found my 12-year-old sneaking in to play with Lego. I spent the whole day battling with him—that probably ruined it for him completely; he will never go in to the environment again.

To respond to the point made by the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), young people are making clear their concern regarding the health of our planet. In 2009—long before I got involved in this place—I was glad to lead an activity with young people to plant hundreds of trees in west Cornwall. Those trees now stand taller than those who planted them. I am glad that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has committed to the planting of 1 million trees and that schools can access trees to plant under a Government-funded scheme. I am also glad that DEFRA's website supports the benefit of tree planting to combat air pollution and that, responding to my question two weeks ago on plans to plant trees in west Cornwall, the Minister showed that she sees the value of community tree planting schemes.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this debate to Westminster Hall. Trees are not only good for capturing carbon and converting it to oxygen and generally good for the landscape; by planting them on banks, and using them as flood mitigation systems, they can do good for air quality and reduce the chances of flooding in the future.

Derek Thomas: That is all part of the agenda on climate change and caring for our environment, so that we can all enjoy it. I am glad that schoolchildren who care about our planet can take action by planting trees and clearing our beaches and seas of the plastics that threaten to suffocate the health of our oceans.

Melanie Onn: On tree planting, just this week in my borough Persimmon Homes has cut down 260 trees, outside planning permission. How does the hon. Gentleman see the balance between the future built environment and the 25-year plan?

Derek Thomas: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I will come to that, because the environment plan commits to environmental net gain measures in planning. That is why, as was mentioned earlier, it needs some teeth. We need to see the environment Bill, which I will ask the Minister to comment on later.

I am an enthusiastic advocate of the challenge from DEFRA to make 2019 a year of action for the environment, working with Step Up To Serve and other partners to help children and young people from all backgrounds to engage with nature and improve the environment. The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) is right that if we are tearing down perfectly healthy trees to build the houses and buildings that we need, that is not the example our children need to see. The Woodland Trust can provide up to 400 trees for schools to plant, and many of my schools have done so. It has 40,000 trees left—and I am hoping to get half of them, so hon. Members will need to get in there quick.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): That recognition of the biodiversity net gain principle is incredibly important. Will the hon. Gentleman join me in condemning what seems to be becoming a pattern of developers netting off hedges? The most recent case was at the Bacton cliffs, where there was terrible footage of a sand martin that had flown back from its winter migration and was trying to return to its nest, but was being prevented by netting. It is an attempt to flout the rules that say, basically, that developers cannot interfere with hedgerows once the nesting season has started. Is it not absolutely appalling that that is going on?

Derek Thomas: I completely accept that. We must find stronger methods to manage that practice, and I wrote to the Secretary of State in the last two weeks or so to ask him how we can toughen up on it. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise it, and I am glad that she has had the opportunity to do so.

I mentioned how important west Cornwall and Scilly is. It boasts some of the most important and precious parts of natural England. For example, due to careful management we are seeing the recovery, as I said earlier, of the Manx shearwater, a rare seabird, and the storm petrel on Scilly. That seabird recovery project has brought

[Derek Thomas]

members of the community together to rid some of the islands on Scilly of litter and rats, which has led to the survival and remarkable recovery of these rare seabirds. There is a need to continue that work and to expand it to other islands on Scilly—as I said, there are just two places across the UK where the birds nest—and I would welcome a commitment from Government to fund this valuable and successful initiative.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): The debate title contains the words “world health”, so we are not talking just about the United Kingdom. Would my hon. Friend therefore welcome the financial investment that the Government have made in the island of South Georgia to do precisely what he was just talking about? Thanks to the RSPB, we have annihilated the mice that were destroying the birdlife. The birdlife on that extraordinary ecosystem is now returning to the vibrancy that existed before the whalers arrived more than a century ago.

Derek Thomas: That is a really valuable point. As my right hon. Friend described, and as I described in relation to Scilly, managing the rat and mice population to protect ground-nesting birds is essential. We must look at how we can develop new schemes, particularly as we leave the EU, to ensure that we fund such work properly.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) I have been applying for this debate since July of last year. I stumbled on World Health Day, and I thought if I included those words in the title I might get the debate. That is a tip for the future. As I said to the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), there is an opportunity for global Britain; that was my reference to the world.

We are also seeing the recovery of the Cornish chough in west Cornwall—another reason to visit. When we protect and enhance those natural habitats, the benefits are widespread. Wildlife, the natural vegetation and humankind all win when we get this right. I thank the RSPB, which has already been mentioned, in particular for the time that its representatives have taken to show me around some of the remarkable work that is being done to support natural habitats. I call for Government support so that that work can thrive.

As has already been said, the Government should be commended for the 25-year environment plan, which sets out the approach to protecting and enhancing our natural landscapes and habitats, leaving our environment in a better state than we found it. As we know, the plan sets out goals to create greener, cleaner air and water, goals to support plants and animals to thrive, and goals to provide a cleaner, greener country. That is the right course of action. Everyone deserves to live in a healthy, wildlife-rich natural world.

The truth is that, unlike the Prime Minister and me, many have little access to clean and green countryside. The lack of access to nature is a significant factor in health inequalities. Those living in the most deprived areas are 10 times less likely to live in the greenest areas, according to the Wildlife Trusts. Increasing access to wildlife-rich natural surroundings can help to stop the rise of preventable, life-limiting and costly illnesses, and reduce avoidable health inequalities.

Despite all the benefits of the natural environment that I have set out, public engagement with nature is low. Nearly 40% of the English public do not visit nature even once a month, with 13% of children reported as not spending any leisure time outside. I call on the Government to act quickly, and implement the nature and wellbeing policies promised in chapter 3 of the 25-year plan.

