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10 April 2019**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 10 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

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Leaving the EU: No Deal

1. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What recent assessment her Department has made of the potential effect on Northern Ireland of the UK leaving the EU without a deal. [910246]

12. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What recent assessment her Department has made of the potential effect on Northern Ireland of the UK leaving the EU without a deal. [910257]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): Today is the 21st anniversary of the Belfast agreement. Our commitment to the agreement and its successor agreements remains steadfast. It has been instrumental in bringing peace and stability to Northern Ireland and remains the bedrock of the significant progress that has been achieved since 1998.

We want and expect to leave the European Union with a negotiated agreement. However, as a responsible Government, we have been working intensively to ensure that all parts of the UK, including Northern Ireland, are as prepared as possible in the event of a no-deal exit. We have been clear that the unique social, political and economic circumstances of Northern Ireland must be protected.

Jeff Smith: May I echo the Secretary of State's words about the Belfast agreement?

Organised crime does not stop at the border, and the European arrest warrant is a vital tool in modern policing. What discussion has the Secretary of State had with the Home Secretary to ensure that we retain this crucial means of tackling crime in all circumstances of leaving the EU?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: the European arrest warrant is vital, and it is used in Northern Ireland perhaps more than in any other part of the United Kingdom. It is a very important tool that the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the security services need to have access to. There is, of course, a way to make sure that they have access to it, and that is to leave with a deal.

Liz Twist: As the Secretary of State has said, the Good Friday agreement was signed 21 years ago today, and it was a landmark achievement of the Labour Government. It ensured ongoing equality between those

in Northern Ireland who consider themselves British or Irish. In the event of a no-deal Brexit, those rights will need additional protection. What plans does the Secretary of State have to ensure that those vital rights are undiluted and protected for all in Northern Ireland?

Karen Bradley: The Belfast/Good Friday agreement was a landmark achievement. It took many years and many people take credit for it, and quite rightly so. We have been clear that there will be no diminution of rights when the United Kingdom leaves the European Union. That is set out very clearly in the Northern Ireland protocol to the withdrawal agreement, which means, as I said earlier, that the answer is to vote for the deal.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree with the Northern Ireland Department for the Economy that cutting corporation tax to the level enjoyed by businesses in the Republic of Ireland would more than compensate for any loss of attractiveness of Northern Ireland to foreign direct investors and the associated job losses?

Karen Bradley: This House gave the Northern Ireland Executive the power to cut the corporation tax rate. That is an achievement of this Government, and we believe it would help the economy of Northern Ireland. We need a functioning Executive—we will come on to that issue later—for that power to be used, and that is what we all want to happen.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that there are already differential rates of duties and VAT between Northern Ireland and the Republic and that, whether we leave with a deal or no deal, co-operation and ensuring that there is no hard border is in everyone's interests?

Karen Bradley: I agree that it is in everyone's interests that we co-operate with all our friends in the European Union, and in particular with Ireland. My hon. Friend is right. Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom—a separate jurisdiction and a separate sovereign country—and therefore there are differences. As I have said, the best way for us to leave the European Union—the way that will protect so many of the things that have been achieved in the past 21 years—is to leave with a negotiated agreement.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Of course everybody wants to get a deal that can get through this House of Commons. I remind the Secretary of State that she, along with us and Members from her own party, voted for an amendment saying that the backstop had to be replaced with alternative arrangements. Will she confirm that she still stands by that, and will she encourage her right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to adopt that approach, which the Leader of the House referred to yesterday?

Karen Bradley: The right hon. Gentleman is right to point out that there was a majority—the only majority in this House for anything—for the Brady amendment. I was one of those who voted for it, because I want to see changes to the backstop. Of course, that is something we have achieved through the agreement that alternative

arrangements could be part of the way in which the backstop is replaced. As I have said, we all want a negotiated exit that works for the whole United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland.

Nigel Dodds: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for confirming on the record in the House today that she agrees that changes do need to be made to the backstop—it is important to recognise that. With regard to a no-deal outcome, she will have heard the Irish Taoiseach, and indeed Michel Barnier, say that in the event of no deal there will not be any hard border on the island of Ireland and that arrangements will be made to ensure that checks and controls are made operationally away from the border. Does she understand the frustration, therefore, with people who say that, in the event of no deal, there will be no hard border, but who are insisting on a backstop, which could actually bring about the conditions that they say they want to avoid?

Karen Bradley: I understand the many frustrations that there are around this process. I voted for the withdrawal agreement—I voted for it three times. I believe that it is a fair and balanced way for the whole United Kingdom to leave the European Union in a way that respects fully the Belfast agreement and its successor agreements, and that is what I want to see us deliver.

Devolution

2. **Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): What recent steps she has taken to help restore devolution in Northern Ireland. [910247]

10. **David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): What recent steps she has taken to help restore devolution in Northern Ireland. [910255]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): On 26 March, I laid before Parliament a statutory instrument that extends the period for Executive formation until 25 August. This follows the recent engagement that I have had with the five main political parties in Northern Ireland and the Irish Government. On the basis of those conversations, I have proposed a short, focused set of five-party talks aimed at restoring devolution and the other institutions at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Sweeney: I think it is fair to say that the Secretary of State has lost the confidence of many political leaders in Northern Ireland over recent months, so will she at least concede that she is probably not the best person to be chairing those talks? Will she repeat the best practice of previous Secretaries of State and appoint an independent chair to lead those talks on restoring devolution in Northern Ireland?

Karen Bradley: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman's opening remarks, but I do want to look at what is the best way to achieve a successful outcome from the talks, and I am open to looking at all options for how to achieve that.

David Hanson: In the absence of local rule and the absence of direct rule there remains a vacuum. Will the Secretary of State now look at the possibility of Members

of this House asking written questions about issues of devolved responsibility to give some accountability to the local civil service?

Karen Bradley: The right hon. Gentleman, who has considerable experience in this field and who will, I am determined, remain the last direct rule Minister, knows that there are some constitutional arrangements. The Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 was very carefully drafted so that it respected the separation and independence of the Northern Ireland civil service, and we mess with that at our peril.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend set a timetable for these talks so that she can bring the various leaders together and make sure that we restore devolved government?

Karen Bradley: I would like to see talks resume as soon as possible, but I am acutely aware that there are issues, including the fact that local government elections are now being fought in Northern Ireland and that we are in purdah, that create difficulties for what can be achieved, but I do want to see as soon as possible a short, focused set of five-party talks.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The Secretary of State has previously said that formal talks could not take place until after the local elections on 2 May, which she has just referred to, but given the Brexit developments, or a lack thereof, is she now proposing that all-party talks will now not happen until after the European elections at the end of May, which would bring us into the heart of the marching season? How can she possibly justify yet another delay in attempting to restore the Assembly that nearly 80% of the Northern Irish public are crying out for?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman refers to a number of issues that may be making it more difficult for parties to find an accommodation to enable them to restore devolution. I know that he is a supporter of devolution, and therefore I suggest to him that the best way that we can all help on that is to vote for the deal.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): More than two years ago, Sinn Féin collapsed the Northern Ireland Assembly. Since then, rather than looking for its restoration, it has been fixated on getting a border poll and on stirring up sectarian tensions in Northern Ireland at the expense of people who want decisions made on education, health, infrastructure, job promotion and so on. In the face of Sinn Féin opposition to setting up the Assembly again, what plans has the Secretary of State considered to get decisions made in Northern Ireland?

Karen Bradley: The right hon. Gentleman knows that the best thing for the people of Northern Ireland is devolved government in Stormont, with local politicians making decisions for the people who elected them. That is what we are all determined to see, and I am as determined as anybody to make sure that I put the conditions in place so that we can enable that to happen.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): May I join the Secretary of State in commemorating the 21st anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday agreement? One of the

casualties of the lack of devolved governance is the compensation scheme recommended by Sir Anthony Hart some five years ago. In the time since that report, 30 victims of historical institutional abuse have died. Only one person can now resolve the issue, rather than pushing it further down the road. Let me make a heartfelt plea to the Secretary of State. Will she now announce to the House that she will take the power to ensure that compensation is paid and announce a date when those compensation payments will begin?

Karen Bradley: I do not wish to correct the hon. Gentleman unnecessarily, but the recommendations of the Hart inquiry came two years ago, just after the Executive collapsed. Since that time, the head of the Northern Ireland civil service, David Sterling, has completed a consultation, and we await its results; that would need to be done in any event. I stand ready to look at the appropriate action that needs to be taken when the consultation recommendations are brought forward and I hear from David Sterling.

Devolved Government

3. **Ross Thomson** (Aberdeen South) (Con): What progress she has made on restoring devolved government in Northern Ireland. [910248]

5. **Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): What progress she has made on restoring devolved government in Northern Ireland. [910250]

7. **Kirstene Hair** (Angus) (Con): What progress she has made on restoring devolved government in Northern Ireland. [910252]

9. **Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): What discussions she has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) representatives of political parties in Northern Ireland on restoring devolved government in Northern Ireland. [910254]

11. **Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): What progress she has made on restoring devolved government in Northern Ireland. [910256]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): As I set out previously, the statutory instrument that I laid before Parliament on 26 March extends the period for Executive formation until 25 August. I have proposed a short, focused set of five-party talks aimed at restoring devolution at the earliest opportunity.

Ross Thomson: Given that the Secretary of State has previously stated that she wishes to ensure the best chance of restoring devolution, is she concerned that no opportunity to successfully bring the parties together has yet presented itself?

Karen Bradley: We have tried on a number of occasions to bring the parties together. My hon. Friend will know that we had an intensive period of talks last year that were very close to a successful outcome, but it has just not been possible to do that. I would not wish to say to the people of Northern Ireland that we were able to do something if I did not genuinely believe that we could. I

therefore need to ensure that the conditions are right to have the best chance of success, because that is what the people of Northern Ireland deserve.

Mark Menzies: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing £350 million for the Belfast city deal, but does she agree that it is vital that we do similar for Londonderry?

Karen Bradley: I was delighted to co-sign the heads of terms for the Belfast region city deal with partners last month. It is a significant milestone, which will ultimately deliver the first city deal in Northern Ireland. Let me be clear that there is no room for complacency. I have committed to delivering a comprehensive and ambitious set of city deals right across Northern Ireland, and I am now working hard with local partners and colleagues across the Government to make progress on the Derry and Strabane city deal. Negotiations are progressing well, and I am hopeful that Cabinet colleagues will be in a position to agree a deal following the conclusions of local council elections in May.

Kirstene Hair: As the Secretary of State outlined, the statutory instrument that extends the period for Executive formation in Northern Ireland runs out on 25 August. What steps will she take if we get closer to that deadline and do not see any devolved government being restored?

Karen Bradley: We are looking at all options, but clearly the only sustainable way forward for Northern Ireland lies in getting the institutions back up and running. The restoration of devolved government in Northern Ireland is my absolute priority, and the willingness to restore the Executive is there among the political parties. I will do everything in my power to get the Executive back up and running as soon as possible.

Maria Caulfield: Given that Northern Ireland has now reached the world record for the longest period ever without a Government, would the Minister consider forming an Assembly of the willing to return devolved government to Northern Ireland?

Karen Bradley: We remain steadfast in our commitment to the Belfast agreement and its successors, including the provisions setting out an inclusive, power-sharing Government. An approach that excludes representatives of either part of the community is not a sustainable way forward for Northern Ireland.

Alan Mak: In the absence of Ministers at Stormont, how has my right hon. Friend engaged with public authorities and local authorities in Northern Ireland to ensure political stability and good governance?

Karen Bradley: As I have said, I have already laid the SI to extend the period during which an Executive can be formed. We need to ensure that we are doing everything we can to get the politicians back into Stormont, running devolved government for the people of Northern Ireland, but of course I work closely with local councils and others—including on city deals, as I set out earlier.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State outline for the House what fresh thinking or fresh ideas she has to try to break the impasse we have had for well over two years now?

Karen Bradley: As I said earlier, I rule nothing out. I am looking at all the options that are available in terms of getting the conditions right and getting those successful talks. If the hon. Gentleman has any suggestions, I would be very grateful to receive them. I rule nothing out. I will of course let this House know at the earliest opportunity when I do have developments in that area.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP) *rose*—

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: There is always a DUP contest between seniority and youth. On this occasion, I call Mr David Simpson.

David Simpson: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

With all the discussions that the Secretary of State has had with the various parties, I am sure she has come to the conclusion that the only party that is holding progress back is Sinn Féin. We in this part of the House would form a Government in the morning.

Karen Bradley: You are probably not aware, Mr Speaker, that I managed to offend the hon. Gentleman in the Tea Room earlier, so I will point out that you allowed youth to win on this occasion.

Of course I have met all the party leaders and all the main parties in Northern Ireland. I do believe that there is a willingness to see devolution restored, and I want to see that at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Speaker: I call Gavin Robinson.

Gavin Robinson: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker—I will always defer to my junior colleagues. The Secretary of State knows that four of the five parties in Northern Ireland would restore the Executive tomorrow, without preconditions. Sinn Féin is the only party that has allowed its political prejudice to get in the way of progress in Northern Ireland. Will she commit, at the end of the time-bound period of discussions, to call the Assembly and put the parties to the test?

Karen Bradley: As I say, I want to see devolution restored at the earliest opportunity. I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's comments about the willingness of his party. I am convinced that the other four parties are determined to see devolution restored, and we need to get the conditions right to allow that to happen.

14. [910259] **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What recent assessment has the Secretary of State made of the extra-budgetary payment to Northern Ireland agreed between her Government and the DUP on the devolution settlement? Does she realise that Scotland and its people have been denied a total of £3.4 billion as a direct result of this dodgy deal, which may have broken the Barnett formula?

Karen Bradley: I do not think it is right for the hon. Lady to make that assertion. There are unique circumstances and pressures in Northern Ireland. The Government respect that and want to make sure that it is reflected in the financial settlement.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): In the absence of devolved government, the direct decisions being made by Westminster for Northern Ireland are increasing every day, whether on the Offensive Weapons Bill, the Healthcare (International Arrangements) Bill, the two-child policy, or even what will happen with the Open golf tournament. The Secretary of State tells us that she respects devolution, but these decisions are being made behind closed doors with civil servants and without the involvement of the people or representatives of Northern Ireland. If she thinks that is acceptable, will she publish in full a list of all the policy decisions she has made under this new legislation, including the legislative consent motions and who has signed them off, so that we know who is really running Northern Ireland?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady did very well to get through the question and still have some voice left.

The decisions that are taken by the civil servants in Northern Ireland—the permanent secretaries—are published. That is part of the conditions of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018. But to be clear, that Act does not allow new major policy decisions to be made; it allows for policy decisions taken when the Executive was still in place to be continued. As I say, no new policy decisions are being taken under that Act.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): Devolution and peace in Northern Ireland are precious and hard won. That is brilliantly captured with great humour and poignancy in the latest series of “Derry Girls”, which I know the Secretary of State is a fan of. Will she join me in congratulating Lisa McGee and the entire production team on another brilliant series?

Karen Bradley: I am absolutely delighted to congratulate everybody involved in “Derry Girls”. I have not yet seen the final episode, so I do not want any spoilers.

Universal Credit

4. **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the effect of the two-child limit in universal credit on families in Northern Ireland.

[910249]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): Both the Secretary of State and I were delighted by the recent announcement by the Work and Pensions Secretary that parents who had their third child before the two-child limit was introduced in April 2017 would not face the cap. This will help thousands of families across the UK, including Northern Ireland. The administration and implementation of universal credit is a devolved matter, but Northern Ireland's Department for Communities knows of no complaints, issues or problems experienced by claimants in the operation of the two-child policy.

Dr Huq: The cruelty of this policy, as was confirmed by the UN rapporteur, is most acute in Northern Ireland, where families are bigger and abortion is illegal, which has been condemned by the Supreme Court. Surely in the case of non-consensual conception, women who

seek to exercise the already humiliating rape clause will risk the prosecution of professionals who assist under section 5 of the Criminal Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1967. Can we have some clarity on this human rights double whammy?

John Penrose: The hon. Lady is right to raise that concern, which has been raised on previous occasions because of the depth of worry. I would just reassure her that in the 52 years since section 5 was passed, there have been no prosecutions for failure to report a rape in Northern Ireland. I would add that an outgoing Director of Public Prosecutions in Northern Ireland said that it is very unlikely that anyone will face prosecution in future.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): The Minister appears to be presenting some new legislation to us. We are not familiar with the information he has just given, and I hope we can have a bit more detail.

I rise in sorrow and in anger to say that the roll-out of universal credit has had an unmitigated devastating impact on the poorest people in Northern Ireland. If universal credit is not good enough for the Minister's constituents or my constituents, why is it good enough for Northern Ireland, where the level of long-term unemployment is twice the national average? Does he believe that making the worst-off worse off is acceptable?

John Penrose: I politely disagree with the hon. Gentleman, not least because unemployment in Northern Ireland has been falling steadily, which is one of the huge success stories of Northern Ireland's economic progress since the troubles. The previous Assembly introduced some rather important legislation, which is still in operation, that mitigates some of the local concerns about the operation of universal credit in Northern Ireland.

Security Situation

6. **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the security situation in Northern Ireland. [910251]

13. **Victoria Prentis** (Banbury) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the security situation in Northern Ireland. [910258]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): The threat from dissident republican terrorism continues to be severe in Northern Ireland. Our top priority is to keep people safe and secure. Vigilance against this continuing threat is essential and we remain determined to ensure that terrorism never succeeds.

Vicky Ford: It is 21 years to the day since the signing of the Belfast Good Friday agreement. I will always remember the devastating bomb that ripped through Omagh, the town of my birth, just months before. Does my hon. Friend agree that the agreement has been vital in delivering the relative peace in Northern Ireland and that it must not be jeopardised?

John Penrose: I do. As the Secretary of State rightly mentioned earlier, the Belfast agreement was a landmark moment for Northern Ireland and all its neighbours. The peace that it has helped deliver is the foundation of

so much of the economic and social progress that has been made since. Of course, the terrorists know that, which is why it is essential that we never let them win.

Victoria Prentis: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Police Service of Northern Ireland does a fantastic job? Will he confirm that the Government will continue to do all they can to support it?

John Penrose: Yes, I do. The Police Service of Northern Ireland does a terrific job of keeping everyone safe across the community in Northern Ireland. I am sure I speak for everybody here in expressing our admiration and thanks for the work it does.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. [Interruption.] I am very glad that the Prime Minister has just taken her seat, because the question relates to dissident republicans. Has the Minister been made aware by the Police Service of Northern Ireland that dissident republicans are responsible for the recent spate of thefts of ATMs across Northern Ireland and are intent on using the stolen money to purchase weaponry to attack police officers and others along the border in the event of a no-deal Brexit?

John Penrose: There has been a great deal of speculation about this matter. I hope the hon. Lady will understand that all I can say in my response here is that policing is an operational matter. There are ongoing live police investigations into this matter and therefore I cannot go any further into it. However, I am sure that everybody here will have heard her concerns and registered them clearly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Bearing in mind that the Secretary of State made a statement saying that the threat level for January was at "severe", will the Minister outline what efforts have been made to increase police presence in local community policing to build relationships within communities? How much extra funding has he secured for the police?

John Penrose: I am happy to report that there has been a great deal of extra funding for the Police Service of Northern Ireland. There was £230 million of extra security funding over the 2010 Parliament and there has been £131 million over the current spending review period, plus £25 million to tackle paramilitary activity. In December, we announced another £16.5 million to help the Police Service of Northern Ireland prepare for EU exit.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What action are the Government taking to tackle delays in the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland? That is essential to ensuring we do more to bring to justice people responsible for terrorism.

John Penrose: My right hon. Friend, as a former Secretary of State, will appreciate that that is predominantly a devolved matter and that many things would be on the plate of a restored Stormont Assembly and Executive. I am sure that that would be one of them, but first it is essential to get that Executive and Assembly back to work.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): In these heightened times of threats against politicians, anyone standing for a council election in England this May does not need to have their home details published. In Northern Ireland, that is not the case, which has led to the Social Democratic and Labour party councillor Máiría Cahill having to withdraw from fighting her seat. Will the Minister tell the House why in England legislation changed but we did not do that in Northern Ireland? When will that change be made?

John Penrose: This matter has come up in the press recently and I know it is causing concern to all parts of the House and in all communities in Northern Ireland. We are tremendously sympathetic. The difficulty is that changing the laws in Northern Ireland in time for the local elections will probably be impossible. We all want to try to ensure that this is dealt with so that the law is in line as soon as we can.

Open Championship 2019

8. **Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con):** What assessment she has made of the effect on Northern Ireland's economy of hosting the Open championship 2019. [910253]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): As a former tourism Minister, I am delighted that in July the Open championship is making an historic return to Northern Ireland after 68 years. Tourism Northern Ireland expects up to 190,000 spectators will attend the event at the Royal Portrush golf club and estimates that the benefit to the Northern Ireland economy will be £80 million. Tourism in Northern Ireland is going from strength to strength. During the first quarter of 2018, visitors spent an unprecedented £180 million.

Tom Pursglove: What steps is the Minister taking to capitalise on this top international sporting event to promote Northern Irish tourism and showcase business opportunities?

John Penrose: My hon. Friend will know that tourism is a devolved matter, which is yet another reason for the Stormont Executive to reform quickly. I also urge businesses to use the event as a huge marketing opportunity. Portrush will be a target-rich environment for them, full of potential customers, suppliers and contacts for all sectors of Northern Ireland's economy—not just tourism. I am sure they will grab it with both hands.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP)
rose—

Mr Speaker: If the hon. Gentleman intends favourably to reference Rory McIlroy, I will call him. If he does not, I will not.

Mr Campbell: I will, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Very good.

Mr Campbell: He is one of the best golfers in the world. Will the Minister meet Invest Northern Ireland, as I have, to ensure that we maximise every potential investment opportunity on the back of the Open returning to Royal Portrush after an absence of almost 70 years?

John Penrose: I am happy to meet Invest Northern Ireland and anyone else who wants to bring more investment into Northern Ireland.

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Colleagues, I am pleased to announce that after a fair and open recruitment process, Her Majesty the Queen has approved the appointment of Sarah Davies as Clerk Assistant and Managing Director of the Chamber and Committees Team with effect from 29 April 2019. Sarah Davies is Principal Clerk of Select Committees and the first woman to hold permanently the position of Clerk Assistant. She is a superb servant of the House of Commons. We unite in congratulating her and we wish her well for the period that lies ahead.

Oral Answers to Questions

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [910330] **Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con):** If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 10 April.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): May I add my congratulations to Sarah Davies on achieving this position and say how good it always is to see women in high office?

The tragedy of Jallianwala Bagh in 1919 is a shameful scar on British Indian history. As Her Majesty the Queen said before visiting Jallianwala Bagh in 1997, it is a “distressing example” of our history with India. We deeply regret what happened and the suffering caused. I am pleased that today the UK-India relationship is one of collaboration, partnership, prosperity and security. Indian diaspora make an enormous contribution to British society, and I am sure the whole House wishes to see the UK's relationship with India continue to flourish.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Craig Tracey: I fully agree with the Prime Minister when she has repeatedly said that we need to honour both the result of the referendum and our manifesto commitments, which mean leaving the customs union and the single market. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that if the best way to do that, rather than delivering a diluted deal that is unrecognisable to many of those who voted to leave, is to go under World Trade Organisation rules, we should grab that opportunity and believe in the ability of the British people and a Conservative Government to make a success of it?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend that I believe a Conservative Government will make a success of whatever the situation is in relation to Brexit. But I still believe that the best Brexit for the UK is to be able to leave in an orderly way, to be able to leave with a deal, and I want to ensure that that Brexit does indeed

honour the result of the referendum. There are Members of this House who do not want to honour the result of the referendum; I do.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I am very pleased that the Prime Minister mentioned what happened in Jallianwala Bagh and the issues of the massacre at Amritsar 100 years ago. I think that the people, in memory of those who lost their lives and the brutality of what happened, deserve a full, clear and unequivocal apology for what took place on that occasion.

I join the Prime Minister and yourself, Mr Speaker, in welcoming Sarah Davies to her appointment. I am sure she is going to be absolutely brilliant. I remember the day she started work in the House, and she has done incredibly well.

I also welcome my hon. Friend the new Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) who is here today. I believe that she is a very worthy successor to the late Paul Flynn.

Today marks the 21st anniversary of the Good Friday agreement, a defining moment in Irish history, which allowed peace to prevail. It was a great achievement, and I pay tribute to the work done by the Labour Government at that time, as well as those on all sides in Ireland, north and south, and in this House in achieving the crucial breakthrough in the peace process, which we have to ensure is maintained.

As we continue discussions to find a compromise over the Brexit deal that could shape our future economic relationship with Europe—protecting jobs, rights and our economy—we should not forget the communities across this country that have been abandoned by this Government in the here and now. Official figures show that nine of the 10 most deprived council areas in this country have seen cuts that are almost three times the average of any other council. Why has the Prime Minister decided to cut the worst-off areas in our country more than the most well-off?

The Prime Minister: First, the right hon. Gentleman is right to reference the 21st anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, which was indeed an important moment in Northern Irish history and which has led to the peace that we have seen subsequently. May I welcome the actions that were taken by politicians of all parties, in this House and elsewhere, to ensure that that peace was possible and that that agreement was possible as well?

May I say to the right hon. Gentleman in relation to the issue of council funding that actually councils do have more money available this year? [HON. MEMBERS: “Ah!”] Yes, a real-terms increase. The right hon. Gentleman voted against that money being available. But what we have also done is listen to councils, and given them extra flexibility. For example, they have called for a long time to have the borrowing cap lifted so that they could build more homes, and we have done exactly that—listened to councils and given them what they wanted.

Jeremy Corbyn: The problem is that child poverty is rising. In councils with the highest levels of child poverty, over £1,000 per household has been taken in funding cuts in the past decade. Some of the wealthiest areas of our country have lost only £5. Take Swindon, for example, where Honda recently announced 3,500 job cuts. Child poverty is over one third higher in Swindon than it is in

Surrey, but Swindon will have lost £235 per household in Government funding cuts, whereas a household in Surrey will see more money from central Government. Can the Prime Minister explain why Swindon faces cuts while Surrey gets more money?

The Prime Minister: Actually, what we see in terms of spending power per home is that the average spending power per home for the most deprived local authorities is over 20% higher than for the least deprived local authorities. That is Conservatives delivering for local councils.

Jeremy Corbyn: Homelessness is three times higher in Swindon than in Surrey. Today, we learn that two-thirds of councils do not have the funding necessary to comply with the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. In Stoke-on-Trent, the council has lost £640 per household, yet child poverty is more than double the rate in Surrey, which has seen an increase in funding. Does the Prime Minister think that areas with the highest levels of child poverty deserve to be facing the largest cuts in their budgets?

The Prime Minister: What I think is that Members across the House who are concerned about child poverty should take action to ensure that we help families to get more money into their pockets. It is this Government that have frozen fuel duty. It is this Government that have introduced the national living wage. It is this Government that have given lower paid workers the highest increase. It is this Government that on Saturday saw 32 million households see a tax cut. If the right hon. Gentleman really wants to help people out there with money in their pockets he should be backing these measures by the Government instead of voting against them.

Jeremy Corbyn: The reality is that under this Government 500,000 more children have gone into relative poverty. In Stoke-on-Trent alone, 4,000 food bank parcels were handed out to children last year. If that was not bad enough, it is about to get worse. Tory proposals on the new funding formula for councils will make poorer areas even poorer. They are removing the word “deprivation” from the funding criteria. In a phrase that George Orwell would have been very proud of they have called this the fairer funding formula. Areas like Stoke will lose out even more. Will the Prime Minister explain why she wants to give less funding to the most deprived parts of our country?

The Prime Minister: No, that is not what we are doing. What we are doing is ensuring that we have a fairer funding formula across local authorities. We are also ensuring that we are making more money available for local authorities to spend. Let us just see what we see from council after council up and down the country. If people want to ensure that they have good local services and pay less in council tax, that is what they see under Conservative councils. There is a clear message: if you want to pay less council tax and have good local services, vote Conservative.

Jeremy Corbyn: Unfortunately for the Prime Minister the truth is that when Labour controls local councils, households pay on average £350 less than those living in

Tory areas. The average council tax per dwelling in Labour council areas is £1,169 compared to £1,520 in Tory council areas. The Society of Local Authority Chief Executives has called the fairer funding formula decision “perverse”. Even before this new formula kicks in, councils are losing out now. A Conservative council leader said earlier this year:

“we are really, really short of money...I mean there is no money” for him to run his services. What does the Prime Minister say to local authorities struggling to make ends meet while her Government continue to underfund the vital services they deliver?

The Prime Minister: We have over the years asked local councils to take some difficult decisions in relation to living within our means. Why did we have to do that? We had to do that because we were left the biggest deficit in our peacetime history by the last Labour Government.

Jeremy Corbyn: A political choice to impose austerity on local government has hit the poorest and worst-off the hardest in every one of our communities across the country. Since 2010, 50p of every £1 has been stripped from local authorities by her Government. That is the reality of what life is like for those trying to deliver services.

The evidence is clear: the Tories have abandoned communities across the country. They have left towns and cities to fend for themselves after nine years of vindictive, damaging austerity: 1,000 fewer Sure Start centres—one of the greatest achievements of the last Government; 760 fewer youth centres; and a social care system in absolute crisis. Child poverty is up. Violent crime is up. Homelessness and rough sleeping are also up. This Government stand for tax cuts for the richest and swingeing cuts for the rest. Will the Prime Minister now admit that far from tackling the “burning injustices” that she talked about, her Government’s cruel and unfair policies have pushed councils to the brink and left those “just about managing” not being able to manage at all? That is her legacy.

The Prime Minister: I am proud to lead a Government who have seen more children in good schools, more doctors, more jobs, lower borrowing, lower unemployment and lower taxes—that is Conservatives delivering across the country for everyone. What would we see with a Labour Government under the right hon. Gentleman? We would see them destroying our defences and abandoning our allies, billions more in borrowing, fewer opportunities and higher taxes for everyone. That is a Labour future and we will never let it happen.

Q3. [910332] **Antoinette Sandbach** (Eddisbury) (Con): Some argue for completely free markets and self-regulation by big business, but this can lead to harmful content and extreme views being promoted. The tech giants who act as publishers have shown that without regulation they will not act. Will the Prime Minister join me in welcoming the publication of the “Online Harms” White Paper and support the levelling of the playing field between print and broadcast media and the tech giants?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised a very important point that matters to people up and down the country. The internet can be absolutely brilliant at connecting people and providing them with information,

and connecting people not just nationally but across the world, but for too long the companies have not done enough to protect users, especially children and young people, from harmful content. That is not good enough, and that is why we have listened to campaigners and parents. We are putting a legal duty of care on internet companies to keep people safe. I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend the Culture Secretary and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on the work that they have done on this issue. Online companies must start taking responsibility for their platforms and help restore public trust in their technology.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Today, as we know, is the anniversary of the Good Friday agreement—a peace accord that not only ended violence in Northern Ireland but brought stability for all of us living throughout the United Kingdom. Brexit threatens to undermine that—to drag us out of the most successful peace project in history: the European Union. What a tragedy. It is now one week since talks began between the Tory Government and the Labour party. I want to ask the Prime Minister: at any point during these talks, has a second referendum been offered on the Government side of the negotiating table—yes or no, Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: My position on a second referendum and the Government’s position has not changed. The House has rejected a second referendum two times. When we come to a deal, we will have to ensure that legislation goes through this House. Of course, it may be that there are those in this House who wish to press that issue as that legislation goes through, but my position on this has not changed.

Ian Blackford: It was a very simple question: has a referendum been offered—yes or no? People cannot have faith in a backroom deal cooked up by two leaders who do not possess the ingredients to hold their parties together, never mind hold these islands together. Scotland will not be forced to accept what these two Brexit parties are preparing to serve up. There is no such thing as a good Brexit. There is no such thing as a good Tory-Labour Brexit deal. The Prime Minister must recognise the difference between what she believes is duty, but what the rest of us see as delusion. In her final days as Prime Minister, will she accept the EU offer of a long extension, accept that she has run out of road, and accept that the only choice now is to put this back to the people?

The Prime Minister: As I have said, I have made my position clear. I think it is a little difficult for many of us in the House to see the right hon. Gentleman, week after week, stand up and say that the UK should stay in the European Union, given that Scottish independence would have meant taking Scotland out of the European Union. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is a lot of noise. Let us hear the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison).

Q4. [910333] **Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Surplus waste incinerator capacity is taking pressure off efforts to reuse, recycle and reduce waste.

Will the Government strengthen their bid to host the 2020 United Nations climate change conference by putting a moratorium on new incinerator, gasification and pyrolysis applications, including the one in Westbury, in my constituency?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue, and for highlighting the fact that we are bidding to host COP26. The issue of incineration is crucial, particularly in certain local areas. We want to maximise the amount of waste that is sent to recycling rather than to incineration and landfill. Waste plants continue to play an important role in reducing the amount of rubbish that is sent to landfill, and we welcome the efforts to drive it down further, but if wider policies do not deliver our waste ambitions in the future—including those higher recycling rates—we will consider introducing a tax on the incineration of waste, which would operate in conjunction with the landfill tax and would take into account the possible impact on local authorities.

Q2. [910331] Mr Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley) (Lab): Charlie Foster, one of my young constituents—aged seven—has cystic fibrosis. When he has an attack, he feels as if he is breathing through a straw. I have never tried the test, but I will when I get back to my constituency. Young people are suffering very badly because a drug called Orkambi has not been licensed by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. It increases the lung capacity of these kids by 42%, and it stops them having to be sent straight to hospital when they have an attack. Will the Prime Minister try to get that drug across the line and give kids like Charlie Foster a better quality of life?

The Prime Minister: Let me say first that I am sure that the thoughts of the whole House are with Charlie and his family.

We recognise the significant concerns about access to this drug. On 11 March, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health held a meeting with the company Vertex, NHS England and NICE, and they discussed how best to reach a deal so that people with cystic fibrosis and their families could benefit as soon as possible. They met again later in March and they are continuing those discussions, but I will ensure that the case that the hon. Gentleman has raised and the importance of the issue, are once again brought to the attention of the Department of Health.

Q5. [910334] Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee has produced an excellent report on leasehold reform. As a result of the doubling of ground rents, outrageous charges for permissions for minor improvements and the absolute scandal of developers' selling freeholds without even contacting leaseholders, the market is broken. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we cannot rely on voluntary codes to put this right and that we need legislation to restore fairness to the housing market?

The Prime Minister: I thank the Select Committee for its report, and I thank my hon. Friend for the way in which he has championed housing issues. His Act is already having an effect on homelessness reduction.

We have committed ourselves to legislation to reduce ground rent on future leases to a peppercorn. As for current leaseholders, we have been working with the industry to ensure that existing leases with onerous ground rent terms are changed to a better deal. Leaseholders of flats have a right of first refusal when their freeholders are planning to sell the properties, and we are considering introducing a right of first refusal for house lessees as well. Last year, we made a commitment to consider a range of charges facing leaseholders and freeholders, including permission fees, and to consider in what circumstances they are justified and whether they should be capped or banned. I have asked Lord Best to chair a working group to look into the regulating and professionalising of property agents.

We are considering the Committee's report carefully, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right: if we believe that a market is not working properly, we should act to deal with that.

Q7. [910336] Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): The Prime Minister will be aware of the Channel 4 "Dispatches" investigation aired last week into the extent of the involvement of both BAE and British military personnel in the tragic war in Yemen. In the programme, it was claimed that BAE carries out 95% of the preparations for Typhoon bombing raids, including the one that killed 40 schoolchildren in August 2018. Will the Government act now to review arms export licences to Saudi Arabia and British complicity in these bombings?

The Prime Minister: We have one of the toughest regimes in relation to the export of arms across the world. The hon. Lady references the situation in Yemen. We are very clear that that cannot go on. It is four years since the beginning of that devastating conflict, and there needs to be a political settlement. We are working with and backing work that is being done by the UN special envoy, Martin Griffiths. The parties have made significant progress towards an agreement to implement phase 1 of the redeployment of forces from Hodeidah, and we are urging all parties to honour the agreements that were made in Stockholm. Our total bilateral commitment to Yemen since the start of the conflict now stands at £717 million. We are backing the UN peace process. The coalition is there, and as has been acknowledged by the United Nations, it is there at the request of the Government of Yemen. We have been backing the United Nations peace process and will continue to do so, and we will continue to provide humanitarian support to the people of Yemen.

Q6. [910335] Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Children in Shrewsbury receive, on average, £4,350 per annum for their education. Their counterparts in Hackney receive over 50% more, at £6,590. These huge regional differences in funding for our schools are leading to real problems in Shropshire in supporting children with special educational needs and with the fabric of our school buildings. When will this Conservative Government finally tackle the huge differences in regional funding for our schools?

The Prime Minister: We are obviously working to improve education for every child, regardless of what part of the country they live in or their background. As

I made clear earlier, we are putting more funding into our schools through to 2020. We have recently announced an extra £250 million over two years for the high needs budget, together with extra money for children with special educational needs. My hon. Friend references the funding formula and the distribution of funds. The new national funding formula is about distributing funds more fairly, and historically underfunded schools will be receiving the biggest increases, of up to 6% per pupil, this year through the schools formula. We will also be allocating additional funding to small, remote schools that play an essential part in rural communities. We have recognised the need to introduce a fairer funding formula, and that is what we are doing.

Q8. [910337] Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): In 2010, when the Conservative party took office, child poverty had been falling continuously in Preston for 16 years. Today, according to Government figures, 38% of children in Preston—that is nearly 8,000 kids—are living in poverty. Food banks are being overrun, and what is accelerating that demand? It is the roll-out of universal credit from July 2018. When will the Prime Minister scrap universal credit?

The Prime Minister: The way to ensure that we develop a sustainable solution to poverty is to have a strong economy and a welfare system that helps people into work. That is what universal credit does—200,000 more people in work as a result of introducing universal credit. Work is the best route out of poverty. The evidence is that a child growing up in a home where all the adults work is around five times less likely to be in poverty than a child from a home where nobody works. We are making sure that we encourage people into the workplace. There are more jobs out there; more people in work; a record level of people in employment. Work is the best route out of poverty.

Q14. [910343] Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): On Monday, a constituent contacted me to tell me that three men armed with a knife had tried to rob his 15-year-old son as he walked from a friend's home in a neighbouring borough. He expressed his frustration that police stations are closing and that he never seems to see police on the beat any longer. To keep our young people safe, is it not time that the Mayor of London reversed his decision to close Barnet police station and others in the London suburbs?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that decisions about the closure of police stations across London are a matter for the Mayor of London. We have been protecting police funding. This year, there will be almost £1 billion extra available for the police, and the Metropolitan police are receiving up to £2.7 billion in funding in 2019-20—an increase on last year. We will always ensure that the police have the powers and resources that they need, but it is important that people recognise the responsibilities of the police and crime commissioners and the decisions they take. In London, that is the Labour Mayor of London.

Q9. [910338] Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Mr Speaker, I really think it would be unwise of me to mention any hotels in the highlands this week. At Dounreay in Caithness in my constituency,

we have a skills pool that is second to none. As Dounreay continues to decommission, it is vital that we redeploy those skills to the maximum benefit of the local economy and the UK economy. Can the Prime Minister give me an undertaking that the Government will work very closely with the management at Dounreay, the relevant local trade unions and the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority to make sure that redeployment of skills actually happens to the benefit of the UK?

The Prime Minister: I recognise that this must be a time of concern for staff at Dounreay. It is important that we recognise the skills that have been developed there and make sure we take every opportunity to put them to the benefit not just of local people but, as the hon. Gentleman says, of the United Kingdom. We welcome Dounreay Site Restoration's statement of support for its staff and its intention to support them through a transition into other employment. I understand that it will develop training and support programmes to put individuals in the strongest possible position to move into another local job in one of the growing local industries, such as space, which the hon. Gentleman has referenced in previous Prime Minister's questions, or renewable energy.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the Government's commitment. We remain absolutely committed to supporting the region and the staff affected. We will continue to work with the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority, Dounreay Site Restoration Ltd, Cavendish Nuclear, Jacobs and AECOM during this time.

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): The "Access for All" programme championed by this Conservative Government is helping more disabled people, elderly people and people with prams and pushchairs to access our stations with greater ease. After my campaign in Southport, Hillside station was the successful recipient of some of that funding. Will my right hon. Friend do more in that area so more of our stations right across the country truly give access for all?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his successful campaign to get that access at Hillside station. We need to continue the programme of opening up routes for disabled people by ensuring they have access to stations. We are moving closer to a transport sector that is truly accessible. The changes that will take place at Hillside are an example of that. If the programme continues to be delivered successfully, the Department for Transport will make submissions for further funding in due course. It is absolutely clear that we are providing extra opportunities for disabled people. I am pleased to say that 900,000 more disabled people are now in the workplace. Access is important for them. The campaigns that my hon. Friend and other right hon. and hon. Friends have run to get access to their stations are an important part of that.

Mr Speaker: In wishing the hon. Gentleman a happy birthday, I call Luke Pollard.

Q10. [910339] Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker. As you may know, there are 53 Mondays this year on which rent is due for people who pay their rent weekly, but there are only 52 universal credit payments this

year. The Department for Work and Pensions has acknowledged that that is a problem it is awaiting Government action on. Will the Prime Minister confirm that she recognises that problem and that she will act to ensure that people do not need to find an extra week's rent or go into debt because of that entirely predictable universal credit fault?

The Prime Minister: Of course no year contains 53 weeks, so if somebody pays a 53rd rent payment in a year, it will cover some days in the subsequent year and mean that the following month has only four payment dates. As such, the claimant will be overpaid for their housing, and a shortfall is immediately recovered. It is about the way in which the days fall and making sure the system works for everybody.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): If the Prime Minister is seeking a year-long extension to Brexit, does she not recognise that that would cost the British taxpayer over £1 billion a month in subscriptions to the EU? Does she not agree that that funding would be better spent on tackling crime, or funding schools and even tax cuts for my constituents and others up and down the country?

The Prime Minister: I am pressing the case for the extension that I wrote to Donald Tusk about last week, which was in fact endorsed by Parliament last night. We could actually have been outside the European Union by now, if we had managed to get the deal through. I am continuing to work to ensure that we can deliver Brexit in a way that works for people across the country.

Q11. [910340] **Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab):** What would the Prime Minister boast is her Government's greatest achievement: the Brexit shambles, rising knife crime, record numbers using food banks, pay packets worth less than a decade ago, or the smallest Army since Waterloo?

The Prime Minister: I will tell the hon. Gentleman what I am proud of the Government achieving. We see more people in work than ever before. We have seen tax cuts for 32 million people. We are seeing wages rising, the deficit falling and debt coming down. We are restoring this country's finances to build a brighter future for all our constituents.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I would like to see more women on the boards of big business, so will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating Ruth Cairnie, who has recently been appointed the chair of Babcock International, the first female chair it has ever had. Hopefully, she will improve the company's fortunes.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue. I am very happy to congratulate Ruth Cairnie on achieving that role as chairman of Babcock. The Government have been working and have done a lot since 2010 to see more women on the boards of companies, as that is very important. The greater the diversity we have on those boards, the better those companies will do.

Q12. [910341] **Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab):** Before the Prime Minister's visit to Brussels, I have a little light reading for her. It is a graph of police funding from the

Government, in Gwent. It shows clearly that police funding is going down, not up. Will she study this carefully, and come back to the House with an accurate statement about what is really happening to police funding in this country?

The Prime Minister: We have been protecting police funding since 2015. This financial year, nearly £1 billion extra is available to police, and we have indeed put extra money into police. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced the £100 million extra that is going into key areas in relation to dealing with knife crime, and we have been protecting police funding since 2015.

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): The Prime Minister earlier made reference to the British Indian diaspora. Does she agree that the diaspora should be commended for the fact that, despite comprising 4% of the UK population, they contribute some 10% of taxes to the Treasury?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to welcome the contribution that the Indian diaspora make to our country. My hon. Friend has referenced the economic contribution they make through their taxes, but many of them run successful businesses that employ people up and down the country, many of them are successfully exporting from this country and supporting our economy, and they also play an important role in our society. I am very happy to welcome that and to congratulate them on it.

Q13. [910342] **Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green):** This Friday, young people across the UK will again be calling for more urgent action on the climate emergency. So far every party leader except the Prime Minister has agreed to meet members of this extraordinary uprising. Following a speech at Davos and a meeting with Pope Francis, 16-year-old Greta Thunberg from Sweden, who sparked this global uprising, will visit Parliament on 23 April. Will the Prime Minister agree to meet Greta and hear direct from young people when she is here?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady asks whether I will meet and hear direct from young people about the issues they are concerned about in relation to the environment and climate change. I do that, and this gives me an opportunity to congratulate a school in my own constituency, St Mary's Catholic Primary School, which has won five green flag awards in the past 10 years and last year won the first ever national green heart hero award. I assure her that I often hear young people tell of the importance of climate change. This Government have a fine record on climate change. One day, the hon. Lady will actually stand up in this House and welcome the efforts that this Government have made.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that it is still this Government's firm commitment to leave the common fisheries policy and to negotiate as an independent coastal state no later than December 2020?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend; he has been consistent in his campaigning on this issue, which I know is of great importance to his constituents. We remain committed to establishing fairer fishing policies

that truly work for coastal communities. The deal that we have agreed with the European Union would see the UK leave the common fisheries policy, providing the UK with full control of its waters as an independent coastal state. We remain committed to coming out of the common fisheries policy.

Q15. [910344] **Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The Department for Work and Pensions has stated in ministerial responses to written questions that

“Universal Credit should not leave councils out of pocket”,

yet despite Highland Council providing evidence to show costs of £2.5 million, including £640,000 in additional administration, it still has no offer from the Prime Minister’s Government. They are doing a runner, and every household in the highlands is bearing the costs of universal credit. Is it not time that her Government paid their bill?

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answers I gave earlier in relation to universal credit and the importance of this system, which is encouraging people into work—200,000 more people are in work under universal credit and 700,000 people are getting money that they were entitled to but not receiving before. Universal credit is helping people into work and making sure that work pays.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): My constituents Mark and Panna Wilson have a little son, Aadi, who has the terrible condition of spinal muscular atrophy. He desperately needs the life-changing drug Spinraza, which is available in many other countries. I know that the Health Secretary is working on this urgently. Will

the Prime Minister intervene to create a new route to market for this important drug, so that my constituents can get the life-saving treatment that their son needs?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised an important issue. Obviously, as he will appreciate, it is important that we ensure, first, that patients get access to cost-effective innovative medicines, but at a price that is fair and makes best use of NHS resources. That is the independent system that we have through the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, which reviews the evidence. I understand that Biogen has submitted a revised submission to NICE in relation to Spinraza and that a meeting of NICE’s independent appraisal committee took place early in March to consider its recommendations. It is clear that everyone at the Department of Health and Social Care and in NICE recognises the significance of this drug, but we need to ensure that the decision taken is made on the basis of the clinical aspects, together with cost-effectiveness. That is what NICE will do in looking at the new offer.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): When Melrose Industries took over GKN last year, it promised Ministers that it would back British manufacturing and not reduce the company’s defence capacity without the Government’s permission. Last week, GKN announced that it intended to close the Kings Norton plant, which makes windscreens for military and civilian aircraft. Will the Prime Minister tell GKN that the Government expect the company to abide by both the spirit and the letter of the undertakings given by Melrose last year?

The Prime Minister: I was not aware of the particular issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised. If I may, I will look into it and respond to him in writing.

Hong Kong: Pro-Democracy Activists

12.44 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the conviction of pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong.

Mr Speaker: I call Minister Mark Field. We are very accustomed to seeing the right hon. Gentleman at the Dispatch Box recently. He is well and truly earning his keep.

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I seem to be here to discuss either this area, the middle east or, indeed, Turkey, a debate to which I was responding in Westminster Hall earlier today.

I emphasise at the outset both to the right hon. Gentleman and to the House that the UK Government are acutely aware of our enduring responsibilities to Hong Kong. We were a joint signatory to upholding the joint declaration between the UK and China some 35 years ago, and the joint declaration is of course lodged with the United Nations. As such, we remain absolutely committed to monitoring and ensuring the faithful implementation of the joint declaration and the principle of one country, two systems. I reassure the House that we clearly and consistently raise our concerns with the Chinese and Hong Kong authorities. Parliament is updated on developments in Hong Kong through our six-monthly reports submitted by the Foreign Secretary, the most recent of which was published on 27 March. We always stand ready to comment publicly and robustly when appropriate.

Yesterday, the Hong Kong courts gave their verdict on the nine key figures in the Hong Kong Occupy movement. The protesters were arrested after large-scale protests in 2014. Each was found guilty of at least one public nuisance offence, and such offences carry a maximum sentence of seven years in prison. We shall have a better understanding of the severity of the sentence, and therefore the signal that the decision purports to send to others who choose to exercise their rights under Hong Kong's Basic Law and Bill of Rights, once sentences have been handed down. Sentencing is due on 24 April, and the defendants have the right to appeal. It would therefore not be appropriate to comment further or in detail on the ongoing legal cases, but suffice it to say that this is a potentially protracted legal process that may take years rather than months.

I have visited Hong Kong twice as a Foreign Office Minister and have held meetings with a number of senior legal figures. On my most recent visit in November, I raised the issue of the rule of law directly with the deputy chief justice, as well as with representatives from the legal, political and business communities. All staunchly defended the independence of the judiciary and it remains our position that Hong Kong's rule of law remains robust, largely thanks to its world-class independent judiciary. Many Members will know that Baroness Hale, Lord Hoffmann and others are part and parcel of the panel that is based in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong citizens are guaranteed the right to freedom of assembly and demonstration under the Sino-British joint declaration of 1984 and the Basic Law, and it is

essential that those rights are properly respected in a democracy. Hong Kong's success and stability depend on its high degree of enduring autonomy and its respect for the fundamental rights and freedoms enshrined in the joint declaration and the Basic Law. The Foreign Secretary recently pronounced that he was

"concerned that on civil and political freedoms, Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy is being reduced."

It would be deeply concerning if the ruling discourages legitimate protest in future or discourages Hong Kong citizens from engaging in political activity.

Mr Carmichael: I thank the Minister for that answer. I hope that he will be as robust in his tone when speaking to the Chinese Government as he has been in his remarks to the House today.

The prosecution and now conviction of nine leaders of the Umbrella movement is the latest in a series of egregious human rights abuses by the Government in China. Using the criminal justice system and public order offences in this way is an abuse of fundamental and internationally protected human rights. Amnesty International points out that the convictions all stem solely from non-violent direct actions in largely peaceful protests. As the Minister's noble friend Lord Patten said, it is

"appallingly divisive to use anachronistic common law charges in a vengeful pursuit of political events which took place in 2014".

Will the Minister make the strongest possible representations to the Chinese Government that these convictions are an abuse not just of the activists' human rights but of China's treaty obligations? This country has both a moral and a legal responsibility to pursue this matter with all vigour. We made commitments to the people of Hong Kong at the time of the handover to China and we still have those commitments under the Sino-British joint declaration.

The one country, two systems framework promised the people of Hong Kong progress towards democracy, but these convictions are not an isolated incident. Over the past five years, we have seen the abduction of Hong Kong booksellers who published titles critical of China's rulers; a political party banned; a senior *Financial Times* journalist, Victor Mallet, expelled from the city; and, now, proposals to change Hong Kong's extradition laws to enable suspected criminals to be extradited from Hong Kong to mainland China, which is something that not only political activists but businesspeople fear, as they believe they could be in danger if the change goes ahead.

Will the Government stand by the people of Hong Kong and their human rights, and will the Minister ensure that we in this country do not allow the Chinese Government to break the promises that this country made to the people of Hong Kong?

Mark Field: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his considered comments, and I fully accept and agree with the concerns he has raised. We take very seriously our responsibilities under one country, two systems, and we have expressed concerns in consecutive six-monthly reports that there has been a tightening of individual rights. We also feel that commerce and the independence of the judicial system have remained true to one country, two systems.

[Mark Field]

It is in China's interest that Hong Kong continues to succeed under the framework. The joint declaration must remain as valid today as it was when it was signed three and a half decades ago. It is a legally binding treaty that is registered with the United Nations. I have raised this, and will continue to raise it, with my Chinese counterparts. Some criticism has been addressed to the FCO in relation to the idea of having a six-monthly report, which we feel is a particularly important foundation for ongoing confidence within Hong Kong that we take very seriously the responsibilities to which we have signed up.

The right hon. Gentleman raised the change to the extradition laws. We are aware that the Hong Kong Government have proposed changes to legislation. We are seriously considering the potential implications of those changes, including how the proposals might affect UK citizens and, indeed, our current extradition arrangements with Hong Kong.

The British consul general to Hong Kong, the very talented Andy Heyn, has spoken to senior figures in Hong Kong's Administration to seek clarity on what the proposals will mean for UK citizens, for our law enforcement co-operation and for the current extradition arraignments. He has raised the potential impact of the proposals on business confidence in Hong Kong and has explained our concern that, given the sensitivity of the issues raised by these extradition proposals, considerably more time should be given for a full and wide consultation with interested parties before the Hong Kong authorities seek to put it into law.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): In his excellent statement, my right hon. Friend emphasised the importance of the independence of the judiciary in Hong Kong, with judges of the calibre of Baroness Hale and Lord Hoffmann. If the Chinese Government really wish it to be believed that they are upholding the highest standards of human rights, is it not essential that the court is allowed to do its duty with full independence?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend, who has worked hard on these matters, which he takes seriously. Indeed, he headed a delegation when I first went to mainland China some 15 years ago, and I am well aware that he keeps an eagle eye on what is happening, particularly in Hong Kong.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right. When I was most recently in Hong Kong, I had a chance to speak to senior legal figures, and they do feel that the judicial system and its independence are being upheld but, clearly, the sense in which other rights are being questioned and eroded by the Chinese authorities raises some concerns in that regard. Hitherto, we have been confident that cases coming before the Hong Kong judiciary have been dealt with in a fair way and without political interference.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing it, and I share his profound concern at yesterday's verdict.

A serious discussion in this House on the situation in Hong Kong is overdue. China's erosion of the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Hong Kong Basic Law has been growing since the pro-democracy Umbrella protests in 2014. The last few years have seen an increasing crackdown on dissent and protest, with political parties banned, pro-democracy candidates blocked and journalists expelled. The conviction of nine leaders of the Hong Kong Umbrella movement yesterday—they could face seven years in prison for organising peaceful protests—is totally disproportionate and clearly politically motivated. The proposals to change Hong Kong's extradition law mean they could serve sentences thousands of miles away in mainland China.

The Sino-British joint declaration is a legally binding treaty registered with the United Nations, and the British Government are a joint guarantor, with China, of the rights of Hong Kong citizens. I have one simple question for the Minister: how will the Government fulfil their legal responsibilities to the citizens of Hong Kong?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Lady for her contribution, and I am sorry to hear that her constituency office was attacked over the weekend, which is unacceptable in the world in which we live. It is a salutary reminder that some of the concerns we deal with across the world are becoming quite prevalent closer to home.

We take one country, two systems very seriously, and we will continue to do so. The fact that we are the guarantor is important. As I have said, the six-monthly reports come not without criticism from our Chinese counterparts, but they provide a detailed opportunity. I encourage Members who have an interest in Hong Kong, and perhaps even those who do not have a strong interest, to read the reports when they come out every six months. The reports address specific concerns and cases, including a number of those raised by the hon. Lady.

Our continuing work from London, Hong Kong and, indeed, Beijing is important as we try to maintain the one country, two systems approach. Our view is that the approach is very much in China's interests, and China has implicitly recognised the importance of Hong Kong as a financial capital market and business centre. It is therefore equally important that we impress upon China that the uniqueness of Hong Kong will be properly maintained, with Hong Kong reaching its full potential, only if we ensure that "two systems," as set out in the joint declaration, is every bit as important as "one country."

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: A noted Sinologist, linguist and cerebral denizen of the House, Mr Richard Graham.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. The six-monthly Foreign Office report on Hong Kong, which is circulated by the all-party China group that I have the honour to chair, recognises the close bilateral Hong Kong-UK relations on culture and trade in many sectors, but the Minister is right to highlight the continuing pressures on Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy. Will he confirm that, in relation to the pro-democracy activists found guilty of public nuisance, the appeal process is still very much open and that the

higher courts including, if needed, the Court of Final Appeal must take into consideration the freedoms of assembly and speech guaranteed under the joint declaration?

Mark Field: I am happy to confirm that. As I said, we have highlighted our hope that a range of recent court rulings do not discourage lawful protest in the future. I stress that Hong Kong citizens are guaranteed the rights to freedom of assembly and demonstration under the joint declaration and the Basic Law.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): May I express my solidarity with the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) and in particular her constituency staff?

I also thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for raising this important matter. We share his concerns about democracy and human rights. As the Minister said, the UK has a particular responsibility for Hong Kong in our ongoing commitment to democracy and the rule of law. Amnesty International has said that this case is

“a crushing blow for freedom of expression and peaceful protest in Hong Kong.”

Does the Minister agree that judicial independence is absolutely critical to commercial investment and certainty and that it is in the interests of China as well? What Hong Kong-related discussions have he and his colleagues had with regard to trade talks, and what reassurances have Ministers sought over China's commitment to Hong Kong's autonomy and the independence of the legal system?

Mark Field: I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman and thank him for his comments. We are often criticised for speaking endlessly about trade and other opportunities. Clearly, Hong Kong was very much a mercantile base for the UK from the 1840s onwards. However, we do not in any way take lightly the importance of addressing human rights issues, particularly for those living in Hong Kong.

We have made it very clear that for Hong Kong to fulfil its potential—and, indeed, for China to do so in areas such as the belt and road initiative—the independence of, dare I say it, a common law system such as the British legal system is seen as more reliable for investors than perhaps the more doubtful, or at least less orthodox, systems in Shanghai and elsewhere. Although Pudong in Shanghai is a very important financial centre for China and does a lot of domestic work, Hong Kong still enjoys the confidence of many international capital markets.

On the specifics of free trade agreements in a post-Brexit world, clearly Hong Kong would be towards the top of the list, given the strength of our relationship. We have made it very clear to China that one of the reasons we want one country, two systems to be properly promoted is that it is very much in the interests of China's plans for its own economic development in the years to come. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his focus on that particular issue, but we should not deny that human rights issues will remain extremely important as far as our own commitment to one country, two systems is concerned.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Yesterday's convictions are extremely concerning, involving as they do a 75-year-old pastor, Rev. Chu, who declared himself as a peaceful

protester, and Benny Tai, whom I invited to a fringe event at last year's Conservative party conference and who spoke of the erosion of academic freedoms in Hong Kong.

Does the Minister agree that Hong Kong's proposed new extradition laws, which may result in political activists and even international business people being in danger of extradition to mainland China, would fundamentally undermine Hong Kong's autonomy, do irreparable damage to one country, two systems, and destroy business confidence in Hong Kong as a result? Is it not in all our interests, especially business, to defend Hong Kong's freedom, autonomy and rule of law, which underpin its status as an open, international financial centre?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend, who speaks so knowledgeably about these issues, particularly in relation to Hong Kong but also China as a whole. I reassure her that it remains the UK Government's view that for Hong Kong's future success it is absolutely essential that it enjoys, and is seen to enjoy, the full measure of the high degree of autonomy and the rule of law, as set out in the joint declaration and enshrined in the Basic Law, and in keeping with the commitment to one country, two systems.

In my earlier response to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), I referred to issues regarding the planned extradition law, which is a good example of how difficult cases make for tough law. As my hon. Friend may be aware, it has come about because of an important case where an individual was murdered in Taiwan and the accused has ended up in Hong Kong but there is no extradition treaty in place. For that reason, given that Taiwan is regarded as part of One China, the issue suddenly has far greater implications.

