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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Tuesday 23 April 2019

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Victims Law

1. **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): When the Government plan to undertake a consultation on proposals for a victims law. [910418]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): Mr Speaker, I will endeavour to croak my way through my response.

We published the first ever pan-Government victims strategy in September 2018 containing 88 commitments, of which we have already implemented 24, to better support victims of crime. Among those is a commitment to consult this year on the revised victims code and details of victim-focused legislation, reaffirming our manifesto commitment to such a law.

Henry Smith: I am sure that the whole House will join me in sending condolences and expressing shock at the terrorist attack in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday. Sadly, it highlights the issue of the effect on victims of terror incidents, whether in this country or abroad. When will the Government come forward with a law to ensure that victims are properly supported, because all too many reports from victims in previous incidents suggest that that has not been the case?

Edward Argar: I join my hon. Friend in his expression of condolence and sympathy to all those who were affected by the horrific events in Sri Lanka over the weekend. It is vital that we get any new legislation right—hence our commitment to consult. We will first revise and strengthen the victims code and then identify any legislative gaps arising from that. We will consult on a victims law this year and bring forward legislation subsequently when parliamentary time allows.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the Minister and the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) for what they said. Many Members will have noted what is on the Annunciator, but for those who have not I simply give notice of the intention for us to hold one minute's silence in respectful memory of those who tragically and horrifically lost their lives in Sri Lanka, and that will take place after the urgent questions and immediately before the first of the ministerial statements.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree that the tragic victims are those people who cannot speak because they have been killed by an accident or a violent crime? Will he meet me to discuss the case of a bereaved family whose little girl was killed 15 months ago as a driver crashed into a bus queue? The driver not only killed the little girl, an only child, but seriously injured another woman. They have not been prosecuted. Can we have a chat about that?

Edward Argar: I would not want to comment on specific cases on the Floor of the House, and although decisions on prosecution are not a matter for Ministers, I would, as always, be very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): If prolific repeat offenders spent longer in jail there would be fewer victims of crime in all of our communities. Does the Minister agree?

Edward Argar: I believe that the key to seeing fewer victims of crime is effective rehabilitation of offenders and breaking the cycle of offending. That is exactly what I and the Secretary of State are focused on.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): My constituent Kristian Thompson would have been 27 years old today had his life not been taken when he was 19 years old after he was the victim of a one-punch attack. His mam, Maxine, set up the charity One Punch UK. This week is One Punch Awareness Week when many people who have lost loved ones are pleading with the Government to follow Australia and Canada and create a one-punch law imposing a minimum sentence for perpetrators. Why are the Government continuing to resist doing so?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Lady and I send my sympathies to Kristian's family and friends on the terrible events that she has just described. I am very happy to look at what she is proposing, and if she would like to write to me, I will respond as fully as I can.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): A vital feature of justice for victims is financial redress, so why have this Government presided over a near 60% fall in the number of victims of violent crime receiving payments from the criminal injuries compensation scheme?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the shadow Minister for her question. Our ongoing review of the criminal injuries compensation scheme has one simple aim: to make sure that it better supports victims and reflects their needs in the 21st century. Indeed, last year we awarded compensation of more than £154 million, and recently, we have announced that we are abolishing the "same-roof" rule so that many more victims can make claims. In respect of the specific issue to which she refers, which I believe was covered in *The Guardian* newspaper recently, I would sound a slight note of caution about the figures for 2010-11 being a benchmark as I understand there is a possibility that they were inflated that year due to a £30 million pay-out specifically for compensation for asbestos-related conditions. None the less, I welcome her engagement with the review that we will be undertaking this summer.

Imprisonment for Public Protection

2. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What steps he is taking to reduce the number of prisoners serving sentences of imprisonment for public protection. [910419]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): The Government are committed to providing IPP prisoners with opportunities to progress to the point at which they are safe to release. Our primary responsibility is public protection. Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service and the Parole Board are delivering a joint action plan to improve IPP prisoners' sentence progression. In 2017-18, three quarters of those considered by the Parole Board were either recommended for release or a move to open conditions. This shows that our approach is working.

Jeff Smith: My constituent Wayne Bell is currently in the 12th year of a sentence for which the original tariff was four years. Owing to his significant mental health issues, he is unable to engage with the parole process and the review process, and his mental health problems are exacerbated by the hopelessness of his situation. Does the Secretary of State realise that prisoners with mental health issues can get trapped in a vicious cycle where it becomes almost impossible to achieve parole, and will he look at interventions that could be considered to enable Wayne's cases and others like it to be resolved?

Mr Gauke: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this point. I am happy to write to him on the individual case, which has a number of complexities, as I am sure he is aware. I have mentioned the joint action plan to improve IPP prisoners' sentence progression. These measures include case reviews led by psychologists for those prisoners not making the expected progress, an increased number of places on specialist progression regimes, and greatly improved access to rehabilitative programmes. I continue to be ambitious to ensure that we do everything we can in this area, remembering that public protection must remain our priority.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for what he has said about his ambitions for IPP prisoners. Does the joint action plan have an end date—that is, is there a date beyond which we should not detain people under these sorts of sentences?

Mr Gauke: In the end, it comes down to the decisions made by the Parole Board, which has to make its decisions based on public protection. In some cases—regrettable though it may be—if someone is not safe to be released, the Parole Board must make that decision. We need to ensure that we do everything we can to progress these cases as best we can. As I have said, we have made progress in recent years.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): The latest figures show that there are still nearly 2,500 prisoners serving IPP sentences. These sentences often have punitive recall conditions, which means that people might be returned to prison for fairly minor breaches of their licence conditions, resulting in many prisoners serving well beyond their original tariffs. It was previously a target of the Parole Board to reduce IPP prisoner numbers to 1,500 by 2020, so what steps will the Secretary of State take to ensure that this happens?

Mr Gauke: Obviously I want to reduce the numbers, and one of the reasons that we have provided additional support to the Parole Board is to enable it to do so. In the end, it comes down to individual decisions in respect of particular individuals, and some cases present a number of challenging factors. Decisions have to strike the right balance between progressing people as we should and ensuring that we protect the public.

Access to Criminal Justice

3. **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase access to the criminal justice system. [910420]

7. **Teresa Pearce** (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase access to the criminal justice system. [910424]

20. **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase access to the criminal justice system. [910446]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): It is vital that our criminal justice system remains fair and accessible, and we are taking a number of steps to ensure justice within it. Legal aid is a very important part of that process, and last year we spent almost £900 million on criminal legal aid alone. However, our court system also needs to be modern and up to date, so we are spending £1 billion on technology to bring our court system up to date for the 21st century.

Mr Virendra Sharma: I thank the Minister for her response. The Law Society has highlighted the fact that low criminal legal aid fees are having an adverse impact on the number of new, younger lawyers. Criminal legal aid fees for solicitors have not been increased since the 1990s. Will the Government commit to raising fees for solicitors, at least in line with inflation?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point, because those who work within the criminal justice system play a vital part in upholding justice. That is why, over the course of last year, we have consulted the professions and put a further £23 million into the advocates' graduated fee scheme. It is also why we have recently announced that we will be doing a holistic review of criminal legal aid with regard to the professions, looking overall at a whole range of issues across the Bar and across the duty solicitor schemes. That review has already started.

Teresa Pearce: I thank the Minister for that reply, but there is a crisis in legal aid and in legal representation. The Law Society data says that within five to 10 years there will be insufficient criminal duty solicitors in many regions. She has mentioned the review and mentioned more money, but what specific steps will she take to make sure that people have their right to be represented while being interviewed by the police?

Lucy Frazer: Doing a review and putting in £23 million are specific steps to ensure that we get better justice. I am very grateful to the Law Society, which the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall

(Mr Sharma) mentioned, because it is actively engaged in our review, as are the Bar Council and the Criminal Bar Association.

Janet Daby: It is really good to hear that the Law Society is having such an impact on the Government. However, the Law Society has also published research that shows that the criminal legal aid means test is preventing families living in poverty from accessing justice. Although the Government will eventually review this, the review will not conclude until 2020, and it will be even further down the line when any changes come into place. Will the Minister therefore commit to taking action now to ensure that vulnerable people are still able to access justice?

Lucy Frazer: I am very pleased that the hon. Lady has highlighted that we have already committed to doing a review of the threshold for legal aid across the board, not just in relation to criminal law but civil law as well. It is very important that we get that review right. Legal aid has not been updated for a number of years. We have committed to doing that, but not only that—we have already started the review.

Violence in Prisons

4. **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to tackle violence in prisons. [910421]

10. **Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of violence in prisons. [910427]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): I am sure that the whole House will join me in expressing our deep horror at the recent attack against a prison officer in Nottingham prison. It is completely horrifying to see this happen. It must not happen again. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to our prison officers for the work they do in very difficult circumstances keeping us safe. There are three main things we can do to stop this kind of thing happening again. We need to improve perimeter security, which means really searching people for weapons and drugs at the gate; we need to make sure that the conditions in the prison are decent and work; and, above all, we need to provide the training and support for prison officers to have the right kind of relationships with prisoners whereby things like this do not occur again.

Vicky Ford: My hon. Friend the Minister vowed that if prison violence did not decrease, he would resign. I, for one, think that we have seen too many members of the Government resign. Could he give us an update on his own ambitions to stay in post?

Rory Stewart: As some people in the House will be aware, I promised to reduce violence in 10 key challenge prisons over a 12-month period. At the moment, the figures are looking reasonably positive. In other words, it looks as though, in the majority of these prisons, violence is coming down so hon. Members may be in the unfortunate position of still having me at this Dispatch Box in a few months' time.

Alex Norris: As the Minister mentioned, on Sunday 14 April a prison officer at my local prison in Nottingham had his throat slashed with a razor by a prisoner in what his union calls a cowardly, unprovoked act. According to doctors, this young public servant—a brave man in his early 20s—came within millimetres of losing his life. Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to this prison officer and to his thousands of colleagues facing this sort of violence every day, and does he agree with the union—the Prison Officers Association—that this ought to be treated as an attempted murder?

Rory Stewart: I absolutely agree that these are extraordinary public servants. This is a horrifying and completely unacceptable act. We need to punish the person who did it, and we need to punish them properly. At the moment, the charge that is being brought forward carries the maximum life sentence, as it should, but there is more that we can do. That includes body-worn cameras, the rolling out of PAVA spray and ensuring we have enough officers on the landings, which is why I am pleased that we now have the highest number of prison officers at any date since 2012.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Would there not be less violence in our prisons if there was a relentless focus from the first day in prison on getting prisoners work on release? We could do that by combining training in prison with employer and college support on release.

Rory Stewart: This is not an either/or. We have to be confident and practical about doing two things at the same time. Controlling prisons—these include some quite dangerous individuals—involves serious measures on searching people for drugs and weapons, but it also involves treating people like humans and turning their lives around, because that is the way we protect the public from the misery of crime through reoffending when these individuals are released from prison.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): In the light of the recent disturbances among 16 and 17-year-olds at Feltham young offenders institution, is the Minister aware of the previous episodes of violence at the prison, which were attributed to the lack of education and training facilities, 23-hour confinement in cells and the mixing of remand and convicted prisoners? Why do lessons appear not to have been learned?

Rory Stewart: A lot of lessons have been learned since that initial event, but the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right; there was a very disturbing event two weeks ago. The basic challenge, as he will be aware, is getting the balance right between ensuring that people are motivated and focused on the regime and that there are high expectations around prisoners and prison officers. To some extent, it is like running a very difficult school, particularly when we are dealing with 16 to 18-year-olds. It is a mixture of being strict on the one hand and loving on the other that is the key to a good prison.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Does the Minister agree with his party's former long-serving Secretary of State, Sir Malcolm Rifkind—a self-confessed true believer in privatisation—who wrote recently in the *Financial Times*:

"The physical deprivation of a citizen's liberty should not be the responsibility of a private company or of its employees?"

Does the Minister accept that the renationalisation of HMP Birmingham heralds the end of his Government's failed prison privatisation agenda?

Rory Stewart: I respectfully disagree with Sir Malcolm on this issue. It was absolutely right to take Birmingham back in hand, because that prison was not performing properly. On the other hand, the same company is running some very good prisons in Oakwood, Altcourse and Parc. It is doing good things on family work and on technology. Private sector prisons are often among the safer local prisons in terms of assaults per 1,000. We are not ideological on this. The private sector can certainly play a role.

Welfare Benefits: Legal Advice

5. **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What assessment he has made of trends in the number of people able to access early legal advice for welfare benefits cases. [910422]

22. **Stephen Morgan** (Portsmouth South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of trends in the number of people able to access early legal advice for welfare benefits cases. [910448]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): In the most recent Legal Aid Agency civil tender, the number of offices providing legal aid services on welfare benefits increased by 188%. In February, we set out our legal support action plan, which focused on the importance of early legal support. We will be establishing a number of pilots in a range of areas of law to see how best we can support those in need. It is critical that welfare decisions are made right the first time, and we are working with the Department for Work and Pensions to help ensure that.

Paul Blomfield: I thank the Minister for that answer, but she will know that the number of people receiving legal aid to challenge benefit decisions fell from more than 91,000 in 2012-13 to fewer than 500 five years later, which was clearly the Government's plan. The Department's own figures show that while 28% of unrepresented claimants are successful on appeal, that figure jumps to 90% for those who have legal representation, so literally tens of thousands of people have lost out on moneys to which they were entitled. Does she agree that the Government should consider restoring legal aid for social security appeals, so that claimants can get the support they need to win the money they deserve?

Lucy Frazer: Legal aid is available in welfare cases on points of law to the upper tribunal and the higher courts. A wide variety of considerable support is also available from some fantastic third sector organisations. I visited a number of them recently, and they are doing an excellent job. As I mentioned, we are also looking in our legal aid action plan at how we can provide people with support early on in a variety of areas, which may include this area.

Stephen Morgan: Recent BBC research found that 1 million people live in areas with no legal aid provision for housing, with a further 15 million in areas with just one provider. Does the Minister not agree that only rogue landlords benefit from this situation?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Gentleman mentions housing. It is right that, across the country, some areas are quite sparsely populated, but people can always get advice on the telephone gateway. There are 134 housing and debt procurement areas, and as of 31 March 2019, there is at least one provider offering housing and debt services in all but five procurement areas. The Legal Aid Agency recently concluded a procurement process, and services in three of those areas will commence on 1 May. The agency is considering how to procure provision in the remaining two.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Government cuts to legal aid have left tens of thousands of welfare benefit claimants without the ability to appeal flawed DWP decisions. We continue to see harrowing stories of those who have suffered after such poor decisions. Those cuts left tens of thousands of tenants unable to take on lousy landlords, and left migrants unable to fight back against the Conservative party's hostile environment. Can the Minister explain why these vulnerable people are far too easily cast aside, while the private companies failing in our prison, probation and courts systems are too readily bailed out? Does this not sum up in whose interests the Conservative party governs?

Lucy Frazer: This party and this Government would like to support all people who need support, but we need to provide it in a way that is efficient, provides a good service and uses taxpayers' money well. That is why we set out in our legal aid support strategy a variety of pilots that we will hold to help people in a variety of areas of law—housing, immigration—and all these can be bid for. We are putting forward £5 million for people to develop and put in place technology provision, face-to-face support and other support for legal aid.

Richard Burgon: It is just not good enough because all too often the Government spin against legal aid, with talk of fat cat lawyers and unmeritorious claims, but the latest figures show that the number of not-for-profit providers, such as law centres, has fallen by nearly two thirds under this Government. Will the Minister follow Labour's lead and commit to funding a new generation of social welfare lawyers that can empower communities to battle against injustice and a new generation of law centres that can empower people to fight back against cruel Government policies?

Lucy Frazer: While the professions and those who provide support are incredibly important—that is why, as I mentioned earlier, we have put £23 million more into criminal legal aid professionals—we would like to focus on helping those who need that support. That is why we are focusing on our £5 million innovation fund to find out what sort of support people need and how best to provide that support. We recommend and hope to support bids from legal advice centres as well as from professionals.

Youth Justice System

6. **Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What steps he is taking to reform the youth justice system. [910423]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): Significant reform has been undertaken since 2010, and we remain committed to driving further

improvements. While fewer young people are committing crimes for the first time, with an 86% reduction in the number of young people entering the youth justice system for the first time, we still have more to do to break the cycle of reoffending. Working with youth offending teams in partnership is central to prevention, but for those who end up in custody, we believe our reforms to move to a secure school model will play a key role in reducing further offending.

Nigel Huddleston: The recent increase in knife crime has highlighted the very young age at which some of our most vulnerable young people get involved in crime. What steps is the Department taking to divert young people away from offending and reoffending?

Edward Argar: We work very closely with youth offending teams and youth offending services run by local authorities to help with that prevention. I pay tribute particularly to the team in Lewisham, whom I was lucky enough to visit the other day. We also work closely with the Department for Education on exclusions and the role they can play in causing offending behaviour.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Feltham young offenders institution has had a difficult recent history and problems with sustainability of management. Following the recent attack on prison officers, I am grateful to the Minister for how quickly the management, the Prison Officers Association and the Department responded.

It is increasingly clear that the growing violence to which young inmates are subject, and which they experience prior to prison, is presenting new challenges. Will the Minister join me in welcoming new projects that use sport—such as Tough Cricket in Feltham, which works with faith communities—to support young offenders in more positive activity and help to develop an alternative set of values?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her work following the incidents of violence that she has mentioned. Once again, I thank the Prison Officers Association for its constructive engagement, and our thoughts are with the welfare of the injured staff. She is absolutely right to highlight the importance of sport as one of the positive ways we can divert young people away from violence and offending behaviour.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Too many young people who get involved in crime have been failed by the education system or have special educational needs, which often go undiagnosed or are not coped with well by schools. What more can be done to ensure that young people do not fall foul of the system and end up with very few qualifications and very little hope for the future?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Central to tackling the problem is partnership working, not only with youth offending teams but with colleagues in the educational sphere. We are fully engaged with Edward Timpon's review of exclusions, and we are working very closely with the Department for Education on matters such as speech and language therapy, learning disabilities and other factors that can play a part.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The age and maturity of children is so important. The age of criminal responsibility here is 10 years, which is low; it is 14 years in Germany and 15 years in Italy. There was a 60% increase in the number of young offenders between 1996 and 2004. What has been done to reduce the number of young offenders?

Edward Argar: We have worked extremely hard across the Government, and with local authorities and other state and charity agencies, to drive down the level of offending. We have seen an 86% reduction in the number of young people coming into the criminal justice system for the first time, but there is more to do to break the cycle of reoffending for those who are already in the system, and that is what we are focused on.

Housing Cases: Legal Advice

8. **Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What assessment he has made of trends in the number of people able to access early legal advice for housing cases. [910425]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): Legal aid is available when someone is at risk of losing their home or seeking to address safety concerns that pose a serious risk of harm to the person or their family. In 2017-18, the Legal Aid Agency spent £28 million on housing matters, including £9 million on legal help for housing. We recognise that early support may well be helpful, and I have mentioned already a number of pilots and an innovation fund. We will also be piloting face-to-face advice in an area of social welfare law, which may possibly be in housing.

Bambos Charalambous: Labour has committed to restoring legal aid funding for early legal advice for housing, welfare benefits appeals and family law cases, helping hundreds of thousands of people. Why have the Government refused to do the same, despite evidence that to do so would actually save them money?

Lucy Frazer: There is already funding available, as I have mentioned. In 2017-18, we also spent £3.6 million on the housing possession court duty scheme—in other words, on-the-day advice. The Government want to ensure that people are helped early on, but also that we provide advice in the best way possible. That is why instead of just ploughing taxpayers' money back into traditional legal aid, we want to evaluate many different forms of provision of early legal support and see which is the best, and then we will take a decision on what support we want to give.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The Minister may well say that, but thousands of families up and down the country rely on citizens advice bureaux and law centres for help with a wide variety of problems. Even refugees rely on those centres. What is she going to do about properly funding those organisations? They cannot wait around for some Government review that might take place in the future. Will she deal with the matter urgently?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Gentleman mentioned immigration, and people can already get legal aid for asylum cases. We are committed to ensuring that people know when legal aid is available to them. We are going

to advertise when it is possible and undertake a programme to ensure that people know when legal aid can be claimed. In other areas where it is currently out of scope, we want to ensure that we provide it in the best way possible. In relation to housing advice, I should also mention that people can always get advice on the telephone gateway.

Leaving the EU: Legal System

9. Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What steps the Government plan to take to ensure that the UK legal system operates effectively after the UK leaves the EU. [910426]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): The UK and the EU have agreed the terms of an implementation period. If Parliament is able to support a deal, common rules will remain in place during that period. That will provide certainty to businesses and citizens. The UK and EU have also committed to explore a new agreement on family judicial co-operation and other related matters; ambitious arrangements for services and investment, including legal services; and a future security partnership. My Department continues to work to ensure we are in the best position to negotiate our priorities.

Gavin Newlands: The former Brexit Minister, the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) said at the Dispatch Box that a no-deal Brexit

“would not result in a reduction in mutual capability”—[*Official Report*, 20 March 2019; Vol. 656, c. 1077]—

on security and law enforcement co-operation.

However, the Solicitor General, when giving evidence to the Justice Committee, said:

“A no deal is deeply suboptimal when it comes to criminal justice”

and that

“we would lose the European arrest warrant”,

which

“raises all sorts of questions of delay and, frankly, potential denial of justice”.

Will the Justice Secretary tell me which Minister’s version of the post-Brexit future is accurate?

Mr Gauke: We are very clear that the best way forward is to reach a deal. That is what the Government are endeavouring to achieve and support from across the House would be quite helpful in delivering that.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Solicitor General’s evidence to the Justice Committee was indeed crystal clear. Does my right hon. Friend also agree that it is critical for civil justice co-operation that there should be a deal? None of the ambitious objectives for future collaboration would work if there is no deal. For example, mutual recognition and enforceability of judgments in civil and family law cases would fall away immediately in the event of no deal.

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is right to highlight these issues. We have made progress in our negotiations, particularly in the context of family law. It is to the advantage of citizens in the UK and the EU that a deal is reached, which will enable us to enforce judgments in

this area. Our ambitions are to go further and, in terms of the future framework, to make further progress on civil judicial co-operation.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): In thousands of instances, we are not able to deliver justice in this country unless we have a proper extradition agreement with other countries in the European Union. As I understand it, even if the withdrawal agreement were to go forward at some point, we will still have to operate as a third party outside the European arrest warrant. Relying on the 1957 treaties will not be enough, so what plans does the Secretary of State have to ensure we are able to maintain a proper extradition arrangement with other countries in the European Union?

Mr Gauke: The hon. Gentleman is correct to say that on leaving the European Union we will not have access to the European arrest warrant. We would wish to be able to do so, but there are difficulties. For example, Germany has a constitutional bar in this area. The Home Office continues to work with EU member states to try to find a way in which we can have as effective extradition and arrest warrant arrangements as possible.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Justice issues are, of course, largely devolved. EU initiatives such as Eurojust and the European arrest warrant are well utilised by Scottish prosecutors and are hugely valued by them. In the current Brexit talks between the UK Government and the Labour party, will the Secretary of State confirm what proposals regarding justice have been discussed and if the Scottish Government have been or will be consulted on these or any forthcoming proposals that may result from the talks between the Tories and the Labour party?

Mr Gauke: I am not going to comment specifically on those discussions. What I would say in the context of no-deal preparations is that, as I understand it, the Scottish Government have not allocated any of the money given to them for no-deal preparation on justice matters. Certainly, when it comes to the United Kingdom, we are doing everything we can to prepare for every eventuality.

Joanna Cherry: I can assure the Secretary of State that the Scottish Government’s no-deal planning is well advanced. The Justice Secretary’s Government recently opted into the Eurojust regulation. Eurojust plays a vital role in the fight against serious organised crime, particularly terrorism but also cyber-crime and child pornography. His Department said that opting in was necessary to ensure that the UK continues to work in line with our European partners in the lead-up to exit day and during the transition period. Will he tell us how many more justice opt-ins has he planned before Brexit takes place and will they feature in the Tory manifesto for the EU Parliament elections?

Mr Gauke: What I say to the hon. and learned Lady is that we want to work in a pragmatic way with the European Union, so that as we leave the EU, we continue to co-operate wherever we can to our mutual benefit. That does require us to reach a deal.

Access to Justice: Criminal Case Delays

11. **Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of delays in progressing criminal cases in the courts on access to justice. [910428]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): Unnecessary delays can always cause distress for all parties. Some cases are moving more quickly through the criminal courts, but due to the complexity of cases, impacts on the time that they take to reach courts are being realised. The Crown Prosecution Service and the police are driving change across the system through the national disclosure improvement plan, and we are working to reduce delays and improve the way cases are progressed through the system through better case management and transforming summary justice.

Kate Green: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer and I am aware of the work that is being done to improve disclosure processes, which both the Law Society and my local police tell me are still contributing to delayed and, in some cases, collapsed trials. What is her view of the Law Society's suggestion that different disclosure rules should apply in the magistrates courts and Crown courts, where the nature of the cases and the amount of disclosed but unused material differ greatly?

Lucy Frazer: Of course, the Attorney General has done a review in relation to disclosure more broadly. I am very happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss any ideas that she would like to put forward on those matters.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): Since 2016, payments to consultancies by Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service have shot up from £3 million to £20 million. The Government appear to think that expensive private consultants are the solution to all their problems, even in the face of spiralling costs. Does the Minister really believe that the way to increase access to justice is to hand over yet more public money to private consultants at a time when our courts are facing unprecedented cuts?

Lucy Frazer: We are in the process of a £1 billion court programme—one of the most ambitious across the world in relation to how we transform our justice system—and it is appropriate that we get the best and right advice to manage that process. Sometimes we find that it is cheaper to instruct experts than it is to develop that expertise internally, so we use consultants where appropriate.

Enforcement Agents: Regulation

12. **Emma Reynolds** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the regulation of enforcement agents. [910429]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): There is no excuse for aggressive tactics by bailiffs. I know that the hon. Lady has worked very hard to highlight the issues that have occurred in her constituency, and I was very grateful for her contribution

to a recent Westminster Hall debate. She will know that we have undertaken a call for evidence, which addresses the regulation of the industry. Recently, we were very pleased to see the report of the Justice Committee, and we will respond both to the call for evidence and the Justice Committee's report in the summer.

Emma Reynolds: I thank the Minister for that answer. It is unacceptable that many people, including the disabled constituent of mine she referred to, have suffered at the hands of aggressive bailiffs, who seem to think that they are above the law. Debt collectors and debt advice charities are regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority, but bailiffs are an anomaly in all this and do not have independent regulation. I hear what she says about the timetable, but when the Government do respond to the call for evidence and the Justice Committee report, will that include plans for an independent regulator of bailiffs?

Lucy Frazer: As the hon. Lady will know, regulation is one of the questions that we are asking in the call for evidence. We will look at the evidence—we have had quite a lot of evidence submitted—and we will be responding to that point about regulation. The Justice Committee made a number of interesting recommendations and put forward some proposals, and we will of course look at those in due course as well.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I rise as co-chair of the justice unions cross-party group. The number of public sector civilian enforcement officers is less than half what it was four years ago, while private bailiff firms receive millions from the taxpayer every year, and the Government recently admitted wasting almost half a million pounds on their cancelled private bailiff procurement process. When will they admit that privatisation is not worth it and invest instead in public staff?

Lucy Frazer: Sometimes it is appropriate for the public sector to provide services; sometimes the private sector does it just as well, and sometimes better. It is appropriate to ensure that in all services we get the best service, not dictate who provides those services.

Living Wage

13. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): If he will make his policy to pay officials in his Department the living wage. [910430]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): We believe very strongly that we need to both provide decent wages for people and grow the economy and make sure we have employment, which is why we have undertaken to provide a living wage to all our direct employees, and also to our third-party employees, but we have done so—and this is where I suspect the disagreement between me and the hon. Lady lies—at a level that has led to us having the highest rates of employment on record.

Diana Johnson: Just to be clear, will the Minister state that the people who clean his offices and the security guards who keep him safe in his role as a Minister will receive the living wage, meaning that his Department's name, the Ministry of Justice, is accurate?

Rory Stewart: Yes, I absolutely can confirm that. In April, their wages will go from £7.83 to £8.21 an hour, which is the national living wage.

Prison Officer Safety

14. **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What progress he has made on improving the safety of prison officers. [910431]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): Protecting our prison officers is vital to having safe prisons. In order to do this, we have doubled the maximum sentence for assaulting a prison officer; we are introducing body-worn cameras; we are rolling out PAVA spray; and we are ensuring, through the training and support we provide for prison officers and the work we do on drugs, that we keep our prisons safe.

Daniel Kawczynski: A key factor in the safety of prison officers is the number of these professionals in each prison. In an earlier response, the Minister said that the number was at a higher level than in any year since 2012. What is the number of prison officers at the moment and what plans does he have to increase the number of these professionals over the next 12 months?

Rory Stewart: We now have 4,300 additional prison officers, which is the highest level since 2012.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): What about 2010?

Rory Stewart: We have fewer officers than in 2010. There was a reduction from 2010 to 2012, but we have now turned that around, with the 4,300 extra officers, meaning we can now roll out the key worker programme, which is central, as it means we have the ratios we need to have one prison officer allied with four prisoners to make sure we deliver the work on rehabilitation.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The number of officers is only one part of the equation. Will the Minister increase the almost poverty pay of those in the lowest-paid jobs in the Prison Service and the courts?

Rory Stewart: We have been looking at this very carefully, and the public sector pay review body is currently gathering evidence on the situation. We owe a huge debt of obligation to our prison officers and we have to think about their salaries. We also have to balance that with making sure our resources go into improving the physical fabric of these buildings and having the right security infrastructure and the right programming in place. Looking at the resources as a whole, we think we have got the balance right, but we will listen to the public sector pay review body.

Child Sexual Abuse Victims

15. **Andrew Griffiths** (Burton) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that the criminal justice system adequately supports victims of child sexual abuse. [910432]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): We are determined to ensure that support is in place for all victims of child sexual abuse. In particular, a range of special measures is available in court cases to assist and support victims of child sexual

abuse to give their best evidence in criminal proceedings, including the provision of evidence via video links, recorded evidence-in-chief, screens around the witness box and access to an independent sexual violence adviser.

Andrew Griffiths: I recognise the good work done to support victims of child sexual abuse, but access to compensation is key to that. The Minister will know that in 2017, of the 6,861 cases in which someone was found guilty of child sexual abuse, in only 26 was a criminal compensation order awarded. That is 0.4%. Will he work with me and others in the House to ensure we get victims of child sexual abuse the compensation they deserve?

Edward Argar: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the very powerful and, indeed, very personal speech that he made recently when presenting a ten-minute rule Bill on this subject. I should be happy to meet him, with my officials, to discuss this further.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Given that so many victims of child sexual abuse have spoken out about their horrendous experiences through the family courts, what consideration is being given to a full inquiry into the treatment in those courts of women and girls who have suffered domestic abuse and violence?

Edward Argar: I know that the hon. Lady speaks about this subject with passion and knowledge, and that she has championed a number of those who have suffered in the past. She has highlighted a very important point. As she will know, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer), and I—along with members of the judiciary and others—are looking closely into what can be done to ensure that the family courts themselves continue to ensure that the voices of victims of child sexual abuse are heard, and that they are responded to appropriately.

Topical Questions

T1. [910433] **Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): On 12 April, the Voyeurism (Offences) Act 2019 came into effect. It criminalises the reprehensible behaviour known as upskirting. The offences specified in the Act are framed in clear and focused terms to ensure that that disturbing practice is tackled robustly wherever it occurs, so that victims can be confident that their complaints will be taken seriously. I thank Gina Martin for leading the campaign, and I thank all Members on both sides of the House who supported this law. Together, we have sent a clear message to those who think that they can get away with such invasive and unacceptable behaviour: it will not be tolerated.

Marsha De Cordova: A staggering 72% of decisions on personal independence payments and 65% of decisions on employment and support allowance are overturned in the first-tier tribunal. That means that not only are ill and disabled people having to fight for the social security support to which they are entitled, but a great deal of money is being wasted on the administration of appeal

tribunals. May I ask the Secretary of State how much is being spent on the administration of PIP and ESA tribunals? If those figures are not recorded, will he agree to start producing them?