Those policies include progressing the natural environment for health and wellbeing programme, and delivering environmental measures through planning—for example, by making environmental net gain mandatory. For the Duchy of Cornwall, which has committed to becoming carbon-free by 2030, these tools are essential if we are to achieve our carbon-free ambition. Local authorities must be supported by Government and given the right resources for the right ecological expertise to ensure the greening of our towns and cities—or, in our case in Cornwall, a single city.

I am asking Government to provide an update on the progress of the commitment to incorporate nature-based, health-interfaced interventions in the NHS and the three-year natural environment for health and wellbeing programme, all of which feature in the environmental plan. GPs in my constituency have led the way in the innovation of social prescribing, as we discussed just a moment ago. It is important for the Government to clarify the timeline of the natural environment for health and wellbeing programme, so that the good work being done is adequately funded and replicated.

For the ambition of the 25-year environment plan to be realised, it is essential that the Government introduce an environment Bill that contains a legal obligation on this and future Governments to take action for nature’s recovery. As has already been mentioned, we need a nature recovery network to bring nature into every neighbourhood, and to ensure that everyone—whatever their background—has access to wildlife-rich natural green spaces every day. All this should be underpinned by statutory targets and a robust, independent watchdog that will uphold the law and stand up for the environment. I would be glad if the Minister can set out when she hopes to bring forward the environment Bill.

4.51 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker, on a subject that I know is close to your heart as a friend of the fishing community and the chalk streams, and to hear such an eloquent exposition of the problems facing our country from the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas). Our paths have not crossed very much since he was elected to the House. I am sure I join other members of my Committee—my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally)—in inviting him to join us on the Environmental Audit Committee, for which we currently have at least one vacancy for Conservative Members. His expertise and eloquence would be very welcome, and this is a subject that we are currently exploring in our inquiry on planetary health, which is based on the “understanding that human health and human civilisation depend on flourishing natural systems and the wise stewardship” of the natural world.

I want to signal to the hon. Gentleman that we are about to start an investigation on toxic chemicals—the various pollutants that are around us and are affecting

our hormone systems and lungs—straight after the recess. We are also about to start an inquiry on invasive species—back to the mice and rats on South Georgia—so we will have some very interesting discussions to come. Perhaps we will end up going fishing for some invasive crayfish and having a crayfish boil.

I want to say a couple of things to emphasise how grave the position of our planet's health is, highlight the link between the health of the planet and that of humans, and explain why it is so important to act now and how the 25-year plan goes some way, but still needs further work to deliver the roadmap that we need. Everything we do to the Earth, we do to ourselves. We saw that with microplastics, as we discovered that these tiny plastic particles are being pumped into our cosmetics, shower gels and shaving gels and then flushed down the drains. They now appear in every lake and river in the UK. Indeed, I believe that the River Tame in Greater Manchester is the most polluted by microbeads—again, the science is emerging in this new area of pollution.

Humanity's footprint is now so great that we are in new ecological epoch called the Anthropocene. It has been defined by scientists as

“the mass extinctions of plant and animal species, the pollution of the oceans”,

and a radically altered atmosphere because there is so much carbon.

Melanie Onn: On microplastics, has my hon. Friend had any thoughts about how they got into the food chain, in particular through fish? There is a plan for fishing and its sustainability, but how can we know the health of the fish that we consume?

Mary Creagh: One of the shocking things that we discovered in our microbeads inquiry was that if someone eats a plate of oysters or mussels, they consume 30 microplastic particles. It is particularly into those bottom feeders—that seafood—that this material goes. There is evidence, I think, that it can pass through the fish gut, so as long as the fish is cleaned, people will be okay, but we know that it is accumulating in the guts of seabirds, and we do not want our marine life to be choked, entangled and starved to death, whether that is by large plastics or smaller plastics, so I welcome anything that is done on this. We do not know whether the plastic particles act as vectors for chemicals such that the pollution that exists in the sea, that persists in the environment, attaches to these plastics and then potentially is delivered into our bodies. These are big emerging areas of science, and I am grateful to the chief medical officer for commissioning research on the matter.

We know that insects are the canary in the coalmine. That is a slightly mixed metaphor, but there is the issue of insects and insect loss. They make up two thirds of all life on Earth, but they are almost invisible and are being lost at alarming rates. Forty per cent. of species will be at risk by the end of the decade, and there is a 2.5% decline in insect biomass each year.

As the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) said, this has to do with climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change special report entitled “Global Warming of 1.5°C”, published last October, warned that we have just 12 years to avoid catastrophic climate change. It warned that the rate of biodiversity loss will be twice as severe in a 2° warmed world as it will be in a 1.5° world. The difference that that makes is that in a

1.5° world, 90% of the coral reefs will be lost, so our children will be able to see the remaining 10% of coral reefs, whereas in a 2° warmed world, our children will never see a coral reef. That includes the cold-water coral reefs on the southern border of the UK as well.

Richard Benyon: Does the hon. Lady share my increasing anger that our conversation in this place and the conversation in this London postal district of SW1 among the commentariat is obsessed with one issue, which will pass and will be, in history terms, a blip in the road? What we are talking about in this debate is an existential issue, and we have to wise up to that. The young people who campaigned recently on the doorsteps of MPs need to be listened to. This is their future. We as a Parliament have to start reflecting the anger that people are starting to feel about their future, and we have to start doing something about it.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order. Let me just say to the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) that I would like to get one more speaker in, so if she could finish at three minutes past 5, I would be very grateful.

Mary Creagh: Thank you for that guidance, Mr Walker. I totally agree with the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon). This issue is a passion of his, and I agree with him. Young people are starting to campaign on the issue. They are being educated—this generation is certainly better educated than ours was about these issues. I pay tribute to the work of schools such as Horbury Bridge Academy in my constituency, which is doing a series of workshops on the sustainable development goals—that is the plan that the Government have signed up to—to educate primary school children about the small actions that they can take to make the big changes that we need in our world. One problem is that we can feel overwhelmed, so one of the things that we need to do is to say, “We have to start here in the UK. We have to start in our own families and in our own Parliament.” I pay tribute to the parliamentary authorities for doing so much to clean up our plastic use.