I believe, as I am sure my hon. Friend does, that it is important that any changes to extradition arrangements from Hong Kong to mainland China must respect Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy and cannot and must not affect the rights and freedoms set out in the joint declaration.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for what he has said so far, but may I press him further on the Sino-British joint declaration? How confident is he that China is respecting it as legally binding? If he feels that it is not doing so—which is my observation—what steps is the Department taking to represent the UK Government's view that it should be legally binding on the Chinese Government?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I will see her later this afternoon for a Westminster Hall debate on other matters—it is one of those busy days. Obviously, we are concerned by some of the Chinese Government's comments about the joint declaration. Our view is that it is and must remain as valid today as it was when it was signed more than 35 years ago. It is a legally binding treaty, as has been pointed out, registered at the United Nations, and it continues therefore to be in force. We are committed to monitoring closely its implementation and we will continue to do so.

Of course we are concerned. We only need to look at the last half a dozen or so six-monthly reports to recognise that we think there is a deterioration in the way in which China is looking at this particular issue,

[Mark Field]

but we will stand up for the rights of all Hong Kong people. As I have said, this is also in the interests of China, and it is an important part of the process to make that very clear to ensure that one country, two systems prevails.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): About 100 years after the first Chinese legation was established in London in 1877, I was at a gathering with the then Chinese chargé where he made an elegant joke in Greenwich about how east meets west. I think the same could be true about Hong Kong.

Will my right hon. Friend make it clear that if the sentence is more than nominal, and if there is no chance to appeal against the convictions, people will think that the declarations and matters of principle agreed with the Chinese are not being properly fulfilled, which will affect both the future prosperity of Hong Kong and how people see China?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. I am not sure what I was doing 42 years ago, but I know that he was already a Member of this House at that time. He makes a valid and fair point. He is absolutely correct that it is vital that we maintain that for the interests of all Hong Kong citizens today and in the future. We will continue to make the robust case, which is absolutely essential.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Ind): You will recall, Mr Speaker, that in 2014, at the height of the Umbrella movement protests, the Chinese embassy prevented a delegation from this country's Select Committee on Foreign Affairs from going to Hong Kong. It is clear that the Chinese Communist authorities are extremely sensitive about any scrutiny and any questions asked by this House and its Committees. When the Minister meets his Chinese Government counterparts, will he emphasise to them that this country has a pluralistic parliamentary democracy, which is what the people of Hong Kong also wish to have?

Mr Speaker: I rather remember that the Chinese Government's obstruction at that time was regarded across the House as thoroughly reprehensible. I also recall that the Chinese embassy had the greatest possible difficulty in grasping the concept of an independent Parliament. I think some re-education was required.

Mark Field: I think some of us get rather concerned by an independent Parliament, particularly members of the Executive at any one time, but that is another matter. I remember being on the Back Benches for many years, so I do not in any way criticise you, Mr Speaker.

I very much agree with the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes). We need to do our level best to ensure that we stand up for our rights. I do not think that the Chinese are entirely unknowing of that. Of course, they know exactly what is going on and want to squeeze those rights. It is interesting, however, that in a significant number of areas they recognise the benefit of two systems, including commercially, where the idea

of a settled rule of law will allow capital to go into Hong Kong. We need to do our level best to ensure that all aspects are maintained, and we shall do so.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Following on from what you said, Mr Speaker, I was heartened by the Minister's earlier comments about the correlation between future free trade negotiations and our continuing pressure regarding human rights. Will the Minister confirm that, when we talk about the rule of law with Chinese interlocutors, we mean our international definition of the rule of law rather than theirs?

Mark Field: My hon. Friend is obviously trying to get herself on to the next trip that I take to Hong Kong. We need that matter explained in a much more succinct style than I am used to doing. None the less, she is absolutely right: we do recognise that at a time when—dare I say it?—the rules-based international order is coming under increasing threat, indeed from some unexpected quarters as well, we need to work together with many of our counterparts to ensure that we make that argument as robustly as we can.

Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): In his opening remarks, the Minister made it clear that the Hong Kong judicial system had integrity and was robust, and he evidenced that through the talks that he had when he visited the area with senior legal figures. In the same breath, though, he is saying that the system is being undermined. Will he tell me how the system is being undermined and what evidence he has for that?

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman and I were on a trip to Hong Kong more years ago than I care to imagine—I think it was about 13 years ago. Obviously, it was the first time that I had been to the area as a parliamentarian. Our concerns are over the right to protest and press rights. Members have already referred to the issue of the very sudden withdrawal of the visa of Victor Mallet, the *Financial Times* journalist. There are a number of issues in the area that we would call civil rights, but, as far as the legal system is concerned, there is a sense that that remains independent. Equally, though, we are concerned. In relation to the judgments that took place yesterday, there is likely to be a long and winding road of appeals that will take place over some considerable time. It is one reason why we are not commenting directly on this, because, obviously, we want to read the full judgments, but we recognise that there will be appeals from virtually all the defendants.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Peaceful protest and the right of free expression are fundamental parts of democracy. Recently, China has put pressure not only on Hong Kong, but on Taiwan. Will my right hon. Friend impress on the Chinese Government that it is totally and utterly unacceptable to try to distort the position in Hong Kong and that, as Hong Kong acts almost as an investment gateway for China, it is important that they understand that we will stand up for the people whom we seek to protect?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and I very much agree with what he has to say. It is important to make a distinction between Taiwan and Hong Kong. Much as we are concerned about increasing

pressure being put on Taiwan, the Hong Kong situation is different, as it is set out in a joint declaration. Indeed, the whole idea of one country, two systems that came into place in July 1997 absolutely protects the position of Hong Kong. There is a slight danger—dare I say it?—in trying to equate the situation in Taiwan with that in Hong Kong. It may well be in the Chinese Government's interest so to do as we then potentially undermine the Hong Kong situation. Hong Kong's rights are set out and it is the UK Government's responsibility, as we have all pointed out, to make sure that they are maintained.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister says that, along with our counterparts, he and we will do what we can to defend human rights, but does he accept that our ability and strength in defending our fundamental values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, which we share across Europe, will be less in the event of Brexit? People who voted in 2016 did not anticipate the muscular, aggressive, authoritarian approach of China, which means that we are now seeing extraditions, the arrests of people engaged in peaceful protest, Canadian nationals facing the death sentence, and Britain in a much more vulnerable position, as it will have to rely on trade with China and therefore turn a blind eye to human rights. Does he not think that, in light of this emerging evidence of abuse, the people should have the right now to a public vote on the deal?

Mark Field: Just when we thought that we had got away from the Brexit debate, here we are. The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point in this regard: we must not take our eye off the ball when it comes to standing up for human rights as we come to make trade agreements. I am actually much more optimistic and hopeful than he is, and I say that from the perspective of a Foreign Office Minister. As we leave the European Union, we will have to work hard—and we are working hard—and redouble our efforts to make sure that the strongest relationship in a range of multilateral organisations is maintained—whether in the United Nations in New York and Geneva, or in organisations such as the World Bank, the IMF and the OECD. I am very confident that we will rise to that challenge. It is certainly important that we keep the connection open as much as we can. For example, in the UN, we are working extremely closely—and will continue to do so for some considerable time—with France, which is a permanent member of the Security Council, and with Germany and Poland, which are important partners in the European Union and also now on the Security Council this year.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): It is deeply concerning that the Hong Kong Government recently rejected the renewal of the visa of the *Financial Times* journalist. Does my right hon. Friend agree that upholding freedom of speech and of the press is essential for Hong Kong's way of life?

Mark Field: Absolutely. We were particularly concerned by the Hong Kong authorities' unprecedented rejection of a visa extension—it was actually a small visa extension for the senior British journalist Victor Mallet who is now the Paris correspondent. It was simply a matter of the last two or three months of his time in Hong Kong

that was at stake. In the absence of an explanation from the authorities, we can only conclude, as my hon. Friend rightly points out, that this move was politically motivated. I believe that it undermines the basic idea of freedom of speech and freedom of the press in Hong Kong, which, as I have said, are guaranteed by that joint declaration.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The creation of Hong Kong was a fantastic example of British-Sino co-operation in building a global city that is a massive player in the global economy. Indeed, the Sino-British joint declaration itself was a great achievement of co-operation and it was done with great sacrifice from the British side, as Hong Kong Island and Kowloon, had been part of the British territories in perpetuity. It was done for practical and diplomatic reasons. Can the Minister reassert the continuing mandate that Britain has to ensure that the Sino-British declaration is respected until July 2047? What practical steps will he take to achieve that?

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. In many ways, the joint declaration and the Sino-UK discussions were a fantastic template for broader co-operation and it is to our regret that that is now under pressure, and we will continue to stand up for it. I will, if I may, make this point. Obviously, there has been speculation in relation to what might happen in the broader region around Shenzhen and Guangzhou, which may be linked together as a particular region along with Hong Kong. Again, we will keep our eye on exactly what changes are being made in that regard, although one can see the importance of the interconnections economically within the broader region. I shall certainly be noting what happens in the greater bay area, which is an area that I am looking to visit later this year. I will be going to Guangzhou and Shenzhen and then to Hong Kong at the same time. Obviously, we will report back to the House after that time.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): As someone who grew up in Hong Kong, I am concerned about the progression of extradition that may occur to these people who are currently seeking some kind of appeal. What can the Foreign Office do to stop any extradition from Hong Kong to China?

Mark Field: As I mentioned earlier, this is a live debate at the moment because of a particular case, which is very much at a preliminary stage. The lobbying that our own consul general has received from business connections makes it very clear that there is a reduction in broader confidence. On the rights of British national overseas passport holders, my hon. Friend will be aware that the right of abode in the UK is defined under the Immigration Act 1971 and only British citizens and certain British subjects have that right. However, we have ongoing responsibilities to Hong Kong citizens, and even to those who do not enjoy that right of abode, and we will continue to make the strongest of cases to ensure that, up to 2047 and potentially beyond, such rights are properly upheld.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his responses. China is guilty of some of the worst human rights abuses and religious persecution in the world. Minister, in discussions with the Chinese and

[Jim Shannon]

Hong Kong Governments regarding the recent guilty verdict, what was done to secure the trio's release, and what will be done to secure the release of the other six who face impending imprisonment? Their only crime was to promote democracy as part of the 50 years of autonomy and freedom that were promised by the Chinese Government when Hong Kong was handed over in 1997. China often says no, but acts in a different way.

Mark Field: We very much hope and understand that, given the nature of the alleged offences and the protracted legal process, any individuals will not be held in custody but have a right to a reasonable bail within short order. As the hon. Gentleman rightly points out, three people have already been released, and I very much hope the other six will be. We will be keeping an eagle eye on this matter. Above all, we trust that the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region will continue to make every effort to ensure that the environment in which the media and individuals operate is conducive to freedom, including freedom from self-censorship or the like. Our officials in Hong Kong, London and Beijing—we have a number of consulates general in China that are nearer to Hong Kong—will continue to monitor these issues very closely.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I echo the concerns expressed on both sides of the House that, in the light of recent developments, the rights of citizens of Hong Kong are being eroded. What is the Government's view of the steps that the Chinese authorities should now take to allay such concerns and to restore faith that these fundamental freedoms—and, indeed, democracy—in Hong Kong are not under threat?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his thoughtful contribution. I am working on this issue in many ways with our Hong Kong desk at the Foreign Office and with our consul general. It is rather important that we try to work through a pathway, rather than just stepping back and taking a view that we do not like what is going on; let us try to work together constructively. As I alluded to earlier, the belt and road initiative is a good example of where working together to ensure that Hong Kong's freedoms are maintained will actually be in China's own interests—not just in trading terms. If I were Chinese, I might also think that there is an important opportunity to utilise Hong Kong as a chance for experimental changes in freedoms that may or may not be in the mind of this regime or future Chinese regimes. There is a lot of work in progress, and I am working closely with my counterparts on the issue.

Voter ID Pilots

1.21 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will make a statement on the Government's voter ID trials ahead of local government elections.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): I should say at the outset that I am afraid my voice might give out, but I hope that everybody will bear with me.

Electoral fraud is an unacceptable crime that strikes at a core principle of our democracy—that is, that everybody's vote matters. There is undeniable potential for electoral fraud in our current system, and the perception of this undermines public confidence in our democracy. We need only to walk up to the polling station and say our name and address, which is an identity check from the 19th century, based on the assumption that everyone in the community knows each other and can dispute somebody's identity. Dare I say it?—if we really wanted to go back to 19th-century politics, neither I nor the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) would even be in this House. The voter ID pilots, which are supported by the independent Electoral Commission, are a reasonable way to ensure that voter ID works for everybody ahead of a national roll-out.

Showing ID is something that people of all backgrounds already do every day—when we take out a library book, claim benefits or pick up a parcel from the post office. Proving who we are before we make a decision of huge importance at the ballot box should be no different. I can reassure the House that both last year's pilots and the decades of experience in Northern Ireland show that voter ID does not have an adverse effect on election turnout or participation. Furthermore, the Government have consulted a range of civil society groups to ensure that voter ID will work for everybody. Crucially, local authorities will provide alternative methods of ID free of charge to electors who do not have a specified form of ID, ensuring that everybody who is registered has the opportunity to vote.

At next month's local elections, voters in 10 diverse areas across the country will be asked to show ID before they place their vote. Let us remember that those votes will have a real effect on communities, so these elections are important. People should be confident in our democracy. If they are, they are more likely to participate in it. My message to the voters in the pilot areas is that these pilots are about protecting their vote. We want them to go out and use that vote, and to take part in these elections. I ask hon. Members here today to ask their constituents to do so. Voter ID is part of how this Government are strengthening the integrity of our electoral system to give the public confidence that our elections are secure and fit for the 21st century.

Cat Smith: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker.

Next month, voters in 10 local authorities across England will be using the voter ID pilots in local elections. These schemes have been the focus of significant controversy. At last year's local elections, where there

were five pilot areas, the Minister appeared to celebrate the fact that at least 350 citizens were excluded from voting for not having valid ID. This included people who had voted legitimately for their entire lives.

The Government claim that voter ID is designed to tackle electoral fraud in polling stations. However, during an evidence session with the Select Committee on Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs, the Minister could not even say whether the pilots had had any impact on voter fraud. Given that the Minister was unable to draw any conclusions from the last set of pilots, what does she expect to gain and how will she measure success this year?

Civil society groups and the Equality and Human Rights Commission have warned that voter ID will have a disproportionate impact on voters from ethnic minority communities, older people, trans people and disabled people. Has the Minister failed to notice the Windrush scandal, which demonstrated that it can be more difficult for some communities to provide official documentation than for others? We all know that voter ID will have significant ramifications for our democracy, because 3.5 million citizens—7.5% of the electorate—do not have access to photo ID. If voter identification requirements are restricted to passports or driving licences, as they are in some areas, that number rises to 11 million people, which is 24% of the electorate.

Following last year's pilots, it was revealed that rolling out voter ID nationwide would increase the cost of each general election by as much as £20 million. Is this an effective use of taxpayers' money when local authorities are already on their knees? If the Minister thinks that these pilots schemes are value for money, why has she refused to tell the House how much they will cost?

Electoral fraud is a serious crime, which is why we would support any effective measures to combat it. However, this Government are not focusing on the real issues. There is no evidence of widespread voter personation in the UK. The latest figures by the Electoral Commission show that, of the 266 cases of electoral fraud investigated by police last year, 140 related to campaign offences and just eight related to personation fraud at the polling station, which is what the Minister claims this trial is designed to tackle. Does she think her Government have the right priorities when, despite most electoral offences being committed by political candidates, it is actually the innocent voters who are being excluded from our politics because of this ill-thought-out policy?

With local elections fast approaching and the Government planning a roll-out at the next general election, it is only right that Members of this House have the opportunity to scrutinise and comment on the Government's plans. We are therefore requesting that the Government allow time for a parliamentary debate to discuss these pilot schemes ahead of local elections next month.

Chloe Smith: I am sorry to have to start in this tone, but almost everything the hon. Lady said has just been wrong. She suggested that we were unable to draw conclusions from last year's pilots. That is simply not the case. Both the Cabinet Office's evaluation and that of the independent Electoral Commission—which she may wish to dispute but it is, none the less, that of the independent Electoral Commission—concluded that the pilots did what they set out to do. The pilots were a

success, in that the overwhelming majority of people were able to cast their vote with no impediment. What is more—here is the really important point—the evidence showed that no particular demographic group was affected by the requirement to bring ID.

Cat Smith indicated dissent.

Chloe Smith: The hon. Lady is shaking her head, but she knows that it is true. Perhaps this is part of the pattern we have seen from the Labour party of saying one thing and doing another. She still cannot explain why many constituency Labour parties require voter ID for their own selection meetings. She cannot explain why these were acceptable powers when they were passed by the last Labour Government; and she cannot explain why the last Labour Government did this in Northern Ireland, and why the Minister at that time said that this measure would

“tackle electoral abuse effectively without disadvantaging honest voters”—[*Official Report*, 10 July 2001; Vol. 371, c. 740.]

The Opposition cannot explain any of these things, and that is just not good enough.

Let me turn to the detail of what the hon. Lady has tried to put forward. Among her scaremongering and, frankly, conspiracy theorising, she made reference to the costs of these measures. I would like to make it clear to the House that, through correspondence with the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, I have been clear about how those costs will be able to be accounted for. She asks whether we can allow time for a full debate on this in Parliament. I would beg advice from the Chair, perhaps, but I suggest that this is that debate. Moreover, the powers that the previous Labour Government put in place allow for this process to be done in this way, without any such debate, so if she has that problem, she ought to have taken it up with her colleagues of that time.

The hon. Lady asks what we are expecting to see this year. We are expecting to see that voters will be able to cast their ballots in a way that is protected. She does down voters by suggesting that this is in some way an attack on them and—I think this was her phrase—some kind of privileging of the political class. That is simply not the case. We are engaged in the breadth of the work that we need to do to keep our elections safe and secure and to update them for the 21st century. If she thinks that we should not be doing that, she is welcome to live back in the 19th century, but I do not think we should be doing so. We should be making sure that voters can cast their votes in a way that is protected and means that they can have confidence that they are not being usurped in their role.

The hon. Lady asks whether we should be focusing on crime that involves small numbers. Well, really—I ask her whether she would have said that decades ago about, for example, rape. Would she have said that about a crime that was under-reported? Would she have said that about a crime that involves small numbers simply for that reason? Of course she would not. Nobody would do so, because it would of course be disgraceful. It would be disgraceful to make that argument about small numbers, and that is the argument that Labour Members are making. Crimes with small numbers should not be ignored—people should none the less be protected against them, and that is what we are doing.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): When I was first elected, I used to come and go from this Palace unchallenged. Now I am required to show ID even within its precincts—but is that a big deal?

Chloe Smith: I think my right hon. Friend makes the point, quite rightly, that we expect to show who we are in every walk of everyday life. It is quite fair enough that we do so at our workplace, and quite fair enough that we do so when we pick up a parcel from the post office, when we apply for benefits, or when we do many types of things that involve interacting with public services or just going about our everyday life. It is therefore right that we do that in our elections as well.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): There is one instance of voter fraud in this country for every 1.6 million votes cast. It is a problem that is so minor as really not to exist at all, yet it continues to be the focus of the Government's policy in this area. One can only conclude that it is a policy driven by suspicion based on prejudice rather than hard facts and evidence. We know that forcing people to produce ID to vote will put people off. So is it not time that the Government stopped concentrating on putting hurdles in front of people who do vote and tackled the real problem, which is the 14.5 million people who are registered to vote but do not do so? When are the Government going to prioritise measures to improve participation through public education, extending the franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds and piloting new ways to allow people to vote, including electronically?

Chloe Smith: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman, also, is not talking on the basis of the evidence. He should be able to do so from the evaluation that we published last year, which clearly said that there was no such negative impact on people turning out and participating in voting. That is crucially important. I am very pleased to have been able to bolster that work from last year with work this year to speak to groups across civil society who may have concerns that people they represent would be less able than others to deal with this requirement. I am absolutely confident that the equalities aspects of this work have been thoroughly considered, both by us in central Government and by the local authorities that are piloting it. I am afraid that he is not speaking from the evidence when he says that we know this is not going to work. Had he read the academic literature, looked into the Northern Ireland example and looked at the evaluation, he would know that that is not the case.

We need to make sure that this work is part of encouraging people to go to vote. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right on that, of course; we should be doing it hand in hand with encouraging people to vote. That is why I am proud that we have only recently refreshed our democratic engagement plan, which is full of the ways that we will be continuing to do that work, as we have always done. We are working closely with the Electoral Commission, and all the local authorities that are relevant at these elections, to encourage people to vote. I would hope that hon. Members would join me in doing so in a way that prioritises the security of those votes alongside participation in them.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I am glad that the range of councils taking part in voter ID pilots this time is broad—more than 10—in about three or four different ways.

May I suggest that in agreeing that we should do more to get voter registration up to much higher levels, we should have a debate when the Electoral Commission has done a study on the result of these voter ID pilots, and then we can really hear what the proper policy of the Labour party and the SNP is to be?

Chloe Smith: Those are words of wisdom. I would be happy to confirm to the House what I have said in other contexts, which is that it is the intention of this Government to move from having done pilots to being able to have a nationwide policy at the next general election. We think that is important, so that is our intention for 2022. We are looking forward to the information that comes from these pilots, on top of last year's work, to be able to inform that and to make sure that the scheme works for voters and any concerns can be addressed.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): Does the Minister think that perhaps more people might be put off voting not because they might have to show ID but because they have realised that sometimes their vote is totally ignored by people in this House?

This system has worked perfectly well in Northern Ireland, and I have seen it for myself. I really do think that we are talking about common sense. If I have to go to the post office and show something to be able to pick up my parcel, I cannot see, particularly with the extra things that the Minister has put in to ensure that people can be identified, how anyone could think that this is anything other than common sense.

Chloe Smith: I thoroughly welcome those comments. The hon. Lady is absolutely correct. This is simply a matter of common sense. It is a quite reasonable and proportionate thing to ask people to do that is in line with what we do elsewhere in the UK and throughout everyday life.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker,

"How will we check people's ID? We will be using a two-level check to verify the person attending is who we have on our membership list. Named Photo ID: This is for branch officers to see photographic ID which has a name that matches the name on the list and is of the person who has presented to the meeting...Proof of Address".

That is from the Tottenham constituency Labour party website with regard to its own meetings. If Labour Members think that two forms of proof are needed to vote in their own elections, why do they think that is not appropriate for national elections?

Chloe Smith: I quite agree, and I am delighted that my right hon. Friend has laid it out so clearly. It is not good enough to say one thing and do another, and then come to this House and lecture others on it.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Minister will not be surprised that I do not share her enthusiasm for this new system. Will she look to what the Welsh Government are doing to expand the franchise and the inclusivity of voting, including consulting on e-voting? Will she consider

that in future? If we are to make voting more accessible and expand the ways that people are able to vote, we need to learn from good practice. The Welsh Government are looking at e-voting pilots in local government elections in 2022, and the UK Government could learn from that for future general elections.

Chloe Smith: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's characteristically thoughtful way of addressing this matter and welcome his engagement with the substance of it. He raised a number of things. First, I am a supporter of the franchise having been devolved to Wales, and I look forward to seeing what my counterparts in Wales will be doing with that shortly. I work closely with them and, indeed, with colleagues in Scotland to make sure that we are, together, operating a system that works for voters.

Secondly, behind the hon. Gentleman's example of e-voting is a point about the powers under which we are doing these pilots that were passed by the previous Labour Government, as I mentioned. Indeed, in the past those powers had also been used by that Government to test e-voting. That is an interesting reflection on the history of how we have been able to come to this point of using powers to look at ways to make the voting system relevant to voters and protect their votes. I am here today principally to talk about how we are protecting their votes. I do not think this is going to turn into a general debate on e-voting, although I should confirm that the Government's manifesto was not in favour of that.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): At the last general election, the Labour candidate in Morecambe and Lunesdale lived in Blackpool and registered herself from her parents' front room in Morecambe. Her husband had actually been the Labour party manager for the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) in the previous election. Is it not time that we had voter ID in Lancaster?

Chloe Smith: I would be delighted to see interest from Lancaster City Council in participating in the pilots. I would like to put on record again how grateful I am to all the local councils that are taking part in them. Some very hard work is being done by administrators to test this important move in our voting system. The example my hon. Friend gives reminds us that there are concerns up and down the country about how well protected our electoral system is, and it is right that we address those.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): I have pursued the issue of electoral registration for 18 years in this place. The hundreds of questions that I have tabled show that there is no issue with voter fraud. These are tactics that are used by the right wing in America for voter suppression. May I offer an alternative use for the £20 million that has been allocated for this policy? It should be transferred into getting the missing millions who are not even on the register on to the register.

Chloe Smith: If this is about voter suppression, the Labour party clearly does not want any members, because it uses it for its own party membership. This is not about voter suppression, nor is it about disenfranchisement. I object strongly to the use of those words to describe what is being done. This is a reasonable step to protect

voters' choices. It is simple common sense, as the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) said, that people should be able to show who they are at the polling station.

I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his campaigning over time on these issues, because he is right to keep consistent scrutiny on how we can help as many people as possible to be registered in this country. I hope he knows that I share his determination to make our registers as complete and accurate as they can be and to have as many people taking part in our elections as possible. Recent figures suggest that we have record levels of electoral registration in this country. They fluctuate slightly throughout electoral cycles, as he will know because he looks at these things closely. The point is that we do have a thriving democracy in this country—let us keep it that way.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): One of the many things about Stirling constituency that I am really proud of is the level of democratic engagement. Turnouts in my constituency are always well above any kind of average that can be picked out of all the statistics that are available on elections. When will the Minister be able to update the House on the specifics of how her Department is trying to drive up engagement in the democratic process across all parts of our society?

Chloe Smith: I look forward very much to being able to do that. I will do it in conjunction with my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) in the coming months, because as Members may know, I shall be taking maternity leave shortly.

In the first instance, I direct my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) to our democratic engagement plan, which sets out the principles of how we intend to engage people and how we will work with partners across the electoral community to do so. Of course, we have to work with colleagues in the devolved Administrations and local councils up and down the country. We are doing that and have set out a range of plans. We will update the House regularly when we have the opportunity to do so. My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that we will come back with an evaluation of these pilots in due course, as we did last year. We expect the independent Electoral Commission to do the same thing again in the summer period, after the elections.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Let us get this right: the privileged class of MPs can register once in London and once in their constituency and vote twice at local elections, but should this House foolishly allow a second referendum, my constituents who do not have a car and do not have a passport could turn up to vote, having voted in the first referendum, and be sent away to walk back a mile because they do not have a driving licence or a passport, having been told, "You can't vote." And the Government call that democracy. Why is it that I have constituents who have to come to me to get passports? They have no ID of any kind and have been refused a passport, and the only way they can get one is if I intervene. That is the price that will be paid for this absurdity.

Chloe Smith: No, it is not. As I have set out, every council that participates in the pilots will make ID arrangements that are free of charge. That is as the

[Chloe Smith]

House would expect it to be. Frankly, if the situation were as the hon. Gentleman describes it, I would agree with him, but it is not. He is simply not giving an accurate picture of the pilots. Crucially, the 10 pilots, which are being done in slightly different ways across the country, are operating a broader list of ID than only driving licences or passports, and as I have emphasised, there will be a free-of-charge alternative. What I would say to his constituents and to anybody else who is listening is that they need not have that concern. This policy has been well planned, with them at its heart.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—it all comes to those who wait. I was here in 2003, not in the Chamber but up in the Press Gallery, and I listened to the Labour Minister explain why there needed to be voter ID in Northern Ireland. There was a debate in the Chamber at that time. I do not think that that Government could be called right-wing—it was led by Tony Blair, so it could not possibly have been right-wing. At the end of the day, has that been a huge success in Northern Ireland? I can say as a former Minister of State for Northern Ireland, yes it has. Why is it different in Northern Ireland? Why can we not protect votes from being stolen in England, Scotland and Wales?

Chloe Smith: That is absolutely right. My right hon. Friend helpfully reminds us of the history of how we got to this place, and I am grateful to him for placing it on the record. He makes the crucial point that this is about protecting voters. Why should it be acceptable for a voter potentially to be subject to having their vote stolen? That would be a dreadful crime—it is hardly some kind of victimless crime. It is a crime that, unfortunately, does happen in this country, although not in large numbers. That means that we have to act. These are the actions of a responsible Government to make sure that voters have their voice protected.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Following on from the comment of the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), I endorse the remarks that the Minister has made in relation to Northern Ireland. It is absolutely abominable that someone should steal another person's vote. Vote stealing is a serious crime. In the general election of 2001, it was identified that voter fraud in Northern Ireland was a significant issue. It was the Labour Government who—thank goodness—the very next year, in 2002, introduced photographic ID for all elections in Northern Ireland.

Many people in Northern Ireland did not have a passport and many still do not, although, because of Brexit, people are applying for Irish passports in large numbers. For those who do not have a passport or a driving licence, the Electoral Office supplies electoral identity cards free of charge. They are a great idea. Will the Minister confirm that electoral identity cards will be made available free of charge and will be valid for 10 years? They can be used for other purposes, so there is an incentive for voters to acquire them. Given that they are free of charge and are valid for 10 years, people do not have to go for a passport. If people want to meet their constituency MP, of course they can go for a passport, but electoral identity cards are a useful alternative

as ID for all sorts of things, such as Flybe and various other airlines. I am not advertising Flybe—it might not accept them. However, valid ID cards for electoral purposes are enormously useful.

Chloe Smith: I am really pleased that the hon. Lady has contributed the voice of experience. She is correct about the experience in Northern Ireland. She is also correct that such cards have other uses. I give an example from last year's pilots: in one pilot a group of homeless electors—I hope right hon. and hon. Members are aware that it can be difficult for homeless people to vote, which in itself is a separate disgrace that the Government are working to improve—were able to take advantage of the council-issued alternative and go to claim other benefits and take other steps in their lives that they felt were really helpful. She is right that that can happen.

On how we will take the pilots forward into a broader scheme, we are open to looking at what the next steps may be. They may not be identical to the Northern Ireland card, but as I have already emphasised all councils taking part in the pilots will provide a free-of-charge alternative ID that provides some form of verification that voters are who they say they are. That will certainly be a feature, and I will look at all the experiences around the UK as a guide towards the next steps of the programme.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Is the Minister aware that the percentage of convictions for ID fraud in votes cast last year—I will read this so that I do not forget a zero—was 0.000002%? While it is clear that we need to treat electoral fraud seriously, will she explain why the same degree of enthusiasm is not shown, for instance, for inquiring into the wide-scale cheating that took place during the EU referendum campaign?

Chloe Smith: The right hon. Gentleman is ever predictable; I thought that might be where his argument would end. I have already touched on the fallacious argument that we should not go after crimes of small numbers. It is a terrible argument.

Tom Brake: I didn't say that.

Chloe Smith: The right hon. Gentleman emphasised how many zeroes came after a decimal point, so I think he was making a point about small numbers. The important thing is this: we need to be able to reassure voters that their votes matter, that their votes are protected and that they can have confidence in the votes they cast.

The right hon. Gentleman went on to make an important point about other elections. People want to have confidence in the result of any election. I say in passing, because this is not about the European referendum, that the Electoral Commission has investigated the allegations to which he refers, and that is part of the system in which voters can have confidence. We have those rules, we have an independent regulator, and we have those investigations. That is what voters should expect of the electoral system, and that independent regulator has also long argued for this reform because it will improve the security of our elections.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Democracy works best when it is easy to participate. The Government are engaged in voter suppression here, so why can we not have more pilots to help people on to the electoral register?

Chloe Smith: I have already said that the Government are absolutely committed to wanting to have as many people as possible registered to vote. I have focused on that relentlessly through the two occasions on which I have held this ministerial post with responsibility for electoral regulation. We need to be able to work with a range of people to do that, and we need to use a range of tools. Yes, we are using pilots to look at ways to secure people's votes, but that goes alongside a very large other body of work to ensure that our democracy thrives and is fit for the 21st century. I would welcome the hon. Gentleman's support in that.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My constituency had the lowest turnout of any UK constituency at the last general election, so for me this is a question of priorities. The Government should be spending much more time and effort on driving up participation in elections, particularly in constituencies such as mine that have a higher than average level of deprivation, rather than spending so much money, resource, time and effort on a relatively trifling issue. We need to focus on the main issue of what the Government will do about driving up voter participation, instead of fanning around with this issue.

Chloe Smith: I am afraid the hon. Gentleman's words might have spoken for themselves. I simply do not agree, nor do I think his constituents or mine would agree, that electoral fraud is "trifling", or that we should not be, to use his words, "fanning around" trying to put a crime right. I am sorry; I think he let himself down with his choice of language. The point underneath it is equally poor. We ought to be able to focus on tackling crime. Voters would expect us to do that. Electoral fraud is a crime, and we are focusing on tackling it. That is to the good of our democracy.

Perhaps the hon. Gentleman was touching on an argument about costs and the choice of expenditure in an electoral system. We would be foolish to try to put a price on democracy. We would be foolish to try to isolate the cost of one measure to protect our overall system compared to any other. I say to him, as I have said to other hon. Members, that all these things together give us a thriving democracy. I have happily committed through the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee to ensuring that the costs are available for scrutiny as soon as possible, which is reassuring to all our constituents.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab) *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The hon. Lady probably wonders why she is left to the end. I will explain very simply: she came into the Chamber after—quite a long time after—the Minister had started speaking. Strictly, I could say that the hon. Lady should not have an opportunity to put her question, but I do not believe we need to be utterly strict. I am sure she has an important question to ask, so of course she has an opportunity to ask it.

Marsha De Cordova: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Participating in voting should be a right for everybody, and I want to ensure that disabled people do not face any barriers to voting, whether in the upcoming local elections or the potential European elections. I understand that tactile voting devices must be ordered by the deadline, which is today. Will the Minister confirm whether that deadline could be extended to ensure that all disabled people can participate in voting?

Chloe Smith: That is a really good question. To be able to honour the spirit of it properly in answering it, I will confirm to the hon. Lady in writing the precise situation about the ordering deadlines for those devices, should that apply to any potential upcoming elections. I think the House will be well aware of the situation regarding the European parliamentary elections, and I do not think the question is generally about those, but I will be happy to take up that question in more detail.

More broadly, the hon. Lady is right: disabled voters should be as welcome in our system as anyone else. That is a crucial, fundamental tenet of our democracy. I was pleased to meet her to talk through some of these issues, just as I have been keen to meet charities and civil society groups working on behalf of people with disabilities as part of our work to make elections more accessible. The tactile voting devices are but one part of that landscape, but these are vital issues that I want to get right, and I reassure the House that they have been well considered in these pilots.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I would like to point out that the Minister has been extremely good, bouncing up and down to the Dispatch Box, given the imminent arrival of her next child. We all wish her well and hope that it is soon.

Sir Mike Penning: Not too soon.

Madam Deputy Speaker: No, not too soon.

Parental Rights (Rapists) and Family Courts

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

1.59 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to remove the parental rights of fathers of children conceived through rape; to make provision for an inquiry into the handling by family courts of domestic abuse and violence against women and girls in child arrangement cases; and for connected purposes.

My Bill is to remove the automatic parental right of men who have fathered a child through rape and to establish an inquiry into the treatment of domestic abuse and violence against women and girls in the family courts. The measures I am presenting today were born out of the terrible case of Sammy Woodhouse, which this House is well aware of. Sammy bravely testified against Arshid Hussain in a criminal trial in 2016, and helped to expose the Rotherham grooming scandal. Hussain was convicted, alongside two of his brothers and his uncle, of rape, indecent assault, abduction, false imprisonment and making threats to kill. He was sentenced to 35 years in prison.

During the trial, Sammy voluntarily placed her son under a care order. Because of the stress she was experiencing, she recognised that she was not, at the time, fully capable of looking after him. When the trial concluded, she believed her ordeal with the men who had groomed her as a child was over, but she was wrong. Last year, at a routine variation of her son's care order, Sammy was sitting in court when her social worker turned to her and informed her that notification had been given to Hussain, in prison, informing him of the proceedings and of his right to apply for access to her son. Sammy described to me how she felt at the time: paralysed with fear that the man she thought she would never have to lay eyes on again might walk into the room, and terrified of what her own reaction would be if he did. She genuinely could not guarantee that she would not attack him.

Sammy actually considers herself lucky, if such a word can be used of someone who has been through what she has, because Hussain did not attend court that day, although months after the court process had finished, Rotherham Council once again approached Hussain in prison to encourage contact with her son, without even notifying Sammy it was doing so. It is inconceivable to anyone with any sympathy, empathy or a drop of common sense that Hussain was in effect encouraged to apply to the court. Had he been so minded, he could have used the court as a weapon to cross-examine Sammy and to traumatise her and her children all over again.

Sammy and I have met the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. and learned Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer). Sammy has met Rotherham Council, and we have sought legal advice on whether it acted appropriately and within the law. Astonishingly, the received view is that her case would not have been considered exceptional enough, despite the fact that case law states the court can rule that individuals should not be notified if they present a safeguarding risk to parent or child. It is difficult to imagine how anyone could have posed a greater threat

to Sammy or her son than Arshid Hussain. That is why the law clearly needs to change. We need to flip the presumption that anyone who has fathered a child through rape should be encouraged to apply for access regardless of the risk they present by removing that automatic right and allowing the courts to grant access, in exceptional circumstances, only if it is in the clear interest of the welfare of the child.

In my initial response to this case, I recommended to the Government an amendment to the Children Act 1989 to remove the parental right of any man who has fathered a child through rape. The Government's argument, regrettably, was that this would undermine the convicted rapist's article 8 right to a family life. I am afraid that this is nonsense. This is a qualified right, and no one could conclude that his rights should supersede the safeguarding concerns of mother or child.

I do, however, understand the concerns raised about how my suggestion could undermine the vital principle that the welfare of the child should always be paramount, so, in consultation with Sir James Munby, the former president of the family court, we have developed alternative proposals that would maintain the paramountcy principle, while protecting victims of rape and their children. Requiring a father who has fathered a child through rape to obtain the permission of the court before applying for a section 8 order, or requiring the court to presume, unless the contrary is shown, that involvement of such an individual will be contrary to the child's welfare should satisfy those two tests. You would not think we had to be so explicit in primary legislation with the courts, but the sad fact is that Sammy's and other women's experience demonstrates to us that we must. I am incredibly grateful to Sir James and survivors alongside Sammy who have worked with me on these proposals, and I believe that there is now simply no reason why the Government should not urgently accept them.

My Bill goes further than this specific legislative change. The family courts are private—and rightly so, to protect the children that they must safeguard—but it is precisely this privacy that puts some women at risk. Sammy herself risked contempt of court in speaking out about her story. I have had constituents told by their solicitors that they will no longer represent them because they have been to their MP to ask for help. I have sought to establish how widespread a problem the issue of convicted rapists gaining access to their children is, but no data is collected to allow scrutiny of the courts and their decisions. This is not the case in the criminal courts, where we know outcomes, we can scrutinise data and we can establish if legislation is being properly upheld, but we cannot know that in the family courts.

Pioneering research by Women's Aid found clear examples of family courts prioritising domestic abusers' rights over survivors' and children's rights to life and to be free from degrading treatment. Its report, "Nineteen Child Homicides", revealed the deaths of 19 children following contact granted to men who were known abusers. This research led to the updating of practice direction 12J, which provides protection for victims of domestic abuse and harm. This should be sufficient and it should be followed, but campaigners and survivors have concerns that it is not being followed and that contact is still being granted inappropriately. It should not be down to charities to expose these issues at the heart of our justice system, so I believe we need an

independent inquiry to establish the level of this discrimination in the courts and what needs to be done to address it.

We, as politicians, must never interfere with the independence of the judiciary. We must trust that it will always follow the spirit of the law that we make in this place and that it will take decisions that will protect victims and their children. However, just last week comments by Mr Justice Hayden came to light that were deeply concerning and betrayed an attitude that we had hoped was safely buried in the judiciary—that women are somehow owned by their partners, that we are inferior to men and that we do not have the same rights and certainly cannot exercise them through the courts. He said:

“I cannot think of any more obviously fundamental human right than the right of a man to have sex with his wife”.

This view will, I am confident, not be shared by the vast majority of the judiciary, but it points to wider concerns about attitudes and understanding on violence against women and girls that are clearly barriers to improving the court’s response to these crimes.

While secrecy in institutions prevails, it is the very health of our democracy and the rights of our citizens that are at risk. The relationship between those who make decisions and those whom decisions are made about need not rest on blind trust. In fact, a healthy scepticism—challenging, scrutinising, protesting—is the hallmark of a democracy in good health. However, to achieve that, the scales need to be, as much as possible, evenly weighted between the people and those in power—between the institutions of the state and those that are subject to them. That is why, periodically, when there is deep public concern, it is appropriate to launch an inquiry on behalf of the public to get to the truth.

For family courts and cases involving domestic abuse, there is a fear that, beneath the shroud of secrecy, there is injustice. The women and children we are talking about are some of the most vulnerable in our society. Women such as Sammy have already been let down by the state time and again. We, as public servants, owe it to them to reward the bravery of those who have dared to speak out. We cannot allow their voices to continue to go unheard, silenced and ignored, and we cannot

perpetuate a system that discriminates against them and potentially places them and their children in harm’s way. It is time for the voices of those who have suffered in silence for too long to finally be heard.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Louise Haigh, Sir Nicholas Soames, Eddie Hughes, Mrs Maria Miller, Glyn Davies, Kevin Hollinrake, Jess Phillips, Philip Davies, Layla Moran, Sir Mike Penning, Jim Shannon and Sir Kevin Barron present the Bill.

Louise Haigh accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 378).

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. During the excellent 10-minute rule Bill speech by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) there was commentary going on not from inside the Chamber itself, but from somewhere else. That was completely inappropriate considering the importance of the Bill. Can you investigate—I am sure you are already—why that was going on and make sure it does not happen again?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for raising that point. He is correct. I was also aware that there were voices somewhere in this Chamber which I could not see. I know it was not any disruption in the Public Gallery and there was no one in the side Galleries. I have already asked for an investigation to take place, but if he, or indeed anyone else in the Chamber, has seen parts of this Chamber which I am unable to see and has an idea of where that noise is coming from, I would be grateful if they would tell me. The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. It is totally inappropriate, especially when a Member is speaking on a sensitive subject and there is silence in the Chamber because everybody in here is listening intently to the hon. Lady, as they were a few minutes ago, that there should be noise from some other part of this Chamber. If I find out what exactly happened, I will inform the Chamber, the hon. Lady and the right hon. Gentleman.

Constitutional Law

2.11 pm

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): I beg to move,

That the draft Regulatory Reform (Scotland) Act 2014 (Consequential Modifications) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 4 March, be approved.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to debate this order this afternoon, Madam Deputy Speaker. The order is made in consequence of the Regulatory Reform (Scotland) Act 2014, which I shall refer to as the 2014 Act and which received Royal Assent on 19 February 2014. Some may say the matter we are debating—essentially regulatory alignment between two routes of appeal under two separate pieces of legislation—is very minor, but the provisions have come from the Scottish Government's very welcome distinctive Better Regulation agenda, which is based on principles of requiring regulation to be transparent, accountable, proportionate, consistent and targeted. If we assent to the regulations today, we will remove a disparity that could cause delay and cost to people seeking remedies under particular Acts.

The order is made under section 104 of the Scotland Act 1998, which allows for necessary or expedient legislative provision in consequence of an Act of the Scottish Parliament. In this case, a provision is required in consequence of the aforementioned 2014 Act. I have talked about what has driven the requirement for better regulation. We have seen in all four nations a desire for better and more proportionate regulation. I think we all agree that that is required and it creates a more benign business environment for investors. In this case, which pertains to energy installations, it can deliver benefits for the environment.

The 2014 Act accelerated the procedure by which certain appeals are determined: first, appeals in respect of decisions taken on applications for consent for energy-generating station development; and, secondly, appeals against a decision to hold a public inquiry with respect to such applications for consent. If there is a challenge on those particular issues, the order will ensure that the same appeal mechanism applies whether there is a challenge against a decision of the Scottish Ministers on either an application for a marine licence or on an application for a section 36 consent for energy developments within Scottish internal waters, territorial sea and the Scottish part of the renewable energy zone—REZ. The order ensures that by making two amendments to the Electricity Act 1989 to extend a statutory appeals procedure to the Scottish part of the REZ. It does so by substituting a new definition of “relevant waters” to include those waters in the Scottish part of the REZ.

I note that a change to the definition of “relevant waters” was inserted into the 1989 Act by an earlier order in 2015, with the intention of providing for the statutory appeal. However, the change related only to renewable energy installations to be sited in Scottish internal waters and the territorial sea adjacent to Scotland, not the REZ.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Can the Minister confirm that the geographical location is based on where the turbine or renewable energy is located, rather than the company, the licence holder or any applicant?

Claire Perry: I believe that it is based on the location of the site, but I will double-check that and write to the hon. Gentleman to confirm it.

The order ensures that the statutory appeal is now also available to the section 36 consent applications in the Scottish part of the REZ, thereby fulfilling the policy of providing the expedited appeals procedure for decisions on section 36 consents on which Scottish Ministers have executively devolved functions and control. The order therefore might seem very small but is actually an important amendment and correction to the 2015 order.

For information, the instrument was laid one week after another related instrument, the Scotland Act 1998 (Transfer of Functions to the Scottish Ministers etc.) Order 2019. That order was passed by the House of Commons on 2 April. The effect of that order is to confirm that environmental impact assessment regulatory functions connected to energy consent within the Scottish part of the REZ are available to Scottish Ministers.

The UK Government and the Scottish Government, as is always our desire and intent, have worked closely together to ensure that the order makes the necessary amendments in consequence of the 2014 Act. I believe it demonstrates once again that the UK Government remain committed to strengthening the devolution settlement and that Scotland's two Governments are working well together. As indicated, the order might be small, but it is absolutely necessary. I hope all Members agree that the practical result is something to be welcomed. I therefore commend the order to the House.

2.16 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I do not plan to detain the House for long, as the order before us is purely technical in nature. It is necessary to amend previous legislation with regards to the Scottish section of the renewable energy zone and to correct amendments that were previously made to the Electricity Act 1989 by the Regulatory Reform (Scotland) Act 2014 (Consequential Modifications) Order 2015.

As part of the 2015 order, there was an oversight in its definition of “relevant waters”. It did not include the Scottish section of the renewable energy zone. The order before us today corrects that oversight and will ensure that the same appeals mechanism applies where there is a challenge against a decision of Scottish Ministers on application for a marine licence in relation to an energy-generating station or site development that would be situated in Scottish internal waters, territorial sea or the Scottish section of the REZ.

We all know the benefits that renewable energy can bring to our society and ultimately our planet, which is why I am delighted that the Labour party is committed to a green industrial revolution and fully committed to our target of net zero emissions by 2050. In Scotland, we are all too familiar with what happens when infrastructure projects of a crucial nature, such as renewable energy, are delayed due to court challenges. In fact, the man who now sits in the Oval Office of the White House and is known as the President of the United States is among the more prominent individuals who have challenged offshore renewable infrastructure projects because they happen to dislike the physical or visual impact of them on their golf courses. The order should

prevent court challenges of this kind being dragged out and accelerate the procedure by which appeals are determined by fast-tracking legal challenges to minimise the impact of delays on such infrastructure projects.

The Labour party will not oppose the order because, as I said, it is a necessary but simple technical amendment and correction to the 2015 order.

2.18 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I rise to give my support to this statutory instrument, brought before the House in the name of the Secretary of State for Scotland. It is important because it is about facilitating twin areas of vital national interest: the need for us to continue to support the efficient development of cheap, clean energy generation; and the crying-out-loud need for us to double down on our efforts to stick to hitting our legally binding carbon reduction budgets. Scotland is playing a massive role in giving the UK a lead on clean energy in the G7. That is not just something to take quiet satisfaction from; it is something to shout from the rooftops. In short, that is why I wanted to speak in support of this SI. Yes, it is about a couple of technical amendments, but they point towards a couple of greater things that need to be highlighted.

The first is perhaps a little subtle, but it is significant—it is a political and constitutional point. The SNP in this place and elsewhere—in fact, everywhere that it is given a platform or a microphone—will go on and on about how outrageous everything is and how blatant the UK Government are in their dealings with Scottish interests, saying that they do not listen, they do not co-operate, and so on. My Scottish Conservative and Unionist colleagues in this House and I bear the brunt of this kind of rhetoric through the vile abuse that we receive from fundamentalist nationalists. A Cabinet Secretary in the Scottish Government even called us all traitors—yes, a Cabinet Secretary.

The truth is a very long way away from that kind of bare-faced politicking. It needs to be said and this SI illustrates it well: there is actually a very good working relationship between the SNP Scottish Government and the Conservative and Unionist UK Government. Privately, the Scottish Government's Ministers get on with getting on with the UK Government. While things can always be improved upon—as Members will know, I have many ideas about how that might be done—the day-to-day business of co-operating and collaborating is going on, largely insulated from the faux rage and grievance manufacturing of the SNP.

I was talking to an SNP Member the other day—someone I quite like and respect—who said something to the effect that we always disagree on everything. I said, “No, we actually agree on a lot of things a lot of the time.” That Member said to me, “Whatever you do, don't tell my supporters in my constituency that.” That sums up the SNP attitude for me.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): How is the hon. Gentleman getting on with encouraging his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland to ensure that Ministers are rolling back on the cuts to onshore wind subsidies, which is obviously a crucial industry for Scotland and the hon. Gentleman's constituency?

Stephen Kerr: I will come on to say something specifically about the importance of this sector, particularly for the Scottish economy, but the important thing that I am trying to say about this SI is that it brings about harmonisation. Harmonisation is something that I am very much in favour of—I say, up with that sort of thing. Whenever it is possible—and it nearly always is, despite what we would imagine from listening to the noises from those on the SNP Benches—the people of Scotland expect their two Governments to work together for the commonweal and they want to see that partnering in action. This SI is a good example of that. It might not go down well with the SNP fundamentalists in the conference hall, but I am afraid that the reality is not always the perception that people want to hold on to for the sake of stoking political prejudice.

The second thing I want to mention is how strategically important the offshore wind energy sector is in Scotland, and this SI facilitates it. May I say how much I welcomed last month's announcement of the offshore wind sector deal? It spells out the ambition of the industry and the UK Government to produce a third of British electricity from offshore wind by 2030. Environmentalists in my Stirling constituency say that the UK Government do not get enough credit for the work that they are doing on sustainable energy sources.

The sector deal clearly states the ambition to make the UK a global leader in renewables, with more investment potential than any other country in the world, as a part of our modern industrial strategy. It spells out the ambition of the offshore wind energy industry, with its investment of £250 million—including a new offshore wind growth partnership—to develop the UK supply chain, as global exports are set to increase fivefold to £2.6 billion by 2030. That deal will mean for the first time in our history that more electricity will be generated from renewables than fossil fuels, with 70% of British electricity predicted to be from low carbon sources by 2030 and over £40 billion of infrastructure investment in the UK. I am proud that Scotland is at the forefront of it all.

The UK offshore energy sector has massive potential. There is a significant appetite for new offshore wind energy, and investors are willing to put their money to work investing in Scotland. We need infrastructure and policies that allow development, and we need all levels of Government—local, Scottish and UK-wide—to be fully seized of the opportunity and the moment. The fact that this SI brings the different levels of Government together to ensure a smooth process for applicants and a fair process for interested parties is to be welcomed. It is to the credit of the UK Government and the Scottish Government, who are working together because by working together we can achieve great things for the people of Scotland. Seeing this SI through is what this Government ultimately stand for, in terms of our attitude towards making the Union work for all its people. I welcome the SI's passage through the House today.

2.25 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr). He has made my day and cheered me up—honestly, I had to check my notes to see whether I was in the right debate or whether he was, because we seemed to go slightly off topic. It also seems strange to complain

[Alan Brown]

about SNP complaints, while continuing to put the boot into the SNP—so, that was hypocrisy writ large. However, I take his point: where they can, it is good that the two Governments work well together. He kept talking about this good working relationship. He did not answer the intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) about how the Secretary of State for Scotland is currently blocking the development of onshore wind in Scotland. I want to challenge the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth, who is at the Dispatch Box—if she could look up, please. Her Department and the Secretary of State for Scotland have refused to release correspondence between the two Departments where it is quite clear that he has voiced his objections. For full transparency, will they release this information so that what the Scottish Secretary is doing to block onshore wind in Scotland is out there in the public domain?

Let me turn to the SI. Its title on the Order Paper is “Constitutional Law (Motion)” —how grand does that sound? No wonder a constitutional law motion is in the main Chamber. Then we look at paragraph 2.1 of the explanatory notes:

“The purpose of this...is...to correct amendments made to the Electricity Act 1989”.

Paragraph 6.3 states:

“This instrument is made to correct an oversight in the 2015 Order by amending the definition of ‘relevant waters’ in section 36D(6) of, and paragraph 5B(6) of Schedule 8 to, the 1989 Act”.

Paragraph 14.1 on monitoring and review states:

“The instrument will achieve its policy objective of amending a legislative oversight and therefore monitoring and review are not required.”

This is a simple, technical amendment, as has been said, so why it is in the main Chamber? It is a complete farce and another indication of this zombie Government who have nothing to do because everything is stalled because of Brexit. We keep hearing about getting on with the day job, but it is quite clear that the Government are not getting on with their day job and that everything is stalled. We had a similar SI in a normal Delegated Legislation Committee and it took 10 minutes. Partly because the hon. Member for Stirling talked longer than the two Front-Bench spokespersons, we have thankfully managed to drag this out, and I am doing my wee bit to drag it out in the main Chamber as well.

That said, we welcome the streamlining of this process for challenging Scottish Ministers’ decisions about marine licence applications. As the hon. Gentleman was good enough to say, the Scottish Government are a world leader in the fight against climate change and in advancing renewable energy. The Scottish Government want to have 50% of all energy sources supplied by renewables by 2030. It does figure that it would be much better for the Scottish Government to have even greater powers over energy policy and for that not be blocked by the likes of the Secretary of State for Scotland.

In Scotland, we have the European Marine Energy Centre in Orkney, which is also a world leader, with the world’s largest tidal stream array and the world’s most powerful tidal stream turbine. A recent announcement heralds the world’s first centre aimed at accelerating the development of materials and structures for tidal energy, which will be based in Rosyth. It is a collaboration

between Babcock and the University of Edinburgh. The FASTBLADE project is worth £2.4 million, so we look forward to seeing that being developed. What funds, if any, will the Government provide for that and for future projects? I note that the offshore wind sector deal gives the University of Hull £5.5 million for its technology development. We should like to see the same provision for marine development in Scotland.

When will the Government change the regulations on the Electricity Act 1989 to define electricity storage as a distinct subset of generation? That change will facilitate the co-location of batteries with renewable energy, as the Minister acknowledged in a parliamentary answer in March and in another last week. She described the amendment as “an important measure” and said that it would be implemented “when parliamentary time allows.” I suggest that a full debate in the main Chamber provides sufficient parliamentary time to amend the regulations. That is part of the day job that the Government should be getting on with.

The Government also need to move away from their obsession with nuclear power. It is too dear; it is a dead duck; and it is clear that investors are walking away from it. I do not understand why they continue down that path.

We welcome the corrections of the previous oversight. They should mean that the appeal process is clear, within the remit of Scottish Ministers, and within the remit of the Scottish legal jurisdiction. The intention of the 2014 Act was to streamline the planning application and appeal process for renewable energy to facilitate business deployment and to give investors more certainty. We therefore welcome this measure, which has been agreed with Scottish Ministers. As the Minister said in her opening remarks, better regulation is good for everyone.

2.31 pm

Claire Perry: I think we have seen an outbreak of consensus, which is always welcome on the Floor of the House. I welcome the comments of the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), and commend him on his tartan tie: I feel that I am a little underdressed for this debate.

The hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), who is no longer in the Chamber, asked me to confirm that the Act applies to the geography of the site and not to the business location. I can confirm that to the House.

I was delighted when my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) raised our eyes beyond this narrow definition of the law to the real prize, asking what we could do to facilitate our ongoing leadership in the decarbonisation agenda. The answer is much more. I was also delighted by his support for the offshore wind sector deal, which is utterly transformational. We have the best location in the world for offshore wind generation in terms of wind speed and the shallowness of the marine basin. As he knows, there is an important opportunity for the transfer of skills from the world-leading oil and gas industry to offshore wind generation as part of the transition.

There is, of course, a series of questions to be asked about onshore wind. One concerns the size of wind farms. I have debated that subject many times with Opposition Members, but I should point out that the

Scottish Government's own analysis shows that more than 2GW of wind is already at the planning stage. Not all of that will come to fruition, but we are engaged in an enormous process of re-powering and upgrading existing onshore wind farms.

My hon. Friend also mentioned—and this is absolutely my experience as well—that the day-to-day working relationships with the Ministers in the devolved Administration are excellent. I chair a quadrilateral meeting which we hold regularly to discuss Brexit preparations, and our conversations are professional and focus on working together. There is a great deal of trust. Like the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), I would far rather see harmonisation than dissent in such conversations. It is always dispiriting that we almost never hear his party welcome any of the progress that the UK Government are making. *[Interruption.]* I am afraid that his speech was delivered in such a welter of negativity that I may not have picked it up.

Alan Brown *rose*—

Claire Perry: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman and allow him to congratulate our four nations on the progress that they have made.

Alan Brown: The Minister is obviously not familiar with my personality. That is how I deliver compliments—in amongst that wave of negativity.

What I was going to ask the Minister was this. Will the Government release the correspondence between the Secretary of State for Scotland and her Department, rather than hiding behind the freedom of information exemption, claiming that it is Government policy formulation?

Claire Perry: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will regain his usual sunny nature should we have an Easter break next week. As he will know, what he has asked is not for me to decide. These observations are made to the Secretary of State, and it would be wrong for me to comment.

Neil Gray: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Sweeney *rose*—

Claire Perry: I will give way again briefly, but I sense that the House would like me to wrap up, and I also want to give way to the Leader of the Opposition. *[Laughter.]* I mean the potential future Leader of the Opposition, the hon. Member for Glasgow North East.

Neil Gray: If the Minister was so keen for the correspondence to be released, she could just release it and publish it now. She does not have to wait for an FOI inquiry.

Claire Perry: As I have said, it not my decision, and it is not correspondence of which I have been informed.

Mr Sweeney *rose*—

Claire Perry: I will now give way to my shadow—in this particular instance—on the Opposition Front Bench.

Mr Sweeney: We should not tempt fate.

The Minister has made an important point: it is frustrating that the Secretary of State for Scotland is not here to make his comments directly and, perhaps, shed more light on the issues that Members have raised. She also made an important point about the opportunity to exploit renewable potential in the coastal waters of the United Kingdom. However, that is not being matched with an effort to build the British industrial base on renewables. We are seeing significant threats to major industrial capacity such as a BiFab project in Scotland for the industrial development of renewables. We may be in danger of losing that opportunity altogether. Is it not incumbent on the Minister and, indeed, on her Scottish counterparts to redouble their efforts to maximise British industrial content and renewable manufacturing projects?

Claire Perry: I welcome the opportunity to reassure the hon. Gentleman that the offshore wind sector deal focuses on exactly that. What had happened historically was that we had essentially given out contracts for difference without requiring developers who were taking advantage of them to commit themselves to UK supply chain investment. What I have set out in the sector deal is that in return for terming out the auctions to a 10-year look ahead, which will give us the most secure market look-ahead in this sector in the world, we expect UK content to rise to more than 60% of the supply chain. The hon. Gentleman made an important point about BiFab. We have, of course, worked closely with the Scottish Government throughout that process. It has been another example of very co-operative working.

There is another important point to be made about the sector deal: I should like workforce diversity to improve dramatically. We have set a target of over 30% of the jobs in that sector going to women.

I think I have covered all the points that I wanted to cover. I commend the order, but I also commend what I think will be a marvellous slogan for politics in the future: up with harmonisation, and down with dissent!

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I do not know whether the Minister will secure total agreement with that one.

Question put and agreed to.

Continuous At-Sea Deterrent

2.38 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the 50th anniversary of the continuous at sea deterrent.

Half a century ago, HMS Resolution glided into the Clyde and sailed into the history books. That was the start of our longest sustained military operation—Operation Relentless—and the beginning of our continuous at-sea deterrent. Since then, there has always been a Royal Navy ballistic missile submarine at sea protecting our nation, and thousands of submariners have followed in the wake of Resolution's crew conducting vital work, unseen and undetected, every minute of every day. Today, it is for the House to pay tribute to those brave men and women, past and present, who have helped to make this operation so successful.