Mr Gauke: If I remember correctly, only 8% of awards are challenged in tribunals. As for the total cost, I will happily write to the hon. Lady providing the details.

T5. [910437] Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What steps is the Minister taking across Government to spread the successful best practice of organisations such as Care after Combat, which is doing brilliant work with veterans in prisons and driving down reoffending?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): I know that my hon. Friend is a committed supporter of Care after Combat. Indeed, so committed is he that he will be running the London marathon next weekend in aid of the organisation, and I gather that all sponsorship is welcome.

As a member of the ministerial covenant and veterans board, I am happy to confirm that the Government's new strategy refers explicitly to veterans in the justice system. We incorporate a wide range of military and non-military charities in our work on prisons and probation, including SSAFA, the Royal British Legion and, of course, Care after Combat, and we encourage the sharing of best practice on what works.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Climate change is now receiving the public attention that it merits. Greta Thunberg is in the House today, and my party pays tribute to her work. All too often, however, our justice system restricts the ability of citizens to take legal action against environmentally damaging decisions. Last month, the United Nations criticised the Government's failure to meet their international obligations relating to access to justice in environmental matters.

Labour's 2017 manifesto proposed the establishment of a new type of environmental tribunal with simplified procedures so that citizens would have alternatives to prohibitively expensive judicial reviews. Will the Government follow Labour's lead, and commit themselves to the establishment of a tribunal that would empower people to use our legal system to protect our shared environment?

Mr Gauke: I am not sure that setting up a new tribunal is necessarily the right response to this particular issue, but of course we want to do everything we can to ensure that the law—including the Government's ambitious climate change policies—is properly enforced.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Given that the Prisons (Interference with Wireless Telegraphy) Act 2018 became law last year to block mobile phone signals in prisons, could the Minister update us on the progress that has been made on introducing the technology across the prisons estate?

Mr Gauke: I thank my hon. Friend for the work she did in bringing the Bill through and turning it into an Act. It is an important piece of legislation, which extends our powers to work alongside network providers. We are taking significant steps in dealing with the security threat posed by mobile phones. We have to prevent them from getting into prisons. We have to use detection

methods to find them and stop them working, and we are making advances on that. We also need to exploit the data that is held on them.

T2. [910434] Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I went to prison last week—to Downview Prison, which is a women's prison—for the Sycamore Tree course on restorative justice. Does the Minister agree that restorative justice programmes of this nature, and also those run by the Chris Donovan Trust, can have a real impact on reoffending rates and provide some comfort to victims who want to go on them by helping them to recover from a crime?

Edward Argar: Having also recently visited Downview, I know what the right hon. Gentleman is talking about, and I fully agree that restorative justice and the work of charities such as the Sycamore Tree project can have a vital role to play in making our prisons safer and more rehabilitative. Restorative approaches are already used across the youth estate and, as the right hon. Gentleman highlighted, in a number of other prisons. They have real benefits, in terms of both defusing conflict and repairing harm after an incident in prison.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I welcome the fact that a family impact test on the Government's proposed divorce law changes has been published, but what is the justification for the Government cherry-picking not just public opinion, which, according to the responses to their own consultation, is 80% against the proposed changes, but the evidence they rely on, with Ministers seeming to ignore evidence that there will be an immediate spike in divorce rates, which will impact negatively on the families involved?

Mr Gauke: I have to disagree with my hon. Friend on this point. It is true that there was a surge of submissions to our consultation in the last couple of weeks, but the fact is that a YouGov poll on the day the proposals were set out suggested 73% support for them. Indeed, we have had support from the Law Society, Resolution, the Family Law Bar Association, Sir Paul Coleridge—the chair of the Marriage Foundation—Relate and National Family Mediation. This reform will help families and ensure that the divorce process is less acrimonious.

T3. [910435] Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Do the Government have any plans to change the legal system to protect against gender targeting of advertising towards children and teenagers?

Mr Gauke: We will certainly look at any proposals on this front. We do not, at the moment, have any plans, but I will certainly look at any proposals the hon. Lady might have.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I warmly welcome the commitment by the UK Government to recruit 2,500 more prison officers, because prison officers in Scotland have spoken out about the fact that the system there is at breaking point. Rising numbers have led to overcrowding in my local prison, HMP Perth, which was recently reported to rely heavily on inexperienced agency and bank nurses due to staffing shortages. Does the Minister agree that the Scottish Government need to make a similar commitment to restore order in our prison service?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is a doughty defender of the interests of her constituents. As she points out, this is a matter for the Scottish Government, but I am more than happy to share our experience with the Scottish Government if that would be helpful.

T4. [910436] **Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Will Ministers make a commitment today that the Domestic Abuse Bill will include guaranteed access to special measures in courts for survivors of domestic abuse and that that will apply equally across all our court systems and our entire courts estate?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. As he will be aware, we have brought forward the draft Domestic Abuse Bill, which we are currently considering in the Joint Committee. We would very much welcome any reflections he has as part of that process before we draft definitive legislation to bring forward to the House.

Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): During an earlier answer, my hon. Friend the Prisons Minister mentioned the roll-out of PAVA spray. When will it be completed?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): I am delighted to be able to remind the House that PAVA spray is an incapacitating spray and that it can be safer, when dealing with acts of extreme violence, to use a spray rather than pulling out a baton or rolling around with someone on the ground. We need to use these sprays in a moderate, controlled fashion, but they can reduce extreme violence in prisons and protect our prison officers, so we are proud to be rolling them out.

T6. [910438] **Mr Stephen Hepburn** (Jarrow) (Lab): In South Tyneside, disabled claimants are having to wait over 12 months for a tribunal, and 80% of those appeals are successful. What discussions have the Minister and the Department had with the Department for Work and Pensions about this flawed decision making?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): I am happy to answer the hon. Gentleman's question. I met the previous Minister for Disabled People twice to talk about how the DWP can get decisions right first time, and I have already spoken to the new Minister to follow up on those discussions. There were 3.8 million decisions made on the personal independence payment in the last year, of which only 10% were appealed and only 5% overturned. However, it is absolutely fundamental that the decisions should be got right first time and that only those that are more questionable should come through the system.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Ah, a Lincolnshire knight, and an illustrious member of the Privy Council to boot—we are doubly blessed. I call Sir Edward Leigh.

Sir Edward Leigh: Having pissed off half our supporters by botching Brexit, why are we now irritating the other half with an extreme liberal social agenda? Every single study, including the Harvard Law reform and the Margaret Brinig studies, shows that it is poor, vulnerable and

dispossessed children who suffer most from divorce. Will my right hon. Friend at least accept that if he makes something easier, it will happen more often?

Mr Gauke: The evidence on no-fault divorce is that in a steady state there is not a higher rate of divorce than otherwise. It is also the case that the current fault-based approach to divorce results in divorces that are going to happen anyway being more acrimonious than they would otherwise have been. That is why I believe that it is right that we make this reform.

T7. [910440] **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Health Minister will soon be meeting the parents in Hull affected by the baby ashes scandal, including mothers who do not know how their babies' bodies were transported from hospital with no coffin, no funeral director and no funeral service for the family. Does this not yet again show the need for the local independent inquiry that is still being sought by those parents, and was it not unwise for the Ministry of Justice to accept the assurances of Hull City Council that the parents' concerns had all been dealt with, without asking the parents?

Mr Gauke: The hon. Lady raises an important and sensitive point, and I would be happy to meet her to discuss the issue.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Education is at the very heart of rehabilitation. What are Ministers doing to ensure that people have access to education and the jobs they need when they leave prison?

Rory Stewart: The big change that has been introduced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is to ensure that education in prison is linked to employment. This involves talking to the local job market, ensuring that we provide the skills that match that market and, above all, ensuring that we have safe, decent prisons so that we can remove the prisoners from their cells and into work and education so that we can get them into jobs. That reduces reoffending by an average of 7%.

T8. [910451] **David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): How are we getting on with securing the 26 prisoner transfer agreements that are currently in place with the European Union to ensure that they are in place at the end of this year?

Rory Stewart: I am delighted that Labour Members are working with us to try to get a good Brexit deal in place, and if we can get such a deal, we will be able to continue through the transition period. In a no-deal situation, however, it will become significantly more difficult because we will have to fall back on older and more cumbersome ways of moving prisoners. That would not be good for us or for Europe.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Despite the wilful destruction of thousands of small businesses by their own bank, no senior executive has ever been held to account. Will the Minister update the House on the Government's proposals to bring forward legislation to make failure to prevent fraud a corporate criminal offence?

Lucy Frazer: Of course, when people suffer economic crime it is as devastating for them as it is with any other crime. As my hon. Friend will know, we put out a call for evidence and we are looking carefully at the responses across the Departments. We will be responding in due course.

T9. [910452] Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): The number of recorded child sexual abuse offences increased by 178% between March 2007 and March 2017. Can the Minister explain how his Government's substantial cuts to the MOJ, the CPS and, of course, the police have helped victims achieve justice?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. I know that she has a sustained interest in this area. She will be aware that we increased funding for specialist rape and sexual abuse support services, including for child sexual abuse, from April this year. That means a 10% increase in funding, a move to three-year rather than annual settlements, and support for 96 centres across England and Wales—the highest number that the MOJ has ever funded—ensuring that support services are available in each of the police and crime commissioner areas.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The law regarding the sentencing of offenders has grown piecemeal and become ever more complex, even for experienced judges and practitioners. Bearing that in mind and noting that comparatively uncontroversial legislation is being sought for a future Queen's Speech, would not paving legislation for the Law Commission's sentencing code consolidation Bill absolutely fit the bill?

Mr Gauke: The Chair of the Justice Committee makes a good point. There is cross-party support on the matter, and I hope that we can make progress in the not-too-distant future.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): In 2010, the then Secretary of State for Justice said that he wanted to examine what could be done to use technology more effectively so that fewer people have physically to attend court for routine purposes. Nine years on, however, this Government have admitted to not collecting information on how many times video links break down; nor have they published the business case for their modernisation programme. Will Ministers commit to undertaking that research before proceeding with any more closures or cuts to our courts?

Lucy Frazer: There are a number of developments relating to the use of technology to ensure that people do not have to attend court or fill in lengthy, unwieldy documentation. People can now apply for divorce and for probate online, and users can be updated about social security claims through their mobile phone. We piloted online tax tribunal hearings, which were extremely effective, and we are now piloting further video hearings in the civil courts.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Of the 9,000 foreign national prisoners in our jails, 760 are from Albania. What are we doing to negotiate a compulsory prisoner transfer agreement with Albania?

Rory Stewart: My hon. Friend has raised this matter several times, and I recently met with the Albanian Minister of Justice. It is difficult to return prisoners to Albania. We are ahead of the Italians and the Greeks, but we still have a lot more to do. The problem is that

the host country needs to receive these prisoners, so we cannot transfer prisoners in a compulsory fashion. I assure my hon. Friend, because he has asked this question in the past, that a no-deal Brexit will make such prisoner transfers not easier, but more difficult.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Three of the four men convicted of killing my constituent Jacqueline Wileman were on probation at the time of her death. Does the Minister recognise that that demonstrates the devastating failure of the privatised probation system? Will he meet with me to discuss both the case and how to prevent similar deaths, including by removing the maximum sentence for death by dangerous driving?

Rory Stewart: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her campaigning on this issue. This was a tragic case involving death by dangerous driving, and the individuals have now received sentences of between 10 and 13 and a half years for the crime. We fully support the idea that the maximum sentence for causing death by dangerous driving should be increased up to a life sentence, but we still need to maintain a basic distinction in law between people who intend to commit murder and people whose actions lead to the horrible situation of loss of life through gross negligence and carelessness. We support the idea, and I will meet the hon. Lady.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I have met many excellent prison officers who serve at HMP Long Lartin in my constituency and elsewhere, but way too many of them seem to leave to pursue careers elsewhere. What more can be done to retain more prison officers?

Rory Stewart: In order to retain people in the job, we need to make sure that we have the right salary rates and that our prisons are safer. However, we also need to make sure that people feel motivated and that their morale is good, which is one of the reasons why the training and support packages we have introduced should transform retention rates for prison staff.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Two Members have been standing for some time, and I am keen to accommodate them. I feel sure they will agree that a sentence each seems fair.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Street & Arrow is a social enterprise street food project and is part of Scotland's violence reduction unit. It hires people with convictions for 12 months, mentors them and provides them with wraparound support. Does the Minister agree that such support is the best way to reduce reoffending?

Rory Stewart: Obviously I must pay tribute to the extraordinary achievements, particularly in Glasgow, on reducing violence. On my recent visit to the United States, I also picked up things we could do to work with ex-gang members to interrupt the cycle of violence and have a rapid impact, but we can certainly learn from Scotland on this issue.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. We must move on.

Climate Action and Extinction Rebellion

3.41 pm

Mr Speaker: Before I call the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) to ask his urgent question, I want, I hope on behalf of all colleagues across the House, to welcome Greta Thunberg, an enthusiastic and dedicated environmental campaigner who is with us today.

I, as Speaker, am very conscious that there are different views on these matters and different views on the matter of tactics in campaigning, but I think, across the House, we all believe in encouraging young people to stand up and speak up, to say what they think and to make their concerns known, so it was a pleasure for me, among other colleagues, to welcome Greta this morning. Greta, it was a pleasure to meet you, and I hope you enjoy listening to these exchanges.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth if she will make a statement on climate action and Extinction Rebellion.

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): I hope not to try the patience of the House—I will be making a further statement on this topic later this afternoon—but I want to take this opportunity to join you, Mr Speaker, in welcoming Ms Thunberg and her team to the United Kingdom Parliament. We tried very hard to meet her personally but, despite the best efforts of our diaries, we could not do it. I know she has met many Members of the House of Commons today, including my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Watching the protests over the past few days, both here and globally, has raised slightly mixed emotions in me. First, there is excitement that the conversations that many of us were having about climate change 30 years ago are finally moving from niche to mainstream. The question is not “Why act?” but “How fast can we act?”

Secondly, we completely understand the brilliant scientific evidence base, the motivation and the commitment that are driving people across the world to make their views known, but I worry that many of the messages we are hearing ignore the progress that is being made and, as such, make people fearful for the future, rather than hopeful.

Here in the UK, thanks to excellent cross-party working, we were the first country in the world to pass a climate change Act. We have led the world in reducing the carbon intensity of our economy over the past 40 years. We have made huge progress on plastics-free activity. Last month, renewables contributed over 40% of our electricity supply. In fact, just this last weekend we had our longest ever period of no coal contributing to electricity generation in the UK; and we now have more than 400,000 people working in the low-carbon economy.

Of course we share the desire to raise this country's ambition, which is why we asked our independent Committee on Climate Change to advise us on how best to reach our net zero target—we were the first industrialised country to ask for that advice. I am also pleased to welcome the cross-party support for our bid to host the crucial United Nations climate change talks next year.

I have to say that, although the protests have been respectful and good natured, they have caused disruption for many hundreds of thousands of hard-working Londoners, and they have required a heavy policing presence. I thank the police—I think we should all agree on that—for their professionalism and for their proportionate response, especially over the holiday weekend.

We know we need to continue and accelerate the decarbonisation of our economy, across all aspects of activity, and crucially to help other countries around the world, especially those not at the same stage of economic development as us. That is going to require a broad-based, engaged, informed debate to deliver the low-carbon progress we need; this must be fair, just and progressive, and able to be shared. I am pleased to say that our progress to date has been supported by all political parties, and I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman for his great leadership and continued support in this area. Our work has been supported by all political parties in the UK, and I hope we can continue to work together to drive the changes we must make in order to secure our future. We have to secure the future of planet A, because there is no planet B.

Edward Miliband: I thank the Minister for her reply.

People can believe that the tactics of Extinction Rebellion are right or wrong—the Minister obviously believes they are wrong—but the demonstrators are certainly not wrong about the failure of politics to do anything like what is necessary to fight climate change: they are right. She said in her reply that we have made progress as a country, and I thank her for what she said about me, but the truth is that the planet is warming far faster than we are acting. Even the path-breaking Paris commitments will take us way beyond the disaster of 2°C of warming, as the Minister knows. The truth is that climate change is not some theoretical future prospect; it is with us here and now, with wildfires, droughts and floods. We have been warned by the scientists: it will get far worse if we do not act with much greater urgency. In these circumstances, it is no wonder people are disrupting the traffic and schoolchildren are striking. The response from Government cannot simply be to restore order and say they are doing a good job. The only credible answer of democratic politics in response to these protests is to admit that we need to raise our game and show we can act.

May I therefore ask the Minister today to commit to the following four actions as a down-payment on what is necessary? First, will she seek to persuade the Prime Minister to declare a climate emergency, as many local authorities have done, in order to focus minds across Government on the centrality of this issue to every Department, not just hers? Goodness knows that is necessary, because we know from the figures that came out just before Easter that the Government are woefully behind in meeting the fourth and fifth carbon budgets covering the next decade.

Secondly, the Minister is to be commended for asking the Committee on Climate Change to recommend a date when the UK will need to hit zero emissions, which it will do next week, but these recommendations cannot be allowed to get buried in Whitehall. So will she now commit to responding formally to them before the summer recess? Only by Britain showing world leadership again, quickly, can we hope to persuade other countries to act.

Thirdly, will the Minister commit to working on the delivery of a British green new deal at scale, which could have the effect of giving work to hundreds of thousands of people across our country, for example, in retrofitting buildings, and showing beyond doubt that economic justice and climate justice go together?

Fourthly and finally, will she take up the idea of Extinction Rebellion and others to involve the public in these discussions about both the threat of climate change and the action necessary—and, yes, the trade-offs—with a process of citizen deliberation? For too long—this covers both parties—people have been shut out of the climate debate and made to feel powerless. That must change.

I wish to make one final point. Greta Thunberg, who is with us today in the Public Gallery, said this:

“I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is.”

She is right. If we do not act, people will say in the future, “You knew the facts, but you did not care enough.” We will be known as the generations with the knowledge of what was to come but without the will or imagination to prevent it. We will be condemned, and rightly so. The right response to rebellion on our streets is to produce a revolution in climate leadership, and the time for action is now.

Claire Perry: In the right hon. Gentleman’s remarks we hear the passion that he has brought to this portfolio for many years, and I share that passion. Let me correct him: I do not disagree with the protests. I disagree with some of the methods, but certainly not with the message. As I have said to him before, I think that just a few years previously he and I would have been out there ourselves carrying placards.

Let me pick up on the challenges the right hon. Gentleman talked about. He is right to acknowledge that the Government were bold to ask for advice on a net zero economy—we are the first industrialised economy to do so. I will consider that advice carefully and proportionally and, crucially, I will work out how we are going to pay for it. He will know from his time in his climate change role that the Committee on Climate Change was unable to recommend a net zero target when previously we asked for that advice, because the committee did not believe it could be done cost-effectively or, indeed, that we had the technology. It is right that we give that work the focus that it requires.

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that we need to take a whole-of-Government approach. I was really pleased to see the Chancellor stand up and make the first ever green financial statement, in which he brought forward some extremely ambitious programmes to ensure that from 2025 no new homes will be built in this country that rely on fossil-fuel heating.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the declaration of a climate emergency. The thing is, I do not know what that would entail. I could stand here and say, “I believe there is a climate emergency,” and he could say that, too. Many of our local councils, including my own council in Wiltshire, have done that. The question is: what are we going to do about it? That is why we should be proud of the fact that we have the most detailed proposals for how we will hit our carbon budgets.

I will answer the right hon. Gentleman’s point about carbon budgets in a moment, but he needs to look, as I am sure he has, at what other Governments have done. It is the easiest thing in the world for a politician to stand up and say, “I’m going to do this and I’m going to set these targets,” knowing that they will be dead and buried before the targets have to be met. The responsible thing to do is to put in place legislation, as the right hon. Gentleman did, to bind every successive Minister who comes along to meet the budgets, or to explain why they are not met, and to hold every future Government’s feet to the fire—as he says, it often is a fire—in respect of how we deliver on our ambition.

The right hon. Gentleman made a point about carbon budgets. He will know that we are not woefully far off: we are at 95% and 93% of the way to being where we need to be to meet the budgets that end in seven and 12 years. And that is without even costing or calculating the carbon savings that we will have from the homes changes we have made. This is an ongoing process and we are absolutely committed to delivering.

I take the right hon. Gentleman’s point about citizens’ assemblies. The wonderful thing is that everybody can talk about this issue. A national conversation is now happening. We have to engage with citizens, businesses, politicians, local authorities, bill payers and taxpayers—with everybody—because there is not one single thing that will move the dial. We have to change everything, do it rapidly and do it in a way such that no future Government can wriggle out of their responsibilities.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): In this policy area, it is most important that everything is based on the best possible science. I am sure we would all agree about that. What is the Government’s view on the likely changes in water-vapour levels and cloud cover, and on levels of solar radiation? Those are also important matters.

Claire Perry: My right hon. Friend is right. As a newly appointed fellow of the Royal Geographical Society—I had to get that in there—he will know that we have some of the best climate modelling in the world. The problem we have is that the planet is an unbelievably complicated ecosystem. We are finding some feedback loops that we did not even realise about: for example, what happens to the Thwaites glacier in Antarctica could have a meaningful impact on our sea levels immediately. We have the best scientific evidence base we have ever had. The 1.5° report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was based on the best peer-reviewed science the world has ever seen. We have the message from our scientists; we must now continue to act.

Mr Speaker: Who is the newly appointed fellow of the Royal Geographical Society—the right hon. Lady or the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood)?

Claire Perry: That would be me, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Oh, many congratulations to the right hon. Lady.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): She’s blowing her own trumpet!

Mr Speaker: Well, if she does not blow it, it may well be that nobody else will blow the trumpet. It is perfectly right that we offer her the warmest congratulations on that new acknowledgement.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): I commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) for his timely question.

The right to protest is one of the foundations of our freedom. From the Chartists to the suffragettes, and from the civil rights movement to the anti-apartheid campaign, all those victories were won by citizens uniting against injustice and making their voice heard. Extinction Rebellion and the school climate strikers are doing just that. I, too, thank the police for the way they have policed the demonstrations: on the whole, they have done so with good humour. I was delighted to meet the demonstrators at Marble Arch yesterday and I thank them for speaking the truth.

Many of us listened to Greta Thunberg earlier today. She spoke about truth—the truth that we are in the midst of an ecological and climate emergency. She also spoke about our refusal—our fear—to acknowledge the truth that stopping this catastrophe requires a complete rethink in the way we run our economy, so that GDP growth is no longer the touchstone. We are on track for catastrophic levels of global warming, yet in the UK we pride ourselves on the 40% reduction in emissions that we say we have achieved on 1990 levels, while achieving a 72% increase in GDP. But the truth is out there. Schoolchildren are teaching it to us. Those figures do not include aviation or shipping emissions. They do not include our imports, our exports and they have largely come from the clean power directive in the European Union, which forced us to announce an end to coal-fired power stations. That is why thousands of our schoolchildren are on climate strike: they know that we are not acting with the speed and seriousness that the climate emergency demands.

Therefore, I ask the Minister: will she listen to the voice of Extinction Rebellion and of our own children? I echo the call from my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North: will she join my party in declaring a national environmental and climate emergency and commit to bringing forward the Government's response to the Committee on Climate Change's recommendations, which will be published shortly, to achieve net zero urgently? Will she do more to engage with the public in tackling the climate crisis, because it is clear that our citizens need to be in the driving seat for a sustainable future? Will she work with Treasury colleagues and the Bank of England to address what Mark Carney has identified as climate-related financial risks and make the emissions curve and natural capital the key elements of our future economic viability? We know that, however disruptive the climate demonstrations may have been in this past few weeks to businesses, they pale into insignificance against the capacity of climate disasters to wipe out human prosperity and human life itself.

Claire Perry: I just want to pick up on a couple of factual points. First, I entirely share the hon. Gentleman's commitment to the right to protest. It is a wonderful, wonderful freedom that we have and one that we should use judiciously. I know that he and I have both done so.

On the point about coal, it is not the case that other countries across the EU are phasing out coal. In fact, when I was at the climate change talks in Bonn, it was shocking to see the barges of dirty Ruhr coal floating down the Rhine because Germany took an ideological decision to phase out nuclear power. For us to get to zero now—it will be zero completely by 2025—is a huge achievement for an island that is built on coal and surrounded by fish and that had 40% of its energy generation coming from coal in 2010 when I was elected. That has been done not by the climate directive, but by unilateral policy decisions taken by the coalition Government and continued by my Government. That is how we will continue to lead the world—by taking tough decisions, hopefully with cross-party support, to make the differences that we need but that we can then accelerate around the world. Our leadership on coal has enabled me and my counterpart in Canada to set up the global Powering Past Coal Alliance—an alliance of 80-plus countries, cities and companies that have all committed to phase out coal thanks to the UK's leadership.

I also want to reassure the hon. Gentleman. He made a brilliant point about natural capital accounting, which will be formal Government policy by 2020. I join him in paying tribute to the work of the Bank of England and the Governor, Mark Carney, who have identified the challenge for investors and companies, and indeed for regulators, if there is not proper accounting for climate risk disclosure—again, an area where we have continued to innovate and lead the world.

I am delighted to share many of the points that the hon. Gentleman made, but I do believe fundamentally that a market-based economy that delivers rapidly reducing costs of technology and innovation—the sort of innovation that has seen the price of offshore wind tumble over the last two years—is the way to go. I will look with great interest at the advice that we get from the Committee on Climate Change and act as soon as is proportionate and possible.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): It is not just the protesters on the streets or the children coming to our offices who are raising this matter; this issue is being talked of around kitchen tables, among families whom we represent. The worst way to reflect those concerns—whoever they are from—would be for our Opposition parties to say, “The Government are not doing enough” and for us to say, “Look at all the things we're doing.” I therefore absolutely concur with the Minister's cross-party consensus on this matter. Does she agree that we should applaud the fact that this country is not like the United States, where this is a polarised political issue? This is an issue on which we, as a Parliament working together, can actually move the dial. The Minister has made some really good points, as have the Opposition. Does she agree that, on this issue, we really can reflect the needs and wishes of the people out there through the consensual nature of our debate?

Claire Perry: I very much thank my right hon. Friend for his work as a Minister, particularly on waterways and rivers. This issue is not simply about the air or the biosphere. It is about the whole planet—all the ecosystems working together. He made an incredible amount of progress with that portfolio. Of course he is right. People look at us and see us filling this place with hot

air over the three-year forward look regarding our relationship with the European Union, and then they see this place when we are debating these portfolios. In my time as a Minister, this is the fullest I have ever seen the Chamber when we have debated these matters. *[Interruption.]* Well, there have been very few Members on the Opposition Benches previously as well. People are right to look at us and say, “What are you going to do, working together across parties?” and to ask what role organisations such as the Youth Parliament can play—that is, whether there are organisations and assemblies which already include young people that can help us to make progress with the issue.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): We welcome the fact that the Extinction Rebellion protests have largely been peaceful and non-violent in nature, and that so many of those protesting have been young, concerned activists, including Greta Thunberg from Sweden and Holly Gillibrand, whom I met today and who has led climate action protests in her home town of Fort William in Scotland; I welcome both of them here today. Along with other young activists, they have travelled here to meet the leaders of the Opposition parties to discuss how to respond to climate change. Given that the Prime Minister has yet to meet these young adults, will she take the time this week to discuss this vital issue with them? After all, it is our collective responsibility and the UK Government must show leadership.

Scotland continues to outperform the UK and is world-leading in its low-carbon transition, with figures showing that emissions in Scotland are down 49% since 1990, as opposed to 38% for the UK as a whole. Will the Minister join me in welcoming these figures from Scotland, and will she commit to increased, faster and deeper efforts by her Government to help the UK’s figures to come into line with Scotland’s?

Claire Perry: The good news is that all the devolved Administrations and the Westminster Government have worked incredibly hard on the low-carbon transition. It is a joint project; we calculate on a joint account. Of course, the taxpayer subsidies that have gone into so much of the energy generation system, helping Scotland with its transition, have come from UK taxpayers and UK tax policy.

I cannot speak for the diary of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, but I am always delighted to meet groups of people, as is the Environment Minister. As I have said, we worked really hard today to try to get our diaries to mesh with the plans of the groups coming here and we offered various meetings, but apparently they were not available at those times. It is a total pleasure to meet people to discuss these issues. Like so many other Members, I am sure, I only have to go home to hear my own children telling me what more we need to do and asking whether they should take part in the protests. I say to them, “Wouldn’t it just be easier to tell mum what you want over a cup of tea?” but it is more fun for them to protest. We genuinely have to listen and move on this issue, and we will continue to do so.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): It is a testament to my constituents—young, old, of no religion, of any religion, whatever shape and size—that they have come to me about the environment. This is an overridingly

important issue for everybody. Sustainability should be at the heart of every Government Department, and cross-party should be the name of the game. If we can do one really positive thing to reverse climate change, it will be to reduce our emissions to net zero, and to do so fast. I take my hat off to the Minister for going to the Committee on Climate Change and for asking for its advice on how we could possibly address this more quickly than our targets. The committee’s advice was that we could not do so by 2050. I am hopeful that it will change its mind. Will she please update us on that and will she tell us when aviation and shipping might be included, as they need to be?

Claire Perry: To answer in reverse order, there has been progress made on aviation and shipping. That continues to be an international challenge because flights and ships leave and take off from different places, but there is work accelerating on it, and indeed some investment going into low-carbon fuels, which could be hugely important. I will happily update the House when we have received the net zero report and talk about the various aspects in that. We are investing in the first net zero industrial cluster in the UK, with £170 million of funding from the industrial strategy challenge fund. As my hon. Friend has reminded me, it is not just the young who are protesting: one of the most effective and wide-scale campaigning organisations in the UK in this area is the Women’s Institute, which has over 9,000 climate ambassadors. This is a problem that affects all of us, and the solution will involve all of us.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I thank Greta Thunberg and the climate strikers, and Extinction Rebellion, for showing more climate leadership on the streets than we often see in this Chamber. The Minister says that she does not know what a climate emergency looks like. It looks like doing what is scientifically necessary, not just what is deemed to be politically possible at the time. In that spirit, in the meeting this morning that unfortunately the Prime Minister could not clear her diary to make but all the Opposition leaders did, we agreed a number of proposals, including things like ongoing dialogue with the UK climate strikers and stress testing all new manifesto commitments to make sure that they do not exceed the 1.5° warming target. Will the Minister’s Government sign up to those practical proposals?

Claire Perry: I do not want to politicise diaries, because of course invitations were issued, as the hon. Lady is well aware, that could not be accepted. We are not going to go into that sort of political tit for tat that takes us down a rabbit hole of conflict that this situation does not need. I have debated with the hon. Lady many times, and I frequently pay tribute to her for her passion and commitment and leadership of her party, but just once—just once—she could stand up and acknowledge the fact that the country she is proud to represent has led the world—

Caroline Lucas *indicated dissent.*

Claire Perry: She is shaking her head. She cannot even acknowledge that the UK has led the world in this particular area. If we cannot acknowledge our leadership, and celebrate that, how can we possibly hope to persuade

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other countries that emit far more carbon than us, and have a far greater land area, that they should be making the changes that they also need to make?

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): While I have no time for those who deny climate change, I also have little time for those who deny that great progress has been made. If we have 40% of our electricity from renewables, which is up from 6% in 2010, is it not important that we listen to and work with our scientists and innovators who can improve this picture rather than just listening to those who lie down on the streets?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I think that this debate is about consumption emissions. I will not take the House through the technicalities, but essentially there is an argument that we have exported much of our heavy energy-creating activities. It is also the case, as people will see if they peruse the base numbers, that our consumption emissions are down by 20% since, I believe, 1997. I will check those facts before the next statement. The whole world's economic systems are changing. That is why the leadership that we display will help other countries to which much of this activity has been transferred also to make these changes—in particular, to have a low-carbon electricity system as this is often the greatest cause of emissions in those countries.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister put her finger on it when she said that this is going to be about some tough decisions. She expressed concern about describing this as a climate emergency because what she really wanted to do was to move the dial. Ireland has been able to move the dial not by leaving the public out on the streets but by bringing them into a citizens' assembly—a proper citizens' assembly that hears the views not just of the activists but of everyone. That has supported carbon taxes and an end to subsidies for peat extraction, meaning that Ireland is now the first country to divest from fossil fuel. Will the Minister meet me and others who are supportive of the idea of a citizens' assembly to talk about whether that is the cross-party, cross-country way forward by which we can actually tackle this climate emergency?