I will skip on to how the environment changes health. For example, environmental pollution causes up to 16 million premature deaths a year. That is three times the number of people killed by malaria, AIDS and TB put together and 15 times the number killed by violence and war. It is amazing that we are tackling AIDS, TB and malaria, but we are not tackling pollution because, as economic activity, it falls under “too hard”. There is something for us to think about there. We know that there are impacts here in the UK. We are seeing a rise in non-communicable diseases. Incidences of diabetes have more than doubled in the past 20 years. Two thirds of males and more than half of females in England are overweight or obese.

Another inquiry that our Committee did was on heatwaves. We have warned that a 2° rise in temperature could see the average number of heat-related deaths in the UK more than triple, to 7,000 a year by 2050. The Environment Agency has warned that within 25 years England will not have enough water to meet demand, and that problem is particularly acute in the south-east and east of England. We have rehearsed the dangers of air pollution over and over again, and I welcome the Mayor of London's introduction of the ultra low emission zone.

[Mary Creagh]

As I cycled in yesterday and cycled home last night, there was a notable drop in the number of cars and vans that were circulating. Perhaps that was to do with the Easter holidays, or perhaps it was all in my imagination, but it certainly felt a lot cleaner. We await the Committee on Climate Change's review of how we cap emissions at a 1.5° rise.

To finish, I will briefly talk about the Government's 25-year environment plan. That plan is necessary because of the decision to leave the European Union—a decision that I profoundly regret and that many of my constituents also profoundly regret. A tricky third of environment legislation on air, waste, water and chemicals cannot simply be cut and pasted through the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. We need to put into practice the environmental principles that we have signed up to in international law. We want our climate change commitments to be actionable and measured by any new Office for Environmental Protection, and we want an architecture of long-term, legally binding environmental targets that is supported by a five-year planning cycle and takes the Climate Change Act 2008 as its model. I welcome the plan, but I am worried about the lack of targets.

I am also worried about the lack of measurable targets to increase our green space. We on the Committee recommended that we should get urban green space back to 2001 levels to reduce the urban heat island effect. These issues are not just for DEFRA; they need to be dealt with across every Department. Great work is being done in my constituency. We are getting a new garden at the Hepworth gallery, and we have some brilliant groups, such as Friends of CHaT Parks. That group helps to run the nurseries at Thornes Park, working with adults with learning disabilities. I was also proud to plant some trees to mark the Queen's Commonwealth Canopy locally. However, achieving net zero emissions simply cannot wait. We need action across Government. We need greener cities, greener cars, greener diets, greener finance and greener Government if we are to meet that challenge. I look forward to working with the many people of good will across all parties, and of course with the Minister—who I know is working hard on these issues—to make that a reality.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): The wind-ups from the Front Benchers will start at 5.8 pm. The Opposition parties get five minutes, the Minister gets 10 minutes, and the proposer gets two minutes.

5.2 pm

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Thank you for squeezing me into today's debate, Mr Walker, and I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) for securing it. At the outset, I will welcome the 25-year environment plan, which is a great step forward for this Government, and the environment Bill, which is the most exciting piece of environmental legislation that we have had in this country for decades. I am so proud to be part of a Government that will be bringing that Bill forward, and I hope that I can get involved in doing so.

As has been touched on, that Bill is much needed. We have had terrible crashes in biodiversity, not just in the UK but internationally. I will quote a couple of statistics. First, we have had a 75% crash in the number of

farmland birds in the UK since the 1970s. I grew up on a farm, and I used to see yellowhammers every day as I went to school. I have not seen one in years and years; I do not know who else has.

Richard Benyon: Come to my farm.

Rebecca Pow: I will go to my right hon. Friend's farm in Berkshire, but there are certainly very few yellowhammers left in Somerset.

There has also been a two-thirds crash in the global population of flying insects. Insects are our friends: we need them, and we cannot survive without them. I did entomology as part of my university course, and people probably thought that was amusing, but it is proving very useful. Insects pollinate our crops, and we need a world in which they can thrive. It is very important that we put legal obligations into the environment Bill that commit us to achieving all the things that are stated in the environment plan and that will hopefully be put into that Bill.

Nature recovery networks have been mentioned. I have been involved with the Somerset Wildlife Trust, which has a very good model for those networks; I believe the Minister knows about them. They are like a framework for all land use and all the things that go on to a piece of land, so that we can work out what is important, what to concentrate on, what has disappeared, what we can add and what we need to work on. They are very important.

I would also say that our rural areas will be important to us in the future, because they are like the lungs for the urban centres. They provide us with green space, places for tourism, places to grow food, flood control and all those things. We need a much bigger agenda to bring the rural area into helping us to solve our biodiversity problems.

Dr Wollaston: Does my hon. Friend feel that there should be greater penalties for acts of environmental vandalism, where developers come in and clear wildlife corridors and later on we find that the tree survey, for example, shows that there are no trees because they have cut them all down? The current penalties for that are simply not sufficient. It has happened in my area in Dartmouth and caused great upset and loss to the environment.

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for mentioning that, because it leads me on, interestingly, to ancient woodland. I am pleased that this Government, through the all-party parliamentary group on ancient woodland and veteran trees and the Woodland Trust, and working with many colleagues, have managed to get extra protection for ancient woodland. In future, developers should not be able to bulldoze ancient trees down in the way they used to. Those trees are very precious, as is the soil underneath them. We must get teeth so that we can hold people's feet to the fire and ensure that those things do not happen.