We already honour our submariners with a deterrent patrol pin—often known as the bomber pin—giving recognition to their enormous efforts, but we want to go further still. Consequently, we are going to ensure that those who complete 10 patrols will now be recognised with the new silver bomber pin. Future bomber pins will be made from metal taken from HMS Resolution, linking today's submariners with their forefathers and emphasising the longevity and the significance of the 50-year mission.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): I congratulate the Defence Secretary on bringing such an important debate to the House at this time. Does he recognise that there is a case for going even further and making all those who served on bomber patrol eligible for a service medal, given the extraordinary nature of what they have contributed?

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, and it is something that I would be willing to look at. I am sure he is aware that it is not, sadly, a decision purely for the Ministry of Defence, but we would certainly be happy to look at the merits of that and how we give full recognition to all the crews that have served over such a long period.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for giving way, for his welcome announcement and for his response to my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock). I am not cavilling, but will he try to ensure that these medals are made in the UK, please?

Gavin Williamson: I would be very disappointed if they were not to be made in the United Kingdom. My understanding is that the bomber pins are manufactured here in the United Kingdom.

Even as we pay tribute to the submariners, it is equally important that we think of their families, too—those who often have to go for months on end without hearing from their loved ones. We must also pay tribute to the thousands of industry experts who have played a vital role in this national endeavour.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I wonder how the Secretary of State thinks we can possibly lecture other countries about not seeking to acquire

nuclear weapons. What moral high ground do we have to do that if we ourselves not only possess them but are upgrading them? Does he really think the world would be a safer place if every country had nuclear weapons, and if that is not the case, how on earth do we justify what we are doing?

Gavin Williamson: I firmly believe that the world is a safer place because we have a nuclear deterrent and because of the responsible way that it is deployed.

Caroline Lucas: But would the world be safer if all countries had them?

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Lady and I will probably always find room for disagreement on this. I will come on to the issue of deterrence later.

I want to make progress, because it would be remiss of me not to mention the town of Barrow-in-Furness and give our thanks to the people of Barrow, who have crafted these giants of the deep and continue to do so, ensuring that we have the right technology and the right vessels to deliver our nuclear deterrent.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for the way in which he is introducing the debate. The question about other countries possessing nuclear weapons takes me back to the old arguments where we used to ask people to name a single country that would either acquire nuclear weapons because we had got them, or get rid of them if we decided unilaterally to get rid of ours. Do you know what? They never came up with the name of one country.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab) *rose—*

Gavin Williamson: I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman is going to mention such a country, but I give way to him.

Mr Cunningham: I am certainly not going to mention such a country. I was going to ask the Secretary of State about the welfare of the ex-submariners and how they are looked after. Specifically, is it covered by the covenant, which a Labour Government introduced?

Gavin Williamson: I think we on the Government side of the House can be duly proud of the work that has been done since 2010 on ensuring that veterans of all three services are properly looked after; submariners are equally covered by that.

It is important to understand the remarkable engineering that goes into these remarkably sophisticated submarines, whose level of sophistication matches that of a spacecraft. It is only fitting that this debate marks the start of a series of events designed to commemorate such dedicated and continuous service not only from the submariners, but from the industry and the communities that have supported the deterrent.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): As a son of a submariner, I know how important it is that we thank those people who served on submarines. Speaking as the MP for Devonport, however, may I ask the Secretary of State whether he agrees that we should pay special thanks to all those people in Devonport

who have, over many decades, refitted our nuclear submarines and ensured that they are operational, so that they can continue to provide the at-sea deterrent? Without the work of those specialist skilled engineers, we would not have CASD today.

Gavin Williamson: If I recall correctly, 1,000 people in Plymouth are dependent for their jobs and livelihoods on supporting our nuclear submarines. I would very much like to add my thanks to them for the work that they do. That also demonstrates the important benefit that our nuclear deterrent provides for the whole country in jobs and skills.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I am sure that my right hon. Friend, in this geographic tour of areas that support the at-sea deterrent, was coming on to talk about Aldermaston, in the part of west Berkshire that I represent, and the surrounding area. Thousands of people work in that centre of excellence for science and engineering, the benefits of which spread into the economy, into areas that have nothing to do with the nuclear deterrent. That has been of huge benefit to this country.

Gavin Williamson: It is absolutely right that my right hon. Friend mentions Aldermaston and the work that it does on our continued ability to develop our nuclear deterrent, to ensure that we remain ahead of the game. That also has an enormous benefit to the whole wider economy, and not only in the development of skills. This investment has an impact on science and technology, keeping us ahead of the game and ahead of our rivals.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State makes an important point about the industrial contribution that our shipbuilding industry makes; I have worked for the company that builds our nation's submarines and naval ships, so I am all too aware of how important that impact is. However, the construction of these ships and submarines is dependent on in-year financing, which really disrupts the ability to build the infrastructure that will serve these ships throughout their life cycle. How are we going to change the way in which ships are financed by the Treasury to ensure that we give them proper project financing, so that the companies involved can build the world-class infrastructure needed to build submarines and ships for the future?

Gavin Williamson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I will deal with it and then make some progress, because there is a lot of interest in the House and many hon. Members want to speak. The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, and it is why the Government have set aside £31 billion to deliver the Dreadnought programme and ensure that we have continuous at-sea nuclear deterrence. We have also built in a contingency, because we are very conscious that we want to provide security confidence that the programme will deliver within budget and on time.

It is important that we pay our thanks to those who have served on the submarines, to families and to the whole industry. Next month, there will be the Westminster Abbey service recognising the commitment of our submariners. In July, there will be a parade at Her Majesty's Naval Base Clyde, and at the end of the November, there will be a special memorial commemoration at Edinburgh Castle.

However, today's debate is important because it gives us the opportunity to underline why the deterrent still matters so much to the United Kingdom, why it remains very much at the heart of our national security policy and why it has been one of the rare issues to command popular support across both sides of the House. It is an important point to make that the continuous at-sea deterrent has been supported by both Conservative and Labour Governments continuously over the last few decades; I certainly hope that it will be for many decades into the future.

The doubters who persist in believing that the deterrent is simply a cold war relic need to be reminded of three salient points. First and foremost, the nuclear dangers have not gone away; on the contrary, the geopolitical situation is more unstable than ever before. We are facing challenges that are growing in scale, complexity and diversity. Russia is rebuilding its nuclear arsenal. It has breached the intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty and, in Europe, has now deployed new nuclear-capable missile systems to target and threaten the west. It also continues to develop and adapt its doctrine to give primacy to nuclear weapons. North Korea is the only state to have detonated a nuclear weapon in the 21st century. Despite positive dialogue, its weapons remain intact. We hope it will return to compliance with its obligations under the non-proliferation treaty. The point is that both Russia and North Korea have shown their willingness to rattle the nuclear sabre in the past.

There are no indications that those dangers will disappear any time soon, so we cannot relax our guard. While there is the risk of other states developing weapons, we must have a credible response to that threat. Our independent nuclear deterrent—our nuclear weapons posture—gives us defences against such actions. It is our ultimate insurance policy. It protects us every day from the most extreme threats to our national security and our way of life. Beyond that, it gives future generations greater strategic options and the power to protect themselves into the 2060s and beyond, whatever may lie round the corner.

As was recognised at last year's NATO summit in Brussels, the UK's nuclear deterrent provides a critical contribution to our alliance. Since 1962, the UK has assigned all our nuclear forces to NATO's defence. That 50-year commitment to the defence and security of every member of that great alliance is as strong today as it has ever been in the past. All member states benefit from that capability, which gives the alliance another centre of decision making to complicate the calculations of our adversaries.

In fact, many allies signed the non-proliferation treaty in the late 1960s safe in knowledge they would be covered by the nuclear umbrella that the United Kingdom provides for them. Those who argue that we should disarm should consider whether such a move would actually make nuclear proliferation more, rather than less, likely. We cannot blame others, such as the United States, for questioning why they should be paying the price for protecting us from nuclear threats.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): My constituency is the home of GCHQ, which has unprecedented and unparalleled security co-operation and intelligence sharing with the United States. Does the Secretary of State agree that the UK's commitment to the continuous

[Alex Chalk]

at-sea nuclear deterrent is one of the foundation stones of that strong relationship, which keeps our people safe?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend makes an important point, which I will touch on later. Our nuclear deterrent is a cornerstone of that long and enduring relationship. The United States does not have such a relationship with another country anywhere on this Earth. That close collaboration makes us and our allies safer.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Gavin Williamson: I will make some progress. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that.

The extent to which our deterrent underpins our special relationship with the United States must never be underplayed. We should be proud of the fact we are one of the few nations with both strategic nuclear and conventional carrier capabilities. We should be proud that those strengths give the United Kingdom influence not just in NATO but across the world, giving us the capability to influence events in our interest and stand up for our values and the United Kingdom.

My third point is that there are simply no credible alternatives to the submarine-based deterrent. Some claim that there are cheaper and more effective ways of providing a similar effect to the Trident system, but we have been down that road many times before. Successive studies by both Labour and Conservative Administrations have shown that there are no other alternatives. Most recently, the Trident alternatives review of 2013 found that submarines are less vulnerable to attack than silos or aircraft and can maintain a continuous posture in a way that aircraft and land-based alternatives cannot. Their missiles have greater range and capability than other alternative delivery systems. Overall, the review concluded that a minimum, credible, assured and independent deterrent requires nuclear submarines with ballistic missiles.

John Spellar: The Secretary of State is making a very compelling argument. Does he not therefore regret the dithering and delay that took place in the renewal of the submarine programme when the Conservatives were in coalition, at the behest of the Liberal Democrats, who have not even bothered to turn up today?

Gavin Williamson: We could spend a long time debating the Liberal Democrats, but it would probably be a waste of time. I am exceptionally proud of the fact that this Government have committed to a nuclear deterrent, and that in 2015 so many colleagues from both sides of the House united in one Lobby to make sure we delivered it.

Neil Gray *rose*—

Gavin Williamson: I see that a very excitable member of the SNP is keen to make a point.

Neil Gray: We were not in that Lobby, funnily enough. I struggle to see the logic in arguing for multilateral disarmament while simultaneously rearming unilaterally.

My question to the Secretary of State is this: how many nuclear submarines have been successfully decommissioned since 1980? The answer is none, isn't it?

Gavin Williamson: We are intending to see the first decommissioning of submarines over the coming year. That important issue needs to be addressed. My hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) and the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) have been looking at it and have made some very important contributions. It is an issue that the Ministry of Defence takes very seriously. I was hoping—this was obviously very naive of me—that the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) was going to talk about Scotland's pride at being the home of our submarine forces, about the economic benefit that our continuous at-sea nuclear benefit delivers Scotland, about the fact that 6,800 people are employed at Her Majesty's Naval Base Clyde and about the fact that that will increase to 8,500. It is disappointing that he could not talk with a bit of pride about the service personnel who contribute so much. This is about saying thank you, to the submariners who have continuously put their lives at risk and done so much for our nation to keep us safe. I hope that all Members in this House, regardless of their view about the continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent, will have the courtesy to pay tribute to those brave men and women. We cannot wish away the rise of the atomic bomb, especially given that there are some 14,500 nuclear weapons on this Earth. That is not to say we have given up our determination to create a nuclear-free world. On the contrary, we have been at the forefront of arms reduction. Since the height of the cold war, the United Kingdom has reduced our forces by more than 50%. We have delivered on our commitment to reduce the number of warheads carried by our Vanguard submarines from 48 to 40, and we have decreased the number of operationally available warheads to no more than 120.

Caroline Lucas: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Gavin Williamson: I have given the hon. Lady the opportunity to speak.

We remain committed to reducing our stockpile to no more than 180 warheads by the mid-2020s, but the reality is that other nations have not taken the hint from the lead that the United Kingdom has shown. Even as we have cut back, others are creating new systems to get around treaty obligations or are simply ignoring the commitments that they have made. I have already spoken about Russia's breach of the INF treaty. The truth is that the only way to create the global security conditions necessary for nuclear disarmament is by working multilaterally. Our commitment to the deterrent is cast-iron.

We are spending around £4 billion every year to ensure the ultimate guarantee of our safety for the next 50 years, not least by investing in the next generation of ballistic missile submarines—the Dreadnought class. We have made significant progress. We have already named three of the state-of-the-art submarines—Dreadnought, Valiant and Warspite. Construction has already started in Barrow on HMS Dreadnought. Those names recall some of the greatest ships of our naval history. We are investing millions of pounds in state-of-the-art facilities and complex nuclear propulsion systems,

and we are ensuring every day counts by utilising our Dreadnought contingency, with access to up to £1 billion, to fund more in the early years to drive out cost and risk later in the programme.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The Secretary of State speaks of getting around obligations. Can he clarify why the MOD stopped publishing the official safety ratings report from Trident's watchdog, the Defence Nuclear Safety Regulator, for the past two years? Is it trying to cover up the rise in safety incidents instead of taking proper action to fix them now?

Gavin Williamson: Safety is at the core and at the very heart of everything we do at the Ministry of Defence and through all three of our services and with our industrial partners. That is very much the focus that we will always have going into the future.

John Woodcock: The Secretary of State has been very generous with his time. Does not the incident in Barrow today underline the fact that the shipwrights who are involved in constructing the Royal Navy's submarines in Barrow and across the country are performing a vital service for the nation, which is not always without risk?

Gavin Williamson: This is a national endeavour. We often talk, rightly, about those who are serving in the Royal Navy, but it is supported by the other two services. The Royal Air Force, through the P8 Poseidon submarine-hunting aircraft, and the surface fleet of the Royal Navy are all making sure that our deterrents are safe. Of course, those workers in Barrow are constructing some of the world's finest submarines to take to the seas, and our gratitude is deep.

We must not forget the 30,000 jobs that are dependent on this work, or the fact that we are investing in new technology and new capabilities, bringing prosperity across the country.

Mr Sweeney: The Secretary of State recognises the capital investment of over £300 million that is going into the shipyard in Barrow, which is fantastic for the town. If that is good enough for the Trident renewal programme, why was it not good enough for the Type 26 programme on the Clyde, which has not seen the equivalent level of capital investment in shipyard infrastructure?

Gavin Williamson: Simply, BAE Systems decided that that level of investment in the Govan shipyard was not required. But we are making a multi-year investment in Type 26s, providing an order book for the Govan shipyard into the 2030s. That is something that most shipyards would look at enviously.

The investments we have made and the decisions that we have taken on extra investment on Dreadnought mean that the new submarines will be delivered on time. To guarantee that delivery, we have modernised our entire nuclear enterprise. We have established the Defence Nuclear Organisation to manage our portfolio of nuclear programmes. We have created the Submarine Delivery Agency, which with our industry partners has made real progress on the ground in building our future submarines and ensuring that our current boats are able to fulfil their missions. We have established the new Dreadnought Alliance, which through a coalition of the MOD, BAE

Systems and Rolls-Royce combines the skills of the large players in industry with the talents of the public sector to deliver the best for defence and the best for the nation

Meanwhile, we are continuing to refine the options and technical solutions that will inform our decisions on replacing the warhead. Next year, over half a century on since HMS Resolution's historic voyage, Her Majesty's Naval Base Clyde will become home to all our submarines. One of the largest employment sites in Scotland, the base provides for the livelihoods of around 6,800 military and civilians, and brings significant wider benefits to the local economy and the whole of Scotland. It is a salutary reminder, not just of the enormous role that Scotland, as the home of our deterrent, plays in protecting the UK and our NATO allies, but of its role in sustaining hundreds of businesses, as well as thousands of jobs, across the length and breadth of our Union.

The Barrow-in-Furness shipyard gives a sense of the sheer scale of the enterprise. The construction hall alone, where Dreadnought is being built, is the size of 21 Olympic swimming pools. The deterrent does not just provide jobs: it is helping to train thousands of apprentices in engineering, design, software development, naval architecture and combat systems. Many of those apprentices are following in the footsteps not just of their parents, but of their grandparents, and they are learning the sorts of advanced manufacturing techniques that will keep their descendants and Britain at the cutting edge of technology for years and generations to come.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The Secretary of State is making an important point about the importance of skills. We learned the costs when we stopped submarine building in the 1990s and the knock-on effects that had on Astute. Can he emphasise to his officials the importance of those skills now, and the need to ensure a continuation of work after Dreadnought, so that we do not get the gap we had before?

John Woodcock: Get on with it!

Gavin Williamson: I hear what the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) says. We are building a lot more submarines in Barrow than the last Labour Government ever did, so I was hoping that he would shout, "Thank you."

I want to underline the important point made by the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), because it is about investing in those skills continuously. Barrow has one of the healthiest order books that it has seen for a long time, and the sense is that that includes a whole generation not just of Astute but of the Dreadnought class submarines. That is why we are looking at how best to take advantage of how we conduct warfare sub-surface at the moment, making sure that we invest in the right type of technology to keep a competitive advantage over our opponents, and keeping the skills here in the United Kingdom.

Mr Kevan Jones: I agree with everything that the Secretary of State has just said. A lot of the work on the naval design of the early stages of Dreadnought is being carried out now, but it will come to an end quite quickly. It is important that we have follow-on work for those

[Mr Kevan Jones]

designers, otherwise we will get a gap and those people will be employed in other nuclear sector industries. When we come to the next generation of submarines, therefore, they will not be there.

Gavin Williamson: We saw that difficult problem occur after the sustained gap in Barrow when work was not undertaken on submarines over a period of almost 10 years, so we are very aware of that. We are currently doing a study on how we develop the next generation. If the investment in the Dreadnought programme were to come to an end, the skills that are being developed in Barrow—and in Derby with Rolls-Royce and in hundreds of businesses across the country—would be lost. We would lose that national capability. That is why we are doing what the right hon. Gentleman suggests, because those skills are almost impossible to replace. We recognise that the investment in the deterrent is an investment in our future in more ways than one.

Nineteen sixty-nine will always be remembered as an iconic year: it was the year an astronaut first set foot on the moon. From a UK perspective, however, an event far less heralded has proved to be far more enduring, for the unsung heroes who began their undersea vigil that year have guaranteed our peace and prosperity for decades. Our nuclear deterrence posture is only possible thanks to their commitment. Out of sight they may be, but they are never out of mind. We can never fully repay them for what they have given our nation, but in a more uncertain world we are ensuring that they will have the means to perform their outstanding and vital service to our nation, safeguarding our way of life relentlessly for another 50 years.

3.10 pm

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Labour fully supports the UK's continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent, and we are committed to the renewal of the nuclear submarines.

I pay tribute to all those whose hard work and dedication have supported the deterrent over its lifespan: workers on the new Dreadnought class at sites across the country, including those whom I visited in Barrow; and Royal Navy personnel past and present who have crewed the nuclear submarines over the past 50 years. Their commitment and skill are integral to the continuous nature of the deterrent. We are indebted to them for their service and to their families for their support.

The first duty of the Government is the protection of their citizens. The nuclear deterrent makes an important contribution to our country's security, alongside our brave armed forces and a range of conventional and non-conventional capabilities.

We recognise that we live in a world where the number of states that possess nuclear weapons has continued to grow and where others are actively seeking to acquire them. The threats facing the UK are real and undiminished, and there is a need to deter the use of nuclear weapons in all circumstances—none of us ever wants to be in a position where the deterrent is used. If we ever got to that situation, it would represent a catastrophic failure of our rules-based system and of the very concept of deterrence.

Deterrence encompasses a broad range of actions, from diplomatic means to conventional force and, ultimately, the nuclear deterrent. We must always ensure

that we have the very best conventional forces, including cyber-capabilities, and that the UK uses its influence on the world stage to ensure that we deal with conflicts and tensions early, without allowing them to escalate dangerously.

The nature of the threats we face is changing, be they the ravages of climate change, drought, starvation, gross inequality within and between countries—whether state or non-state actors—ever more complex technologies, hybrid warfare, or the sophisticated use of cyber-information warfare to attack our democratic institutions and our open public cyber-spaces. We are committed to working with fellow NATO countries to counteract such threats and to guarantee the collective security of our allies.

As a nuclear-armed power, the UK has important obligations under the non-proliferation treaty, which British Prime Minister Harold Wilson was instrumental in establishing. Next year marks the 50th anniversary of its entering into force, the only treaty that imposes a binding commitment on the nuclear-weapon states to pursue the goal of multilateral disarmament together. Labour is committed to the NPT and to working with international partners on a multilateral basis to create a nuclear-free world. In government, Labour worked to reduce the number of operationally available warheads to fewer than 160. The last Labour Government signed the international code of conduct against ballistic missile proliferation, as well as the international convention for the suppression of acts of nuclear terrorism.

The other objective of the non-proliferation treaty is of course to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and weapons technology. Unfortunately, the number of states that possess such weapons has continued to grow, and other countries are working actively to acquire them. North Korea has continued in its pursuit of nuclear weapons, despite significant UN sanctions and attempts by the international community to seek dialogue with the regime. The Iran nuclear deal, which was so painstakingly negotiated to curtail that country's nuclear ambitions, is now under immense pressure due to President Trump's decision to withdraw US support for it. As a nuclear-weapon state and a member of the P5, we cannot simply stand by as the international norm against proliferation of such weapons is eroded. Instead, the UK should take a leading role in multilateral efforts to combat that trend.

We know that there have been issues with the affordability and timely delivery of our own programme. The Public Accounts Committee has said that one-year budget cycles can present problems for programmes such as Dreadnought, and it recommended using this year's spending review as an opportunity to explore longer-term budgeting arrangements for the nuclear programme. When the Minister winds up, will he set out the discussions he has had with Treasury on that? In addition to the Dreadnought programme, the Government are in the process of considering options to replace the warheads used in the Trident missiles. Will the Minister tell the House when he expects that work to be completed?

Finally, although I had not wanted to mention the B-word, the Government have acknowledged that elements of the supply chain for the nuclear enterprise are based in other European Union countries. However, almost three years since the referendum, the level of access that we will have to EU markets post Brexit is still unclear. In the light of that significant uncertainty, what assurances

will the Minister offer suppliers to ensure that there will be no impediments to parts crossing borders? I will be most grateful if he addresses those issues in his winding-up speech.

3.16 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am delighted to follow two such supportive speeches on the nuclear deterrent and the work of those who have crewed it for the past 50 years. It is amazing to think of the combination of high training and long periods of low activity that such personnel have to undergo. They truly are the silent guardians of the country and we are hugely in their debt.

What is more, most Members of this House recognise that fact. It is worth putting on the record that in recent years the House has had two key votes on the question of the renewal of the nuclear deterrent submarine fleet, the first under the Labour Government of Tony Blair on 14 March 2007. The House voted by 409 to 161—a massive majority of 248—to proceed with the initial gate of the replacement or successor submarine fleet. The second was under the Conservative Government of the current Prime Minister on 18 July 2016, when the House voted by a colossal majority of 355—namely, 472 votes to 117—to proceed to the main stages of development and production of the submarines.

The only issue to which I took a little exception in the contribution of the shadow Defence Secretary, the hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), was in one turn of phrase, when she said how appalling it would be if the deterrence weapons were used. I remind her gently that the nuclear deterrent is in use every day of every week all around the year, because the purpose of the nuclear deterrent is to ensure that nuclear war does not break out because no one is in a position to attack us with impunity.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): In the right hon. Gentleman's description of the deterrent, will he explain why none of the missiles is actually targeted at any targets?

Dr Lewis: It is for the simple reason that, in the unlikely event of anyone being mad enough to attack us—because we have the ability to retaliate—it would be simple to target missiles to retaliate against them, and that could easily result in the obliteration of any country unwise enough to launch a nuclear attack against a nuclear power such as ourselves.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I join my right hon. Friend in applauding the speech from the shadow Defence Secretary, but does he share my disappointment that she did not take any interventions? She may have been able to explain the fundamental flaw in Labour's Front-Bench position, which is that we cannot have an effective deterrent if we have committed never to use it, as the shadow Chancellor and the Leader of the Opposition have done.

Dr Lewis: I accept the fact that Labour has a problem with certain key figures who have always been opposed in principle to the possession of a nuclear deterrent. However, today is not the day to have that debate. I know that the shadow Defence Secretary and every one

of the Labour Back Benchers whom I see opposite are wholly committed to keeping this country safe and strong. If anyone can ensure that the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Chancellor are not allowed to undermine the sensible policy outlined from the Opposition Front Bench today, it is that cohort of people. I wish them the best of luck in that endeavour.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman described a situation in which we would be able to retaliate if we were attacked. I do not know about him, but if I had been obliterated by a nuclear weapon, I would not care a jot whether we obliterated somebody back.

Dr Lewis: I am sorry to have to explain to the hon. Lady that the whole point of our ability to retaliate is to ensure that we are not attacked in the first place. One really does not have to have had more than half a century of experience to realise that that is bound to be the case. I was not going to quote Professor Sir Henry Tizard, whom I have quoted in debates many times before, but it looks like it is necessary for me to do so.

Professor Tizard was the leading defence scientist in the second world war at the time when atomic weapons were being created. In 1945, with a committee of leading scientists, including Nobel prize winners, he was supposed to look forward to see what the future nature of warfare might be. His committee was not allowed to explore the atomic bomb project in detail, but he insisted on putting in this primary rationale for nuclear deterrence, which holds as firmly today as it did in June 1945. He explained that the only answer that those senior defence scientists, with all their experience of the second world war, could see to the advent of the atomic bomb was the preparedness to use it in retaliation, thus preventing an attack in the first place. I am sorry to inflict this on the House again, but he said:

“A knowledge that we were prepared, in the last resort, to do this”—

to retaliate—

“might well deter an aggressive nation. Duelling was a recognised method of settling quarrels between men of high social standing so long as the duellists stood twenty paces apart and fired at each other with pistols of a primitive type. If the rule had been that they should stand a yard apart with pistols at each other's hearts, we doubt whether it would long have remained a recognised method of settling affairs of honour.”

In other words, if someone knows that they are going to die, for a certainty, if they launch an attack against somebody else, they are not going to launch that attack in the first place.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Gentleman and the Secretary of State for actually taking interventions. Anyone who knows the history of the continuous nuclear deterrent knows that it is heavily reliant upon a relationship with the United States. With the present occupant of the White House being such a transactional individual, and with the United Kingdom about to enter into trade negotiations with the US, how confident is the right hon. Gentleman that his Government's negotiators will not, say, trade chlorinated chicken and access to the NHS—[*Interruption.*] I am talking technically. How confident is he that that would be not be traded for the United States role in the nuclear deterrent? Although he knows that I fully oppose it, of course.

Dr Lewis: The hon. Gentleman is an admirable member of the Defence Committee, and we greatly value his contributions, but I do not think that that was his most stellar contribution—[*Laughter.*] Sometimes people say, “Well, what if the Americans wanted to have some sort of veto or to stop us using the nuclear deterrent?”—I mean using it in the sense of firing it rather than of using it in the sense that it is used all day long every day of the year to prevent nuclear conflict. The first point is that this nuclear system is totally under our own control. It would gradually wither on the vine over a long period of time only if the United States decided for some reason that it no longer wanted there to be a second centre of nuclear decision making within the NATO alliance. At any time now, as it has been for the last 50 years, it is entirely independently controlled by us.

The second point is about why an American president would ever not want there to be a second centre of nuclear decision making in NATO, because that reduces any temptation of an aggressor against NATO to think that it could pick off this country without America responding.

Richard Benyon: Looking forward, does my right hon. Friend agree that renewing the fleet with the new Dreadnought class is the most important decision? In doing so, we have decided that we cannot predict what is going to happen in 20, 30 or 40 years. Those who want us to get rid of the deterrent and not renew our fleet are taking a terrible gamble in a dangerous world, because we cannot foresee the enemies that we may face in the decades ahead.

Dr Lewis: I pay tribute to the people who work at Aldermaston in my right hon. Friend’s constituency for all that they contribute to the maintenance of our nuclear deterrent capability. Not only do I agree with him, but he has led me nicely back to the central theme of my narrative, which was to try to set out for the House the five main military arguments in favour of retaining our independent deterrent, the first of which is precisely the point that he has just made. Future military threats and conflicts will be no more predictable than those that engulfed us throughout the 20th century. That is the overriding justification for preserving armed forces in peacetime as a national insurance policy. No one knows what enemies might confront us during the next 30 to 50 years, but it is highly probable that at least some of them will be armed with mass-destruction weapons.

The second argument is that it is not the weapons themselves that we have to fear but the nature of the regimes that possess them. Whereas democracies are generally reluctant to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear dictatorships—although they did use them against Japan in 1945—the reverse is not true. Think, for example, what the situation would have been in 1982 if a non-nuclear Britain had faced an Argentina in possession of even a few tactical nuclear bombs and the means of delivering them. There would have been no question of our being able to retake the Falkland Islands in that conflict.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): This is such an important point. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, when we speak about freedom, our independent at-sea deterrent has been one of the most important factors in securing freedom and democracy around the world?

Dr Lewis: Absolutely. If we get into a situation where the United States and the NATO alliance are paralysed in the face of dictatorships armed even with a few mass-destruction weapons that cannot be neutralised by the threat of retaliation, there would be no prospect of our mounting a defence of any country under attack, anywhere in the world, no matter how deserving it might be of our military intervention.

The third argument is that the United Kingdom has traditionally played a more important and decisive role in preserving freedom than other medium-sized states have been able or willing to play. Democratic countries without nuclear weapons have little choice but to declare themselves neutral and hope for the best or, alternatively, to rely upon the nuclear umbrella of powerful allies. The United Kingdom is already a nuclear power and is also much harder to defeat by conventional means because of our physical separation from the continent.

The fourth argument is that our prominence as the principal ally of the United States, our strategic geographical position and the fact that we are obviously the junior partner might tempt an aggressor to think of attacking us separately. Given the difficulty of overrunning the United Kingdom with conventional forces, by contrast to our more vulnerable allies on the continent, an aggressor could be tempted to use one or more mass-destruction weapons against us on the assumption that the United States might not reply on our behalf. Even if that assumption were false, the attacker would find out his mistake when, and only when, it was too late for all concerned. An independently controlled British nuclear deterrent massively reduces the prospect of such a fatal miscalculation.

The final military argument is that no quantity of conventional forces can compensate for the military disadvantage that faces a non-nuclear country in a war against a nuclear-armed enemy. The atomic bombing of Japan is especially instructive not only because the Emperor was forced to surrender but because of the reverse scenario. Imagine if Japan had developed atomic bombs in the summer of 1945 and the allies had not. An invasion to end the war would then have been completely impossible.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Quite a few colleagues in the House have served in the British Army of the Rhine—I served there three times. When we, as conventional forces, practised deploying against an enemy, we were much sustained by the knowledge that there was a nuclear back-up in our armoury. That raised our morale. We thought that people would not dare attack us when we had a nuclear device in our hand. It would be mad to get rid of it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. To help Members, I will be aiming for 10 minutes each from Back Benchers.

Dr Lewis: I will endeavour to finish quickly, Mr Deputy Speaker.

My hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) was right to think in those terms when he wore that uniform. What is more, hon. Members on both sides of the House, in very large numbers, think in similar terms.

To bring my remarks speedily to a conclusion, I will draw out five lessons that have impressed themselves on me in such debates over the past 35 years, since we replaced the first-generation Polaris submarine fleet with the second-generation Vanguard submarine fleet.

The first lesson is that the concepts of unilateralism and multilateralism are mutually incompatible. One requires the unconditional abandonment of our nuclear weapons and nuclear alliances, whereas the other would consider nuclear renunciation only if our potential enemies carry it out at the same time.

The second lesson is that a nuclear-free world is not necessarily a more peaceful world. Abolition of the nuclear balance of terror would be a curse and not a blessing if it made the world once again safe for all-out conventional conflict between the superpowers. In military terms, Russia remains a superpower, regardless of complacent western analyses of the weakness of her economy.

The third lesson is the fundamental divide—which we see in today's debate—between those people in western societies who believe that wars result mainly from groundless mutual fear and suspicion, and those who believe that only the prospect of retaliation in kind prevents adventurist states from acting aggressively.

The fourth lesson is the validity of the hackneyed but nevertheless accurate concept of the silent majority. Although individual polling questions can be devised to produce apparent majorities against deploying particular nuclear systems, whenever the fundamental issue of deterrence has been posed the result is always decisive. Two thirds of the British people want us to continue to possess nuclear weapons as long as other countries have them, and only one quarter want us to give them up unconditionally.

The final lesson is that since fewer than 10% of our people have been undecided in poll after poll on this fundamental issue, it does not make political sense to try to appease either that small group or the much larger number of highly committed unilateralists such as my friends in the Scottish National party. The strategic task for the Government, and for the Opposition, is to reinforce the views of the two thirds who believe in what may be termed peace through strength and deterrence, rather than peace through disarmament, so the issue will be in the forefront of people's minds, as it was in the general elections of 1983 and 1987, when this was a very prominent topic in the election debate.

None of this would be possible but for the dedication and, indeed, heroism of those people who, month after month, patrol the seas and are not seen and not heard—they are meant to be not seen and not heard—in order silently to spread over us an umbrella of nuclear protection. Long may they continue to do so.

3.37 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the Chair of the Defence Committee, despite agreeing with almost none of what he had to say. He is always unfailingly courteous to my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) on that Committee, and it is always a pleasure to hear what he has to say.

I will start, as the Secretary of State did, by sending our best wishes to those based at Barrow, given this afternoon's bomb scare. Despite our disagreement, which I am sure we will get into, the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) should be under no illusion that folk there have the best wishes of the Scottish National party. The same is true of all those who serve in the armed forces, including on the frontline and in the Royal Navy. The Secretary of State mentioned the submariners, and I will mention one former submariner by name. Feargal Dalton is, of course, the husband of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) and an Irishman who now serves as a Scottish National party councillor in Glasgow. We send our best wishes to all those who serve, including civilian staff and the Ministry of Defence police.

Our disagreement and quarrel is not with them, but with the political decisions taken in this Chamber. Only in this House of Commons, at this time, against the backdrop of a major constitutional crisis, where each day is worse than the last, could it be thought of as a good use of our time to backslap each other on the UK being 50 years as a marine nuclear power. Anyone who thinks that is a good use of our time right now is, frankly, off their head. But it should come as no surprise, as the Prime Minister is out in Brussels with the begging bowl right now, that those on the Benches that represent this crumbling relic of a Government—there is no doubt more to come from the Labour Benches as well—want to hark back to the symbols of power, stature and glory as they diminish Britain's standing in the world. Indeed, Max Hastings, the military historian, put it best in *The Times* last year when he said that Trident renewal was a “big willy gesture” of a small willy nation. I could not have put it better had I tried. The Scottish National party's opposition to the nuclear project is well known and well documented, but given the opportunity this afternoon—

Mr Kevan Jones *rose*—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I will give way in time.

Given the opportunity that we have to discuss the matter this afternoon, we will take the unusual step of dividing the House this evening to show our opposition to the Trident renewal programme.

I intend to set out three clear arguments as succinctly as possible for why there is no military case for the continuous at-sea deterrent—there is certainly no economic case for it—and indeed how we can come to the conclusion, given last week's National Audit Office report on the failure of this Government and former Labour Governments properly to decommission nuclear submarines, that the United Kingdom is now an irresponsible nuclear power.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab) *rose*—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I give way to the president of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

Mrs Moon: I just want to say on behalf of the NATO nuclear alliance that that alliance greatly values the UK deterrent and would actually be grateful for common sense, trust and belief in the UK's deterrent and our capacity and willingness to dedicate ourselves to its stability and security. The alliance would actually be horrified by the hon. Gentleman's earlier comments.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I should just point out to the hon. Lady, for whom I have bucketloads of respect as she does a fine job in her position, that most members of NATO are not nuclear-armed countries.

Mr Kevan Jones *rose*—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman in time.

In opposing the renewal programme this afternoon, we intend to give voice to the millions outside this Chamber who do not back the iron-clad consensus that exists between the Conservative and Labour parties on wasting billions of pounds on nuclear weapons.

On the fact that there is no military case, I want to turn to the recent modernising defence programme, which represents a missed opportunity to do things a bit differently. I had hopes that the much vaunted reforming zeal of the Secretary of State when he first came to office would actually be shown to be true, but those hopes were sadly misplaced on my part. Indeed, the MDP, which represented an opportunity to do things differently, has, rather perversely, actually contributed to the miasma of despair and chaos that hangs over the Department over which he now presides. The armed forces remain as small as they were when Napoleon was on his horse. The Government are woefully off target—the target that was set in their own manifesto for the size of the armed forces. Furthermore, the promises that were made to the people of Scotland in 2014 on the size of the armed forces are going one way, and it is not north. Staggeringly, this Government continue to employ Capita—

Mr Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman in time. He does not need to keep shouting at me. I know he is there—I will give way to him, as I always do, and he knows that.

Staggeringly, despite the recruitment problems, this Government continue to spend millions of pounds on Capita and its deeply flawed recruitment programme.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con) *rose*—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: If a motion came to the House today to sack Capita, I would be in the Lobby with the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), who I know has a track record of opposing Capita.

Mr Kevan Jones *rose*—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I will give way to the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), then I will come back to the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford.

Mr Jones: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He says that he will divide the House today to vote against this motion. I understand that it is the SNP's policy to be a member of NATO. He is right when he says that there are many nations that do not possess nuclear weapons, but as a member of NATO, a country has to agree to the nuclear doctrine and the nuclear strategy and sit on the nuclear planning group. Is he saying that if an independent Scotland joined NATO it would

sometimes want to abrogate its duties, or is he advocating to vote against nuclear weapons today, but actually join a nuclear alliance?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The right hon. Gentleman does not need to explain Scottish National party policy to me. Perhaps if he listens, I can educate him. Scottish National party policy is for an independent Scotland to join NATO—everyone, including him, knows that that would be accepted, by the way—but on the contingency that Trident will be removed from Scotland's waters. That does not prevent the United Kingdom from continuing to have a nuclear at-sea deterrent, although we think it should not and almost certainly would not.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Hon. Members are coming at me from all sides.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: No, no—the right hon. Gentleman asked me a question and I have not finished explaining myself to him. Even if the UK gave up its nuclear weapons tonight, there would still be other nuclear states in the NATO alliance.

Mr Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: No, I am not going to get into this with the right hon. Gentleman.

We are very clear in our belief that the United Kingdom should give up its nuclear weapons, because there is no economic or military case for them, and this country now behaves like an irresponsible nuclear power.

Mr Francois: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: On Capita, I will take the right hon. Gentleman's intervention.

Mr Francois: Well, the hon. Gentleman might get a buy one, get one free. On the matter of Capita, let me just say that, although I do not normally agree with the SNP, I would definitely vote with the hon. Gentleman to sack Capita tomorrow; it is a disgrace and it is now so awful that it is a threat to the defence of the realm. However, when it comes to our nuclear deterrent, the hon. Gentleman and I could not be more opposed, and I will always want to support the maintenance of nuclear defences in this country.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Well, I am glad that normal service has been resumed.

As well as the issue of recruitment, there is of course the other issue of retention, which is becoming a big problem in the armed forces. I know that the Secretary of State recognises that. Indeed, we now have a situation whereby members of the armed forces are staying in the armed forces until such a time as they get a decent skill and qualification, with the sole intention of leaving to go into private industry. That is what the last armed forces survey tells us—I do not know why some Members on the Tory Benches are shaking their heads.

As this Government press on with Trident renewal, we should cast our eyes back to a couple of promises on defence that they made to the people of Scotland in the 2014 referendum campaign. Of course, the promise was made of a frigate factory on the Clyde. That promise was broken—not by this Secretary of State, but by the speaker who I am sure is going to follow me, the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon). Yet he seemed to think that there was a frigate factory on the Clyde. In fact, he seems to be maintaining that there is. I recall him standing at the Dispatch Box declaring that there was a frigate factory on the Clyde, but no such thing exists.

Then we come to the order of frigates. The former Prime Minister, David Cameron, promised that 13 frigates were to be built on the Clyde; that number was then cut down to eight. Any time we get a promise on defence or shipbuilding from this Tory Government—a bit like the way in which the fleet solid support ship contract has been lined up at the minute—we can be guaranteed that it will be another sell-out from Westminster.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend recall that, when the former Secretary of State was at the Dispatch Box claiming that there was a frigate factory, BBC Scotland was with a GMB official at the piece of land where the frigate factory was supposed to be, which was of course a landfill of ash?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I do indeed recall that. My hon. Friend does a fine job in representing the shipbuilding workforce in his constituency.

Mr Sweeney: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: No, I will not. I am going to move on to the issue of the threat. The shadow Secretary of State was right to say that the threat is ever evolving and complex.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My hon. Friend has just mentioned the shadow Secretary of State, and it was unfortunate that she refused to take any interventions. In her opening remarks, she said that Labour supports the continuous at-sea deterrent. Does that not prove what we all know—that it does not matter what the Scottish branch office does, with pretend motions about being against Trident replacement, but that it is about what the head office down here says and the branch office has to do what it is told?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am going to come to the Opposition, don't worry about that. I say to people who may disagree with the SNP's policy on nuclear weapons that at least they know what they are getting—opposition. What we get from Labour is a mess. Whether it is a Front Bencher, a Back Bencher, a Scottish MP, a non-Scottish MP or a Member of the Scottish Parliament, we get a mess from Labour with regard to nuclear weapons.

The new strategic defence and security review that is surely being worked on right now must reflect the threats that we do indeed face. The hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) was right to say that they come from a diverse range of state and non-state actors. She mentioned in her short speech the issue of hybrid

security, which the Government do not understand as well as they could. They could learn quite a few lessons from our allies, particularly in the Baltic states. We also have the issue of the Government of Russia, in particular, continually testing the response times of the Royal Navy and the RAF. There are now regular incursions into Scottish waters and Scottish airspace. In that regard, we commend the RAF, particularly those based at Lossiemouth, for the work that it does in keeping us safe. Both the Defence Committee and NATO itself have urged the Government not to forget their own backyard in the high north and the north Atlantic. Indeed, when I sat in the Secretary of State's office in Main Building before the modernising defence programme, that was central to what we asked for the programme to focus on. I give credit where it is due—a new focus has been given to the high north and the north Atlantic, and SNP Members, at least, welcome that.

It is time for the UK Government to ditch the jingoism of global Britain. Indeed, the Centre for Eastern Studies, a think-tank based in Poland, stated in a recent report on Brexit and its impact on the UK's security posture that this desire to be seen as a big global player could undermine its efforts to help to protect the eastern NATO flank. I recall how the extraordinary speech that the Secretary of State made in February this year telling us how he was going to send personnel off to the South China sea saw China cancel a visit by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. It is time for the Government to focus on the bread-and-butter issues here at home that I have highlighted.

John Woodcock: I have helpfully given the hon. Gentleman, inadvertently, advance notice on the issue of NATO, so let me take him back to that. He talks about the high north. He knows that that is where much of the nuclear patrol activity by Russia is happening. If the SNP's case is that it is morally repugnant to have nuclear weapons, how is it morally defensible for Scotland to maintain itself under the nuclear umbrella if the submarines are just sent a few hundred miles to the south? Surely it would be logical for the SNP to say that it would withdraw from NATO's nuclear alliance.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: No, it would not. Indeed, the two arguments I am setting out, the second of which I am coming on to, are that there is no military or economic case for this. The hon. Gentleman knows, because I have said this to him before, that I am not going to get into an argument about morality with him because you never wrestle with chimney sweeps.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Can the debate come through the Chair? I do not want it to get personalised.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am now going to come on to the economic case. It ought to be the case, for sure—and on this I am sure we do agree with others—that the Government carry out a threat analysis and, subsequent to that, get what they need to meet that threat and to keep people safe. But we do not believe, quite simply, that Trident complements that effort. The total cost of Trident, from design to through-life support, ran into many, many billions of pounds—estimated by some to be as high as £200 billion. We know for sure that the current renewal project is already woefully out

[*Stewart Malcolm McDonald*]

of control. Indeed, over £1 billion of the £10 billion contingency that was set aside by the Ministry of Defence has already been tapped into, and of the extra £1 billion announced by the Chancellor, £400 million is exclusively for the nuclear renewal project. The most recent House of Commons Library figures tell us that the £2.2 billion per year spent on maintaining the deterrent is roughly equivalent to £42 million each week. That is about the same as we spend on income support, statutory maternity pay, carer's allowance or winter fuel payments.

All that represents a drain on conventional defence, which has always been the priority of the SNP. This is at a time when the Department has enormous funding gaps in its equipment plan, estimated by the National Audit Office to be well over £10 billion, and big gaps in the funding of the defence estate, which is draining money as though it were going out of fashion. It is at a time when the Ministry of Defence continues with the bizarre fetish of privatising and outsourcing things that do not need to be privatised or outsourced: the defence fire and rescue service, the war pension scheme, the armed forces compensation scheme and even the medals office. Those things must remain in the hands of the MOD in their entirety. In the armed forces, it is not uncommon for serving members to have to buy substitute kit because the money is not there to get it through the Department's budget.

Far from enhancing our national security and providing the necessary capability to keep us safe, Trident is a drain on conventional defence, particularly as the Government keep it as part of the overall defence budget, to the point that it diminishes our conventional defence and security posture, which is in need of proper investment and oversight.

To make one last point, it can be concluded that this country is now an irresponsible nuclear power. The timing of this debate could not be more breathtaking if the Government had tried. We sit here today to mark 50 years as a maritime nuclear power, but just last week the National Audit Office told us that hundreds of millions of pounds are being wasted by the Government on storing obsolete nuclear submarines and their utter failure to decommission them properly and responsibly. The independent NAO—this is not me—has said that it puts the UK's reputation as a responsible nuclear power at risk.

The MOD has not decommissioned a single submarine successfully since 1980, twice as many are currently in storage as are in service, nine still contain radioactive fuel, seven have been in storage for longer than they were in service and no submarines have been defuelled in the last 15 years. It is a total failure, and the liability costs estimated by the Secretary of State's own Department run to £7.5 billion. We can be sure, as night follows day, that that figure will get higher. The auditors said that the MOD did not have a fully developed plan to dispose of operational Vanguard and Astute submarines or its future Dreadnought-class vessels, which have different nuclear reactors.

Here the House sits with the iron-clad consensus that we must renew a nuclear submarine programme that the Government do not even have plans to decommission in the future, even though the National Audit Office has just outlined what a costly farce that has become. This

cannot just be shrugged off as though it is business as usual. The public expect us to get to the bottom of it. I ask the Secretary of State—perhaps the Minister will say when he sums up—whether he will set up a public inquiry into the farce of nuclear submarine decommissioning.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): The hon. Gentleman will know that his colleague the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman), the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) and I are working with the Department to make progress on this matter. Will he and the SNP support us because, despite their position, we need to find the line of credit for nuclear decommissioning, which is an enormous one across the board? Rather than bashing the Government on a question that is long and historic, will they help us to move forward and get the Treasury to support that decommissioning line?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am sure the hon. Lady wants to catch my eye to speak. I do not want her to use up her speech just yet. I am bothered that, with 19 speakers, there will now be less than 10 minutes each.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The short answer to the hon. Lady's question is yes. I will conclude, Mr Deputy Speaker, because I am conscious of the time.

There is nothing to celebrate here in 50 years as a maritime nuclear power. No doubt the rest of the debate will be wrapped up in British jingoism. I am not sure anything could convince the Conservatives to abandon the nuclear programme, but I am at a loss as to why the Leader of the Opposition allows his party to be locked into it. There were times when he would have spoken in this debate. He would have been on these Benches and, if there had been a Division, he would have been in the voting Lobby with us at the end of the debate. He would have found himself with Members of the Scottish National party. That he has abandoned that honourable principle and not even tried to move his party's position on nuclear weapons remains a disappointment to millions and a mystery to me.

It is left to the Scottish National party to give voice to those who oppose the militarily and economically illiterate case that the Government have put forward, supported by Leader of the Opposition's Front-Bench team. It is left to the Scottish National party to urge the Government to sign up to the nuclear ban treaty. It is left to us to make the case for sound conventional defence that protects us at home and ensures that we can do the job that needs to be done with our allies abroad. And it is left to us to say, with one voice in this House, let us please stop this madness.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): To help everybody to get in, can we use up to 10 minutes and no more?

4.1 pm

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): The only thing on which I agreed with the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) was the tribute he took the trouble to pay at the beginning of his speech to

the crews of the *Polaris* and *Vanguard* submarines. They have been the backbone of Operation Relentless, and the success of that operation is entirely dependent on the commitment of those who have conducted those patrols—in each case, an extraordinary service of perhaps three months or more.

There is no other service in the Navy quite like it, with submariners cut off from the outside world unlike in any part of the Royal Navy, unable to visit foreign ports or carry out different missions. They are isolated from their family and friends at all times in that three-month period. They are the stoics of the sea and we do owe them our gratitude. We should salute them all, past and present, and look again at how that service can be better recognised, but we should also tell them loudly from this House: thank you for helping keep us safe. They did keep us safe.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) said, it is extraordinary that some still argue that the nuclear deterrent is never used. It is used every minute of every hour of every day to ensure uncertainty in the mind of any aggressor towards this country. While we have nuclear weapons, they can never be sure what our response is likely to be. He reminded us that that was endorsed by a majority of 355 as recently as three years ago when we authorised the replacement of the *Vanguard* boats by the new *Dreadnought* submarines.

The Prime Minister and I set out the arguments for that renewal three years ago. I will not repeat them, but I want to make three further points. The threats we identified then, back in July 2016, have increased. First, Russia not only has intensified its rhetoric but is modernising its nuclear forces. It now has the ability to station nuclear missiles in its exclave at Kaliningrad, or indeed in the territory it now controls in Crimea. Secondly, since that debate, North Korea has carried out nuclear tests and is developing systems whereby nuclear warheads can be launched from both space and submarines. We should never forget that London is as close to North Korea as is Los Angeles. Thirdly, nuclear material is now coming within reach of terrorist groups that wish us and others harm. Our response must be relentless and resolute.

John Spellar: The right hon. Gentleman rightly drew attention to the overwhelming majority in this House in 2016. Does he now regret that his Government delayed so long in actually putting that decision to the House?

Sir Michael Fallon: Certainly in my period of office, I wanted that decision brought to the House as soon as possible. We were of course, as the right hon. Gentleman will recall, in a coalition Government, and we spent a lot of time trying to accommodate the wishes of our coalition partners. As he has already observed, that party has not even bothered to turn up to this debate.

It is of course important, each time we make these renewal decisions, that we emphasise our continuing commitment to the international work of non-proliferation. There is a particular responsibility on those countries that retain nuclear weapons to continue to commit to that treaty and to reduce the weapons they hold. That is why I reduced the number of warheads on each submarine from 48 to 40. The stockpile is reducing, and this country now holds only half the number of nuclear

weapons it held 40 years ago. However, we also have to look ahead. It takes 13 to 14 years to put a new nuclear missile submarine into the water. If hon. Members believe, as I do, that there may still be a nuclear threat to this country in the 2030s, the 2040s and the 2050s all the way up to 2060, then it would of course be irresponsible not to renew the delivery mechanism—first the boats and then in time, perhaps later in this Parliament, the missile system itself.

Let me end with three final points. First, on the budget, of course it is true that the £31 billion, and the contingency alongside it, is spread over a very long period of construction, but, equally, it remains a very lumpy and sizeable part of the Department's budget, and we do not get the advantages of scale—we replace only four boats each time—that the Americans are able to profit from when they are replacing many more submarines. There may be points in the work of the Public Accounts Committee and of others in this House that require us to look again at how the submarine renewal programme is actually financed year to year and to see whether there are economies of scale in forward buying some of the parts for all four submarines right at the beginning.

Secondly, as the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) said in challenging the hon. Member for Glasgow South, the NATO alliance is a nuclear alliance. If, sadly, Scotland ever became independent, he would be applying to join a nuclear alliance. In the arguments he put before the House, he seemed to have forgotten that many members of NATO signed the nuclear non-proliferation treaty in the full knowledge that they would be protected by NATO's nuclear umbrella. That is why they signed the treaty, as the hon. Lady pointed out. That means we need to keep reminding our allies in NATO of the importance of the nuclear planning group and of their commitment to maintaining their dual-use aircraft, and we need to remind their politicians and their publics that NATO is a nuclear alliance.

Thirdly, the point about independence, which was raised by the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), is worth addressing. Of course it is true, as my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East said, that the system gives us—the UK, the United States and France—separate sources of decision making, making it even more difficult for potential aggressors to be sure of a single response. However, it is also important that this nuclear deterrent of ours is independent, because we cannot be sure of threats that may emanate simply against our shores and nobody else's. That is why it is important that we keep our deterrent independent and that we satisfy ourselves that it is independent. Indeed, David Cameron and I separately took steps to reassure ourselves that the nuclear deterrent was independent. These are not details I can go into in public session, but it is important that the deterrent remains independent.

Let me conclude by saying yes, this deterrent was born of the cold war, but it is by no means a relic of the cold war. It is a key part of the defence of our country, and a key part of the defence of our freedoms and those of our allies. I am very sure that we need it now more than ever. I am equally sure that our successors in this place will, in 50 years' time, be commending the successors of those crews who have helped to perform this arduous but essential duty.

4.10 pm

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): While listening to some of the fantastic speeches we have had so far I have been able to cross out whole swathes of my speech, because I do not intend to repeat what others have said. I would, however, just like to reiterate that we are here to celebrate 50 years of Britain's continuous at-sea deterrent, which has maintained peace and security for those 50 years. Many will talk of the NATO alliance being a nuclear alliance. I can say that not one member of NATO has ever stood up in the parliamentary assembly and said, "Let's get rid of it. We don't need the alliance. We don't need the British deterrent." Quite the opposite.

The one thing I dedicated myself to doing during my presidency is to remind people what NATO is, what its role has been in keeping peace for the past 70 years, and why it is critical to the defence and security of the United Kingdom and the rest of the alliance. Sadly, we have forgotten to do that. I was in Croatia the week before last. Every year, it celebrates its membership of NATO. The Croatian people know what it means in terms of building a democracy and providing security. We need to do that more in this country. That is why I am so pleased that we have this debate today.

I do not want to go over the past. That has been ably done by those who have gone before me. I want to look at what the current threats are and why the CASD remains absolutely critical to the defence and security of the alliance and every member state within it. Today, as has been said, the tempo and the threat is changing. It is rising again. States are building and expanding their nuclear missile systems, threatening across the alliance. I therefore want to stress the importance of a hidden deterrent—not an airborne or land-based deterrent, mobile though they are. The absolute uniqueness of the at-sea deterrent is its capacity to hide: the lack of certainty about where it is and when it will be brought into commission.

I accept that the sea domain has been neglected. I think everyone in this House who knows anything about defence will know that certainly across the alliance but especially in the UK because we are a maritime nation, we have failed to maintain our capacity as a military capability. We have also not built the number of submarines that we need, so that NATO's surface and sub-surface fleet is diminished. The SDSR has, however, stressed that we are in a position where revisionist states are building new threats and new tensions. It is on them that I want to focus today.

Revisionist states seek to use military power and threat to change and challenge the status quo to acquire more power by seizing territory, as we have seen in Ukraine and Georgia, and imposing a new form—their form—of government, not democracy, or by unilaterally and fundamentally rewriting the rules of the game. The best description I have had of what is happening in Russia in particular was by Norway's defence attaché to the UK, Colonel Olsen, who said:

"Russia is introducing new classes of conventional and nuclear attack submarines and is modernising its Northern Fleet through the addition of long-range, high-precision missiles. The totality of its modernisation programme adds up to a step-change strengthening of Russian maritime capability in support of an anti-access strategy that could challenge NATO's command of the high seas"—

with potentially both Europe and North America being placed "at existential risk". This is a strategy that we have not seen since the cold war.

Bob Stewart: I thank my hon. Friend, as I will call her, for allowing me to intervene. Russia now practises using nuclear weapons on its exercises, so we ought to listen and watch what it says it will do, because my goodness, it will do that if it is pushed. That is why we need the nuclear deterrent.

Mrs Moon: I could not disagree with anything that the hon. Gentleman says. Those of us who are on the Defence Committee are very aware of that threat.

Russia has revamped and reoccupied seven former USSR bases in the Arctic. This is important to its ability to project power down through the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap. Access into the north Atlantic and the ability to disrupt or control the sea lines of communications between North America and Europe would have a huge impact on the global economy, as well as preventing reinforcements from reaching Europe in the event of hostilities or crisis.

Russia has new capabilities, such as the Kilo SSKs, which are armed with dual-capability Kalibr missiles, which are very fast. The Yasen—SSBN—and Kalina-class subs are extremely long endurance. Russia has about 40 combat subs, the balance of which are in the northern fleet. Added to those impressive new subs are modern patrol boats, frigates and destroyers, all joined by a new ability to deploy submarines by stealth, explore underwater cables and exercise electronic warfare jamming.

Russia has also done something else: it has withdrawn from the 1987 intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty. The US and NATO argue that Russia has violated the INF treaty by testing and deploying a prohibited intermediate-range cruise missile. Russian officials deny that the missile in question—the 9M729—can fly that far. We tend to forget that the INF treaty banned all US and Soviet ground-launched missiles of intermediate range—that is, between 500 and 5,500 kilometres—and it resulted in the destruction of some 2,700 missiles up to 1991. There is a simple way of resolving this conflict: the special verification commission, established as part of the INF treaty, could be used to work out procedures for Russia to show that its missile does not fly that far. Russia has refused to do so. However, this is not just about new missiles and whether a treaty has been broken. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has made it clear that these missiles are hard to detect, mobile and nuclear capable, and they can reach European cities. They are a direct threat to NATO.

Equally, China is not a signatory to the INF treaty. It has deployed intermediate-range missiles on its territory. It has also begun to turn its attention away from land forces and towards the sea. Since 2013, there has been a marked acceleration in China's investment in naval resources. In 2017, it overtook the US as having the world's largest navy, whose reach goes beyond traditional strategic interests in the South China sea. That navy includes an impressive number of submarines—about 60, according to the United States Congressional Research Service. Not all of them carry nuclear warheads, but China is reported to be seeking to diversify the structure of its nuclear forces and to have a credible deterrence.

Alongside its fleet, China has opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti, and continues to develop interests in bases across the Indian Ocean. It also has an ambitious strategy of investment in commercial ports around the world. The Hudson Institute estimates that 10% of all equity in ports in Europe—including ports in Ukraine, Georgia and Greece—is now owned by Chinese companies. Much of the strategy is economic, but it brings with it defence threats.

For 50 years, this deterrent has kept us safe. We owe a huge debt of thanks, not just for the past but for the future, to those men and women in the silent service—in our industrial base—who continue to provide peace, security and stability, and who have prevented nuclear war for all those 50 years.

4.20 pm

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), who painted a very clear and well-informed picture of the threat that we face. It is also a pleasure to speak in the debate.

I last spoke about this subject during a debate on alternatives to Trident under the coalition Government. It was a most unusual debate, in that it began with the then Liberal Democrat Chief Secretary to the Treasury putting forward one position, which would put CASD at risk, and ended with me, in closing the debate, putting forward another that would sustain it for the foreseeable future. I recall colleagues—perhaps in all parts of the House—being somewhat bemused at the novel idea of Ministers pulling in opposite directions. I had firmly wished that those days were behind us. However, in a sense that highlights the main point that I wish to make today: regardless of the turbulent politics of the time or the party of government of the day, the continuous at-sea deterrent has been there, day in, day out and night after night, the ultimate guarantor of our nation's security against existential blackmail or threat.

Let me begin by adding my personal tribute to the Royal Navy personnel who have made Operation Relentless the longest sustained military operation in this nation's history. With each boat having two captains and two crews, allowing continuous deployment, there are a large number of personnel on whom we rely and who perform to the highest standard in the challenging conditions that other Members have already described. We should also be grateful for the support of their families; long operations can take a particular toll on loved ones. There are pinch points of skills, which means that attracting and retaining skilled submariners is vital, but difficult, for the maintenance of the deterrence. I support the Royal Navy's efforts to allow increased flexibility in service to take account of modern family life in such difficult circumstances.