Claire Perry: With pleasure. I point out to the hon. Lady that we already have a carbon tax. We introduced a unilateral tax on carbon emissions, which is what has driven us off coal. She does not seem to realise what an achievement that is. When she and I were elected, 40% of our electricity system was coal-based. Of course I will meet her, but let us look at what has worked and see how we can do more of that.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the 2017 PwC report which shows that the United Kingdom is the fastest decarbonising nation of the G7? Can she tell us how the Government are supporting new technologies, such as the use of hydrogen to heat domestic homes in the Keele University experiment, and what further steps can be taken to promote geothermal energy in Clackmannanshire?

Claire Perry: I welcome my hon. Friend's mentioning an independent report which shows that we have decarbonised, as a proportion of our economic growth, faster than any other country in not just the G7 but the G20. We continue to work to accelerate our carbon reduction. He is right to focus on heating, which is a major problem for a centralised gas-based heating economy such as ours. Innovation is happening in Keele, Leeds and other areas to see how we might safely introduce hydrogen into the heating system. Of course, we then have to produce hydrogen in a low-carbon emissions form, which is an opportunity to use excess renewable energy, and particularly offshore wind. This is an incredibly innovative time. By the way, if we can help the world migrate to hydrogen boilers and make those boilers in the UK, we can export them and create a competitive advantage as part of this transition.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Looking at the climate science, I do not suppose that a single Member of the House does not ask themselves, "How can we make the changes that are needed?" The Minister will be aware that the Committee on Climate Change said in November that emissions from homes are off track and we will need to replace gas with hydrogen boilers and supplementary electric heating. Given that about 80% of homes depend on gas for heating or cooking, how will that change happen?

Claire Perry: The right hon. Gentleman is right to emphasise homes, although they are responsible for only 15% of our CO₂ emissions. In fact, the biggest nut we have to crack is industrial emissions, which is arguably much harder to do. There will be no one-size-fits-all policy on homes. There will be some decarbonisation of gas, some introduction of pure hydrogen, a move to electrification and a use of community heating or heat networks. Some amazingly innovative local authorities—Nottingham and Leeds spring to mind—are trying to design new forms of heating system into their local economies and home building programmes. That is how we will innovate and drive the cost down. I think that the announcement of no fossil fuel heating in new homes from 2025 will kick-start a revolution, particularly in reducing the cost of alternatives such as heat pumps.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): The protests last week did not greatly inconvenience my constituents, but many of them, like me, share the concerns about the grave emissions situation we face. I do not think that panicking ever helped any situation, but does the excellent Minister agree that if we are going to do our bit on these small islands, we have to face up to the poor energy efficiency of our existing homes? We will need a new green deal, as the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) said. The Minister can call it whatever she likes, but we will need a retrofit new green deal if we are going to move the dial—that seems to be the expression of the afternoon—and lower emissions.

Claire Perry: I cannot disagree with my hon. Friend that the focus on retrofitting is hugely important. He and I put ourselves on the green deal Bill Committee because we believed there was a way to incentivise people—if someone retrofits their home, their energy bills go down, and they often get a higher sale price or a lower running cost.

We have to work in all sectors. There will continue to be an element of Government investment. We are working with mortgage lenders. There is evidence that offering a green mortgage pays for itself, because people can borrow more cheaply and get a better rate of return. There have to be many ways of doing this. In constituencies like mine, many homes are not suitable for traditional retrofit technologies such as cavity wall insulation. That is why part of the £2.6 billion we are spending on innovation over this Parliament has to go into finding solutions for such homes.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): The Minister is right that there are some sectors, such as power generation, in which major progress has been made in carbon reduction, but does she agree that there are others, such as aviation, where virtually nothing is taking place? Does she agree that the Government should re-examine major expansion projects such as Heathrow specifically to look at the climate change implications?

Claire Perry: The right hon. Gentleman tempts me into another Department's area. I have to say that I believe that most of the emissions problems with this specific aviation project relate to transport to and from the airport, and clearly there is much more that can be done on that with the Department for Transport. Equally, however, we have to look at how we try to solve the aviation problem globally. Again, there is no point trying to do something unilaterally that disadvantages the UK economy, when we could be working to solve the problem. One of the things the Department has been doing is investing in alternative fuels, in many cases created from the waste products of other processes, and that is the sort of innovation we need to see because unless we can drop the emissions from aviation substantially, we will not be on track.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The science is clear that we need to stop pumping more emissions into the climate. I thank the Minister for spending time with the Science and Technology Committee today and answering very detailed questions on the Government's policy. Does she agree with the other four experts before the Committee that the UK has led the world in investment in innovative technology, such as carbon capture and storage, and does she agree with me and many colleagues that the UK should continue to lead the world in investment in innovative technologies to help find solutions to this situation?

Claire Perry: I thank my hon. Friend for raising carbon capture and storage. Members will know that a competition was run several years ago, and it was a rather crude, as it were, point-to-point competition—in one case, it was just decarbonising a coal plant that would in effect no longer be generating power. We are now trying to work out how carbon capture, usage and storage are embedded in an industrial cluster, so that we can actually decarbonise heavy industry and create a way of sequestering the carbon alongside clean power generation. This is how I think we will solve the problems: not looking at them in economic silos, but trying to solve these problems on a whole-economy basis.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The global food system accounts for 30% of emissions, and it is said that without any action—if we do not do anything about it—food and farming will take up the whole of

the Paris carbon emissions budget, so why is no one talking about it? I have been sitting here listening to this, and I have sat here listening to many of these debates, and I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of parliamentarians who are ever prepared to ask what we are going to do about the global food system.

Claire Perry: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady, who has been walking the vegan walk now for many years and has been a doughty campaigner. She is absolutely right: CO₂ emissions from land use and farming will continue to rise precipitously unless we have changes both in the way we treat soil—she will know about the UK's plans for improving carbon sequestration in soil—and in how we farm. Unfortunately, the challenge is also about how we feed the world cost-effectively, and we need to continue to look at technological solutions for that, but she is right to focus on this. I find that this and the industrial emissions bit are the parts that people very rarely talk about, so I thank her for raising this issue.

Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): The Minister is right to raise the effect that this Government have had on emissions, particularly from the power sector. I am sure she will remember that, during the Labour leadership campaign of 2015, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) said he wanted to reopen the coalmines. He went on to win the leadership—it was a very popular policy—and a couple of months later he clarified that he wanted to reopen only one coalmine in south Wales. Will the Minister update the House on how the Leader of the Opposition's campaign to reopen the coalmines is going?

Claire Perry: I was not at the Durham miners' gala where those pledges were made, but, with the exception of some Opposition Members, I think there is general cross-party support for phasing out coal, which is the dirtiest form of fossil fuel, as a power-generation source. Unfortunately, the right hon. Gentleman the Leader of the Opposition is also, I believe, against nuclear power, so that would leave an awfully big hole in the thermal generation part of the energy system.

I want to pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who will know from his own constituency of Selby and Ainsty that some of these transitions can be difficult, involving job losses. This is why it is such a challenge for other countries, and why the transition we have to make has to be just and fair, and has to ensure that people's jobs are maintained and new jobs are created.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Minister asks what would be the point of her declaring a climate change emergency. Well, it is because it is an emergency. It is an emergency right now and it is an emergency across the world—glaciers are melting, seas are rising—and the Minister knows this. I just do not understand, and I do not think people watching or my constituents in Bristol West will understand, what is stopping her declaring a climate change emergency and then treating the problem as an emergency.

Claire Perry: Let me try to help the hon. Lady and her constituents. I do not see the point of saying anything unless we take action to solve the problem. We are now realising that we have a massive, growing problem with

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our global emissions, affecting the balance of our economy. We in this country lead the world in trying to solve this problem. I accept that we need to go further and faster, but I want to focus on actions rather than simply standing here and saying, “I have said a few things—job done.” Let us focus on actions, not words.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Exactly; so having instituted the fastest decarbonisation of any G20 country, will the Minister remind the House what proportion of total global emissions we produce—I think it is 1%—compared with, say, China? We all know what would happen to an Extinction Rebellion demonstration in Tiananmen Square. If we want to make a real difference, what practical steps are we taking internationally to encourage China, the USA and India to take real action?

Claire Perry: My right hon. Friend is right to point out that we make up only 3% of the world’s land area and we rank 17th for carbon emissions. If he will forgive me, however, his suggestion is a little bit of a false choice, because much of our growth and prosperity has been caused by putting the CO₂ up there in the first place. I think that it is very unfair to say to countries that they cannot enjoy future growth unless they are prepared drastically to cut their standard of living.

The point is that we must work together. I pay tribute to many of the actions that have been taken in China and India, where some of the most rapid investments are being made in electric vehicles and renewable energy. That is the reason why solar panel prices have dropped more than 80% in the UK; we no longer need to subsidise them because of other countries’ investments. My right hon. Friend is right to point out that we must work together. A CO₂ molecule does not care where it is emitted from, or where it is going. We are all contributing to the problem, and we must contribute to the solution.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Many of the businesses, citizens and workers who have had their lives disrupted over the past week by protesters—some of whom flew thousands of miles in CO₂-emitting aeroplanes to cause roadblocks, which led to more CO₂ emissions, and then arrogantly threatened to disrupt the Easter holidays of many hard-working families—will be amazed by some of the attitudes expressed in this House today. Will the Minister tell us why police actions that have been used against previous disruptive protests in London were not used on this occasion? Was it because of Government direction, the Mayor of London or a decision taken by the police?

Claire Perry: The right hon. Gentleman makes a strong point. I pay tribute to the response of the Met police, under its commissioner; the right hon. Gentleman will have seen the response today. I think there was a little bit of nervousness at the beginning of the process, unfortunately, led by the Mayor of London, who did not recognise that millions of people’s lives would be disrupted. [*Interruption.*] Hang on a minute; Members are moaning and whinging, but what is the point of stopping people using electric public transport so that they have to take cars? That seems utterly counterintuitive.

We ended up with a proportionate response, and I pay tribute once again to the police, who acted in a very good-humoured way to confine the protests.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): It is imperative to reduce greenhouse gases, and the replacement of coal by natural gas has vastly reduced such gases. Does the Minister agree that we should back a responsible UK oil and gas sector, and not offshore our climate change responsibility?

Claire Perry: I do, and my hon. Friend will know, as do many of his Conservative colleagues, that the incredible contribution of the oil and gas sector to the Scottish economy cannot be overstated. He will also know that we can decarbonise gas very effectively, and, frankly, we produce it with environmental standards far higher than those in the countries from which we import.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): After all that the Minister has had to say today, why are the Government still in favour of fracking?

Claire Perry: The two things are entirely linked. We are a highly gas-dependent economy, as we know. We want to cut the amount of gas that we use, but it is a good transitional fuel. The hon. Gentleman always shouts over me, which is very rude. We want to explore soberly and scientifically whether there are opportunities to extract gas onshore in a way that helps us with our energy security—something he used to care about, when he was mining the black stuff all those years ago—and helps us to generate jobs. Why is it that we trust the science on climate change, but when science says that shale gas extraction is safe, we refuse to listen?

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The environment is important to all of us in the Kettering constituency, which is one of the greenest boroughs in the whole country, with 30 very large wind turbines generating almost as much electricity as is consumed by all the residential houses. I am concerned, however. While we must of course allow people to protest and this is a very important issue, I do object, on behalf of many thousands of my constituents, to encouraging schoolchildren to go on strike. It is important for schoolchildren to have strong views on topical issues, but why can they not protest at the weekend? Education is very important.

Claire Perry: It is a very serious point. Ms Thunberg’s efforts, which have become a global phenomenon, demonstrate the power of a young person deciding to make these statements. What I would say to protesting schoolchildren is this: “We need the climate engineers, the geo-physicists and the scientists of the future. Those are skills that you will learn best by engaging in education. You are protesting; we are listening. We have to work together and we need your skills to solve this problem.”

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): The west midlands was the home of the industrial revolution. We sparked the carbon revolution; we would like to lead the zero-carbon revolution. However, it has been harder to decarbonise our power system since the Government phased out feed-in tariffs for solar. It is harder to decarbonise our transport system because of the confusion, identified by the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee before Christmas, around electric vehicles.

It is harder to decarbonise energy in our homes when the Minister cannot tell me, in parliamentary answers, our share of the energy company obligation funding that might fund that retrofitting. Cities in this country would like to lead the green industrial revolution, so why does she not help them?

Claire Perry: I will certainly look at the last point. It may be that we just do not cut the data by metropolitan area. ECO is an important fund that we are using to focus on fuel poverty and create more innovation. I do not think there is confusion. The feed-in tariff scheme, which the right hon. Gentleman will know given his time in the Treasury, was an extremely expensive scheme. We have spent almost £6 billion so far and it will cost us £30 billion over the future of the scheme. Essentially, as I mentioned to my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), we have seen the price of the renewable technologies we are supporting tumble. We do not have to subsidise to drive take-up. The smart export guarantee, which I will introduce soon, will pay people for that generation and ensure there is a demand-side aggregation created in the homes investing in it.

On transport, we have been very clear. We have one of the most ambitious programmes of moving to zero-carbon new vehicle sales. *[Interruption.]* It is true. Opposition Members should look at what other countries are doing. The right hon. Gentleman will know from his constituency that one in five of the electric vehicles sold in Europe is made in the UK. We do not just want to be leaders in how many are driving on our roads; we want to be leaders in investing in the technology that the world is moving towards.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that caring about climate change and the environment is not a monopoly of the left—far from it, as evidenced by the many actions of this Government—but that there is a political debate to be had? Does she agree that it is possible to reduce emissions and grow the economy and that this is particularly important not only for the UK but for many of the world's developing economies?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. There is too much fear and not enough hope. If we look at the UK, the low-carbon economic sector is growing four times faster than the mainstream economy and we have 400,000 people—bigger than the aerospace sector—employed in green jobs. We can continue to see the global opportunities from investment. This is a massive opportunity. Not only are we saving the world's ecosystems; we are creating jobs for the future. We know that 65% of those under 24 want what they call a green-collar job. They just do not know how many are out there.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): One way we can decarbonise homes is by using geothermal energy, particularly in former mining areas. The University of Durham has done a lot of research on this subject. Would the Minister like to come to learn about the research it is doing and consider how we can implement it?

Claire Perry: It would be a pleasure to come and visit. We have had several debates on geothermal heat, in

particular from old mine workings. It seems only fitting that the blood, sweat and tears of those thousands of men who dug up the energy source of our first industrial revolution could somehow be reused by using hot water as another source of energy.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's comments about listening to and acting on the science. If that is the case, the Committee on Climate Change has questioned whether support for oil and gas may become incompatible with the Government's long-term climate change objectives. In the spirit of not disappearing down a rabbit hole of conflict, perhaps we can agree, on both sides of the House, on whether there is a sustainable way to reduce fossil fuel extraction to move from maximum economic recovery to sustainable economic recovery.

Claire Perry: That is a very important point. The oil and gas industry, which employs hundreds of thousands of people, has contributed billions to our Exchequer and is extremely important to communities north of the border. It is one of our most productive industries. It is part of the transition, and the exciting thing is that technologies such as offshore wind, the sector deal for which I announced just recently, will be a brilliant industry for many of those employees to transition into. In fact, our world leadership in working in very difficult offshore conditions in oil and gas exploration is perfect for offshore wind, so there is a natural transition. Of course, these are important industries, which I believe also recognise the role that they have to play in the transition.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): A young woman from Boroughmuir High School in my constituency wrote to me ahead of the school climate strikes, calling for politicians to prioritise wind and tidal power over nuclear and fossil fuels. The Scottish Government are trying to do that, but until such time as we become independent, we require the UK Government's assistance. Can the Minister tell me when the Government will reverse their policy of prioritising new nuclear plants and putting the kybosh on tidal power in Scotland?

Claire Perry: I will not correct the hon. and learned Lady on too many things, but we have a mixed, diverse energy supply, which is decarbonising very rapidly. We have not put the kybosh on tidal. In fact, we invested the same amount in R&D funding for tidal as we did with any other technology; it is just that other renewables have out-competed it much more rapidly. However, I was pleased to meet the renewable energy council with cross-party support recently to see what more we can do to support that. I believe that nuclear has a part to play. It is part of our zero-carbon future. We have a nuclear sector deal and it is an incredibly productive industry for the United Kingdom.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I welcome what the Minister had to say on our cleanest and greenest year for electricity yet and her approach to the Committee on Climate Change, but does she share some of my concerns about the goals of Extinction Rebellion? This is an organisation that has pledged to take non-violent direct action but whose co-founder was arrested on charges of criminal damage against a corporate headquarters.

[Richard Graham]

To what extent are the Government also looking at how we can mitigate the potentially violent actions of this movement?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend is right to point out that we should be able to have a civilised, important and strong debate about our aims. It is challenging, though, to see that there are acts of violence or acts of criminal damage. I am also aware that no political party or campaigning organisation is endorsing one of the key asks of Extinction Rebellion, which is a net zero emissions target by 2025. It is simply not something that can be delivered. It is right to have that challenge, but we have to be able to take what we do best in this country, which is to have a civilised debate, and apply it to the most important issue of our time.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): The Minister mentioned her international influence in relation to reducing carbon emissions. The USA is one of the biggest CO₂ polluters in the world. Can she ask the Prime Minister to use all her influence when President Trump comes to the UK to get the US to recommit to its obligations from the Paris summit and to set up a climate emergency in the USA to tackle global warming?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, but despite the rhetoric, the US's decarbonisation record is very good. In fact, it cut its carbon intensity by 3.7% for the year ending in 2017, which is well ahead of the global average and, indeed, well ahead of the EU's average. He will know that this is about not just federal actions, but the actions of states, cities and companies. The We Are Still In coalition, which is hugely accelerating work on decarbonisation action—for example, the net zero targets of the state of California—is delivering real change in the United States, and we should celebrate that.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I, too, had the honour of meeting Greta Thunberg at the parliamentary leaders' roundtable discussions this morning. I would like to put on record my thanks to all the youth climate change activists who have succeeded in putting climate change at the top of the agenda.

Climate change waits for no Government. I travelled to London on the train with Heather Bolton from Gwynedd. She was on her way to attend the Extinction Rebellion protests in Westminster. We talked about Fairbourne on the Gwynedd coast where the whole community has been warned to prepare to move out within 40 years. Climate change is more than a passing inconvenience to the people of Fairbourne. Will the Minister accept my invitation to visit the community and see the economic, social and human cost of inaction?

Claire Perry: I am always delighted to visit installations in Wales—I visited Bridgend with the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) and saw the amazing innovation work being led there—so it would be an absolute pleasure. The hon. Lady is right to point out that this is not just a challenge for a few. The Karman layer—the line where the earth's atmosphere merges into outer space and where all the gases on which life depends are found—is 60 miles deep. I would not get even halfway to her

constituency, if I was driving straight up, before I tipped out of the atmospheric layer. That is why this is such an important opportunity and we must work together.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): If you can believe it, Mr Speaker, it was not in the too-distant past that I was a young activist. What I hated then and what I know young people hate now is when politicians say the future is theirs, because the present is theirs and this planet is theirs. One of the four demands of the climate strikers is extending the vote to 16 and 17-year-olds. They are so passionate about this topic. Will the Minister agree to giving them the vote so that they can vote on it?

Claire Perry: I did not realise the demands had got that broad. The hon. Lady is right to focus on something really important: it is the job of Governments to steward what they have for a period of time and then pass it on in a better state to the next generation. Whether it is the earth's climate or the economy, that is what we exist to do. I do not know where the argument about the voting age sits in that. We have heard loud and clear what the next generation, and indeed grannies, grandpas, parents—all of us—need to do. We need to work together to accelerate our actions.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I congratulate the young people in many countries across the world without whom we would not be here today having this debate. They have reminded us how urgent the climate crisis is and that we have to be very ambitious—a lot more ambitious than we have been so far. Are the Government committed to making our electricity grid 100% carbon zero before 2050? If so, when will we know about this new target?

Claire Perry: When I launched the offshore wind sector deal, I said that power generation would be at least 70% net carbon zero by 2030—in only 11 years—so we can extrapolate from that. There is a view among energy system modellers, however, that there will always need to be some level of thermal energy generation on the grid, because you cannot do a cold start based on current renewable and storage technology, which raises the question of how we further decarbonise our gas supply in particular.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Complacency in government is the reason young people have left their classrooms to educate politicians and to challenge us in this place. Rather than just warm words, in the light that we are going to miss our fourth and fifth carbon budgets, will the Minister commit to setting every public authority and local authority stringent carbon budgets?

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady is right to point out the role of local authorities. I believe that much policy is best pulled through at a local level, where it is possible to join up regeneration, transport systems, cycling and walking strategies and so on, rather than pushed out from Westminster. The young people of today—it is such a patronising phrase, isn't it? Everybody in the UK today should be proud of the fact that we listened and 10 years ago with cross-party support passed the world's first climate change Act. We listen in this place. We

might not act as quickly as people want, or in the ways people want, but we must look at our early movement and the fact that we have led the world in decarbonisation. We are listening and we are acting.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Dealing with the climate emergency will require us to ensure that billions of pounds are invested in low-carbon technologies. Most of that money will come from the private sector, and must be invested in heat and transport technologies in particular. The money is there, but for it to be invested at scale will require certainty.

Since 2010, zero-carbon homes have been needlessly scrapped by the coalition Government; now that is coming back. The energy company obligation solid-wall programme lasted less than a year after it was announced. Tidal lagoons have been flirted with, and have gone nowhere. The carbon capture fund money was put up and then taken away. Onshore wind was banned entirely. The Green Investment Bank was set up, and has already been sold off. That is fundamentally why green investment in the UK is falling. Where there has been certainty—mainly in offshore wind—progress has indeed been rapid. However, it is not just the protesters but those in the financial markets who are saying that while there has been some good progress, it is just not enough. Perhaps it is time for the Government to listen to one or both of those groups.

Claire Perry: Many of the projects that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned were being funded entirely by Government subsidies. The Government have no money of their own; the money that they have is other people's money. Someone has to pay—either the taxpayers and consumers who have already borne many of the policy costs, or private sector shareholders. However, the hon. Gentleman is right to refer to the importance of certainty, and policies that will stand the test of political time, such as those that we have set out now in the clean growth strategy, will secure that investment certainty. The good news is that the world is moving rapidly away from high-carbon investments, and investors are looking for opportunities that we are able to offer.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): We salute 16-year-old Greta Thunberg, the school climate strikers and Extinction Rebellion. They have shone a light on the issue of the issue of climate change in a way that it seems only David Attenborough is able to equal. Surely the Minister recognises that her Government must do more. Perhaps they could follow the lead of the SNP Scottish Government, with their world-leading climate change targets, and perhaps—as was suggested by the hon. Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley)—they could follow our example of allowing 16 and 17-year-olds to vote on these issues, because they are clearly well ahead of some of the dinosaurs in this place.

Claire Perry: I do not see too many dinosaurs in the building today. However, I pay tribute to both the devolved Administrations and the Westminster Government, who have worked incredibly well on these issues. We share one goal, we share one set of climate budgets, and we share one set of, largely, taxpayer receipts which have paid for much of this investment. We must continue to work together, and we must look

for points at which we can come together rather than looking for those at which we can diverge, which I am afraid the hon. Lady's party often wants to do.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): Climate change is not a party political issue, but an issue of global importance. In the light of that, the Government's complacency today, and their refusal to take leadership at a national level, is extremely worrying.

I feel very emotional about this issue. I listened to Greta earlier, and I applaud her for pointing out the obvious, for inspiring us, and for reminding us how crucial it is that we take action now. This morning my granddaughter was born. Looking at her, I feel that we owe it to these children and young people—the Government owe it to them, and let me politely say to the Minister that she owes it to them—to demonstrate that we are doing more than talking about this. What actions will the Minister take to ensure that those young people have the future that they deserve?

Claire Perry: I congratulate the hon. Lady on becoming a granny. That does not seem possible.

Whatever I say, or other Ministers say, from the Dispatch Box is reported in *Hansard*, and is the next day's chip paper. What we must do is act. We must set out actions, set out our ambitions, and work together. I am disappointed to hear that the hon. Lady thinks I have been complacent at the Dispatch Box. I have tried incredibly hard to show that we are listening, we are acting, and we are delivering. We must accelerate that, but the hon. Lady should be proud of the fact that ours is the first developed country to say, "Help us to understand what net zero looks like: what will the changes have to be?" Does that sound hopeless? It sounds hopeful to me.

Chris Bryant: Despite living in an area of multiple deprivation, the vast majority of my constituents own their homes, but it is very difficult for them to make those homes viable and to conserve energy. The previous system, introduced by the coalition Government, was a complete and utter disaster: local businesses closed, and a great deal of shoddy work was done. Many families were desperate, because they thought that they had wasted money and were financially out of pocket themselves. Will the Government look closely at a new means of ensuring that people like my constituents can do their bit, although they have not much money in their own pockets?

Claire Perry: I am happy to tell the hon. Gentleman that the Each Home Counts review that we did, whose recommendations we have accepted, and where we have a trust mark for the work he mentions, should stop this problem happening in the future. Too much shoddy work has been done. Reparations have been made. Essentially, people have to have confidence that the work they are having done to their homes is of a high standard and is effective.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Tragically, Ella Kissi-Debrah lost her life to asthma, and the courts are currently looking at whether the authorities had any responsibility in that tragic death. I believe there is a crisis in children's respiratory health.

[Catherine West]

There is a meeting tonight with the title “Pollution Has No Borders”. One thing the Government could do would be to take away the cuts to local councils, which were looking at having more clean buses. Just increasing the number of bus journeys rather than car journeys would help not only lots of people on low incomes but the planet. Please could that be one thing that the Minister takes away from these questions and pledges to look into? Will she give that money back to councils so that action can be taken on our terribly polluted air?

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady is right to point out that one problem we do not talk about enough is that CO₂ pollution is often associated with particulate pollution, and one of the co-benefits of cutting emissions is that we get cleaner air. However, I gently say that she is wrong to focus on a reduction in budgets for zero-carbon transport. My recollection—I will check this and write to her—is that those budgets have gone up, and I myself have seen some of the hydrogen and hybrid buses that are running. Of course, the challenge is also to get more cars off the roads, because they obviously have a far greater level of pollutant per mile travelled, and to ensure that children, particularly in the most deprived areas, have clean air to breathe.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Extinction Rebellion is a vital movement. During the protests on Sunday, my five-year-old son Andrew and I found an amazing sense of positivity, peace and passion for change. Young people are leading the way, and we must listen to them. Does the Minister recognise that, for all the action that is being taken, it will not be enough on the current trajectory, and that we need a transformation in the level of our ambition if we are to secure our future?

Claire Perry: I do recognise that ambitions need to be raised not just here but around the world. That is why I hope we will have the chance to secure the crucial climate change talks next year, because we need to demonstrate that that is possible and not something to be frightened of. We need to work together with other countries to try to raise ambition collectively, and it will be wonderful to have cross-party support for the UK to be the host of those talks.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I think I could sum up the Minister’s response today as, “The rest of the world is rubbish. We are better. We are doing things ahead of everybody else. I can’t understand why people came here and demonstrated.” By definition, it was a peaceful demonstration, but over 1,000 people managed to defy the authorities to the point where they were arrested. These people are not going to go away. So, Minister, what has changed as a result of their protests over the last few days?

Claire Perry: I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that I think that that is a really wrong reading of what I have said, and I am happy to send him *Hansard*—he will find that quite the opposite was said. What has changed is that everything has changed in a way, in that we now know how broad this protest is and the depth of people’s feelings. We are as frustrated as they are about some of the challenges, but we also have to recognise in this

place that whatever we do is fair to the hon. Gentleman’s constituents, to my constituents and to those who pay for the changes. I must also mean that the world can come with us, and I want to keep emphasising that point. We must not be complacent—nobody is complacent—but we have shown that we can deliver, that we will deliver and that we know we need to do more. However, we will have to do that together.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): The Extinction Rebellion protest over the last few days has prevented business as usual, but that is nothing compared with what climate change will do, and is doing, in certain areas of the world. It is not good enough to talk the talk and not walk the walk. This issue needs a fundamental, transformative shift in our economy and in what we do. The Secretary of State is shutting her eyes and ears on this. Will she tell us today what action is actually being taken across Government to demonstrate that fundamental shift and to challenge business as usual?

Claire Perry: I thank the hon. Lady for my inadvertent promotion. She just has to look at the numbers: we have had the cleanest year for electricity generation that we have ever had, and this weekend this country, which was built on coal, went for the longest period ever without using any coal. We are legislating to ensure that homes will have no more fossil fuel heating, and 42,000 homes in my constituency are now off the gas grid. From 2025, no home will be able to be built there unless it has some other form of heating. [Interruption.] The hon. Lady shakes her head, but she knows better than many in this place, given her long involvement in these matters, that it is all very well for politicians to stand up and mouth empty platitudes but what we have to do is deliver actions, not words. That is what we are delivering.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): As the Minister knows, the Governor of the Bank of England warned last week that climate change poses a financial risk to investments such as people’s pension savings. In March, the \$1 trillion Norwegian sovereign wealth fund declared that it would no longer invest in oil and gas exploration, in order to minimise exposure to those climate-related financial risks. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that the green finance strategy includes incentives for people to invest and for organisations to provide investments that are sustainable?

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady is right to raise the issue of pension fund investing. When we had our Green Great Britain Week last year, we said that one of the most effective things that an individual could do was to their move pension fund if they were able to, or to lobby the trustees of their pension fund, like the House of Commons pension fund’s trustees, to move away from fossil fuel or unsustainable investment. The opportunities are there, and I am really proud of the work that the Bank of England has done on the climate risk disclosure, but clearly we need to do more. If the hon. Lady has ideas, we would be extremely keen to discuss them, because we would be much better off if we all put our heads together.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): My city of Oxford is the first in the country to create a citizens’ assembly focused on the climate crisis. The Minister

said that she wanted a broad-based debate, but we all know what happens far too often: we have a politically expedient knee-jerk reaction to anything that goes against the status quo. So please will she come to Oxford, see what we are doing, and look genuinely at these cases so that we can have a much more broad-based discussion about the climate crisis and do something about it?

Claire Perry: Of course, and part of the reason that I am so passionate about this is that I studied climate change, geography and meteorology at Oxford University many years ago. Many of the people associated with the university have been world leaders in understanding the science, and Oxford City Council has done some amazing things in this space. Again, we are really keen to learn. I do not accept that there are knee-jerk political reactions. The clean growth strategy sets out what we will do over the next 25 years to meet our budgets, but if we have good ideas, let us stop hoarding them; let us share them.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): One of the sectors that has not done well on reducing carbon emissions is road transport. One of the policy levers that used to be available was the fuel duty escalator, which the coalition Government ceased to proceed with and which the current Government do not want to return to. Does the Minister agree that that matter needs to be looked at again and that, in terms of carbon emissions, those decisions were a mistake?

Claire Perry: I mentioned at the beginning that we have to do things that are proportionate and fair. I know that the hon. Gentleman supported the cap on fuel prices that we put in, because we had to ensure that it was not the least well-off who were paying for the transition. I pay tribute to his work and to his own personal cycling activities. As he knows, the city of Cambridge is an exemplar for cycling and for effectively ensuring that road transport becomes a thing of the past.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for supporting the message and for her actions. I was among the MPs who attended the meeting to listen to Greta Thunberg today. She is 16 years old and an inspirational young girl; she inspired me and many other Members as well. At 16 years of age, she is just six years older than my oldest grandchild Katie, 10 years older than my grandchild Mia and almost 16 years older than my grandchild Austin. What message would the Minister give to my three grandchildren and all other children that the climate action being taken today will have made a difference?