I was pleased to hear just this week that we have nearly one quarter of a million pounds to do an ancient woodland inventory. That money came from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, but I am sure that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will be interested in the project. It will

mean that we can identify all those precious woodland sites and trees, so that we can help to protect them in future. If we do not know what is there, how do we know whether we can protect it?

I praise the Select Committee on Environmental Audit, which I was so proud to be a part of, because that Committee held the inquiry into plastics and microbeads—all credit to the Government, again, for bringing in the microbeads ban. They are only 2% of all plastics, but they were something controllable. The ban is a good start and proves that we can do these things if we want to. The Committee also conducted the soil inquiry, which revealed so much; I do not think soil had ever been talked about in Parliament before.

As I mentioned earlier, it is so important to get the biodiversity and health of our soil right. I reiterate my call to make it an indicator in the 25-year plan and give it the credit it needs as a public good in the Agriculture Bill, because without it we cannot have healthy food. It holds our carbon. We can achieve all our climate change commitments because of that property of soil—its ability to hold carbon. If we get the management of that right, we have ticked a massive box on the way to meeting our net zero targets. I am optimistic on climate change; this Government are making huge strides on the issue, for which they are not getting enough credit. I am optimistic, having had many meetings about this, that we are going in the right direction, and I believe that we will meet our net zero targets sooner than we think.

I have to wind up, so I will say that we need to get climate change sorted. I understand how important it is. As part and parcel of that, we need to get biodiversity sorted. We owe it to the nation. I am pleased that the Chancellor mentioned all that in his spring statement, and I am pleased that we have a Minister who understands this.

5.8 pm

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing this great debate. I must tell him that I visited his constituency some time ago on a painting holiday. It is obvious that he values the role of communities and I can honestly say that, like my mum Rosa, he appreciates the importance of how great little things are in our communities. That came across very well.

When reporting on the Government's 25-year plan in July 2018, the EAC welcomed cross-Government ambition for the restoration and recovery of our natural environment, but what worried the Committee was the lack of detail on how to achieve those objectives. We all know that behavioural change is required worldwide, within Government, in our towns, cities and streets, and across our communities.

As the Scottish National party spokesman on the environment, I will take this opportunity to speak on Scotland's role in planetary health. All political parties in Scotland have placed the environment at the heart of the Government's plans. Indeed, other countries are now looking to Scotland for a lead. For example, our progress on climate change was praised as "exemplary" by the United Nations climate change secretary; for your information, Chair, the Scottish Government are on course to smash our goal to reduce emissions by 42% come 2020.

Some examples of the Scottish National party's progressive government have resulted in praise from Norway for our proposed deposit return scheme, an initiative that is soon to be introduced. Confor—the Confederation of Forest Industries—the aim of which is to support sustainable forestry and wood-using businesses, welcomes the Scottish Government's pragmatic and positive approach to forestry and land management. Those are good examples of working with and listening to professionals.

If I may be a wee bit self-indulgent, I should like to point out the contrast between the Scottish Government's thinking and Westminster's dismissive thinking. On 12 February, I petitioned the Department for Transport to consider using the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency to issue penalty points to drivers caught littering from their vehicles. The Minister's reply was disappointing. He said that the courts issue penalty points, not the DVLA. To me, that showed more concern for process than for progress.

In contrast, last week Rosanna Cunningham MSP said:

"There can simply be no excusing the practice of littering from vehicles".

She has committed to bringing forward new legislation, as part of the Circular Economy Bill, to tackle that avoidable national embarrassment. Scotland's Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform not only says what she means, but means what she says.

Scotland's rich and diverse natural environment continues to offer fantastic opportunities to our economy. The Scottish Government recognise the link between access to quality natural spaces and the benefit to health and wellbeing. Scotland accepts its responsibility for leaving a better planet to future generations and is taking a leading role in reducing carbon emissions by setting the most ambitious statutory climate change targets of any country in the world for 2020, 2030 and 2040. That means that Scotland will be carbon neutral by 2050.

Furthermore, the Scottish Government are encouraging reduction of energy use and promoting more energy-efficient lighting to reduce Scotland's overall carbon emissions and maintain the quality of our skies. I have attended busy meetings in our local communities to promote better lighting, the more efficient use of everyday products and products that use a traffic light warning system to reduce water waste. In short, our communities care about their environment.

In Scotland, we have a rich and diverse natural environment. My job here is to speak up both to protect that environment, which supports a huge variety of opportunity for our community, through jobs and a sense of wellbeing, and, importantly, to prevent any slip back to the UK becoming known as the dirty man of Europe once again.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order. The sitting is suspended for 15 minutes for a vote in the House. The SNP spokesperson has 50 seconds to wind up when he gets back.

John Mc Nally: Thank you for your generosity.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): We might make it run to a minute—just to be generous.

5.12 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

5.27 pm

On resuming—

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Mr Mc Nally, your final minute, and I will hold you to it.

John Mc Nally: Apology accepted; it is not your fault, Mr Walker.

It is important that we all do our bit to help the environment and the wellbeing of our wider world. Biodiversity is at the heart of a thriving, sustainable Scotland. I believe that if we want to change the world, we should get busy in our own little corner. In Scotland, we are doing just that.

5.27 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I congratulate my fellow west country MP, the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas), on securing this important debate, and for introducing it so eloquently. I especially liked his phrase that we have to “up our game”. He rightly encouraged ministerial colleagues to do that. Our environment needs to be taken more seriously by all Members of Parliament and all those in public office if we are to meet the challenge that we face.

It has been a good debate. The Division has led to a slightly emptier Chamber than we had a moment ago, but we heard some fantastic contributions from speakers from right across the political spectrum. I especially pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) and for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), who spoke about the importance of bird nesting—a subject that now has media attention, not only because of the horrendous footage on social media today of sand martins trying to get through nets to get back to their nests.