Of course, the deterrent has an impact on employment not only through boat crews but in the wider community. I hope that the House will excuse this shameless plug, but colleagues who read the Dunne review last year will be aware of the contribution of defence to our economy around the UK, and the submarine programme is a vital part of that. About 6,800 military and civilian personnel are currently employed at Her Majesty's Naval Base Clyde. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said earlier, that number is scheduled to increase to more than 8,500, and Clyde will then become the

largest employment site in Scotland. Those vital skilled jobs would be lost should the Scottish National party's policy of scrapping the nuclear deterrent ever come to pass. Thousands more are employed in keeping the deterrent both current and afloat, working for companies in the industrial supply chain in constituencies all over the country—in addition to the particular concentration in the constituency of the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), who is in the Chamber to hear me point out that he is a long-standing champion of this whole endeavour. Now more than ever, it is vital that we make the case for our continuous at-sea deterrent.

Looking back over the 50 years of Operation Relentless, it is clear that in its infancy the need for the deterrent was fresh in the public consciousness, following the horrors of the second world war. In the years that followed, the immediate concern of Soviet proliferation and posturing outlined the very real potential existential threat to the west—perhaps no more so than during the Cuban missile crisis, which brought the world so close to the brink of devastating nuclear war. But since the fall of the Berlin wall 30 years ago and the collapse of the Soviet Union, current generations have faced a less obvious threat. For some, that has led to an undercurrent of public perception—so readily fed by social media misinformation—that there is less threat and that the need for a nuclear deterrent is behind us. But that, as we have heard so well from the hon. Member for Bridgend, is fundamentally to turn blind eyes—to underestimate and ignore the global risks that we face as a country.

Mrs Moon: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that also much of that disinformation on social media is actually generated out of Russia, China, Iran and North Korea?

Mr Dunne: The hon. Lady is quite right to point out that the nature of warfare and threat has changed. It is no longer purely a direct kinetic effect. It is taking place in the airwaves all around us, and it will take effect not just through social media; the potential to disrupt vital national infrastructure is becoming a tool of conflict for the future. That is one of the challenges that I feel that we, as a nation, have to face up to more than we have to date.

The attitudes that I have just described are personified by the previous career of the Leader of the Opposition. I am sorry to have to raise that again and slightly disrupt the consensus that there is across at least the two main parties, but if, God forbid, such attitudes were ever allowed to pervade public discourse and become the official policy of the Opposition, it would do irreparable harm to our national security.

Now, as in the past, the UK faces a range of threats for which conventional forces simply cannot act as sufficient deterrent. The increasing Russian aggression, which we have heard about, the upgrading of its nuclear arsenal and delivery mechanisms, will continue to threaten the potential security of the west. Other states, including Iran and North Korea, maintain their nuclear ambitions despite international pressure. The existence of 17,000 nuclear weapons in the world today shows the risk that we still face.

Fortunately, in the face of such threats, we do not stand alone. Our membership of NATO—a nuclear alliance, as has been said by others—remains the cornerstone of

[Mr Dunne]

our defence, and our decision to maintain the continuous at-sea deterrent sends a clear signal to our allies that we will continue to play our part in contributing to the security of all NATO members. It also provides NATO with another centre of decision making, alongside the primacy of our strongest ally, the United States. By sharing the burden of nuclear responsibility, we demonstrate the true collaborative nature of the nuclear alliance and of the mutual defence we are committed to upholding.

That close co-operation over our nuclear capability with the United States is at the very core of the strategic defence relationship between our two countries. It also places us in a pivotal role in offering continuing leadership to the free world. That was encapsulated by Winston Churchill in his last great speech in this place as Prime Minister, as he ushered in the era of the strategic deterrent. He said:

“Our moral and military support of the United States and our possession of nuclear weapons of the highest quality and on an appreciable scale, together with their means of delivery, will greatly reinforce the deterrent power of the free world, and will strengthen our influence within the free world.”—[*Official Report*, 1 March 1955; Vol. 537, c. 1897.]

In my view, that remains the case today and is worth our bearing in mind as we approach the challenge of life after we leave the European Union.

Britain has the opportunity, as a responsible country, to show that nuclear powers need not relentlessly pursue further proliferation. While other states seek to increase their stockpiles, we have committed to reducing our overall nuclear weapons stockpile to no more than 180 warheads by the mid-2020s, having already reduced our operationally available warheads and the number of warheads and missiles on each boat, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), the previous Defence Secretary, has just told us.

Britain has already led the way in this decade in showing that the existing stock of nuclear weapons in the world can be reduced. Next year, there will be another important milestone in that effort: the 2020 review conference of the parties to the treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. Our position as a P5 member of the UN Security Council provides the UK with the opportunity to continue to make the case for non-proliferation. Our work on developing disarmament verification solutions, particularly with the US, Sweden and Norway through the Quad Nuclear Verification Partnership, is helping to deliver an effective verification regime, which is essential if non-proliferation is to become a trusted way forward.

The fact that we have not had to use a nuclear weapon in conflict is a sign of their efficacy. Discouraging action through fear of consequences is the very definition of deterrence. In that respect, our continuous at-sea deterrent has been remarkably successful. A credible deterrent is not something that we can afford to relax. The skills on which it relies cannot be switched off and back on again in a time of crisis. To move away from a deterrent-based system would present an enormous risk to the country. It has not been shown how any alternatives to the deterrent would make the UK safer in the face of existential threats now and for future generations.

I point out to colleagues who believe that future risk is small enough to justify the removal of our deterrent that the world is an incredibly unpredictable place. The

Dreadnought class of submarines is due to come into service in the 2030s with a 30-year expected lifespan. Our decision to maintain the deterrent will provide the ultimate guarantee of safety for our children and grandchildren.

4.31 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I welcome this debate. Reference has already been made to the men and women of our submarine service who have been part of Operation Relentless over the past 50 years, and I add my tribute to them. The Secretary of State rightly mentioned a group who are not remembered very often: the families of those servicemen and women, who make a great contribution in their own way to our defence. I will not name all the sites because most of them, including Barrow, have been mentioned already. I pay tribute to the industry and the men and women who work in it, not only in the supply chain but directly in maintaining our nuclear deterrent. The issues relating to our nuclear deterrent are rightly secret and do not get a great deal of attention. Today is an opportunity to say thank you, to those individuals. I accept that a level of secrecy is needed, but for anyone who wants a good tribute to that, I recommend James Jinks's and Peter Hennessy's book "The Silent Deep", which gives a fascinating insight into not only the history of our nuclear deterrent but the present-day operations.

I have always had the utmost respect for those who hold the view that Britain should not have nuclear weapons. I disagree with them, but I respect their position. What I cannot respect is the dishonest and unprincipled position of SNP Members, who argue that Britain should give up its nuclear weapons but at the same time want us to be part of a nuclear alliance—NATO. They accept that they would hide under the umbrella of NATO, but they say they have a principled objection to nuclear weapons. They cannot have both.

The post-war Attlee Government decided that Britain would become a nuclear power because they saw the rise of the threat from the Soviet Union to the post-war order that they and the west were trying to put together. It was a rules-based system, and we rightly pay tribute to the founders of NATO and other international organisations after the second world war. People such as Attlee, who lived through the second war but also saw action at Gallipoli during the first world war, were determined that this country, in the new nuclear age, would not be vulnerable to harm from those who threatened its security. That has always been a long tradition in my party. I know that recently there has been much veneration on the left of the 1945 Labour Government, but that part of the story is always conveniently airbrushed out. The formation of NATO and the beginning of our nuclear deterrent set the course of our security and has dictated it over subsequent generations. Some of the principles that were underlined then, such as mutual destruction and deterrence, have been borne out by the fact that we have not had a nuclear conflict throughout the subsequent period.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) outlined the nature of the threats that face us today. Are they different to 1945? Yes, they are. Certainly the technology is very different, but so are the threats. At the end of the cold war, there was the possibility of making more reductions in nuclear weapons, but that

has been snatched away from us by the current state of the Russian Government, who clearly do not respect the international rules-based order that our forefathers in post-war Britain helped to develop. The Russian Government wish to have their own order, which does not respect international law or nation states. Clearly, they also do not accept that nations should be able to live peacefully alongside one another.

I am clear about the need to retain our nuclear deterrent. It keeps us safe. If we could uninvent nuclear weapons tomorrow, I think most people would, but as a nation we have a proud record—and we should not forget this—of commitment to disarmament. The Secretary of State pointed out the steps that we have already taken, unilaterally, to reduce stockpiles to the minimum that is required, for example removing the WE177 nuclear bomb. It is also right for us to take an active part in moves to stop nuclear proliferation and to achieve arms reduction. That is not easy in the present climate, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend outlined, but that does not mean that we should not try. That has to be part of our overall policy. While maintaining CASD and our nuclear deterrent, we should have a strong commitment to a nuclear-free world. We can work harder at that, although it will not be easy, given the present state of the world, which looks a lot darker than it has for many years.

One threat that I do see to CASD—the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) and I are at one on this—is the decision in 2010 to delay the replacement of the nuclear deterrent. That has had huge issues for the maintenance of CASD. It means that the life of our present Vanguard submarines will be extended way beyond what was designed. I pay tribute to the industry and others who are trying to do the refits, but I ask the Secretary of State to ensure that the Treasury realises that those refits, and the money available for them, are vital. We will not meet the deadlines for the Dreadnought coming on stream, but if we are not to put CASD at risk it is important that the money is made available. I accept that recently some money has come forward, but it has to be available continually over the next few years. I have no wish to be disrespectful to the Secretary of State, but in the words of Robin Day, he is—like us all—a “here today, gone tomorrow” politician. It is important to have consistency in that investment for the life extension and for Dreadnought.

It is also important not to have a repeat of what happened with the Astute submarines, when we turned off the supply tap and the skills base, later having to work to play catch-up, which led to the problems we have now. We need to think about putting investment in now, certainly on the design side, for the generation that comes after Astute or Dreadnought, for example. That is how we keep the capability, because such skills are fragile if we do not invest in them.

To finish where I started, I pay tribute to all those involved in this endeavour. It is a complex one, ensuring not just that we have CASD but that the enterprise works. That it has done so over 50 years is a remarkable feat.

4.40 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I am not as qualified as many to speak in this debate, but I remind those who wish to look into the subject further that they should read the 1934 book “Peace with Honour”

by Alan Alexander Milne. He had served continuously in the first world war and in the book he wrote the reasons why war should become unacceptable—he argued for pacifism. In 1940, after he had re-enlisted, he wrote a book called “War with Honour”, in which he explained what had gone wrong.

In the middle of the 1934 book, A. A. Milne imagined a situation in which Germany attacks the United Kingdom in 1940. He asked what would happen if Russia said that it would join on our side but set various conditions. We have to understand that people have been thinking about such issues rather more deeply than, from some of the remarks we heard, the Scottish National party—but I want to leave them to one side.

I will move on to the other great person who could deal with the constitutional, policy and moral principles of nuclear deterrence: Sir Michael Quinlan. He was permanent secretary at the Department of Employment when I served there as a junior Minister. He then moved back to the Ministry of Defence, which was his real home.

While working for the Government and before he got moved to the Treasury in 1980 or '81, he wrote some words that were not known to be his at the time:

“Our task now is to devise a system for living in peace and freedom while ensuring that nuclear weapons are never used, either to destroy or to blackmail.”

No one has yet made a serious case that our abolition of the continuous at-sea deterrent would do much to reduce the possibility of blackmail or the risk of destruction.

Mrs Moon: May I remind the House of the Budapest memorandum? Ukraine gave up its nuclear capability of 1,700 warheads and a large number of other capabilities; in return, Russia, the US and the UK agreed to secure its stability and safety.

Sir Peter Bottomley: The hon. Lady, the leader of the NATO parliamentary delegation, makes the point better than I could, and I am grateful to her for doing so.

I occasionally speculate what would have happened had not Mr Putin but his FSB predecessor become President of Russia. Had Nikolay Kovalyov become President, things might not be so rough now—nor for Ukraine—but that is not the issue.

We have to prepare for whatever happens in any major country around the world. We have to remember that one of the reasons why we had our independent deterrent was to give a second place of decision making, so that people did not rely only on the Americans being prepared to respond, but thought we might if we had to. I hope that we never do have to.

I recommend that real students of policy operating in this field get the collected correspondence of Sir Michael Quinlan and go through the essays in the book edited by Francis Bridger in 1983 for the chapter that Michael contributed. It followed on from the work of the Catholic bishops' conference in the United States, and all that has guidance for us now. It does not say what we have to do in the future, but it gives us the reasons for where we have been in the past 50 years.

I join with others in paying tribute to the submariners and to the people in the dockyards and the like who have kept the deterrent going. One of the proudest times in my life was when I held a dinner in 2003—two years before the 200th anniversary of Nelson's death at

[Sir Peter Bottomley]

Trafalgar—at which I sat down with two Marine generals and 38 admirals. Those admirals were there to represent the people of all ranks who had served and all the civilian contractors who had helped. We thank them.

4.44 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): As the Member of Parliament for Argyll and Bute, my constituency takes in Her Majesty's Naval Base Clyde at Faslane. Although I am and always will be implacably opposed to nuclear weapons being in Scotland, or anywhere else for that matter, for so long as we remain part of the United Kingdom and the UK Government insist on possession of these weapons of mass destruction, I will put on record my gratitude for the dedication and professionalism of the Royal Naval service personnel, the MOD Police, the MOD Guard Service and the civilian workforce at the base. As Scotland moves towards its independence, let me reassure them and the wider community that the naval base at Faslane will have a bright non-nuclear future. The SNP has never and will never advocate its closure. Its strategic location, allowing speedy access out into the north Atlantic while still being close to the large centres of population in central Scotland, will continue to play a vital role in Scotland's future defence post independence.

Gavin Williamson: I am curious about the hon. Gentleman's comments. What does he plan to put in Faslane if there are no nuclear submarines? They are what creates employment and wealth in that area.

Brendan O'Hara: I thank the Secretary of State. This is like having my very own straight man. Maybe we should take our act on tour. Not only will Faslane continue as the main conventional naval base for us, our allies and our friends, but it will also serve as the tri-service headquarters of an independent Scottish armed forces. The SNP's plan could not be clearer. The security of the north Atlantic and high north is paramount, and we will work with our allies to improve not just their security, but our own.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I am fascinated to hear of the SNP's plans for the future of Faslane. Will the hon. Gentleman go a little further and indicate how much a future SNP Government would want to spend on developing a Scottish navy?

Brendan O'Hara: The plan has been laid out time and again. The Scottish Government are absolutely committed to the security of our border. I find the patronising tone of the "Better Togetherites" absolutely astonishing, because they seem to think that Scotland is somehow uniquely incapable of defending itself and its people as part of a greater alliance.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is impressive that the Labour Front Bench has found its voice given that the shadow Secretary of State's speech lasted five minutes and that she took no interventions. Do not take any lessons from that lot, who do not have a spine among them.

Brendan O'Hara: Indeed. I will take no such lectures.

We all know that the United Kingdom's obsession with being a nuclear power has more to do with politics than with defence. The UK's so-called independent nuclear deterrent is not really a military weapon; it is a political weapon. It is as political today as it was in 1946 when Ernest Bevin returned from the United States having seen the atomic bomb and enthusiastically declared:

"We've got to have this thing over here, whatever it costs. We've got to have the Union Jack on top of it."

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

Brendan O'Hara: I will not. Sadly, those words and that sentiment seem to have dictated the thinking not just of the British establishment, but of Conservative and, sadly, Labour politicians ever since.

Let us be honest about it. Having this so-called independent nuclear deterrent is all about allowing the United Kingdom to perpetuate the myth that it is still a world superpower. Judging by the astronomical amounts of money that Members are prepared to spend on these weapons, it seems that there is no price too high. There is no price they will not pay to propagate that delusion. Eye-watering amounts of public money are being poured into weapons of mass destruction at a time when poverty and child poverty are at Dickensian levels and food bank use has never been higher.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is no word to describe the sense of betrayal felt by people who formerly supported the Labour party? The Leader of the Opposition was once the head of CND and was committed to ridding the UK of nuclear weapons, but the party now embraces them enthusiastically.

Brendan O'Hara: I will let the Leader of the Opposition speak for himself, but I find it astonishing. As a unilateralist, I could never imagine myself suddenly becoming a multilateralist.

This whole debate about the UK's desire to be a nuclear power, come what may and regardless of cost, has striking similarities to the debate we have been having on Brexit. In both cases, we are seeing a post-imperial power struggling to come to terms with, and find its place in, a changing world. Rather than accepting and being part of that new world, the UK has decided to embark on a desperate search for a better yesterday. The result is that it is almost impossible to have a reasoned debate on nuclear weapons because, for so many in this House, possession of nuclear weapons, weapons of mass destruction, has become nothing more than a national virility symbol.

Mr Kevan Jones: I have always respected people who argue on the principle that we should not have nuclear weapons, but that is not what the SNP is doing. The SNP is arguing that we should give up our weapons, but that it wants to be part of the NATO nuclear alliance, in which it would have to sit on the NATO nuclear planning group and accept the nuclear umbrella of the United States and France. Is that not a rather unprincipled position?

Brendan O'Hara: I do not think it is at all. Last time I looked, the last two Secretaries-General of NATO were from Denmark and Norway, both non-nuclear members of the NATO alliance. The logical extension of the right hon. Gentleman's argument is that NATO would somehow shun an independent Scotland due to the stance we have taken. Given the strategic importance of Scotland to the high north and the Arctic, it is inconceivable that NATO would shun an independent Scotland.

Mr Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Brendan O'Hara: No, I will move on.

It remains the case that an astronomical financial commitment is required to pay for these weapons, and the detrimental effect that is having on the UK's conventional capability is being overlooked. The UK is choosing to pour billions of pounds into having nuclear weapons, which is akin to a mad dad selling off the family silverware and remortgaging the family home so that he can have the Aston Martin he has always fantasised about when all the family needs is a Ford Mondeo. That is the situation we are in.

We are here today to mark 50 years of the United Kingdom's continuous at-sea deterrent. The world has changed beyond recognition over those 50 years, and all the old certainties of the 1960s, '70s, '80s and '90s have moved on. The threats we face today are more complex and far more nuanced than they have ever been, yet we are being asked to believe that the solution remains the same: a nuclear-armed submarine patrolling the seas 24 hours a day, seven days a week and 365 days a year. It is not the case.

Finally, this is one issue on which the Scottish Government, the Scottish Parliament, the SNP, the Labour party in Scotland, the Greens, the TUC, the Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church are all agreed. We oppose nuclear weapons and having them foisted upon us, because Scotland knows that there is absolutely no moral, economic or military case for the United Kingdom possessing nuclear weapons.

4.54 pm

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): It is a great honour to speak in this debate and to have the opportunity to share with the House and all those who follow our proceedings a little of the unique and extraordinary commitment and sacrifice of those who serve in our Royal Navy's submarine service, delivering our continuous at-sea deterrent—our silent service.

In the late 1950s, it became clear to the US and UK Governments that in order to ensure that those infamous words of Sir Winston Churchill,

"Indestructible retaliation...is the secret",

could be credible, nuclear deterrence needed to go out to sea, where, as Admiral Arleigh Burke, the then chief of naval operations of the US navy, said

"the real estate is free and where they are far away from me."

The creation of Polaris meant a deterrent system that could be effective because it was capable, reliable, available and invulnerable, and, most importantly, because there was the political will to use it in extremis. I always describe our nuclear deterrent as the most effective weapon of peace ever created, because by its existence and invulnerability it fulfils the modern function of

military force to prevent war. Once the power and destructive force of nuclear weapons had been created, and demonstrated, those charged with trying to maintain global order and peace after two world wars had to find a way to harness the awesome and terrifying power of these weapons to reduce future risks to populations around the world.

We have been running CASD for 50 years, and it happens, at the sharp end, because the submariners who man our strategic deterrent agree to go to sea, below the waves, for 100 days or more at a time, in the harshest of watery environments in the depths of our seas and oceans, in a long metal tube reminiscent of a caravan with no windows. It is cold and pitch black, the sea is unforgiving and corrosive, and there are inordinate pressures on the submarine hull.

I ask Members to consider for a moment that, when the sailor closes the hatches as he enters his vessel, he will not be physically able to open them again until they resurface. The pressure of the water at depth means that once he is in, there is no getting out again until he resurfaces. That happens for months at a time.

What submariners at sea most fear, however, is not the external pressure on their metal tube, the lack of fresh food or milk, the lack of internet or the inability to get Amazon to deliver. What any submariner fears most is fire. The whole submarine will fill instantly with smoke—noxious smoke, creating zero visibility, so they cannot see their hand in front of their face; choking, acrid smoke from burning oil or plastic. The relationship and interdependency between every member of a submarine crew is like that of no other team on earth—or indeed on sea.

They have only themselves to rely on. They eat four meals a day together—frozen, dried or tinned food after using up all the fresh milk, fruit and vegetables over the first few days. They work six hours on, six hours off—every day—and getting into a warm bed for four hours' sleep is normal, since the previous occupant will have just got out to go back on duty. It is not your average work routine.

We take completely for granted our ability to keep in touch with family and friends, more so than ever nowadays, through text, WhatsApp, email, a quick phone call, popping next door for a coffee with neighbours or nipping to the shops for that thing we ran out of. None of that is possible for those serving in our Royal Navy's submarine service. They and their family can send and receive one message a week—short, read by the commanding officer and potentially censored. They will not be given the message if someone is ill, or has died, until they get back from the three-month patrol. Lovers develop codes to share their affection, away from prying eyes, with ploys that Alan Turing might have been proud of. Fundamentally, however, submariners on duty on HMS Vengeance, Vanguard, Vigilant or Victorious are out of contact with the rest of the world they are protecting.

For the past 50 years, the greatest unsung heroes of CASD have been and remain, in my humble opinion, the families of those who serve. Being the wife or child of a submariner is a job that most of us will never fully understand or appreciate. These sons and daughters, wives and lovers, parent and grandparents have to be stoic and as committed to their submariner's service as the sailor himself or, since 2011, herself.

[Anne-Marie Trevelyan]

Imagine celebrating children's birthdays or Christmas without dad and having to remember to plan to celebrate them at another time. For children that represents a displacement of normal routines, which makes no sense to their friends at school, and for partners there are the logistics of thinking about how to include their sailor in the special events of life that happen without them when they are deployed, such as the first day at school, the first tooth, the birth of a baby, parents' evenings, broken bones from sports matches not cheered on, school plays missed, family events, weddings, funerals, and a child's first steps and first words.

The sailor misses them, but the partner not only has to experience them without being able to share the joy, the anxiety, the sadness and the grief, but has to remember that when their husband or wife, son or daughter, returns from their tour that these events have happened and need to be shared and re-experienced. The spouse also has to deal with life's challenges, which cannot be shared because of the silence in communications—things such as broken washing machines, insurance problems, money worries and decisions, problems with the in-laws and family discipline decisions. It is a strange and unique continuous stress, because it is single parenthood some of the time and then not. The spouse has to keep their children's world stable in a profoundly unstable environment; be able to remain strong alone, going to sleep every night not knowing where their sailor is or being able to tell them that they love them.

For the sailor who has been isolated from all these ordinary normal day-to-day activities, it is a real challenge to return to normal life after 100 days underwater in a pressured tube, living with a nuclear reactor and fellow sailors in very close proximity. Normal life is noisy, full of confusion and complexity, and full of events, news, gossip and change of which they have no knowledge. It falls to their spouse or parent to try to help them adjust back to shore life just for a while before they deploy again.

Submariners man our bombers—the SSBN, or sub-surface ballistic nuclear vessel, as NATO describes it—tour after tour, with some serving below the waves for 20 years. That is extraordinary commitment not only by those who serve, but by their families who silently wait for their return and keep their world going while they are away.

The continuity of delivering our strategic deterrent is critical to doing all we can as key NATO allies to maintain global peace. In the past 50 years, whether the world has been more or less stable, the white ensign has commanded respect and admiration around the globe. The challenge of delivering the continuous strategic deterrent—one achieved by the Royal Navy since HMS Resolution began this continuous deployment rotation—continues to elude many nations' navies. It requires a commitment from our manpower, from industry's ability to provide engineering resilience, a political strength in the national psyche and the sheer will to meet all those challenges—every second, of every minute, of every hour, of every day, of every week, of every month, of every year since April 1969, which is when I was born.

For the whole of my life there have been submariners willing to serve under the sea, and families willing patiently to wait for their return, to deliver the continuous

at-sea deterrent on our behalf. I pay tribute to every single one of them and thank them for their service to our nation's security over the past 50 years, as well as to all those who are yet to join the extraordinary ranks of our exceptional, world-class, silent service.

5.2 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan). I am grateful to her for how she entered into what I think should be the spirit of this debate, by giving us such a vivid account of a submariner's life underneath the waves and of their families. It was a particularly nice touch that she was dressed as a submariner for the occasion. It is also extraordinary and almost unbelievable that she herself is practically exactly the same age as the practice of continuous at-sea deterrence.

I am glad that the hon. Lady struck that tone, because the SNP spokesman, whom I respect and really quite like, which will probably be to his detriment, suggested that it was misguided of the House to take this time to honour the service and the sacrifice principally of the submariners, but also of their families and many others, in maintaining this policy of continuous at-sea deterrence. This is not the House slapping itself on the back; this is the House paying tribute to this extraordinary service. It does not matter whether one agrees with the policy of nuclear deterrence; it is right that we all say thank you to everyone who has served.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: In fairness, I did open my remarks with exactly what the hon. Gentleman has just said. I am sure that he would not want to suggest otherwise. I have no issue with such a debate, but the problem is that this is a backslapping exercise. It is turning into exactly that, and that is what we deprecate, not the service of those who serve in the armed forces.

John Woodcock: It is true that the hon. Gentleman gave a tribute at the very beginning, and then went into why this is all a terrible thing. I have to say that, for a party that believes that this debate should not be happening, SNP Members have had an awful lot to say. Well, I say that they have had an awful lot to say—what I mean is that they have taken up a lot of time.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Hang on. It is the job of the Opposition—and I wish Labour would remember this from time to time—to oppose the things that they feel they have to oppose. I know the hon. Gentleman disagrees, but millions of people across the country share our view, and it is right that their voice is represented.

John Woodcock: Okay—well, let us move on.

I want to ensure that this House gives proper thanks to all the workers involved, including shipwrights and engineers. Sometimes manufacturers and engineers in all parts of the United Kingdom—including many hundreds in jobs in Scotland—have no idea that they are contributing to the submarine programme. These are the most cutting-edge, advanced engineering and manufacturing jobs in the world, producing not only the Dreadnought-class submarines that are being developed now, but all the nuclear patrol submarines. These vessels have been built principally at Barrow, but the project has been made possible by what the Secretary of State rightly described as a national endeavour.

Although I recognise that it is difficult, I hope that the Government and the bodies responsible for awarding new medals listen to the campaign that we have launched today for a new service medal for submariners who have been on bomber patrols. We have heard about the service of this group of people, but because of the necessarily secret nature of their work—and because of their achievement in the fact that this operation has been continuous, relentless and ongoing—they have not had the opportunity to be awarded a service medal as many of their colleagues in different parts of the armed forces have for serving in particular conflicts. It would surely be fitting to advance that case as part of these 50th anniversary commemorations—celebrations, if you will. I am grateful to many in this Chamber who have already added their support to the early-day motion that I am tabling today.

Deterrence is not a perfect science. It is impossible to prove categorically what works and what does not when acting in the negative to prevent something else from happening. But I hope that even those who say that it is too expensive for the UK to maintain its submarine fleet would accept that it is no accident that the only time that the horror of nuclear war has been inflicted on the world—in the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—was in a world with only one nuclear power, meaning that that nuclear power could unleash that devastation without fear of retribution.

We have to make the case time and again that the reason why the UK continues to invest in its deterrent capability is to make the horror of a nuclear war less likely, not more likely—not simply for ourselves, but for all our NATO allies. Apparently, an independent Scotland would want to remain part of NATO, under the protective umbrella of what would become an English, Welsh and Northern Irish deterrent, while casting aspersions from over the border about how morally repugnant it is that we are maintaining this service and keeping Scotland safe. I think that is the SNP's policy, but it is still quite hard to ascertain. It is possible, perhaps, that it believes that no one should have nuclear weapons—that America should take them away as well, and that we should leave ourselves at the mercy of nuclear blackmail from Russia.

Mr Kevan Jones: Was it not a misunderstanding when the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) said in response to my earlier intervention that the last two Secretaries-General of NATO came from non-nuclear nations? They do not possess nuclear weapons themselves, but they are part of a nuclear alliance. Also, if an independent Scotland was to join NATO, it would have to sit on the NATO nuclear planning group, which determines NATO nuclear policy.

John Woodcock: Absolutely. Is the SNP's position that NATO should cease to be a nuclear alliance? If so, how would that make us safer from Russia given what we know about its aggressive stance under President Putin and the way that it is proliferating, in contravention of the non-proliferation treaty, in a way that UK is not? Or is the SNP's position actually that we should leave it all to the Americans and that although we do not accept the hegemony of American global power in any other form, we are fine just to sit underneath their nuclear umbrella here? That is not a responsible position, but unfortunately it is one that we hear far too often.

I am a great admirer of the shadow Defence team for the way that they have battled to try to keep Labour's policy, on the face of it, sensible. They have been huge allies over the years. However, we cannot escape the fact that the Leader of the Opposition remains implacably opposed to the use of the deterrent, which renders it, at a stroke—

Mike Gapes: Is not the essence of nuclear deterrence that if you have nuclear weapons you have to be prepared to say that you will use them, and does not someone who says that they will never use them under any circumstances undermine the essence of that deterrence policy?

John Woodcock: They do, absolutely. It makes it very hard to imagine why a future Labour Government would continue to pour in the billions of pounds that would be needed to maintain the deterrent once they had rendered it useless.

Let me once again thank the people of Barrow, in particular, for the amazing work that they have done in serving the nation for over 100 years of the submarine, 50 of which have maintained our policy of continuous at-sea nuclear deterrence.

5.12 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I am very grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker, to have caught your eye in this important debate, first as a member of the Defence Committee, but also, more importantly in this context, because my father, Reginald Francois, was a naval veteran, although he served on minesweepers—as did the Chairman of the Defence Committee, incidentally—rather than as a submariner.

The silent service, or the men who wear dolphins, as they are sometimes referred to, are part of the elite of the Royal Navy—itsself the senior service—and have played a fundamental part in the defence of this country for over 100 years, since submarines first went into action in the first world war. The history of the Royal Navy submarine service since the end of the second world war was brilliantly summarised by Lord Peter Hennessy and James Jinks in their recent book, "The Silent Deep", which tells a story of immense professionalism, bravery and courage, not least during the difficult and tense periods of the cold war when submarines regularly travelled up "around the corner", as it was known in the submarine service, to conduct surveillance on their Soviet counterparts based on the Kola peninsula. As a senior naval officer reminded me recently, President Putin's father was a submariner, and that is one of the reasons why the Russian submarine service now benefits from such massive reinvestment. The book is an inspiring tale of men—and now, rightly, women, too—who have given unstinting service to their country down the decades and have helped to keep us free.

An epitome of this is the crews of our deterrent submarines: first, the Resolution class armed with the Polaris missile and then its later Chevaline upgrade; and then the Vanguard class armed with the Trident D5 missile. Because of the delays in the decision to proceed with the Dreadnought class, which many have referred to, those vessels are now likely to serve for up to 37 years—13 years longer than their original design life—to maintain

[Mr Mark Francois]

CASD. [Interruption.] Forgive me, gentlemen, but take it into the Tea Room next door if you do not want to listen.

While I was Minister for the Armed Forces a few years ago, I had the privilege of visiting one of the submarines based at Faslane. I remember being taken aboard by the submarine's commander and walking across the missile casings while boarding the boat. I was very conscious of the massive destructive power sitting beneath my feet. It was fascinating to be taken on a tour of one of these boats and to have the opportunity to meet members of the highly specialised and extremely dedicated crew who are part of Operation Relentless.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) pointed out so well, these sailors have been prepared to be parted from their families for months at a time, maintaining a lonely but vital vigil in the ocean depths, ready to unleash, if ultimately necessary, unacceptable levels of destruction on any potential enemy, and in so doing helping to deter them and to keep us free. We must never take those very special people or their stoic families for granted, and we should remember that there are retention issues in the service. Ministers must be mindful of that if we are to maintain CASD in the future.

Some members of CND have, in the past, argued that we have spent a great deal of money on something we will never use. Like others, including the previous Secretary of State, I believe that the reverse is true: we use this system every single day to provide the ultimate guarantee of our national security. Therefore, it is only right, and it is not backslapping, that on the 50th anniversary of these vital patrols, we in the House of Commons have an opportunity to pay heartfelt thanks to and admire the dedication of those who have manned these boats so professionally on our behalf down the years.

Part of the continuous at-sea deterrent programme involves having nuclear attack boats, on occasion, to protect the deterrent submarines. That duty will increasingly fall to the Astute class of SSNs. The Astutes are incredibly capable boats, at least on a par with the new Virginia class in the United States and arguably even better, thus making them the most effective attack submarines in the world. However, that capability does not come cheap, with a current price of around £1.25 billion per boat.

Unfortunately, the history of the Astute programme has been a chequered one, with both cost escalation and chronic delays in the production of the boats. Sadly, it is true to say that BAE Systems—I am not looking to enrage the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock)—has not covered itself in glory on the Astute class. Unfortunately, neither has Rolls-Royce, whose transfer of the production of the nuclear steam raising plant across Derby to its Raynesway facility cost some two years' delay in delivering the reactors, which had a major knock-on effect on the timeliness of the whole programme.

As a result of the delays to the Astute, there have been serious issues with the availability of British SSNs over the past five to 10 years. I reassure the Secretary of State that I will not discuss classified matters on the Floor of the House, but suffice it to say that when our

friends from the north have come visiting, we have not always been prepared to welcome them in the way that we should.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Francois: Very briefly, because I am tight on time.

Mr Jones: The right hon. Gentleman was here when I spoke, and one of the issues was that the Conservative Government in the 1990s did not order submarines and turned off the skill base and investment that were needed. Is that not a lesson we should learn for the future, rather than just blaming BAE Systems and Rolls-Royce?

Mr Francois: I will meet the right hon. Gentleman halfway. It is true that the delay in orders had an effect—I am not denying that—but there were also management issues.

The delays to the Astute have had the unfortunate effect that the venerable Trafalgar class of SSNs has had to be run on at considerable cost. The final Trafalgar is due to leave service in around 2022 and the seventh Astute boat is not due to enter service until 2024. In fairness, to respond to the right hon. Gentleman's point, I know that the senior management of BAE, right up to and including the chief executive, are fully aware of the problems with the programme and have taken executive action to try to address them. I hope they will continue to apply pressure to bring the boats into service as soon as possible. It is vital that we learn the hard lessons from the Astute programme to make sure that the Dreadnought programme runs effectively to both time and cost; the defence of the realm demands no less.

I wish to pay full tribute to the men and women of the Royal Navy who have selflessly carried out their vital task for 50 years so that those of us in the United Kingdom can sleep safely in our beds at night. We owe a great debt to those who wear dolphins, and it is appropriate that we salute them in the House of Commons this afternoon. We are not backslapping; we stand here in admiration.

5.20 pm

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) said that he did not want to get involved in struggles with chimney sweeps, which seemed somehow a nod towards the concept of deterrence. However, as I am afraid is normal for contributions from the Scottish National party, he spent most of his speech attacking Labour party policy and the Labour party. It was more about internal politics in Scotland, I feel, than the national issue we are discussing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) made an excellent speech reaffirming current Labour party policy, in line with long-standing party policy and indeed the bipartisan policy of British Governments of both parties. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) drew attention to the Attlee-Bevan Government's record in developing the nuclear deterrent; not, as seems to have been implied, in some bombastic gesture but in response to being cut off from nuclear information by the McMahon Act. They had to decide whether Britain was to maintain an independent capability, and they made the right decision.

Today, we are discussing the 50th anniversary of HMS Resolution, built under the Wilson Government, which first sailed in April 1969. As has been mentioned, under the last Labour Government, a resolution of this House was carried overwhelmingly to renew that capability. It is only a shame, as I said in interventions, that the Cameron coalition Government did not go through with that. That caused considerable delay and dislocation not only to the industry but to the operation of the CASD, which had to be maintained at considerably increased maintenance costs.

That, frankly, only reinforces my view of the previous Prime Minister, David Cameron: deep down, he was shallow. There was very little there. He believed in very little, and he allowed himself to be dragged around by the Liberal Democrats, while they pursued all sorts of fanciful alternatives for maintaining a nuclear deterrent, whether land-based or cruise missiles. It is interesting today that while there have been genuine and proper disagreements about whether we should have a nuclear deterrent at all, there has been no mention of those fanciful alternatives that were basically a way of kicking the can down the road. That seems to have been the default setting of Conservative Governments since 2010.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I wonder if there is something we could agree on: the decision taken by Cameron and Osborne to depart from Labour's practice of having funding for this programme outside of the Defence budget. Does the right hon. Gentleman think that was the right or wrong thing to do?

John Spellar: I could wax lyrical about the deficiencies of George Osborne's stewardship of the Treasury, but probably not within the time allowed. I move on to the broader issue. My right hon. Friend rightly drew attention to the view that the collapse of the Soviet Union and end of the cold war rendered deterrence—and much of conventional defence—redundant. We had "Options for Change", with huge dislocations. Frankly, when I came into the Defence Ministry in 1997, we were still dealing with the aftermath. If, however, we leave on one side any points about the issues then, it is now absolutely clear that a complacent attitude is no longer tenable. State and non-state threats have increased, are increasing, and need to be confronted and contained. Threats are a combination—are they not?—of capability, intention and doctrine. What we are seeing from Russia is a worrying and alarming increase in activity in all those areas. We are seeing the clear development of a nuclear doctrine in Russia, including in short-range, non-strategic nuclear weapons in the form of the Gerasimov doctrine.

The Defence Committee report, "Missile Misdemeanours: Russia and the INF Treaty", goes into some detail about the several and continuing breaches of the INF treaty by Russia. Such breaches were agreed by all NATO states at the recent meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers, who made it very clear that, frankly, Russia is tearing up that agreement. Indeed, in response to the United States calling it out on this, Russia has also moved away from that treaty. I must say that that may have worrying implications for the strategic arms reduction treaty negotiations on strategic weapons, and we should be arguing—in NATO, but also in other forums—for maintaining those discussions. If Ronald Reagan could come to many such agreements, quite frankly, the United States should now

be able to do so. Let us be clear, however, who is the prime instigator in breaching these agreements—it is Russia.

One of the things that worries me sometimes about these debates, including on the INF, is that for me they are very reminiscent of the time of the cruise missiles issue. People campaigned in this country against cruise missiles, and I always found it slightly perverse that they were more concerned with campaigning against the missiles pointing in the other direction than with campaigning against the SS-20s pointing in our direction. Those missiles were changing the strategic balance in Europe, which was why leading social democrat figures, such as Helmut Schmidt, were arguing for cruise missiles to maintain the balance and therefore to maintain peace in Europe, and were showing resolution in doing so.

We are also seeing such activities away from the nuclear field. We are seeing a preparedness to use force in Ukraine and Georgia, as well as cyber-attacks on the Baltic countries and massive exercises within the Baltic region. We have to be clear that, while nuclear is awful and almost unimaginable, conventional warfare is also awful. That was summed up by General Sherman in the 19th century when he said that "War is hell". Yes, we all remember the tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but that conflict also saw the firebombing of Tokyo, in which hundreds of thousands died, and the bombings of Hamburg and of Dresden, let alone the bombings on our own soil.

Carol Monaghan: Is the right hon. Gentleman suggesting that indiscriminate bombing is actually okay and an acceptable part of warfare?

John Spellar: Quite the opposite: I am saying that warfare results in devastation and a huge loss of life, as indeed we are seeing in Syria today. The hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) drew attention to the seminal work of Sir Michael Quinlan on nuclear strategy, and one of the points he made very strongly in all his works was that conventional warfare, particularly with modern technology, has awful consequences. We must therefore try to contain, if not abolish, warfare, and rather than just focus on one aspect of warfare, that is the important issue we have to address.

Some believe that maintaining the peace is achieved by disarmament or by pacifism. I argue that history demonstrates that peace is better maintained by preparedness and vigilance. That is why continuous at-sea deterrence has been so critical in keeping the peace for the past 50 years and why we owe so much to those who operate it around the clock and those who build it and maintain it around the country. It may be a silent service, but this anniversary gives us the opportunity to both acknowledge and praise it.

5.30 pm

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): It is an absolute pleasure to follow what I thought was an excellent speech by the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar). He sums up the ethical as well as the practical case for why we need a continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent.

This has been a really good debate. I praise my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the Chair of the Defence Committee, who set out very

[Mr Simon Clarke]

crisply why we need to do this and why it is so much in our strategic interest to make sure we have this level of protection. The right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) referred to “The Silent Deep” by Hennessy and Jinks. That excellent book sets out the debt we owe to the technological brilliance of scientists and engineers; the political resolve of successive Governments and diplomats to ensure we acquire the technology; and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) pointed out, the personal courage, sacrifice and professionalism of thousands of submariners and their families down the decades. Even as we speak, our forces are keeping us safe. As we sleep tonight, they will be keeping us safe. That is a debt that we can never really adequately repay and the least we can do is spend time in this House today to put on record our gratitude and thanks for their service.

Churchill referred to the Spitfire as a machine of colossal and shattering power. These submarines, in their own way, are our modern answer to that. It is a power that we all hope and pray will never have to be unleashed, but as the right hon. Member for Warley pointed out, the mere fact of its existence makes not just nuclear but all war less likely. If we think about the 1960s and 1970s and the superpower conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, it seems to me that it is almost inevitable at some point that that would have flared into a conflict had it not been prevented by the fact that the consequences of that conflict would have been unthinkable. The act of crossing into West Berlin would have come at too high a price to pay. That remains, still, the fundamental basis for why we need the deterrent.

In the world we live in today, Theodore Roosevelt’s adage to “walk softly and carry a big stick” seems never to have been more apposite. There is the presence, we must acknowledge, of real evil in our world. It is intense and increasingly unpredictable. Whether it be Iran, North Korea or Russia, we all know that there are malign forces in this world who will not act by the rules that we act by, who will not live by the values that we live by, and who set very little value in the sanctity or dignity of human life. That is what we are up against. That is the choice that, as democratic politicians in one of the most powerful countries in the world, it behoves us to make. We would be failing not just ourselves but the rest of the world were we to duck that responsibility.

There was a window in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union when we heard much talk about the peace dividend, but I am a great believer in what Vice-President Cheney said when he said that the “only dividend of peace is peace”. We should not in any way to attempt to do defence on the cheap, or without the resources and tools to make sure we can keep ourselves safe. That is why it is so welcome that the decision to launch the Successor class programme has been made. Indeed, as my right hon. Friend the Chair of the Select Committee and my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) pointed out, it is crucial that we get regular updates and focus on continuing that programme at pace. We cannot afford further slippage. Frankly, we are already at the limit of what we can expect the Vanguard class to continue to deliver.

It is also why we have brave Labour MPs on the Opposition Benches making the case for why we need the strategic nuclear deterrent. This is not a debate for partisanship.

John Spellar: I do not regard it as an act of outstanding courage to speak in support of long-standing and current Labour party policy.

Mr Clarke: I am absolutely delighted that the right hon. Gentleman regards this as an item of faith and that it will be pursued. However, the Leader of the Opposition, the shadow Chancellor, the shadow Home Secretary and indeed, the shadow Defence Secretary voted against the motion of 18 July 2016 in which this House pledged to renew the deterrent, so there is a question over this. Anyone who has seen—certainly in my part of the world—the actions of Labour activists and the noises they make will know that they do not suggest that this is in any way a question settled beyond doubt. That is important and I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Warley for making that case. This should come from both traditions.

Mr Kevan Jones: I know that it has become Tory party policy for there to be a pick and mix on which policy Members support, but one thing I would say about the Leader of the Opposition is that he has made it very clear since becoming leader that he sees the primacy of Labour party conference policy.

Mr Clarke: On that note of great unity, let us resolve the matter there. I very much hope that the Leader of the Opposition is listening to this debate and that he hears the wise words of the right hon. Gentleman.

Quite simply, there is no value to someone being morally pure if they are dead. That is something that we need to underscore time and again in this debate. Our way of life in the west—compassionate, sometimes chaotic, but above all, free—is underpinned only by the security of our defences. That is the ultimate litmus test of our ability to continue to live our lives free in the way that we want to. We owe a debt to those people, who are, frankly, unheralded and very often forgotten about, including by me—I cannot be alone in taking it totally for granted that we have that deterrent ability. When we think about what it requires of the sailors involved and their families to live that life day in, day out, for years, it brings home how much they have contributed. The fact that we have not had another nuclear weapon deployed since 1945 is not an accident; it is precisely because of the principle of deterrence. I think that principle will endure, because I can see no way in which these weapons can be uninvented, and therefore, I see no realistic situation in which we will ever be able to totally disarm.

To answer the Scottish nationalists’ point, the United Kingdom does maintain the minimum possible deterrent consistent with being able to deploy it as required. We are not in any way reckless about it. I absolutely pray that we never have to use it, but the point stands that we must make the message very clear to the rest of the world that we would use it if this country or our allies were attacked in such a barbarous fashion. That applies not only to direct nuclear attack, but to biological and chemical weapons, because those are weapons that need to be understood to be abhorrent and we must have the ability to counteract them if required.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman is wrong when he says that the Government are not reckless. They have not decommissioned a nuclear submarine since 1980. The National Audit Office said last week that the UK is at risk of becoming an irresponsible nuclear power, so he is just wrong when he says that.

Mr Clarke: This debate is about the principle of deterrence. On the decommissioning of the boats—*[Interruption.]* On the decommissioning of the boats, the MOD will make provision to make sure that they are put away, but the point about this debate is—*[Interruption.]* That is under way. The point is that we have—*[Interruption.]* From a sedentary position, I am getting heckled—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Clarke: By all means.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Gentleman should speak to his colleague, the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan)—perhaps she can educate him.

Mr Clarke: The principle of the debate is whether we should have the nuclear deterrent. The Scottish nationalists, for a mixture of bizarre self-loathing of this country and political opportunism—*[Interruption.]* No. I am proud to come from a country that will defend ourselves and our allies. If that is good enough for the United Kingdom, it is certainly good enough for Scotland. The only negative tone in this entire debate has been injected, by common accord, by SNP Members. They are the only ones who want to divide the House—

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Clarke: No, I will not give way. I have had enough negative carping from a bunch of people who, frankly, bring great discredit upon their own country by their constant negativity and the way in which they are the sole dissenting voice in a country that otherwise widely recognises our responsibilities to ourselves and others to stand up for what we believe in. If they will not do it, I certainly will.

In this resolve, we must never falter, because in the end there are those relying on us not to falter in our duties. We must not falter in our duty of gratitude and respect nor in our duty to uphold the military covenant to those who discharge this duty on our behalf. We are very fortunate to have them, and we are very fortunate to have the deterrent. Long may it continue.

5.39 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke).

I want to make a couple of what I consider to be very important points, but let me begin by saying that I think it is really good that the British Parliament is discussing this fundamental issue. I have agreed with most of the speeches that I have heard today—although I have disagreed with the Scottish National party—but I think it important for us to recognise that we sometimes need that clash of views, that clash of opinions, to establish

better public policy. I say that as someone who utterly supports the continuous at-sea deterrent. However, I also strongly believe that it is representative of, and to an extent a political declaration of, the importance of our country on the world stage.

I have no problem at all with stating that view. It is not an old-fashioned view, as was suggested earlier, and it is not a view that Members should somehow not be proud of expressing in this Parliament. We are a senior member of NATO; we are a senior power in the world; and we are a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. Those are fundamental matters for our country, and they bring with them fundamental responsibilities. In my opinion—which is not held by everyone in the Chamber—those responsibilities mean something when it comes to military deployment, diplomacy, and our view of the world. I think that our country makes a massive contribution to stability and peace in many parts of the world, and part of that contribution is the deterrent.

I was very pleased that the Secretary of State—and, indeed, many other Members—observed that we spend a lot of time in this Parliament simply asserting the need for the deterrent. We do not argue the case. We do not take on, in a proper, intellectual way, those who oppose it. We simply dismiss their opposition, and I think that that is wrong. As was pointed out by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), it is perfectly possible, and feasible, and a philosophy that some people support, that having a nuclear deterrent is fundamentally wrong. We should accept that philosophy and argue with it, rather than simply dismissing it.

I think that some of the arguments that have been advanced are very important, but I also think that the argument has to be won in our country again. I have to tell the Minister, as someone who supports the deterrent, that mine is not a view held universally across the country. *[Interruption.]* Not just in Scotland, but throughout the UK, there are people—people in my own party, people in my own family, people in my own community—who do not agree with what I am saying. They will ask me, for example, “Vernon, how does having nuclear weapons defend us against terrorism?” Well, of course they are not meant to defend us against terrorism, but it is no good just saying that; it is necessary to argue it.

We have other ways of defending ourselves against terrorism, through, for instance, special forces, policing and Prevent. However, as many other Members have said, we are witnessing a rise in the activities of Russia and other states, and not simply rogue states. We used to say, “There are rogue states: what happens if North Korea...?” However, it is not about that; it is about what is actually happening in the state of Russia, which, as far as I can see, is a very real threat to our country, to western Europe and to democracy. But we have to explain that, and put that point of view.

Many of my constituents do not see Russia as a threat, in terms of its using nuclear weapons against us, and do not understand why we have to have nuclear weapons to deter it. It is therefore incumbent on people like me to say that it is important for the stability of the alliance—the stability on which NATO vis-à-vis Russia works—that that nuclear deterrent is in place. I think that the concept of mutually assured destruction does bring stability, but it is necessary to argue that constantly.

[*Vernon Coaker*]

Similarly, I understand where the SNP is coming from, and I think it is perfectly legitimate to challenge its members, and to say, “You may have a non-nuclear policy in terms of Scotland, but how does that fit with membership of the NATO alliance?” That is a perfectly reasonable thing to ask. It is not dismissing what they are saying, but it is a challenge.

It is not only people in this Parliament who challenge that. Scottish National party Members know that at their conference in 2012, people resigned from the party because they saw it as a betrayal of policy to hold that a non-nuclear Scotland could still be a member of NATO, as NATO was a nuclear alliance. Indeed, one person said:

“I cannot belong to a party that quite rightly does not wish to hold nuclear weapons on its soil but wishes to join a first-strike nuclear alliance.”

That is a challenge to the SNP. I am not condemning that, but that is a challenge. Members of the SNP will have that argument within the party. All I am saying is, I believe in a continuous at-sea deterrent, and therefore it is important that I argue why I think that brings stability to our country.

President Obama made a brilliant speech in Prague, which inspired the world, in which he talked about global zero. He said he wanted a world where nuclear weapons did not exist. The challenge for people like me, and the challenge for this Parliament, and for the Defence Secretary, the Chair of the Defence Committee and all my hon. Friends, is, do we share that ambition? When has this Parliament ever debated how we re-energise, re-enthuse the drive for multilateral nuclear disarmament?

The Secretary of State rightly pointed to the fact that the last Labour Government and this Government, to be fair, have reduced the number of nuclear weapons and nuclear warheads. Who has got a clue that we have done that? The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) will condemn any possession of nuclear weapons. That is a reasonable position to adopt. As for those of us who support that deterrent, how often have we gone out and explained to the British public that we believe that we can still defend our own country, but we can do it with fewer warheads, fewer missiles, in our submarines? That is a challenge as well.

How do we re-energise the non-proliferation treaty? How do we re-energise multilateral talks? These are big strategic questions for our country—even if there was an independent Scotland, they are massive strategic questions for us, and for NATO. When do we ever debate that, rather than simply hurl accusations at one another? There is a real need for that debate. I ask the Defence Secretary, how do we re-energise those non-proliferation talks, that non-proliferation treaty? Do we really mean that we want a multilateral process that leads to global zero?

Caroline Lucas: On that issue—a good issue—of how we revitalise multilateral talks, does the hon. Gentleman agree that we would have a better chance if our Government had taken up their potential seat at the negotiations for the UN ban treaty, which had 122 countries supporting it? That is multilateral; it is exactly multilateral. Why were we not there?

Vernon Coaker: There is a debate to be had about whether that is multilateral or not.

I believe that we are a global power. I think we are a global force for good—I am not ashamed to say that—and as part of that, our possession of nuclear weapons is accepted in the non-proliferation treaty. We legally hold those weapons, and that contributes, in my view, to global stability and peace. Alongside that, we need to be more assertive in the way that we explain that to the British public. In addition, there is a price to be paid by the Government, hon. Members and this Parliament, which is that we must drive forward on multilateral disarmament, and really mean it when we say, as President Obama did, that we want a world that is completely free of nuclear weapons. We can achieve that, but we do it together, not on our own.

5.49 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker). I note his very positive and passionate input into the debate.

The United Kingdom has a very proud naval tradition spanning several centuries. Various classes of ships and, more recently, modern submarines, together with their highly trained crews and enhanced weaponry systems, have served to protect our island nation and its people effectively, either offensively or defensively as the intelligence gathering and assessments of risks and dynamics determine. I trust that the Royal Navy's stated aim to be guardians and diplomats remains to the fore. I hope it will be a stabilising influence, preventing rather than engaging in conflict, unless needs must. Then and only then will it be used as a last resort.

The former battleship, HMS Dreadnought, was in 1915 the only one of its class to ram and sink an enemy submarine, proving itself to be a powerful deterrent. That is perhaps why a later UK submarine bore the name Dreadnought as a continuing stark reminder of powerful deterrence. The Royal Navy's ballistic missile submarines have kept the United Kingdom and its people safe for the past half century. The Dreadnought programme maintains the UK's posture of continuous at-sea deterrent. It will replace the Vanguard class in or around the 2030s, initially with the existing Trident missiles. It is worthy of note—this has been said before—that since 2010, the Government have reduced the number of operational warheads available to our submarines. I believe that is a step in the right direction.

We are proud that the UK's strategic nuclear deterrent is located in Scotland at Her Majesty's naval base on the Clyde. For some, that may be controversial; others may experience a form of military nimbyism. However, the facility provides significant employment opportunities. I understand that by 2020, Scotland is set to host the entire Royal Navy submarine fleet. That will potentially increase the number of military and civilian employees from approximately 6,800 to a staggering 8,500 in Argyll and Bute.

Carol Monaghan: Even if the hon. Gentleman's figures about the number of people directly involved in the Trident programme are correct, the renewal programme will cost £200 billion. For 6,000 jobs, or whatever figure he cited, that works out at more than £29 million per employee. That is quite an expensive job creation scheme.

Bill Grant: I am not sure what abacus the hon. Lady has bought or where she purchased it. I would return her abacus or calculator to where she bought it and ask them to check that it is indeed accurate.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I think the point that my hon. Friend is making is that we cannot put a price on safety, security and the ability to sleep at night. Those people give their lives to keep us safe, and there is an impact on their families. It is a peripheral benefit that there are jobs for the people of Scotland. I find it demeaning that the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) says that that is not a fair price to pay.

Bill Grant: The word we are looking for when we talk about the protection of our country and its people is “priceless”.

It would be remiss of me to fail to mention the delayed safe disposal of the end-of-life nuclear submarines, which have been mentioned. It has been some time; that point was well made. I understand that the Government are in constructive negotiations to resolve that somewhat belated, but very important, project. I am sure they will do so, because we have to resolve it.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Can the hon. Gentleman tell me three things? How are those negotiations going, who are they happening with, and should there be a public inquiry?

Bill Grant: I am sure it will come as no surprise that I am not privy to those discussions and conversations. *[Interruption.]* My goodness me! I am entitled to talk. Is the hon. Gentleman taking away that entitlement of fellow parliamentarians now? What a question to the MOD!

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Can we restore some semblance of politeness to this debate? It is an important debate, and it was going quite well. I do not want the other end of the Chamber to descend into a shouting match. I really mean that. It is important that we discuss this important issue and respect each other's views.

Bill Grant: I apologise if I have caused any inconvenience to the Chamber this afternoon.

What is most important in this debate is that I, as a proud Scot, a proud parliamentarian and a proud Unionist, pass on my thanks and those of many others to the submariners, past and present, for keeping us safe for half a century, all day, every day, for 18,250 consecutive days. They are rightly proud of that record, and we should be proud of them.

I hope that the Minister agrees that we should never lose sight of the focus of the treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and that he can confirm today that it remains the UK's long-term goal to be part of a world without nuclear weapons.

5.55 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): When I rose to make my maiden speech on 1 July 2015, I touched on the Trident programme, because it is close to my heart. In fact, it is very close to my constituency. At the time, I mentioned that Trident seemed to be a bit of an abstract

concept. People know it is out there, but they do not know what it is, how much it costs, how much it cannot be used and what it is actually doing as a deterrent.

If people stand on the shore of my constituency, they will often see Vanguard class submarines moving silently through the deep waters. They catch the sunlight, which shimmers along their long, sleek, black bodies as they cut through the surface of the water. Their colour may suggest giant eels, but they lack the elegance. They are, however, engineering marvels. It takes some doing to fire a missile from beneath the water's surface, project it through the water until it breaks free, and manage two controlled explosions that project the missile to a pre-defined target where ballistic missiles carrying nuclear warheads are released and either explode on impact or are exploded automatically at the required height to cause maximum death and destruction. Mankind has never lacked ingenuity when it comes to inventing ways of killing each other. I cannot help but wonder what else we could have achieved with all that time, effort, ingenuity and money.

The issue we have is that successive Governments of the United Kingdom have supported and expanded the nuclear weapons programme at eye-watering cost. Why? When I sit in the House of Commons, I talk to many Members who support Trident. I can tell them that these weapons can kill tens of millions of people. But they know that. I can tell them that the watershed will be poisoned, crops will fail and many more will die in the most degrading ways from famine, pestilence and plague. But they know that. I can share stories of survivors, such as Setsuko Thurlow, who told me of people falling to the ground, bellies extended and bursting as they hit the ground, of people trying to carry their own eyes that had fallen out of their heads, and of people with their flesh falling off their bones as they died in agony.

I can also tell Members that WMD have not stopped wars across the globe from Vietnam to Afghanistan. But they know that. I can tell them that WMD are no protection from terrorism. But they know that. I can tell them that the £205 billion could be spent on health, education, housing, transport or even financing our conventional armed forces. But they know that, too.

The majority of supporters of WMD are just like me with one vital difference. They believe that WMD are a deterrent. They believe their existence has kept us safe. As those weapons have existed during a period in which we have avoided wars on the scale of the first and second world wars, I can see where they are coming from. If people believe that keeping their guard up is keeping them safe, then lowering their guard is a frightening thing to do. In this case, they are so frightened that they are prepared to carry out the greatest atrocity humankind has ever perpetrated, and have it done in their name. Well, not in my name. Not all countries believe that nuclear warfare is required. Maybe as many as nine countries feel the need to have nuclear weapons, out of 200.

Dr Julian Lewis: I make one point for the hon. Gentleman's consideration—one could say exactly the same thing about poison gas, which was used in the first world war and not in the second. It was not used in the second because of fear of overwhelming retaliation. The British warned that we had those stocks and that

[Dr Julian Lewis]

we would retaliate not only on our own behalf but on behalf of our allies such as Russia. The question is, which keeps the peace?

Ronnie Cowan: We could say that about almost any weapon that we have managed to invent. The threat escalates because such weapons exist. We sit in this Chamber to debate all sorts of subjects, which we sometimes try to do in a fairly amicable manner. If that escalated and went beyond debate, it could turn to violence—but it does not, because we respect each other, we back off and we discuss it. We say to kids in the streets, “Don’t carry knives. If you are carrying one and I’m carrying one, someone will get stabbed.” We talk to those kids, saying, “Don’t carry those weapons,” yet here in this place our attitude towards ending war is to escalate the weapons that people can carry.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): My hon. Friend makes a point about weapons being available. Does he agree with the statement of the United Nations Canberra Commission:

“So long as any state has nuclear weapons, others will want them. So long as any such weapons remain, it defies credibility that they will not one day be used, by accident, miscalculation or design...It is sheer luck that the world has escaped such catastrophe until now”?