Claire Perry: By working together, we can solve the biggest challenge humanity has ever faced. It will be difficult, but it is doable. In doing so, we will create jobs and prosperity for the next generation.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): The Minister will know that over half of the UK's planned carbon reduction is tied up in some way or another with EU regulations and that EU agencies are key to enforcement. Assuming that the Government's new office for environmental protection is ever established, will it have a climate change enforcement remit? If not, why not?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman will be able to discuss that matter further during the passage of the environment Bill. He makes a powerful point, but I reassure him, as I have said many times, that no part of our exiting the EU will compromise our climate ambition. Indeed, our progress to date is well ahead of the rest of the EU.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I extend my thanks to and express my admiration of Greta Thunberg, whose speech I had the honour of hearing today—her microphone was working, which I know was of concern to her at some points. Much needs to change, and we need to move forward together as a country to deliver that change sustainably. Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), what substantial and specific plans does the Minister have for how we should formally engage with the public on how we respond, in policy and legislative terms, to our climate crisis? Why will she not consider a citizens' assembly?

Claire Perry: I have not ruled such an assembly in or out, and I am interested in how one would work. I am also interested in how the Youth Parliament could provide a steer for younger people coming to this place. The hon. Lady said that we have not had this conversation, but I was struck when I launched the first Green Great Britain Week last October that it marked the first time that we had had a national moment at which we could come together to talk about what we had achieved and then challenge ourselves to go further. There have been many campaigns, such as the Climate Coalition's brilliant #ShowTheLove campaign, but one of the exciting things—the hon. Lady asked me what we are doing that is different—is that this conversation has stopped being niche and started being mainstream. If the hon. Lady thinks that citizens' assemblies are the way to go and that we should be listening to them to get a stronger steer, let us have a conversation to see how that could work.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Will the Minister overturn the ban on onshore wind?

Claire Perry: There is no ban on onshore wind, as the hon. Lady well knows. I was elected on a manifesto which said that large-scale wind development, of which there is now 13 gigawatts in the UK, rising to 14 gigawatts over the next year, is not appropriate for many parts of England. She will know from her constituency the benefits that offshore wind can deliver. We can put up 198 turbines, each as tall as the Gherkin, which offers incredible opportunities for the offshore servicing fleet in her constituency. We can regenerate the coastal communities that service such developments. We will continue to invest in onshore wind, but large-scale onshore developments are inappropriate for many parts of England.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): Alongside a growing list of my Opposition colleagues—71 as of now—I have written to the Minister, the Prime Minister and the Leader of the House calling on the Government to table at least a day's worth of debate in Government time to discuss their response to the Committee on Climate Change on how we will achieve net zero carbon emissions sooner rather than later. Will the Minister support that request today and join us in that debate?

Claire Perry: I will let the usual channels work out the timetable, but the hon. Gentleman knows that I will talk about such issues all day. In fact, I am due to make another statement in a short period of time, so we can do all this again.

Mr Speaker: And more. There is plenty of scope.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Minister is keen to trumpet the fact that the UK went 90 hours and 45 minutes without coal power, but the reality is that her Government are not making nearly enough of our potential in onshore and offshore wind, solar, wave and hydroelectric, particularly in pump-storage hydro. Scotland's efforts are being stymied by her Government's policies. What specific measures will she bring in to incentivise renewables across the UK?

Claire Perry: We are already incentivising renewables. We have always said—I believe that this is right—that we must be technologically neutral in such things. All technologies started out from pretty much the same place, but some have progressed faster than others. We must also have cost-effectiveness, so we cannot spend other people's money on supporting technologies that will remain expensive over the long term—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Lady is waving her hands, but is it not incredible that the price of offshore wind has dropped over the past two years by a proportion befitting a technology company, let alone a mechanical engineering company, because of the policy and auction structure and the market investment that we have brought forward? We should be celebrating that and the fact that the North sea is the best place in the world for offshore wind.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Global Witness published a report this morning that found that \$4.9 trillion is invested in oilfields and gasfields that are either in development or not yet in production and will therefore contribute to exceeding a global warming scenario of 1.5°, as per the terms of the Paris accord. Much of that investment comes from FTSE 100-registered companies. What legal advice will the Government be giving to London headquartered businesses that are investing in breach of our international obligations?

Claire Perry: I am sure the hon. Lady has also read "The Burning Question", which was published in 2013

and addresses the challenge of the valuation of oil and gas reserves. Indeed, I have already answered a question on this subject. There is a challenge on how quickly the oil and gas companies are transitioning but, as we were discussing earlier, many people in the UK, including the Exchequer, rely on this industry, which has allowed us to cross-subsidise much of the renewables success we have delivered. She also knows that these companies are global organisations, and we need to work globally to ensure we solve the problem.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Minister talks about action not words, and she also talks about the clean growth strategy. What does she think of the plans to downgrade the electrification of rail lines and, as the Secretary of State for Transport has done, to invest in and promote bimodal trains, which obviously are diesel for part of the time?

Claire Perry: I am having a flashback to my old job as rail Minister. The hon. Lady's constituency is a beneficiary of some of the big investments we are making, such as in the wind turbine factories located up there. We always need to balance cost, carbon and competitive advantage, and it was the case that we could deliver those benefits to passengers with those bimodal trains, which obviously have much lower CO₂ emissions than if they were full diesel, and I am sure her constituents welcome that investment.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): The point of declaring a carbon emergency is to take action immediately, not in 2025 or 2030, so why are we not changing the planning rules so that all homes have to be carbon neutral now? Why are we not ensuring that all new buses on our streets are non-carbon emitting? These things are possible.

A thousand people have been arrested on the street in order to raise this issue in the House and in the country. Does the Minister agree that it is not in the public interest to prosecute those people? They should be getting awards, not prosecutions.

Claire Perry: I thought there might be a bit of Mace-waving coming on with that passionate speech. I will leave the question to my hon. Friends in the Ministry of Justice.

South-Eastern Rail Franchise

5.3 pm

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on his decision to delay, yet again, the award of the south-eastern rail franchise.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): In June 2017, the Department for Transport announced that the shortlisted bidders for the south-eastern franchise competition were: South Eastern Holdings Ltd; London and South East Passenger Rail Services Ltd, a wholly owned subsidiary of Govia and the current incumbent; and Stagecoach South Eastern Trains Ltd, a wholly owned subsidiary of Stagecoach Group plc.

Subsequently, in December 2018, the Department exercised an extension with the existing south-eastern operator, London and South Eastern Railway, until 23 June 2019 to allow further time for the competition to identify the next operator for the franchise. The Department is now in the process of negotiating a further direct award which, subject to a successful negotiation, will run until 10 November 2019, with an option to extend the agreement until April 2020. We are taking these steps to ensure continuity of services for passengers. This additional time is necessary to deliver the best possible outcome for passengers and taxpayers alike. We will update the House in the usual way as soon as this work is concluded.

Sir Michael Fallon: I am grateful to the rail Minister, but he has not quite explained why such a mess has been made of this franchise. Can he confirm exactly when my constituents, who already pay the second-highest fares in the home counties, will get the long-promised new carriages? Can he explain why, if the franchising system is now under review, he has been able to award an eight-year franchise for the east midlands? Finally, can he explain why the compensation in respect of last year's timetable chaos is not going to the two stations most affected in my constituency, Shoreham and Eynsford, when the two operators enjoy common ownership? Is it not time to restore confidence in the whole franchising system?

Andrew Jones: I thank my right hon. Friend for those questions. He has been a strong and tenacious champion for rail passengers in his constituency, raising issues with me and speaking in Westminster Hall debates. I share his impatience to get the benefits that are emerging from our franchises to his, and indeed to all, constituents. This is a huge and complex piece of public procurement, and it is right to take the time to make sure we get it right and to finalise this competition. The area is one of the most complex on our network; it has a mix of high-speed and commuter services, with a highly intensive use of infrastructure. I cannot tell him the date on which we will be able to make the announcement. This is a live competition involving market-sensitive information. There is an established method of communication to the House and the markets, so I cannot answer him and am able to say little on that point today.

I can confirm to my right hon. Friend why the east midlands franchise was awarded, with the rail review taking place. That was simply because it was considered

that with the east midlands franchise award and this one we could get the benefits to passengers before the work of the rail review came into play. On compensation in respect of the two stations he mentioned, I will look at that carefully. On the point about the compensation following the May 2018 timetable changes, there were some significant problems, but they were not everywhere. The issue was to get the compensation to those who had been most affected. They received compensation that I think was appropriate, but I will check out those two stations and write to him as quickly as possible.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): So here we are again: a Transport Minister forced to the Dispatch Box to defend the actions—or, in this case, the lack of action—of the ever-failing Secretary of State. Following four delays on the south-eastern franchise, we now know that the Government are planning a direct award. After 12 other direct awards, including on south-eastern, is this approach being taken to avoid the embarrassment of failure further down the road? Two monopolies, Govia and Abellio, are left in the competition to run Britain's most beleaguered franchise. Following a litany of failures under Govia, highlighted in Chris Gibb's report two years ago, and a lacklustre response by the Secretary of State, who, frankly, should have brought the franchise under direct operation, the travelling public are being failed.

What discussions has the Minister had with the trade unions, as the hard-working staff face further uncertainty, not least over their jobs and pensions? Will he also confirm that there is no intention to cut pensions to staff through this franchise process? Are the Government going to stall on all franchises until the conclusion of the Williams review, which is undertaking a comprehensive look at why our rail system is floundering? If so, when will this report be published? In the light of revelations this weekend that sensitive confidential information was leaked from Stagecoach into the hands of Abellio during the east midlands process, what changes has the Minister made in his Department to ensure that commercially confidential information is not shared with competitors in this broken process? How are the Government measuring past failure of these rail monopolies? In the light of evidence, will he then rule out their bidding, as he has for other companies involved in other franchises?

With 176 million journeys being made each year, how can these passengers have any confidence that they will not pay the price for failure—something they have had to endure under the current award? They are paying some of the highest fares in exchange for one of the worst services, so it is clear that this franchising fiasco must end. If the Secretary of State will not take back control of our rail, Labour will.

Andrew Jones: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions. We are negotiating a short direct award to allow the competition to reach its end. This is not the end of franchising, which has been a significant ingredient in improving and turning around rail performance in this country. It has led to our having more services and passengers and at a greater level of safety than at any point in our country's history. Franchising has been part of that success. This is an issue not of failure but of making sure that we get it correct.

[*Andrew Jones*]

Have I discussed the franchise bid with the trade unions? No, because the bids are assessed by officers of the Department for Transport, who anonymise them. It is important, market-sensitive information. Such information runs through a standard procedure, of which the hon. Lady should be aware; it operates in councils, in the Government and in devolved Assemblies, too. I have of course met the trade unions, and I was able to confirm with them that my aspirations for the rail industry include the careers of those who serve the industry. The Chair of the Transport Committee, the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), asked about the same point in an urgent question just before the Easter recess. I do not want to see any cut to pensions; I want to see those who work on our rail services retire with secure and stable pensions. Nevertheless, we are talking about pensions from a private business, not something that comes from the Government.

The work on the Williams review is under way. I am sure the hon. Lady will have seen some of the evidence papers and heard about the emerging thinking that Mr Williams has discussed in some of the speeches he has made over the past few weeks. We look forward to seeing the output of that review. Franchising has been an ingredient in the turnaround of our rail industry that has been so fantastic for this country. The question now is how we take that to the next stage, which is what the Williams review is all about.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): My constituents are as anxious as anyone about the reasons that lie behind this continuing delay, but they are even more anxious that the improvements we have all been promised under the new franchise do actually happen. Will my hon. Friend assure me and my constituents that the improvements, particularly the extra capacity on the high-speed line, will be available when the franchise is eventually awarded?

Andrew Jones: My right hon. Friend asks about how the bid may finally be judged. I cannot comment on the work in progress, but I can say that an invitation to tender was published in November 2017. It was the result of a significant consultation, to which there were 10,000 or so responses. I am as anxious as my right hon. Friend to get the benefits of that invitation to tender out to the constituents whom he serves so well, and as fast as possible, but I cannot give an answer today on who will win the franchise. That work is carried out separately by officials, away from Ministers, and the information is anonymised because it is so important and market sensitive, but his point will have been heard by all those in the industry.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The south-eastern franchise was originally due to end in 2014. The failure of the west coast franchise delayed that ending until August 2018, and now the direct award to Govia could be further extended. It is hard to understand why, if the Government still believe in competition for rail services, the Department for Transport seems absolutely unable to run a competition for this franchise. Will the Minister clarify how many compliant bids were received for the south-eastern franchise and how many were received for the east midlands franchise that was awarded two weeks ago?

Andrew Jones: The hon. Lady makes the point about whether franchising is dead; no, it is not, because of course we managed to award a franchise only in the week before Easter recess. As a process, then, franchising is working. Can we get the benefits out to passengers as fast as possible? That is of course what it is all about, but these are complex questions and it is appropriate that we take our time to get it right. On the number of compliant bids, the issue of pensions obviously attracted a lot of attention in respect of the east midlands bid. We have two pension-compliant bids for the south-eastern franchise and look forward to making the announcement as soon as we possibly can.

Joseph Johnson (Orpington) (Con): Will my hon. Friend assure me that this further delay to the award of the franchise will not hold up long-awaited works for Petts Wood and St Mary Cray stations to become fully accessible—something for which residents have been campaigning for many years?

Andrew Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I share his enthusiasm for the access-for-all process and the recent announcement of extra funds and where those funds will be targeted by the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani). I can tell him that design work on the stations selected will be starting over the summer, with construction as soon as possible thereafter. I know that he is anxious for the benefits to serve his constituents. So am I and so is the Under-Secretary of State, who I know is listening. She has indicated that she would be very happy to meet him to take the matter forward.

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): Further to his letter of 10 April in which the Under-Secretary of State assured Members that robust scrutiny would be used in this decision-making process, can he please reassure my beleaguered constituents in east Kent that that scrutiny will also apply to the exorbitant fare rises, constant delays and disruptions, arbitrary timetable changes and removal of services?

Andrew Jones: I can most certainly provide the hon. Lady's constituents with the assurance that she is seeking. We will obviously be focusing on fares. We want to make sure that the travelling public get a great deal, which is why we have frozen regulated fares in line with inflation for the sixth year in a row. It is also why, in January, we saw the launch of the 16 to 18-year-old railcard, which will come into play later this year. So will there be attention on costs and scrutiny of fares? Of course there will. We will be maintaining that. This policy, which has delivered its sixth year, against Labour's intentions, will be continued.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): Will the Minister please confirm that the City Thameslink service from Maidstone East will still be delivered before the end of the year? It is desperately needed and it has been promised on a multitude of occasions.

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend has been a very diligent campaigner on this issue. I know that it matters a lot to her and to her constituency. She has been a real vocal champion on this issue specifically. However, this is also an industry-led process and we are working with it to

deliver the benefits as soon as possible. I cannot comment immediately on that matter because it is not part of this franchise but, of course, I will check the information and keep her posted on progress.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): If the rail review recommends that suburban services in the London area be transferred to London government, will the Government allow south-eastern suburban services to be transferred in that way to maximise integration of transport services in London?

Andrew Jones: That is a very interesting question. I would expect the rail review to make some interesting recommendations about devolution. I am personally a fan of devolution, but we had better see what it says before commenting on the outcome.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I note my hon. Friend's statement today on the south-eastern rail franchise. I am, of course, bitterly disappointed that we have not made any progress on this matter. In the meantime, my constituents continue to suffer a poor service into London. It is also disappointing, but rather ironic, that, just like the rail service, all we seem to see from his Department is continual delay. As he is well aware, improvements are desperately needed to our service in the borough of Bexley—and not later this year, next year or sometimes never. Our constituents are paying more money for a poor service. What we are expecting is a decision so that we can look to a better future and the travelling public from Bexley have a better service. At the moment, they do not.

Andrew Jones: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point. He is a diligent campaigner on rail issues for his constituency. We saw that at an important level when there was the landslip earlier this year. He was a great champion in making sure that the voices of his travelling constituents were heard in this House. I cannot yet tell him when we will be making the announcement on the decision on who wins the south-eastern franchise competition, but I can tell him that I am extremely keen to get the benefits that the franchise will bring to his constituents. I will make sure that he is kept fully posted on progress.

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): There appears to be a serious issue around rail pensions. The Minister has said that there are two pension-compliant bids on the table. Could he tell me whether the Department has made any changes to the franchise specifications in respect of pension obligations, and what conversations have been held with the Pensions Regulator regarding the deficit?

Andrew Jones: The Pensions Regulator is an independent body and the pensions that we are talking about are those of private companies, so the role for the Government is not a direct one. Operators are currently liable for the full pensions risk during their franchise term. These competitions—including the east midlands competition, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood)—included a risk-sharing mechanism with the Government that actually reduced the risk to which operators are exposed. Under this mechanism, the operators retain risks that they are able

to manage. There have been some changes, but they are about risk-sharing for the future; so there was a notable change in the franchises.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): It is disappointing that, like so many Southeastern trains, the south-eastern franchise is itself delayed. My constituents expect the new franchise to give them improved services, to reduce overcrowding, and to introduce Delay Repay 15, smart ticketing and flexible season tickets, which are all really important. Will my hon. Friend ensure that, although the franchise is delayed, these improvements will not be? Could they be introduced in advance of the new franchise, rather than our having to wait for so long?

Andrew Jones: I will have a look at my hon. Friend's point. The key benefits that have come into our rail services over the past few years have come in through the franchising process, as it has brought in private investment. That investment has purchased or leased new rolling stock, which has meant a transformation across the country for the travelling public. My hon. Friend is as impatient as I am that the benefits that we are seeing come to fruition for her constituents, and I will of course work to deliver them as fast as possible.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): The franchise specification promised extra capacity, new rolling stock, greater frequency of trains and 15-minute Delay Repay, but my constituents will now not see those improvements for at least another seven—perhaps 12—months. What specifically is the Department going to do to improve services for passengers on Southeastern throughout the period of the franchise extension?

Andrew Jones: We are working to bring the franchise decision to a conclusion as fast as possible, and to get the benefits that will come with that decision right across the franchise as quickly as we can.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): The delay to this franchise is not only a delay to the people of Tonbridge and West Malling, and to the towns and villages around the area; it is also a delay to a strategy that the Minister already announced—the 15-minute delay compensation. I do hope that his initial statement that this scheme will wait until a change of franchise will no longer apply, and that he will instead introduce the change from a 30-minute to a 15-minute delay compensation now. If we are to wait still further, it will cost commuters in the wonderful towns that I have the privilege to represent, as they will have to pay more for delayed services.

Andrew Jones: Delay Repay 15—a compensation system that will give any passenger who has been delayed by 15 minutes or more 25% of their fare back—will be a part of all future franchise awards. We have recently been able to make some in-franchise changes in other areas, such as on Northern and Great Western. I will look into my hon. Friend's point. I am aware of how well this scheme has been received where we have been able to make the changes. It is not quite as straightforward as saying that we can do this immediately, but I know that he is hungry for that benefit and I will do what I can to help him achieve it.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I do not quite understand how the Minister can anonymise the two bids when there are only two bidders, one of which is the existing franchise. Setting that aside, this franchise is fraying at the edges. There have been yet more delays this afternoon because of a broken down train. Is it not time that the Department for Transport spoke to the Mayor of London about London's suburban services and sorted out this mess once and for all?

Andrew Jones: The process for the assessment and award of bids is handled away from Ministers and by the content of the bid rather than by the bidder's name, so these things are handled in a way that is perhaps a little different from that which the hon. Gentleman suggests. I have had a conversation with the Mayor, but not on this issue. He came to the Department for Transport seeking a loan facility of over £2 billion to help with the completion of Crossrail. We were able to help with that. It is of course a loan that will need to be repaid, but the loan has been made and he is, I believe, drawing down on it. He needs to answer some questions about the long-term viability of Transport for London's finances.

On the performance on the network, of course there is more to be done on every single franchise. I want to make sure that we have services that are on time, every time. Ninety per cent. of trains on this franchise have been on time over the past few months. When I looked at the performance figures earlier today, I saw that it was 97%. But of course nobody wants to have any delays, and that is why this is my top priority.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): Rail users and constituents of mine on the Maidstone East line and the Medway Valley line from Chatham are fed up with being forced to pay through the nose to use a service beset by delays, lack of information and poor-quality rolling stock. Continuous delays in deciding the next franchise provide no incentive for the current franchise holder to make any investment to improve services for those users. What can the Minister do to ensure that passengers receive the service that they pay for now rather than in the future—for which, like Southeastern's, the timetable keeps changing?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend has been a champion for her travelling public. I know that because she has made this point to me on a number of occasions, both in this House and in meetings outside. On the management of the franchise, there is, as with all franchises, a performance regime that is operated through the Department for Transport. Whenever we see franchises failing in any way, we take action right away. I say what I have said to other colleagues across the House: I am impatient to see the benefits of this franchise award out there as soon as possible. Consequently, I will be making sure that we get this decision made as fast as we possibly can, and I will keep her informed of progress.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): This is the fourth time that the award of a new franchise has been delayed. Commuters from my constituency and from others across the south-east have been facing delays, cancellations, and overcrowding on trains. The continued delay is preventing long-term investment and improvements, placing millions of passengers at a disadvantage. Will the

Minister therefore provide an update on the timeline for the award, be transparent about the reasons for the repeated delay, and outline a long-term view on the viability of the franchise system as a whole?

Andrew Jones: My view on the franchise system as a whole is that it has been a part of our improvement in our rail performance as measured by the number of services, the number of passengers, and the quality of journeys over the past few years. The benefits of a privately run industry have been profound. I cannot answer the hon. Lady's question because this is market-sensitive information. There is information that will need to be announced to the markets and to the House in the normal manner when the decisions are made.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I happen to agree with my hon. Friend the Minister about the benefits that come from franchising. Having said that, perhaps he will take this point in the spirit in which I make it when I say that if one was paying someone to discredit the franchising process, the way his Department has gone about it could not be bettered—it is an utter shambles. In order not to add insult to injury to my long-suffering constituents, will he return to the very fair point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat)—that the very least the Department can do is to ensure that if the company seeks an extension to the current franchise and continues to get financial benefit, it shall be obliged to bring in 15-minute Delay Repay straight away, and not wait?

Andrew Jones: The issue for me is how to ensure that the trains are run on time every time, but when things go wrong we need a compensation scheme that is fair to the traveling public. I share my hon. Friend's impatience to get the benefits that will come from this franchise award to the constituents he serves so well. I will keep him updated on progress, including on DR15.

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): As the Minister knows, the contract for the rolling stock for the London underground deep tube was awarded to a company that intends to build the majority of the rolling stock in Austria, having promised that it would be built in the UK. What guarantees can he give that the company awarded the new south-eastern rolling stock contract will build the trains in the UK and provide work for train companies such as Hitachi in Newton Aycliffe in my constituency?

Andrew Jones: The hon. Gentleman is a great champion for that rail company in his constituency. He has told me about it on a number of occasions, and I hope to visit the plant shortly. I have met the company, and I am aware of the quality of its product. I cannot direct where a private company places an order. We are in an open market economy—we have competition, which delivers passenger benefits, value and passenger experiences that were never possible when this railway was nationalised. I am sure that those who are making the purchasing decisions will be aware of the point he makes and of the merits of British manufacturing.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): These delays are regrettable, but they at least give the Minister an opportunity to look again at the terms of the franchise. I was pleased

when the Oyster card system was extended to Dartford, to cater for my constituents. Does he agree that any new franchise contract should include a term to ensure that smart ticketing is extended beyond the current boundaries?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend makes a wise point, as ever. Smart ticketing is a part of the rail future right across the country, not just in Dartford. The pay-as-you-go extension has been very popular across the south-east. The benefits of smart ticketing are profound, including convenience for passengers and the ability to change tickets more easily, and we are trying to ensure that they are part of all franchises.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Minister has referred to the Williams review several times. Keith Williams has already warned about the Government “micromanaging” the rail industry and driving passengers away. He has also said that the current franchise system is damaging to innovation. Does the Minister agree with those comments?

Andrew Jones: There are points in the current operation of the franchise system that can be improved, but micromanaging from Government is not helpful. The Labour position is to micromanage everything from Government by nationalising the railways, so there is—[*Interruption.*] There is a little bit of inconsistency in what the hon. Lady says.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): My constituents will be disappointed with this delay, but I have every faith that the Minister will get this right. The Transport Committee has looked at the franchising process in a number of reports. It is very complex and detailed, and as a result it can be expensive and litigious. Will there be an opportunity to simplify the franchising process, so that we do not experience such delays when making decisions?

Andrew Jones: I hope that simplification of the structure of the industry, including the franchising process, will be one output of the Williams review.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance. I went outside into Parliament Square to speak to members of Extinction Rebellion who wanted to exercise their right to come into Parliament to lobby their MP. I am holding over 100 letters to MPs. What guidance can you give those people who are unable today to exercise their right?

Mr Speaker: I have been attending to my duties in the Chair, so I cannot comment on what restrictions on access to or egress from the estate have applied, either as a matter of policy or on account on the very large number of people who may be around. In so far as the hon. Lady is seeking to give voice to the concerns of her constituents and others who are campaigning on this subject, she has found her own salvation, because she has made the point, she has held up the letters and it will be on the record in the *Official Report*, and I think therefore honour is served.

Sri Lanka

Mr Speaker: Colleagues, in respectful memory of the 321 people slaughtered in the appalling Easter Sunday terrorist attack in Sri Lanka, including eight British citizens, and of the approximately 500 people wounded in those attacks, I propose that we now hold a one-minute silence.

5.35 pm

The House observed a minute's silence.

Mr Speaker: Colleagues, thank you.

5.36 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Today, the flags in Downing Street and on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office are flying at half-mast following the horrific Easter day terrorist attack in Sri Lanka. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on the attack and the UK Government's response.

On Sunday, multiple terrorist suicide bombings were conducted across Sri Lanka. Six explosions occurred simultaneously—three in churches conducting Easter day services in Colombo, Negombo and Batticaloa, and three more in hotels in Colombo popular with foreign visitors. Information is still coming in, but we know that over 300 people have been killed, and we know that at least eight of those, sadly, are British nationals. They include mother Anita Nicholson with her 14-year-old son Alex and 11-year-old daughter Annabel, teenage brother and sister Amelie and Daniel Linsey, and retired firefighter Bill Harrop with his wife, retired GP Sally Bradley. The whole House will want to pass on our deepest sympathies and condolences, as we digest a truly heartbreaking situation.

I spoke to James Dauris, the British high commissioner in Colombo, earlier this afternoon, and I want to put on record my thanks to him, his team and all the employees of the British Council for their dedication in extremely testing circumstances. One locally employed British Council employee is in hospital with his wife, both with serious injuries, and our thoughts are also with them and their family. Our travel advice has been updated and remains the best source of information for any British nationals or family members who have concerns about the situation.

Yesterday, I spoke to my counterpart, the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister, to express my thanks for the work of the emergency services in Sri Lanka, as well as to pass on our condolences to all the bereaved families. I also discussed what further support the UK might be able to offer. Her Majesty the Queen, the Prince of Wales and other members of the royal family have sent messages of condolence to the President and people of Sri Lanka, and the Prime Minister is expected to speak with Sri Lankan Prime Minister Wickremesinghe later today.

These attacks were a primitive and vile attempt to sow division between people of different faiths. Religious tensions have caused some of the bloodiest battles in human history, and it is sombre and sobering that even in the 21st century attempts continue to set believers of different religions against each other. Our response must be to deny the perpetrators the satisfaction of dividing us by being united in our condemnation of the attacks and united in our support for religious tolerance—

[Mr Jeremy Hunt]

surely one of humanity's greatest achievements. Just as after the equally horrific attacks on the two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, we must respond by bringing people together; that is the exact opposite of what the perpetrators intended.

It has to be said that the sheer brutality of the attacks was stark. One pair of attackers, after detonating their first explosives in a hotel, waited for people to try to escape before detonating a second device. The device destroyed by security services at Colombo airport was most likely designed to target fleeing civilians. The attack was complex, tightly co-ordinated and designed to cause maximum chaos, damage and heartbreak.

The UK will never stand by in the face of such evil. Today, we stand in solidarity with the Government and people of Sri Lanka, who have made enormous strides towards stability and peace following the conclusion of the civil war almost exactly 10 years ago. The Metropolitan police counter-terrorism command has dispatched a team of specialists to Sri Lanka, including family liaison officers, to support the families of British victims and assist with the repatriation of deceased British nationals. A recent programme run by Interpol involved the training of 30 Sri Lankan forensic specialists and police officers by UK experts in disaster victim identification. We hope that that will be of additional support.

The Government of Sri Lanka have declared a state of emergency as the investigation continues. More than 20 arrests have been made, and there are likely to be more people who were involved in the planning of this attack still at large. A large amount of improvised explosive device material has been recovered, including 87 low-explosive detonators that were recovered from a bus station. There are no verified claims of responsibility as yet. So far, 40 arrests have been made, and counter-terrorism activity continues. The Sri Lankan Prime Minister and President have both said publicly that there will be a thorough investigation into the incident and whether information was handled correctly, and it is important to let that process follow its course.

To attack Christian worshippers at Easter, which is a celebration of peace and the holiest day in the Christian calendar, betrays in the attackers an absence of the most basic values of humanity. Just two days ago, the Prime Minister and I both noted in our Easter messages the dangers facing Christians around the world, 300 of whom are killed every month. In response to such acts, we must redouble our efforts to protect the freedom of religious minorities to practise their faiths, wherever they are. For that reason, the FCO has asked the Bishop of Truro to do an independent report into what more can be done to protect persecuted Christians around the world.

The British Government will continue to give their wholehearted support to the people of Sri Lanka, and I am sure the House will join me in once again expressing our deepest sadness and sympathy to everyone who has been affected by these monstrous attacks. I commend this statement to the House.

5.43 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of his statement and for the tone of his words, with which

I wholeheartedly agree. I join him in commending the work of the British high commission in Colombo. Once again, it has demonstrated that in the very worst of circumstances for British nationals abroad, our consular services offer the very best of support. I am sure the high commission will continue to ensure that the families of the British nationals who have so tragically been killed in the attacks get all the support they need at this time of unbearable shock and sadness.

I have full confidence in what the Foreign Secretary has said about the assistance that the Government are ready to offer to the Sri Lankan authorities, whether in relation to security and intelligence, or in relation to help for the forensic services. He has our support and our thanks for that.

I know that there are many questions to be asked about who was responsible for the attacks and what could have been done to prevent them, but today is not a time for those questions. On this day of national mourning in Sri Lanka, as the first of those who were killed are buried and as the death toll continues to mount, it is simply a time for this House and this country to stand with the people of Sri Lanka, with the British families and with those from around the world who have lost loved ones and to express our shared solidarity and grief at the devastation that they have suffered. It is a time to stand in admiration at the way in which the Sri Lankan people and their Government have responded to this attempt to divide them by instead coming together in peace and calling for the unity of all communities. We in the west must do our part to help Sri Lanka to recover from this horror by continuing to visit that beautiful country and showing the terrorists they will not win.

It is sadly apt that on St George's day, when we mark both the birth and the death of Shakespeare, we are confronted with the latest example of what he once called "mountainish inhumanity". That is the unspeakable inhumanity and evil of men who would walk into a group of peaceful Christian worshippers at prayer or happy foreign tourists having breakfast and blow these innocent people up, killing at least 320 people, including 45 children and an eight-year-old cousin of our good friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq). Dozens are still fighting for their lives in hospital and hundreds more have received life-changing injuries.

When we ask how anyone's mind could become so warped and depraved as to commit such an act, just as we did about the attack on Muslims in Christchurch last month and on Jews in Pittsburgh last October, we must not make the mistake of blaming religion. There is no religion on this earth that teaches that the way to salvation is blowing up innocent children or shooting people at prayer. We must also not make the mistake of saying that one act of evil begets another, that somehow this atrocity happened because of the atrocity in Christchurch. I believe that that is an entirely false narrative, one that excuses terrorism. We should never indulge it. Instead, we should call it out for what it is: an act born of pure, vicious mind-polluting hatred perpetuated by sickening, despicable individuals who do not worship God but death; whose only religion is hate and whose fellow believers in hatred and in death must be wiped from the face of our earth.