There is also concern about the practice of developers netting trees to prevent birds from nesting, and the sense that that is being done against the best interests of our natural world. Hon. Members on both sides of the House feel aggrieved by that, but we have the powers in this place to do something about it. We must call out developers who use cruel, inhumane tactics against our wildlife and, if they persist in such behaviour, we must introduce regulation to prevent it.

I also pay tribute to the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), who spoke so eloquently about microplastics. We need Ministers to rise to the challenge of how we test for microplastics, ensure that we are using common science across all forms of testing and create a safe level and an action plan not only to reduce microplastics and microfibres but to tackle what is already in the natural world.

I pay tribute to those Members across the House who mentioned insect loss, a subject which my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) led a good debate on only a few weeks ago. Despite many of us not being huge fans of creepy crawlies, we need to spend more time on that. We need to focus not only on bees but on a wide variety of insects that are vital to our natural world.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for St Ives for talking about public engagement with nature. If we are truly to value and protect our natural habitat, we need to ensure that people visit it, understand the value of it, and get something from it. It is deeply disturbing how few people engage with our natural world. I am leading the campaign for Plymouth Sound to be designated the country's first national marine park—the first, but I hope the first of many. Some 20% of our young people in Plymouth, Britain's ocean city, have not even seen the sea, and 50% have not visited a beach. Those were the findings of the fairness commission that was run by Plymouth City Council. Those should be the type of statistics that scare us all. That is a city right on the coast, so much more needs to be done.

At the last DEFRA questions on 28 March the shadow Environment Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Sue Hayman), declared a climate and environment emergency, on behalf of the Opposition, at column 534. She challenged the Minister to join us in cross-party working to jointly declare a climate crisis. Ministers did not agree to do that, but I hope that the Minister will recognise the importance of cross-party working in relation to declaring a climate crisis. In local government up and down the country, Conservative, Labour, Green and Liberal Democrat councillors, and others besides, have been working in collaboration to declare local climate crises. The public and the young people whom the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) spoke about expect politicians in this place to do something similar and declare a climate crisis at national level. We can then take cross-party action against it.

The 25-year environment plan is a good start, but we need much more besides. My hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) spoke with passion about the need for action and that is something I want to impress on the Minister. Since the Environment Secretary took office there have been 76 DEFRA consultations, but only one piece of primary legislation. It is not good enough to be the Secretary of State for consultations. We need to tackle climate change properly, which means that we need proper action. I implore the Minister to tell the House when the Agriculture Bill and the Fisheries Bill will make a comeback, and when the environment Bill, for which the hon. Member for St Ives made a good case, will be seen. We need action, not just warm words.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): A beautifully timed speech from the shadow Minister.

5.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing the debate. He spoke eloquently about the beautiful part of the country that he represents. Of course I have visited it more than once, and for me Mousehole stands out particularly. It is right that we should talk about elements of the countryside, but I am sure that my hon. Friend will agree that we also need to tackle the urban environment, recognising that more than three quarters of the population live in towns and cities.

The 25-year environment plan sets out how we will deliver our commitment to pass our planet on to the next generation in a better condition than it was in when we inherited it. As I said last week to the Environmental Audit Committee, during its inquiry into planetary health, the 25-year environment plan is one of a growing set of strategies intended to have a positive impact on the health of humans and the planet that sustains us. It may be a plan for England, but its ambition extends to the world beyond. It commits us to taking on an even more prominent international role in protecting the planet, whether by pushing the agenda on climate change, tackling biodiversity loss, or leading by example through the development of innovative approaches such as natural capital accounting.

The hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) is right to say that Scotland is playing its part—certainly with respect to biodiversity. He mentioned littering from vehicles, and the Government have already taken the power in question. The legislation is in place and councils have powers to make it easier to find the owners of vehicles from which littering takes place. I look forward, on this occasion, to the Scottish Parliament and Government catching up.

A key component of the 25-year environment plan's domestic strategy is connecting people with the environment to improve health and wellbeing. There is increasing evidence, which has already been widely discussed in the debate, that spending time in the natural environment improves our mental health and wellbeing. It can reduce stress and depression, boost immune systems and encourage physical activity. It may even reduce the risk of chronic diseases. Several Members referred to a mental health programme, the natural environment for health and wellbeing programme, DEFRA, NHS England, Public Health England and Natural England, along with the Department of Health and Social Care, are already working together in alliance, and more information will be made available later in the year. However, I want to stress that this programme has already launched two evidence-gathering projects to inform the design of the programme. We have also established a board to oversee the implementation and, once the evidence-gathering exercises have been completed, more information will be available.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care announced last year a £4.5 million investment to boost social prescribing. As the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) said, that is an important part of what can be done. I know that several Members recognised that in the debate.

In terms of our youth, the Government have committed £10 million to our Children and Nature programme. That programme will make school grounds greener and make it easier for pupils to visit green spaces, particularly those children from disadvantaged areas. It is also intended to increase community forest and woodland outreach activities and to transform the scale and scope of care farming.

Richard Benyon: Is the Minister, like me, pleased that, when she was working in 2011 with her boss, the current Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, when he was Secretary of State for Education, the natural environment White Paper reduced the health and safety guidance for schools for learning outside the classroom from more than 100 pages down to just

11 pages? It is that kind of change, right across government, that can make a difference to getting people out into the countryside—particularly the young.

Dr Coffey: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. Of course, he authored that paper, which is why it is so excellent and long-standing. He is right to push that particular issue. He should not be modest. I am sure that he will give credit to my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman); but I know that he was the driving force.