Ronnie Cowan: I absolutely endorse that statement. I find it ironic that we are debating this as we head out of the most effective peacekeeping organisation in Europe, the European Union. When we sit down with representatives of foreign countries on a day-to-day basis to discuss all things political, that breeds understanding and co-operation. It generates trade and mutually beneficial outcomes. We can travel and experience life through others’ eyes. We can experience their culture and values. We gain better understanding of them and of ourselves. That is a deterrent; that leads to peace.

Threats just lead to the escalation of threats. That is why some feel the need to replace and upgrade our WMD systems, but all that does is to put us into an upward spiral of mistrust and an ever increasing cost to maintain and develop our deterrent. We have 20 submarines that require decommissioning at an estimated cost of £7.5 billion. Since the end of the cold war, the ballistic missiles that would carry the nuclear payload have not been targeted at any specified location, which raises the question of the legality of the commanding officer giving the go to launch the missile when he does not know the target, and so does not know if it is legal—yet we ask him to do that.

We must ask serious questions of the existing system and its proposed replacement. The advent of underwater drone technologies and cyber-capabilities could render submarine-based nuclear systems obsolete. Can we guarantee that those weapons could not be turned on us by advanced cyber-attacks?

It cannot be denied that manufacturers of submarines, missiles and ancillary components of the Trident programme have created and supported many jobs over the years and that people employed in the sector have a right to express concerns about their employment futures. However, those people should not be held to ransom or financially blackmailed. It is not beyond the wit of man to utilise some of the existing skillsets and to retrain

others for a conventional navy, one that is fit for purpose to defend a unique coastline and the waters of the United Kingdom—currently, we do not have one.

That is what we shall do in an independent Scotland: remove the Trident programme and replace it with a military base at Faslane and Coulport, one that fits the needs of a small independent nation situated in northern Europe in the 21st century and employs the same workforce. We would actively work towards creating a more stable planet, where peace, love and understanding are valued more than weapons of mass destruction.

6.3 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I am grateful to be able to follow the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan). I respect the passion and conviction that he brings to these arguments, but I fundamentally disagree with him. The debate was opened superbly by the Secretary of State. His predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), gave an outstanding speech, as did someone we could rightly call President Moon, the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon).

I rise to speak in this debate because it relates to a matter of principle for me and many of my colleagues. We have heard many things from SNP Members during the hours of this debate, but I assure the House that they do not speak for Scotland. The SNP is not Scotland, and its Members do not speak for the majority of Scots.

It is the first and most important duty of the state to ensure the safety and security of our country, and my firm belief and contention is that the continuous at-sea deterrent is essential to that. There is a clear moral case for it and my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) made that case in a superb speech, so I do not intend to go over the same ground. It is our responsibility as parliamentarians to ensure that we are safe as a country and ensure not only that the peace is preserved, but that the cause of peace is promoted in the world. Peace is preserved through strength and threatened by weakness. That is the lesson of history.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman is right. The fact of the matter is that the possession of nuclear weapons by the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and other western countries in NATO is the peacemaker. That is the deciding factor for other countries not to attack. Being a nuclear power brings peace, but that fact has been lost in this debate by some in this Chamber.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. History shows that a balance of threat in the world is a real deterrent to aggression.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Gentleman talks about history and peace, but I remind him that 25% of the UN’s peacekeeping force during the cold war came from the four Nordic countries. What is wrong with a defence posture similar to theirs?

Stephen Kerr: As I will say later on, we are a peacekeeper and peacemaker because of our commitment to freedom and its defence. We are protected and insured against aggression by our collective will and our collective commitment to stay strong, but we must be prepared to commit resources to that end. While we are rightly

proud of our armed forces, which are the undoubtedly the best in the world—I have heard the Defence Secretary on several occasions say that they represent the best of us and the best of our Union—and proud of their operational capabilities and reach, I worry that they are simply not big enough for everything we ask of them. I remind the House, although it needs little reminder, that behind our men and women in the Queen's uniform there are families.

Scotland's national motto—the House will forgive my schoolboy Latin—is “*Nemo me impune lacessit*,” which, appropriately for this debate, means, “No one provokes me with impunity.” In Scots, we might say, “Wha daur meddle wi’ me?” Our strength is not only our defence, but defence to our friends and allies in NATO, and the hon. Member for Bridgend spoke so well about the importance of the combined strengths of NATO's members. The UK is not a warmonger. We take our nuclear non-proliferation obligations seriously and remain committed, as a country, to the long-term goal of a world without nuclear weapons, and the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) made an outstanding contribution on that point.

However, the nuclear arsenal is a vital part of western defence under the NATO umbrella. We enjoy a hard-won peace, and there has been no recent major state-on-state conflict, principally because of the strength of resolve of the members of NATO, to which I am proud that we contribute. Aggressors need to know that they will face consequences. Our love of peace should not be misinterpreted by anyone. We are resolved to protect it by being strong in the deployment of soft power through diplomacy and hard power through our armed forces. Our security is put at risk by those who would simply dismantle such capabilities. We should not glory in weapons systems. This country, rightly, does not parade its missiles, as some countries do, but we should not be ashamed of our nuclear stance.

The Leader of the Opposition, who has always opposed nuclear weapons from a position of principle, would put our country at risk if he ever sat in 10 Downing Street. Anyone aspiring to this country's greatest office of government should be prepared to put our national security front and centre, and anyone who aspires to that job must accept the important place of the nuclear deterrent in our defensive formation.

The SNP position is clearer than Labour's, and the position derives from the party's position on independence. The House needs to understand that, for the past few years, the SNP has been busy trying to build a wide coalition of support in Scotland to break up the United Kingdom, and it is doing that by pivoting, contorting and doing whatever it has to do to mop up as much support as possible.

It is not so long ago that the SNP was not just not in favour of NATO but was anti-NATO, and Alex Salmond persuaded his followers that they needed to be more realistic about the mood of the most conservative nation in these British Isles, namely the Scots, who would never wear the idea of us walking away from our obligations and responsibilities to other free people in the world. He persuaded the party that it needed to embrace the idea of NATO, and it now has this half-hearted position of saying that it would be in NATO on certain conditions. But those conditions would make Scotland an unsuitable and inappropriate member of NATO. There are many principled proponents of disarmament in the SNP.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Is it the hon. Gentleman's policy that, if Scotland votes for independence, it should not be a member of NATO?

Stephen Kerr: I will do everything in my power to make sure that Scotland remains part of the United Kingdom. Until my last breath, I will make the argument for my country remaining part of the most successful Union in hundreds of years.

I am running out of time, so I simply say that I have great respect for those who serve in our armed forces. I have met many submariners and former submariners, and I cannot but be impressed by their courage and resolve. The life these people have chosen to lead in defence of our country is one of sacrifice and commitment. They are at sea for many months, separated from family and friends, in cramped and, I would say, claustrophobic conditions.

There is no doubt in my mind about the need for a continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent. The world has changed and will continue to change, but the insurance policy of our nuclear submarine fleet and the missiles and weapons it carries is still an essential part of our national defence. We enjoy a hard-won peace, but it is a watchful peace that requires eternal vigilance by our submariners, armed forces and security forces, and they deserve the support of our nation's Parliament.

6.13 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I start by declaring an interest. My husband served on Trident submarines for most of his 17-year service in the Royal Navy. His final post before retiring was as the weapon engineer officer on HMS Victorious. He brought her through refit in Devonport and sea trials from Faslane, and he carried out the firing during the 2009 demonstration and shakedown operation off the coast of Florida. There are rumours that jelly babies are consumed during nuclear firing chain message authentications, but that is not something he would confirm before this debate.

Following the DASO firing, Victorious re-entered full service and, following an extremely busy year, the crew carried out a deterrence patrol over Christmas 2009. It gives me great pleasure to say that my granny's Christmas tree went on that patrol. When my husband finally left Victorious, he forgot to take my granny's Christmas tree. I wonder if any crew members would be able to confirm whether that Christmas tree—a little white optical fibre fellow—is still on board. For the role he played, my husband received the Commander-in-Chief, Fleet commendation, an award that still hangs proudly in our home in Whiteinch in Glasgow.

Despite my pride in my husband's service, my opposition to Trident has been constant. As a teenager my views were formed over the cold war and fears of mutually assured destruction, and my earliest political campaigns, long before I ever thought to consider Scottish independence, were against Trident. Over time the indiscriminate nature of these weapons, which are designed to cause such widespread devastation, has meant that I will never support Trident or its successor. That is regardless of whether we can afford these platforms, which, to be frank, as conventional forces are being cut to the bone, we cannot. In fact, our maritime capabilities are so depleted that we no longer have any major

[Carol Monaghan]

warships based in Scotland. This is at a time when threats from Russia are at their greatest for a generation. We have repeatedly had to rely on our allies when incursions occur. On at least two occasions in 2016, Russian submarines were suspected of operating off Faslane, and the UK had to seek assistance from its allies to help track those intruders. Those incursions fit a pattern of Russia testing defences and seeking crucial information about the Vanguard boats, namely the acoustic signature that allows them to be tracked. If Russia were able to obtain a recording of the signature, it would have serious implications for the UK's deterrent.

Are we increasing conventional capabilities to help deal with that? No: we decided to scrap the entire fleet of Nimrods. Although the Nimrods will eventually be replaced by the P-8, the first of which is expected in Lossiemouth in 2020, we have been playing Russian roulette for the past 10 years and will continue to do so unless we increase conventional capabilities, particularly around the north of Scotland. If we were to find ourselves under attack, as has happened in Crimea, our defences are being whittled down to two options: we can either nuke them or chase them away with pitchforks. How on earth does that make us safer?

The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) said that the SNP does not speak for Scotland. Okay, we may not speak for some of Scotland, but our position on Trident is supported by the Scottish Government, the Scottish Labour party, the Scottish Greens, the Church of Scotland, the Catholic Church in Scotland and Scottish civil society. I would suggest that it is the Tories who are out of kilter with the Scottish people.

This is a debate to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the continuous at-sea deterrent. I take no pleasure in the money and resources that have been funnelled into this vanity project, which allows Britain to have a seat at the big boys' table at the UN, to the detriment of other parts of our armed forces. I take no pleasure in the money that is thrown into the maintenance and into the successor project, while at the same time child poverty is at the highest level that many of us have seen in our lifetime.

I pay tribute to the men, and now women, who have made the commitment to serve. People often talk about the difficulties of separation and the three-month patrols, but those who have a partner on one of the boats will know that in many ways the patrol is the most settled time. The work-up period and testing, false starts and defects mean that families cope with massive upheaval in the lead up to the actual patrol, repeatedly saying big bye-byes only to have partners return the next day and children not really knowing whether this is the time that daddy will disappear. That puts enormous strain on families and relationships—a strain that is not always recognised.

It is time that the MOD considered the realities of modern-day families. In the past, partners and families would live close to the base with a ready-made support network. Recognising that spouses have their own careers is important to a modern-day armed forces.

Submariners do an incredible job and are the most highly skilled personnel in the armed forces. They have many career options on leaving, so retention issues leave

serious skill shortages in the submarine service. The MOD has said that no submarine goes to sea without the minimum complement of suitably qualified and experienced personnel required to operate the boat safely and that vacancies are managed to ensure that safety and operational capability are never compromised, but that is done off the back of submariners. Severe shortages of suitably skilled personnel meant that, in my husband's last year in the Navy, he had six days' leave. That included weekends. That is simply not sustainable. There comes a point when pride in serving cannot make up for poor conditions of service. Ultimately, many choose between service and seeing their children grow up. I argue that despite the money being thrown at Trident, its ultimate demise will be caused by a failure to support the personnel and by gaps in critical skills.

As we mark 50 years of the continuous at-sea deterrent and recognise the dedication of those serving in the silent service, I say that the time has come to invest properly in cyber, in conventional defence and in our personnel. Despite campaigning actively against the platform, I and my hon. Friends pay tribute to those who have served and to those who continue to serve.

6.21 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): It is a real pleasure and honour to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), because she speaks with real authority and eloquence about these issues. I am happy to speak as well in my capacity as chair of the cross-party group on nuclear disarmament. Let me put it on the record at the top of my speech that I am very happy to pay tribute to the submariners for their service to this country and to their families for the sacrifice that they make, which the hon. Lady has set out very clearly.

I do not think that there is any contradiction between paying tribute to that service and also being very clear that, for me, nuclear weapons are abhorrent. Others have said during this debate that it is inconsistent to have a nuclear deterrent if we are not prepared to use it. I absolutely agree with that, and I am very proud to say that I would not, under any circumstances, use nuclear weapons, and still less would I support the Prime Minister's position of a first use of nuclear weapons. I believe that nuclear weapons are indiscriminate, illegal and obscene.

Let us just think what that first strike, which the Prime Minister was so proud not to rule out, could really mean. The heat of a nuclear explosion reaches a temperature of several million degrees centigrade. Over a wide area, the resulting heat flash literally vaporises all human tissue. At Hiroshima, within a radius of half a mile, the only remains of the people caught in the open were their shadows burned into stone. People inside buildings will be indirectly killed by the blast and the heat effects as buildings collapse and all inflammable materials burst into flames. The immediate death rate in that area will be over 90%. Individual fires will combine to produce a fire storm as all the oxygen is consumed. As the heat rises, air is drawn in from the periphery at or near ground level. This results in lethal hurricane-force winds and perpetuates the fire as the fresh oxygen is burned. The contamination will continue potentially for hundreds of thousands of years. The Red Cross has estimated that 1 billion people around the world could face starvation as a result of a nuclear war.

Let me be very clear: I hate all war, but there is something particular about nuclear war. Simply saying that it is in the same category as other forms of war is wrong. What is wrong as well is to say that we cannot uninvent things that have already been invented. We saw what happened when it came to chemical weapons, biological weapons and cluster munitions being banned. If there was more support from countries such as the UK, nuclear weapons could be banned as well. There was the UN treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons, and I found it frankly outrageous that the UK Government could not even be bothered to turn up to the talks. That was a campaign that was run throughout the world. One hundred and twenty two countries supported the nuclear ban treaty. The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons won the Nobel peace prize for its efforts. The treaty is a strong and comprehensive text, with the potential to achieve a world without nuclear weapons. It opened for signature in September 2017 and will enter into force when 50 states have ratified it. It has so far been signed by 70 states and ratified by 22, and more and more are signing up.

I want to counter the argument made from the Labour Benches that the treaty is somehow not multilateral. It is, not least because there is no requirement for a country to join; there is no requirement on a country to have forgone their nuclear weapons before joining. If the UK had used its considerable clout on the world stage to have really shown some leadership on this issue, there could have been at least a chance of getting the countries around the table to have gone away and begun the process multilaterally of getting rid of their weapons.

John Spellar: The hon. Lady is very critical of the United Kingdom in this respect, but did Russia, China, France and the United States—in other words, the declared nuclear weapon states—attend either? Surely this is just another cul-de-sac, whereas the real way of reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons is through negotiations, primarily between Russia and the United States initially, but then involving all the nuclear weapon states. Is not that real politics, rather than gesture politics?

Caroline Lucas: If the right hon. Gentleman really thinks that 122 countries around the world are engaging in gesture politics, I would suggest to him that it is perhaps more a gesture from him than it is from them. I believe in Britain taking a leadership role. Perhaps he does not. The constant sitting back and waiting for something else to happen—doing the wrong thing—would frankly be unconscionable.

It is very easy to characterise those of us who are against nuclear weapons as somehow not living in the real world, so perhaps I could just remind the House that there are plenty of people within the military world who do not think that nuclear weapons are a useful tool going forward. Back in 2014, senior political and diplomatic figures—including people such as the former Conservative Foreign Secretary Sir Malcolm Rifkind, former Defence Secretary Des Browne and former Foreign Secretary Lord Owen—came together with very high-ranking military personnel to say that they believe that the risks posed by nuclear weapons and the international dynamics that could lead to nuclear weapons being used are being underestimated and that those risks are insufficiently understood by world leaders.

The Government's main argument for replacing Trident appears to be that it is the ultimate insurance in an uncertain world. I argue that they fail to acknowledge that it is our very possession of nuclear weapons that is making that world more uncertain. Nor have the advocates of nuclear weapons ever explained why, if Trident is so vital to protecting us, that is not also the case for every other country in the world. The Secretary of State did not answer me at the beginning of this debate—it seems a long time ago now—when I put it to him that we have no moral arguments to put to other countries to ask them not to acquire nuclear weapons if we ourselves are not only keeping them but upgrading them. I put it to him again that a world in which every country is striving for, and potentially achieving, nuclear weapons would be an awful lot more dangerous than the world we have today.

Dr Julian Lewis: Let me try this question again. If we were to give up our nuclear weapons, which other countries that possess nuclear weapons would follow suit? Does the hon. Lady know how many nuclear warheads have been reduced as a result of us reducing our nuclear warhead totals unilaterally? The answer is a big fat zero.

Caroline Lucas: That is why one needs international processes such as the UN treaty that I have described, which is supported by 122 countries, to make that happen. Although I am personally in favour of unilateral nuclear disarmament, that is not the case that I am making this afternoon. I am moving one step towards people such as hon. Members like himself—or right hon. Members like himself, perhaps, I cannot really remember—who I completely understand are never going to be persuaded by unilateral nuclear disarmament, but who I hope might be willing to engage in a serious argument about multilateral nuclear disarmament.

So far there has been very little recognition in this debate of the fact that nuclear weapons systems are themselves fallible. According to a shocking report by Chatham House, there have been 13 incidents since 1962 in which nuclear weapons have very nearly been launched. One of the most dramatic, in 1983, was when Stanislav Petrov, the duty officer in a Soviet nuclear war early-warning centre, found his system warning of the launch of five US missiles. After a few moments of agonising, he judged it, thankfully and correctly, to be a false alarm. If he had reached a different conclusion and passed the information up the control chain, that could have triggered the firing of nuclear missiles from Russia.

Deidre Brock: Parliamentary questions I have asked uncovered the shocking fact that since 2006 there have been 789 nuclear safety incidents at Coulport and Faslane, and half of the incidents at Faslane have taken place in just the past four years. Does the hon. Lady agree that it is a very serious worry that nuclear safety incidents are on the rise under the watch of a Government who should not have control of a TV remote, let alone the most dangerous weapons on the planet?

Caroline Lucas: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. She rightly shines a spotlight on issues that far too rarely get covered in the media or even in debates such as this one.

[Caroline Lucas]

The UK Government have shamefully refused to participate in the treaty negotiations I have been describing while nevertheless claiming that they share the goal of a nuclear weapons-free world. But it is not too late to make amends. The Government should now engage constructively and work towards signing that treaty and supporting the global moves towards the total elimination of nuclear weapons. That, unlike a willingness to launch nuclear weapons and incinerate millions of innocent people, or to waste billions on a weapon that will never be used and therefore serves no evident purpose, would be the true test of a Prime Minister's leadership.

6.31 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I am very pleased that we have had this excellent and important debate on the 50th anniversary of the continuous at-sea deterrent. I apologise if I do not mention every single Member who has made a contribution. It is very important, to begin with, for us to recognise where we are. The continuous at-sea deterrent is currently provided by four Vanguard class submarines carrying the Trident missile system. In July 2016, this House voted to maintain the UK's nuclear deterrent beyond the early 2030s, when the Dreadnought class submarines will replace the Vanguards. The first of the new class will enter service in the early 2030s.

One of the strong features of this debate has been the fact that many—indeed, most—Members have paid genuine tribute to the women and men, and families, who support our at-sea deterrent. It is important that this House places on record that we are truly grateful for their ongoing commitment. I think, in particular, of the contributions by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), and the right hon. Members for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) and for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), as well as the right hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), whose review is truly excellent. I absolutely agree with him, and I hope that the Government take his ideas forward.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) made an important contribution. He not only, rightly, placed an emphasis on paying tribute to our servicemen and women, but made the point that all of us, collectively, who believe in the concept of deterrence need to make the case to the people of this country. He also pointed out that it is very important that we stress that none of us wants to keep nuclear weapons. We are not in favour of nuclear weapons; we want to see a peaceful world and an impetus given to the process of multilateralism.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Why, then, has not a single Labour Member of Parliament spoken out against nuclear weapons in this debate?

Wayne David: Because we take it for granted that we are all against nuclear weapons. None of us wants to see nuclear weapons being used. The most effective way to preserve peace, however, is the concept of deterrence.

Mr Kevan Jones: The alternative position is that of the SNP, which wants the UK to give up its nuclear weapons, but is quite happy to be secure under NATO's European umbrella.

Wayne David: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. I will come on to the SNP's interesting position in a moment.

The case for this country's nuclear deterrent is overwhelming. It has been put forward with eloquence and determination by the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) and others, but it was particularly well put by the Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis). I would like to quote an article that he wrote back in 2006:

"the purpose of a British nuclear deterrent remains what it has always been: to minimize the prospect of the United Kingdom being attacked by mass destruction weapons. It is not a panacea and it is not designed to forestall every type of threat. Nevertheless, the threat which it is designed to counter is so overwhelming that no other form of military capability could manage to avert it."

That was true when he wrote it and it is certainly the case today.

This is a debate that has gone on for generations; the debate about deterrence is not new. In that context, I would like to refer to one of my predecessors, a man by the name of Morgan Jones. He was the first conscientious objector elected to Parliament and he represented Caerphilly. I have produced a book on him that will be available in all good bookshops in three weeks' time. In the early 1930s, Morgan Jones, who had been a strong pacifist in the first world war and throughout the 1920s, reluctantly came to the conclusion that it was necessary for Britain to defend freedom and protect democracy by re-arming and being prepared to stand up against the evil of fascism. That is an important lesson that we should not forget today.

Some people argue that the world has changed over the past few years: the polarisation between east and west—between the free world and the so-called communist world—no longer mars the globe and we have seen the emergence of non-state players such as al-Qaeda and ISIL. The world has changed, yes, but let us be clear that the threat of state players is still with us. Recently, we have seen the development of a new style of old-style nationalism, particularly in China and Russia. I pay tribute to the way my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) has highlighted these facts very clearly. We see China becoming increasingly assertive in the South China sea—the East sea as the Vietnamese refer to it. We have also seen Russia being increasingly assertive and, I have to say, duplicitous with regard to Ukraine, Estonia and many other places.

Although the case for modern deterrence is overwhelming, one of the interesting points of the debate has been the position articulated by the Scottish National party. If anybody wants to have their cake and eat it, it is the SNP Members. We heard from the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) and the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) that they want nothing to do with the nuclear deterrent and they want Britain to abandon it. Nevertheless, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham said, they want to continue to be part of NATO, which of course is a nuclear alliance.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: While it is the hon. Gentleman's position that the workers of the world should ignite, the position of the Scottish Labour party

is the same as that of the Scottish National party. Can he explain why the Scottish Labour party is wrong and he is right?

Wayne David: I have no doubt whatever that this is not a devolved matter, so the policy that counts is that of the British Labour party. I would like to quote the manifesto on which all Labour Members were elected in 2017. It said very clearly:

“Labour supports the renewal of the Trident nuclear deterrent. As a nuclear-armed power, our country has a responsibility to fulfil our obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.”

We want to see multilateral disarmament—yes, we want to encourage that process—but we are also four-square in support of Britain’s nuclear deterrent.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I want to clarify his position from what he said in response to my last intervention. Does Scottish Labour’s policy not matter because Westminster Labour’s policy is for Trident renewal?

Wayne David: I am simply pointing out what should be blindingly obvious: decisions on these matters are made here. We all want different points of view to be expressed—we value points of view in all parts of the United Kingdom—but decisions on Britain’s nuclear deterrent are made in this House.

It is also interesting that, when we heard contributions from SNP Members, they were blasé about saying, “Yes, we don’t want the nuclear deterrent. We are quite prepared to see it shipped out of Faslane.” But what would be put in its place? They were very reluctant to give any indication of that. *[Interruption.]* Hang on a second. They talk blandly about having a Scottish navy, but how much would that cost, and what frigates would they buy? We would like to know.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald *rose—*

Wayne David: Now is that opportunity—tell us.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Let me make one thing perfectly clear—he should remember this, as his party put up a poster boy for the Better Together campaign; I do not see him in his place—when we make promises in shipbuilding, unlike him or the lot opposite him, they will not be broken.

Wayne David: That is a cardinal example of the SNP being unwilling or unable to answer a straightforward question: all talk, no action, full of hot air. That is why the SNP is getting nowhere fast in Scotland.

I want to ask one question of the Government before I sit down. We heard earlier from the Secretary of State that the Dreadnought programme is to cost £31 billion, with a contingency built in. However, not so long ago a National Audit Office report pointed out that the programme was extremely expensive, and it is. Of course, it is inevitably putting a huge strain on the MOD’s overall equipment plan. We know that the MOD budget faces enormous difficulties, so I ask the Minister whether he can make any comment about the programme’s cost and how any future cost escalation will be built in.

I also ask the Minister to return to the often put and discussed question whether the whole programme should be outside the MOD’s budget. It has been suggested

that the Treasury is reluctant, and we know that relations between the MOD and the Treasury are not too good and have not been for some time. Does he think the programme and the amount of expenditure is so important that a strong case needs to be made now to ensure that it is taken out of the MOD’s budget and considered separately?

This has been a good debate. We have all paid genuine tribute to the men and women who have kept us safe in this country. We live in a world that has changed profoundly since the decision of Clem Attlee and his Government to give the UK an independent nuclear deterrent, but deterrence is still vital, and the best way to maintain deterrence—and therefore peace—is through our continuous at-sea deterrent.

6.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): We have had a useful and important debate in which we have heard passionate arguments both in support of our continuous at-sea deterrent, and against it. I support the strong arguments made by right hon. and hon. Members for our deterrent, and while I completely disagree with those who oppose it, I do respect the fact that they have stuck to their principled views.

Before addressing some of the points raised today, I think it would be useful to remind ourselves of the continuing rationale of our independent nuclear deterrent. Following its July summit in Brussels, NATO made it clear that:

“As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance.”

The UK’s independent strategic nuclear force, together with that of France, plays a vital deterrent role and contributes significantly to the overall security of the alliance. NATO also said:

“These Allies’ separate centres of decision-making contribute to deterrence by complicating the calculations of potential adversaries.”

We recognise the common threats and our common purpose in facing them down. It is ultimately by standing together that we strengthen our deterrence and shore up the rules-based international order. That is what underpins NATO’s nuclear umbrella.

I now turn to the points raised during the debate today. The Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), asked me to answer a few questions, particularly on financing. As she will know and as has just been mentioned, we have the £10 billion contingency. Through that, we have been bringing forward parts of the project early so that we can try to have as much time as possible, and bring in cost savings where necessary. Of course, we are working closely with all the industry to make sure that this is delivered on time. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State meets the Treasury regularly, and the Treasury fully understands the importance of our nuclear deterrent.

On Brexit, again, the Ministry of Defence continues to meet our suppliers regularly to ensure that they have robust plans, whatever the outcome of the negotiations, and that work is extensive. On the warhead, work continues to transition. We continue to refine the options and the technical solutions that will inform the final Government decision, bearing in mind that the replacement is not really required until the late 2030s or possibly even later.

[*Stuart Andrew*]

I have heard my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the Chair of the Defence Committee, advocate the importance of our nuclear deterrent for many years, and he always puts those points extremely effectively. He rightly pointed out the support that exists for it in this House, with the votes that have taken place on numerous occasions, and he rightly reflected the nation's support for our deterrent, with some two thirds of the population supporting it.

If I remember rightly, the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) started with a quote about big willies and little willies, but I am not going to go there personally. He also said that this was a backslapping exercise, and I have to say that I think many Members on both sides of the House found that a bit out of order. This is certainly not about backslapping, because the first job of any Government is the defence of our nation. This debate is about marking the gratitude to those who have made sure that our country has remained safe.

As others have already said and pointed out, particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) and the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), NATO is a nuclear alliance, and there are therefore conflicts in the position that the SNP has taken.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Will the Minister give way?

Stuart Andrew: No, I am still referring to the points the hon. Gentleman made, if he will just give me some time.

The hon. Gentleman also raised the issue of decommissioning and the NAO report. I acknowledge, as does the report, that this issue is very complex. I accept that this has gone on for too long. However, the report also recognises that the Department and the Government are actually taking the initial steps. I am personally taking an interest in this—following several meetings I have had with the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard); the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman), who represents Rosyth; and my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan)—and I will continue to work on it. I should make it clear that in August we completed the initial dismantling with Swiftsure, and we are now commencing with Resolution. We are working on a plan, as the first Government to do so for many years.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: That is fair enough, and I hope the Minister does make progress, which no one wants to see more than I do. May I take him back to the point he made about the Scottish National party position on NATO? An independent Scotland's place in NATO is supported by none other than the former UK ambassador to NATO, Dame Mariot Leslie, who was ambassador at the time of the coalition. She is right, is she not?

Stuart Andrew: It feels as if the Scottish National party wants to be protected by nuclear weapons but have no responsibility for them whatever.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald *rose*—

Stuart Andrew: In fairness, there were lots of speakers and I want to get through them all, and we have heard quite a lot from the hon. Gentleman today.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks rightly reminds us that the deterrent is used every day. To say that it is not used is really quite an insult to all those who work so hard on our behalf. He reminded us of the growing threat, not least from Russia and North Korea, and talked about the importance of maintaining our country's independence.

The hon. Member for Bridgend made a very valid point about reminding ourselves of the importance of NATO to us, and the importance of our deterrent being an at-sea deterrent. The fact that it is hidden is very important in keeping our adversaries guessing.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) held the position I currently have. I have great admiration for him. He is clearly respected right across industry, particularly for his recent report. I will come on to prosperity later.

The right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) rightly recognised the commitment to the NPT, which is really important. We do want a reduction in nuclear weapons. The question is how we go about it. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State never fears fighting our corner when it comes to the Treasury.

The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) said that the future of Faslane would be safe in an independent Scotland. That is a very big statement for the SNP to make without a nuclear enterprise. It would be a cause of great concern, I am sure, for the 127 Scottish companies who are in the supply chain that generates business for them of £130 million. I also wonder how many of our service personnel would actually want to serve in Scotland when they are taxed so much. It is only thanks to the mitigation of this Government that we are able to help them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Stuart Andrew: I want to get through my responses to the debate. Whenever we have these debates, Scottish National party Members try to disrupt the closing speeches. I have given way once and I will carry on.

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan)—yes, she is wearing a submariner's sweater—spoke eloquently about the detailed day-to-day experience of servicemen and servicewomen. Having been on one of those submarines, I will be honest and say that I am not sure that I could do it. It is the thought of being in a confined space for that length of time, so the ability to do that is something I always admire. What strikes me is how proud service personnel are and how much they love doing the role.

The hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) has long been an advocate of the continuous at-sea deterrent, holding many events in the House over recent years. He rightly talked about the workers in Barrow and the huge contribution they make to this national exercise. We should of course recognise the contribution made by those in all parts of the country. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport rightly pointed out the contribution those in his constituency make to the deterrent. The hon. Member for Barrow and Furness talked about the medal campaign. He will

have heard my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State say that he will look into the issue. I will make sure we do that as quickly as possible.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) talked about his experience of going on board. I repeat my remarks about admiring the people who work in this service.

The right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) rightly reminded us of the modern-day threats—not just in intentions, but in the capability that is being built up by many of our adversaries. It is important that we recognise that. He also rightly reminded us that many campaigners will talk about the weapons that we have pointing in one direction, but they never refer to the weapons that may be pointing at us.

The hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) made strong and powerful points. He was absolutely right that being a nation with a permanent seat at the UN Security Council and a member of NATO comes with a responsibility. It is important that we stand up, and successive Governments have been proud to do that. The point he made that really struck home to me was that we are pretty poor at explaining why our deterrent is needed and advocating the case for it. He is absolutely right: I do not think the public are fully aware of the growing threats that we face and the need for this in the way that people were perhaps aware in the cold war in the '80s and '90s. It is also important to remind people, as he said, that we have done a lot of work to reduce the number of weapons globally. In 1986, there were 64,500 nuclear weapons. Now, there are 14,500. This is also the 50th anniversary of the NPT and it is important that we continue to redouble our efforts to do all we can to support that.

The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) mentioned the ban treaty. While I respect her point of view, it fails to address the key issue that first has to be overcome if we are to achieve lasting global disarmament—that is, the security context in which we find ourselves—and does nothing to increase the trust and transparency that we really need between those nuclear states.

Finally on hon. Members' comments, the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) asked about her grandmother's Christmas tree. I will try to find out if it is still on board. [*Laughter.*] And if it is, it will stay there.

It is also important to remind ourselves of the significant economic benefits that we get. Our continuous at-sea deterrent supports thousands of highly skilled jobs in hundreds of companies across the UK. BAE Systems, with around 8,000 personnel, is key in Barrow and Furness, where our submarines are designed and built, and Rolls-Royce has over 800 employees in Derby and Barrow who manufacture the plants that will power our submarines. Of course, the Atomic Weapons Establishment employs nearly 6,000 people working on manufacturing, maintaining and assuring the UK's nuclear warheads, in addition to providing nuclear threat reduction services. I have mentioned the support that the Scottish economy benefits from.

Today is essentially about marking the tremendous contribution of the people who serve to protect our country. Those submariners and their families have done so much over the last 50 years. Many of the

contributions from Members today rightly point out that these people go away from home for many, many weeks and months at a time and that is a big commitment for them to make. It is also a big commitment for the families that they leave behind. We should say a very big thank you today from us all for the support that they have given to our nation to keep it safe. I am glad that the SNP will push this to a Division, because it means that this House can again show its support for what we believe is absolutely right.

I will end by quoting Churchill's final speech to the United States Congress in 1955.

"Be careful above all things",

he said,

"not to let go of the atomic weapon until you are sure, and more than sure, that other means of preserving peace are in your hands."

Baroness Thatcher reminded Congress of that line when she addressed it herself in 1987, but she left out Churchill's next line:

"Meanwhile, never flinch, never weary, never despair."

Operation Relentless has been maintained by thousands of brave submariners since 1969—and they never have.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 241, Noes 33.

Division No. 414]

[6.59 pm]

AYES

Adams, Nigel	Coaker, Vernon
Afolami, Bim	Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Aldous, Peter	Cooper, Rosie
Amess, Sir David	Costa, Alberto
Andrew, Stuart	Courts, Robert
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Creagh, Mary
Argar, Edward	Dakin, Nic
Bacon, Mr Richard	David, Wayne
Baker, Mr Steve	Davies, Chris
Bebb, Guto	Davies, Mims
Bellingham, Sir Henry	Davis, rh Mr David
Benyon, rh Richard	De Cordova, Marsha
Beresford, Sir Paul	Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Berry, Jake	Dodds, rh Nigel
Betts, Mr Clive	Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Blackman, Bob	Donelan, Michelle
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Double, Steve
Bowie, Andrew	Doyle-Price, Jackie
Brabin, Tracy	Duguid, David
Brady, Sir Graham	Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Brokenshire, rh James	Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Ellis, Michael
Bruce, Fiona	Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Bryant, Chris	Elmore, Chris
Buckland, Robert	Eustice, George
Burns, Conor	Fabricant, Michael
Burt, rh Alistair	Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Field, rh Mark
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Ford, Vicky
Cartlidge, James	Foster, Kevin
Cash, Sir William	Francois, rh Mr Mark
Caulfield, Maria	Frazer, Lucy
Chalk, Alex	Freeman, George
Charalambous, Bambos	Freer, Mike
Chishti, Rehman	Garnier, Mark
Clark, rh Greg	Gauke, rh Mr David
Clarke, Mr Simon	Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Cleverly, James	Gibb, rh Nick
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl

Girvan, Paul
 Glen, John
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Luke
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Bill
 Gray, James
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Griffith, Nia
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Hair, Kirstene
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hanson, rh David
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hayman, Sue
 Healey, rh John
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Hermon, Lady
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Hurd, rh Mr Nick
 James, Margot
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Johnson, rh Boris
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Keegan, Gillian
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kerr, Stephen
 Khan, Afzal
 Knight, Julian
 Lamont, John
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Little Pengelly, Emma
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, John
 Masterton, Paul
 Matheson, Christian
 Maynard, Paul
 McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Milton, rh Anne
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Moore, Damien
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morgan, rh Nicky

Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morton, Wendy
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryl
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Perry, rh Claire
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Pollard, Luke
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees, Christina
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Mr Bob
 Shannon, Jim
 Simpson, David
 Skidmore, Chris
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Royston
 Snell, Gareth
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Sobel, Alex
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spellar, rh John
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Stride, rh Mel
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Tami, rh Mark
 Thomson, Ross
 Throup, Maggie
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Michael

Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Twist, Liz
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Warman, Matt
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather

Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, Phil
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Woodcock, John

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Rebecca Harris and
 Amanda Milling

NOES

Bardell, Hannah
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Chapman, Douglas
 Cherry, Joanna
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Day, Martyn
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Patricia
 Grant, Peter
 Gray, Neil
 Hendry, Drew
 Hosie, Stewart

Lake, Ben
 Law, Chris
 Linden, David
 Lucas, Caroline
 Mc Nally, John
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 Monaghan, Carol
 Newlands, Gavin
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Stephens, Chris
 Thewliss, Alison
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Williams, Hywel

Tellers for the Noes:
 Marion Fellows and
 Patrick Grady

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the 50th anniversary of the continuous at sea deterrent.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Oh, very well. I very much doubt it is a point of order, but we shall discover. It would be a novelty—not just for the hon. Gentleman, but more widely in the House.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I do not know what gives you that idea. I seek your guidance and advice. It is my understanding that not a single Scottish Labour Member of Parliament voted in the Division that has just taken place. You and other hon. Members will know that that will be up on the Commons votes app fairly shortly after the Division. Can you tell the House when we can expect that to be up to confirm that not a single Scottish Labour Member of Parliament voted in favour of their own policy this evening?

Mr Speaker: Shortly.

Dr Julian Lewis *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Oh, very well. Let us have a point of order from Dr Julian Lewis—the good doctor.

Dr Lewis: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is there any way within the rules of order that I can point out that the nuclear deterrent has been supported on this occasion by a ratio of 7:1, which is even greater than the normal ratio whenever public opinion is tested on this very important matter?

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman has found his own salvation. He has registered that point. If memory serves me correctly, he might even have very marginally understated his case, because I think that seven times thirty-three equals slightly less than the figure that he attained, so I daresay he is satisfied with his endeavours.

I think that is an end to these bogus points of order, at least for today. [HON. MEMBERS: “More!”] Well, there will be more, but not more points of order—more by the way of clarion calls of support from the SNP Benches for the petition in the name of Mr Martyn Day.

PETITION

TV licences for over 75s

7.15 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents relating to television licences for the over-75s.

The petition states:

The petition of the residents of Linlithgow and Falkirk,

Declares that free TV licences to households with someone aged over 75 should remain for the foreseeable future; notes that this scheme should remain in governmental hands rather than being privatised via the BBC; further that the removal of the free TV licences will have a negative impact on some of the poorest pensioners in the constituency and across the country; further notes that one of the BBC’s proposals in the consultation is means-testing the concession by linking the free licences to Pension Credit; further that the Department for Work and Pensions’ own estimates show that nationally 40% (two in five) of those entitled to receive Pension Credit are not in receipt of the benefit and would be excluded; further that access to media, especially if frail or housebound, can reduce loneliness in older age and improve wellbeing.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to reverse the planned decision to end the funding of the free TV licence to households with someone aged over 75 and the privatisation of this to the BBC.

[P002449]

Lowestoft High Street: Revitalisation

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Rebecca Harris.)

7.17 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I am pleased to have secured this debate because businesses on the high street in Lowestoft are really struggling at present, and there is an urgent need for government, both national and local, to work with the private sector to address the problem. If we do not do so, more businesses will close, more jobs will be lost and more livelihoods will be jeopardised. While there are specific challenges that need to be addressed in Lowestoft, this is a challenge that town centres face all around the country.

High streets are the backbone of our economy: they are at the heart of local communities; they nurture local businesses; and they provide many local jobs. Millions of people all around the country work or have worked in retail, often in town centres and often as their first experience of the workplace. High streets need to reinvent themselves, otherwise untold damage will be done to many local economies.

Businesses cannot do this on their own: there is a need for teamwork with businesses, landlords, business improvement districts, chambers of commerce, the Government and, in the case of Lowestoft, East Suffolk Council and Lowestoft Town Council all working together. Lowestoft Town Council has an important role to play with its local knowledge and contacts.

In Lowestoft, there are exciting plans to reinvigorate the local economy—making the most of offshore renewables, regenerating the local fishing industry and showcasing our tourism offer as Britain’s most easterly town, with a rich maritime heritage. However for those plans to be successful, we need a vibrant high street, a beating heart at the centre of the community.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I sought permission from him to intervene, because the high street is an issue in not only Lowestoft but Newtownards in the middle of my constituency. Some businesses in the core centre of Newtownards, in the heart of Strangford, not only have high street shops but are online. There is a success story there. Does he feel that while some can do that, not all can? We need help for the high street centrally from Westminster and regionally—perhaps defraying or reducing the rates—so that high streets can continue to be vibrant.

Peter Aldous: I am very much homing in on the issues and challenges in Lowestoft, but the problems are faced all around these islands, from the very east, which I represent, to the very west, which the hon. Gentleman represents. Business needs to adapt, and the Government have a role to play in addressing the problems. He mentioned business rates, and I will come on to that.

The challenges that the high street faces have been with us for some time. Lowestoft faced up to those and formed a business improvement district, Lowestoft Vision, which instigated initiatives that have helped to stem the rising tide, but in recent weeks there has been an alarming acceleration of shop closures. Following the relocation of Poundstretcher and the closures of BHS, Argos, the

[*Peter Aldous*]

Body Shop and Claire's Accessories, Beales department store, Kerrys, and long-established family businesses Coes and Cook's have all put up the closing-down signs.

The town centre in Lowestoft, which comprises Station Square, London Road North, the High Street and the surrounding streets, is in danger of being hollowed out. Last month, out of 410 premises, 75 were vacant. National retail analysis indicates that that trend will accelerate in the coming months rather than slowing down. We do not have a Debenhams in Lowestoft, but such administrations will be a recurring feature of the retail landscape.

I shall just mention London Road South in Kirkley—not technically in the town centre of Lowestoft—where in recent years the business community has come together to regenerate that particular street, that particular thoroughfare. They were very successful in doing so, but they also face challenges and I shall liaise with them about how best to assist them.

The high street is under pressure for many reasons. Those that affect all towns include the move since the 1980s towards out-of-town shopping, with the convenience of free parking right in front of the store, which is not available for shops on the high street; high rents on the high street, which are a problem because they are not sustainable for many businesses as footfall declines; the high level of business rates is a problem, as we heard, although the recent revaluation helped some businesses in Lowestoft town centre; the relentless rise of the internet, which is well documented; and the fact that as a nation we make fewer big shopping trips.

Other factors are unique to Lowestoft, such as the challenges of being a coastal town, with half the catchment area being sea and trade being seasonal; the disadvantage of ready accessibility to Norwich, which is a regional shopping and cultural centre that, much as it grieves me to say so as an Ipswich Town supporter, punches way above its weight; and Lowestoft's relatively isolated location with poor road and rail links does not help, albeit with a station right in the town centre. The situation is made worse because the A47 main road goes right through the middle of Station Square.

Numerous other obstacles to ready access at times make the town centre difficult to reach. Those include a number of congestion pinch points, repair work to the Bascule Bridge that links south and north Lowestoft, and emergency utility works, such as the sewer repairs in Station Square, which took place at the end of last year. Such barriers to getting into Lowestoft have meant that many prefer to do their shopping in Beccles, about 10 miles away. The third crossing of the port, which is being considered by the Government's Planning Inspectorate, will alleviate the problem, but its opening is some three years away.

Out-of-town shopping has not helped and the council recently faced the difficult decision of deciding whether to grant planning permission for the redevelopment of the former Zephyr Cams factory on the south Lowestoft industrial estate. The proposal would remove an eyesore at a prominent gateway to the town, but it would also enhance the attraction of out-of-town shopping to the detriment of the town centre. The relocation of the district council's offices from the town hall in the High Street has removed lunchtime shoppers, and it is unfortunate that the alternative use of the property that was lined up

fell through. It also grates with me that Suffolk County Council is relocating the Lowestoft Record Office, currently based in Lowestoft's library, to Ipswich to facilitate a regeneration project there seemingly without considering the need for a similar initiative in Lowestoft. The library, which lies between the Britten Centre and the Clapham Road car park, wants to be a key component of the regeneration of the town centre and the High Street.

While there is an urgent need for short-term measures to slow down and halt the rate of closures—I shall return to that topic later—East Suffolk Council has put forward an exciting vision for the revitalisation of the High Street, which forms part of its bid to the future high streets fund. I urge the Minister to give the bid full and favourable consideration, although I appreciate that the Department will go through a full and proper assessment process.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. His description of the challenges facing Lowestoft mirrors the situation facing my constituency, because fishing, tourism and renewables are also relevant to Cleethorpes. I am sure that the Minister will mention the Greater Grimsby town deal, a private sector-led initiative that will support Government initiatives such as the coastal communities fund, and it is vital to get the private sector involved.

Peter Aldous: My hon. Friend makes the point that coastal towns face particular challenges. There is so much in Cleethorpes that is similar to Lowestoft, and the public and private sectors need to get together as a team to address those problems. I sense that we have not been able to achieve that previously, but the clock is ticking alarmingly close to midnight, so we must get on and create that team.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), I share my hon. Friend's recognition of the isolation facing coastal communities due to the 180° of sea. Does he agree that the recently announced stronger towns fund will introduce welcome funding into such communities? Will he join me encouraging the Minister to help nudge the scheme along so that it supports not just England, but the devolved nations?

Peter Aldous: I will come on to discuss the variety of funds that we will be able to dip into, so I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. I am very interested in the fact that he referred to himself as an Ipswich Town supporter, because my eldest son Jamie also supports Ipswich Town. The Tractor Boys, as they are called, are holding up the Championship at the minute, but we hope that they will get out of relegation.

My question is about councils. My council has a regeneration project involving all the villages in the area, including the fishing villages. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that councils have an important role to play when it comes to regeneration?

Peter Aldous: I am pleased to hear that the gospel of Ipswich Town extends throughout these islands. They kick off at Brentford in about 15 minutes' time.

The hon. Gentleman is right about the importance of teamwork between councils and the private sector. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) said, they need to work together. We need to grasp that nettle.

East Suffolk Council has come up with a strategy to address these problems and take full advantage of Lowestoft's unique selling point as Britain's most easterly town, which is perhaps something we have previously been rather shy in shouting about. It is also important to make the most of the regeneration opportunities that the third crossing will provide, as well as the location of the railway station at the heart of the town and the potential to blend the town centre with the modern and newly vibrant fish market.

The need to increase leisure provision is also recognised in the bid, building on what we already have with the Marina theatre and the Bethel, which is home to the Lowestoft Players. The proposal highlights Lowestoft's heritage, invariably closely associated with the sea, and seeks to provide seamless links to Ness Point, the country's most easterly point, and to the south beach via the historical Scores.

There are four distinctive interrelated areas in the proposal. First, the buildings around Station Square will be restored, with the objective of creating an area attractive to restaurants and leisure activities. It will be renamed Peto Square, after Sir Samuel Morton Peto, who built the station. The former parcel office is currently being refurbished and will be brought back into use as a visitor centre and community café.

Secondly, in the southern section of London Road North, retail uses will be consolidated around a refurbished Britten centre. The council's recent purchase of the former post office will act as a catalyst for redevelopment. The council also owns the Battery Green car park site, where significant public-private investment is envisaged to create a modern leisure hub, with the possibility of a multi-screen cinema, a gym and a hotel. This will link to the Marina theatre via a newly pedestrianised Marina Street.

Thirdly, at the northern end of London Road North, a wider range of uses is proposed. As well as retail, there will be refurbished and new build housing, community space, work units and offices.

Finally, the High Street area will become Lowestoft's heritage quarter, with a mix of independent retailers, galleries and local eateries. The town hall will be brought back into use to provide cultural and community space. The ancient pathways known as the Scores, which link the High Street to the former beach village and onwards to Ness Point, will be restored to their original condition.

Newly designated parking areas on the periphery of the High Street will cater for an increase in visitors to what will be a destination location. The Triangle marketplace will be reintroduced, with high-quality market stalls and support for a regular and varied programme of art, craft, antique and food events. The vacant space above shops could be converted into residential accommodation.

To be fair to the Government, they are not asleep on the job. They have come forward with a variety of initiatives to meet the challenges faced by high streets across the country. These include providing £10 million to help local areas clean up their streets, making them

more attractive places to work and visit; reducing the business rates bills of many small businesses and taking 600,000 businesses out of paying rates altogether; promoting the future high streets fund, which will make £675 million available to help modernise high streets and town centres; relaxing planning rules to support new homes on high streets; establishing an expert panel chaired by Sir John Timpson to diagnose the issues that affect the UK's high streets and to advise on how to make our high streets thrive; and promoting the Great British High Street awards and supporting businesses through the future high street forum. It is important that these initiatives are properly co-ordinated, sustained and adequately resourced.

There is a slight sense of *déjà vu*, because in 2012 Lowestoft was designated a Portas pilot town, but seven years on the situation has got worse. If we read the Portas review again, we see that Mary Portas came up with 28 practical recommendations. Not all of them were necessarily appropriate for all towns, but if they had been implemented and fully followed through, I sense that they would have helped to improve the situation across the UK, although I do not think that on their own they would have brought about the renaissance that our town centres so urgently need. The fact that the Portas review did not bring about the transformation that she was seeking and that we all yearned for was, in my opinion, partly down to the fact that there are so many organisations with a role to play and it is difficult to get them all working together, hence the need, as we have heard this evening, for team building.

I sense that the future high streets fund will be over-subscribed and the Government will be under pressure to hand out smaller slices of cake to a great many towns. If necessary, additional funds must be found, and it would be helpful if it was possible for funds to be pooled from the future high streets fund, the coastal communities fund and the stronger towns fund. I wrote to the Secretary of State last month seeking clarification on whether that would be possible, and I look forward to receiving his reply.

While highlighting the role of government, it is also important to mention the role of the private sector. Yes, high street businesses need national and local government to provide a level playing field with online competitors, without any grand national-style obstacles, but they also need to adapt what they offer so as to ensure that it is distinct and different from what their online competitors provide.

It should also be pointed out that some of the prime retailing area on London Road North is owned, like so much of the UK's high street, by institutional investors such as pension funds and insurance companies. Their post-war business model of letting shops on 25-year full repairing and insuring leases, with five-yearly upward-only rent reviews, to businesses with a proven track record is now outdated and largely a thing of the past.

There are examples in the big cities—at King's Cross, Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham and Bristol—of such institutions playing a leading role in redeveloping business and shopping districts, helping create a distinct sense of place, with a wider variety of commercial and community activities. They have a similar role to play in smaller cities and towns, on high streets up and down the country where they own property. They need to be brought in as part of the team.

[Peter Aldous]

As I mentioned earlier, I am conscious that East Suffolk Council's vision, while exciting, may feel like a distant dream to businesses fighting for their survival on the Lowestoft High Street. There are a variety of short-term measures that could be instigated to support them now. First, East Suffolk Council should carry out a review of its car park charges. I accept that the council faces difficult budgeting challenges of its own, but all avenues should be explored to see whether it is possible to come up with a system of charges that are not a deterrent to visiting Lowestoft town centre.

Secondly, linked to that, the statutory instrument for decriminalising on-street parking in Lowestoft and across much of the rest of Suffolk must be fast-tracked. This would help prevent illegal street parking, which currently handicaps many retailers, and would be another source of income for the council, which could then be reinvested into the town centre. I urge the Minister to do all he can to encourage his colleagues at the Department for Transport to give that work the highest priority.

Thirdly, working together, Lowestoft Vision, Lowestoft Town Council, East Suffolk Council and I must ensure that Lowestoft town centre is as tidy and clean as possible this coming summer. That was not the case at times last summer, partly due to the long hot, dry spell.

Fourthly, the plans to find a new occupier for the former town hall must be stepped up. Again, I will work with Lowestoft Town Council and East Suffolk Council to help achieve that.

Looking at the role of national Government, I have three additional asks of the Minister. First, a root and branch review of business taxation needs to take place. I acknowledge that the Government have introduced the business rates relief for small businesses, but the business rates burden continues to accelerate store closures, job losses and the decline of the high street. There is the associated problem that, with business rate retention by the councils, our councils are now more reliant on business rates, and if there is a fall in the income available to them from rates, they will have less funding available for investment in services.

There needs to be a full review of business taxation, taking into account the interplay between all taxation of businesses, including business rates, corporation tax, VAT, national insurance contributions and taxes not yet used in the UK. At present, businesses on the high street are carrying too big a burden. The system is not progressive and does not properly take into account a business's profitability and ability to pay.

Secondly, to encourage the conversion to residential use of vacant town centre accommodation, particularly on upper floors, should not VAT be zero-rated on such refurbishment projects in line with the construction of new residential dwellings? Thirdly, a wider range of uses are going to take place in high streets in the future, so national and local government need to think carefully about what public sector activities should be encouraged to take place there. Should not the NHS and our schools pursue a "town centre first" approach when considering the location of surgeries, clinics, schools and colleges?

With the Brexit debate raging, there is a worry that the future of our high streets will be overlooked. That must not happen. If it does, we shall be letting down

people, communities and businesses all around the country. I believe that there is an exciting future in Lowestoft, but to get there, while limiting further business fall-out, we need a concerted effort by all, with government taking the lead. I hope that, in his reply, the Minister can provide the reassurance that people in Lowestoft are seeking.

7.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for raising this important debate. I note that, only two weeks ago, he also raised the matter with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister at Prime Minister's questions. He has raised it at length and with sagacity, and I hope to have the opportunity to respond.

The passion with which my hon. Friend has spoken about his town centre is just so exciting. In fact, the Conservative Members present here tonight and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) of the Democratic Unionist party are demonstrating that they, too, share that passion and desire for their high street. That passion is also shared by the Government. When I get up every single morning, I go to work thinking that my job in government is to oversee and drive forward the renaissance of our regions, and the high streets of our smaller towns and cities around the country are on my agenda.

I wish briefly to thank John Timpson, who carried out the Timpson review. I spoke to John last year and asked him whether he would lead the review. Initially, he said no, and the reason was that he had 2,200 shops to run. I then put it to him that it was quite a good idea to have someone who runs 2,200 shops to help the Government write their new high streets policy. I was delighted with his expert panel, and he went on to say yes. One thing that he recommended, which fed directly into the Budget, was the creation of the future high streets fund. My hon. Friend has repeatedly talked about the need for teamwork, and the prospectus for that fund explicitly sets out that the bids that succeed will have teamwork and business very much at their heart. Of course, it is not only my hon. Friend who has grabbed the opportunity of the future high streets fund—over £600 million—with gusto. More than 300 bids have been sent to the Government, and we are currently reviewing them in line with the independent bidding policy that we have put in place.

My hon. Friend talked very well about teamwork, which is hugely important. He also talked about locating public services on high streets. As well as thanking Sir John Timpson, I want to thank Bill Grimsey, who said in his Grimsey review, "Wouldn't it be refreshing if we located our libraries, GP surgeries, childcare and town halls on our high streets to ensure that people visited?" I was therefore slightly concerned to hear my hon. Friend say that Lowestoft is moving some of those very same services away from the high street, when the big push of public policy is to place the public sector absolutely at the heart of the high street.

My hon. Friend raised the short-term challenges faced by Lowestoft, particularly his desire for free parking. In my own local authority area, we have the blessing of free parking on our high street. Parking charges should always be locally determined, but I would say to local

authority leaders around the country that at the Trafford Centre—my constituents' nearest major shopping centre—the parking is free and every parking space is full, but when I visit towns that charge for parking, it is clear that many parking spaces lie empty, just as the shops will eventually lie empty if people do not visit their high streets. I urge local authorities to bear in mind my hon. Friend's comments, as well as my own.

My hon. Friend said that he is seeking UK Government action regarding a review of business rates. This is of course a question for my friends and colleagues in Her Majesty's Treasury, and he may seek to engage them more heavily on that. On the town centre first policy, he would do well to build on the good practice set out by Bill Grimsey.

Finally, we heard a brilliant contribution from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Business rates are devolved in their entirety, so he would need to take up his point locally in Northern Ireland. I celebrate and cheer on the involvement of Northern Ireland in the Great British High Street competition for the first time last year. We are running that competition again this year, and it will be bigger, better and have more applicants, many of whom I hope will come from Northern Ireland.

7.47 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 10 April 2019

[MR GEORGE HOWARTH *in the Chair*]

British Steel Pension Scheme: Transfers

9.30 am

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered pension transfers and the British Steel pension scheme.

For many of us, pensions are a distant, complex and opaque topic. Everyone hopes that their pension will provide financial security for their family's future. It is often the single biggest pot of money that anyone will have, but that makes pension pots ideal targets for mis-selling. Unfortunately, in recent years pensions mis-selling has got worse. Since further pension freedoms were brought in four years ago, it is easier to transfer out of defined-benefit pension schemes. More than 200,000 people have done that, but as transfers have increased, so have the problems. The compensation paid out for poor transfer advice increased to £40 million last year.

I called for this debate because of a specific mis-selling crisis that affected hundreds and potentially thousands of people across south Wales in particular. Two years ago, the British Steel pension scheme began to restructure its fund after a difficult period for the industry. Scheme members had a hard deadline to make a critical decision: they could go into a new scheme, be defaulted into a lifeboat fund or transfer out. They had to decide against a backdrop of serious uncertainty about the scheme and the industry. The scheme's administrators were under enormous pressure, with 4,000 calls a day. Vital information about pension advisers from the Financial Conduct Authority was often highly technical. All that helped to create a perfect storm.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate and commend the work that he is doing in this area. He has mentioned the Financial Conduct Authority. Does he agree that one issue here is regulation and that too often those who suffer a loss are pushed in the direction of a civil remedy when actually we need stronger enforcement and tougher criminal sanctions?

Nick Smith: I agree. I think that the FCA has the right teeth but is not using them and that the police need to intervene much earlier.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I, too, congratulate the hon. Gentleman on initiating the debate. I do not have any people with steel pensions in my constituency, but I am here to support the hon. Gentleman and to do so on the record. He mentioned that 4,000-plus people a week were trying to get details and advice on how to move forward. Is not the onus on the FCA and, ultimately, the Government to ensure that the necessary advice is there and available? The volume of contacts being made clearly indicates that the system is unable to respond in the way it should.

Nick Smith: The advice is there. The difficulty is that for many people it is too technical and complicated; working through it is really very hard.

Transfers were talked up, and pension sharks soon began circling around the key steelworking sites across south Wales and the rest of the UK. They were often facilitated by unregulated introducers, through word of mouth. For example, constituents of mine were approached by a rogue financial adviser at their caravan while they were on a family holiday. Wider possibilities were common currency: a place in the sun, a conservatory and a deposit for a son's or daughter's new home were all said to be within reach.

The pension changes meant that it was easier to transfer from a stable fund into investments that were far riskier, on the promise of better returns. Unfortunately, it meant that a safe bet could turn into a bad bet, and a high fee was often part of the deal too. It was the case that 7,800 steelworkers transferred out altogether, of whom 872 had transfers arranged by firms that were eventually ordered—ordered—to stop advising by the FCA. One steelworker lost £200,000. Many others lost tens of thousands of pounds. Many suffered incredible stress and anxiety. I heard yesterday that £1.8 million has been paid out in compensation to steelworkers so far. I emphasise the words “so far”. Because that might not grasp the full scale of the issue, the FCA has now reviewed the files of 2% of the nearly 8,000 steelworkers who transferred out. It found that 58% of the advice was not suitable, which means that the tally of those who lost out could run to several thousands. To deal with that possibility, the FCA now needs to set out a clear programme of how it will identify the steelworkers affected, how it will let them know and what practical support it will provide to help to get them through this process.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for securing this debate and leading on this issue, as he has now for several years. On how the FCA now informs steelworkers, does he agree that part of the problem is that lots of steelworkers will simply not know that this has happened and will not understand that they have received bad advice? Given that these are complicated issues, as he has mentioned, that means that they will often just ignore the issue in the hope that it will somehow resolve itself. This could be yet another pension scandal waiting to happen, purely because people do not wish to face up to the realities of what is happening.