But in these dark and terrible moments, I see one shred of light and one piece of definite proof that the narrative that says that evil begets evil and we reap what

we sow is indeed a false one. That was the deeply moving statement made by Ben Nicholson, confirming the loss of his wife and two children in the blast at the Shangri-La hotel. I do not think there is any one of us who could understand what that grief would feel like. We would all have understood if Mr Nicholson's reaction had been one of anger and hatred towards the people who had destroyed his family, but instead his response was filled with love for his wife and for his beautiful children. He rejected hatred, the hatred that had killed his family, and he responded to it with mountainish humanity: a humanity that no act of evil could corrupt, because, as Shakespeare also wrote:

"unkindness may defeat my life, But never taint my love."

Mr Hunt: I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary not just for the tone of her comments but for the very moving way in which she delivered them. I thank her for her support of the work of the British high commission, which is particularly challenging at this time. We are indeed giving help to the Sri Lankan Government in the two areas on which they particularly requested help: counter-terrorism work and countering violent extremism, of which we sadly have a lot of experience in this country.

The right hon. Lady is right to say that at times like this bringing people together with a message of unity and reconciliation is the only approach. I think people on all sides of the House were immensely inspired by the tone taken by the New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, after the horrific attacks in Christchurch. I know the Sri Lankan Government are making every attempt to take the same approach.

I thank the right hon. Lady for talking about the extraordinarily generous response made by Ben Nicholson after losing his wife and two children. I also agree with her that these kinds of attacks, far from being religious, are condemned by people of all faiths and none for their utter depravity.

The final point I want to make is simply that while it is right that, in this House, we think about the eight British people who lost their lives, the vast majority of people who were murdered were Sri Lankans at church on Easter morning, celebrating the resurrection of Christ and life. They did not deserve to suffer this way and it is absolutely right that we remember them as well.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for his statement and for raising the reality, which is clear to us all, that these attacks were planned to have the maximum effect on the single biggest day in a Christian calendar, when children are encouraged to be in the church, celebrating what has been the resurrection for Christians of Christ. Therefore, they would have known that the maximum effect would be devastating. Following what the Opposition spokesman, the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) said, does my right hon. Friend agree that the reality is that the one thing that Easter teaches us is that it is about sacrifice for others and the forgiveness that follows? I wonder whether he will therefore ensure that no matter what else happens, we give our greatest support to the Sri Lankan Government in pursuing those who conducted this terrible attack but, at the same time, recognising that the Christian faith is about forgiveness.

Mr Hunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for saying those brave words. It is very difficult for many people to think about forgiveness after what happened, but that is indeed an appropriate thing for Christians to think about, particularly at Easter. But forgiveness does not mean the absence of justice, and that is why it is absolutely essential that we support the Sri Lankan authorities in their determination to track down everyone responsible. We know that they have identified other people who have not yet been arrested, who they are looking for at the moment. Obviously, for the safety and security of everyone in Sri Lanka, it is vital that they are found, but I thank him for the generosity of his comments.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement and join him in thanking the high commissioner, everybody at the high commission in Colombo and the rest of the Foreign Office officials, who must have worked in the most difficult and distressing circumstances over the weekend. I extend our thanks to the Sri Lankan emergency services as well for their efforts and work. At this time, our thoughts are obviously with all those who are affected, and we send our condolences to the families who have had their loved ones taken away in the cruellest of circumstances. That loss of life is always sad, but I have to say, I find it particularly heartbreaking how many children were killed in this attack, and the brave and touching statement from Mr Nicholson is a lesson for each and every one of us.

Savage acts of terrorism do not discriminate by age, but they do not discriminate by faith either. These attempts to sow division through violence at Easter, of all times, should be met with a response of peace and solidarity. Our message is that barbarism strengthens our belief in our common humanity, regardless of faith, background or ethnicity. I thank the Foreign Secretary for the work that is ongoing with the Sri Lankan authorities. I am glad that that assistance will be ongoing, but at the moment, our prayers and thoughts are with all those affected. The message from this place has to be that hate and violence will not win out.

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments, with which I wholeheartedly agree. The number of child victims, of many, many nationalities, is one of the most heartbreaking things to have occurred. What this event also reminds us is that when we talk about Christians suffering around the world, we are talking not about wealthy westerners, but about some of the poorest people in the world—it is only 8% of the population in Sri Lanka—and sometimes that fact has been obscured in terms of the priorities that we set ourselves as a country. That is what we are hoping to put right with the review that is being done by the Bishop of Truro.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I thank the Foreign Secretary and the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) for the tone of their statements today. Through the Foreign Secretary and from experience, I express my thanks to Foreign Office and other UK Government personnel who will be involved in dealing with the aftermath of the incident. I thank the Foreign Secretary particularly for expressing so clearly the indiscriminate nature of terrorist violence. Does he agree that the best way to

[Alistair Burt]

protect the Christian community, or any community in the future, is to ensure that the rule of law is everywhere, that the best of intelligence is shared around the world, and that the understanding that an attack on one is an attack on all becomes universal, for there is no hierarchy in terms of victimhood?

Mr Hunt: Those are the kind of wise words that I would expect from my right hon. Friend, with whom I was privileged to work; he spent many years in the FCO. He is right to say that if we are going to prevent this kind of horrific massacre from happening in future, it is really a combination of the hard and the soft. The hard side, of course, is making sure that the security is there and that the security services are able to do their job to track down perpetrators and potential perpetrators. The soft side is what he and the shadow Foreign Secretary so movingly talked about, which is the message of reconciliation, because trying to set faith against faith is one of the oldest tricks in the book in human history. It is a great measure of human progress that in the last 100 years, we have massively increased across the world the amount of religious tolerance, but I am afraid that these events show that we can never be complacent.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his words, his statement and for all that his Department is doing, and I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for her moving words. This was a heartbreaking attack on Sri Lanka, Christians and peace-loving people everywhere, and we stand with Sri Lanka. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that we face a real threat from those who seek to divide us and to drive our world towards conflict, where far right nationalism and pseudo-religious extremism feed off each other in a dependent, destructive cycle? We need to stand up and challenge that hate and the best way to do that is to stand together with love.

Mr Hunt: I agree. That is the fundamental challenge. When we are trying to answer the important question of how we prevent this kind of thing from happening, the most important first step is to properly understand the motives of the people who try to perpetrate these attacks. We do not know that at this stage, but it seems clear that one was a religious motive to try and set faith against faith, and one was a cultural motive to try and target western tourists who are visiting Sri Lanka. We have to be alive to both of those, but the shadow Foreign Secretary was absolutely right in saying that one of the things that we can do to support Sri Lanka is—obviously subject to travel advice, which is very carefully kept under review—to continue to visit a country that depends on tourism to show our support and to show that we are not going to be put off by this kind of terrorism.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Whoever perpetrated these hideous crimes and whatever their warped ideology, they are murderers, and cowardly murderers at that. Will my right hon. Friend therefore convey to the high commissioner James Dauris, his staff and to the Government of President Sirisena and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe that we want to show our solidarity and sympathy with our Commonwealth cousins at this extraordinarily difficult time? Will he confirm—it may

be premature to do so—that many of those arrested to date appear to have connections of one sort or another with Syria? And if that is the case, will he look very carefully at extending whatever assistance he is giving to the Government of Sri Lanka to include offering similar assistance to the Government of the neighbouring Maldives, where there is also a problem with returning foreign fighters from Syria and where we have many British tourists on holiday at any given time of the year?

Mr Hunt: As I would expect, my right hon. Friend, being a former Minister for Asia, makes an important point. He is right that there are early indications of Islamist extremism that we need to investigate properly, and the Maldives is a very young democracy to which we want to give every support, so I will take his point away.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I am sure you will join me and other right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House in passing on our condolences to the former Member for Manchester, Withington, Keith Bradley, now a Member of the other place, whose sister, Dr Sally Bradley, was killed in Sri Lanka. Her husband, Bill Harrop, was also killed.

Dr Sally Bradley qualified as a doctor at Manchester University, worked as a GP in Salford and served as director of public health and director of medicine in the Pennine Acute Hospitals NHS Trust, which covers a large part of Greater Manchester. Her husband, Bill Harrop, was a firefighter, but not just a firefighter, and had worked in Manchester and received a commendation after the 1976 IRA bomb, which went off in the centre of Manchester. No distinction can be drawn between victims of such crimes, but there is something particularly monstrous and brutal about people who dedicated themselves to public service being killed in this fashion. I spoke to Keith Bradley yesterday and he told me he was being supported by liaison officers and wanted me to pass on his thanks to the Foreign Secretary.

I finish by asking the Foreign Secretary—I know what his answer will be, but it is worth saying anyway—to redouble his efforts to ensure that people in this country and elsewhere are as safe as they can be from the diaspora of ISIS in Syria and elsewhere.

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for reminding the House that behind all these tragedies are human beings and for his moving description of the wonderful public service of Bill Harrop and Sally Bradley. I pass on my condolences to Keith Bradley—and indeed to the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), who also lost a relative in the attack. I was privileged when Health Secretary to see at first hand the extraordinary work of the Greater Manchester emergency services in combating terrorism after the arena bombing, but I had not realised Bill Harrop's connection to fighting terrorist incidents in that city. It makes it all the more moving.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I join others in expressing my horror at and condemnation of the stomach-churning cruelty and appalling depravity of these attacks on innocent worshippers and tourists. Does the Foreign Secretary agree it is vital that this

appalling atrocity not deter Sri Lankans in their efforts to press ahead with peace, reconciliation and accountability following the long years of conflict in that country?

Mr Hunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for making that point; it is of course the bigger picture. The extraordinary change in Sri Lanka, compared with 20 or 30 years ago, means it is now possible to visit all parts of the country. It has made incredible progress in tackling terrorism, and that must not be obscured by this horrific incident, so she is absolutely right to say that.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): As we mourn all those who died in this Easter Sunday massacre, the Foreign Secretary will be aware that ISIS has sought to claim responsibility, saying it had

“targeted nationals of the crusader alliance...and Christians”.

If that proves to be the case, does it not show that although its forces may have been defeated on the battlefields of Iraq and Syria, its ideology has not, and does that not make it all the more important that on this day and every day in the future we stand shoulder to shoulder with all those who stand for the right of all God’s children to freely practise their religion in safety and peace in the face of such barbaric hatred?

Mr Hunt: The right hon. Gentleman speaks incredibly powerfully and I absolutely agree with him. Sadly, I doubt we will ever defeat the ideology of hatred, because it is a persistent feature of human existence, but we must be ready to stand up and fight it in whatever guise it emerges. He is absolutely right, too, that the territorial defeat of Daesh does not mean the ideological defeat of Daesh. We must continue to redouble our efforts in precisely the way he says.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): It was a privilege to listen to the statement by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and to the response from the shadow Foreign Secretary. They spoke with great passion and integrity. I cannot have been alone this weekend in holding my children that much closer after reading Ben Nicholson’s heartbreaking words and hearing of his enormous courage.

This issue offers a challenge to us here in this House, as so much of our debate in the last year or two has been inward-looking; we must look outwards, and in doing so we must not only support the people of Sri Lanka at this incredibly difficult time. Will my right hon. Friend also redouble efforts elsewhere and, in supporting Christian communities around the world, on the advice of the Bishop of Truro, also support other communities threatened by terrorism? We might not be world leaders in every field, but there are a few areas where we really are: intelligence, diplomatic support and training to important allies and partners is one area where we can make a real difference. I welcome the work of the Metropolitan police and the units already deployed, and I know there is much more he cannot talk about, but it would be good to know that support is going to our friends and allies around the world.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend makes an important point and subtly alludes to the challenge we face at the moment. Preoccupied as we are in the House with one big issue, we should not forget that the rest of the world

looks to this country to show leadership in tackling these big issues and wants us to get back on the job as quickly as possible. When it comes to freedom of religious belief, it is important to remember that terrorism is not the only issue; there is also in many countries state-sponsored oppression of people who just wish to practise their faith freely. That is why our work will look not only at what we can do to prevent such terrorist incidents, but at how we can use diplomatic levers to stand up for the right of people all over the world to do what we can do in this country, which is practise our religion freely.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary and shadow Foreign Secretary for their moving words, because the events and stories coming out of Sri Lanka are truly heartbreaking. To attack churches on Easter Sunday in this way, and the streets and hotels, is vile. They are right that the extremists and terrorists are seeking to divide us and that it is important to bring people together. Does this not show the importance of our international intelligence and security partnerships and our ability to use them in support of Sri Lanka and other countries in the international fight against ISIS and extremism? Does it not also show that this work is about supporting peace and saving lives?

Mr Hunt: The right hon. Lady understands this area very well, from her former role as shadow Home Secretary, and is absolutely right. We in this country are lucky to have superb intelligence services and strong intelligence relationships all over the world, which we need to keep each other secure, and I can absolutely give her the assurance that, even though these things happen under the surface, they are a very important part of our counter-terrorism effort.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement.

This is so sad for Sri Lanka. It takes us back to the dark old days of which my right hon. Friend has spoken. Such cold, calculated attacks make us all think about the character and the thought processes of those involved—or, dare I say, the lack of any thought at all. As has already been said, to attack Christians on Easter Sunday was nothing short of barbaric.

I am grateful for my right hon. Friend’s assurance that Britain will never just stand by and has already committed resources to support the Sri Lankan Government, but will he go further, and say that Britain will support not only Sri Lanka but others in tackling this global threat? It appears that ISIS has influenced and integrated into domestic organisations in Sri Lanka without which these organisations would not have been able to cause such devastation.

Will my right hon. Friend also confirm that this event has strengthened his resolve—I know that this is a personal mission of his—to ensure that we tackle the persecution of Christians around the world, which too often goes unreported?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to give my hon. Friend a personal commitment that I want to do more on this front, and also to tell him that the United Kingdom is a world leader in countering extremist disinformation online. We have developed particular expertise over the past five years or so, and we share our information widely.

[*Mr Hunt*]

My hon. Friend is right to say how coldly calculated this attack was. To co-ordinate six explosions to take place at virtually the same moment required an enormous degree of planning. Those people knew exactly what they were doing. They spent a long time planning the attacks and finding the recruits to carry them out. We have to think hard about the kind of people who would do such a thing, and I hope that will mean that we redouble our efforts to ensure that it does not happen again.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I join the Foreign Secretary, the shadow Foreign Secretary and colleagues across the House in utterly condemning these terrorist attacks. My thoughts are with the victims and their families.

Does the Foreign Secretary agree that the focus on protecting religious minorities—in this case, Christian minorities—must be redoubled? The atmosphere of intolerance towards religious minorities in different countries—whether they are Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews or Hindus—has increased, and the international community must step up to provide that protection, as well as security for minorities.

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Let me also commend her for the work that she has done in championing the rights of Rohingya Muslims in Burma; I think that my first contact with her when I became Foreign Secretary was in that connection.

It is important to understand that it is an easy first step to target and attack someone because of their religion, and that in very poor countries where many people have not had a proper education it is easy to whip up feelings in a way that can be lethal.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend and the shadow Foreign Secretary for what they have said this afternoon. The freedom to practise a faith—in the community or alone, in public or in private—or to change one's religion, or follow none at all, goes to the heart of what freedom means. Does my right hon. Friend agree that freedom of religion is not an optional extra but goes to the heart of our freedom values, and will he confirm that he will continue the excellent work that he has begun in his Department, which has made that a central focus?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Freedom of religious belief is just a form of freedom of belief. The fact is that states which try to control what people believe will try to affect their human rights in many other ways as well. One of the points made by the Archbishop of Canterbury is that the countries that have the biggest problems when it comes to freedom of religious belief tend to have the biggest human rights problems generally. That is a kind of litmus test of the freedom that people have in different countries, which is why it is such an important issue.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

As many Members have said, terrorism does not discriminate between the rich and the poor, and will target people whatever their age, sex or gender, nationality

or religion. The harrowing vista that we have seen since the Easter weekend grows more sorrowful as each day passes, and as more stories unfold about the barbaric acts that took place in Sri Lanka. The Foreign Secretary will be aware of the book of condolence that has already been opened in the high commission, and I hope that he will encourage people to sign it.

Can the Foreign Secretary assure the House that, as the days unfold, he will examine the sources of all the financial support that flows from the United Kingdom and other Commonwealth countries to political groups in Sri Lanka, and can he confirm that none of that support makes its way to radicalised groups or individuals there?

Mr Hunt: Rather than responding to the hon. Gentleman from the Dispatch Box, I will look into the work that we are doing and, if I may, write to him giving the full details. I know that we do an enormous amount of work in trying to strangle the sources of terrorist funding throughout the world.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): My right hon. Friend and the shadow Foreign Secretary set the tone for this set of exchanges. I think that more and more people are saying, as they did when the Provisional IRA was at its peak, "This has not been done in our name"—even people who may somehow be beyond those who know what they are doing in directing violence of this kind.

I spent Christmas with my family in a church in Sri Lanka at a multilingual service. During our time in Sri Lanka, we were very impressed by the intercommunal peace and harmony. It was clear to us that tourism matters a great deal to the development of Sri Lanka as it recovers from its past. I hope that people will soon realise that they can travel to Sri Lanka safely and enjoy helping it to put itself back on its feet.

We must do what we must also do in Tunisia, Egypt and other countries where people have tried to destroy the prosperity of others in the countries that they share.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He is also right to point out that there has been great progress in Sri Lanka, and great progress in religious tolerance. It is important to recognise that the extent of religious tolerance in any developing country is also a function of its political leadership. If there is leadership from the Prime Ministers and Presidents of those countries, it is possible to set the right tone when it comes to religious tolerance, but if those leaders fan the flames of populism or extremism, things can go wrong very quickly.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Let me express my sympathy and sincere condolences—and those of constituents who have contacted me following these horrific attacks—to the families of all who were killed or injured, and to the injured themselves. Words cannot describe the shock that was felt around the world. The despicable terrorist attacks which targeted the Christian community also killed or injured people of all faiths and none. This was an attack on humanity, on the values of respect and compassion, and on freedom of religion and faith.

The Sri Lankan diaspora community, including many people in my constituency and across the country, will currently be experiencing huge fear, anxiety and great concern for their friends, families and loved ones. Will the Foreign Secretary confirm that as well as continuing to provide vital security, intelligence and consular support in Sri Lanka, he will ensure that support is extended to the diaspora communities here, given what they will be going through, and given that they will also have a vital role to play in helping Sri Lanka to heal?

Mr Hunt: I can certainly assure the hon. Lady of that. I will be talking to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government about what support the Sri Lankan diaspora community might need. I will also be signing the book of condolence in the Sri Lankan high commission tomorrow, and I hope that I will have a chance to talk to the high commissioner as well.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): The interconnected nature of the modern world means that abhorrent atrocities as far away as Sri Lanka can hit terribly close to home. I am very sad to tell the House that the Nicholson family, who were so tragically caught up in the cruel and barbaric attack on the Shangri-La hotel, were residents of Upminster, in my constituency, before their move to Singapore. Will the Foreign Secretary join me, and the community that I represent, in expressing profound condolences to Mr Nicholson for the unbearable loss that he has suffered, and will he assure me that Mr Nicholson and other affected families will have access to the full range of consular and other support services in the difficult and dark days ahead?

Mr Hunt: I am absolutely happy to give that assurance. The high commission has been supporting the Nicholson family and will continue to support other families. I think the whole House has been touched, moved, shocked and saddened by what happened to that family, but also uplifted by the generosity of Mr Nicholson's response to an unspeakable personal tragedy.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): May I begin by thanking the Foreign Secretary and the shadow Foreign Secretary for what they said? Unfortunately, this will not be the worst day we will have to talk about, because this Daesh death cult and its local affiliates will continue to carry out these kinds of atrocities globally. We must always say that this will not change our behaviour, it will not change our values and it will not change our solidarity with the people of Sri Lanka or elsewhere. We will stand resolutely with them in trying to get to the people who have done this and to stop other attacks.

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his strong and powerful words as a former Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. I can only agree with everything he said. I think other countries around the world look to this country because of our, sadly, extensive experience in fighting terrorism here. They look to us for expertise, and they look to us to say and do the right thing in these terrible situations.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): May I join other Members in passing on my commiserations to the people of Sri Lanka as they seek to rebuild their

lives after these despicable terrorist acts? Will my right hon. Friend pledge whatever expertise this country has to help our good friend Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to rebuild that country? In particular, will he support Prime Minister Wickremesinghe's call for help in finding out how the use of better intelligence might have prevented this attack and might prevent future attacks?

Mr Hunt: I am very happy to do that. I know that our Prime Minister was hoping to speak to Prime Minister Wickremesinghe this afternoon. We absolutely want to support Sri Lankan efforts to get to the bottom of what intelligence they received—apparently, it did not reach the politicians involved, although it is important to say that, even if it had, it would not necessarily have been possible to prevent these attacks. However, we will give Prime Minister Wickremesinghe every help he requests.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary and to my right hon. Friend the shadow Foreign Secretary for the tone they have set. The Foreign Secretary mentioned that religious intolerance is about not just terrorism, appalling though it is, but oppression. Would he consider adding intolerance of those who do not practise religion? That is, in itself, a belief system, and a valid one, and it can also preach messages of hope and love. There are countries around the world in which having no religion is as dangerous as having the wrong religion. Would he be able to comment on that issue and on whether the Bishop of Truro's investigations could cover it?

Mr Hunt: I absolutely support what the hon. Lady is saying, because the whole point about freedom of religious belief is that people should be free to believe what they want, and that applies to people of any faith or no faith. A fundamental tenet of a free society is that people should be free to come to their own conclusions.

The Bishop of Truro's review is specifically about Christians. I hope the hon. Lady understands that that is because we have a concern that the plight of Christians worldwide has not had the attention that it needs, and we want to put that right. However, I will happily look into the issues she raises about humanist beliefs and other beliefs that are not attached to any particular religion, and write to her if I may.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I concur with the statements made in the House today of compassion for those who have suffered in Sri Lanka this Easter weekend. Across the world, whole swathes of humanity—by some estimates 250 million people in 40 countries—are being persecuted, intimidated, victimised, terrorised, tortured, murdered, deprived of their livelihoods and driven from their homes simply because they seek to practise the Christian faith, and this is getting worse year on year. I thank the Secretary of State for recognising that one of the best weapons to prevent such atrocities is the systematic and determined promotion of religious freedom and for the steps his Department has taken over recent years to address the issue—particularly the inquiry he has called for, which is an acknowledgment that more needs to be done. However, may I urge him to ask his Department for International Development colleagues to do the same, to engage with the inquiry and to look at what more DFID can do?

Mr Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for the passion of her words. Last year, according to the figures I saw, 3,000 Christians were killed because of their faith, and that was double the previous year. These are largely some of the poorest people on the planet. The oppression of Christians, just to deal with that particular issue, is often concentrated in countries such as Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Afghanistan, where we have large aid budgets and therefore a significant degree of leverage with the host countries. One purpose of this review is to understand how we can better join up our Government Departments so that we really do use the influence we have.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Bishop of Truro's review, and its importance is highlighted by this awful massacre. My constituent Councillor Lakmini Shah, who is in Sri Lanka, points out that many children have been orphaned as a result of the attacks, and there is no safety net available to help them—hospitals have been overwhelmed. What immediate relief can the Foreign Secretary's Department and the Department for International Development give, given that many in Sri Lanka face a very difficult few months?

Mr Hunt: I will look into that if I may. I know that we would stand ready to help in any way we could with that situation. I am very pleased that the right hon. Gentleman asked that question, because it has reminded me of something the high commissioner asked me to pass on to the House and, through Members here this afternoon, to their constituents. He strongly encourages anyone who is in Sri Lanka on holiday to contact their friends and family just to say that they are safe. Obviously, there are a lot of people at home worried about what may have happened.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for the statement. In Essex, there is a very strong Tamil community. Will he express his condolences to the Tamil community, particularly regarding those Tamils who lost their lives in this horrific terrorist atrocity? As my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) said, we could use this tragedy to bring about reconciliation with the Tamil community in Sri Lanka.

Mr Hunt: I am very happy to do that. There is a very large Tamil Christian community in Sri Lanka. The important work that has happened over the last decade to achieve reconciliation between Tamils and Sinhalese also needs to be about religious reconciliation and religious tolerance.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Undoubtedly, questions will need to be answered and lessons will need to be learned, but today is not the day for that. Will the Foreign Secretary therefore reassure the House that the UK stands ready to help Sri Lanka with whatever it needs? Furthermore, does he agree that the world, and not just Sri Lanka, may need to reflect on the learnings that come out of any investigation, particularly when it comes to the persecution of faiths?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to give the hon. Lady that undertaking. I think a number of hard lessons will need to be learned about what happened, not least because it does seem, from statements that the Sri Lankan

Government have given, that there was some intelligence forewarning of these attacks, although we do not yet know whether that meant that they could have been prevented.

However, we are also keen to understand broader issues around freedom of religious belief. My own view is that the issue has been talked about a lot in the United States but not so much in Europe, and it is important that we have our perspective on it, which might be different from the perspective in the United States. That is absolutely our intention.

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): I join others in the House in congratulating the Foreign Secretary and the shadow Foreign Secretary on the respectful way in which they have conducted this debate. We in this House rightly protect people's right to worship in whichever way they wish, but the Pew report has stated that Christianity is the most persecuted of religions, and the Open Doors report states that the persecution of Christians is on the increase. This shows the challenge that we face. Every day across the world, Christians face violence, intimidation and death just for worshipping Jesus Christ. What advice would the Foreign Secretary give to people like me who have constituents who are missionaries in Sri Lanka and around the world? What practical steps, alongside the Bishop of Truro's investigation, can the Government take to protect Christians across the world?

Mr Hunt: It has always been a brave thing to be a missionary, and I urge them to ensure that they are fully abreast of Foreign and Commonwealth Office travel advice in order to maintain their own safety. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that there is a broader issue here. The Open Doors report says that 245 million Christians are persecuted every year, and we think that around 80% of the people who are persecuted for their faith are Christians. That is why the independent review by the Bishop of Truro is so timely.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I will not be the only person in this House who finds 11 o'clock on a Sunday morning to be the most peaceful time for practising their faith, but until recently it has felt like the safest time as well. There is no doubt, however, that recent events in Pittsburgh, Christchurch and Sri Lanka have highlighted the fact that there are now attempts to attack people as they go to worship God, whichever God they believe in. The Foreign Secretary spoke about ensuring that we share our experience of counter-terrorism, and I am glad that he is doing that with Sri Lanka, but the reality is that this now appears to be emerging in a number of countries. Can we therefore ensure that we share these resources proactively, starting with the 50 countries that are on the world watch list, to ensure that events such as these do not happen again?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. When we have the Bishop of Truro's report, I want to look at how we can build a coalition with other countries worldwide that have concerns about freedom of religious belief so that we can start spreading those lessons. One of the most important things we can do is to ensure that we express our views to any Governments, particularly in younger democracies, who might be tempted to resort to populist messages that can lead to discrimination against religious believers of one faith or another, and to make them aware of the dangers of that approach.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): This was a horrific and cowardly series of attacks against Sri Lankan nationals, tourists and Christians who were gathering together on the holiest day of the Christian calendar to celebrate their faith. According to the Open Doors world watch list, 11 Christians lose their lives every day because they are practising their faith. What more can the Department do to protect them from persecution and to share the counter-intelligence initiatives that are needed to protect us all?

Mr Hunt: There are two specific things. When it comes to countering terrorism, we in this country have huge expertise and we share it with as many countries as we can in order to try to prevent terrorist attacks. Unfortunately, however, a lot of the persecution that the Open Doors report talks about is state organised and state sponsored, and in those cases we can use our diplomatic levers and those of our friends in other countries who share our values, to try to make it clear that that is not the right way forward.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I thank those on both Front Benches for their response today and particularly for their defence of pluralism. They outlined their horror, which we all share, of innocent people being attacked in their place of worship, where they should feel safe. I agree with the Foreign Secretary about the importance of religious freedom and of the capacity of different faiths to live together and coexist in peace but, given these attacks, there will be people even in this country who are now more nervous about their own places of worship. What assurance can he give to people here that the maximum measures are being taken to defend the pluralism and freedom of worship that we enjoy here in the UK?

Mr Hunt: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising that issue. I think he would agree with me that the extraordinary advances that humanity has made since the time of the Enlightenment have come about because the human race has come to accept pluralism as a mechanism for progress. However, that principle always has to be defended and I am afraid that it still has to be defended in this country. For example, we see some of the protection that is necessary around synagogues and mosques, although not yet around churches. We have to be eternally vigilant on these issues.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I wholeheartedly join others in condemning this sickening action. It is almost unbelievable that people could be so callous as to do something like this on Easter day. I believe that the Sri Lankan Government very quickly shut down social media straight after the attacks to stop the spread of fake news. We have been talking about what we can do to reduce terrorist attacks on the worldwide stage, and one way in which we can really help is by tackling fake news and the spread of disinformation and misinformation. Social media is such an easy tool for those who want to cause us harm, and I would like to ask the Secretary of State what he is doing about that. Is he speaking to colleagues about it?

Mr Hunt: What we call countering disinformation online is an area in which this country has been taking a lead internationally. We spent £20 million on it last year

and we have huge expertise. Unfortunately, we do not have to go as far as Sri Lanka to see these problems; they are also here in Europe—many of the eastern European countries are dealing with propaganda being pumped out into their social media systems, for example—and we absolutely do make that expertise available to our friends around the world.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I should like to put on record my condolences to all those affected by this awful attack. In the practical sense of supporting the Sri Lankan diaspora in the UK, what communication has the Foreign Secretary had with the Home Secretary about the current status of applications from people from Sri Lanka for asylum or leave to remain in this country? Some of them will wish to have the reassurance that they are in a place of safety and that they can stay here.

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady makes an important point. The Home Secretary was with me this morning when I briefed the Cabinet on the situation in Sri Lanka, but I will take up the specific concerns that she has raised.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Social media in this country was used on Sunday by members of the Tamil diaspora with whom I work closely to give me real-time updates and to share their horror and despair. Social media was also used in Sri Lanka to encourage people to donate blood because of the shortages in the hospitals there. The people of Sri Lanka are now unified in their grief, whether they are Sinhalese, Tamil, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Christian or of any other faith or none. What more can we do to work with the Government of Sri Lanka and the international community to cement that universal solidarity as that island moves forward?

Mr Hunt: It is early days, but I spoke to Foreign Minister Marapana yesterday, and our Prime Minister is due to speak to the Sri Lankan Prime Minister this afternoon. Our offer is there to support them in any way possible, but one of the things that we can do is what this House is doing this afternoon. We have had a nearly full house of people from all political parties wanting to show their solidarity with our friends in Sri Lanka, and I think that that is something of which we can be rightly proud.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I should like to associate myself with the comments of my Mancunian colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer), and to send my deepest sympathy to Lord Keith Bradley and his family today. There are 1.2 million Catholics in Sri Lanka who will be frightened to go to mass this coming Sunday. The Church aid agencies are saying to me today that the two priorities are security intelligence, to help the Government there, and expertise to help to rebuild family lives. The Foreign Secretary eloquently covered those two matters in his statement, but will he personally undertake to look at how well the Foreign and Commonwealth Office does in those two areas, to help to inform the Mountstephen review?

Mr Hunt: I would of course be happy to do that. Sadly, what happened in Sri Lanka will colour the review and make us consider the issues around terrorism

[Mr Hunt]

more fully. When we originally set up the review, we were perhaps not thinking that that would be such a big focus, but I think it must be.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Having visited Sri Lanka several times over the past 30 years, I am acutely aware that what makes Sunday's events even more tragic is the progress that has been made in that country over the last 10 to 15 years, including prosperity, national unity and the real prospect of it becoming a tiger in south-east Asia. Will the Secretary of State reiterate our commitment to work with the Sri Lankan Government and people to ensure that they build on the progress that they have made over the past 10 to 15 years, so that they can become that prosperous and unified country?