As has been said, 2019 is the year of green action and is providing a focal point for organisations, individuals, communities and businesses to learn more about their environmental impact and take action to reduce it. That is why we have partnered with the charity Step up to Serve, to help encourage environmental youth social action through their #iwill4nature campaign. I also met with the Minister for Civil Society and know that she will be taking this up with the National Citizen Service, to make sure that it is also fully involved in these projects, not only this year but, I hope, going forward.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives referred to the benefits of tree planting. Besides the social benefits of community forests, to which I have already referred, it is true that trees benefit us economically and environmentally, in particular in sequestering carbon dioxide. That is why the 25-year environment plan sets out our ambitions for tree planting. In addition to the 11 million trees that we have committed to plant across the country, we will ensure that 1 million more are planted in our towns and cities. We have also been consulting on the rules that we want to see in place to make it harder for councils to cut down trees when they become a nuisance, rather than being cherished for what they are.

Mary Creagh: The Minister is making some powerful points, particularly about community forests—bringing forests closer to people. That is certainly a welcome change, after the attempts to sell off the forest. Can she tell us who is monitoring these 1 million trees? Who is counting them, and how will we know when those targets have been reached?

Dr Coffey: I used to have the forestry portfolio, but that is now the role of my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley). I am afraid that I do not have that information to hand; the hon. Lady may wish to pursue that question in a different way.

In January last year, alongside the launch of the plan, the Prime Minister announced £5.7 million to accelerate development of a new northern forest, signalling the importance that we attach to tree planting. As my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives said, he is supporting a group of schoolchildren in his constituency to plant more trees. I am very pleased that they have taken up that project. In 2016, the Government launched the Schools for Trees project, and provided funding for 400,000 trees to be planted, which directly matched the corporate-sponsored programme already organised by the Woodland Trust. I am glad that he is taking advantage.

Hon. Members have referred to climate change. There are many stressors on planetary health, which have already been referred to—human population growth and climate change being the most significant. As climate change affects the environmental and social determinants of health, under future climate change scenarios impacts

[*Dr Thérèse Coffey*]

could intensify, increasing existing disease burdens and widening health inequalities if no interventions are made. Mitigating and adapting to climate change is one of the fundamental goals of the 25-year environment plan. Once we leave the EU, we will introduce an environmental land management system that will be the cornerstone of that intervention, changing the way farmers and land managers manage their land to deliver this crucial goal. Although I do not know when the Agriculture Bill will complete its stages, that will of course be part of it. Environmental land management will be supported by other interventions related to waste management, soils, agriculture and forestry—each playing a critical role—as set out in the plan.

I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) that we undertook a recent consultation that proposed an indicator framework including soil. She will be aware of some of the challenges in trying to make that assessment. I suggest that she looks out in the next couple of days for my written answer to the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy).

Globally, the UK played a leadership role in securing the 2015 Paris agreement and continues to work to ensure that subsequent negotiations unlock ambitious action. The Government are on track to deliver their commitment to providing at least £5.8 billion of international plant finance between April 2016 and March 2021. Through this fund, the UK has helped 47 million people cope with the effects of climate change. DEFRA's investments alone are expected to save 70 million tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions. This funding will go to projects such as the Blue Forest project in Madagascar and Indonesia—a £10.1 million programme that is reducing deforestation of mangrove habitat, helping to support sustainable livelihoods and community health and increasing climate resilience in coastal communities. I am pleased to say that we have also added some funding to a project to prevent mangrove deforestation in the Caribbean, focusing particularly on Belize.

Although much more progress is needed globally on the greenhouse gas emissions generated by energy and transport in particular, we need to increase substantially the focus on nature-based solutions, to reduce the pace of climate change and fulfil much climate change mitigation as well as adaptation.

Biodiversity change is intrinsically linked to climate change and is another key indicator of planetary health. It underpins many benefits enjoyed by individuals and

communities, from the food we eat to clean air and water and the endurance of nature. The plan represents a step change in ambition for nature through its goal to see thriving plants and wildlife. As such, we are investing in peatland and woodland restoration, which contribute to climate change mitigation and provide important wildlife habitats. The House will know that we are establishing a nature recovery network as a key contributor to our ambition to create or restore 500,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat, which will provide wider benefits for people. I expect the new environment Bill, which will include a number of ambitious measures, to be the first Bill in the next Session of Parliament. Internationally, the UK is committed to playing a leading role in developing an ambitious post-2020 framework.

On bird netting, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government is on the case. On Bacton cliffs, the nets are there so that the birds rest somewhere else; they are protecting the birds. The challenge is that the eroding coast is a risk to birds, and the nets are being checked three times a day to make sure that no bird becomes stuck. I am conscious of what is being said about the matter, and we will continue to look at it carefully, but there are balances that we must strike to ensure that nature is preserved.

5.42 pm

Derek Thomas: I am grateful to Back-Bench Members and Front-Bench Members for their contributions. I am glad of the opportunity this afternoon to talk up the environment plan, and I am grateful to the Minister for setting out some of its benefits. I was pleased to hear her talk about the value of nature-based solutions to climate change. We were right to focus on that this afternoon. This is an urgent issue that engages people in politics—even if we have our eyes elsewhere—and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to talk about something that matters to people and in which they can engage and be part of the solution. I am pleased that we are beginning to look at how we can give equal access to the great planet that we live on and to our natural environment.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the effect of the 25-year environment plan on world health.

5.43 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 9 April 2019

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Leaving the EU: Contingent Liability

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): In the event of the UK leaving the European Union without a deal, I have agreed to extend a financial assurance to cover the work of any UK organisations delivering funding agreed by direct bid to the European neighbourhood instrument, instrument for pre-accession and the common foreign and security policy instrument, in the regrettable event that funding is cut by the EU. My Department for International Development (DFID) colleague has made a separate announcement regarding heading IV instruments under her remit.

This financial assurance will prevent both a loss of funding to UK recipients of grants secured through direct bidding to the Commission and disruption to programmes led by these recipients in areas such as north Africa, western Balkans, Turkey, Ukraine and the Caucasus, where UK expertise is delivering important support to stability and reform. We want to ensure that ongoing work is not impacted on unfairly after we leave the European Union.