Nick Smith: My hon. Friend makes a really good point. The FCA is a large organisation based in London. I believe it does not have sufficient resources to help consumers on the ground in places such as Port Talbot or Shotton, or across the country, where pensioners need support at their homes.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The concerns that my hon. Friend has raised are valid in north Wales among steelworkers who used to work at the Shotton plant, many of whom live in my constituency. A cursory look at the FCA website reveals that there are 17 firms that the FCA is currently examining. I did not know that until I looked at the site in preparation for this debate. How are steelworkers supposed to know who those 17 firms are?

Nick Smith: My right hon. Friend gets to the nub of the situation. Who does one trust when one has a pot of gold and people want access to it? He poses a really important question. The FCA has got to help our steelworker pensioners and their families.

[Nick Smith]

It can be argued that this was a unique situation, but many of the underlying problems that allowed it to happen are still there. Rogue financial advisers do not face sufficiently tough consequences from the regulators. The FCA's register has been improved, but consumer information sometimes remains unclear. The support for people who might have been mis-sold pensions is insufficient.

I recognise that some steps have been taken to improve co-ordination between regulators. That is welcome, but much more needs to be done. At the moment, the pension sharks have generally received administrative sanctions only, but I think they need to face serious penalties. Will the Minister scrutinise the effectiveness of the FCA's enforcement regime? Steelworkers say the FCA needs to impose heavy financial penalties on bad financial advisers. I think it needs to employ its powers much more often, as it seems this has not been done sufficiently.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and pay tribute to him for his work for our constituents in this important area. At our recent meeting with the FCA, the issue of mandatory insurance wording came up. Those unscrupulous financial advisers are not taking out proper insurance—when they go bust, there is no source of compensation for the steelworkers who have been ripped off. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Minister needs to take urgent action to improve the regulatory framework, not least in the area of mandatory insurance wording?

Nick Smith: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Given reports that the FCA is investigating so-called introducers in connection with a major scam, the Government should now ensure that they, too, are regulated. The Treasury has to take action to ensure that financial advisers always have—this comes to my hon. Friend's point—sufficient insurance to pay out, should they go into administration.

Will the Minister ensure that the FCA updates the Treasury on how it is supporting the potentially several thousand steelworkers who might have received poor transfer advice in this instance? The Treasury needs to co-ordinate with the Department for Work and Pensions and other key bodies in order to help victims of mis-selling to access the support they need. Although BSPS members have been supported by a strong team in Port Talbot, including a financial adviser and a lawyer, there needs to be a single initiative, aimed specifically at people who may have been mis-sold in cases such as BSPS.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I am very grateful to my good friend for giving way and congratulate him on securing the debate and on the powerful case that he is making. In the consultation on the changes, concerns were raised that the burden could fall too heavily on scheme members, and we worry that that is the case. Our mining and steel communities built this nation. Does my hon. Friend agree that they should be looked after in retirement?

Nick Smith: My hon. Friend is a champion for miners' pensions, on which she has done some great work, and I think she is absolutely right.

I press the Minister on the Treasury's response to recommendations that others have made about the crisis. The Rookes review suggested that the FCA needs to look at how it handles advisers who have had regulatory issues in the past. Phoenixing, as it is called, has allowed some advisers to reinvent themselves to sell anew. There must be greater scrutiny to stop rogues re-emerging in the marketplace. The review also suggested that the FCA work with the Treasury and the DWP to use digital channels to help to communicate important information to pensioners and to help them.

Finally, the review suggested that the Pensions Regulator work with BSPS, trustees and trade unions—Community and Unite have been particularly good in south Wales—to select a panel of reliable financial advisers that members can use. Those advisers must be able to deal with the scale of the problem with BSPS and with the insurance needed. Can the Minister explain how the Department is progressing those recommendations and when we can expect the changes to be fully implemented?

In his valedictory speech, Mark Neale, the outgoing chief executive of the Financial Services Compensation Scheme, strongly advocated increasing the compensation limit in cases of poor transfer advice. They were powerful remarks, so let us listen to him. I ask the Treasury to actively support that proposal and to investigate how many people are currently suffering uncompensated financial losses because of poor advice.

We need justice for steelworkers who are ripped off. If the FCA will not do that, local police forces in south Wales need to pursue what appear to be complicated cases of fraud. The crimes are committed locally; the losses are clear and often substantial; and those responsible are identifiable. I call on the police forces across south Wales to open files and thoroughly investigate whether those cases amount to fraud. Criminal investigations have to start. If they do not, I call on the forces to state publicly why not.

The financial and emotional toll that this crisis has taken on my constituents and many others has been heavy. They worked hard for decades to earn their pensions, and they expected a secure pot to provide for them and their families. That was put at risk because of the wrongdoing of a few bad actors and a weak response from the regulators. Steelworkers and their families have been let down. The Government and the FCA must improve their act and support those people better. The rogues who ripped off steelworkers and their families must be held to account. If the regulators cannot do that, the police need to step in. We need to make sure that good people see their hard-earned money better protected in future.

9.44 am

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I pay tribute once again to my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) for securing the debate and for all the work that he does. He and I have worked on the transfer of steelworker pensions out of BSPS since 2017, which was when all Tata Steel workers were forced to decide whether to move into the BSPS 2 or transfer out into another pension scheme. Given that trust between employees and employer at that point was fragile to say the least, it is not too surprising—completely understandable, in fact—that about 8,000 of the steelworkers decided against joining the BSPS 2. Little did they know that the vultures were circling.

The behaviour of the unscrupulous financial advisers who ripped off these men and their families was completely inexcusable. The sheer size of the pension transfer exercise, the high level of publicity that the transfer received, and the workers' deep-seated mistrust of the employer at that time, the trustees and Tata made for fertile territory for the parasites. The trade unions, steel MPs and the BSPS trustees all called on the Government to introduce a system of deemed consent regarding the transfer of BSPS 2. I was one of those MPs; I sent a letter to the then Pensions Minister, the right hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Gauke). However, we were ignored and those hard-working, honest men were targeted, despite the fact that in only a very small number of cases was transferring out their best option.

These unscrupulous advisers are not stupid; they have behaved in a manner that is cunning, morally bankrupt and in many cases criminal. These events have had a dreadful effect on steelworkers in my constituency and their families. One man transferred £560,000 out on the strength of a 40-minute phone call with an "adviser", who convinced him that it was what everyone was doing—40 years of service reduced to 40 minutes on the telephone. He believes that he was charged £11,000 to transfer out and for a 40-minute consultation. A man's entire life plan was ruined by one phone call. Another was advised by one of the local advisers to transfer £348,858 out. He is now paying in excess of £3,500 a year in various costs and charges, as well as exposing himself to the risk of shortfall and dying after his pension pot runs out. That adviser played on the fear that BSPS was going to go into administration. They did not present my constituent with the facts or evidence, but approached the situation from the starting point that he wanted to transfer out, and facilitated that transfer without checking that it was in his best interest to do so.

Who were those unscrupulous financial advisers? The main culprits have been Active Wealth (UK) Ltd and a man named Darren Reynolds, who account for all but a couple of the 77 cases that have so far been taken up with the Financial Services Compensation Scheme. The FSCS has so far paid out £1.8 million to 61 of the 77 claimants, 16 of whom exceeded the £50,000 compensation limit—a limit that has since risen to £85,000. For those who have not been granted compensation, it is purely because they have not suffered a loss, not because they were not badly advised. I think I am right in saying that every single claimant was judged to have been badly advised.

It has been clear for some time that Active Wealth was just the tip of the iceberg. Several other advisers have been acting inappropriately; one did a lot of work in concert with a financial adviser who did not have the required permissions. The transfers were going through in about one hour, and some steelworkers never even met with an adviser. In another part of the country, in west Wales, an adviser had the required permissions, but by the end of 2017 had had their permissions to do pensions transfers revoked. Scores of steelworkers were days away from the transfer cut-off when that adviser circled in. Other advisers saw the writing on the wall and went into voluntary liquidation a few months ago. Those two advisers took their clients with them, literally next door.

Other sales tactics were entirely risible. In one case, steelworkers were turning up at an adviser's office over the weekend because he had told them that on Monday the pension company would be stopping distribution in the UK. He was literally telling them to hurry up and buy; he spent 30 minutes talking to each steelworker about their pension. It is notable that those financial advisers are finding it easier to simply lock up shop, close their business down and walk away than to face up to what they have done. That, in effect, then limits the redress that steelworkers can receive to £50,000—now up to £85,000—under the Financial Services Compensation Scheme, and from £150,000 under the Financial Ombudsman Service. In effect, we have a deep structural problem in the system, with financial advisers able simply to lock up shop and walk away, rather than give redress to the people they have ripped off. That is a fundamental question for the regulator.

These men were let down not just by rogue financial advisers, but by the authorities: the regulator, namely the Financial Conduct Authority, and the Government. The FCA was far too slow to see the obvious risks and act to protect steelworkers from these vultures. It knew from its investigation in 2017 that more than half of the transfer advice being given was not up to its own standards, but even that, apparently, did not raise any alarm bells or red flags. Most shockingly, certain financial advisers who were under investigation still appeared on the FCA website. The fact that that information was unavailable to the steelworkers feels utterly unjust.

The focus now is to raise awareness among steelworkers who have not spoken up but are due compensation, and to ask them to come forward and seek advice. Something that we have all observed is the role of shame in that. Many steelworkers are deeply embarrassed and ashamed that they have been ripped off. They have found it extremely difficult to share that difficult information with their families and spouses—one of the reasons that more men have not come forward.

I recognise that this is an emotionally sensitive matter for those involved, who may be reluctant to overturn the rock and look at what they might find underneath. However, it is right that we do everything that we can to get justice for these men. Investment companies and self-invested personal pension providers must no longer be able to look the other way and adopt a "see no evil, ask no questions, tell no lies" approach as long as the money continues to roll in. That approach is morally bankrupt.

Since the end of 2017, I have been working with my hon. Friends the Members for Blaenau Gwent and for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), lawyers and independent financial advisers in order to bang the drum and get these steelworkers the justice that they deserve. In November, 18 steelworkers came to Westminster to meet the regulators and the FSCS. We were pleased that the FSCS was able to revisit some of those adviser charges. We have also had very welcome promises from the FCA to run seminars in Port Talbot. Tata has also shown a willingness to facilitate meetings with the men—all in the cause of raising awareness. That means that we can at least be optimistic that getting these men some of the justice that they deserve may be possible.

Looking forward, our main focus must be, first, to continue to raise awareness among the steelworkers who may be affected. All firms that gave advice to transfer

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should verifiably send out a letter written by the FCA, strongly advising them to get the advice looked at and reminding them that they may be entitled to a form of financial top-up if they come forward. We will keep pressing the FSCS and FCA to offer the level of compensation package that the men who have come forward deserve and are due. We will also focus relentlessly on ensuring that unscrupulous advisers are exposed for what they are, and that every bit of insurance that they owe is claimed.

Secondly, we must do all we can to achieve legislative change. We need to ensure that individuals are automatically enrolled in new schemes, not left to be picked off mercilessly by rogue financial advisers in an environment that is characterised by uncertainty. Thirdly, we need to ensure that regulators do their jobs. Why the advisers that I mentioned were allowed to remain on the FCA website while under investigation seriously needs looking into.

Finally, it is worth noting that this issue does not affect steelworkers alone, and that pension mis-selling pay-outs in 2018 hit a whopping £40 million—double the figure for 2017. This is a national issue across many sectors, and it is up to the FCA and the Government to stand up and stick by workers and pensioners who have been wrongly advised, and do all they can to improve regulation and legislation for future generations. I look forward to working with those in this room on all of those challenges, and I thank hon. Members for their attention.

9.55 am

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) on securing this important debate. I should also declare that I have a steel plant in my own constituency, although it is not as badly affected as those in Port Talbot.

About 40,000 members of the British Steel pension scheme, the Tata Steel retirement fund, had the choice to trade their guaranteed pensions for a cash lump sum and transfer to a riskier plan as the scheme was restructured. To date, there have been about 8,000 transfers worth about £2.8 billion. Last year, as transfers from the British Steel scheme ramped up, the Financial Conduct Authority intervened to halt the activities of advice firms because of concerns that dubious advisers, incentivised by commissions and high fees, were descending on steel towns, especially Port Talbot in Wales, and enticing BSPS members to transfer their pensions.

It is extremely alarming that we now know the role advisers played in persuading steel workers to move their savings into riskier schemes. To call them cowboys would be an insult to cowboys. Financial advisers persuaded hundreds of steelworkers to give up their guaranteed pensions before the FCA halted their activity, concerned that it was mis-selling. The Work and Pensions Committee report into the BSPS described how:

“Many BSPS members were shamelessly bamboozled into signing up to ongoing adviser fees and unsuitable funds characterised by high investment risk, high management charges and punitive exit fees.”

It is clear that there was widespread mis-selling to members of the BSPS. The FCA found from a sample of those members that nearly half had been given unsuitable advice or advice that was unclear.

In its findings, the review into those pensions transfers recommended that pension scheme trustees should compile a list of recommended advisers for pensions transfers. Indeed, it seems strange that that is not already the case. I know that unions such as Community and Unite have done their best, but it is a complicated set of circumstances in which people have been shamelessly robbed of their pension funds. It is right that scheme members should not be left out in the wilderness when it comes to advice on what to do with their retirement savings. There must be more clarity for scheme members, so that they are not lured in by dodgy and self-interested firms, as illustrated by the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock).

The Scottish National party is keen to support steel communities across Scotland. First and foremost, workers must be put at the heart of solutions to put pension funds on a sustainable footing. The SNP Scottish Government took urgent action to ensure that steel plants were attractive to potential investors, to save workers from losing out. An investment of almost £200,000 was made by the Scottish Government to keep key workers on standby to safeguard full manufacturing capability, ensuring that plants could get back up and running as quickly as possible. The Dalzell works in my Motherwell and Wishaw constituency was the prime beneficiary of that policy, which also helped to safeguard Clydebridge works in the neighbouring constituency of Rutherglen and Hamilton West.

When the UK Government were dealing with the matter of the British Steel pension scheme, my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) expressed concern to the then Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills that workplace pensions and incentives to save must not be undermined by any deal. In Parliament, my SNP colleagues and I have expressed solidarity with the workers at those plants, and I must thank the all-party parliamentary group on steel and metal related industries, which has done outstanding work in that regard as well. Hon. Members should rest assured that we will continue to press the UK Government to take meaningful action on issues that threaten the viability of industrial premises across the UK and their workers. This entire episode reaffirms the need for an independent pensions and savings commission to put the pensions landscape on a sustainable footing.

People have a right to know and understand their pension savings. At the moment, the UK Government's extremely complicated pensions and savings landscape—made all the more confusing through the introduction of pension freedoms and vehicles such as lifetime ISAs—is making it more likely that consumers will make the wrong choices for their circumstances.

The BSPS members were in an extremely difficult and vulnerable situation that was exploited by greedy firms to the detriment of normal working people, who deserve the retirement that was promised to them. I can speak personally of the difficulties of realising that the pension being looked forward to will not materialise, because it happened in my husband's case. We were not in anything like extreme circumstances, but it was still a shock to us that the future we had been promised and were looking forward to did not happen.

The SNP has long called for the establishment of an independent pensions commission to ensure that employees' savings are protected and a more progressive approach to fairer savings is considered as we move to a period

where defined benefit schemes are becoming a thing of the past. Now that the UK Government are battling with the chaos caused by the Brexit vote, the need for such an independent commission is more important than ever. This also highlights that the Government's initiatives to improve consumer support and pensions are playing catch-up. More action must be taken urgently.

The Government have dragged their heels on the introduction of the pension dashboard, but there is absolutely no reason why this needs to be dragged out. It certainly should not be watered down. Consumers need a unified dashboard that includes their state and private pensions. The SNP was broadly supportive of the creation of a new single financial guidance and claims body that would merge independent financial and pensions advice bodies, and the Minister should update the House on the progress of the establishment of this body. Is it up and running? How can it be used to ensure that people in vulnerable circumstances, such as BSPS members, can be armed with the facts to be able to make the right choices for their retirement?

I again congratulate the hon. Members for Blaenau Gwent and for Aberavon on their outstanding work in this field. In the past, I have had dealings with the Financial Conduct Authority on pensions matters and with the financial ombudsman and have found them to be reactive, dilatory and unable and uncertain about how they can best help constituents who have been tricked and duped in terrible circumstances. The idea that men, and it is nearly always men, who worked in a hard and sometimes dangerous job should end up being duped by financial advisers—to their complete detriment—and unable to look their families in the eye and say, “I made a mistake, I am sorry, but nothing can be done”, is unacceptable to everyone in this place.

10.3 am

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) on securing the debate. I praise my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), who has played a major role in the drive for justice for those who were cheated on their pensions, the work of the APPG and the co-operation of colleagues from the SNP. I also welcome to her first Westminster Hall debate the newly elected Member for Newport West, my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones), who will, I know, be a strong champion of the people of Newport West.

A good pension is about security and dignity in retirement. The people of Britain deserve nothing but security and dignity in retirement. People work hard, build our country and, when they come towards retirement, plan ahead for the holiday they had always dreamed of, or to help their kids to be able to buy their own home. There can be nothing more painful than to be cheated out of what they have worked for all their lives.

I sometimes say I have been around since Churchill was a boy. I remember the era back in the 1970s and 1980s, when half the population of Britain was in good final salary DB schemes. We have made some progress—for example, the battle on auto-enrolment that we fought and won when Labour was in power, and which I welcome being carried forward by this Government—but to be frank, there has been a depressing direction of

travel for good final salary schemes. There have been too many scandals, but none more scandalous than that of British Steel, and that is emblematic of the problem we face with the regulation of DB pension schemes in the UK.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent stated, when a deal was struck to keep Tata afloat, members belonging to the £15 billion British Steel pension fund were given the option to shift their assured benefits to the Pension Protection Fund, to join a new retirement scheme backed by Tata, or to transfer to personal pension funds. That led to what was called a “feeding frenzy” at the site in Port Talbot, as dodgy introducers preyed on workers who were more than likely confused about the position of their pension, and who may not have had the financial support or education needed to make such an important decision. Some advice was available, but often it was simply not good enough, or it was technical and unintelligible. Those rogues, those introducers, should be utterly ashamed of themselves. They bought meals for workers in local pubs, and convinced them to transfer their pensions into totally unsuitable schemes. Some people could have lost up to six figures from their pension total.

The Financial Conduct Authority has been probing concerns that pension changes that involve 130,000 members of the Tata retirement fund appear to have been affected. A study of the 8,000 people who transferred their pension demonstrated that 58% received advice that was simply not suitable, and the Pensions Regulator calculated that in 2017, the average loss was £94,000.

I will never forget the heartbreaking story that I was told by the chief executive of the Pensions Advisory Service during the passage of the Financial Guidance and Claims Bill that introduced the Single Financial Guidance Body. The Pensions Advisory Service set up an advice facility on site, and one of the first people to come in was a big burly steelworker and shift supervisor. He sat down and burst into tears. It turned out that he had been duped by one of those introducers, and it had cost him tens of thousands of pounds. The main reason for his grief, however, was not what he had suffered and would endure for the rest of his life, but the fact that the 20 guys on his shift had all followed his lead. He said to the Pensions Advisory Service, “I’ll never, ever be able to forgive myself, because the mistake that I made has had catastrophic consequences for the people I’ve worked with for 10, 20 or 30 years”.

The British Steel case was central to our work during the Financial Guidance and Claims Bill, and I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friends the Members for Blaenau Gwent and for Aberavon, and many other Members, particularly from Wales, who played a noble role in strengthening the legislation to crack down on the outrageous. Real progress was made. Cold calling more generally was central to the debate on the Bill, and the ban on pension cold calling was a significant step in the right direction. However, we must now go further and introduce a ban on all cold calling—there were constructive discussions about that, and it would be helpful if the Minister would update us on the Government's thinking—and we must also ban the work of introducers. From January this year there has been an end to pension cold calling, but more needs to be done.

More generally, the introduction of the Single Financial Guidance Body is a welcome step towards greater financial education and security. It brings together the three previous

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bodies, which all did good work, into a new, more effective body for the next stages. Crucially, it needs to be adequately resourced, not least because of the role that it will play in the oversight of the dashboard process, but it is welcome that it has been established.

Having said that, lessons need to be learned, and significant further progress must be made. On the learning of lessons, and the need for action, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, said of the Committee's findings earlier this year:

"British steelworkers were roundly failed by the official regulators meant to protect their life savings. They were given precious little to guide them through murky waters filled with scammers looking to snatch their pensions—scammers who had little to fear from the FCA's grossly inadequate action at the time", which I think it now acknowledges. The right hon. Gentleman continued:

"Now it seems they are being sold short again on what even the FCA calls 'rightly' deserved compensation. The FCA has ridden to their defence and urged the FSCS to be more generous, but the FSCS is clinging to rules the FCA says needn't apply."

That is a powerful indictment of what happened, and a call for further action to be taken. That is essential because—I say this with some sadness—British Steel is not the only outrageous case of pension mishandling. We have seen too many other scandals, most notably BHS and Philip Green, who ought to be utterly ashamed of the way he has conducted himself over the years, and what happened with the collapse of Carillion, which I will never forget.

In my constituency, we had a first-class apprentice training centre that was operated by Carillion and that had 60 apprentices going through it at any one time. When Carillion collapsed on the Monday, they were told, "Don't worry. You'll be okay." On the Tuesday, they all got called in and sent home at lunch time—a number of them in tears. One young man, who had suffered from autism but whose life had been moving forward in the right direction, was sobbing uncontrollably and saying, "What am I going to tell my mum?"

On the pensions issue, Carillion has been centre stage in our discussions, including with the Government, about the further steps that need to be taken. Some of the proposals in the DB White Paper are welcome, such as stronger criminal sanctions for directors neglecting pension schemes—although I will come on to the fact that the possibility of criminal action is there in the here and now—stronger powers for TPR, and clearer standards on scheme funding.

Stephen Kinnock: On the issue of further action, particularly regarding legislation, is it not vital that the Government recognise the huge risk in divesting pensions? If people are not defaulted into the new scheme that is being set up, and it is left completely open to them, there is a real risk that they will be easy prey for unscrupulous financial advisers. Should the Government not bring forward a statutory instrument that makes it the default to go into a new scheme, rather than to go into the Pension Protection Fund? That is particularly important when all the actuarial advice is that it would be best for the vast majority of those pensioners to have gone into the new scheme and that they should have just been defaulted into it. That can be done by statutory instrument.

Jack Dromey: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. In the debate over the last 12 or 18 months, we have called that the progressive default option. There is no question but that it has enormous merits and it would be helpful if the Minister were to comment on it in his response.

The experience with Carillion pointed to more general problems that started with the Government's lamentable non-intervention. Despite the fact that the company was getting into greater and greater difficulty, and despite repeated profit warnings, they continued to let contracts to Carillion. The regulators were aware of the risks at a relatively early stage, but they did not use the full extent of their powers to avoid unnecessary burdens on business. I kid you not. I quote from what was said at the time.

The board, which failed in its duties to workers and pension scheme members, continued to pay out large salaries, bonuses and dividends, but did not pay into the pension deficit. The trustees did not alert regulators to the extent of the problems early enough. Asset managers continued voting through large pay packages despite profit warnings, and the auditors did not spot the signs of trouble early enough. There is a raft of problems associated with the scandals that have befallen too many workers in our economy. The lessons from Carillion in terms of the need for action more generally are powerful indeed.

At the next stage it is vital that the regulators act to make sure that such events never happen again. They need to become more people-focused, ensuring that workers' pensions are protected at all costs. Rogues in the industry must be sought out and punished, ensuring that they never work in the industry again, and the law needs to be strengthened. To that end, there have been constructive discussions with the Government on presenting a Bill as soon as possible to introduce the stronger powers contained in the DB White Paper to go after rogues. Perhaps the Minister will comment on where that legislation is. It is important for two other reasons, including the introduction of the pensions dashboard—for example, the compulsion on providers to provide the necessary information to the dashboard—and the collective defined contribution pension scheme that has been agreed between Royal Mail and the Communication Workers Union.

There are welcome measures on pensions that can and should be taken where there is a degree of consensus, even if we argue that the Government should go significantly further. The sooner they are introduced into legislation, the better.

In conclusion, this is little comfort to the workers of British Steel or those in Carillion, but the tragedy that befell them was at the centre of the drive for changing and strengthening the law last year. It is at least something of a legacy, even if it is cold comfort to them. At the heart of it were MPs such as my hon. Friends the Members for Blaenau Gwent and for Aberavon, who played a major role in highlighting the scandal and demanding that action be taken.

At the next stages, I stress again that it is important that lessons are learnt by all those I have referred to and that the law is strengthened. I will finish by referring to something that my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent said, and he was absolutely right. Is it necessary to change the law in the ways that I have argued for? Yes, without hesitation, but there are powers that exist now in criminal law, and those powers should be used.

I know the workers of Port Talbot would say that those evil men and women who cheated them on their pensions need to be investigated, tracked down and put in the dock. An unmistakable message must be sent: if you rob workers of their pension scheme, you are an utter disgrace and, will end up in the dock, and, in extreme cases, in prison.

10.18 am

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Howarth. I thank the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) for securing this important debate. I know he has engaged extensively and constructively with the Financial Conduct Authority on these matters over the past year. I was pleased to meet him in February to discuss how we can avoid a repeat of the unfortunate circumstances that occurred in the British Steel pensions scheme case. I am aware of the extensive work he has undertaken with the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) and others from south Wales, and I know that the FCA has valued immensely that interaction to try to improve communications and other aspects raised in the debate this morning.

Many issues have been raised in the debate, and I will seek to respond to them all—particularly the importance of a well-functioning financial advice market. I have listened carefully to all those who have made observations about the aspects of that that are not functioning well.

I will refer to the lessons that have been learned specifically in the British Steel pensions case; the actions the FCA has taken to address unsuitable pensions transfer advice; the protections in place for consumers; and the issue of so-called phoenix firms—an outrageous situation where individuals seek to leave behind responsibility for a previous, failed enterprise, recreate a new enterprise and therefore absolve themselves of responsibility.

I am here as the Minister responsible for financial services. I note the questions that have been raised by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) concerning the status and other aspects of the pensions Bill. I was in front of the Work and Pensions Committee last week with my colleague, the Minister for Pensions, so I have some observations on that, but he has lead responsibility in that area, so I shall seek to secure a response from him.

As the Minister responsible for financial services, I am committed to ensuring that a well-functioning financial advice market exists to support people to make the right decisions for them and their families. In 2015, as has been mentioned, the Treasury and the FCA launched the financial advice market review, with the goal of improving the accessibility and affordability of financial advice. The Government and the FCA have now implemented all 28 recommendations from that review and will be reviewing the advice market again over 2019 to monitor progress and report back next year.

The Government have also made financial advice mandatory for people considering a defined-benefit pension transfer where the value of the pension is over £30,000. That threshold is purposely low, given the dire consequences of taking poor advice and making unwise decisions—as has been said in relation to a number of cases this morning. That is to ensure that people consider the fact that they may lose guaranteed income in retirement and are aware of all the options available before they make such a complex decision.

Turning to British Steel, although most financial advisers offer sound advice, unfortunately there are cases where the advice people receive is not right for them. The British Steel case was one such instance and resulted from a unique set of complex circumstances. A minority of advisers were responsible for giving unsuitable advice, which resulted in losses for scheme members. The restructure of the British Steel pension scheme occurred at a time when there was considerable concern over the future of Tata Steel, and members were understandably worried about whether they were about to lose their jobs and pensions. Several public bodies were involved in supporting scheme members to decide what to do with their British Steel pension, and it would be helpful to outline their different roles, because that will bring clarity to where the issues lie and how we can address them.

The Pensions Regulator is responsible for negotiating and agreeing arrangements where an employer is unable to continue to support a defined-benefit scheme, as was the case for Tata Steel and the British Steel pension scheme. That includes guidance and oversight of the trustees and scheme administrators. As such, the Pensions Regulator was also responsible for the options available to BSPS members, the communications sent by the trustees and the deadlines for decisions to be made.

The FCA is responsible for the regulation of the financial advice market. Financial advice firms must be authorised by the FCA before they are permitted to provide advice, including on pension transfers, and advisers are required to provide financial advice that is suitable for the individual's personal circumstances.

The Pensions Advisory Service was an independent service offering free-to-consumer guidance on pension matters. As has been mentioned, it has recently been merged with Pension Wise and the Money Advice Service to create a new single financial guidance body, which is now known as the Money and Pensions Service. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington asked from the Opposition Front Bench about the status of that body. The chief executive is now in place, and work is going on in this financial year to set up the processes for bringing those three entities together. There will be a series of announcements over the coming months about their intentions, but the body will operationalise in the course of the coming financial year.

As to the lessons learned from the experience in south Wales with the British Steel scheme, the independent Rookes review, which considered the communication exercise that supported members of British Steel to take decisions on their pension, reported in January. It noted that there are important lessons for organisations to learn to prevent such a case from happening again. There are, I think, 18 recommendations, and they include earlier intervention and intelligence sharing between the regulators and the Money and Pensions Service; improved support for members considering cash transfers out of defined-benefit schemes; improved guidance for trustees facing restructuring and other major changes; and improved message content clarity and channels.

The Pensions Regulator, the Financial Conduct Authority and the Money and Pensions Service have publicly committed to addressing the review's remaining recommendations. They have agreed a joint protocol to work together to ensure that consumers are appropriately protected. It includes ensuring that support and

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communications are in place for members of defined-benefit pension schemes, ahead of any restructures and consultations—something manifestly different from what happened in the regrettable case that we are considering. Another aim of the protocol is that there should be better co-ordination of the involvement of different public bodies through early intervention, expedited approval processes and improved information sharing. The bodies have also developed branded written materials for trustees, to ensure that there are better communications with pension scheme members, including letters to alert them to the risks of transferring out of DB pension schemes, and the giving of practical information.

I will now talk about action on unsuitable pensions transfer advice, because the British Steel case has also raised many questions about quality.

Stephen Kinnock: The Minister has set out some of the structural and institutional issues and the lessons to be learned, but does he agree that when 8,000 members transfer out there is clearly a problem that needs to be addressed at source? Flagging up risks is all very well, but this is a case of shutting the door after the horse has bolted. We need a system that prevents such mass migration out, because once those kinds of numbers are involved it is highly likely that people will be going against actuarial advice that is in their best interests.

John Glen: I have listened carefully to the hon. Gentleman's interventions, and he is right to say that 6.6% of the 122,000 individuals who had those pensions did transfer out, and that, in general, the default option would not be to transfer out of a DB scheme. There is work going on to develop pathways. I am not clear, given that it is not my direct area of responsibility, about the status of that work. I think, however, that there is a challenge, in the context of the policy on freedoms that is now well under way, about how to reconcile that freedom with making the decisions in question. Perhaps I might pivot over to consider the DC schemes. I think what is happening is that many people decide to take the 25% tax-free lump sum and then do not necessarily make appropriate, or the best, decisions on the remainder of that pot of money. Work is being done on that, but with respect to the specificity of the default option, I cannot give the hon. Gentleman a definitive response now.

I think we are moving to a point where there will be default pathways that people will need to be advised on when they take advice. I think that is probably a sensible compromise that deals with the fact that, in some instances, not coming out of the DB scheme would not be the right thing to do. The hon. Gentleman will agree about that, although he is also perfectly correct to say that, generally, not coming out would be the right thing to do. There is work to be done, but I think progress is being made, and I acknowledge the sensible point he has raised.

Nick Smith: I want to focus on what the Minister calls the 6%—perhaps nearly 8,000 people—who may have been badly advised in this case. What is he going to do to get the FCA to up its game, contact those people and help them, in case they have been badly advised?

John Glen: Following our meeting, I undertook to speak to Andrew Bailey, the chief executive. We are due to meet every few months, and our next meeting

is imminent. I will speak to him about that. A number of live investigations are under way; I do not have investigative power myself, but I will take a close interest in those investigations. Individual companies—I will not name them—are being actively investigated now, and I expect the FCA to make announcements and recommendations consequent to those investigations imminently. I am not privy to the detail, but I am taking a close interest and will be speaking to the chief executive, because I realise that time is pressing on. This morning we have heard vivid accounts of individuals and families ruined by these decisions, and I take the matter seriously.

To get back to my script, the FCA leads on financial advice and has considerable power to act against firms and individuals who provide negligent advice. To be clear: the FCA can impose a financial penalty on a firm, require the firm to pay redress to its customers, restrict the firm's permissions, or prohibit individuals from operating in financial services. The FCA can bring criminal prosecutions. I hear the enthusiasm for that action being taken, and I think the FCA hears it too, but it works closely with other organisations to support criminal prosecutions. Both the Government and the FCA are targeting their attention on the effective regulation of financial services and wider work to tackle scams, including the recent implementation of a ban on pensions cold calling.

Jack Dromey: That is helpful, but in the case of British Steel, I think it would send absolutely the right message to the workers concerned if the Minister said today that a sense of urgency is needed on the part of the FCA and the South Wales police about investigating potential criminal wrongdoing and taking action. The workers back at the plant would welcome that.

John Glen: I am happy to respond to that intervention by saying that it is absolutely imperative that the FCA works with all bodies to hold those individuals to account and to take the appropriate action in the light of the evidence presented to it. This is urgent; the individuals who have suffered this experience expect that of the FCA, and I believe the FCA is keenly aware of that.

The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent talked about the regional presence of the FCA. It has more than 3,000 employees and runs an annual programme of regional supervisory workshops under its "Live and local" banner, in which it educates firms and gathers intelligence from across the country. That has included recent workshops on DB pension transfers. Although the FCA does not have a series of regional offices, there is a clear expectation on the part of the Government and the FCA itself that it will go out into communities across the country, to ensure it has a presence among the 35,000 IFAs that operate.

The regulator is also undertaking further work on the pensions transfer advice market. The FCA is analysing responses to a recent data request from firms that undertake pensions transfer advice and is planning a programme of work, which is likely to include further engagement with stakeholders, targeted education for firms involved in providing pension transfer advice, and assessment of those firms significantly involved in the provision of DB transfer advice. The FCA has already announced a requirement for all pension transfer specialists to obtain the same qualifications as fully regulated investment advisers, alongside their existing qualifications,

by October 2020. In relation to the BSPS, the FCA intervened to stop 11 firms from providing pensions transfer advice, and several firms are still under investigation.

It is important to ensure that consumers are protected from poor-quality and unsuitable advice, and there are proper mechanisms for redress when they receive poor advice. The first port of call for consumers to seek compensation is to approach the firm itself. If they cannot resolve the issue, consumers can take their complaint to the Financial Ombudsman Service. The FOS is a free, independent service that provides an alternative to the courts. The maximum award it can recommend was increased at the beginning of this month from £150,000 to £350,000 per individual. If firms go into liquidation and cannot provide compensation to individuals, a second tier of protection is open through the financial services compensation scheme. The FSCS is mainly funded by an annual levy on the financial services industry. Since its founding, the FSCS has helped millions of people and paid billions of pounds in compensation.

It is important to note that in the British Steel case, only a very small minority of former steelworkers who have taken their claims through the FOS and the FSCS have not been fully compensated. That group were all clients of one firm, and the Government's decision to make financial advice mandatory for those seeking to transfer their DB pension has therefore guaranteed a crucial layer of consumer protection to those individuals.

"Phoenixing"—firms or individuals seeking to avoid liabilities arising from poor investment advice by re-emerging as a different legal entity—can leave consumers and taxpayers out of pocket and tarnish the reputation of the industry. The FCA has a range of tools to identify and act against firms or individuals who try to avoid responsibility in that way. Those seeking to liquidate firms must provide information about outstanding complaints, and the assets of collapsed firms cannot be sold on or passed back to former directors without the prior consent of the regulator. The FCA has already used those powers to prevent several individuals and businesses from avoiding their liabilities, and other cases are under investigation. This has caused some individuals to withdraw their applications, knowing full well that they will not get through. Although I acknowledge that this will not give absolute comfort to those who have suffered, I believe that we now have in place a regime that will prevent the practice in future.

Stephen Kinnock: On the issue of compensation, phoenixing and rogue financial advisers' ability to just shut up shop and walk away, surely there is also a question of insurance. In our recent meeting with the FCA, which I found absolutely extraordinary, it was made clear to us that there appears to be no mandatory level of insurance that financial advisers must take out so that they can be held to account and insurance pay-outs can be made. My understanding is that, as soon as these advisers see the writing on the wall and know that people will come after them for compensation, they shut down, and there is no backstop—perhaps safety net is a better term—so that people who have been ripped off can go after them through an insurance process. Does not that extraordinary situation require a policy and legislative shift so that the FCA has a chance of doing its job in this area?

John Glen: I have been trying to find the note that one of my officials kindly sent me on the quantum of insurance. My understanding is that FCA-authorised

and regulated firms must have insurance in place; if they do not, the FCA has it in its armoury to de-authorise. I listened carefully to the hon. Gentleman, and his point seemed to be on the amount of that insurance. I am happy to take that matter away and consider it. On the practice of phoenixing, I am given to understand that the FCA has done a significant amount of work in that area. It launched a programme of work in April 2018 to strengthen authorisations, and I have given some of the details. I do not want to waffle further on this point, but I will give consideration to the amount and level of insurance required. The hon. Gentleman has discussed the matter with the FCA; I will do so as well and write to him. If it is not fit for purpose, it is not fit.

I thank the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent for bringing to the House this debate on a very important topic. I was pleased to hear that he is committed to supporting the communications work with the FCA to raise awareness among former BSPS members of their rights to complain and to seek justice. The Government, regulators and other organisations are strongly committed to monitoring the market for financial advice and defined-benefit pension schemes, and to taking decisive action to ensure that these events cannot be repeated. I recognise that Ministers often say that at this point, but I have listened sincerely and carefully to the points that have been raised.

A lot can be done as a consequence of the excellent work of the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues, and through my interaction with the FCA. I accept that there have been some differences of opinion in the Chamber this morning regarding the amount that can be done by regulatory intervention and legislative action. However, I will do all I can to ensure that we exhaust reasonable opportunities for the FCA to tighten up in all these areas. The example given by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington of an individual who inadvertently, unwittingly and tragically led his 20 colleagues to make certain decisions, and the multiplier effect of those, was heartbreaking, and one that the Government need to respond to. I thank Members for the opportunity to respond to this morning's debate.

10.41 am

Nick Smith: Thank you, Mr Howarth for chairing what has been a productive debate on an important issue. There have been some strong contributions about some of the key problems that steel pensioners have had to work through in the last 18 months or so. In particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) spoke movingly about the human impact on his constituents, who were at the epicentre of these problems. I have seen the impact too, and it has been heartbreaking.

My constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), emphasised the importance of looking at the possibilities for criminal proceedings. I strongly endorse that point, which needs to be taken on urgently by the South Wales police or the FCA.

Other contributors spoke clearly about these serious issues, and about what needs to be done to help in the future. It is clear that a lot of things went badly wrong, and hard-working people found their life savings put at risk. The problems that have been highlighted today need to be addressed as a matter of urgency so that we

[Nick Smith]

do everything we can to prevent this from happening again further down the line. I hope the Minister will see through the changes that are needed, given the problems that we have identified today. We will work with him to do that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered pension transfers and the British Steel pension scheme.

10.43 am

Sitting suspended.

Turkey: Treatment of Kurds

11 am

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the treatment of Kurds in Turkey.

Thank you, Mr Howarth, for allowing me to speak on this matter. As a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Kurds in Turkey, I wanted to secure this debate to highlight what I believe is a worsening situation for Kurds in Turkey.

On 31 March, my hon. Friends the Members for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) and for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) and I were meant to travel to Turkey to meet Leyla Güven and observe the local elections taking place in Turkey. Unfortunately, the Government announced extra sitting days due to Brexit—something that I suspect even the Government could not help at that time—and we had to cancel the trip. However, my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate and I did travel down to Newport to meet Imam Sis. Imam is a brave Kurdish activist from Newport who, 114 days ago, embarked on an indefinite hunger strike. Two weeks ago, when we met him, the hunger strike was taking its toll, but although his body was giving way, his determination in the cause of Kurdish freedom was not.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): As my hon. Friend said, I visited Imam Sis in Newport with him, and what struck me most was Imam's plea for the world not to look on in silence at the human rights abuses against the Kurds in Turkey. Deciding to go on an indefinite hunger strike for one's political cause is one of the hardest decisions and most drastic peaceful political actions that one can take, so does my hon. Friend agree that this Parliament and this Government must not stay silent about human rights abuses against Kurds while British citizens are risking their lives for the Kurdish political cause?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I totally agree that we must speak up, and I hope that we will get good responses from the Front Bench later.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on initiating the debate. It is good to see this issue being discussed in this Chamber. I support the Kurds and their right to self-determination—their right to be a nation and form their own Government. Alongside that, we have Turkey, which is an abuser of human rights and a suppressor of civil rights. Religious and ethnic groups are having their beliefs restricted; new churches are being prevented from being built. Is it not time that the free world, the west, the Minister, this Government and we ourselves stood alongside the Kurds and backed their wish for democracy and freedom—indeed, for liberty itself?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I totally agree. Of course, historically, Britain was part of drawing the lines on maps that exterminated a Kurdish nation. We therefore have a responsibility to ensure that we are adding our voice in support of correcting an historical wrong in terms of the map, but also recognising the role that the Kurds have played in allying with us in numerous battles and particularly the latest one, against ISIS.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I, too, congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate and I would like to echo the comment that he has just made. It is a fact that the west and the wider world have let down the Kurdish people, particularly after the first world war and again when we have seen them help the rest of the world—most recently in Syria against ISIS. We are in danger of once again turning our backs on the Kurds, but that must not happen.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I totally agree. I should of course mention that my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) is the local Member for Imam Sis. She has been an advocate for his struggle, but cannot be here today because of the death of her agent last week; she is at his funeral. She is following this debate with great interest.

When I was with Imam, I asked him to write down the key demands that he wanted to be raised in Parliament, so I am here today to put Imam's voice in *Hansard* as well as to get a response. He wrote to me, saying:

"The hunger strikers are demanding that Turkey ends the isolation of Abdullah Öcalan. Namely, they are demanding that Öcalan be returned access to his lawyers and family. In not doing this Turkey is breaking international law and its own laws. The hunger strikers are also asking that the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture re-open its investigation into the conditions on İmralı Island where Öcalan is being held."

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I, too, congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. I am sure he will agree that we have noticed a pattern with Turkey: when there is international attention, Abdullah Öcalan gets something, such as a brief meeting with, say, his lawyer or his brother; then the attention of the world retreats and nothing further happens. It is essential that we keep the pressure on and that we call on the Government to ensure that the response of the Turkish Government is not just a superficial and tokenistic one.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I totally agree. Since 2015, little if any access has been granted to Abdullah Öcalan, and it is only because some of the hunger strikes and campaigning that brief interventions have been allowed for relatives to make sure that he is still alive. He has been allowed no access to the external world and his lawyer has had no access in that time.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman, like me, praise the trade union movement in the UK for highlighting this issue as part of the Freedom for Öcalan campaign? Is he, like me, concerned that 700 appeals have been launched on behalf of Mr Öcalan but that, as he has said, lawyers are not getting access to him?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I totally agree; this last year just gone, the Durham Miners' Gala had an international theme of Freedom for Öcalan. Like many other struggles that we have had in the past, it shows that the trade union movement is stepping up to fight for what is just and right.

For the benefit of those watching proceedings who may not be aware of Abdullah Öcalan, he is the Kurdish leader and political philosopher who is currently imprisoned in Turkey. Last Thursday was his 70th birthday, but for 20 years of his life he has been held in prison by the Turkish authorities. Öcalan was abducted in February 1999 from Nairobi, Kenya, where he was in exile, in an

international clandestine operation involving Turkish intelligence agencies. He was transported to the island prison, where he has been kept in harsh solitary confinement. He has been forbidden to contact his lawyer since 2011—I met his lawyer a month ago—and he has only been granted access to anyone twice since 2015. The conditions in which he is held violate not only Turkish law, but the European convention on human rights, which Turkey is obliged to follow as a member of the Council of Europe.

To protest these unlawful conditions, the then imprisoned MP for the HDP, the People's Democratic Party, Leyla Güven, began an indefinite hunger strike on 7 November. Leyla was imprisoned by the Turkish authorities following her critical remark on the Government's bombing of Afrin in northern Syria, which she rightly described with detestation. She was a sitting MP, thrown in prison for doing her job and holding the Government to account. She was released 80 days later, but now, after almost 140 days, she is nearing death, suffering from nausea, fever, severe headaches, insomnia and unstable blood pressure. We have seen a set of elections in Turkey that are beyond what anyone could call fair and free, particularly in some of the Kurdish regions.

Leyla in Turkey and Imam here in the UK are not alone in their hunger strike. Since the end of last year, they have been joined by 8,000 political prisoners from across Turkey, and numerous activists in Europe, north America, the middle east have all joined Ms Güven in declaring indefinite hunger strikes. Many hunger strikers are now suffering from serious health problems, but refuse medical treatment until the isolation of Öcalan is lifted.

We are joined in the Public Gallery by three hunger strikers who are based here in London. If they will excuse my pronunciation—I will probably get it wrong—they are Ali Poyraz, Nahide Zengin, and Mehmet Sait Yılmaz, who are on their 27th day of hunger strike. It is awful to find oneself in the position where that is the only recourse to political voice, but I welcome them to Parliament today and I know that many MPs in this place, while not joining them in their methods, will be sympathetic and support their demands.

The human rights situation in Turkey has been progressively deteriorating since the breakdown of talks for the peaceful resolution of the decades-long conflict between the Kurds and the Turkish state in 2015, at which point the Turkish state began to engage in a policy of brutal oppression of the Kurdish population, imposing harsh 24-hour curfews in the south-eastern Kurdish region and committing countless human rights abuses—all this after Öcalan had spurned violence in favour of peaceful, political resolution. In Britain, we know that converting a violent protest to a peaceful one is not an easy road; it requires good faith and perseverance on all sides. The fact is that Turkey's continued repression of Öcalan and the Kurds destroys any potential for a peaceful resolution for them and Turkey as a whole.

The situation was greatly exacerbated by the state of emergency that followed the failed coup in 2016, under which political opposition and trade union activity has largely been banned, and democratically elected politicians, Members of Parliament and members of the judiciary have been removed from office on the grounds of suspected affiliation to opposition activity. They have all been replaced with President Erdoğan's AKP puppets.

[Lloyd Russell-Moyle]

The Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture has visited the notorious island where Öcalan is held, İmralı, and other political prisoners seven times since 1999. Very few of the improvements that it has called for have ever been implemented. The CPT's last visit to the island was in 2016, and Turkey gave permission for the publication of its report only in 2018, two years later. The hunger strikers are demanding that the CPT be allowed to revisit İmralı island prison immediately and investigate the conditions of the prisoners there, to see if any of the improvements have been made.

I have been disappointed by the reaction to the growing concern. In January, the Council of Europe passed a resolution expressing concern about the human rights situation in Turkey and the condition of the hunger strikers, as well as calling Turkey to authorise the immediate publication of the CPT's reports. However, the resolution has been insufficient in putting pressure on Turkey to change its ways. The hunger strikers are calling for all possible pressure to be put on Turkey to end the isolation of Öcalan before the situation escalates and there are mass casualties.

What recent discussions has the Foreign and Commonwealth Office had—I am aware that the Minister covering for this debate is not the Minister for the middle east—with counterparts in Turkey on the treatment of Kurdish prisoners in Turkey and in particular on the conditions on İmralı island. Will he seek assurances from the Turkish authorities that Öcalan will be granted access to his lawyer in compliance with Turkish and international law? Will he, as a matter of urgency, seek to have the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture reopen its investigation into İmralı island? Will the Government support the Welsh Assembly's referral to the CPT on this matter, so that it has the backing of the whole of the British state? Will we ensure that our member of the CPT raises this issue in those committee meetings? Turkey is a NATO ally, but we must not allow a friendship to stop us demanding fair and just treatment of all citizens.

In Northern Ireland and other parts of the world, we have seen that we achieve lasting peace only if political leaders on all sides are given legitimacy, respect and a seat at the table to forge peace. The British Government must stand with the Kurdish people—as I have mentioned, we have an historic duty, as well as a current humanitarian and moral duty to do so—to seek the peace that they desperately deserve.

11.14 am

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): May I first say how grateful I am to the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) for securing the debate, and to other hon. Members for their contributions? The Minister for Europe and the Americas, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan), cannot be here today and sends his apologies. The fact that I am speaking about Turkey is not a further extension of my duties, but it is a great pleasure to respond on behalf of the Government. I will try to respond to all the points that have been raised; if I fail to do so, I hope that the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown will forgive me, and I will respond in writing afterwards.

We are obviously aware of Imam Sis's hunger strike in protest at the conditions in which Abdullah Öcalan is being held and related issues. I will go into more detail about the hunger strike later, because it has been raised by a number of hon. Members.

The hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown also mentioned election outcomes. We note the preliminary conclusions of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, which monitored Turkey's local elections, including wins for the HDP in a number of major cities in the south-east. On the one hand, its conclusions welcome the impressive turnout of 84%, calling it a

“sign of healthy democratic interest and awareness.”

However, we also note the deep concerns that were raised about the fairness of the campaigning environment, particularly in relation to the media coverage. We will encourage the Turkish authorities to engage with the recommendations of the full report, which is due in July. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, recounts are ongoing in Istanbul, and the governing AKP has appealed to the Supreme Electoral Council for a full recount. We must of course await the decision of that council, which may adjudicate on the matter as soon as 13 April. Meanwhile, the CHP candidate for Ankara received his certificate of election from the council on Monday.

I will say a bit more about broader relations with Turkey. It was fair of the hon. Gentleman to recognise in his contribution that Turkey is a vital partner for the UK. Turkey is a long-term member of NATO; it sits on NATO's southern border, on the frontline of some of the most difficult challenges we face. We work together to counter terrorism, build our prosperity and pursue stability in our neighbourhood, recognising that a lot of these issues are now of global importance. We should also acknowledge that Turkey is hosting some 3.6 million Syrian refugees, at considerable cost.

Of the approximately 83 million Turkish citizens, some 15 million to 18 million are of Kurdish origin. They live in all parts of Turkey, from the traditional Kurdish heartlands of the south-east to the larger cities in the west, with perhaps 3 million in Istanbul alone. There are many Kurds in the Turkish diaspora, including here in the UK, where they make a positive contribution, not just to the UK economy but culturally. I know that the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), who is no longer in his place, recognises the importance of the Turkish diaspora to that part of north London.

It is important not to generalise when we talk about “the Kurds” or their plight. They are a diverse section of society, with a range of political affiliations, lifestyles and outlooks. As Members will be aware, there are also large Kurdish populations in Iraq, Iran and Syria, countries that are all of great strategic importance to the UK. Our approach to the issue of the Kurds in Turkey needs to reflect aspects of that wider context.

We should also not generalise when we talk about the treatment of Kurdish people in Turkey. I absolutely note the concerns that have been expressed in this debate about the policies of the current Turkish Government towards Kurds, and I will try to address some of the issues that have been raised. It is worth remembering that a great many people of Kurdish origin have voted for, and continue to vote for, the AKP Government.

Indeed, some have served in it—two of Turkey's most recent Deputy Prime Ministers were of Kurdish origin. All Turks, regardless of their ethnicity or faith, enjoy the same rights under the Turkish constitution, and from 2003 onwards—especially following the 2009 Kurdish opening policy—the AKP did much to end the historical restrictions on the free expression of Kurdish identity in Turkey.

The Turkish Government have always said that their quarrel is not with the Kurds as a whole, but with the specific terrorist groups that threaten the Turkish state. I appreciate that this matter is open to some dispute, both within Turkey and among those in the UK who have an interest in Turkish issues. However, the Turkish state has been locked in a bitter conflict with the Kurdistan Workers' Party—the PKK—since the 1980s. The PKK is a proscribed terrorist organisation in the UK and throughout much of the world.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Does the Minister recognise that the latest court ruling in Belgium about the PKK's proscribed status in European law at least opens up a discussion about whether it is still an active terrorist group or has transitioned to more peaceful means?

Mark Field: I understand that. It is worth pointing out that the proscription of organisations is always quite fluid and constantly under review—I see that in my day-to-day brief as Minister for Asia and the Pacific, as well as in the middle east and north Africa.

That tragic conflict has resulted in an estimated 40,000 deaths and the displacement of millions of people in south-east Turkey. An end to that conflict is possible. Between 2013 and 2015, the Turkish Government and the PKK engaged in fruitful negotiations to end it, and a ceasefire was in place for much of that time. Sadly, that ceasefire broke down in July 2015. Since then, according to the International Crisis Group, more than 4,000 people have been killed. That includes more than 400 civilians and more than 1,000 members of the Turkish security forces. I say to hon. Members who have a strong interest in this matter, not least because of the diaspora in their constituencies, that the UK very much hopes that those negotiations can reopen to bring an end to the conflict and prevent further deaths. For that to happen, the PKK must end its campaign of terror, and we urge it to do so.

I note that there are Members from across the House in the Chamber today. There are two Members from Plaid Cymru: the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) and the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake)—I am sure I have mispronounced both constituencies.

Jim Shannon: You have been practising.

Mark Field: In fact, there are no other English Members here at all. We have the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) from Northern Ireland and the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for the Scottish National party. All have raised the serious situation of the imprisoned PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan. Naturally, we condemn the PKK's acts of violence, just as we condemn all forms of terrorism, but we also naturally expect Turkey to respect properly its international obligations regarding the treatments of all prisoners. We are aware that the Council of Europe's Committee

for the Prevention of Torture reported on Mr Öcalan's prison conditions as recently as March 2018. In January, British embassy officials discussed his case, as well as that of hunger-striking prisoners, with Turkish officials.

Hon. Members have raised the issue of hunger strikes by prisoners, including by members of the HDP. Although it is of course distressing to witness any hunger strike—we see evidence of them closer to home, in Newport and elsewhere—the decision to embark on one is a matter for the individual concerned. As I said, we expect Turkey to respect its international obligations with regard to prison conditions, including by ensuring access to appropriate medical treatment.

A number of HDP MPs have been arrested on the basis of their alleged links to the PKK. If those links are proven to be accurate, we urge the HDP to distance itself entirely from the PKK and any terrorist activity. However, we have registered our concern with the Turkish authorities about the very large number of relatively recent detentions, including that of the HDP leader, Selahattin Demirtaş. Our embassy in Ankara, alongside other diplomatic missions, has attempted to observe Mr Demirtaş's trial hearings. Unfortunately, we have sometimes been prevented from doing so. We urge the Turkish authorities to allow diplomatic missions to observe such trials so that we can understand the evidence on which the charges are based.

Hon. Members raised concerns about the replacement of large numbers of HDP mayors in the south-east of Turkey with state-appointed trustees. President Erdoğan has suggested that the same measures may be taken following last month's local elections. That decision was taken on the basis that those mayors and their municipalities were allegedly channelling funding and political support to the PKK. Again, if that is the case, we should condemn it unreservedly, but we also expect the Turkish state to undertake any legal processes against locally elected representatives fairly, transparently and with full respect for international law and the rule of law. That is vital not just for the long-term health of Turkish democracy, but increasingly for Turkey's international reputation.

As hon. Members will know, in 2016 there was an attempt to overthrow the Turkish Government by force. Obviously, we are thankful that the attempt failed, but many innocent civilians were killed. I am proud that the UK Government stood alongside our Turkish allies on that night. The Minister for Europe and the Americas travelled to Turkey as soon as he could to show solidarity. I also accept that aspects of the trauma have allowed more space for other activity. However, the trauma of the attempted coup is still fresh in the Turkish consciousness.

Liz Saville Roberts: Does the Minister feel personally comfortable that the PKK is aligned with terrorist groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda on the proscribed list?

Mark Field: As the right hon. Lady will be aware, obviously we have a proscription in place for good reason, but it is not a hit list of acceptability from one organisation to another. Until such time as the PKK denounces violence, it must recognise that it will be regarded as a proscribed organisation in many parts of the world. I would like to see those people who have been actively engaged denounce violence to ensure that they are no longer proscribed and can play a proper and full part in the democratic process. The list does not run

[Mark Field]

from A to Z according to some level of acceptability; an organisation is either proscribed or it is not. One might objectively sit back and think, “Certain organisations are more dangerous to our interests than others.” None the less, it is right that rules for proscription are in place.

The Turkish Government have a right and a responsibility to act against the perpetrators of any coup attempt and all who have committed or are planning terrorist acts. However, it is also vital that any and all measures taken are proportionate and in line with Turkey’s democratic principles and freely given human rights obligations. We shall continue to express our concern to Turkey where we believe that is not the case. This includes a number of individual cases, including that of a former Amnesty director, Taner Kılıç, who was released on bail last year. We look forward to the judicial reforms that Turkey’s reform action group is considering and hope they will make a genuine difference to other cases of concern, including those of the civil society patron, Osman Kavala.

We remain concerned at the sheer scale of the response, including the number of civil servants who have been summarily dismissed from their jobs, and especially the number of journalists who have been detained. We believe that a free press is an essential component of a healthy democracy, and I know that the UK’s championing of that will have support across the House with our Defend Media Freedom campaign in 2019, which will culminate in a conference in London on 10 and 11 July with our friends from Canada. In raising these issues, we will never forget the trauma of the coup attempt and the extraordinary security threats that Turkey continues to face on a day-to-day basis. We can see that just by looking at a map of the region.

To conclude, we shall continue to engage with Turkey and other countries that have significant and sizable Kurdish populations on all the issues that have been raised in this important debate. We shall continue to press for lasting solutions that are proportionate, democratic and lawful.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

Legal Aid for Inquests

[MRS ANNE MAIN *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered legal aid for inquests.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Main. This debate is about a simple premise: who can access justice, and who cannot? Much to our shame, during inquests, too many people who have experienced appalling loss and suffering fall into the latter category. This debate is about deaths in state detention and custody, or where there is a public interest, and about how the families of those lost should be given adequate resources to find the truth. It is about a fair request for a non-intrusive, non-means-tested, automatic right to legal aid for legal representation for bereaved families. The charity Inquest claims that granting such a request will cost as little as £5 million, yet it will be invaluable to suffering families who need answers. The topic of legal aid for inquests has rightly moved up the political agenda, and I pay tribute to Inquest and other campaigners who have worked tirelessly to make that so.

A huge injustice sits at the very heart of our justice system. On the one hand, state bodies and representatives are equipped with access to unlimited funds and resources—the best experts and the best legal teams. On the other hand, vulnerable families in the midst of grief are forced to navigate a complex and alien application process that is provided with the bare minimum of support—indeed, most people will not even receive that.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Legal aid is currently means-tested, and even then it is for limited purposes. Once someone has overcome that hurdle they must then apply for exceptional case funding, which puts them at a massive disadvantage compared with the huge resources available to state bodies.

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend gets to the heart of this debate. The process is far too complex, and those who apply for legal aid are forced to run up huge legal bills on their own, represent themselves in court or rely on the generosity of strangers to help raise the required funds. Often, people have to tackle complex legal processes that involve multiple interested persons and agencies. Among a host of other complicated legal matters, people must address issues such as access to and release of a body, post mortems, communication with investigation teams, securing evidence and criminal investigations. Most people do not have the legal knowledge to do those things, and many do not have the resources to help. I ask the Minister: is that fair?