Mr Hunt: I can absolutely give my hon. Friend that assurance. We are the penholder for Sri Lanka on the United Nations Security Council, so we have a particular responsibility to ensure proper accountability and reconciliation as part of the progress that is being made. I thank him for pointing out that progress. In these dark moments, it is important not to forget that there is actually a lot of hope in the country given the progress that has been made over the past 10 years.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary and the shadow Foreign Secretary for their comments today. Whether in a Christian church in Sri Lanka, a Pittsburgh synagogue or a mosque in Christchurch, the targeted murder of people at prayer because of their faith is a particularly heinous and hateful act of terrorism. Given the dangerous levels of intolerance in the world today, does the Foreign Secretary agree that it is incumbent on each of us, as elected representatives, to reflect on the words that we use, the arguments that we engage in, and the way in which we conduct our political debate to ensure that we contribute to a world that is more tolerant and more inclusive, rather than breed hatred and fear?

Mr Hunt: I cannot really add anything to that, because the hon. Lady speaks powerfully of the responsibility of all Members, except to say that to do what she says is quite challenging. Elections are competitive things, and we get headlines by saying strong things that grab people's attention, but we must always ensure that we stand on the right side of the line and do not foster the kind of hatred that we so tragically witnessed this weekend.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): It is right that we should respond to this unspeakable outrage with a message of tolerance, calm and peace, but it is also right that this wickedness should not go unpunished. Does my right hon. Friend agree that our intelligence agencies, including GCHQ in my constituency, should be authorised to give their Sri Lankan counterparts whatever support is deemed appropriate to ensure that those responsible for this wickedness are brought to justice?

Mr Hunt: I can absolutely give my hon. Friend that assurance. I am pleased that he mentioned GCHQ, because it has done a spectacularly important job in recent years in helping us to understand the Daesh

networks and how they operate online. That has played a significant role in the defeat of Daesh in recent months, at least in terms of their territorial possessions.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement and my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) for her response. They set a perfect tone for this exchange. As my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) just said, we must consider how we behave and set high standards for how we conduct our politics if we are going to show leadership at times like this. Intolerance can reach into all our communities. Yesterday was the 26th anniversary of the murder of Stephen Lawrence, and such events bring home to us the need for us all to face up to intolerance wherever it is.

If the Bishop of Truro is conducting an inquiry looking specifically at the Christian faith and at how Christians are being persecuted around the world, we must avoid any suggestion that we are setting up one religion to be more important than another, because people may seek to prey on that. I know that the Foreign Secretary would want to avoid that, but we must be aware of it.

Mr Hunt: I entirely understand why the hon. Gentleman raises that issue. I reassure him that we support freedom of all religious belief; it is just that we think that Christianity has been slightly left behind for various reasons. More Christians are persecuted than those of any other faith, so we want to ensure that we are giving that the proper attention it deserves without excluding any other faith from our concerns.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I also thank the Foreign Secretary and the shadow Foreign Secretary for what they said and the way in which they said it, and the same goes for all colleagues. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the people of Sri Lanka deserve immense praise for the fact that there is freedom of belief in their country? We have already heard mention of Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus and others who are able to practise their beliefs. Indeed, this atrocity was possible only because Christians were freely able to worship together on Easter Sunday, which is not possible in so many other countries.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend makes a profoundly important point, and I totally agree with him. The perpetrators of this evil attack were trying to stop freedom of religious belief, and we must ensure that they are not successful.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. I thank the Foreign Secretary for his article in *The Mail on Sunday* in which he referred to the story about "God's smuggler", which he read when he was about 10 years old and I read when I was about 24 or thereabouts—perhaps that shows our age difference. He also said that Britain cares "about those who stand up for the right to believe", and I think that he spoke not only for his Department and our Government, but for MPs and for our nation.

The photographs of children at Sunday school or people who had closed their eyes in prayer only to be murdered because they were Christians resonate with us

all. Such grief brings us together. We can pray, but we must also provide emotional support, because both Sri Lankans and others have suffered life-changing injuries, and some families have also been deprived of their wage earner. Is the Foreign Secretary able to help in providing the necessary medical help to those who have life-changing injuries? As he rightly said, the Christians are probably some of the poorer people in Sri Lanka, so can we also reach out and give financial assistance? If we can do those things, we can provide the innocents with the practical help that they so badly need.

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development will consider any need for that kind of support with the greatest of sympathy, but I thank the hon. Gentleman for drawing attention to the people who have had life-changing injuries. Around 500 people were injured in addition to the more than 300 people who tragically lost their lives, including a local employee of the British Council and his wife.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Foreign Secretary, the shadow Foreign Secretary, and all colleagues who have spoken in the course of these exchanges both for what they said and for the way in which they said it. It is the right thing to do in itself, but I think I speak for all colleagues in expressing the hope that it might offer some very modest comfort and succour to the families and friends of those who have been slaughtered or injured in the course of these horrific attacks.

Northern Ireland: Murder of Lyra McKee

6.49 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): With permission, Mr Speaker, it is with great sadness that I wish to make a statement on the appalling murder of Lyra McKee in Londonderry on Thursday evening.

That evening the Police Service of Northern Ireland carried out searches at two locations in the Creggan area of the city, believing that dissident republicans were storing firearms and explosives in preparation for attacks. While the searches were being carried out, a crowd gathered, three vehicles were hijacked and set alight, and the police came under attack, with up to 50 petrol bombs thrown at police lines.

During the disorder, a gunman fired a number of shots in the direction of police, wounding Lyra McKee. Showing incredible bravery while still under attack, PSNI officers attended to Lyra as she was transported to hospital in a police vehicle. Tragically, neither those on the scene nor medical staff were able to save her and she died from the injuries she sustained.

I thank, once again, the police, medical staff and other emergency services for their bravery and commitment. On Saturday I had the privilege of thanking a number of them in person and of paying my respects to Lyra at the guildhall with John Boyle, the mayor of Derry City and Strabane District Council. As we signed the book of condolence, he told me the touching anecdote that he was one of Lyra's first journalism tutors.

This is, first and foremost, a personal tragedy for the family and friends of Lyra who fully expected her to come home that evening. It is a truly shocking and heartbreaking situation for them, and we can only imagine the devastating pain they must feel—something they should never have had to endure. I know the whole House will want to join me in extending our deepest sympathies to her partner Sara and her family, friends and colleagues.

Lyra was a brilliant, talented journalist and is a true loss to Northern Ireland. She was a role model to many, and she always fought to make Northern Ireland a better place. Nothing we say today can take away the pain that her family must be experiencing now, but what I can say to her family, the people of Derry and the whole of Northern Ireland is that we will continue to strive for peace in Northern Ireland. We are behind them, and we are united in rejecting those who seek to undermine peace with terror. They have no place in our society and they must be dealt with under the law. The people responsible for Thursday's sickening attack will never win.

This is also a tragedy for the community in Creggan and for the city as a whole. I am sure we have all been struck by the profound sense of anger at this sickening and callous attack. This was a young woman with so much hope and so much to offer, unlike those who have continually shown that they have nothing to offer.

It remains the case across Northern Ireland that small numbers of dissident republican terrorists remain intent on killing, but what we have seen in the days since Lyra McKee's death is that the communities they claim to represent and seek to control do not want them.

[Karen Bradley]

Those communities want peace, prosperity and progress, and they want no part of the sort of mindset that leads to the death of a young woman simply doing her job.

To those responsible for this act of terrorism, we say, “We have heard your excuses and your hollow apologies. No one buys it. This was no accident. There is nothing that can justify this murderous act, and you are being called out for what you really are.” Church and community leaders have united their voices in condemnation, as have those across the political spectrum. Those voices of peace are strong, united and louder than those who peddle hate and division in a city with so much to offer.

Strong and effective policing has reduced the number of national security attacks in Northern Ireland from 40 in 2010 to just one in the whole of 2018, yet, despite this welcome reduction, vigilance in the face of this continuing threat remains essential. The current threat level in Northern Ireland from dissidents remains severe, meaning an attack is highly likely. As the PSNI investigation into Lyra’s murder continues, I urge anyone with information to pass it to the police, or anonymously to Crimestoppers, so that her killer can be brought to justice. The brave men and women of the PSNI and other security partners will always have the fullest possible support from this Government.

I have heard those in Northern Ireland calling for the political leaders now to come together, and I am sure the whole House will join me in welcoming the united display from the leaders of the political parties in the Creggan estate on Friday. The Belfast agreement has formed the bedrock of peace since it was reached just over 21 years ago, and it must be upheld and defended against those who would seek to undermine it. I intend to hold discussions with party leaders later this week to see what progress can be made.

Our clear and overriding objective must be the restoration of all the political institutions established by the Belfast agreement. Northern Ireland’s politicians need to take charge, including in the vital area of tackling all forms of paramilitary activity, but today is not a day for party politics.

Lyra McKee was a young, vibrant woman who symbolised the new Northern Ireland—a modern, dynamic, outward-looking place that is open to everyone, regardless of their community background, political aspirations, race, gender or sexuality—yet, last Thursday, she was killed in the most tragic of circumstances. It should not have happened, and it cannot be in vain. All of us must take inspiration from what Lyra achieved in her life in wanting to make Northern Ireland a brighter place for everyone. Lyra once wrote of being part of the Good Friday agreement generation and of the need to reap the spoils of peace. Our lasting tribute to Lyra must be to ensure that we continue to work for peace for the whole of Northern Ireland. I commend this statement to the House.

6.55 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance notice of her statement. The way the House listened to her today is significant in showing that we share her words and, importantly, the meaning lying behind them.

Of course we need to condemn, and we do condemn, those who perpetrate these acts of violence. It is sad that this statement follows a statement on the atrocities in Sri Lanka. In offering our commiserations to Sara—Lyra’s partner—and Lyra’s family, it is right and proper that we remember the brightness of Lyra’s life and say that it was a life well lived. She was most certainly a child of the peace agreement, and she was a young woman who lived her life in the way she chose, campaigning for the things she believed in. We should remember that bright spark and not simply the way in which that spark left the world.

I am struck by the contradiction between Lyra and the values she stood for and the values of those who chose to take her life, because that is the starkest contrast. Who represents the modern city of Derry? Who represents the Northern Ireland of today? I think it is the Lyra McKees, not the gunmen who mowed her down.

Londonderry is a greatly changed city over the 21 years since the peace process began. It is a modern city that is unrecognisable from the city of years back. Derry has also been changed by Lyra’s murder. The wave of condemnation from people of all backgrounds has sent a stark message to the people of violence who now find themselves isolated and out of touch with the mood of the people of Derry.

I also commend the cross-party solidarity, and it is significant that the leaders of the political parties have signed a joint declaration. It was important to see Michelle O’Neill and Arlene Foster walk from Creggan together. It was also important to see the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), a Londonderry boy, there. That is the leadership that the people of Northern Ireland are entitled to expect in light of this tragedy.

As the Secretary of State has already said, this is a foundation on which to build a different future—a better future. She mentioned the police and the security services, and we know there is a paramilitary threat not only from dissident republicans but from loyalist paramilitaries, sometimes involving gangsterism rather than political violence. Nevertheless, that violence corrupts and pollutes the society of Northern Ireland. I ask without any great criticism, but will she review the way in which we deal with paramilitaries of all backgrounds? We certainly need to look at the numbers, but perhaps that is for another occasion.

In conclusion, the phrase “not in my name” has been used an awful lot in recent days, and this House should say that this is not in our name and it is not in the name of our common humanity. Our common humanity says that we stand together with the people of Derry and we stand together with the people of Northern Ireland. In particular, across these islands, we stand together in saying that we condemn those who perpetrated this act and we celebrate the life of Lyra McKee.

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments and agree with much of what he said. He sums up eloquently, in a way that is typical of him; he is a very eloquent speaker at the Dispatch Box, and that was a particularly poignant and moving contribution. He is right to say that the whole House shares in the condemnation of the acts that took place. His comment about the brightness of life of Lyra was very moving. She did represent Londonderry. She represented Northern

Ireland, and she represented its future. As I mentioned in my statement, I was with the mayor of Derry and Strabane on Saturday, and he knew Lyra personally and had taught her; Councillor John Boyle said that Lyra was one of those people who wanted her name in lights—just not in the way that her name was in lights over the weekend, and that is the tragedy.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman that there is definitely a sense on the ground that this is the end and people do not want to see this happen again. Those communities, which have been oppressed by the terrorists and the dissidents, and made to live in a way they do not want to live in those estates—they do not want to be part of that—are standing up and saying, “No, not in my name.” He is right about that. None of us can escape the symbolism of this. It was Good Friday and a woman, a journalist, an innocent was shot dead by terrorists. None of us can escape that. None of us can miss that. I also agree with him about the symbolism of the political leaders joining together on Friday in Creggan and being together. Great leadership was shown by all those political leaders; it was leadership that the people of Northern Ireland want to see, and I commend them all for what they did. We will need to talk about many things in the coming days, and I am happy to work with him on those, but at the moment, with Lyra’s funeral tomorrow, it is best that we reflect on the brilliance of the light that she shone and the future that she had that we will never see.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Viacom channel MTV appears to have been central to this awful tragedy, through no fault of its own. What can be done to ensure that media operators that, quite legitimately, seek to create content in conflicted situations of this sort are not involved, clearly against their wishes and much to their horror, in events of this sort, where there appears to have been a failed propaganda attempt by the New IRA?

Karen Bradley: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee. I know that he, as a former Minister in the Northern Ireland Office, is very familiar with the situation in Londonderry and the security threat the PSNI and security forces face every day. It is quite something to think that when actions like this happen in Londonderry it is almost normal—it is just what happens. The PSNI face petrol bombs and shots being fired at them. They sit in Land Rovers and take the fire and the onslaught. Clearly, we will need to wait to see, in the days to come, what effect the camera crew being on the ground had, but this also shows that a crowd had gathered. People came out to watch what was seen as being a spectacle. That just goes to show that these spectacles can have the most deadly outcomes.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement, and I echo the comments that she and the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) made. On behalf of the Scottish National party, I fully condemn this careless, cruel and cowardly murder. We send our deepest condolences to Lyra’s partner, friends and family.

Lyra McKee was simply doing her job at the time she was murdered, and it was a job she carried out with great skill. The New IRA has admitted its responsibility, saying that it was simply an “accident” and apologising

to her friends and family. But sorry is nowhere near good enough. Sorry does not bring Lyra back. Sorry does not ease the suffering of her partner Sara and of her friends and family. Sorry does not alleviate the concerns of communities across Northern Ireland about a step backwards to a past they had hoped to forget. Reading the statement, we would be forgiven for thinking that the past two post-Good-Friday-agreement decades simply had not happened.

This tragedy underlines what people in Northern Ireland have been saying for years now, and there is no possible alternative conclusion: the current stalemate has been going on for too long. So I am grateful for what the Secretary of State said in her statement about talks with the parties this week. Can she confirm what form they will take? Does she have a realistic goal as to when she thinks the Executive can be back up and running by?

I want to finish with Lyra’s own words, powerful words that highlight just what her murder has robbed us of. She wrote a letter to her younger self about growing up gay in Northern Ireland, in which she said:

“You will do ‘normal’ things. You will spend time with your mum. You will go to work and pay your bills. You will go to the cinema with your best friend every week because that’s your ritual—dinner then an action movie where things explode. You will fall in love again. You will smile every day, knowing that someone loves you as much as you love them. Keep hanging on, kid. It’s worth it. I love you.”

Poignantly, she also said:

“We were the Good Friday Agreement generation, destined to never witness the horrors of war but to reap the spoils of peace. The spoils just never seemed to reach us.”

Let us ensure that she is the last to suffer.

Karen Bradley: Lyra’s words need no comment from me; they are powerful enough in their own right. The hon. Gentleman asked questions about devolution. I would be very happy to talk to him and others about next steps, but I feel that today is a day when we should think about that family who are going to bury a much-loved partner, daughter, friend. They are the ones we should be thinking about today, and perhaps we can talk about the other things after that.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that although any death is a tragedy, the murder of a journalist is particularly abhorrent? Is she aware that Lyra McKee’s death came on the very same day when the world press freedom index was published, which showed the UK rising by seven places? At a time when the Government are rightly championing the protection of journalists, this terrible act is a dreadful stain on our record.

Karen Bradley: My right hon. Friend and I share the honour of having served in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport; it perhaps did not have the “Digital” at the time he was there, but we have both been Culture Secretaries and both of us were charged with ensuring that press freedom was respected. The work he did as Secretary of State, which I was fortunate enough to follow on from and take up the mantle of, helps us to be in the position where our status on the press freedom index is improving, but he makes a powerful point about what we have seen in Londonderry and the murder of Lyra McKee.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I join the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State in their powerful words today in this House. Everybody is shocked and horrified at what happened in Londonderry just before the weekend. It has brought a palpable sense of real grief, shock and anger across the community at how a young lady who had so much to offer, Lyra McKee, was struck down in such circumstances. We had the appalling statement by those responsible that this was some kind of accident, as though it was okay to murder police officers. These are people—journalists, police officers and others—going about their proper business on behalf of us all, and they deserve all of our thanks and gratitude. Can the Secretary of State be assured that all of the political parties and all of the community, right across the board, are united in their absolute determination that we will move Northern Ireland forward and never return to the terrible types of incidents that we have seen on such a scale before?

Karen Bradley: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for those comments. He rightly says that “shocked” and “horrified” absolutely sum up the feelings in Northern Ireland over the past few days. As I said in my statement, there is no apology for this—this was murder. There is no justification. There are no excuses. This was taking the life of an innocent, dynamic, bright, energetic young person, depriving her of her future and depriving her partner and her family of their loved one. There can be no excuse for that.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I join the Secretary of State in expressing my condolences to Lyra’s family and friends and to the whole community.

When the Chief Constable of the PSNI last gave evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, he told us how difficult it was, without there being an Assembly, for him to know month by month whether he had the funds to pay for more police officers. Given the increased paramilitary activity, will the Secretary of State assure the House that the PSNI will have whatever resources it needs to keep communities safe in Northern Ireland?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend highlights one issue that we face in the absence of an Executive at Stormont. I have said that I am determined to see the Executive restored as soon as possible, but I also reassure my hon. Friend that the Government stand committed to making sure that the PSNI has the resources that it needs, and we have continued to make sure that that is the case.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Last Thursday, Lyra McKee was murdered as she stood on the streets of Creggan in my home city of Londonderry. The following morning, a number of us—politicians, businesspeople, police and people from the local council—gathered in the city centre to discuss a response. The word came in that people were going to gather to show solidarity and opposition to the terror that had appeared on the streets the previous night. There was a decision to take about whether people should go. Those who know the geography of the city will know that I live on and represent people on the other side of the river, but there was no other side; there was only one decision to be made, and that was to go and stand in solidarity with those who abhorred such a deadly and tragic act.

Hopefully, the wider community will unite, because this week has been a particularly poignant one. It marks 25 years since Alan Smith and John McCloy were shot dead in Garvagh in my constituency. Constable Gregory Pollock was murdered by a mortar in Londonderry—he was the final policeman to be killed before the ceasefires were called—and his grave was desecrated for several years after his murder.

Does the Secretary of State agree that not just in April but in every month we must all stand against terror and murder, from wherever it comes, by whomsoever it is carried out and wherever it has occurred or does occur, so that we can deliver a better future for our people?

Karen Bradley: Hear, hear—those were very moving words. I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman because the images of him in the Creggan estate on Friday—a boy from Londonderry, as he said—standing rock solid in solidarity with all parts of the community to condemn what happened were incredibly moving and important. Those images demonstrate more powerfully than many images could just how the people of Northern Ireland do not want to go backwards and want to stand firm together against the terrorists.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Lyra McKee was not just an amazing journalist and writer, but a passionate campaigner on several issues that cannot be taken forward in the absence of an Assembly. Nobody can have failed to have been moved and to have felt hopeful at the sight of real, incredible leadership from across the political spectrum in Northern Ireland in response to these events. Does the Secretary of State share my hope that this can be some kind of turning point in the political process, and that people can continue to show that leadership and resolve to move Northern Ireland forward?

Karen Bradley: I agree with my hon. Friend: we need to keep seeing leadership of the kind that was shown last Friday and over the weekend, because this is a moment when people can make a difference and do the right thing for the people of Northern Ireland, who really desperately need them to.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that in the face of this horrific terrorist murder it is incredibly important that the people of Northern Ireland hear the words of the House of Commons, and that we stand with those brave people, including the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) whose moving words we just heard, with the DUP leader Arlene Foster, and with Michelle O’Neill? Their condemnation, with others, of that terrible attack at least shows that we all condemn it and stand together to do so, and that they will not win. In the end, democracy will.

Karen Bradley: I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Gentleman’s comments. He is quite right: they will not win.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I am sure that Lyra’s family and friends, and particularly her partner Sara, will get some comfort from the measured and moving words we have heard today, not only from the Front Benchers but from everyone. Does the Secretary of State

agree that one thing that may well come out of this, hopefully, will be the fact that we have seen such unity throughout Northern Ireland—from all of Northern Ireland—in total condemnation this act? We should also remember that the PSNI suffers attacks of this kind regularly. If things are not changing, we will see more people die. We must be absolutely clear that this kind of terrorism has to be stamped out, and that it will be stamped out only by the unity we have seen here today going throughout Northern Ireland.

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady speaks powerfully and I agree absolutely with what she said.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I once had the privilege of being interviewed by Lyra when she was working on a book about the late Robert Bradford, who was Member of Parliament for Belfast South. I found her to be a warm, humorous and very talented young woman, and I echo the comments that have been made in sympathy with all her family and friends.

One worrying aspect of this incident was the young people present who were cheering as the gunman fired those fatal bullets that killed Lyra. We see displays of men in paramilitary uniforms who belong to this organisation, walking openly in Dublin and flaunting themselves in Milltown cemetery in Belfast. If we are not to encourage the next generation to believe that there is something right in what these people do, we must surely do something to prevent these naked displays of terror and paramilitarism in public places.

Karen Bradley: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very powerful point. When I visited Londonderry on Saturday, I heard people say that they want this to end, that this was not what they wanted to see, that it was not the Northern Ireland they wanted to be part of and that these people did not represent them. The tragedy is that so many of the people involved are young people who were not even born at the time that the Belfast agreement was signed. They have been groomed by evil people who have put them in a position where they have ended up murdering an innocent journalist. We cannot allow that to happen. They will have heard the unity of the House's voice very, very loudly.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Secretary of State said that there is nothing that can justify this act of violence, and she is right. This time it happened to be Lyra, a journalist, but it could have been a police officer or a citizen on the streets of Creggan. To support what the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) said, the key point is that these are proscribed organisations. It is an offence to wear material that promotes these organisations and it is an offence to support them. It is an offence to organise meetings and to have contact with them. There is a case for the Secretary of State, after the funeral, looking into what action can be taken on proscription and enforcement, to support the community and make sure that these people are outlawed among the community as a whole.

Karen Bradley: I assure the right hon. Gentleman that we will consider carefully all the points he made. He will know that the Fresh Start agreement committed not only money but resources to the tackling of paramilitary activity. One of the problems is that that agreement is a

responsibility of the Executive Office, which is another reason why we need to see devolution restored. *[Interruption.]* I agree with the right hon. Gentleman, as he shakes his head, that this needs to be tackled and dealt with. He is right that tonight we need to think about a family who are grieving, but in future we need to think about such measures.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): May I add my own expression of revulsion at this most brutal and senseless act and offer my condolences and those of my party to the family of Lyra McKee and to all those who knew her?

At a moment such as this, I always think that it is important to identify some sort of positive towards which we can work. For my part, I hope that for whatever unwanted and unwanted reason that we may find ourselves here today, everybody now in this House and throughout the rest of Great Britain—I use the term Great Britain advisedly—understands that the peace in Northern Ireland is still a very, very fragile thing and not something to be taken for granted. We have seen in the most graphic way possible that when politicians leave a vacuum the men of violence will fill it. When the Secretary of State speaks to the parties in Northern Ireland later this week, will she give leadership and make sure that, as a consequence of that, we see the political process back at the centre of Northern Ireland's life again?

Karen Bradley: The right hon. Gentleman talks about politics in Northern Ireland. Of course, Northern Ireland is one of the places in the world that has been most transformed by politics: politics won over violence; politics won over terror—words won. People made enormous sacrifices, both personally and collectively as a community, in order to achieve the peace that we have seen over the past 21 years. He is right that it is a fragile peace; things can flare up at any time, as we saw last week. Hon. and right hon. Members have talked about the regularity of these kind of attacks and activities. Business as usual in Northern Ireland is not business as usual as many people in Great Britain would expect it to be, or would accept, and that needs to change. It is absolutely clear that we need to have devolution restored, but the lack of devolution is not the reason for these attacks. These attacks have been going on for far too long. There is no excuse for the acts that we saw; there is no excuse for anything that we have seen; and there is no excuse for the person who pulled that trigger and shot Lyra McKee.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): In the days following her brutal murder, Lyra's words have been shared around the world. It is not hard to see why. Just a few weeks ago, she wrote on social media:

“Derry is such a beautiful city. I've fallen in love with it over the past year, while falling in love with a woman who hails from it. Here's to better times ahead and saying goodbye to bombs and bullets once and for all.”

Can there be no better tribute that we make to Lyra than pledging ourselves to achieving her dream in her name?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady makes such a powerful point, but the words of Lyra McKee are the most powerful. Derry is a beautiful, beautiful city. It feels ironic in many ways, but on Thursday evening, I had the

[Karen Bradley]

opportunity to sit down with my family for the first time to watch the final episode of “Derry Girls”. To see the hope in that series, which was set around the time of the peace process, and to go to bed to be woken by that devastating news was just so tragic for such a beautiful city and for such wonderful people who really do deserve better.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Sadly, I am unable to attend Lyra’s funeral tomorrow in St Anne’s cathedral, and I know that other colleagues are unable to attend as well. On behalf of them, I extend our deepest sympathy to Lyra’s family, her friends, her colleagues who have spoken so movingly and so courageously about their work as journalists, and especially her partner whom she loved deeply and who loved her deeply—they should have been able to grow old together. Their lives are forever changed, and there will always be a gap at the table that no one else can fill.

I found the apology offered today by the New IRA absolutely nauseating. It cannot undo the grief, the heartache, the pain and the suffering of Lyra’s family, friends, colleagues and partner. It identified as the enemy PSNI officers—police officers—who courageously go about their business day after day and face this threat. They are not the enemy; they are there to protect the entire community—all of the community, as the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) has said—courageously and impartially. Will the Secretary of State just repeat the words that I have long remembered from a papal visit to Ireland: “Murder is murder is murder and it is always wrong”?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady speaks incredibly powerfully. There have been some wonderfully moving contributions and hers is certainly one of those. I am sure that Lyra’s family and friends will have heard her condolences. I am happy to pass on personally those condolences as I will be at the funeral tomorrow. About her comments and her quoting of the Pope, “Murder is murder is murder”—absolutely.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): Lyra spoke about the dividends of peace not being shared. She was talking, I believe, about communities such as the one in which she was standing when she was so cruelly murdered. Does the Secretary of State accept—I know that she does not want to get into the restoration of the Assembly tonight—that if we are not going to see a restoration of devolution, she will have to find some other way, perhaps, of intervening, supporting and making a change in communities where young men are being raised to believe that those active in the troubles were heroes?

Karen Bradley: I am determined that we will see devolution restored because it is the right thing for Northern Ireland and the right thing for the people of Northern Ireland. I absolutely agree with the sentiments and the comments of the hon. Lady about the young people in those communities in Northern Ireland. She is right to say that those communities have been unable to benefit from the economic prosperity that we have seen in Northern Ireland largely because of how the dissidents behave and how they oppress that community. We need to see an end to it.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I am sure that the Secretary of State will agree that it should not take a leading light of the future to be extinguished for hope to be reignited. Seeing those politicians in Northern Ireland coming together in memory of Lyra was hugely moving. I hope that the Secretary of State and others in the Cabinet will do everything that they can, because we have lost a leading light. Gail Walker, the editor of the *Belfast Telegraph* and Lyra’s friend wrote of her that “everything about Lyra was about the light.”

The LGBT community has lost a leading light. My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) read Lyra’s letter to her 14-year-old self. It was so searingly familiar to me that I wish I could go back in time and read it to my closeted 14-year-old self, because I do not think that I have ever read anything that captured my fears and worries as a closeted teenager so well. Her light may well have been extinguished tragically at such a happy and successful point in her life, but I hope that we will all do everything we can to make sure that her legacy will shine on forever and that what happened will not be in vain; peace, as we know, is precious.

Karen Bradley: I agree with the hon. Lady. I do not think that there is anything that I can add to what she has just said.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): The outpouring of grief for Lyra from her friends and from right across the community stands as a testimony to the wonderful kind person that Lyra was. I had the privilege of knowing Lyra personally. Indeed, she reached out to me and showed me great kindness at a very difficult time in my life. That is the sort of story that we have heard about Lyra. That is the person that she was. I know that I speak for so many of her friends today when I say that I just cannot believe that we are sadly talking about her death and her murder. Her testimony stands in direct contrast to the violent thugs who killed her and those who have attempted to justify that. There have been disgraceful, repugnant displays on the streets of Dublin and Belfast, and propaganda on social media. What actions will the Secretary of State take to ensure that these organisations cannot continue to spread the hate and the bile and to recruit more young people?

Karen Bradley: May I pass my personal condolences to the hon. Lady as a friend of Lyra’s? It must have been the most horrendous weekend to have heard the news and still be coming to terms with it. I thank her for being here and making her contribution; it is a great honour to her friend Lyra.

The hon. Lady is right about the way in which the dissident organisations operate, using social media and otherwise. As I said earlier, the way in which they operate, convincing young people—young men—that the right way to behave is to turn to a life of crime, is almost grooming. We do not tolerate organised criminality and dissident behaviour, and we need to see an end to it. I would be very happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss further what we can do.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Lyra McKee was a child of the Good Friday agreement, and grew up in the hope that we could leave behind

the idea of sectarianism and the division it caused. I was particularly moved by her comments in 2014, when she wrote:

“The Good Friday Agreement has created a new generation of young people, freed from the cultural constraints and prejudices of the one before. It used to be that being a Unionist or Nationalist was an accident of birth. You didn’t decide whether you were for the Union or not; the decision was made for you. Your friends were drawn from your own kind.”

Lyra represented a future where the only barriers to friendship were of bigotry and badness; and she represented a future of hope beyond that. I cannot help but feel a sense of loss for what Lyra represents—the embodiment of hope for Northern Ireland.

I am particularly concerned that organisations such as Saoradh seed that sense of division and hatred. Indeed, they plan to take part in events in Glasgow this coming weekend. Will the Secretary of State liaise with her colleague in the Home Office to ensure that we do whatever we can to prevent that horrible, toxic organisation from showing its face on the streets of Glasgow this weekend?

Karen Bradley: I will be very happy to take that matter up with the Home Secretary. The hon. Gentleman’s words and sentiments are absolutely right.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): There has been a typically selfish, self-centred and “we’re the only people who matter” response from the republicans who have tried to justify the murder this weekend, describing it as a “difficult time for republicans” and blaming it on the PSNI by saying that it would never have happened if they had not been there. Will the Secretary of State give this House an assurance that, despite the fact that these people can rent a mob, rent a riot and everything else to try to disrupt life, there will be no let-up in police activity to search out the arms of these people? Will she also assure us that the police will not let up in pursuing and bringing to justice those who spread poison and hatred through social media or at graveside speeches, or who strut around the streets in illegal paramilitary parades?

Karen Bradley: My conversations with the police officers of the PSNI, including at the Strand Road police station on Saturday, have given me absolute reassurance that the PSNI is determined to take those steps, and that there will be no let-up.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I echo the words of the Secretary of State and pay condolences on behalf of my party to the family and friends of Lyra McKee. I am sure that the Secretary of State values the need to accord safety to journalists bringing truth from conflicts. Following this horrific attack, would she consider working with the Foreign Secretary to propose a UN convention for the protection of journalists worldwide, to ensure that reporters in conflict zones are not treated as combatants?