The exact size of the contingency liability is still unknown, as there is a lag in the awarding and publication of contracts by the EU. The size of the liability is therefore subject to change, though our current estimate is approximately £50 million.

[HCWS1499]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation: Report

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): In accordance with section 36 of the Terrorism Act 2006, Max Hill QC, the former independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, prepared a report on the operation in 2017 of the Terrorism Act 2000, the Terrorism Act 2006, the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures Act 2011, and The Terrorist Asset Freezing etc. Act 2010, which was laid before the House on 10 October 2018.

I am grateful to Mr Hill for his report and have carefully considered the recommendations and observations included in them. I am today laying before the House the Government's response to the report (CP88). Copies of which will be available in the Vote Office and it will also be published on gov.uk.

[HCWS1500]

JUSTICE

Divorce Law Reform

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): I am pleased to lay before Parliament "Reducing Family Conflict: Reform of the Legal

Requirements for Divorce", the Government response to the consultation on reform of this important area of family law. The full public consultation ran from 15 September to 10 December last year and sought views on the Government's proposals to revise the process for obtaining a divorce to minimise acrimony during the legal process and reduce the potential for ongoing conflict afterwards. I am grateful for the insight and experience shared by people in providing evidence of the real-life difficulties that can arise from the current law, particularly how it incentivises focusing on the past to make allegations that can unnecessarily pit one spouse against the other. That is why we are proposing to remove the legal requirement to make allegations about spousal conduct or to have lived separately for up to five years.

Families are the bedrock of society, and marriage has long proved its vital importance to family stability. The Government will always support marriage, and we want to ensure that the system as far as possible supports couples to remain married. In revising the legal process for divorce, we have also sought to maximise the opportunity for couples to reconcile if they can, by introducing a minimum period before the court grants the decree of divorce. Divorce should continue to be a considered decision. We heard from respondents to the consultation that couples often feel divorced when the court grants the provisional decree of divorce. Beginning the minimum period before this point is therefore key to allowing for both meaningful reflection and an opportunity to turn back.

When, sadly, a marriage or civil partnership has irretrievably broken down, continuing in it can be damaging for the couple and for any children they have, as well as undermining the institution of marriage itself which can work only if both parties are committed to it. It is vital that the law recognises this and, where divorce is inevitable, allows people to move on in as constructive a way as possible. The ability to have a positive rapport and co-operate after separation is particularly crucial for parents, as children's outcomes are improved by co-operative parenting. Removing from the legal process for divorce those elements which can fuel long-lasting conflict between parents will therefore support better outcomes for children. Where, despite reflection, divorce cannot be avoided the law should do all it can to reduce conflict and encourage good relations as couples move on to reach agreement about practical arrangements for the future.

The Government will therefore bring forward proposals to deal with the legal aspects of divorce or civil partnership dissolution as sensitively as possible. Divorce is of great social significance but for those involved it is also an intensely personal matter. Unfortunately, it affects the lives of too many families. The current law does little to reduce conflict when divorce occurs. It urgently needs reform to encourage a more conciliatory and constructive approach to undoing a marriage, and to ensure better outcomes for all those involved, and especially for children.

The Government have today set out their proposals for reform. We intend to bring forward legislation as soon as parliamentary time allows.

[HCWS1501]

Petitions

Tuesday 9 April 2019

OBSERVATIONS

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Closure of Oldham Post Office

The petition of residents of Oldham,

Declares that we object to the proposal by Post Office Ltd to close our main Crown post office in Oldham town centre and relocate it to WH Smith; further that the proposed closure from its High Street location and relocation to WH Smith in Spindles/Town Square shopping centre is a nonsense as evident to anyone who uses the post office; further that the post office is a busy branch and well used; further that there is no public interest in closing it; further that even if some services will be relocated, services, staff and our high street will be compromised; further that not only will we lose a visible institution on our high street, the experience of post office services in WH Smiths tells us that it will be smaller, queues will be longer and services will be reduced.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and Post Office Ltd to think again about the decision to close Oldham Post Office and to ensure that the consultation is genuine with the real concerns we have fully taken on board.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Jim McMahon, *Official Report*, 27 February 2019; Vol. 655, c. 459.]

[P002430]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, (Kelly Tolhurst)

The Government value and recognise the important role that the Post Office plays in Oldham and other communities across the UK. This is why we committed in our 2017 manifesto to safeguarding the Post Office network and protect existing rural services. Since 2010, the number of branches in the network has been at its most stable for decades, at over 11,500.

While the Post Office is publicly owned, it is a commercial business. The Government set the strategic direction for the Post Office—to maintain a national network accessible to all and to do so more sustainably for the taxpayer—and allows the company the commercial freedom to deliver this strategy as an independent business. The management of the network and decisions on franchising are operational responsibilities for the Post Office. Operational decisions are made by Post Office Limited's CEO and executive team, scrutinised by the Board and accountable to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) for the overall performance of the business.

This strategy backed by Government investment of over £2 billion since 2010 has delivered unprecedented stability to the network. While we understand that changes to post office services can be a cause of concerns to some local residents of Oldham, the Post Office's proposal to franchise Crown branches is part of its plans to ensure a sustainable network in the face of

unprecedented challenges on the high street and changes in consumer behaviour. The Post Office must constantly evolve and modernise the network to meet customers' needs with sustainable branches. While Crown branches are well used, the directly managed network was operating at a loss of £46 million in 2012 and franchising has been instrumental in removing those losses.

Franchising will help retain post office services on our local high streets throughout the country whilst bringing further investment and modernisation in branches and increasing convenience for consumers with extended opening hours and Sunday opening in most cases. Franchising is not a closure or redundancy programme and it does not mean that the Post Office is moving from public ownership. The community in Oldham, and indeed other communities across the UK, are not losing their post office. This will be relocated to nearby WHSmith branch, making services more accessible to customers.