We are talking about the death of a child in a mental health setting—a death as a result of neglectful state services—or the self-inflicted death of a prisoner. The families of those lost feel a deep sense of pain. This debate is about deaths in state detention and custody, or where there is a clear public interest element to finding out the truth—for example, the Grenfell tragedy, the disaster at Hillsborough, or the recent case of Molly Russell, who tragically took her own life, in part, her parents believe, because of distressing material related to depression and suicide that she was able easily to access on social media platforms.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Inquests once opened are sub judice, and even when adjourned they are under a strict interpretation of the resolution. Reference should not be made to legal inquests at all, but if something is linked to a specific case, as the hon. Lady just did, we must ask for details of that case not to be mentioned as they may well compromise the case currently under consideration. I urge all Members who wish to refer to that case to try to refrain from making specific references.

Stephanie Peacock: I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh).

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on making a powerful speech, and I thank her for initiating the debate. The point she is making, and the examples she gives, are incredibly important. This debate is about death at the hands of the state, and the families who are trying to improve things so that such deaths never happen again, and the same mistakes—or criminal acts—are not made again. Given what we are talking about, does she agree that it is even more grossly unfair that the state's legal advice and representation should be so thoroughly weighted against the victims?

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. All we are asking for is a level playing field. At the moment, the situation is totally disproportionate—a point I will come to.

The families of victims require help, accountability and answers, not only for themselves but, selflessly, to make sure that no other family goes through what they have. Instead, they are left by a callous Government to fight alone, their voices denied and excluded from the process. The scale of the discrepancy is a disgrace. In 2017 the Ministry of Justice spent £4.2 million on legal representation for the Prison Service in inquests involving deaths. In the same year the families of those who died were awarded just £92,000 in legal aid. I ask the Minister again: how can we in this place look the families of victims in the eyes and tell them that the current system is fair?

Where families are seeking through truth the knowledge that their loss was not in vain, the state seeks damage limitation through multiple expert legal teams defending the interests and reputations of corporate bodies. Such a staggering inequality of arms is a stain on our justice system. The testimony of those who have experienced it at first hand, kindly provided to me by Inquest, serves to prove it so. The process required to acquire legal aid is complicated, and the effects on those not fortunate enough to be successful are devastating. One father who lost his son in police custody said:

“The legal aid application process was incredibly stressful...the hoops we had to jump through to get funding to represent our son, who died as a result of one of the state agency's actions, remains a source of anger and hurt.”

Another, who lost his daughter in a care home after a long history of serious mental ill health, said:

“The time, effort, emotional energy, distress that the process has cost me in itself is very damaging. The cost of my legal representation to the State fades into insignificance compared to the cost the State has incurred in the aftermath of my daughter's death.”

Another who was unsuccessful in their legal aid application said:

“We had to do everything ourselves. We had no lawyer at the inquest. Those three weeks were the most terrifying thing I've

ever done in my life. I had to cross examine witnesses, it was absolutely terrifying, and they had lawyers. There needs to be a level playing field; a family member should never be put through that.”

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech with many good points. Does she agree that many families find the process intrusive as their own circumstances and financial situation are looked into? However, the state gets automatic legal representation. Does that not create exactly the uneven playing field that she refers to?

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The system is simply unfair. Others have spoken of how the inquisitorial hearings are anything but. Instead, they are adversarial, law-drenched, distressing journeys, where already traumatised families are silenced and a well-oiled state machine sets about cementing a wall of denial. The families did not ask to be in such a situation. It was not something they sought or could prepare for. They are thrust unexpectedly into intense grief and pain and forced to go through further trauma.

One father spoke of how his family was forced to use money that they had been putting away for his daughter's wedding to pay for legal help following her death. Such stories are utterly devastating. The Government must do more to help. They cannot continue to turn a blind eye to the suffering of some of the most vulnerable in our justice system.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Government seem to rely on this point about the inquisitorial process, so one must ask why, if the family does not need representation, the various state bodies always need to be lawyered up. Indeed, there is something deeply cynical about the Government saying that in their final report—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman has applied to speak, but he cannot make his speech now. He has made his point and hopefully the hon. Lady will tackle it.

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend makes an important point: the system is completely unfair. The Government and their agencies are given a blank cheque, whereas victims are not. It is not just the families of those lost and charities such as Inquest telling them that. Reports have proposed the necessity for changes for years, yet over the last few years the weight of evidence has mounted. Dame Angiolini in her report on deaths and serious incidents in police custody; the Right Rev. James Jones in his report on Hillsborough and the experiences of families; Lord Bach; two chief coroners; Baroness Corston; Lord Harris; the Joint Committee on Human Rights; the Independent Review of the Mental Health Act; and agencies, including the Independent Office for Police Conduct, have all outlined the need for change. Central to the reports of Dame Angiolini and the Right Rev. James Jones were the voices of families speaking about the impact of the inquest process on their wellbeing, much like the testimonies we have heard today.

In response, the Government launched a call for evidence in July as part of their review of legal aid for inquests. What followed was a Government submission document that was riddled with errors, strewn with inaccuracies and in no way befitting the seriousness of the subject. The short turnaround time for submissions

[Stephanie Peacock]

left those whom the Government should have been doing their utmost to hear from unable to sufficiently offer their thoughts.

Furthermore, the document made no explicit mention of, and no adequate attempt to hear from, bereaved families. After its so-called consultation, it was therefore of little surprise that the, in February Ministry of Justice decided to ignore the weight of evidence to the contrary and refused the call for non-means-tested legal aid for inquests where the state has representation.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): The Government's normal consultation period is 12 weeks. Does my hon. Friend share my surprise that it was six weeks for this consultation, which was held over the peak summer holiday period? Does she share my suspicion about its timing?

Stephanie Peacock: I absolutely share my hon. Friend's concern and suspicion. I hope the Minister will answer that point.

For families to fully and effectively participate in the inquest process, they should have access to free automatic non-means-tested legal representation throughout. The Labour party has pledged to provide that, after listening to those who know best, but the Government remain in denial. However, the playing field must be levelled, the inequality of arms addressed and access to justice made a staple of bereaved families' experience throughout inquests.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I, too, join Inquest's call for legal aid to be made available, especially for people in rural areas, as well as subsistence and travel costs, which can be a real drain on families.

Stephanie Peacock: I support that call. Not only is that the way to discover the truth that will provide redress to individual families in individual cases, but it is an avenue to expose the systematic practice problems that have led to deaths, which can alert the authorities and prevent more. That means providing truth and accountability to prevent another Hillsborough or Grenfell, and ensuring that our justice system works for everyone—not just those who can afford it.

2.42 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I had not planned on speaking, but when I saw the debate's title, I realised that I come at the issue from a variety of angles and, sadly, with a great deal of experience. In about 1994, as a junior lawyer, I was sent—because I was cheap, I suspect—to sit in on inquests concerning elderly people who had died in old people's homes. In those days, it was common practice for us to provide a report for insurance companies, which even junior lawyers were considered capable of, and inquests were viewed as the place where we could garner information.

As a junior lawyer, I thought that was exciting, and I was pleased to see a system that was inquisitorial and not that adversarial, and where real facts were teased out that could be of use, or not, to insurance companies that wanted to protect their assets from later claims. I remember being excited by the ancient nature of the coronial system, by how flexible it could be and by how it can adapt to needs today and later on.

Ultimately, I became a Government lawyer for 17 years and specialised in article 2 inquests. [Interruption.] I am glad to be described as the best of the best, and we were—indeed, we are, incidentally. In that respect, I had the privilege of taking part in some very sad inquests, including many relating to Iraq and Afghanistan, Mr Litvinenko's inquest, the 7/7 bombings inquests, and far too many about prisoner deaths. As a Government lawyer, I hope that I was able to help and counsel families, and that we were able to come to the truth of what happened in many of those tragic situations. I also, rightly, protected the Government's assets in terms of secret material, which is what I was usually there for.

Jo Stevens: The hon. Lady is making an interesting speech, but does she agree that it illustrates exactly the inequality of arms at inquests? Insurance companies and the Government have exceptional lawyers, but the bereaved families do not, and that is why the system is so disadvantageous for them.

Victoria Prentis: I partially agree with the hon. Lady, for whom I have great respect. I am trying to make a speech that is possibly slightly less political than the one that opened the debate, and to say that there are many reasons for inquests. As a Government lawyer I was useful in protecting the secrecy of what had happened. Often, in a war context, for example, important national security secrets had to be protected. It was not awfully much something that we were protecting from families—often families had been talked through the secret issue in the privacy of their home at an earlier date; it was just something that we did not want to have aired in open court. I am not anti-family at all, and I will come on to say why not, but I am trying to explain why, if the Government are lawyered up, it is, I hope, not often in an adversarial way. In my working life, I tried hard to make sure that it was not that way. I completely accept that it does not always look like that.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Others are waiting to speak. Can I drag the hon. Lady on to the legal aid for inquests side of the debate? I think that is what many of those who have put in to speak want to cover.

Victoria Prentis: Yes, Mrs Main. I should also say that I am the parent of a child who died, so I know how ghastly it is for people to think of the death of someone who matters so much to them being legalised. I am fully aware of the impact and full horror of the inquest process for families, which is why we are talking about whether they need legal aid.

The inquest usually comes at a particularly bad time for families. Is it often around the anniversary mark—sadly, in Mr Litvinenko's case, it was seven years later—and it is often at a difficult time in the grieving process. Inquests themselves are horrible. Legal language is used about someone's worst nightmares. In the inquest, the family will meet the other people who were there at the time of death, and hear evidence directly from people who might have been the last to talk to their loved one or, indeed, whom they might blame for causing the death. It is often the first time that that happens. It is really horrible.

Even in the most no-blame type of car accident the inquest may be the first time the family hears truly about the time of death. They will have been told at the time, "Oh, yes, he died instantly," but at the inquest they might find out that he died two or three hours later.

They may find out about the place of death: “Oh, yes, he died instantly at the scene.” Oh no, he did not; he died two or three hours later in hospital. Those are horrible, difficult issues for a family to deal with and very difficult to grapple with, but they are not legal issues, and that is the point I am politely trying to make. This does not have to be adversarial.

In my experience, coroners are very sensitive and well trained these days. Coroners’ officers should be lauded to the skies. They do a great deal of loving and supportive work with families.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): My hon. Friend speaks about a more inquisitorial system. Does she agree that if we are looking at a genuinely inquisitorial system of the kind that would be recognised on the continent, it might help if coroners were able to question and probe rather than being expected purely to be the independent arbiter and judge, which lends itself to cases being more adversarial?

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Before the hon. Lady continues her speech, can I say that it is far broader than the debate we are having. Given the shortness of the debate, I would appreciate it if we could stick to the legal aid aspect that has been explored by the Member who moved the motion. I do not wish to interrupt, and I know that the hon. Lady has personal experience, but I would like her to get on to the debate.

Victoria Prentis: My hon. Friend’s intervention was helpful, and the point I am trying to make is that I am not sure legal aid is the answer in all cases. I am quite sure that more support is needed for families. I am not sure that that support can be provided only by lawyers. I do support the idea of airline-style investigations—for example, in the health service. We are teasing this out at the moment; it is quite a new concept in the health world, and we have talked about bringing it into the prison world as well. That style of inquisitorial investigation is possibly more useful for families than legal aid. That is the point I am trying to make, Mrs Main—I am sorry if it does not entirely fit with the terms of your debate, but that is why I am not sure that legal aid for inquests—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): It is not my debate; it is the debate of the hon. Lady who introduced it, and it is important that it is on legal aid.

Victoria Prentis: My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) is here. He is a great man, and he recently managed to steer a private Member’s Bill on stillbirth inquests through the extraordinary system that we have set up for such Bills—I was involved tangentially in framing that Bill. I am not sure whether we need legal aid for the parents of stillborn babies who have inquests—I think the pass is still out on that. We do not want to over-legalise some of these very tragic events.

I welcome the review the Government had, although I slightly take issue with what the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) said about the timing of the review. I suspect, although the Minister may correct me, that the timing was meant to fit in with the legal aid review generally. I counsel hon. Members present not to over-politicise this issue. It is a difficult one. I, for one, am convinced that families need more support, but there might be better people than lawyers to provide it.

2.51 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): Before I start, may I say that it is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mrs Main?

I want to begin by saying how much I empathise with the aim of an inquiry, which is to find the truth of the matter when someone has died whose safety has been entrusted to the Government—truth that, when found, can provide the families of the bereaved with much-needed and sought-after closure; that simply tells them how and why it is that their loved ones are no longer here; and that provides a foundation of understanding about what mistakes may have been made and how we can learn from them to ensure that what happened may never happen again.

Yet what we find in the present system of legal aid is a great barrier to the goals of truth and understanding. The aim of the bereaved families, more than any other party in an inquest, is to ensure that what has happened to their loved ones cannot happen again, and that nobody must again feel the pain of losing somebody they love in the same, preventable way that they did. However, under the present rules, bereaved families are more often than not forced to fund their own legal representation in these inquiries.

Under the current financial eligibility rules, the threshold for receiving legal aid for an inquest is only a gross monthly income of £2,657—a gross income of just under £32,000 per year. Those earning more must pay for rent, food and all the other basic essentials of life, as well as what can be the crippling costs of legal fees in inquiries that can take months, if not years, to complete, as in the case of the Mid Staffordshire inquiry, the Morecambe Bay investigation and the Harris review. All those inquiries provided great insight into how the state needed to make changes to protect the lives of those who had been placed into its care. However, those who cannot cover the costs face the prospect of representing themselves in proceedings.

When talking about the Hillsborough disaster, Bishop James Jones described how families who had no public money provided for their legal expenses, or who were self-funded, would be forced to pool their resources. At one of the mini-inquests, one solicitor represented the interests of over 90 families. At the generic inquest, one barrister represented 43 families. One of the families was represented by the mother of the person who had died. What a harrowing experience for a woman who had lost her son to be forced to question witnesses and untangle legal proceedings just to find out what had happened to her child.

Compounding that is the fact that all those other families had no representation whatever. Their voice was stolen away from them because they did not have the financial means to represent themselves. It is simply not right, and it is simply not justice.

When we compare that to the funding that the Government or linked organisations have in these kinds of proceedings, we find that, unlike the bereaved families of those lost, the Government are able to bring the full might of the public purse to bear on these proceedings. On 3 April, the Secretary of State responded to my question about public funding for bereaved families. He stated:

“We must remember that there are ways in which we can be sympathetic to and supportive of bereaved families without ending up in an arms race of who has the most lawyers, the most expensive lawyers and so on”.

[Ms Marie Rimmer]

If we must use the analogy of an arms race, then at present the Government can spend money on the legal equivalent of tanks, helicopters, fleets and so on, while the families of the bereaved are left with the legal equivalent of a stick. It is all well and good for the Secretary of State to argue that we must not enter an arms race, when the Government sit in the position of power, possessing the finance to bring those legal arms to bear.

The Secretary of State also stated that he was “keen to ensure that” inquests

“continue to be essentially an inquisitorial process, rather than adversarial”.

However, I and many others in this place and beyond would argue that the process is already adversarial. While the nature of the inquest itself is not adversarial, we often find that the Government and other organisations do not fear the judgment of the coroner’s court, but that of the court of public opinion.

Jo Stevens: Quite often in an inquest a person will be gathering information, and that will be the only venue in which they can do so in advance of potential litigation. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is so important for families to have lawyers with them to enable them to carry out that process?

Ms Rimmer: Absolutely, and that is why I am here today. The Government and other organisations approach proceedings with the aim of damage limitation, instructing combative legal teams to defend state policies and practices, rather than to seek the truth that I spoke of earlier.

There are ways in which we can overcome that imbalance. First, automatic, non-means-tested legal aid for families would both help to level the playing field and prevent families from being burdened with crippling legal costs. It would also avoid forcing families to jump through confusing bureaucratic hoops during what can be one of the most traumatic periods, if not the most traumatic period, in their lives. Non-means-tested legal aid is provided in care and supervision proceedings in which children are to be removed from their parents, and in certain cases under the Mental Health Act 1983 and the Mental Capacity Act 2005, which demonstrates that there is a precedent.

Secondly, funding for families must be equivalent to that enjoyed by the state bodies, public authorities or corporate bodies represented. Ensuring like-for-like spending between the parties involved in inquests would not only further help to level the playing field for bereaved families, but would prevent the arms race that the Secretary of State alluded to in his response on 3 April. The parties mentioned would be able to spend more on lawyers only if the bereaved families received the same funding. As mentioned earlier, bereaved families do not have the means with which to outspend the Government.

I ask the Government to heed the recommendations made by the 1999 Stephen Lawrence inquiry, the 2003 independent review of coroner services, the 2004 Joint Committee on Human Rights, the 2007 Corston report, the 2015 Harris review, the 2016 report of the Chief Coroner to the Lord Chancellor, the 2017 Angiolini review, the 2017 Bach commission, the 2017 Hillsborough review, the 2017 report of the Chief Coroner to the

Lord Chancellor, the 2018 Joint Committee on Human Rights and the 2018 Independent Office for Police Conduct consultation response. I ask them then to finally make the reforms necessary to give bereaved families the tools they need to achieve the fundamental goal of inquests, which is to find out the truth—the simple truth.

3 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) on securing the debate and on doing such a good job of presenting her case. It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer), who is not just a colleague but a good friend. It was good to hear her comments too.

I wish to highlight the case of young Molly Russell’s parents and their fight for legal aid as they tried to make sense of their daughter’s death and to make a change to prevent more deaths. That is heart-rending and touching, and I fully support them. I was relieved to see the Minister’s Department being more positive about helping them—well done for that.

In my constituency, I have seen several cases in which legal aid has been turned down, and that can only be classed as a travesty. I have also watched people representing themselves and receiving help from a judge who felt that, on the day, during the trial, they should advise the person before them. The hon. Member for Barnsley East referred to how complex the system is, and it is sometimes hard to follow how it works. However, that should not happen in genuine cases in which there is an element of public interest and a need for not just representation but the correct representation.

There must be a more open route to public inquiry funding, but there must also be safeguards in place. Lessons have to be learned from the likes of the Bloody Sunday inquiry, during which approximately £400 million was claimed, although not paid out. After that, there was a question about, and an inquiry into, the fees for the solicitors’ firms. Almost £200 million was paid out in that one case. That is astronomical. There must be a clear delineation as to what is in the public interest. A system is now in place for legacy issues in Northern Ireland. There is a budget to be used for these cases to ensure that there is not further Saville inquiry palaver—to use a word used quite often in Ulster Scots. I understand that there is not an unlimited supply of finance, but the decision not to introduce automatic public funding where the state is represented, and it being cited that the policy change would cost between £30 million and £70 million, seems strange when the cost of just one case in Northern Ireland was allowed to run up to £200 million.

My parliamentary aide may not be on the headline—we know she is not—but could she afford to take on the Government? No, she could not. Could anyone in the House today afford to take on the Government? I suggest that the answer is no. Therefore, on behalf of our constituents, whom we are here to represent, the argument has to be that they would find that difficult as well. Most people could not do it. There must be some middle ground that we have not yet reached that takes account of the representations of those who need legal aid to satisfy their own conscience, to answer the questions they have and to get beyond the period of grief that they are clearly experiencing.

I recently read an article that furiously challenged the decision. It stated:

“The ministry said: ‘Means testing serves to determine the allocation of taxpayers’ money to those most in need. This mechanism upholds the wider policy intention of the existing legal aid statutory framework of ensuring that legal aid is targeted at those who need it most,’

as it should be,

“for the most serious cases in which legal advice or representation is justified. An additional spend of £30m-£70m would run counter to this wider policy intention.”

I have always supported access to legal aid, whatever the case may be. I know that this debate is specifically about inquests, but I have supported legal aid being available across the board and have always been of that opinion. I supported that when I was in my previous job in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and I am on record as supporting it in this House as well. But I do understand that, in relation to inquests, there is a special need. The hon. Member for Barnsley East, in introducing the debate, explained that special need, and you have guided us, Mrs Main, on how best we should do that as well.

I want to finish with this comment. Inquest, a campaigning charity—most of us will know it and the good work that it does—has called for automatic non-means-tested legal aid funding to families for specialist representation immediately after a state-related death, to cover preparation for and representation at the inquest and for other legal processes. We are elected representatives and compassionate people. Our compassionate nature as representatives should be reflected in what we ask the Minister for today. I fully support the call for legal aid at inquests and believe that that message should go from this place today. I gently and respectfully ask the Minister for a positive response to help those who find themselves in a very difficult situation. On legal aid for inquests, let us do our best for them.

3.5 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) on securing this debate. It concerns a very technical subject that is hugely important to a number of constituents, whether because of large tragedies involving the multiple loss of human life or because of the single tragedy of losing someone, from a baby through to someone in adulthood. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) for her kind words about my private Member’s Bill, now an Act, which will enable coroners to have the power to launch inquests into stillbirths. The consultation, which has already been launched by the Ministry for Justice, will explore the whole issue of legal aid for those inquests, too. It is very important that we get the consultation right, so that measures in this sensitive area can be brought in proportionately and appropriately and help in the campaign to reduce the number of stillbirths in this country, which we all wish well. It is also important to explain to already traumatised and grieving parents exactly what happened and how improvements can be made to the system to make sure it is less likely to happen to other parents in that situation in the future.

Jo Stevens: In addition, would the hon. Gentleman support legal aid for people who are killed at work? It is not available for the many people who die in fatal accidents in work every year.

Tim Loughton: That is a completely different subject, and one that needs to be looked at, absolutely. I am sympathetic to this. When families are faced with the sudden loss of a loved one through circumstances that are well beyond their control—in a workplace, air crash, or whatever—we need to give them every support and not add challenges such as the need to try to find the money to fund lawyers to try to get to the basics of the truth.

I want to focus purely on the Shoreham air show crash in my constituency. On that fateful summer’s day in August 2015, 11 Sussex men were tragically in the wrong place at the wrong time and lost their lives. Almost four years on, we have still not had the inquest for that tragedy. For a range of issues, not least the fact that there has now been a trial, which was completed last month, that delay has meant that the families of those 11 men have been denied the opportunity to get to the bottom of the truth for an extended period, compounding the grief, confusion and challenges that they have felt. We need to do more to make their pain less in any way we can. The system is not working for such people, as we have heard in the case of other tragedies as well.

To recap, in August 2015 those 11 men lost their lives when a Hawker jet crashed on the A27, on the very spot where I had been travelling in my car four minutes before the accident happened. It could have been a much more serious tragedy, and as it was, it was the largest civilian loss of life since the London terrorist attack in 2005. It had a huge impact, not only on those families directly affected, but on the wider community of my constituency and beyond, which still remembers and is in the process of installing a permanent memorial to the loss of life in that tragedy.

The pilot was acquitted. I make no comment about that, other than to say that those families sat through the trial with great dignity—I joined them at the beginning and end—listening to the lurid details of exactly what happened and watching the footage taken by people’s mobile phones of the plane coming down. They sat through that trial with great dignity, and they then had to accept a verdict that they did not want and had not expected.

Justice went through its due courses—I make no criticism of that—but it means that the inquest, which had to wait until the trial was completed, is now even more important for those families who wish to try to flush out who was responsible, and whether any parties contributed to that accident in some way. Most importantly, what is being done to try to minimise the likelihood of such an accident happening again in future?

The record of civil aviation shows was virtually unblemished in this country, and there had been no on-the-ground casualties since the Farnborough tragedy in the 1950s. This was a huge and important event that went well beyond its impact on the local community and the families. I pay tribute to the local coroner for West Sussex, Penny Schofield, who has worked tirelessly with the families to try to manage their expectations and to be as sensitive as possible about their continuing grief. What has compounded that grief, however, is the issue of legal aid—I know you want me to come on to that, Mrs Main. Legal aid is the focus of what I am about to say, but I wanted to put it into context, as I am sure you will appreciate.

[Tim Loughton]

The inquest is likely to happen in the autumn, more than four years since the tragedy took place. At last count there will be at least 19 interested parties, including a number of public bodies such as Sussex police, the Civil Aviation Authority, the Air Accidents Investigation Branch, and the Health and Safety Executive, which will have legal representation paid for out of the public purse. Until recently—this has still not been confirmed—the only parties whose legal representation at that inquest will not be paid for will be the families of the 11 victims. Arguably, therefore, the people who are most important and have the greatest interest in those proceedings will have no legal representation at the inquest. That is a travesty of justice, and I once secured a debate explicitly on that subject. I have also spoken to the Minister about the issue, and raised it at Prime Minister's questions. I have worked with the families and their lawyers, but the system is not working.

In 2017 there was a bid to the Legal Aid Agency and the exceptional cases fund to get legal representation paid for during the inquest, but that was turned down on the basis that somehow it was not within the scope of the ECF and did not represent the wider public interest. That is extraordinary because what I learned during this process is that civilian air shows have the second largest public audience of any activity in this country. There is a huge wider public interest, given the many hundreds of air shows that happen up and down the country each year.

The AAIB's report was published in March 2017 and stated that

"the parties involved in the planning, conduct and regulatory oversight of the flying display did not have formal safety management systems in place to identify and manage the hazards and risks. There was a lack of clarity about who owned which risk and who was responsible for the safety of the flying display...Controls intended to protect the public from the hazards of displaying aircraft were ineffective".

It added that there was a valid, proper and serious legal argument that the CAA failed as a regulator in properly implementing the safety recommendations made over six years by the AAIB after a previous fatal Hawker crash. If that does not represent a wider public interest, I do not know what does.

The coroner spoke in support of ensuring that legal aid is available to pay for legal representation for the families when the case is put in front of her at the inquest. She said:

"This is a highly complicated case. It involves areas of aviation law which are complex and technical in nature. Families will struggle to participate in the Inquest in any meaningful way without the assistance of legal representation. The Inquest will engage a number of complex legal issues including article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights. It is further complicated by the fact that I will be sitting with a Jury. If the families are not represented it is likely that the Inquest, which is already likely to last up to 8 weeks, will take considerably longer".

Those are the words of the coroner, who says not only that it is unfair for the families not to have legal representation when all those public bodies do, but that it will be difficult for them to participate and to assimilate the proceedings of the inquest properly without legal experts to put it to them, and that it could end up costing more.

If we provide a legal expert to represent all the families as a whole, it will make proceedings more efficient, but if all the families look to have legal representation, or even to represent themselves, it will spin out the inquest and cost the public purse more. Not making sure that legal aid is available for those families is an entirely false economy. That was the coroner speaking about the inquest that will come in front of her. The lawyers acting for the families have also produced papers that show how essential it is for family members to have legal representation at that inquest, which must be provided by the public purse.

The decision by the Legal Aid Agency not to permit funding under the exceptional case funding provisions, which were introduced by the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, is patently wrong and unjust. Exceptional case funding is available for categories of law that are not in scope for legal aid, and where failure to provide legal services would be in breach of an individual's rights within the meaning of the Human Rights Act 1998, or other enforceable EU rights relating to the provision of local legal services.

Inquests have never, however, fallen within the main body of legal aid provision. Legal aid for inquests is available only at the discretion of the Legal Aid Agency under the exceptional case funding provisions introduced by the LASPO Act. This is just the sort of case that was envisaged when setting up the fund in the original Act, so it is nothing to do with cuts in legal aid funding, as some have tried to claim, but is about the provisions in the legislation apparently not working.

The Law Society supports the application and strongly believes that bereaved families should have access to legal representation where possible. It says that the definition of exceptional case funding does not provide an adequate safety net for inquests. Applications for exceptional funding are highly complex and time consuming, and require applicants to have an understanding of human rights law, and, in the case of inquests, to show that there is an article 2 right to life issue or a wider public interest in legal aid being granted. Even when one of those triggers is present, the Legal Aid Agency guidance suggests that the assumption should still be that the bereaved family does not need representation because the process is inquisitorial and led by the coroner, rather than adversarial, but the Law Society challenges how far a bereaved family can be expected to engage effectively with a legal process that relates to the death of a loved one.

I pay tribute to the legal firm *Stewarts Law*, which is providing a lot of support to the families, largely pro bono. It has challenged the ruling. Unofficially, we are optimistic that legal aid funding may be available when the inquest comes around, but the families should not have had to fight for it. It should have been there as a matter of course—as was intended in the original 2012 Act. The inequality of arms is inequitable and could undermine the inquest's ability to serve the public interest by failing to protect the rights of the families under ECHR article 2, and there is clearly a wider public interest.

I welcome the Government review of the LASPO Act, which the Minister recently published, but it does not make the future of exceptional case funding clear. The Minister might wish to comment on this when she winds up, but in response to the review we need to look at this further and in more detail to make sure that

when tragedies such as the Shoreham air show disaster happen, and in the many applications that we have heard about when there is a multiple or single loss of life, the system automatically swings in to support the families, rather than putting yet further hurdles in the way of their securing justice and access to the truth, which only exacerbates their trauma, tragedy and grief. We surely owe it to people who have been unfortunate enough to suffer such loss to do everything to support them and not put obstacles in their way.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Wind-up speeches will begin at 3.37. I have three speakers left; the maths are fairly self-evident.

3.20 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) on securing this incredibly important debate. As she has said, access to justice is a fundamental issue. Inquests where families are properly legally represented are important not only for the families' sakes, but because they perform a wider public service to ensure that lessons are learnt so that things change for other people and so that lives may be saved in future. That is achieved by ventilating the issues in public and putting those potentially responsible for the deaths under proper scrutiny.

If the families are not fully involved to press to ensure that such lessons are learnt, an inquest is far less likely to result in the wider reform and lesson-learning from which we all benefit. It is naive to expect that an inquest in which the family is not legally represented, but in which the agencies of the state are fully represented, will approach an investigation into a death with a genuine desire to uncover failings. On the contrary, state agencies approach inquests with the express objective of, at best, damage limitation and, at worst, to undermine and downplay the concerns of families. I urge the Minister to look at the submission made by Liberty on the review of legal aid eligibility and the exchange that took place between counsel for Surrey police and the father of one of those who died at Deepcut barracks to see probably one of the worst, most callous and distressing lines of questioning imaginable. Although there was legal representation on that occasion, it is concerning to think that a family member could be faced with such cross-examination without any support at all.

I mention Deepcut because in 2002 one of my constituents, Yvonne Heath, tragically lost her son, James Collinson, to gunshot wounds there. She is among four families who have been looking for answers ever since. The other three families have had or are in the middle of inquests, and there is no doubt that it is in the public interest for there to be one into James's death as well. I understand that the other families have all had to face what has been described to me as a tortuous and intrusive process just to get legal aid granted. It should be absolutely self-evident that the families need representation at the inquests, so I put the Minister on notice that should my constituent face similar obstacles to obtaining legal aid to the previous families, she can expect regular representations from me until the right thing is done.

I have no doubt about the value that representation can provide at an inquest. I have previously spoken in a debate here about the sad case of Ronald Volante, whose daughter, Rita Cuthell, is a constituent of mine. Ronald died in tragic circumstances when an ambulance call made via a community alarm service led to his call not receiving the priority needed. When the ambulance turned up two hours later, it was too late. We had various meetings following that debate and improvements have been made to procedures, but one area where there has not been any change relates to the experience that my constituent had at the inquest. There is no doubt that she would have benefited enormously from legal representation. I know how distressing and bewildering it was, and how she did not feel that the process gave her the answers that she needed.

If the Minister needs any more persuasion on the importance of the issue, there are many examples of how improvements were made and lessons learned that would not have happened but for the involvement of legally aided, represented families cross-examining witnesses and pressing for change. Such examples include the inquest into the death of Corporal Anne-Marie Ellement, who died after reporting rape and bullying in the Army. The inquest led to recommendations that a special kind of victim support be made available to soldiers who complain of sexual assault against other soldiers, as well as improvements in mental health training and procedures. It also led to soldiers being given information about non-military sources of support and help in the aftermath of sexual assault.

The inquest into the death of Sean Benton, who died at Deepcut in 1995, finally revealed the true extent of the abuses and assaults that trainees had suffered at the camp and has led the police to open a criminal investigation. That would not have happened had the family not been legally represented to press for it. The inquest also led to the Army's undertaking to the coroner that it would ensure that in future all trainee soldiers would be informed that if they were the victim of a criminal offence they could approach the civilian, as opposed to just the military, police. That happened only as a consequence of the family pressing for it at the inquest. I doubt whether it would have happened had they not been legally represented.

A cursory glance at the relevant pages of summaries of inquest findings demonstrates the enormous potential of inquests to identify and learn from failings when people have died where there is state involvement. For example, a jury found that failings in the immigration detention centre system had contributed to the killing of Tarek Chowdhury, and another inquest found serious failures at Sodexo-run HM Prison Peterborough, which contributed to the death of a prisoner, Annabella Landsberg. An inquest found that failings by South West London and St George's Mental Health Trust had caused the death of Charlotte Ball. Finally, an inquest found there was neglect involved in the death of 18-year-old Connor Sparrowhawk, which resulted in the coroner making various formal recommendations.

In all those cases the families were legally represented, which demonstrates the enormous public interest and value in ensuring that lessons are learned from the most tragic cases. That can be achieved only if families are represented on an equal footing against state bodies. It is a basic tenet of justice that everyone is equal before

[Justin Madders]

the law. When well resourced public bodies are legally represented at inquests it is only right that the bereaved families seeking answers should be represented as well.

3.26 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be here under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mrs Main.

To be fair to the Minister, as I always try to be, the issue is not a new one, and has not appeared on her watch. I remember appearing at inquests more than 20 years ago when lack of representation for families, including in death in custody cases, meant that Inquest—led then, I think, as now, by the admirable Deborah Coles—was going around finding pro bono lawyers to act for families.

I do not entirely agree with the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) about lack of need, and indeed the Government's report includes something about families receiving legal aid, and being represented. Not all coroners treat families well in those situations, not all lawyers acting for state agents behave well, and not all witnesses tell the truth, particularly when they may be found negligent, or even culpable of causing death.

I share the concern of my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) about the Government's report, that the process was not entirely right. The fact that it came out with the rest of the LASPO review meant that it got rather lost in all that. It shares some of the faults of the LASPO review in that the facts are well marshalled but do not appear to bear out the conclusions. In particular, the report states that

“a number of stakeholders pointed out that it should not be assumed that in cases where the state has legal representation, representation for the family is necessarily required nor that it enhances the results of the coroner's investigation. They suggested that the addition of further lawyers might actually hinder the process, by making the process more adversarial and legally complex.”

The Government hide behind other “stakeholders”, whoever they are, but that is a rather cynical way of dismissing families' concerns. How else, other than by the provision of legal aid—because pro bono cannot carry the weight of inquests in its entirety, although lawyers do a good job—are we to deal with complex medical and legal issues, with coronial rules that are not straightforward and are unique in the way they work, as well as securing evidence, preparing cases and challenging witnesses? As an analogy, public family law cases are one of the few areas where there is still representation for families, because it is perceived that the issues are crucial and the state has a lot of power in those cases. I do not see that inquests are different.

The case of Molly Russell was mentioned. I am not going to deal with the facts of that case, but nevertheless it is true that legal aid was refused on the basis that the matter is not of “wider public interest” and because of the means test. The matter was being appealed, but then the Legal Aid Agency just changed its mind, which shows rather faulty logic. I have been involved in a number of cases, including the tragic case of my constituent Natasha Ednan-Laperouse, who died on an airline flight because of an allergen in a Pret a Manger sandwich that she was eating. That led to a prevention of future deaths report that made substantial recommendations to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and other Government agencies.

I could mention, also—I wish I had more time—some of the cases involving the Whirlpool company. I have had incidents in my constituency, but in particular I want to talk about the death of Douglas McTavish and Bernard Hender in Llanrwst. That was caused by an electrical fault in a Hotpoint tumble dryer, which caused the fire which led to their death. In all these cases, there is a need for proper representation in the public interest, even though those involved are not state actors.

Why should there be legal aid in such cases? In many cases, the Government should have been aware of the risks, but took no action—whether that involved the Office for Product Safety and Standards, the Food Standards Agency or the internet and internet regulation, which are very topical at the moment. The Minister cannot get away with the report that has been done so far. These matters need to be properly looked at again.

3.30 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I hope that my constituent's experience can help to illuminate some of the learned arguments that have been made today. Families can provide important inputs to help a coroner reach correct findings and make recommendations to help state bodies to improve their systems and avoid more tragic cases.

My constituent, Angela, is a senior manager in social care. She has huge experience of local care systems. Her son, Adrian, suffered from mental health issues all his adult life. In 2016, he was taken into the care of a mental health hospital but discharged a few weeks later into the care of the community mental health team. He was told by that team that he would be discharged from any support just two weeks after his discharge from the hospital. He was distraught about that. His mother, Angela, was frantically seeking some support for her son on the Friday before he took his life. She had obviously been involved with him throughout his life. Having not found support on the Friday—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. This is not an ongoing case, is it?

Ruth George: It is not an ongoing case, Mrs Main. I took your advice.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): We have to be very careful.

Ruth George: Absolutely. I have full permission from the constituent to raise the details.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Thank you.

Ruth George: Adrian took some drugs and alcohol on 10 December. He was found by police at 2.30 in the morning and taken to the local A&E. However, the police left, and he was allowed to walk out without being triaged. He later lost consciousness at a friend's home and passed away.

The inquest with the coroner involved the mental health trust, the hospital trust and the police. It was to take place over an eight-day period—although that was reduced to four days—with barristers representing the three bodies, all with their legal representation funded by the state. When I first met Angela, before the inquest took place, she had been told she would not qualify for legal aid. Although she was desperate to use her personal

and professional experience to make changes to the systems to make sure no other parent had to go through this, she was not sure she would be able to participate fully in the inquest, due to a lack of representation.

The coroner, when considering applying article 2 of the Human Rights Act and using a jury, finally decided that the family should have legal representation, but that was just three days before the inquest. Angela had to go through very detailed financial statements, which was very personally intrusive at the time she was grieving, a year after she had buried her son.

In the end, she was able to participate with the help of her lawyer, and she pays tribute to the lawyer and the barrister. With three organisations all arguing about who was culpable in the circumstances, Angela felt it was very important not only that she was able to be involved and put the facts of the matter straight, but that she could make sure that recommendations were made.

I quote Angela's comments on the coroner's report:

"Following Adrian's death, the burning question we asked ourselves was 'did we do everything we could to gain support for him? Did we call enough people or shout loud enough to be heard? Was there more we could have done?'. Given the evidence that was heard through Adrian's inquest, it became clear that as a family we had not failed our son, although this may not be said for some of the professionals involved in his care. We will miss Adrian for the rest of our lives, but hope that changes will be made in the near future to avoid further deaths following the recommendations made by the coroner".

Families in this situation have just one opportunity to make a difference; that opportunity is at the inquest, where, as some learned Members have said, incredibly difficult facts may be put to them about the death of their loved one. It is not only important that families are able to grieve, have their voices heard and find the truth, but that we as a society and our state agencies can learn from their experience and their support and make recommendations so that no family has to go through this again.

3.35 pm

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mrs Main. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) on having secured this debate.

Families affected by a state-related death are already going through some of the most difficult moments of their lives, but if they cannot afford legal representation, the process of finding out what happened and why is made harder still. It is almost impossible for me to put into words the pain, fear and frustration that is in these human stories. The stories we have heard about their constituents from my hon. Friends the Members for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for High Peak (Ruth George) and for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) and from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) are the most compelling arguments for change that anyone could make.

Reading through the testimonies that bereaved families have provided to the Government's recent review highlights the gaping injustice at the heart of our justice system, which must be addressed. My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East made an excellent speech, and it is worth reading part of one of the comments from a family member once more:

"We had to do everything ourselves. We had no lawyer at the inquest. Those three weeks were the most terrifying thing I've ever done in my life".

Another explained:

"Families are often left in the dark, trying to sort out numerous matters associated with a loved one dying whilst under the protection of the state, while trying to make sense of what has happened both emotionally and legally. Having access to funded legal representation is paramount for justice."

Today's debate is about the fundamental values and principles of our justice system, which should never leave people feeling afraid and helpless when seeking truth and justice for their loved ones. My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) spoke particularly powerfully about that point: is our justice system fair if state bodies are legally represented at inquests, and victims' families are not?

The Government's recent review states that about 30,000 cases per year result in an inquest. Of those, about 500 are related to deaths in custody or other forms of state detention, whether that is police, prison or immigration detention or detention under the Mental Health Act. Will the Minister confirm what the year-on-year rise is in litigants in person at such inquests? In such cases, the bereaved families deserve state support in their pursuit of the truth, but proper legal representation is also about preventing others from suffering, by identifying mistakes and ensuring future deaths are prevented. It is an urgent and ongoing issue for everyone in this country and should be treated as such, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston stated in his contribution.

The need for better state-funded legal support for bereaved families at inquests has been a central recommendation of several major reviews in recent years, including Bishop James Jones's powerful Hillsborough report; Dame Elish Angiolini's independent review of deaths in police custody, which was initiated by the Prime Minister herself; the independent review of the Mental Health Act; and Baroness Corston's review of vulnerable women in the justice system. All of those reviews called for a major improvement to funding for bereaved families at inquests, in order to prevent further miscarriages of justice of the sort that shocked us all in the cases that have been mentioned. When such heavyweight reports about profound flaws in our justice system, often commissioned by the Government, call for better legal representation, it would be astonishing if the Government did not do the decent thing and adhere to their recommendations.

However, the Government's review into legal aid for inquests just let bereaved families down again. The charity Inquest, which works with bereaved people, lawyers and support agencies, providing expertise on state-related deaths and their investigation, labelled the Government's inaction

"a betrayal of those who invested in this review in the hope of securing meaningful change".

Having listened to the story about the constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak, it is hard to conclude anything different. If the Government do not listen to me, or even to the charity sector, can the Minister give me one good reason why they have chosen to ignore the powerful, united voices of Bishop James, Baroness Corston and Dame Angiolini?

There are families trying desperately to afford the crippling costs of legal fees they never expected to need to pay. We are seeing increasing numbers of families whose

[Gloria De Piero]

loved ones were killed in horrific accidents crowdfunding vital legal help, and the ongoing failure of the legal aid system to treat even the most determined families fairly.

Last year—Mrs Main, this is all in the public domain—the families of five men killed when a wall collapsed at a recycling plant were denied legal aid for the inquest. The men were crushed to death under a pile of concrete, bricks and scrap metal in 2016. Their families, who are from Gambia and Senegal, applied for funding for a lawyer to represent them at the inquest, to establish the circumstances around the deaths, potentially leading to compensation from the employers. Despite meeting the means test and not speaking English, they were turned down for legal aid. The Health and Safety Executive and the recycling company were both to be represented by lawyers, so the families would have been at a significant disadvantage if they had been left without one. Could they represent themselves in court, with no English and no knowledge of the legal system? Of course not. They resorted to crowdfunding their legal fees—reduced to shaking a modern version of the collection tin in pursuit of their basic rights to truth and justice. They managed to raise over £3,000 to fund their costs before their appeal was finally heard and legal aid was granted—after the inquest had already begun.

That completely unnecessary stress during such a traumatising process can be blamed only on a totally dysfunctional system, which should obviously have known that the families were eligible, given that they met the means-testing criteria and spoke no English. This protracted process cannot possibly have had any advantages for the public purse, but it will have cost bereaved families a great deal in emotional stress. It is that process that was raised by the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), and also by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), who spoke about the 11 men who lost their lives and the inadequacy of exceptional case funding.

Will the Minister tell me how common she believes crowdfunding is for inquests? Following on from the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East regarding the Government's inadequate consultation, will the Government publish a list of respondents to their review and a summary report of the responses? Will they also publish the findings of their survey of coroners and the coroners support service?

A Labour Government would commit to providing proper legal support to those who have been the victims of deaths in custody, with legal aid for representation at inquests. Truth is the first step towards justice, and quality legal support is a key first step towards the truth.

Although she did not make a speech, I should just mention my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens). I always learn things from her when she makes an intervention, because she brings so much experience to these issues.

Unless the Government will commit, as Labour has, to giving automatic, non-means-tested legal aid funding to families to allow them to seek specialist legal representation following a state-related death, I suspect bereaved families and those who support them through the inquest process will continue to feel nothing towards this Government but a deep sense of betrayal and abandonment.

3.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) on securing a debate on this important subject. She spoke passionately about the issue, and I am pleased to have the opportunity to respond.

Last Friday I had the opportunity to visit Westminster coroner's court to watch an inquest. I saw first hand the professionalism of the coroner and the importance of the inquest process to the bereaved family. Before turning to the individual points that have been made in this debate, I would like to set out some facts in relation to the inquest process, the purpose of an inquest and what we have done to improve that process. I would also like to mention some of the types of cases that inquests deal with, which we have heard about throughout the debate, and to respond to the points that have been made in relation to legal aid. I would like to do that, because it is important to understand the process and how legal aid fits into it.

The starting point is, what is the purpose of an inquest? An inquest is an investigation by a coroner into a death reported to them, and it should answer four questions: what is the identity of the deceased, what is the place of death, what is the time of death, and how did the deceased person come to his or her death? An inquest is a public court hearing to determine those matters.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) said—as we heard, she has considerable experience of these issues—an inquest is meant to be an inquisitorial process, not an adversarial one. Bereaved families have a special status in any inquest. They do not have to make legal arguments, but they can question witnesses, or ask coroners to question them on their behalf. Inquests are essentially about fact finding.

At the inquest I saw on Friday, a man had either taken his own life or died from natural causes. The family were given every opportunity to question the toxicologist and the doctor present. There was no legal representation on either side, and at the end of the inquest the father of the deceased thanked the coroner for her findings and commented that she could not have done much more.

As with all legal processes, we can make room for improvement. The hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) suggested that not everyone who appears at an inquest—for example, coroners or legal representatives—always behaves as they should. We have sought to improve the experience of bereaved families who go through this process at such a tragic time, and I wish to highlight some of the changes that we have made or are making.

First, we are in the process of revising the information we give families on coronial processes, to ensure that it is tailored to them. We have re-established a stakeholder forum to engage with other Departments and external stakeholders and to consider what more can be done to ensure that the process is inquisitorial, as it should be. Our reforms allow bereaved families access to most documents seen by the court, and they should expect the coroner's office to update them at regular intervals and explain each stage of the process. We have also

introduced the role of Chief Coroner, who provides leadership, guidance and support to coroners, and we have engaged with him on training for coroners and their officers, which will be delivered in 2019-20.

As we have heard, many types of inquest come before coroners. My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) mentioned stillbirths and the tragedy in his constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury spoke of her experience in a number of matters, and the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) mentioned some terrible stories. The hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) told us of the experience of someone in her constituency. At the inquest last week, a number of cases were opened at the start of the hearing. They involved men who had died—some had taken their own lives, some cases involved drugs, and some were in foreign countries.

None of those cases involved the state. Other cases do involve the state, however, and there is a question over whether the state or its agents were responsible. Those are known as article 2 inquest cases, in reference to the state duty to protect life under article 2 of the European convention on human rights. In those cases an enhanced investigation must decide not only who died, when, where and how, but the broader circumstances of their death.

As hon. Members have suggested, it is likely in such circumstances that the state will be represented. Bereaved families may require representation, and legal aid for that may be available through the exceptional case funding scheme—my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham mentioned that, as did the hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero).

Legal aid for representation through the ECF scheme may be provided where failure to provide representation would amount to, or risk, a breach of article 2, or where there is a wider public interest. In the last two years, 339 applications for publicly funded representation at an inquest were granted, and we have taken a number of measures to ensure that ECF funding is more easily granted.

As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned, most people who apply for legal aid generally in civil law have to satisfy a means and merits threshold. That is to ensure that public money is well spent. Those who do not merit legal aid should not get it, and those who can afford to pay themselves should do so. We have recently made it easier in two ways to obtain legal aid. First, we have made changes to ensure that there is a presumption that the article 2 threshold is satisfied in cases where there is a death in state custody. Secondly, we have relaxed the means test.

The hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) mentioned the stress of filling in the form at a difficult time. In June, we updated the Lord Chancellor's guidance so that the Legal Aid Agency can disregard the means test and take into account the stress that the family are going through, which may be exacerbated by the legal aid process. Furthermore, only the individual applicant's financial means will be tested, and not the means of family members, which will help to ease the burden of the application process.

As the hon. Members for Barnsley East and for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) mentioned, the process is complicated. In February, we identified that

we will do a wider review of legal aid. We have committed to simplifying the exceptional case funding forms and guidance to ensure that applying for legal aid is as simple as possible. We will put more money into resourcing that to ensure that funding decisions by the Legal Aid Agency are made in as timely a manner as possible.

Ruth George: The Minister has described how there is some process for people to apply for legal aid, but in my constituent's case the decision was made only three days before the inquest. She had to attend a pre-inquest trial with three barristers, which was incredibly upsetting. She also had to go through her personal finances, including her car finance, to make the application again—on top of what was happening with the inquest and the anniversary of her son's death. Does the Minister agree that that process would be assisted if there was automatic legal aid for victims' families?

Lucy Frazer: I hope that I have identified a number of measures that we are putting in place that may help the hon. Lady's constituent. We are making sure that the process is easier. The Legal Aid Agency is looking at linking up with banks and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, not just in relation to inquests but across the board, to automatically see whether people satisfy the means test, without them having to fill in a whole load of forms. I appreciate that, obviously, automatic non-means-tested legal aid would be much easier for everybody, but we are taking steps to make things easier within the ambit of having a means test.

In February, we announced another measure that may help the hon. Lady's constituent, which is that we have agreed to backdate the legal help waiver. The director of legal aid casework has the discretion to backdate funding for ECF representation to the date that the ECF application was made, but he did not have the discretion to backdate funding for legal help, even when an application for the means-test assessment to be waived had been successful. We have committed to changing that by the end of the year.

The hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) mentioned the threshold for legal aid, as did several other hon. Members. Our action plan sets out a broad, across-the-board review of the means-test threshold for legal aid, which will include the means test for inquests. We have committed to looking at the threshold at which people become eligible for legal aid across the board. We have also committed to launching a campaign to raise awareness about the availability of legal support, including legal aid, which will ensure that all bereaved families are aware of their rights to claim ECF.

I was disappointed by the cynical suggestion of several hon. Members, including the hon. Members for Barnsley East and for Hammersmith, that the timescale of the review that we conducted was somehow inappropriate. The hon. Member for Hammersmith identified that that review ran alongside the legal aid review, and the timing was dictated by the legal aid review, which we promised to publish by the end of the year, as he is aware.

Jo Stevens: The Minister has not explained why the consultation lasted for only six weeks rather than 12. Is she disappointed that only 48 out of the 89 coroner areas in England and Wales responded to the survey? They are obviously not very interested in the review either.

Lucy Frazer: We wanted to publish the review at the same time as the legal aid review. In addition, we have committed to look subsequently at a key part that will affect inquests in relation to the threshold, so we are now undertaking a review of the threshold. All the comments made about inquests will be carried forward to that review, which is ongoing.

Some hon. Members mentioned families' input into the review. Some 20 families provided evidence, and we held a roundtable event for bereaved families. The hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston and others mentioned funding and an inequality of arms, which I will touch on. We say in our report that we are interested in looking at that area more fully. There are a variety of ways to tackle funding, all of which involve working with other Departments that may be represented in a hearing involving an article 2 case. It might involve reminding those that take part in the process on behalf of the Government of their duty of candour. It might involve asking Government Departments to look at their own instruction of lawyers and whether they need the number they instruct. It might also involve looking into further options for funding legal support at inquests where the state has state-funded representation. We will look at all those issues and will work closely with other Government Departments.

In conclusion, very important issues have been raised about the inquest process. It is important that an inquest is sensitive and meets the needs of the bereaved. Legal aid and the process in relation to state deaths are an important issue, as we have heard in the debate today, but legal aid is only one part of the jigsaw, and we must look at the whole system more widely if we are to deliver access to justice.

I thank the hon. Member for Barnsley East for securing the debate on legal aid for inquests. I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in the debate, and I thank you, Mrs Main, for chairing it.

3.58 pm

Stephanie Peacock: I thank hon. Members for their powerful contributions. We have heard so many examples of why change is needed, and I want to briefly mention a few. The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) mentioned a travesty of justice and the families of the victims of the terrible Shoreham air show crash. He mentioned that they will not have legal representation and talked about how they have been turned down for legal aid, showing clearly how the system is broken. My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) talked about the tortuous process of getting legal aid. A tragic case was highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George). In seeking justice and truth, bereaved families want to help other families and prevent future deaths.

The hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) remarked on the political nature of my speech. I gently say to her that decisions about public expenditure are inherently political. We have been given no answer on, and there is no excuse for, the huge disparity in funding between the Government and victims. Labour Members make no apology for calling for equality and justice. It is all very well to say that inquests are inquisitorial in nature, but time and again that is simply not the experience of families. The system is not equal.

I thank the Minister for her comments, but they simply do not go far enough. She talked about the merits of means, but this issue is not comparable to other legal aid applications. Families do not choose to be part of the process. She has given no real explanation for the disappointing consultation.

I will conclude by quoting Inquest, which states:

"Specialist legal representation and input from families is crucial to ensuring robust post-death investigations and inquests. Inquests must shine a light on any state failings".

I implore the Minister: please listen to Inquest.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Primary Care: Plymouth

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Will those not staying for this debate please be kind enough to leave quickly and quietly, because we are moving on to the important issue of primary care provision in Plymouth?

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered primary care provision in Plymouth.

Today is a special treat for me. Not only is it my 39th birthday, but I have a chance to raise the concerns of the people I represent about a very important issue: their difficulty accessing primary care in Plymouth. This is the second time that I have spoken in this place about primary care in Plymouth, having participated in a similar debate in March last year, and never has the issue been more pressing.

I will start, though, with a welcome and a thank you. First, I welcome the new Minister to her place. I have great respect for her, and there is sincere warmth towards her from both Government and Opposition Members—although perhaps they are not in the Chamber today. She has a very difficult job, and I genuinely wish her well. She is not the type of Minister to play party politics; she does engage with the issue, and I am really pleased that she is able to respond to this debate.

Secondly, I thank all those medical professionals who work in primary care in Plymouth: the doctors, including GPs, paramedics, nurses, community pharmacists, dentists, medical students, receptionists, wellbeing professionals, volunteers, patient participation groups and many more besides. Their dedication and good will is the glue that is holding together a very fragile system in Plymouth, and I place my thanks to them on the record right away.

Many GPs in Plymouth often work long hours—12 or 13-hour days. They do so out of dedication to their patients and to the health service, but they simply cannot be expected to do more and more with less and less. I am pleased to have secured this debate. When I was elected, I said that I would try to give Plymouth its voice back in Parliament by raising the issues that really matter, and primary care is one of those issues that comes up at nearly every constituency surgery that I hold. People who live in Plymouth know that the far south-west does not get its fair share of funding, and that is true from health to education and from transport to housing—all get below-average spend. Ours is one of the lowest funded regions in the UK, and that has consequences for our public services.

I worry that with the housing crisis, the NHS crisis, the crisis in young people's mental health and the social care crisis, we are at risk of crisis fatigue. That is where the exceptional support required to resolve any one crisis is no longer given because a crisis is no longer exceptional.

I think that these debates are best done on a cross-party basis. Plymouth is represented by three Members of Parliament, and I am sorry that the other two are not here today, but I hope the Minister will recognise that many of the things I speak about are cross-party concerns. I will attempt to keep party politics out of my remarks today.

Plymouth's primary care is in a state of crisis. Our GPs are working to the point of exhaustion because of the lack of funding and resources not just in primary care, but throughout the system. I think that it would be helpful to hear the voices of those on the frontline. An inner-city Plymouth GP, Dr Williams, told me:

"I don't know of a GP at the moment who isn't working at full capacity. We are all working way beyond our contracted hours, late into the evenings, on our 'days off' and at weekends. Not for money, not for glory, but to give our patients the best possible care.

I have colleagues who have burnt out, friends who are burning out, friends who are back at work too soon after serious illness because we are...putting our lives on hold to prop up the job we love and the patients we are passionate about. But the system is failing, and it's feeling like that may be intentional. We believe we are set up to give the most cost effective and best patient care—but maybe that's wrong. Can you give an honest answer about where NHS England see primary care going? Is there an agenda or even a plan in place for change?

It has been said that Plymouth is being watched to see what happens when Primary Care fails. If there is any truth in this please tell us now—don't watch it fail",

but act to stop that happening. That is a common view among most of the GPs I spoke to. They have a real sense that primary care in Plymouth is being watched by NHS England and other NHS bodies to see what happens when a system falls over. Whether or not that is true, that is the sense they have.

As a result of underfunding, nurse and GP vacancies in Plymouth's primary care sector are hard to fill. If GP practices cannot fill vacancies, the quality of care they can offer suffers as more and more patients chase fewer and fewer available GP appointments. NHS England estimates that one in seven GP posts in Plymouth have not been filled, which is alarming. A GP in Plymouth who recently advertised for a vacancy at their surgery told me that they did not receive a single application. We know that the far south-west has trouble recruiting healthcare professionals at primary, secondary and acute levels. Our peripherality as a region compounds an already extremely difficult recruitment environment for health professionals. I know that the Government have considered support for GP recruitment in Plymouth in recent months, but it has not produced the additional GPs we are looking for. Will the Minister update us on GP recruitment and on what will happen next?

A common theme in feedback from GPs is that funding and pay have decreased while job pressures have increased. If there is not enough funding GP practices cannot recruit enough doctors, nurses, healthcare assistants and other health professionals, receptionists or managers. Everyone therefore works harder, yet many GP surgeries feel they cannot meet patient demands or expectations. An inner-city Plymouth GP, Dr James Boorer, told me yesterday:

"Working in Plymouth is hard. But we are not alone—there are many other practices in similar deprived cities around the country where it is equally difficult. The problem probably stems from systematic under-resourcing of primary care over the last 10 years where demand has increasingly outstripped resource and funding.

This has led to a failure to recruit new GPs and retain others who have left the profession early because it has been so difficult. The challenge is so great that we feel abused by the government who know we are dedicated and will stay until the job is done no matter how hard it gets. But there is a limit—we do break."

[Luke Pollard]

That sense of getting to the point where they cannot go much further came across from a lot of GPs, and we have witnessed that in the number of practice handbacks across Plymouth. About 15% of Plymouth's population is now covered by non-general medical services primary care, where a contract has been handed back and an emergency provider has stepped in. That should worry the taxpayer as well, because those organisations consume two to three times as much resource as normal primary care. Last year, instead of about £79 per patient, the step-in provider got about £191 per patient. If that is acceptable as a step-in provision, I would like the Minister to look at whether increasing the per patient funding would avoid the need for practices to hand back their contracts. Levelling funding across a city in this respect, rather than adding extra resources to those practices that have handed back their contract, might be a more efficient tool to address the funding crisis and to deal with the emergency situation.

Deprived practices in Plymouth are not the only ones that are underfunded and under-resourced; the crisis is a national one affecting the whole of primary care, but the crisis is crystallising in hotspots, where the funding and resources are more markedly different from elsewhere in the country. It gets tough in those hotspots first, so GPs leave to work in better resourced areas, and it is harder to recruit in those practices when partners retire. This inequality in funding is driving the crisis. Will the Minister reconsider whether levels of deprivation and health need can be taken into account in the funding formula to ensure that inner-city practices are well resourced?

On average, GPs in more deprived areas have a higher workload, with 20% more consultations with patients, who are more likely to have multiple morbidities, with both physical and mental conditions, but they do not necessarily receive the additional funding to address those complex needs. The Care Quality Commission has described primary care in Plymouth as at a "tipping point". It found 15% GP vacancy rates, with several practices having handed back their contracts or at risk of doing so, in some cases owing to recruitment difficulties. It also found that between 25% and 35% of GPs and practice nurses would be retiring in the next five years. I realise that issue is not specific to Plymouth, but it is a trend across primary care that we need to address if we are to continue providing patients with the care they deserve. I should be grateful if the Minister responded to the concerns that those GPs have raised and set out what steps her Department is taking to address GP recruitment and retention, in particular. I think that a lot of GPs will be watching the debate and looking for reassurance that there is light at the end of the tunnel, albeit the route to it may not be an easy one. They are looking for confidence that there is a plan.

In a similar debate in March 2018, I spoke about primary care in Plymouth and the Minister's predecessor, the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), agreed to meet to discuss the issue with Plymouth GPs. I spoke to him about it in the Tea Room the other day and, while I realise that the Minister will not be controlling her diary in the same way as she did before being elevated to ministerial office, I should be grateful if she confirmed that she too would be happy to meet Plymouth GPs, so that they can raise their concerns directly with

her about the direction in which primary care in Plymouth is going. I should welcome it if the meeting were with a cross-party delegation, to make sure that the concerns were not party political.