Karen Bradley: I would be very happy to take that matter up with the Foreign Secretary.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for the calm and thoughtful way in which she has led proceedings on this statement, and the way in which she reflected on the life of Lyra McKee,

her contribution to the community in Northern Ireland and her sense of purpose in dismissing the view that political vacuums lead to violence. In the four years that I have been a Member of Parliament, we have seen the Provisional IRA murder a constituent of mine, Kevin McGuigan; the New IRA murder a constituent of mine, Adrian Ismay; and, within the last two months, the Ulster Volunteer Force murder a constituent of mine, Ian Ogle. The Secretary of State was right that what happened on Thursday night/Friday morning should not have happened, and she was right to say that it cannot be in vain. But does she recognise that that is a call to action, that we need to see action and that the Democratic Unionist party stands ready for it?

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. The conversations that I have had with the political leaders across Northern Ireland over the last few days indicate that all political parties are ready for that call to action. As I said earlier, tonight we need to think about a family who are grieving, but we absolutely have to ensure that we get political leadership back into Stormont, because it is what the people of Northern Ireland need and deserve, and it is what Lyra would want to see.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her comments. Last week—in 2019—the New IRA murdered Lyra McKee in an indiscriminate shooting, depriving Northern Ireland and the whole world of a magnificent talent. She was an innocent bystander. We offer our sincere condolences to her partner, her mother and her family.

An apology from the dissident IRA is, of course, meaningless; it means nothing. I am sorry to say that the fact of the matter is that, unfortunately, they will kill again and they will say sorry again, and it will not mean anything to them. I remind the Secretary of State and the House of the murder of Joanne Mathers some 38 years ago, in 1981. This is the same IRA. There are new recruits—different people—pulling the trigger, but it is the same old men behind, directing operations. Joanne Mathers left behind her husband Lowry and her son Shane. Struck down for being a census worker, Joanne was a legitimate target as far as the IRA were concerned, and they deprived that family of a wife and a mother.

Will the Secretary of State give this House an important assurance? After the murder of Lyra McKee, 140 people gave evidence to the PSNI. Although we are pleased to see that an investigation is ongoing, is it too much to ask—for the husband and son of Joanne Mathers—that another investigation be reopened to ensure that those who perpetrated the murder of Joanne in 1981, the same as they did in 2019, are held accountable for their actions?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman made a number of points, the final of which related to the investigation of previous atrocities and murders. He will know that we have conducted a consultation into setting up the institutions that were agreed in the Stormont House agreement. We will publish our findings from that consultation shortly, but I would be very happy to sit down with him and work through where we are on that.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): May I too express my personal condolences to the family of Lyra McKee—to her nearest and dearest, her loved ones, her partner, her

[Ian Paisley]

friends and her colleagues? Grief is an awful bitter cup of which to taste, and no doubt the family feel that tragedy at the moment.

Lyra was on one of the first “Lessons from Auschwitz” visitations run out of Northern Ireland by the Holocaust Educational Trust; she took part just a few years ago. I understand from the leader of that group, whom I was in communication with this morning, that Lyra was clearly moved by her visit to Auschwitz, where she learned the vital lesson that people want to live for their beliefs, not to be murdered because of them.

Humanity has taken a terrible blow in the last few days and over this Easter weekend. That humanity is unbowed by terrorism, but it is only unbowed if we take action, and the actions that have been called for across this Chamber tonight will eventually fall to the Secretary of State. We cannot continue just to hope that something will happen. There has got to be more than words. The Secretary of State will have to take brave actions in terms of calling the Assembly together and in terms of putting it up to those parties reluctant to take action to either form a Government or not form a Government. That will fall to the Secretary of State.

The 17, 18 and 19-year-olds have no excuses. They do not have years of discrimination, and they have never known a terrorism war or mass unemployment. They have no excuses, yet there are people around them who will try to make those excuses. Pretty soon there will be no excuses for no action by this Government. We need action and we need an Assembly back; and you, Secretary of State, have to play your role in achieving that.

Karen Bradley: I want to assure the hon. Gentleman that I am determined that we will see the Executive re-formed. I will come to this House to talk about that at an appropriate time. I think that tonight, as I said earlier, is a moment for us to reflect on the life of Lyra McKee, but also, as the hon. Gentleman said, to reflect on the fact that this weekend we have seen the most heinous, barbarous acts across the world, reminding all of us of just how precious human life is. That is something

that none of us wants to see, particularly over an Easter weekend. I, as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, am determined that we will take the measures that we need to in Northern Ireland to ensure that it does not happen again.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for her words and pass on my own condolences to Lyra’s partner and the rest of her family, but also, especially, to the cross-community LGBT community in Northern Ireland on the loss of such an important figure in their movement to equality in Northern Ireland. I am sure that the Secretary of State will agree that to see, the other day, the political leadership of Northern Ireland, from the Democratic Unionist party to Sinn Féin and others, including the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), coming together gives us hope that the Good Friday agreement will continue for another 21 years.

Karen Bradley: I agree with the hon. Gentleman’s comments. What has been achieved in the past 21 years in Northern Ireland is absolutely remarkable. We cannot go backwards. We cannot allow the men of violence to win. We have to stand united. That is what we saw on Friday, when political leaders from across the community stood united in Creggan. I am absolutely determined that we will build on that and that we will see not just, as he said, 21 years but much, much longer for the people of Northern Ireland to enjoy peace, prosperity and a future following the Belfast-Good Friday agreement.

Mr Speaker: Colleagues, for the second time today it is my privilege to thank all Members, from the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State downwards, for both the content and the tone of what they said. Those words have been sincere and powerful, and therefore valid in and of themselves. If, in addition to those virtues, the words that colleagues have expressed offer some modest comfort to Lyra’s partner, her family and all those who knew and admired her, and everyone who believes in the triumph of peace over war and love over hate, that makes them additionally worth while. Thank you.

Climate Change Policy

7.42 pm

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry):

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the current climate change protests and on our climate change policy. I apologise to Members of the House if we are covering ground that we covered extensively earlier, but I think it is a subject that will bear as much scrutiny as we care to give it.

Colleagues will be aware that public concern about climate change has grown to levels never seen before. In recent weeks, it has been incredibly powerful to see people of all generations, across the world, voicing their concerns about a warming climate and demanding a global response to this global crisis. We have heard loud calls today that we should declare a climate emergency. My answer to that is that we can say words from the Dispatch Box all we like; what counts is actions. I hope to set out the many actions that we are taking that have enjoyed cross-party support. My fervent hope is that we will continue to tackle this enormous crisis in that spirit.

There is no doubt that climate change is the most profound environmental challenge facing the world today, and one where more action is urgently needed. We should not shy away from that fact; we must recognise it. We welcome the strong and growing pressure for action to cut our emissions, but we should also ensure that, while we acknowledge the scale of the challenge ahead, we try as hard as we can to build consensus around change so that communities across the UK and, indeed, across the world feel secure, optimistic and involved in our shifts to decarbonise the economy.

As I said earlier today, we should be talking about hope, not fear, communicating the progress that we have made globally and that we have made here in the UK. That demonstrates that this urgent action to decarbonise the economy can comfortably sit alongside opportunity, growth and employment. The Government entirely accept, and I accept, that concerted action—more action—at national and international levels is urgently required. However, I still feel that we must focus on the fact—because it shows that this is possible—that we have shown real leadership in the UK thanks to the cross-party consensus that we have forged on this since the passage of our world-leading Climate Change Act 2008, over a decade ago.

I want to update colleagues on this progress and to outline priorities. Again, I hope that Members will forgive me if I cover some of the ground that we covered extensively earlier. In 2008, we were the first country to introduce legally binding long-term emissions reduction targets. The right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) was very instrumental in bringing that legislation forward, but it also enjoyed strong cross-party support. For me, the Climate Change Act has been an absolutely seminal piece of legislation, because I am one of the few Ministers in the world who can stand here with high ambition and high aspirations as well as a legally binding set of budgets that we have to report on to Parliament. It is a great way of ensuring the climate action survives the political cycle, and it has delivered. Since 1990, as many Members will know, we have cut our emissions in the UK by 42% while growing the economy by 72%. We are independently assessed as leading the G20 in decarbonisation since 2000.

People talk a lot about the disparity between territorial emissions and consumption emissions. I invite Members to consider the latest data that shows that our greenhouse gas emissions, on a consumption basis, fell by 21% between 2007 and 2016. Indeed, they fell by 6% year on year—in the year to 2016. *[Interruption.]* It is true—that is the data. I would be very happy to write to all Members and share it with them.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Even a little Swedish girl can see it's not true.

Claire Perry: Well, again, I would be very happy to write to the hon. Gentleman with the data and copy in Ms Thunberg.

Across the UK, almost 400,000 people are working in low-carbon jobs and their supply chains. It is a sector that is bigger than aerospace and is growing at a factor of two or three times the mainstream economy. We have continued to be active on the international stage. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd) was the Minister who carried the baton at the Paris climate change talks, which were so instrumental in the world coming together, as it did previously in the Montreal protocol, to show that there is concerted international support for action to tackle these enormous international challenges. COP24 took place last December in the Polish city of Katowice—a city where you could taste the hydrocarbons in the air. That is what happens when you burn coal; it must have been what London was like in the 1950s. At that conference, we in the UK—I pay tribute to my excellent officials—helped to drive the work of progressive groups and secured global agreement on a robust rulebook that brings the Paris agreement to life. If you cannot measure it, Madam Deputy Speaker, you cannot manage it. We are continuing to take targeted and impactful actions to support ambition internationally through promoting global alliances and collaborations, from the Powering Past Coal Alliance—which now has over 80 members that, like the UK, are committed to rapidly ending the use of coal as a source of electricity generation—to the Carbon Neutrality Coalition.

I was frequently asked this afternoon, “What are some of things you have done in the last six months?” so I thought I would focus on a few choice morsels to share with colleagues. Colleagues will, I am sure, be sick of me waving around the “Clean Growth Strategy” document that we published in November 2017. We will continue to do that, because it is one of the most comprehensive documents that any Government across the world have put out, detailing how we will take decarbonisation action across the economy. To date, we have acted on the vast majority of those actions. I will highlight some of them.

Only last month, I launched the offshore wind sector deal, including a £250 million growth partnership with investors to ensure that we will continue to invest in the North sea—the best place in the world for offshore wind. We will, crucially, drive up the UK content of that nascent industry to over 60%, and we will ensure that the industry employs at least 30% women by 2030. This industry is regenerating coastal communities right around the UK. It is one in which we lead the world, and we will continue to do so.

[*Claire Perry*]

In the spring statement, the Chancellor introduced the future homes standard, which will require all new homes to have low-carbon heating systems and world-leading levels of energy efficiency by 2025. That will radically transform house building in constituencies such as mine, where most homes are not connected to the gas grid. He also announced that we will increase the proportion of green gas used in the grid, in a bid to drive down the carbon profile of the hard-to-decarbonise heating network.

Only this Easter weekend, we had the longest run ever in this country of no coal contributing to power generation on the grid. When many of us were elected to this House, coal contributed 40% of our electricity. Our unilateral policies, including a carbon tax and emissions targets, have led us to do something utterly transformational that other European countries have been unable so far to replicate. We also continue to contribute internationally. We are one of the largest donors of overseas development assistance, with more than £6 billion committed in this Parliament. In January, UK Climate Investments announced almost £30 million of investment in a dedicated African renewable energy company, to try to make projects marketable and investable in much of the developing world, so that those countries never have to go through a high-carbon stage in their growth cycle.

Action is being taken not just in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy but across Government. We have published the ambitious 25-year environment plan and kick-started the creation of a vast northern forest, which will see 50 million trees planted from Liverpool to Hull. Tree planting is one of the most cost-effective ways to sequester carbon and improve soil conditions, as colleagues will know. Our new resources and waste strategy outlines steps to reform the packaging producer responsibility system, introducing a deposit return scheme and food waste collection scheme.

We should celebrate those actions, not to imply that we are in any way complacent or do not need to go further much more rapidly, but to demonstrate that this is a win-win for both the planet and future generations' jobs and prosperity. As colleagues will know, last year we celebrated our first ever Green Great Britain Week, and I can announce that we will continue that process annually, with the second time on 4 November this year. We look forward to the celebrations and challenges around that.

We have not shied away from our responsibility. That is why, after the publication of the chilling Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change 1.5° C report, we were the first industrial economy to ask our Committee on Climate Change for advice on our long-term targets, and particularly a net zero target. I look forward to receiving its advice on 2 May and will engage with colleagues across the House on our next steps in the light of that. It is worth pointing out that the last time we asked for this advice, the committee told us it was not feasible to do from either a technological or cost point of view, so it will be extremely interesting to see what has changed and how we can rise to that challenge.

I have the utmost respect for those who are pushing for stronger action to address the risk of uncontrolled climate change. The right to protest peacefully is a long-standing tradition in this country and a vital

foundation of our democracy, and it has been good to see that the demonstrations have by and large been good-natured, and the policing response has been sensible and proportionate. I welcome the passion and fervour of the protestors and their constant reminder of our duty to raise our eyes from the next few years of conversations about our relationship with Europe, to think about the long-term challenges we face. I hope that those who have taken their passion public will continue to express their views without disrupting the daily lives of ordinary people, endangering the safety of the public or undermining the consensus that I strongly believe we will need to support further, bolder action.

We must work together to solve the challenge of climate change—in this House, in the other place, in classrooms and boardrooms across the UK, in international negotiating huddles, in homes and throughout civil society—and to deliver the broad, just and progressive action on climate change that we urgently need.

7.53 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Mr Speaker has graciously allowed both an urgent question and statement on climate change today. That is unique in my remembrance, but it is uniquely appropriate, given the visit of Greta Thunberg to the House today. Through you, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to thank Mr Speaker for that.

In our earlier discussion, we focused almost exclusively on emissions reduction and energy policy, so I would like to start by asking the Minister to enlighten the House on the other aspects of our climate change policy that received less attention. Let us start with the national adaptation plan. The Minister will know that, of the 56 climate risks and opportunities identified by the Committee on Climate Change, 27 simply do not feature in the Government's plan. Why is there no word on the transition for flood-affected areas ahead of the withdrawal of Flood Re? Why is there nothing on the dangers to elderly people's health from overheating in summer?

Even where targets are set, there is a record of failure. The woodland cover target calls for 5,000 hectares of new plantation every year, so why is the rate so far only 1,500 hectares—less than a third? Has the Minister examined the work of Professor Ian Bateman on the differential natural capital values of such plantation depending on its location in relation to urban areas? What account is she taking of that? Over the last two years, increasingly frequent severe weather events have cost our economy £1.5 billion a year. In 2016, the Government acknowledged the increased risk of flooding and coastal erosion and accepted that the current levels of adaptation were inadequate. They promised to update their flooding and coastal erosion management strategy by 2019; 2019 is here so where is the updated strategy?

We naturally focus on the impacts on human communities, but the impact on our biodiversity is devastating. It is only through a coherent and comprehensive network of protected areas that our biodiversity will not suffer further loss. What does the Government's climate strategy do to restore the 50% cut since 2010 to the income of Natural England, which is responsible for monitoring and maintaining that network?

The Minister said in her response to the urgent question that she does not see the value of declaring a climate emergency. The value is this: it tells the truth.

On emissions reduction, the truth is that we are making some progress. I acknowledge and welcome that, but the full, honest truth is that we are not making progress fast enough. The Government's own statistics show that. The fourth carbon budget is set at a limit of 1,950 million tonnes of CO₂ equivalent, but current policies are off track, projecting an overshoot of 5.6%. To counteract that overshoot, we will have to reduce emissions even further during the fifth carbon budget period. Because of that overshoot, we will need to reduce emissions by 334 million tonnes. Current policies leave us only halfway between where we expect to be at the end of the fourth carbon budget and where we need to be by the end of the fifth.

The Government have rightly asked the Committee on Climate Change for its advice on reaching net zero emissions, and I welcome the Minister's assurance earlier that she will bring the Government's response back to the House expeditiously. But I gently make the point to her that if we are already off track to meet our existing targets, we need urgent action to get anywhere close to meeting net zero.

The Minister spoke earlier of cross-party support on climate change. It already exists: the Labour party, the Green party, the Lib Dems, the SNP and Plaid Cymru all agree that we need to declare a climate emergency. We would love it if the Conservatives joined us. Will they? If we are to stand any chance of winning the battle against climate change, we must work together over the decades ahead to ensure that we are cutting our greenhouse gas emissions at the scale and pace demanded by the science.

Labour has already committed to enshrining a net zero emissions target in law, as have a number of other parties. Indeed, more than 190 Members joined together in a remarkable display of cross-party support for climate action in signing a letter championed by the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) asking the Government to adopt a net zero target. Will the Minister commit today to taking whatever action the Committee on Climate Change recommends when it publishes its report and to enshrining the new net zero target in law? If the Minister were fully to accept the recommendations that the Committee on Climate Change report put forward, I give her this commitment: we on the Labour Benches will work as closely as possible with her and all colleagues across this House to ensure that we get a net zero climate target passed into law before the summer recess.

As the climate protestors have told us, time is of the essence and we cannot afford to let this important piece of legislation be delayed any longer than strictly necessary. The clean growth strategy that is supposed to meet those budgets is simply not fit to do so, and once we have enshrined a net zero target, the clean growth strategy will be out of date. Does the Minister therefore agree that we need a new, more ambitious strategy? There is no shame in recognising that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman has exceeded his time, but I will allow him to conclude rather than cut him off immediately.

Barry Gardiner: That is very gracious of you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will try not to exceed the time that the Minister took.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman misunderstands: the Minister has rather more time on a statement than the Opposition spokesperson.

Barry Gardiner: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Earlier, the Minister spoke of the need to consider our international impacts: 97% of UK Export Finance support to energy in developing countries goes to fossil fuels, which is a subsidy to dirty, polluting energy worth nearly £5 billion. Will she look at that? We need even greater ambition and action if we are to inspire others in our bid to host next year's UN climate change conference here in the UK, and my party will wholeheartedly give the Government its support to achieve that bid.

Claire Perry: I see many colleagues standing, but I thank the shadow Minister for his commitment and his support for cross-party, and I want to answer some of his points.

The hon. Gentleman raised, rightly, the question of natural resources and the contribution they can make in carbon reduction. I am sure he will be pleased to know that, since 1990, emissions from that sector have halved. He is absolutely right that there is more to do, but they now account for only 15% of the total emissions pie. Indeed, there have been some amazing efficiency improvements, and I pay tribute to our farmers and to our innovative investors in this area. For example, it takes a third less CO₂ to produce a kilo of pork now than it did in 1990. However, there is clearly more to do, and he clearly points out something with which he knows I agree, which is that we have to take a whole-economy approach to making these reductions.

I will say to the hon. Gentleman what I said earlier about declaring net zero. The only way to ensure that the actions we want to deliver actually can be delivered is to make sure, when we set them out, that they are fully understood, fully costed and fully planned, and that we have buy-in from local authorities, civil society and so on. I am really looking forward to seeing the CCC's advice, but I will take the time that is required and work with whoever needs to be involved to ensure that, when we set that target, it can actually be delivered. I do not want to be the Minister who attempts to set out something very profound, only for it to be hived off because of other pressures that may occur down the line. If we make such a commitment, it must stick.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): First, I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her outstanding record in her Department, on which I also congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd). Does the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth agree that one of the things that is essential in a grown-up discussion on climate change is that there should be a proper sense of proportion about what has been achieved and an understanding of what needs to be achieved, which everyone agrees is itself of the first importance? Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the United Kingdom has been among the most successful countries in the developed world in growing our economy while at the same time reducing our emissions, which in itself is a very important lesson for the future?

Claire Perry: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments, and I would also like to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood

[*Claire Perry*]

and Pinner (Mr Hurd), who did so much in this brief before I was lucky enough to take it on. My right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) is absolutely right: a sense of proportion is hugely important. I can go further and say that not only are we among the leaders, but, according to independent research, we have led the G20 in decarbonising our economy through looking at carbon intensity. Again, this is not to say that there is not more to do; it is to say that it can be done—it can be done in a way that does not jeopardise energy security, and does not put undue cost burdens on consumers or businesses—and that while we know there is more to do, we should take hope from the progress that we have made.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): May I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement? I have to say, however, that this statement seems very empty. It appears to be a case of saying something because she has to say something, rather than because she has something to say. It is a reaction to the protests we have seen, rather than a real plan for the future or any indication that there is a real plan for the future.

Since there was no mention of it in her statement, may I ask the Minister: where is the Government's response to the report of the green finance taskforce? We were promised it in the spring of this year, and surely there should have been at least some indication of that in this statement on the way forward. Where, too, is the response to the comments of the Governor of the Bank of England warning of the economic risks of the low-carbon transition? Will the Government commit to creating a green and resilient pipeline of low-carbon projects, and will she clarify that institutional investors will be made responsible for limiting climate-related financial risks to pensions, savings and investments?

In June last year, the Environmental Audit Committee warned of an “alarming collapse” in investment in renewable energy, and this morning the Minister told us that wave and tidal power had been outcompeted for support. What are the Government doing to address the low investment in renewables? Finally, the UK is set to miss its emissions reduction targets under the Climate Change Act for the fourth carbon budget by 3% to 12%, and for the fifth carbon budget by 6% to 20%. Will she commit the Government to implementing the recommendations of its own green finance taskforce in full, and will she give that commitment today?

Claire Perry: As I set up the green finance taskforce, along with my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, I am absolutely committed to bringing forward many of its proposals. Indeed, we have been making progress on its proposals. We are very lucky—again, it is a source of great success for us—that we have one of the most innovative financial capabilities in the world, and we are really capable of advancing progress in that area. For example, we have set up the green finance institute; there is the green finance strategy, and more details will be coming forward.

The hon. Lady raised the question of wave and tidal, and I just want to clarify that slightly. It is a question of how, if we have a limited amount of money, we are best to spend it to achieve the decarbonisation targets we

want with the best value to taxpayers. I believe we have spent almost £60 million on innovation funding for wave and tidal—I will make sure that number is correct, and write to the hon. Lady if it is not—and we look carefully at every proposal that has come forward. I was very pleased to meet the Marine Energy Council, working on a cross-party basis, to see how we might do more to go forward.

Finally, I do not want to nit-pick, but the hon. Lady is citing numbers on the budgets that are simply not true. We are currently at 95% of where we need to be to meet CB4, which ends in 2027, and 93% of the way to meet CB5, which ends in 2032. Importantly, we are bringing forward policies and proposals all the time, including the proposals made in the spring statement, against which we have not yet done a CO₂ accounting. As the House knows, I am confident that, with a level of investment, focus and support, we will achieve these budgets. However, that will not be enough to get us to a zero-carbon emissions net target by 2050, which is why we will have to continue to innovate and invest.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): Obviously, the public sector's contribution to this is equally important. What does the Minister have to say to companies such as Zebra Fuel in my constituency, which can play its part in bringing new technology on electric batteries to the public sector, but has actually found it quite hard, with its more innovative approach, to engage with many different parts of the public sector?

Claire Perry: I am disappointed that my right hon. Friend's constituents are finding it difficult to engage, because leadership in the public sector is actually something on which we can really demonstrate progress. We have introduced a voluntary public sector emissions reduction target of 30%. We have actually over-achieved on the central Government estate on narrower targets. We have set up a new greenhouse gas reduction target of minus 43%—of course, this also saves taxpayers' money—and we have things such as the Salix Finance programme, which provides zero-carbon funding through a revolving fund to ensure that the public sector can access funds where needed. I encourage us all to make sure that our local authorities are aware of that fund. If my right hon. Friend wants to send me any more information, I will certainly make sure that that engagement happens.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I want to ask the Minister about the global context. We have had 1° of warming already. Paris set the objective of no more than 1.5° of warming, but I think I am right in saying that the Paris pledges add up to about 2.7° of warming, and the world is off track on the Paris commitments. Can the Minister tell us what progress has been made since Paris on improving the pledges globally? It seems to me that very little progress has been made. In the run-up to the conference of the parties in 2020, wherever it is hosted—I hope that we host it—what is the strategy for getting there? People are out on the streets not just because of the domestic context, but because they think that a rise of 2° will be a disaster and we are going to go well above that, so the global context is vital.

Claire Perry: I am not surprised that the right hon. Gentleman makes such a profound point, given his experience. Whatever we do in the UK and however

much we talk about our progress, it is an infinitesimal part of the current emissions profile.

Two things have happened since Paris. First, I know it sounds very boring and dull, but the development of a rule book, so that we can look each other in the eye and hold each other to account on an agreed set of measurements, is really important. If we cannot measure it, we cannot manage it. Secondly, the COP next year will be important because we will set out our nationally determined contributions and be able to quantify, on a like-for-like basis, what the current emissions profile looks like.

It is incredibly important that the COP is successful and ambitious, but we should not forget how seminal it was to get 196 countries even to agree on that target and to agree a process for working together; that is unprecedented. My hope is that the global protests and conversations will focus the minds of Ministers across the world and result in a successful outcome from the 2020 COP.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I listened, “Blue Peter”-style, to the statement that the Minister made earlier, and I congratulate her on her bold assertion that there is no planet B. Does she recognise the actions of institutional investors to save the planet? The Church Commissioners, as shareholders, require the companies in which they invest to be compliant with the Paris agreement, thus demonstrating the power of market forces to effect change.

Claire Perry: Some of the most important meetings I have been lucky enough to have in this role have been with faith groups. Interfaith groups work extremely well, setting their own targets and using the significant power of their own investment might to effect change. During our first Green Great Britain Week, people asked, “What else can I do? I have turned off my lights; I am cycling a lot; and I am recycling.” The most effective thing we can do is to think hard about our pension funds—either through our investments or by lobbying trustees, such as those of the House of Commons scheme—because it is 27 times more effective to get an institutional investor to make the shift. The good news is that that is happening right across the world, and amazing groups, such as the Church groups, are doing it in the UK. That is the power of market forces, and such actions will dwarf the amount of money that Government are investing in this low-carbon transition.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I am proud to have supported the Climate Change Act 2008, and I pay tribute to the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband). The Minister is right to say that progress has been made by successive Governments, but one area that is very challenging is the built environment. Does she agree that more has to be done, particularly in England? The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee is doing an inquiry on that topic, and the statistics are that the Welsh Government spend twice as much as the UK Government, Scotland four times as much and Northern Ireland 1.5 times as much. She keeps saying that we need action, so let us have action in this House by this Government.

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman makes a valuable point. The built environment can encompass homes, buildings and transport—

Albert Owen: I know what it means.

Claire Perry: Good. I was coming on to say that one of the most effective ways to influence the built environment is at a local level. I have been struck by the ambition of, and the progress made by, local authorities and combined authorities across the UK. Of course the Government can set ambitions and change regulations, but it is much more powerful for local authorities to say, “This is what we want to do, and this is where the investment needs to go,” and design it themselves. I have been particularly pleased, in the homes environment, with the announcement that we will not be building homes reliant on fossil fuel heating by 2025. Not only will that transform heating, but it will improve the market conditions and drive down the cost of that technology.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I am not entirely sure what is meant by declaring a climate emergency. As far as I am concerned, there is a climate emergency. The IPCC report gives us 12 years to get this sorted out, which is a nanosecond in climatic science terms. We do need to scare the pants off our constituents about the changes that we need to make, but it will only work if we carry our constituents with us. With their busy lives, they will simply turn a tin ear to finger pointing and negativity. We need to mobilise the essential optimism of the British people about the opportunities for change that exist right across the economy.

Claire Perry: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I paid tribute to him earlier for making the point that this is not just about our atmosphere, but about our watercourses, our land use and our entire ecosystem. We must focus on the opportunities. When many people hear that we have 12 years to save the planet—that is a terrifying thought—they think, “What is the point? We cannot possibly change anything, because there is so much CO₂ and we will never get rid of it.” The point is that we can change, and we have changed. We have done so in a way that has not impoverished people or interfered with our energy security. Energy bills have actually gone down, because energy efficiency in the home has increased. These are myths that we must bust, and we must take people with us as we make the changes.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): When I met young people from Carlton le Willows Academy recently and received their petition, I could feel their frustration in what they said about climate change. They think we are sleepwalking towards disaster and we need to wake up. They think this Parliament is asleep. What are we going to do about that?

I ask the Minister to reflect on the language that she uses, because some of it sounds complacent. The Government have done things, but we need to convey the sense of urgency and explain how we are going to get a move on before the world collapses and implodes on itself. Building on what my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) has said, what are we going to do to bring the world together? This is a wake-up call for our own country and countries across the world, if we are going to avert the disaster that is staring us in the face.

Claire Perry: If there is any communication of complacency, I am horrified. I think that we have to focus calmly on the science. It is striking that in this debate, nobody has stood up and said, “This is a hoax,

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and it is not happening.” That is incredible, and it would not have happened 10 years ago. There is almost universal acceptance of the challenge and our progress.

One thing that I hear from young people is, “You have done nothing.” What does that say about what so many colleagues in this House have done for the past 10 years? Colleagues have done incredible things. They have supported huge changes to our energy system. When I was elected, 40% of our power came from coal. Over this Easter weekend, that figure has been zero, and it will be down to zero completely by 2025. That is a huge achievement. We must say to people, “You are right to encourage us to do more and to be angry with us, but don’t say that we have done nothing. None of you was asleep at the wheel before we got here, and we certainly haven’t been asleep at the wheel since then.”

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Will the Minister elaborate a little on the importance she attaches to growing the economy at the same time as tackling climate change? Is it not the case that we will need to be able to invest in the technology that we will require to cut emissions further?

Claire Perry: Yes. One of the challenges that I have heard is that we need a fundamental reworking of the market-based system to solve all our problems. My recollection is that centrally planned economies historically had some of the worst records on environmental pollution, climate change and emissions. I have seen the power of the private sector investment that my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) referred to earlier, the technology and innovation that come from competition and things such as the auction system—I see the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey), who previously occupied the post held by the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and who helped to design the system—which have sent the costs of offshore wind tumbling over the past few years. The market-based system does deliver, but we need Government to set ambition, to regulate where required and to convene where necessary.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): This statement is very timely, given that Marsden moor, outside Huddersfield, and Ilkley moor, outside Bradford, have been on fire—raging—this weekend. Today, there has been a machinery of government announcement that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is transferring greenhouse gas business emissions over to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and 12,000 companies will now report on that. In that new guidance there are just seven pages on water, three pages on waste, two on resource efficiency and biodiversity, and woodland creation, and the greenhouse gases associated with it, has been relegated to one page in annexe K. May I urge the Minister not to lose sight of the natural world? When the new greening government commitments are made in 2020, may I ask that every Government Department is properly accountable? Our audits have found that they are failing to meet them in both the policy sphere and in their own operations.

Claire Perry: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady and the Environmental Audit Committee. She knows that I and others are very impressed with the work she does. She

raises an important point. The whole-of-Government approach is so valuable. We can no longer just point to a silo and say that if we have solved that, the problem is solved. We have to advance on all fronts. I will look at what she suggests we review. If improvement is needed, we will deliver it.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): The Minister quite rightly outlined the very wide-ranging ways we are decarbonising across all sectors. That is absolutely the right thing, but does she agree that better management of our soils could go a very long way to achieving many of our emissions targets—indeed, getting to net zero sooner—if only we managed the soils better? We have a great opportunity to get this right through the 25-year environment plan, the Agriculture Bill and the environment Bill, which will be the biggest piece of environmental legislation since the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Does that not show that while we get the message about the crisis—we are hearing that—the way to put it right is through policies?

Claire Perry: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend’s work on this topic, on which she is something of an expert. She had a very successful soil summit just before the recess. We have realised that some of the most cost-effective ways of sequestering carbon, such as soil improvement, changes in land use management and forestation, are also those that are best for the natural environment. I think we have all collectively realised how we need to continue to invest in these important areas.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): In thanking the Minister for her kind words about the design of CfD auctions, which has ensured that Britain is a world leader in offshore wind, I have to say to her that I found her statement rather panglossian. Renewable energy investment has fallen off a cliff in the past two years. The major expansion in renewable investment was really about investment decisions made before 2015, which, I have to say, her former colleague, the then Chancellor George Osborne, tried to unpick directly after the 2015 election. May I refer her to the point made by the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) on the Paris climate change treaty? Does she not accept that it was Britain’s leadership in the European Union on climate change that led to very ambitious targets adopted by heads of state of the EU in October 2014, that led to the Americans and the Chinese being more ambitious on climate change, and thereby to the Paris climate change treaty? What is going to happen when Britain is not at the table at the European Union showing that leadership?