WHSmith has been successfully operating post offices within its stores since 2017 and currently runs over 130 branches, demonstrating its proficiency to run the branch in Oldham. The franchise arrangement will bring extended opening hours and seven-day trading for customers offering a wide range of products and services with the exception of a cash machine. Although the existing ATM will not transfer, customers can withdraw money from the post office counter as part of the agreement with all the major high street banks. The nearest alternative external cash machine at a post office branch can be found approximately 1.4 miles away at Lees Road post office, 266 Lees Road, Oldham, OL4 1PA.

Regarding the Post Office's consultation in Oldham, this ran for six weeks and closed on the 27 February. This process sought to inform, and gather views from, opinion formers and local stakeholders of the proposed changes to the network and to allow the public to inform the Post Office's plans for the new branch. The Post Office also runs a customer forum to allow the public to speak to them directly. This process in line with the Post Office's code of practice on changes to the network agreed with Citizens Advice. A recent review by Citizens Advice reported that the Post Office consultation process is increasingly effective, with improvements agreed in most cases, demonstrating that the Post Office listens to the community.

The decision resulting from the consultation will not be promulgated until after the response to the petition has been filed. However, once all the responses from the consultation have been reviewed and all feedback considered then the community, staff, concerned parties and individuals will be advised of the decision.

Community Energy Savings Programme: Lowestoft

The petition of residents of Lowestoft, Suffolk,

Declares that the Community Energy Savings Programme is causing us significant suffering: accruing detriments to our finances, health and wellbeing, and private and family lives; further that residents of Lowestoft particular grievance is with the standard of external wall insulation installed to certain properties as part of the Community Energy Saving Programme 2009 - 2012 (CESP); further that the CESP was a Government policy, set down in legislation, designed to improve

domestic energy efficiency standards in the most deprived geographical areas across Great Britain; further notes that many vulnerable residents are having to live with the impact on our homes from the premature deterioration of the very poor installations; further notes that there is no evidence of appropriate training certification for the external wall cladding insulation and thus many residents are unable to obtain a valid guarantee/warranty which has affected the value of our homes and at worst has meant homes cannot be sold; further that the GCS Chartered Surveyors who were instructed to comment on the standard and workmanship of the external wall insulation have concluded that the external wall insulations do not meet system designer and BBA specification; further that the GCS Chartered Surveyors found the insulations were installed by MITIE Property Services who did not have approvals in place to install the system at the time; further that many partners are responsible for the failure of this programme including: MITIE Property Services, The Bright Green Lowestoft Organization, Waveney District Council, Suffolk Climate Change Partnership, Climate Energy Limited and npower; further that whilst the project was delivered by a number of partners the main contractors, MITIE, have overall responsibility for ensuring the installation is compliant to the system designer's specifications; and further that the installations were found to fall fault of numerous problems including: incorrect sealing, missing trims, faulty cladding and poor rendering.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons to setup a means whereby each house be assessed by an external specialist ECO assessor and obtain redress for their individual issues, compensation for financial losses and have assurance our homes can be insured without penalties.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Peter Aldous, *Official Report*, 12 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 854.]

[P002418]

Observations from the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth, (Claire Perry):

Those who had poor installations under the Community Energy Savings Programme (CESP) should seek redress from the installer in charge of the work, in this case MITIE Property Services, which remains a functioning business.

CESP ended in 2012 and since then Government have taken big steps to change the design of policies to reduce the risk of poor installation.

The Energy Company Obligation (ECO) started after CESP and steps were taken to raise standards and improve consumer protection. The Government worked with the British Standards Institute to develop new standards for ECO installations. These went over and above building regulations to drive up quality and are an eligibility requirement of the scheme;

ECO requires that all solid and cavity wall insulation installations are accompanied by a guarantee—something not required under CESP.

The guarantee must: give financial assurance even if the company providing the original guarantee cannot honour it; provide sufficient coverage—at least 25 years and the replacement of the measure and any remedial work; and provide a verified quality assurance framework for the installation and the product which are independently verified.

The Government are going beyond the protections introduced under ECO. The Each Home Counts (EHC) review was commissioned in July 2015 and reported in 2016. The review has been a key driver in understanding what we need to change in the market and it identified the need for an independent, all-encompassing mark of quality that consumers can rely upon and trust.

This has led to a new Government endorsed quality scheme, being taken forward by TrustMark. The new scheme was launched last October and sets out a clear code of conduct for registered businesses delivering to households and it will be underpinned by rigorous new technical standards to tackle poor design and installation. These will be published this spring and, going forward, we plan that Government schemes such as ECO will require installers to deliver to these standards.

Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 9 April 2019

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Homeless People: Death Rates

The following is an extract from Housing, Communities and Local Government Questions on Monday 8 April 2019.

21. [910282] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for her answers so far. Clearly, to prevent people from dying on our streets because they are homeless, it is far better to provide them with a home, or to prevent them becoming homeless in the first place. Will she update the House on what is being done in the Housing First trials, so that we can see that innovative scheme rolled out across the country and end homelessness for good?

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. The Housing First pilots are in the Greater Manchester, Greater Birmingham and Greater Liverpool areas, and **£38 million** has been put aside to assist with them. The Mayor of the Greater Birmingham area, Andy Street, phones me regularly to tell me about the progress on the Housing First pilots in the west midlands. The pilot in Liverpool is going quite well too but, sadly, the one in Manchester is not going as well, but I like a bit of competition between the three Mayors and I am sure they will all step up.

[Official Report, 8 April 2019, Vol. 658, c. 12.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Wheeler):

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman).

The correct response should have been:

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. The Housing First pilots are in the Greater Manchester, Greater Birmingham and Greater Liverpool areas, and **£28 million** has been put aside to assist with them.

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