A crisis in primary care means longer waiting times. It means patients will experience longer waits for routine appointments, have trouble getting through on the phone, and face reduced availability of urgent appointments. Healthwatch Plymouth published a report in November about primary care in our city. One patient had this to say about their experience:

"I had a brilliant surgery. But since merging with another I have had problems. I had the flu bug over Christmas, I received a diagnosis of a throat virus over the phone. I waited 7 weeks to see my doctor. Then when the results of my ultrasound came in, I found out from the receptionist that my doctor had retired. I have just tried to make an appointment and have been told I can't make an appointment"—

for many months—

"as they are changing their systems."

I think that is an isolated example, but it is part of a trend of concerns that patients express not only to the patient participation groups in practices—groups of patients who deserve special thanks and who are often overlooked in our debates—but by way of representations in the postbags of councillors and MPs.

The Care Quality Commission found that people could not always access a GP when they needed one and GPs told the CQC that it is not uncommon for the waiting time for a routine appointment to be four weeks. There are even some areas of the city where people are having difficulty registering or cannot register with a GP, because GP surgeries have closed and there is not sufficient bandwidth in the system to accept additional patients. I know that because my GP surgery in Plymouth closed and it was a struggle for the patients to find another with places available.

People in Plymouth have reached out to me on social media, and I have been inviting comments on my Facebook page. It was nice to get comments that were not about the B-word. I will recount a few of those experiences, but should the Minister or officials want to look at them again there are plenty more on my Facebook page. I heard from a pregnant woman who told me she had to wait three weeks for an appointment. Someone else said:

"For months now, it's been impossible to book appointments online at my doctor's. It takes three weeks to see a GP, and two just to see the practice nurse. After becoming part of a merged practice, the surgery has declined drastically."

Another told me:

"Telephone consultations now seem to be the norm. Better than nothing, but a poor substitute for thorough examination."

There is, of course, a growing role for community pharmacy in Plymouth, as there is across the country, and our pharmacists do a superb job. More people need to access services provided by community pharmacists, and I encourage the Minister to continue to promote the services that pharmacies offer as part of the broader array of services to address the primary care crisis.

GPs are on the frontline of healthcare and many people in Plymouth have told me that pressure has increased as community services have been cut back in other areas. A large proportion of the patients that GPs see consists of patients with severe, complex and enduring mental health difficulties who need regular GP support,

and for some their GP is their only point of contact. While GPs continue to go above and beyond for their patients, they are not being given enough help to ease the pressure, particularly with patients with complex needs. Mental health services in Plymouth have significantly longer waiting times than other areas in Devon. Patients struggling with their mental health consult their GPs more frequently, until they are accepted into a specialist service that can support them in appropriate settings. That means that GPs in Plymouth have far more appointment demands to support patients with mental health needs than GPs elsewhere in Devon. At a meeting I held with GPs last year there was general agreement that integration of general practice, mental health and community services would be beneficial and would lead to patient care being not only better but more efficient.

This is a good moment to talk about something that Plymouth is really good at, as well as having challenges: the introduction and roll-out of health and wellbeing hubs. Plymouth City Council, our local clinical commissioning group, and Livewell Southwest—our social enterprise that provides NHS services in Plymouth—have come together to roll out health and wellbeing hubs across our city. Many of them are in the north of Plymouth, which is represented by the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), but three weeks ago I attended the opening of an all new wellbeing hub at the Cumberland centre in Devonport in my constituency. Those are genuine attempts to provide wraparound care, in addition to primary care, and to provide more thorough and effective services. I believe that Ministers should roll that model out across the country as it has real benefits. We should listen to our doctors, not just when it comes to our health but about what is best for our health services. They claim that the health and wellbeing hub model is an important addition to GP services, although not a substitute for them.

Plymouth City Council has submitted a bid to Ministers for £13 million funding to create more hubs across the city, including a superhub in our city centre. I have spoken to the Minister of State for Health about that a number of times, and I will be grateful if the Minister looks favourably on that funding application if it crosses her desk, as it is a genuinely pioneering project. The superhub would bring together in one location NHS dentistry and Plymouth's award-winning dental school, sexual health testing, mental health support, social care, and new forms of directly employed general practice doctors, as well as wellbeing services. A site has been identified for those services in the Colin Campbell Court development, and my Labour colleague on the city council, Councillor Mark Lowry, and our health lead, Councillor Ian Tuffin, would jump at the chance to brief the Minister and her officials about that project.

As GP services in the localities continue to close in Plymouth, that project would create a new south pole in Plymouth for health services, as well as the north pole at Derriford Hospital in the northern tip of our city. We all want to discourage people from attending hospital if they can access their care in local communities, and health and wellbeing hubs, as well as the new superhub, could make a transformative difference in Plymouth.

The doctors and patients I have spoken to in Plymouth all agree that our primary care is in crisis, but recognising that there is a crisis is the first step to solving it. The crisis is not because our doctors, nurses and health

professionals are not working hard enough; it is because they need more support and a better system to support them in their work. Dr Boorer said:

"We regularly continue working late into the night, often still doing administrative tasks and checking bloods at 10 to 11 pm, or catching up at weekends so we can meet the needs of our patients. But this level of work is unsustainable as evidenced by practice closures. With the current crisis, related as a result of sustained under resourcing, we see sub-optimal care for patients, burnt out GPs handing back contracts and leaving the profession".

I praise those GPs who have chosen to work in inner-city practices such as those in my constituency, because they genuinely care about their patients and the quality of care they receive. I am concerned, however, that the current GP partnership model, and the high costs of buying into it, is not sufficient or appropriate for 21st century Britain, especially when we are suffering from a recruitment and retention crisis. We need to attract more younger talent as we seek to replace those GPs who are nearing retirement, and I believe there are ways to flex the model of providing primary care.

Research shows that cities such as Plymouth have been hit hardest by some of the cuts to public services. Levels of deprivation are high, and the wraparound care provided by other providers—in particular council services—is not as present as it used to be. We know that when the primary care system breaks, costs for the taxpayer rise and people suffer. The scale of the challenge we face is great. I genuinely welcome the Minister to her new role. I hope we will be able to work together to address the specific challenges faced by Plymouth, and come up with some solutions.

4.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) for securing this important debate and for his kind words. I wish him a very happy birthday.

The hon. Gentleman spoke passionately about his constituency, as he always does, and he raised a number of pressing issues related to GP provision in Plymouth. I join him in thanking GPs and all the 1.3 million dedicated NHS staff for how they coped with increased demand on services over a challenging winter. The Government will continue to give the NHS all the additional support it needs over winter to ensure that patients continue to receive high-quality care.

The Government recognise the vital role primary care plays at the heart of our NHS, but a growing and ageing population, and increasing numbers of patients with long-term conditions, are putting strain on the system and adding to the challenges we face in recruiting and retaining GPs. Those real pressures can affect the quality of care that patients receive. We fully recognise those huge challenges, which is why we have made primary care a clear priority.

I will set out the significant measures that we are taking to support and reinvigorate general practice, which will improve GP services for patients across England, including the hon. Gentleman's constituents. In 2015, we set an ambitious target to recruit 5,000 more GPs. That is challenging, but it is vital to ensure that we have more GPs in the NHS, so we remain committed to delivering that commitment as soon as possible. The NHS long-term plan, which was published in January,

[Seema Kennedy]

made a clear commitment to the future of general practice, with primary and community care set to receive at least £4.5 billion more a year in real terms by 2023-24.

In January, we launched the new five-year GP contract, which was agreed with and widely welcomed by the profession. It will see billions of pounds of extra investment for improved access, expanded services at local practices, and longer appointments for patients who need them. We have listened to GPs about the biggest pressures they face and where we must focus to deliver reform of general practice. GPs have told us that one of the biggest pressures they face is an often unsustainable workload, which is a key reason why many dedicated GPs leave the national health service. Our new GP contract seeks to address the workload pressures that have resulted from a workforce shortfall. NHS England has committed to further expanding community-based multi-disciplinary teams and will provide funding for up to 20,000 other staff, such as physician associates and social prescribers, in primary care networks by 2023-24. Those bigger teams of staff will provide a wider range of care options for patients and free up more time for GPs to focus on their true passion—treating patients.

Another huge cause of concern for GPs has been professional indemnity. In recent years, the spiralling cost of purchasing professional indemnity cover has been a major source of stress and financial burden for GPs. That is why we addressed it in the GP contract and why just last week, on 1 April, we launched the new state-backed clinical negligence scheme for general practice. That brings a permanent solution for indemnity costs and coverage and includes all staff delivering primary medical services, including out of hours. It will remove a huge cause of worry for GPs, which will help with the recruitment and retention of GPs.

As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, we are looking at how to make the general practice partnership model fit for GPs working in the NHS in the 21st century. We recognise the huge contribution that the partnership model has made over the last 70 years of the NHS, but we know that it faces huge challenges, because many GPs, like other NHS doctors, want more flexible and varied portfolio careers; perhaps they do not want the long-term financial and geographical commitments of joining a GP partnership. That is why we commissioned Dr Nigel Watson to lead an independent review of the partnership model to understand those challenges.

As part of that review, Dr Watson visited more than 25 practices around the country, some of them small and some super-partnerships. As the hon. Gentleman alluded to, Dr Watson visited areas that are experiencing the greatest difficulty in recruiting GPs, including meeting some in Plymouth. Those visits played a key role in informing the work of the review, which reported in January and made seven key recommendations about workforce, business models and risk. We are grateful to Dr Watson for his important work, and we will respond to his recommendations in due course, with a view to reinvigorating the partnership model and making it fit for the 21st century.

I have set out that general practice is a priority for the Government, but what does that mean for Plymouth, and the hon. Gentleman's constituents? GPs know the needs of their patients best, which is why the long-term

plan seeks to change the balance of how the NHS works by shifting more activity into primary and community care. That will be enabled by expanding multidisciplinary teams working within general practice.

In Plymouth, the funding linked to the new GP contract will create extra capacity, with a 25% increase in staff numbers expected over the next five years across Devon as primary care networks employ pharmacists, physician assistants, physiotherapists, paramedics and social prescribers. I commend the valuable work being undertaken in Plymouth to open a network of local wellbeing hubs, aimed at giving residents easier and earlier access to health advice and support.

I understand that in a meeting with the former Health Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Stephen Barclay), there was a specific proposal for funding to develop a hub in Plymouth city centre. I understand that following that discussion the clinical commissioning group has undertaken further work on the case for investment with the local sustainability and transformation partnership, in anticipation of the next capital funding bidding process.

I am encouraged by the number of promising local recruitment schemes that Devon CCG has put in place both to recruit more GPs and to retain those already in the workforce. I am very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman, hopefully along with my hon. Friends the Members for South West Devon (Sir Gary Streeter) and for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), and some GPs. Other schemes include investment in portfolio careers for GPs, supported by funding from NHS England; investment in GP coaching to support retention, and a scheme to entice those who have left the primary care workforce to return to the profession, which will launch this year. It will also offer flexible working and alternative employment arrangements.

Luke Pollard: Flexible working is a huge opportunity. May I ask the Minister to look also at whether flexible working schemes with acute hospital trusts, such as part-time GPs and part-time acute hospital doctors, could be included in that scheme? I think there is real merit in that.

Seema Kennedy: I will take that salient point away and write to the hon. Gentleman.

The CCG is also working closely with the Devon Community Education Provider Network and Health Education England to develop primary care training hubs to support GP training, as well as the broader primary care workforce. Furthermore, the targeted enhanced recruitment scheme in England—an initiative that offers a one-off payment of £20,000 to GP trainees for committing to work in a specific area—has offered 24 places in Plymouth from August 2019. I am delighted to tell the House that 22 of the 24 places have been filled ahead of schedule, which is excellent news for Plymouth. It is the second highest number of places for any one area in England.

It is important to note that, despite the difficulties that the hon. Gentleman has raised, primary care in Plymouth is improving. Provision has been reviewed by the local authority's health scrutiny committee regularly over the last five years. Most recently, the committee concluded that it was assured that the system in Plymouth—in particular, general practice—had made

substantial improvements since its last review, and that although the system was fragile, significant work was under way to address recruitment issues.

I hope that I have made it clear what an absolute priority supporting and reinvigorating primary care is for the Government. We know that there are challenges with GP recruitment and retention, and other important issues facing general practice as the hon. Gentleman has outlined. However, the commitments made in the NHS long-term plan and the significant extra funding to back them up mean that we are well placed to address them. We can anticipate real improvement and reform of general practice, ensuring better access and improved services for patients in Plymouth and across England. It is such an exciting time for me as the new Minister responsible for primary care to come in and see those new commitments begin to be put into effect, and to ensure that they are delivered. I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing such an important matter for debate, and I wish him a very happy birthday.

Question put and agreed to.

LGBT Rights: Brunei

4.29 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered LGBT rights in Brunei.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I am glad that so many right hon. and hon. Members have been able to come today, because this is an important topic that is dear to our hearts and those of our constituents.

As Members will know, last week the Sultan of Brunei implemented the third phase of the sharia penal code—the SPC—which was first introduced in 2014. This phase of the code’s implementation licenses brutal executions and violent punishments of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, including death by stoning, effectively just for living their sexual identity. As a result, Brunei is now the eighth country that can punish consensual same-sex relationships with the death penalty. It also punishes women for abortion, which is a health matter, and anyone for sex outside of marriage, which is a private matter.

Last week in the House, the Minister gave a welcome statement about this situation. However, he said that the UK has a “close friendship” with Brunei as a result of our long-standing military and strategic partnerships, which I understand. He also mentioned Brunei’s membership of the Commonwealth. I believe that that relationship gives the UK special responsibility to act against this violation of human rights, which has implications for people both within and beyond Brunei. I will return to that point later.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this vital debate. When I clicked on the Commonwealth’s website this morning, the strapline that came up was “53 countries working together to...celebrate diversity” and to “protect human rights”. Given the situation in Brunei, which, as the hon. Lady says, is appalling, and the fact that same-sex consensual sex is criminalised in 35 of the 53 Commonwealth countries, does she agree that Britain must raise this issue at the forthcoming Commonwealth meeting?

Thangam Debbonaire: I absolutely agree, and I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. Later in my remarks, I will emphasise that Britain’s position in the Commonwealth gives us a position of leadership that we must act upon. Brunei is only one of the countries that are behaving in an egregious manner towards people because of their sexuality, and I would like us to use our influence.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Last November, I was privileged to visit Rwanda with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, where there are also questions about LGBT legislative equality. Surely the role of the British Government, and the Foreign Office in particular, is to provide challenge within the Commonwealth and to promote the idea that if a country is a member of the Commonwealth, it must advocate the equality legislation that the UK Government and other members of the Commonwealth partake in. It is simply unacceptable

[Chris Elmore]

in 2019 for these barbaric acts to be undertaken against people who are LGBT, purely on the basis of the way they were born.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He is absolutely right, and I would like the Minister to urge his colleague, the Foreign Secretary, to use his position in the Commonwealth. I will return to that issue later.

I will set out the dangers that the penal code poses for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in Brunei and outside, and also for other women. I will also identify how I believe Brunei benefits from its association with the UK through military, diplomatic and economic relationships. Finally, I will press the Minister on the ways in which this country can bring its influence to bear on Brunei. I have some specific suggestions for action that I would like him to consider.

First, I thank the all-party parliamentary group on global lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights—particularly Anna—the Brunei Project, the Kaleidoscope Trust, the Human Dignity Trust, Stonewall, ForcesWatch, the House of Commons Library, and others for having provided briefings for this debate. I also thank the parliamentary Digital Engagement Programme, which has brought members of the public into this discussion in a way that I never knew about. Because of that programme, the House of Commons Facebook post on this topic was seen by 35,435 accounts between 5 and 9 April. There were 6,061 post-clicks and 1,275 engagements, including reactions, comments and shares, and the post prompted 20 private messages to that Facebook page. I will refer to some of those comments and suggestions during my speech.

The Government of Brunei, as part of an increasing trend towards religious conservatism, introduced the SPC in 2014. It applies to both Muslims and non-Muslims, although the latter group is exempt from certain sections, and operates in parallel with common law inherited from British rule, which the Bruneian Government have said continues to be the primary means of administering justice. Punishments that came into effect with the implementation of phase 3 of the SPC include death by stoning for adultery, sodomy or extramarital sexual relations by Muslims, public flogging as a punishment for abortion, sex between women or consumption of alcohol, and amputation of limbs for theft. The SPC also criminalises trans people through charges of “indecent” dressing.

Homosexuality was already illegal in Brunei, but the third phase of the SPC increases the sanctions, which are barbaric in themselves. They are punishments for love, for private matters and for health matters, not for anything that any country with a legal framework based on human rights should count as crimes. Last week, the Minister rightly noted that there is an evidential bar, such as requiring four witnesses for some acts, and said that that bar is high and could therefore mean low use, if any, of these punishments. However, there is an alternative, which is confessions, and I am worried that coercion may be used to push people into confessing. For my money, a high evidential bar does not make anything better; the punishment is still on the statute book.

The Brunei Project, a human rights campaign, has stressed the intersectional implications of the SPC, with its attacks on rights to freedom of expression, religion and belief, and noted that the SPC laws also codify discrimination against women and girls. Human Rights Watch says that the SPC has further implications for women and will make it difficult for Muslim women in particular to escape violent marriages or seek employment opportunities. As I have mentioned, there are also the punishments for abortion and adultery.

Why should the legal system of a far-away country matter to any of us here? Well, both Bristol West and the UK are diverse and home to an international community, including a large student population. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people come to Bristol and the UK from all over the world, and there will be Bristolians who come from, live in or work in Brunei who will be affected by the SPC. They want to see us fight this assault on their rights. Local people with no direct connection to Brunei are also rightly concerned about this erosion of human rights. They, I, and all hon. Members here want a world in which human rights—including those of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people—are respected everywhere.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on making an incredibly powerful speech. Given the problems that some LGBT asylum seekers have recently found in gaining asylum, will she join me in calling on the Minister to raise concerns with the Home Office to ensure that we in this country are granting sanctuary to those LGBT people who face persecution in their home countries?

Thangam Debbonaire: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on refugees, I am particularly concerned at this country's record, at the fact that, unfortunately, it often fails to give asylum to people who come here because of persecution due to their sexuality, and at the high evidential bar that seems to be imposed on them. I gather that that is particularly true for women.

The implementation of the SPC has been condemned by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Gender Expression Caucus, so this is not just the west criticising south-east Asia; Brunei is not acting in step with its friends in other south-east Asian nations. I am also pleased to note that, despite things going backward in many parts of the world, India recently repealed section 377 of the Indian penal code, introduced by the British under colonisation, which criminalised sex between people of the same sex.

That is progress, but we need to keep progress and halt backward steps, because if we tolerate them, it signals to other countries that it is fine for them to go backward too. In too many countries, the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are being undermined and fragile gains lost to bigotry and authoritarian chauvinism. As I said, Brunei is now one of several countries where being gay is effectively punishable by death, but there are over 70 countries where it is criminalised.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I have had dealings with Brunei for a very long time, in so far as I know the people there. What I do not understand is how anyone as civilised and used to working in the west as the

Sultan and the people around him would even contemplate being so barbaric. That is the big question: why are they doing this stupidity?

Thangam Debbonaire: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I am also baffled—why do this? I hope the Foreign Secretary will be able to use the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group later this month as a place to talk openly, frankly, but firmly to the Sultan's representatives and ask that very question.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. It is outrageous what is going on. Does she agree that the Government should review the deployment of our troops to Brunei?

Thangam Debbonaire: I would certainly like us to use the fact that we have troops in Brunei as a measure of leverage. I understand the strategic position that those troops hold, but it is important that we do not just give troops unconditionally when the nation of Brunei and the Sultan are benefiting from those troops.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Last September, a Defence Minister confirmed to me in a written answer that Brunei's armed forces had had UK military training during the previous 12 months—2017-18. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should make the case for there being no further military training for Brunei until this issue is resolved?

Thangam Debbonaire: That is certainly a way of using our position of influence. I ask the Minister to consider that, and to talk to his colleagues in the Ministry of Defence about how we are deploying our military, to what purpose and whether that is appropriate given the Brunei state's attitude towards lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. I contend that it is not appropriate, and I really would like the Minister to consider talking to his colleagues about that.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing the debate. Is she aware of the petition started by my constituent Sarah Quinn, who is a brilliant counterpart of mine in the Scottish Youth Parliament? Her petition calls on the UK Government to do more to use their influence to stop human rights abuses against LGBT people in Brunei. The petition is just 16,000 signatures short of the 100,000 it needs to secure an even longer debate on this subject, so will the hon. Lady encourage others to sign it?

Thangam Debbonaire: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman's constituent on taking that step. It is great to see such campaigning by young people, and I certainly encourage everyone who watches or hears about this debate to take that sort of action and to show the Government, who I believe agree that this is an egregious breach of human rights, that we want them to take firm action. This is not good enough. An abuse of human rights anywhere is an abuse of human rights for us all; it is an attack on all of us.

As was mentioned, Brunei is a strategic partner of the UK in the region, and we have close military, diplomatic and economic ties. I would like us to make use of those ties as a form of leverage. On military ties, as others mentioned—I will try not to repeat what they

said—the British Army in Brunei comprises an infantry battalion of Gurkhas and an Army Air Corps flight of Bell 212 helicopters. That arrangement has been periodically renewed since 1962 by a series of agreements known today as the Brunei garrison agreement, the most recent of which was signed in 2015 and lasts until 2020. I understand that the Ministry of Defence has already begun discussions about the continuation of that agreement. Will the Minister communicate my hon. Friends' suggestions to the Ministry of Defence for consideration in negotiations about the future of that agreement?

Since 1997, the garrison in Brunei has been the only remaining British military base in the far east. Obviously, we want to keep our strategic influence there. However, the continued presence of British armed forces in Brunei offers clear defence and security benefits for the Sultan—the Sultan wants us there too. According to the *UK Defence Journal*, Brunei

“sees Britain as its biggest European ally to count on if necessities arise”,

and

“the UK is expected to be prepared to support Brunei against an expansionist China; not mentioning the British role as a political ‘stabiliser’ for the Sultan.”

What can be given can also be taken away, and we can use the possibility of its being taken away. I understand the need for us to have geopolitical influence in the region, but that influence is morally bankrupt if we do not use it for good.

On economic ties, the Institute for Public Policy Research estimates that there are around 6,400 British citizens in Brunei. Around 2,000 are military personnel or civil servants attached to the British Forces Brunei base, but 60% of Brunei's GDP is derived from oil and natural gas, so many British citizens work for Brunei Shell Petroleum and in related industries and businesses. I am concerned about what is happening to UK citizens in Brunei.

There are also trade links. Neither the UK nor the EU currently has a free trade agreement with Brunei, but Brunei is a member of the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership, a trade agreement between 11 countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Brunei does not appear to have ratified that agreement yet, but the Department for International Trade is currently consulting on a possible future free trade agreement between the UK and the CPTPP. That is one of four consultations on possible future trade deals happening now, the others being with the US, Australia and New Zealand. The question is how we use our influence. Will the Minister talk to his colleagues in the Department for International Trade about how human rights can and must be integrated into the conditions for trade?

We must ask how we can use our influence not only directly with Brunei but with other nations. This morning, I met activists in UK civil society, who urged thoughtfulness and caution, and asked us to listen to the voices of Brunei civil society—particularly to the voices of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in Brunei. This is difficult, because the voice of civil society is not strong in Brunei, and neither is the voice of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. We will need to do some work to allow it to be heard.

[Thangam Debbonaire]

There has also been a lot of press about boycotting the Dorchester—I am not in a position to boycott something I cannot afford.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware that this afternoon the Police Federation has announced that it will boycott the Dorchester for its police bravery awards? Will she join me in congratulating the Police Federation and hoping that other organisations will follow suit?

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank my hon. Friend very much for that intervention, because it brings me to my next point. I might not be able to afford to stay at the Dorchester, but I can talk to organisations that use the services of other organisations about how we all make our own decisions about how we spend our money and where we bring our trade and business. I want companies with interests in Brunei to think about their influence, but also, crucially, about the safety of their staff there. I understand concerns about economic boycotts, and I also understand the need for us to have a relationship with Brunei. I do not want Brunei to feel cornered, because dialogue is essential, but I want it to feel encouraged to change its mind and do the right thing.

Friendship has limits. We need to show how we feel when our allies or associates treat their own citizens' human rights, and potentially ours, as optional. I have various things that I want to ask the Minister. I will start with the members of the public who, via the parliamentary digital engagement team's work on the Commons Facebook page, gave various views—this is not a statement of endorsement, but of representation. Their views included taking away the Sultan of Brunei's honours; freezing his assets; boycotting his businesses; suspending Brunei from the commonwealth; guaranteeing assistance and/or asylum to all persecuted lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Bruneians; withdrawing military support; and recalling the British ambassador to Brunei. It would be good for the members of the public who contributed those ideas to have them at least considered by the Minister. Many respondents rightly pointed out that several of Britain's other allies have similarly egregious human rights records, and that Government policy should apply consistently to them, too. Some respondents said that the UK should not interfere with the laws of another country and should focus on its own issues—I represent this, even though I do not agree with such a view.

I would like the Minister to consider diplomatic pressure. What steps have the Government already taken to convince the Sultan of Brunei and his Government to repeal the SPC? What representations have the Minister or his colleagues made on the UK's commitment to securing human rights internationally for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and for women? Have the Government considered the full range of diplomatic sanctions, and if so, can the Minister tell us more about that? What consideration has the Minister made of sanctions or actions against similar regimes with similarly abhorrent legal frameworks?

What contact has the Minister or his colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy had with businesses that have employees or representation in Brunei? What support is being offered to UK citizens

in Brunei? If state sanctions are being considered by this Government, what consultation is being carried out with civil society in Brunei on the impact of those sanctions and how to make them most effective?

I reiterate what I mentioned earlier. Will the Minister ask his colleague the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary—I emphasise the word Commonwealth—to ensure that equality briefings are provided to all attendees at the meeting of the Commonwealth Ministers Action Group in London this month, and to help to give civil society activists a voice at that meeting? Will he ask the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary to do everything he can to create a constructive atmosphere for dialogue with Ministers from Brunei, in which the voices of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are heard?

Chris Elmore: My hon. Friend will obviously be aware that the next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting will be held in Kigali in about 18 months' time. Perhaps I could suggest to the Minister that an agenda item on equality and LGBT legislation could be developed for that Commonwealth summit, where Rwanda will take over the chair. While we in the United Kingdom have the chair, this issue should be very much at the top of all the agendas of Commonwealth Ministers.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. [Interruption.] I am hearing a colleague say from a sedentary position that LGBT rights was an agenda item last time, and my concern is that this influence is used as strongly as possible. It feels like we are in danger of going backwards, which is not okay. It is not good enough.

I would also like to refer the Minister to my question from last week, on which I hope he will show me a little patience—I kind of sprung it on him. It is a very techy question, but I hope he might be able to update us. Article 1 of the United Nations convention against torture and other cruel and unusual punishments prohibits the use of intentionally inflicted pain as a form of punishment inflicted by a state action. I think we both agree that that covers this situation. However, the UK has agreed to that convention, so we are also bound by article 3, on refoulement, which means that we should not return, expel or expedite anyone to another country if there are substantial grounds for believing that that person will be in danger of being subjected to such cruel and unusual punishment or torture. What discussions has the Minister had since I raised this matter with him last week with his counterparts in other Departments, such as Justice, about ensuring that we abide by the principle and practice of article 3?

In relation to asylum, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) said, there is deep concern among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in the UK that the Home Office does not understand the risks that people seeking asylum in the UK face if they are returned to their home countries where they are at risk of persecution because of their sexuality. As chair of the all-party group on refugees, I am concerned that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people report not having their sexuality believed and that officials do not recognise that, while a specific state might be generally safe for heterosexuals, there may be a well-founded fear of persecution for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

The UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group report published in 2018 found that LGBT people face insensitive questioning, that statements from partners and friends are dismissed and, further, that women asylum seekers face even more scrutiny than men. Home Office data show that, of the asylum claims made between 2015 and 2017 based on a fear of persecution because of sexual orientation, only a quarter were approved. What assurances can the Minister give those seeking asylum in the UK from Brunei—or any other country where this applies—for protection from any aspect of the SPC? What discussions has he had with his counterparts in the Home Office about that? Will he undertake to have such discussions?

Finally, the Minister has a crucial role in talking to colleagues across Government on instilling ethics in defence and trade contracts. The maintenance of the defence presence in Brunei is obviously of regional importance, but in this context the British presence in Brunei is also a political statement. Will the Government commit to using their leverage to secure full human rights for LGBT people and women in Brunei as part of the negotiations over the renewal of the garrison agreement?

To conclude, I applied for this debate because, like many hon. Members and members of the public, I am outraged that Brunei has introduced a penal code that sanctions such appalling violence on its people—as well as ours—contrary to international law and a human rights-based framework. I am disappointed, as the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) said, that the Sultan has chosen to go down this route. It is not necessary. This is a test for the Commonwealth. Will the Minister ask the Foreign Secretary to ensure that every piece of Commonwealth pressure can be brought to bear on the situation?

Bob Stewart: One thing we cannot know about, but I bet happens, is the influence of our royal family, who I know feel very much as we do and will be outraged. I am quite sure that some of the younger members of the royal family will be having words about this subject.

Thangam Debbonaire: I do not think I can comment on the views of members of the royal family, but I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I want the UK Government to take a leadership role in the world on the human rights agenda. It is clear to me that the UK Government have a specific role in correcting injustice everywhere. Whether or not we exercise that responsibility will say a great deal about how we want to be seen in the world and by our own lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people here in the UK.

I do not want my lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans constituents, friends or colleagues, or anyone in the UK, to live in fear anywhere. I do not want my country to be complicit in turning a blind eye to state-sanctioned persecution in a nation where we have a military presence and that we would consider to be friend.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): Clearly, this is brutality at the very extreme end of the spectrum. However, it should not have to get to that point before we take LGBT rights seriously. My hon. Friend is talking about the UK. The Government are turning a blind eye to LGBT rights here in the UK, by denying the extension of equal marriage rights to Northern Ireland. Surely we have to get our own house in order if we are to be an effective voice on the international stage.

Thangam Debbonaire: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, which I agree with, although obviously that is not in the Minister's portfolio. If we are to have true moral authority, we need to make sure that we have equal rights for every one of our citizens, everywhere in the United Kingdom.

I have said what I do not want, but what I want is for my constituents, my friends, my colleagues, and everyone in the UK—every single person, whether they are lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans, or a different sexuality—to be able to travel and work freely and to enjoy the same rights and freedoms as everybody else. I want lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people to be able to visit countries and take up employment or study opportunities anywhere they want, without having to check the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's website to see if it would be safe for them to do so. It does not feel okay that my friends, my staff or my constituents have to check whether it is safe to fall in love, travel with their partner, or live in a way that expresses their true gender identity or sexuality, wherever they choose to live, work or visit.

At this terrible moment for Brunei's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, the UK Government have a responsibility to stand up and be counted. I urge the Minister to do everything in his power to take this opportunity to show the cross-party strength of feeling, which I hope he understands and absorbs, as I believe he does, and show the world that Britain will not tolerate attacks on anyone's human rights—on the human rights of entire sections of the population—simply for being who they are and loving who they love.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. We have about 10 minutes of Back-Bench time before I call the Front-Bench spokespeople: Hannah Bardell for the SNP, Fabian Hamilton for Her Majesty's Opposition, and the Minister. The SNP and the Opposition spokespeople will have five minutes each and the Minister will have 10 minutes, then we will return to Thangam Debbonaire to sum up. Three hon. Members are seeking to contribute, so the time limit will be three minutes each. First, I call Luke Pollard.

4.57 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) on a passionate speech. It is not right that our LGBT friends across the world cannot enjoy the same freedoms as LGBT people in my constituency.

We need to send a strong message from this debate that love is love. We must use our power as a country to impress that on our friends. It is harder when our friends fail, and when we have to have difficult conversations with people with whom we share a common bond, but on this we must, because our values do not stop at our borders. I say that as a gay man who is proud to be out. We have an extra responsibility to make sure that people know that whether someone is L, G, B, T or straight, it does not matter—they deserve human rights wherever they are.

I have asked the Ministry of Defence in a written question about what advice has been given to UK forces stationed at British Forces Brunei, to make sure that

[Luke Pollard]

there are no consequences for LGBT serving UK personnel in Brunei. I would be grateful if the Minister could reflect on that in his remarks.

We must be aware that the roll-back of LGBT rights can happen. There is sometimes a belief in the LGBT community that LGBT rights only go one way—that we will only ever get more equal and that our fight for equality is over. That is wrong. It is a false wrapper that we put round ourselves to pretend that we do not have to fight anymore.

It gave me great strength to see the first-time activists protesting outside the Dorchester and other hotels owned by the Sultan of Brunei, because they recognise that their human rights in the UK are affected if human rights for LGBT people around the world are affected. It does matter. Every time there is hate internationally, hate is brought on LGBT communities in our country. It does not take much to find people on social media saying,

“Perhaps Brunei has the right idea”,

or,

“The sultan of Brunei has the right idea of what to do with you Brighton bitches”,

or,

“Brunei has the right idea in dealing with such FILTH.”

The hate engendered in the laws that my hon. Friend spoke so passionately about empowers people who want to divide others and peddle hate in our country. That is why our determination to fight such cruel punishment for simply being LGBT with our friends and allies abroad must be matched by our commitment to do so at home as well. We must be clear that there is no place for this type of hate, either in the UK or around the world. As we decide what type of country we want to be after Brexit, we must ensure that human rights—LGBT rights—are at the heart of our diplomacy.

5 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) on securing the debate and on the passionate case that she made.

It is clear that the situation in Brunei is totally unacceptable in 2019. Fundamental human rights are the business of everyone—all right-thinking people the world over. It is right that this House and the British Government should give a clear view to the Brunei authorities. We have heard that Brunei sees the United Kingdom as its biggest European ally. It is therefore essential that we use that relationship to make it absolutely clear to the Sultan and to the authorities that the introduction of this latest strict sharia penal code does not fit with the 21st century, and with anyone who believes that basic human rights across the world are rights for all humanity.

The UK and many other countries have made real progress on LGBT rights and equalities in recent decades. It is essential that we send a clear message to any country looking to regress on LGBT or human rights issues that that is unacceptable. We will not go backwards. The decision to impose the death penalty on gay people living in Brunei is utterly barbaric and a violation of

basic human rights. The UK Government must show global leadership, and consider Brunei's suspension from the Commonwealth if it does not reconsider the decision.

We have heard that the British Army has a presence in Brunei—its only presence in the far east—comprising an infantry battalion of Gurkhas and an Army Air Corps flight. As we know, the current agreement will last until 2020. Of the 6,400 British citizens in Brunei, around 2,000 are members of the armed forces or the civil service at the British forces base. It is understood that the Sultan, understandably, values that British Army presence.

In the light of our important defence and security partnership with Brunei, it is vital that the Defence Secretary demonstrates his commitment to human rights by urging the Brunei authorities to drop this appalling law without delay. We must also ensure that no British troops are affected by the law. I would be grateful if the Minister could set out what specific action the Government have taken in that regard, and whether he will raise the matter with the Defence Secretary.

Furthermore, the Government should commit to stripping the Sultan of Brunei of his honorary appointments as Air Chief Marshal of the Royal Air Force and Admiral of the Royal Navy. It is simply unacceptable for those honours to be held by someone who wishes to abuse fundamental rights in that way. This shameful and regressive move simply cannot be tolerated, and that message needs to go out loud and clear. At the very least, we need assurances from the Government that protections are in place for British military personnel, other British persons living and working in Brunei, and tourists.

Over and above that, such treatment is simply unacceptable for any human being. From a human rights perspective, that is the message that this country and Her Majesty's Government need to say loud and clear. I hope that the Minister can give some assurances on this issue today.

5.3 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Of course all right-thinking people will condemn what has been introduced in Brunei in recent weeks. We would condemn the stoning of anybody, whether they were lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or whatever. It is a positively inhumane way of undertaking what they pretend is a form of justice.

However, we in the United Kingdom have a share of the blame for what has happened in the Commonwealth and around the world. The countries with some of the worst records on LGBT rights once owed their allegiance to the Crown here. Sometimes we exported the most draconian laws that any country has ever had on male homosexuality, in particular between 1922 and 1967.

Some people point the finger at religion. Sometimes that is right, but sometimes it is wrong. Interestingly, when the House of Commons tried to legislate to ban lesbianism in 1922 the best speech given in Parliament to strike the law down was from the Archbishop of Canterbury, who said that it was a pile of nonsense. He was quite right. When it came to the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in this country in 1967, Michael Ramsey, the Archbishop of Canterbury, was one of the best proponents for a humane and sensible approach to those matters.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) is right that it often feels as if we are taking steps backwards. We have taken so many strides forwards in this country in recent years, with civil partnerships, gay marriage and all the rest, that it is all too easy to forget that the most liberal city in the world in the last 150 years was probably Berlin in 1930. In 1934, Hitler killed all the gay Nazis, and went on to put thousands of people in concentration camps and kill them.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) said earlier, we have to put our own house in order in Northern Ireland and the British Overseas Territories, as do so many countries with which we do business. It is ironic that the Sultan of Brunei owns the Dorchester, because that was where Victor Cazalet—a gay man who was a Member of this House in the 1930s, and director of the Dorchester—used to interview everybody for his almost entirely gay, queer or nearly queer searchlight battery in the second world war. I have also been to many dinners at the Dorchester that were hosted by Stonewall.

I am absolutely delighted that people—particularly young people—are taking action, because they want to see that the campaigns of yesteryear are not forgotten and because human rights are a seamless garment that have to be fought for by every single generation. In truth, the laws in Brunei will not stop anyone from being homosexual. They will not stop anybody from loving another person of the same gender. All that they will do is condemn them to a life of loneliness, sadness, lying and hypocrisy.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. We can squeeze in one more short contribution of 90 seconds from Richard Graham.

5.6 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Hollobone. This is a good debate that follows both Foreign Office Questions and the statement by the Minister last week. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) on raising the issue, about which many around the House and around the country will feel the same way.

I want to make two points, if I may. The Commonwealth charter itself is very clear about the requirements on Commonwealth members to oppose all forms of discrimination. In 2018 at CHOGM, the Prime Minister was clear about the importance that nobody faces discrimination or persecution because of whom they love. I suspect that the amount of strong opposition to the sharia penal code that has been implemented in Brunei will come as a surprise to the population of that country—an ally and friend of ours—because they will not have anticipated the stream of condemnation that has come their way.

I ask the Minister whether we can, in a sense, help to guide the Kingdom of Brunei through what is a very difficult situation for our relationship with it. Can we encourage it to look carefully at means of reassuring its own citizens, as well as others around the world, that this is not a change in the fundamentally tolerant approach that is characteristic of that country for all of us who

have been? Can we encourage Brunei to do whatever possible to mitigate the introduction of the last part of the sharia penal code?

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to the Front Benches. I call Hannah Bardell for the SNP.

5.8 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) on securing this debate and on her excellent speech.

It is a sad fact—and not one that is in the infamous guide to coming out—that when someone comes out, they look at the world map in a very different way. That is largely to find out whether the country that they are visiting on business or on holiday is going to arrest, torture or murder them just because of who they love or who they are. As we have heard, Brunei's strict legal code mandates for death for adultery and sex between men, lashes for lesbian sex and amputation for crimes such as theft. It discriminates not just against LGBT people, but against women particularly.

That has sparked a tide of condemnation. We in the SNP have unequivocally condemned Brunei's actions. My hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) spoke about the grassroots response, his constituent Sarah Quinn—a member of the Scottish Youth Parliament—and the number of signatures that her petition has gathered. At the weekend, we saw people outside some of the hotels owned by the Sultan.

To my mind that is not enough, because until this shameful announcement, 70 countries criminalised same-sex activity between consenting adults. That accounts for almost 3 billion people, or 40% of the world's population, living in countries that have anti-LGBT laws. Although, unfortunately, the shambles of Brexit is diminishing the UK's soft power, it still has significant power and I know that the Minister has made strong statements of condemnation. However, he and the Government have also recently visited Brunei.

In August 2018 the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) visited as trade envoy to Brunei, Thailand and Burma. He talked about what a successful visit it was, and about the great insight that it gave him into the significant opportunities that already exist within Brunei's economy. I hope that the Minister can give us some comfort and a sense that he will use his power to make sure a strong message is sent. Whatever happens with Brexit the UK will be flailing around potentially looking for trade deals, and they cannot come at the cost of our values.

Richard Graham: It is interesting that since the CHOGM of last year two countries in the Commonwealth have changed their legal position on decriminalising homosexuality, including India, which means that in that great country of more than 1 billion people it is now perfectly legal. Does the hon. Lady agree that some progress is being made?

Hannah Bardell: I absolutely do agree with the hon. Gentleman. It is hugely important. We must be in no doubt that we have the opportunity to bring about change and exert influence. The hon. Member for Bristol West spoke of specific things that we could do: freezing assets,

[Hannah Bardell]

recovering honours, recalling ambassadors and suspending Brunei from the Commonwealth. I endorse that. When I heard the news I felt sick to my stomach, and I am sure that we all did. I visited Malawi recently, where the Government turn a blind eye to homosexuality, but where if someone is trans they literally do not exist. There must be changes in those countries and we must do everything we can.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): My hon. Friend mentions the Commonwealth and the possible remedy of suspension. Of course no country has ever been expelled but countries have been suspended for violation of democracy and the rule of law. Does she agree that what has happened in Brunei is every bit as serious as that and that we must keep suspension or expulsion from the Commonwealth up our sleeve as the ultimate sanction?

Hannah Bardell: I absolutely agree. In the brief time I have left I want to refer to countries such as Qatar, which, in my view, have illegally been awarded major sporting championships. Qatar will host the World cup. Scotland will not be in the men's World cup. England will. What kind of message would it send if England decided to take a stand and say "We are not going to that country and that competition"? It is a difficult decision to take and there is a balance of judgment, but until we stop allowing countries such as Qatar, Brunei and Russia to hold major sporting competitions they will continue to abuse their people and their human rights, and it is time we took a stronger stand.

5.13 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) on bringing this debate to us today, and I thank my colleagues, my hon. Friends the Members for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) and for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), and the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), for their excellent contributions.

Brunei is a country with a population of 420,000 people and is by some estimates the fourth richest country per capita in the world. It has been fully independent of the United Kingdom only since 1984. Its ruler, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, is an absolute monarch and rules absolutely; he is also the country's Prime Minister. This year Brunei became the first east Asian country to adopt strict sharia law. As we have heard today, those laws violate international human rights including the right to life and freedom from torture. They violate certain conventions to which Brunei is a party, including the conventions on the rights of the child. Under international human rights law, corporal punishment in all its forms, such as stoning, amputation or whipping, constitutes torture or other "cruel, inhuman or degrading...punishment", which is prohibited in all circumstances. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, stated recently:

"Any religion-based legislation must not violate human rights, including the rights of those belonging to the majority religion, as well as of religious minorities and non-believers".

Brunei has not executed anyone since 1957, but it has now become one of only seven countries in the world that punish consensual homosexual acts with the

death penalty. We know that these new laws target some of the most vulnerable people in Brunei society. They also place restrictions on Muslim women who want to escape violent marriages.

The UK and Brunei have historically long ties; in 1888 Brunei became a British protected state and it was the only Malay state that chose to remain so in 1963, only gaining independence in 1984. The British Army has maintained a Gurkha battalion—currently about 2,000 personnel—in Brunei since 1962, and as we know, Brunei is a member of the Commonwealth. Commonwealth Secretary-General Baroness Patricia Scotland stated recently that the new laws

"will potentially bring into effect cruel and inhuman punishments which contravene international human rights law and standards".

The Government have stated that they have a good relationship with Brunei, which allows them to have "frank conversations"—a term often used in circumstances such as this—but has not called for Brunei to be suspended from the Commonwealth. The Government have said that

"threatening to kick countries out of the Commonwealth"

is not the "best way" to encourage Brunei to uphold its human rights obligations. I ask the Minister: why not? The scale and brutality of this attack on universal human rights by a friend and close ally of this country should not be without consequence. What action do the Government intend to take to persuade the Sultan of Brunei to rescind these laws, which are an attack on those who only wish to express their love for another human being? What can the Government do to ensure that half the population of that country, its women, do not have to put up with further suffering under the law simply because of their gender—especially those women who are trying to escape violent marriages?

Human rights are universal; Labour Members and, I am sure, every Member of the House of Commons and House of Lords believe that human rights are indivisible. We must ensure that, as a nation with an important and influential place in the world, we uphold those rights wherever they are challenged in today's world. I hope the Minister can answer some of these questions.

5.17 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): It is a pleasure to be here. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) on securing this important debate. She is always a passionate advocate for equal rights, and I pay tribute to her commitment on the issue. I am also grateful for the widespread interest and the insights of other hon. Members.

To begin, I think it is worth reiterating what I said in my statement only six days ago. The Government

"oppose the death penalty in all circumstances and in all forms, and we do not believe that amputation or stoning are legitimate or acceptable punishments. Indeed, we consider them to be illegal under international human rights laws relating to torture or cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment."

We also

"consider it appalling that, in the 21st century, people anywhere are still facing potential persecution and discrimination because of who they are and whom they love."—[*Official Report*, 4 April 2019; Vol. 657, c. 1274.]

As a number of hon. Members have pointed out, human rights are universal and should apply equally to everyone.

LGBT people are not asking for special rights; they simply expect to be accorded the same dignity, respect and rights as all other citizens. That is why the UK strongly supports, defends and champions the rights of LGBT people here in the UK and all around the world, and opposes the criminalisation of homosexual relationships worldwide, whether in Brunei or elsewhere. As has been pointed out, there are still some 70 countries worldwide that discriminate against any person based on their sexuality, and we continue to encourage all those countries to repeal their laws. There has been some progress since 2015, with five countries decriminalising homosexual relationships, but we all accept that there is more still to do.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Mark Field: I will not, if the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, because I want to try to answer as many of the points as I can.

The introduction of the sharia penal code and hudud punishments in Brunei will have an even more discriminatory and intimidating impact on those who are LGBT there. That is something that we cannot accept and that we believe is in contravention of Brunei's international commitments to respect human rights and individual freedoms. We have expressed our concerns to the Government of Brunei. I personally raised the matter when I was there last summer, because we saw this car crash coming. To be fair, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) and others have pointed out, the pure weight of international opinion that has come out over the past week has surprised many within Brunei, and particularly within the court of the Sultan.

The day after the measures came into force on 3 April, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary called Brunei's Foreign Minister, Dato Erywan, to reiterate our very deep concern. The Foreign Secretary, our high commissioner, Richard Lindsay, and I have heard explanations, first, that common law will continue to be the primary means of administering justice and, secondly, that the burden of proof under the sharia penal code is almost unattainably high—although I take on board the comments by the hon. Member for Bristol West about confessions.

Although those explanations provide a very small degree of reassurance, none of us, of course, accepts that they go anything like far enough. The fact remains that homosexual relationships will be illegal in Brunei, whether under common law or under the sharia penal code. We remain clear that homosexuality should not be illegal anywhere in the world, and that any form of punishment—particularly the abhorrent hudud punishments—is unacceptable.

The UK will remain committed to the principle of non-discrimination on any grounds, including sexual orientation, gender and identity. We are a party to the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and a signatory to the UN convention against torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment. To answer the hon. Lady, I understand that Brunei plans to expedite its ratification of UNCAT. That is welcome, but what has happened with this code is, of course, directly in opposition to it. I will come to that towards the end of my speech.

As has rightly been said, these are universal issues, but it is worth pointing out the position of British nationals, who are obviously impacted to a large extent. As I assured the House last week, we have taken positive action to inform and support British nationals in Brunei, whether they are visitors, residents or among the garrison. We have updated our travel advice to ensure that British nationals are aware of both the introduction of the sharia penal code and all its potential, albeit unlikely, implications.

On military personnel, I will obviously ensure that this speech is passed on to the Defence Secretary.

Martin Docherty-Hughes *rose*—

Mark Field: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, as I always do.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way; he is, as always, very courteous. He will know that British Forces Brunei was agreed on the premise that Brunei was seen as a moderate front against extremist ideology. Is that still the case?

Mark Field: Yes, it is, obviously, in counter-terrorism and other areas. The most disappointing thing for me and, I know, for my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester, who is also a regular in Brunei, is the contrast between what we see on the ground—a peaceful, peace-loving people and a state that runs in a very patrician way, as we might imagine given that only 350,000 people live there—and the idea of hudud punishments and the enactment of a sharia penal code. Those things seem entirely at odds with each other, but we are working with Brunei on the grounds the hon. Gentleman points out.

The garrison is the UK's only permanent military presence in the Asia-Pacific. I should point out that a vast amount of the expense of the garrison is met by the Sultan of Brunei, who has always been eternally grateful for our intervention in Borneo in 1962. The garrison provides unique influence and insight—not just for us but for Brunei—in a region of growing strategic importance, and enables vital training for UK forces, supporting our deployments and allies. We have ensured that the necessary protections are in place for personnel based in Brunei, but we would look for that to apply more generally.

A number of hon. Members and others outside this place have asked whether the Commonwealth should take action and whether there should be economic or trade boycotts. The FCO's approach to both is the same: we believe that our concerns are best addressed not through blacklisting or boycotts but through persistent dialogue, as the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) will recognise, and through diplomacy.

Brunei is one of several Commonwealth member states that criminalise homosexual relationships and retain corporal or capital punishments. We will continue relentlessly to try to encourage each of those countries to amend and suspend those forms of punishment. There has been progress, but I accept that many would like to see much quicker progress. In many ways, what is disappointing about this issue in Brunei is that the implementation of such a code is a backward rather than a forward step.

[Mark Field]

My noble Friend the Minister for the Commonwealth has spoken in detail about this issue to the secretary-general of the Commonwealth, who I understand is presently in contact with the Government of Brunei, expressing the deep concerns raised by the international community over the past 10 days. We stand ready to support any Commonwealth member wanting to reform legislation that discriminates against the LGBT community, women and other parts of society. Significant work is ongoing in a number of states where we hope that there will be progress.

The hon. Member for Bristol West asked me to do my homework from six days ago in relation to article 3 of UNCAT. Under UK law, extradition cannot take place where the death penalty is a possibility, unless a satisfactory assurance has been received that the death penalty will not be imposed or carried out.

Hannah Bardell *rose*—

Mark Field: No, I really am running out of time.

The UK Government remain committed to delivering an asylum system that is sensitive and responsive to all forms of persecution, including those based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and that supports claimants in providing all information relevant to their claim in order to facilitate fair and sustainable asylum decisions. We ensure that claimants are given every opportunity to disclose information relevant to their claim before a decision is taken, including where that information may be sensitive or difficult to disclose. Those who need international protection should always, of course, claim asylum in the first safe country that they reach.

The introduction of extreme hudud punishments in Brunei has understandably caused genuine concern, alarm and consternation in this country and elsewhere. It has also caused concern and uncertainty in Brunei, particularly among residents who are from the UK or are other non-Bruneian nationals. We are a friend of Brunei—I am proud to say that even at this time. Many Members will understand that it is easy to criticise Ministers for talking in such terms, but we have to work closely with our friends. We have expressed, and should continue to express, deep concerns candidly and openly.

We remain deeply troubled by the potential impact of the sharia penal code. Therefore, the Government, our high commissioner and I will continue to guide, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester said, the Government of Brunei to take all necessary steps to reassure its own people, the United Kingdom and the

wider international community that it is fully committed to allowing all citizens and residents to live with dignity and free from discrimination or persecution.

The Foreign Secretary and I will reiterate that point when we meet the Bruneian Foreign and Finance Ministers, who are in London tomorrow. We will emphasise that this issue will not just blow over, and we will stress our ongoing concerns and the need for Brunei to provide public assurances. I shall also pass on the very heartfelt views that we have expressed in the House today.

I thank you, Mr Hollobone, for your indulgence in allowing me these additional few seconds.

5.27 pm

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part in the debate verbally or by being present in support. I also thank the Front-Bench spokespeople and the Minister, who responded to some of my points, for which I am grateful, although he should expect a strongly worded letter from me. I would like to know more about what happens when he and his colleague meet ministerial colleagues from Brunei tomorrow. I will also write to him with a list of everything that was raised in the debate to ask if he could respond, because I understand that that is not always possible in so short a debate.

The Minister mentioned friendship. If a friend of mine suddenly decided that it was okay to torture gay people, I would have to talk to them about the nature of friendship, whether they valued my friendship and what price that friendship had for them. I would like the Minister to take that sentiment away. I understand friendship, but we have to be more than just a critical friend who expresses concern; we need to move beyond expressions of concern and outrage to actual action. I want him to understand the strong feeling in the Chamber and beyond the House, and that I speak for an awful lot of people when I say that we do not just want expressions of concern or warm words, welcome though they may be. We want action.

I urge the Minister to take that metaphor of friendship away with him and to think about what he would do if a friend of his was threatening to stone gay people. He would want to know that his friendship mattered more, and he would want to use that friendship as a position of influence. I thank all hon. Members for participating.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered LGBT rights in Brunei.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 10 April 2019

TREASURY

Public Sector Exit Payment Cap

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss):

Today, I have launched a consultation on the draft regulations to implement the public sector exit payment cap. The Government introduced powers to cap exit payments in the public sector at £95,000 in the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act 2015.

Public servants deserve to be properly rewarded for the vital work they do. That is why the Government announced the biggest public sector pay rise in 10 years last summer, with most going to the lowest paid nurses, teachers and police officers.

However, the way we reward public servants must be proportionate and fair to taxpayers. The very high exit payments we have seen granted to some highly-paid public sector employees in recent years clearly breach these principles. It is right that the Government acts on this to give taxpayers the confidence their money is being spent properly.

This consultation sets out the proposed method for implementing the cap, including which bodies should be in scope.

The consultation can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/restricting-exit-payments-in-the-public-sector>.

[HCWS1503]

DEFENCE

Armed Forces' Standards and Values

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson):

The Ministry of Defence and our armed forces expect the highest standards from our personnel. The vast majority not only meet, but exceed these standards on a daily basis in all manner of challenging situations, wherever they are deployed, reinforcing the values on which we pride ourselves. However, it is clear that in a number of cases the standards and values we expect are not being met.

The Ministry of Defence and our armed forces are absolutely clear that there is no place for sexual offending or sexual harassment across the services. Inappropriate behaviour is unacceptable and it stands in stark contrast with everything the armed forces represent. Anyone found to have committed a sexual offence will be dealt with appropriately and will face the full force of the law. To ensure our service personnel are adhering to the highest standards, I have commissioned Air Marshal Michael Wigston, deputy commander for capability at HQ Air Command, to conduct an urgent report into inappropriate behaviour, to include sexual harassment, across the services.

The objectives of the report are threefold: to understand the current evidence regarding inappropriate behaviour across the services; to make recommendations on what can be done to ensure and reassure that the armed

forces are an inclusive and modern employer; and, to identify areas for further action, including potential improvements to controls, processes or policy. The Air Marshal will provide me with a report of his findings and recommendations by mid-May. Once the recommendations have been considered and implementation plans have been agreed, the House will be updated.

[HCWS1504]

TRANSPORT

Rail

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):

I am updating the House on the east midlands, south eastern and west coast partnership franchise competitions.

I am pleased to inform the House that, following rigorous competition, I intend to award the next east midlands railway franchise to Abellio East Midlands pending successful completion of a standstill period of at least 10 days.

The franchise is due to start on 18 August 2019 and will run for eight years, until 21 August 2027, with an extension of two years callable at my discretion.

Passengers, local authorities, businesses and other stakeholders across the country contributed to a highly demanding and challenging specification for this new franchise. Bidders were invited to demonstrate how they would meet this specification, and I am very pleased that we have agreed a plan with Abellio East Midlands for them to exceed these expectations.

Abellio East Midlands will oversee the introduction of brand-new trains, entirely replacing the existing intercity fleet with more reliable and comfortable trains. Passengers will benefit from an 80% increase in the number of morning peak seats into Nottingham, Lincoln and St Pancras. Passengers will also see faster journey times over long distances, with a new express service from Corby through Luton into London.

The east midlands railway will be at the forefront of the Government's commitment to deliver a cleaner, greener rail network. Abellio East Midlands will trial hydrogen fuel cell trains on the midland main line and will run zero-carbon pilots at six stations along the route.

The new franchise will also deliver a fairer deal for passengers. Over £17 million will be invested in improving station facilities across the route, including to deliver accessibility improvements. Abellio East Midlands will also deliver an additional 916 extra car park spaces and 1,050 cycle spaces.

Passengers will benefit from the provision of free wi-fi throughout the franchise, both on trains and at stations, and a significant uplift to the current ticketing system, with the introduction of smart, flexible ticketing options, including to provide better value for those who travel regularly but less than five days a week, as well as improved ticket-buying facilities and nine newly staffed stations.

The new east midlands railway franchise will also introduce enhanced delay repay compensation, with passengers able to claim compensation if their train is more than 15 minutes late.

We look forward to working closely with Abellio East Midlands to ensure they deliver the high-quality services that passengers expect and deserve from the railway and the east midlands railway franchise.

With regards to the south eastern franchise competition, I am also today updating the House that my Department is negotiating a short-term extension to the current franchise agreement with Govia while we make a decision on the competition. This will ensure continuity of services for passengers until 10 November 2019, with an option to extend the agreement further to April 2020.

We are due to award the west coast partnership in June.

Alongside this, there is a root-and-branch review of the railway underway, independently chaired by Keith Williams. This will make ambitious recommendations before the end of the year to reform the structure of the whole rail industry to prioritise passengers' and taxpayers' interests.

The next east midlands railway franchise and the ongoing competitions include significant improvements for passengers and steps to bring track and train closer together. From 2020, we will begin to roll out further reforms, advised by the rail review, across the country. We will be guided by the approaches that deliver benefits to passengers and other rail users soonest. Awarding the new east midlands railway franchise is part of that strategy.

[HCWS1502]

Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 10 April 2019

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Yemen

The following is a Ministerial Correction made by the Minister for Asia and the Pacific on 27 March 2019 to an answer given to the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) during an Urgent Question on Yemen.

The following is an extract from the Urgent Question to the Minister for Asia and the Pacific on Tuesday 26 March 2019.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): The Government contract the manufacture of UK arms for Saudi Arabia. They contract the issuing of bombs into UK aircraft in the Kingdom. They have RAF soldiers in command centres, and now we learn that we have ground assets in Yemen. So can I ask again, because I do not think the Minister answered the question: if this does not constitute being a member of the coalition, what on earth does? What legal advice have Her Majesty's Government received about potential complicity in war crimes and international humanitarian law abuses, which we could now be liable for?

Mark Field: Will the hon. Gentleman please be assured that there is ongoing legal advice on all the matters to which he referred? I should perhaps also say, to correct the record in that regard, that we do not have our

liaison officers or others in command centres with the Saudis. The liaison is in Saudi; they are there in a training and advisory capacity.

[Official Report, 26 March 2019, Vol. 657, c. 196.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Asia and the Pacific:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle).

The correct response should have been:

Mark Field: Will the hon. Gentleman please be assured that there is ongoing legal advice on all the matters to which he referred? I should perhaps also say, to correct the record in that regard, that we do not have our liaison officers or others in command centres with the Saudis. **We have a very small number of staff working in Saudi headquarters in a liaison capacity only.**

[Official Report, 27 March 2019, Vol. 657, c. 3MC.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Asia and the Pacific:

An error has been identified in the Ministerial Correction I issued to the response I originally gave to the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle).

The correct response should have been:

Mark Field: Will the hon. Gentleman please be assured that there is ongoing legal advice on all the matters to which he referred? I should perhaps also say, to correct the record in that regard, that **we have a very small number of staff working in Saudi command centres in a liaison capacity, and our liaison officers are not involved in training.**

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