Claire Perry: I would slightly challenge the right hon. Gentleman on the point about investment. He will know that investment can be quite lumpy—it depends on when you are having an auction round—and we are buying far more with less, because the price of renewables has fallen so much. We are paying far less per unit of renewable energy. I was very struck, when we launched the offshore wind sector deal, with how turning out that market provides investment certainty. There is a real lesson to be learnt there for other technologies. I do not accept the point that without the UK at the table we will no longer be able to push the EU and other countries. We will continue to have a loud voice in this area and continue to lead from the front.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Does the Minister agree that no matter how strongly people feel about this issue, they do not have the right to block roads or to encourage students to take unauthorised absences from school?

Claire Perry: To peacefully protest is a fundamental part of our democracy, but I do think that forcing people to not take energy-efficient public transport on their way home, creating disruption for those going on a hard-earned holiday, and causing our excellent police force to give up their leave over Easter—I want to pay tribute to the police—should make people think long and hard about the tactics they are using.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Minister regularly takes me to task for not being positive enough about her Government, so I am going to surprise her. I am going to overlook the fracking, the expansion of Heathrow airport and the new coalfield up in Cumbria, and say that when it comes to global climate work the Government are doing good work. But even there, it is undermined by the work of the UK export credit agency, which is giving so much—billions of pounds—to more oil and gas exploration in some of the poorest countries. Will she surprise me in turn by saying she will be doing something about that?

Claire Perry: I have to say, Mr Deputy Speaker, that this is a wonderful day to have the hon. Lady being positive about the work that not just my Government but the whole of the UK are doing. She raises an important point about the challenge of investment. We of course support those industries that are highly productive and generate jobs and revenue. She will know that one thing we are looking at is to ensure we are not supporting, for example, coalmining. We will continue to look at that, but we also have to make sure that when we are supporting exports they deliver revenues and jobs for the Exchequer, so we can continue to invest in the low-carbon revolution.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): There is a genuine public appetite to protect the environment, but it is not always clear to people where to direct their efforts. That is where the Government have such an important role in incentivising behavioural change. Will the Minister advise how she is trying to harness that public appetite by better signposting people to ways in which they can do their bit, and how they might help her in lobbying other countries which have been less successful in reducing their emissions?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend will have hopefully heard our announcement that we will have our second Green Great Britain week, which is a brilliant week-long opportunity from 4 November to say what we have done, challenge others to do more and work right across the country. I would hope the whole country would recognise that if we are able to win the bid to host the climate change talks, not only would that be an amazing chance for us to help the world move to decarbonisation, it would also be an incredible opportunity to showcase some of our best green technologies and businesses. Hopefully people will realise the benefit that comes from those investments in terms of jobs and growth.

Mr Barry Sheerman: Does the Minister agree that we should all hang our heads in shame? The great political parties and all their members have not done enough.

We should be ashamed that it took a little Swedish girl to come here today and tell us that we need a sense of urgency and leadership, and recognise that we must act sooner rather than later to stop this threat that will destroy this fragile planet. Does she not agree with me that we should have listened to the scientists years ago? Twenty-five years ago, I started the Socialist Environment and Resources Association—SERA—a campaigning organisation in my party. We should have listened to the scientists then. We are still not listening to them clearly and closely enough now.

Claire Perry: We should have been listening to the scientists in 1950, when the link was first found. What has been important about Ms Thunberg's visit today—it is amazing to see the work—is that the conversation has gone from being niche, held between people who, like me, have long-standing interests in this area, to a mainstream conversation where everybody is talking about what it is that we need to do. That is why this is such a challenge but is so important. For the first time, the whole country is talking about climate change. I believe the whole world is talking about climate change and how we stop it. There are no deniers on the Conservative Benches.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): The UK has a good and proven track record in meeting the challenges of climate change, from passing the Climate Change Act in 2008 to the emergence of a world-leading industry in offshore wind, which is bringing significant benefits to my constituency. That said, we can do more. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need to dramatically reduce carbon emissions from our existing housing stock, which will tackle the scourge of fuel poverty, and will she consider recognising housing as a key component of national infrastructure?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend has been a marvellous champion of renewable energy. It was a delight to launch the offshore wind sector deal in Lowestoft and to see the regeneration that it is bringing to that proud port. He is right to talk about retrofitting homes. I sat on the green deal Bill Committee, as many others did, and we thought that we had an answer there, but it did not work. We have to keep going and recognise that such things as green mortgage lending could make an important contribution. Hopefully he will be pleased to see that we have focused the whole of the ECO budget on fuel poverty and have also upped the innovation component, because we need to have innovation in the area of retrofitting homes, particularly to drive costs down.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): There seems to be precious little action on achieving the Aichi biodiversity targets. The UK is on track to achieve only five of these 20 targets by 2020, so what action does the Minister intend to take to rectify this woeful situation?

Claire Perry: I am afraid that the hon. Lady is challenging the breadth of my knowledge on this. It is not my Department's area, but I would be very happy to engage with her further. She points out that we can no longer talk about climate, ocean and biodiversity as separate silos. We have to join them up, so I look forward to a conversation where she can perhaps educate me more on that point.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Authoritative research from Carbon Brief shows that the UK has now cut CO₂ emissions to the lowest level since 1888, that in the last seven years the decline in CO₂ emissions has been the fastest sustained fall in history, and that since 1990, the UK has cut carbon emissions faster than any other major economy in the world. Are not all three very proud achievements of this Government?

Claire Perry: I know that my hon. Friend's constituents in Kettering are among the most green-minded in the country, as he often points out to us. He mentions an important fact—yes, we have more to do, but we should be really proud of our achievements. People thought that this would be impossible, but it is possible and achievable, and we will continue to do more.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Despite the views of many in this House that Government action can control and fine-tune the complex world climate, the fact of the matter is that climate change is a natural phenomenon. We have experienced it throughout the history of the world and we will experience it in the future. A small part of that is greenhouse gas emissions, 97% of which are natural, caused by water vapour, volcanic activity and decaying vegetation, and 3% of which is caused by man. One per cent. of that is caused by the United Kingdom—a very small percentage—yet we have changed our economy dramatically. While the Minister has outlined the Government's achievements, she has not pointed out that we pay dearly for energy bills and have fuel poverty, and that we have lost tens of thousands of jobs in energy-intensive industries. At the same time, while we are setting these targets, nature and our competitors are offsetting our draconian actions.

Claire Perry: The right hon. Gentleman will not be surprised to know that I disagree with his scientific analysis. The link between CO₂ emissions and temperature increases is proven to an extent well beyond the proof that smoking causes lung cancer. The challenge that he rightly raises, though, is how we act in a way that is just and fair and ensures that we do not put people out of work and that we do not put bills up. The Government go through a process of making sure that our energy-intensive industries are held whole and they do not overpay for their energy. We all supported a price cap Bill to ensure that the cost of energy is held down, but ultimately, this is why when we act, we have to act in a proportionate way and make sure that whoever ends up having to pay for this—whether it is customers, taxpayers or shareholders—is paying a fair and proportionate amount.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): Cornwall and the wider south-west have clean growth at the heart of our local and regional industrial strategy. Many innovative businesses will be delivering the solutions that we need to decarbonise, so will the Minister publish the green finance strategy when she publishes her response to the recommendations of the Committee on Climate Change, because like her, I think that market forces can be forces for good?

Claire Perry: I will look into that. Cornwall is wonderful for many things and the adoption of clean growth as a fundamental part of a local industrial strategy is incredibly exciting. We want to see other areas doing the same.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): In answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), the Minister said she liked local innovation but refused to direct any resources for improving the built environment in local communities, which he was calling for. What resources will local authorities have access to in order to carry out the innovation she is talking about?

Claire Perry: I neglected to mention the £8 million we have put into local energy partnerships. We often find that local authorities have lots of ambition but not necessarily the skills, and we want to make sure they have them and the investment. I also referenced the Salix pot, which is available for many local government buildings, which are also an important part of the built environment.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Solar energy plays a crucial role. Last month, I met the Minister and Moray-based AES Solar, which explained its concerns about the cliff edge the industry was facing because of a change in policy. More than three weeks later, that policy gap still exists. I am sure she accepts the urgency of this issue, so can she tell us when the Government will publish their smart export guarantee policy?

Claire Perry: It will be published as soon as possible. I thank my hon. Friend for that meeting. As he will know, energy companies are voluntarily bringing forward what are in effect smart export guarantee prices, so those price signals are already coming through. As I said, we want to get it right. We do not want to find, as we did with feed-in tariffs, that we have committed more than £30 billion, as we will have done over the lifetime of that scheme, to deliver a relatively small number of installations. We want to future-proof the smart export guarantee and we want to make it stick.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): The Minister mentioned in her statement that the Government had sought the advice of the Committee on Climate Change on a net zero target. Can she reassure the House that, should this advice entail a greater investment in low-carbon innovation than the £2.5 billion detailed in the clean growth strategy, the Government will commit additional funding as necessary?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman is inviting me to make funding bids to my colleagues in the Treasury. Of course, I would want to make that bid. Innovation funding and co-partnership on innovation is a huge success and one we need in order to drive down costs and drive up deployment.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): None of us can doubt the energy and determination of the Minister to deal with this issue, but could I encourage her to take an hour out of her week to watch the fabulous Channel 4 documentary, "The Street", about the very innovative way Cherwell District Council is allowing people to self-build houses in Bicester? I think she would be as surprised as I was at the way eco credentials become very important when people build their own home. Will she watch this documentary—it's Kevin McCloud, so it won't hurt her—and think more carefully about how to encourage people and local councils to embed eco values when they build?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend points out an incredibly important fact. While people want to do the right thing, they often do not know where to go, and centrally imposed standards often suppress rather than stimulate innovation. Trying to get that right is the subject of a review by other Departments at the moment, but perhaps she could pour me a glass of organic wine and we could watch it together.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I asked the Minister earlier what she would do to incentivise all renewables, and I got a very narrow answer, so let me try again. Small-scale renewables such as solar panels have been fitted in developments in my constituency, such as the social rented housing one in Pollokshields, built by Home Group, but Hannah Smith of Scottish Renewables has said

“that the end of the feed-in tariff will mean, at best, a period of enormous uncertainty for the companies that install these projects and for the people who work for them”.

The solar sector in Scotland has sold the equivalent of 360,000 solar panels every year since 2010. It is no small industry. What will she do to restore certainty and incentivise that industry?

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady makes the important point that we need to hurry up with the smart export guarantee and make sure it works to deliver that, but I would gently encourage her to look at the outcome that we are delivering, rather than focusing on a particular technology. Last month, renewable energy in the UK was at over 40%, and we can now source things such as offshore wind at subsidy-free prices, so we are delivering and will continue to deliver, but we need to do that in a way that provides value for money for consumers.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Bristol was the first city in the UK—I think—to declare a climate emergency, so I put on record that Bristol would be more than willing to host the COP talks, if we do win the bid. I can think of nowhere better.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Hear, hear!

Kerry McCarthy: That is a joint bid by my hon. Friend and me!

I want to ask specifically about sustainable development goal 12 on responsible production and consumption. It seems to me that we are using far too many of the world's natural resources producing things we do not actually need just to keep money flowing between buyers and sellers. How can we limit that circle and use our natural resources more wisely?

Claire Perry: As a Nailsea girl, I would naturally be biased in favour of a Bristol bid, but I suspect that there will be a “whole of the UK” bid.

The hon. Lady has made an important point. I think we have made progress with the so-called sustainable economy and will continue to do so, but our continued progress will require Government action alongside action by producers. Again, we are trying to lead by example, but there is clearly much more to do. I must challenge one of the hon. Lady's points: I think that climate change is involved in 15 of the sustainable development goals, which means that it is fundamental to nearly all of them.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The Minister is right to talk about the need for more action at an international level, but can she explain how she intends to use the bid for COP26 to achieve that, and, specifically, will she spell out the more ambitious targets that she thinks the world should embrace?

Claire Perry: Let us try to win the bid first. Other countries are bidding, and I want to ensure that if we do win it, we are able to offer appropriate leadership. Perhaps we can have that conversation in a few months' time.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Earlier this year, the Mayor of Greater Manchester published his clean air plan. I welcomed that, but we need help from the Government to deliver it. In particular, we need funds for a vehicle scrappage scheme and for retrofitting our bus fleet. What assurance can the Minister give us that funds will be made available to us for those purposes?

Claire Perry: I commend that plan as a good example of the work that can be done to pull through change. We have increased our support for the transition to zero-emission vehicles across the country to more than £1.5 billion, which will fund charging points, some support for buyers, and the transition to clean mass public transport. I would welcome conversations both with the hon. Lady and with colleagues from other Departments. If we are to accelerate this process, we need to do that first in areas where it will make a real difference to air quality.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The nature of this emergency necessitates a national mission-orientated approach, the same sort of vigorous approach that the Americans adopted in the 1960s when they had a national mission to put a man on the moon. That requires the Government to be much more proactive, and much more active, in their approach to bringing forward technologies, de-risking them, and launching them into the wider marketplace in our economy.

A good example of the current failure is in the offshore renewables sector. BiFab yards in Scotland are currently lying idle, with no certainty about their future, because both the UK Government and the Scottish Government are failing to get a grip on the need to allocate a level playing field. Navantia, the Spanish shipbuilder, is currently benefiting from 35% subsidies from the Spanish Government, but this Government are taking no action to level the playing field. We have been ripped off by companies in competitor nations that are stealing our technologies and also undermining our industrial base. What is the Minister going to do about it?

Claire Perry: I understand the BiFab situation, which the hon. Gentleman and I have discussed before, but I must gently correct him. The offshore wind sector deal included a commitment to ensuring that UK content—real content, not just intellectual property content—would rise to 60%, and a commitment to a much better audit process. I am aware of the claims that the hon. Gentleman has made, and we must ensure that there is a level playing field when we are essentially committing taxpayers' money to developing the industry further.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): A letter has been signed by me and by Councillor Tudor Evans, the leader of Plymouth City Council, and co-signed by 65 young people aged from three to 17 who attended the climate strike outside the council's offices. If they were listening to the debate, they would have heard nothing from the Minister about agreeing to declare a climate emergency. Those young people would want me to ask the Minister please to declare a climate emergency and work across parties, so let me ask the Government, on their behalf, to demonstrate that they are listening to them.

Claire Perry: I am sorry if that is the impression that has been given. I cannot say too often that we need actions, not just words. It is the easiest thing in the world to stand up with a document and say, "Look, here is our plan." Unless there are actions that we can deliver, unless we can show those young people that we are prepared to put our money where our mouth is, we should all just pack up and go home. Well, I am not going home. I will continue to campaign on climate change, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will do so as well.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Pupils at Kelvindale primary school in Hillhead, secondary school pupils at the Glasgow Academy and students at Glasgow University have all taken part in the climate protests. They understand the importance of tackling the issue, not just here at home but around the world. Is the Minister committed to the principle of climate justice, and in particular to supporting people in developing countries who are feeling the effects of climate change first and hardest but have done the least to cause it? If the Government support that she has mentioned is being counted in the overseas development assistance target, can she assure us that it is being spent in developing countries rather than subsidising other Government work being done here?

Claire Perry: That is an incredibly important point. In fact, we should be really proud of the way we spend funding. We are trying not only to ensure that we fund adaptation and mitigation, but to invest in projects that help other countries leapfrog some of the things we have done—for example, relying on a coal-based energy system. From Brazil, where we are supporting reforestation, to renewables in Africa, our projects are really making a difference. They are providing employment, they are providing skills and they are ensuring that we have that just transition that the hon. Gentleman mentioned.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): I join others in acknowledging the progress made under successive Governments, but the truth is that, unless the status of emissions reduction is raised in this Government, and the UK's response to climate crisis is driven vigorously from the centre so that all Departments are forced to act, we will continue to fall short. With that in mind, how well prepared does the Minister think the institutions of Government are for the scale and pace of the transition required?

Claire Perry: I think that part of the challenge, but also part of the opportunity, is that this has to be a cross-Government process. We simply cannot sit and make policy around transport emissions without thinking

about infrastructure. We cannot talk about energy without thinking about planning systems. There is therefore absolutely fundamental cross-Government agreement on this, as well as, hopefully, cross-party agreement. It is telling that, when we agreed to put forward our COP bid, which involves a not insubstantial cost, that was done with complete Cabinet unanimity, because everybody recognises the importance of this issue and how fundamentally every part of our economy has to change.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): At the beginning of her statement, the Minister said how good the Climate Change Act 10 years ago was because it put legal obligations on the Government. One of the interesting things Greta Thunberg said earlier today was that we needed to move from the politically possible to the scientifically necessary. The high point of political possibility was reached in Paris, but as my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) pointed out, that is not enough—that is not delivering the goods. When the Minister goes back into the international arena, in Chile at the end of the year, will she think about promoting legal obligations and not just pledges at the international level?

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady is right that we have to act as well as just setting out these warm words. One of the things we have been doing that is working is encouraging other countries to pass their own climate legislation so that they are not setting interesting, politically attractive targets and then all going off and having lunch. They are actually putting in law the sorts of budgets and reduction trajectories that we have had to enact. That means that Ministers have to stand up and have these uncomfortable grillings in front of people who know a lot more about the subject than they do.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I listened carefully to the Minister's statement, but I was particularly struck by one phrase, which stood out above the others: that we here in the UK should be proud that we "have shown real leadership." I latched on to that phrase because, as the Minister will know, we have no functioning Assembly in Northern Ireland. We also have no Environment Minister in Northern Ireland, nor have we had one since January 2017—for over two years. I need to know—and I am sure my Northern Ireland colleagues also need to know—that there has been real leadership in Northern Ireland in terms of carbon emissions, in the absence of a functioning Assembly. That, of course, must mean that the Minister and her officials have worked closely with the Northern Ireland Department responsible for this issue. Can she offer me that assurance and give me some details of that work?

Claire Perry: Indeed I can offer the hon. Lady that assurance. I have regular ministerial quadrilaterals—in this case with the civil servants, who do an excellent job representing Northern Ireland on many issues, including climate change progress and deal or no-deal planning, so the system is working. Obviously, we would like to see political leadership as well in Northern Ireland, but the process is working, and the market mechanisms that have been put in place are delivering the CO₂ reductions that we want to see.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The right hon. Lady might be sick of hearing me ask the same question over and over again, so I will try to ask it in a

different way. She says that she wants action and not words, and I agree with her, but the two are not mutually exclusive. She comes up with lots of ideas and, as she said, there is a lot in the various documents that she has referred to, so why not have actions and words? Powerful words often lead to much more powerful action. This is an emergency, and today's young people feel a sense of urgency. They need to see leadership coming from within this room, so will the Minister please think again and declare a climate emergency?

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady will get the same answer, but she gets points for persistency. I am still waiting for my vegan meal to be delivered to the Houses of Parliament, by the way. The point still stands that it does not matter what we all stand up and say; what matters is that we go out of here and do. I know that she is passionate about this on behalf of her constituents and the country that she is proud to represent, and we are delivering and will continue to deliver. I want to be the Minister who actually commits us to a course of action, not just to a slogan that sounds good on a T-shirt.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The Minister is absolutely right to focus on actions. The Government's own analysis shows that the introduction of E10 would take the equivalent of 1 million vehicles off the road. That is something that could be done now, so will she, as one of her actions, immediately speak to her colleagues in the Department for Transport and get them to accelerate the move to E10?

Claire Perry: Yes.

Northern Ireland Executive

8.51 pm

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): I beg to move,

That the Northern Ireland (Extension of Period for Executive Formation) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 616), which were laid before this House on 21 March, be approved.

The Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 initially created a five-month breathing space, in which everyone hoped and expected that we would be able to get the Stormont Executive back up and running, and that is what we have all been working towards. The Act also allowed for a one-off further extension of five months, and that is what these regulations would bring about. This is a small and perfectly formed statutory instrument. It runs to all of one side of a page and contains two regulations, one of which deals with citation and commencement. It simply adds another five months of breathing space, opportunity and potential, during which, if we work hard and if all sides are willing, we might be able to reinstate the different sides in Stormont and get the Assembly back up and running.

I do not need to tell anyone here how important this is. In the preceding piece of business, we heard that this area is crying out for a political voice to deal with the devolved issues in Northern Ireland. Everyone on all sides of the community in Northern Ireland, and more broadly, understands the importance of this, and I therefore hope that everyone will back not only the statutory instrument but the efforts from all sides of the community to push everyone towards a willingness to come up with a successful resumption of and conclusion to the talks. As this is a short statutory instrument of only two regulations, I propose to sit down now and leave the floor open to others who might wish to contribute. I hope that everyone will feel able to support the regulations this evening.

8.53 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I think it is appropriate, although not necessarily relevant, to mention the sombre, serious and sober debate on the murder of Lyra McKee that we had earlier. The statements that we heard from the Northern Ireland Members present will resonate long in this House and far beyond it. It makes it all the more important, when we are dealing with business like this—in the absence of an Executive and an Assembly—that we do not allow a vacuum for the gangsters and the men and women of violence to succeed and to flourish. I profoundly hope that what we heard tonight will be a tipping point and that there is a possibility of a return to normalcy, which would be epitomised by this sort of legislation.

This is an extremely unusual piece of legislation in that it has already been made. It comes before us, as the Minister said, small and perfectly formed, but it was perfectly formed last month. It is what we call an affirmative statutory instrument. I am sure that some people lie awake at night dreaming of unusual affirmative statutory instruments, but I do not count myself among those people. This is a piece—*[Interruption.]* Mr Deputy Speaker, I am being heckled from the Back Benches, but what I do at night is entirely my own business.

[Stephen Pound]

One of the first questions I asked was, “Why was it expedient for this statutory instrument to be made without the prior approval of Parliament?” The answer is quite simply that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland was deep in negotiations with the various parties in the Northern Ireland, and it is a tragedy that we have to consider this piece of legislation now after those negotiations have taken place.

The explanatory memorandum refers to negotiations that have taken place with all the Northern Ireland political parties, and I am interested to know whether any negative comments or suggestions were made at that time. I want to put the House’s mind entirely at rest, calm fragile beating hearts and say that Her Majesty’s loyal Opposition will almost certainly not oppose the regulations.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): One way of avoiding this legislation would be for the Secretary of State to put it up to the parties in Northern Ireland. If they wish to go into the Assembly, as they all say they do, the Secretary of State could call the Assembly tomorrow and see who turns up. That would show which parties are the real obstacle to the Assembly forming again.

Stephen Pound: I have known the right hon. Gentleman for many years—I knew him when he was opposing his predecessor in an impressive campaign—but he tempts me down a primrose path that I must sadly resist. I cannot at this stage in my not-particularly-successful parliamentary career claim to speak for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. The closest that I have ever come to the Secretary of State is being on the other side of the Dispatch Box, and I am sure that she is quite happy with that—the distance, I mean. I cannot make any comment, but I am familiar with the statement, which the right hon. Gentleman has made before. Labour does not intend to oppose the regulations tonight. In fact, on the contrary, we actually intend to confirm our support. However, we would like some indication of the road map to devolution being restored.

I want to refer to Paul Murphy, now Lord Torfaen, who supported the regulations in the other place. I remember him well, and he is held in great respect. I remember that the late Rev. Dr Ian Paisley would greet him every morning with the salutation, “And how is the apostle Paul this morning?” Paul Murphy loves Northern Ireland, but he said in his speech in the upper House that

“Northern Ireland is the least democratic part of our country and of the European Union. No nationalist Members of Parliament, or, for that matter, Members of this House, take their seats”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 10 April 2019; Vol. 797, c. 519.]

and “there is no Assembly”. Tonight, we realise the full impact of that situation, which cannot be allowed to pertain.

There has been some talk of the discussions being accelerated by the appointment of an independent arbiter—someone to oversee them. It is a superficially attractive proposition, but I understand that the Secretary of State is currently in discussions with two committees of Members of the Legislative Assembly, and we would like to see how that progresses.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman have any idea of what is going to happen after the August date expires? What we are being asked to support tonight takes us to August, and he knows how quickly July will pass with the marching season. Does he have any idea of the plan post August?

Stephen Pound: I did ask the Minister earlier for some indication of the road map, but all I can say is that if the Secretary of State or the Minister, let alone myself or my colleague the shadow Secretary of State, had the remotest idea of where we will be in two or three months, we would be buying lottery tickets, not sitting here tonight. With respect, I have to say that I do not know. All I know is that we have to show willing, determination, energy and absolute commitment, because we cannot carry on with a situation in which such legislation is taken through the House in the absence of those who should be dealing with it. This is Northern Ireland business, and it should be dealt with by Northern Ireland legislators in Northern Ireland. I hope every single one of us accepts that.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Pound: Of course I will. I could hardly refuse.

Lady Hermon: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman, and I am sure he will not regret taking my intervention. Having listened to what he has just said, I am curious to know whether, in fact, Her Majesty’s loyal Opposition—we often hear them described as the “loyal Opposition”—would support the Secretary of State if she were to exercise her power to call a Northern Ireland Assembly election in the event that the parties do not come to any agreement before the expiry date in August. Would the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues support the Secretary of State in that event?

Stephen Pound: Once again, I am tempted by the spirit of hypothesis. I cannot imagine that situation at the present time, and it is not really appropriate at this stage even to hypothesise along those lines. I am perfectly prepared to discuss these things in the silent, tenebrous gloom of the Tea Room, but we should not be making such suggestions and prognostications on the Floor of the House.

I finish by saying that we support the regulations and will not be voting against them. We understand that the Secretary of State is doing her best on this. Obviously, like everyone in the House, I wanted to do more, and I think she wanted to do more—I think every one of us feels that way. It is with sadness that we support the regulations tonight, but we understand they are absolutely necessary. This is the first piece of made legislation I have seen come before the House in this way, and I profoundly hope it will be the last and that there will be less and less Northern Ireland business taken on the Floor of the House. Let it be repatriated to Northern Ireland, where it belongs. We support the regulations.

9.1 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I share the weariness of the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) about our continuing necessity

to debate Northern Ireland business on the Floor of the House, and I hope very much that, before too long, we will see democracy in Northern Ireland restored to where it should be: Stormont.

However, we have to contemplate the possibility that that day may be some time off. I share the desire already expressed for some form of road map, some sense of when it may be necessary to bring powers back to Whitehall to make sure that Northern Ireland is properly governed, because there can be little doubt—my Select Committee has certainly taken evidence to this effect—that the good governance of Northern Ireland is suffering big time right now. Decisions that should be made in the interest of the ordinary lived experience of people in Northern Ireland are not being made because of the absence of ministerial decision making.

That situation is sustainable for a while but not for too long, and it has become increasingly clear to us that public services are suffering, that decisions are not being made and that infrastructure is not being put in place. Civil servants, who are trying to do their best, clearly have their limitations. That has been proved in the courts, despite the guidance issued by the Secretary of State, and there will come a time when Ministers here in London will have to start making those decisions with a heavy heart. It probably is not acceptable to kick this particular can too much further down the road.

I share the temptation, expressed by the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), to think about calling the Assembly to see who turns up, but he knows as well as I do that that recall would be very short-lived indeed because of the need for cross-community consent.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The recall may well be short-lived, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that one significant advantage is that reconvening the Assembly would prove, beyond any doubt, who are the willing and who are the unwilling?

Dr Murrison: That's as may be, but the hon. Gentleman will have gathered from my preamble that I am interested in ministerial decision making, and I rather suspect that very few decisions would be made by Ministers in the short space of time between the convening of the Assembly and it breaking down. Under the legislation, it certainly would not have legitimacy.

Sammy Wilson: I can understand the hon. Gentleman's cynicism and caution in all of this, but as Sinn Féin, which I assume he was referring to, has publicly made it clear that it does not object to going back into the Assembly, does he not think this would at least be a useful exercise to test the sincerity of Sinn Féin spokesmen, who almost daily are now saying that they wish to go back into the Assembly? If the doors were opened and the Secretary of State invited all the parties, we would see whether or not those assurances, which are given with a straight face on the TV almost every night, are sincere.

Dr Murrison: I suspect that the right hon. Gentleman has his own views on the sincerity of the party to which he refers, but the preoccupation of the Secretary of State is the good governance of Northern Ireland. In that respect, I suspect we would not be moved much further on were we to recall the Assembly and see who turns up.

The date of 25 August is interesting. As has been said, not much is likely to happen between now and then, particularly given the marching season. What happens on 25 August? It seems to me that there could be a throwing of the electoral dice in order to work out a way forward because something might turn up; the numbers may change and it may be possible to form an Executive. The sense is that that would not happen.

We are then of course faced with another important date: 31 October 2019, the latest in the deadlines for this Brexit journey. One thing has been made clear in terms of the chronology: in the event of a no-deal Brexit, there would have to be some form of direct rule from Westminster. That is the only certainty we have been given by Ministers. I would like to know from the Minister, therefore, whether it is his working assumption that, on 25 August, an election would be called in very short order, because that would give a small window between then and 31 October in which to hold elections and perhaps have a slightly different outcome from the one we have at the moment—that may just be crucial.

That is pretty much all I have to say. As the Minister has said, this is a short measure and it is unobjectionable. Like most right hon. and hon. Members, I cannot wait to get on to discuss seed potatoes, which is the second matter of Northern Ireland business we will be debating this evening.

9.7 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is very much like groundhog day when it comes to Northern Ireland legislation, albeit secondary legislation in this case. I could set out the many reasons why it is imperative that the Executive be re-formed. The Minister would largely agree with that aim but disagree as to the UK Government's role and leadership in achieving that thus far. I hope that the real depth of feeling exhibited in Northern Ireland in recent days, following Lyra McKee's sad death, and the Secretary of State's conversations in the coming days with party leaders will mark a real shift in the political situation, because we are in danger of slipping into a reality where functioning devolution in Northern Ireland is no longer the norm. Although much of the fault ultimately falls on its own representatives, it is far beyond time that the UK Government began a new round of inclusive talks in earnest, in order that they be the arbiter that is required to end this impasse. I reiterate that, if the Government cannot do this, they should consider bringing in independent arbitration.

The murder of Lyra McKee last week has demonstrated to all of us across these islands just how fragile and precious the peace process in Northern Ireland is and always has been. Following her murder, the public and political reaction has been united in sending two very clear messages. The first is a condemnation of those who carried out the killing. The second is a determination that politics, and nothing else, must fill the dangerous political vacuum that has been allowed to develop. So we will not be opposing this SI tonight, but I have a few questions for the Minister to address in his summing up.

Ian Paisley: I understand that the hon. Gentleman does not wish to oppose the motion, but will he stand in our shoes and think about something? If Parliament

[*Ian Paisley*]

were talking about his part of the kingdom—his part of Scotland—he would oppose the motion tonight, would he not?

Gavin Newlands: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question and understand where it comes from. It is of great regret that we have to consider this SI at all. It is not comfortable for me to address situations in another part of the United Kingdom that should be devolved. There should be elected representatives in Northern Ireland, but—I hate this phrase—we are where we are. We have to ensure that the regulations are passed this evening, so we will not oppose them.

On Monday, the leaders of the Social Democratic and Labour party, the Ulster Unionist party and the Alliance party called on the Secretary of State to reconvene inclusive talks on power sharing this week. We in the SNP have been calling for such urgent talks at every turn. The Secretary of State has said that the restoration of devolution is her top priority, so will the Minister respond to the public and political calls to convene talks urgently? They should be proper talks, not just brief conversations between the Secretary of State and the party leaders. Why must there be such delay? I see no reason why talks should be dragged out beyond the local and European elections. The people of Northern Ireland deserved a functioning Assembly three years ago, and they deserve one now, not at some arbitrary future date. Can the Minister explain the justification for this—is the extension a deliberate attempt to stall the reconvening of talks until September?

In previous debates, Members from all parties have outlined concerns that the Northern Irish civil service has been stretched to its limit. Will the Minister update the House on the administrative pressures that the Northern Irish civil service is experiencing because of the absence of political direction? Given the vacuum in Northern Ireland, why has the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference not met more regularly? What meetings are planned for the immediate future?

In conclusion, the SNP wants Northern Ireland to benefit from a fully functioning Executive and Assembly. That is in the interests of Northern Ireland, Scotland, the UK and, indeed, Europe. The continued absence of power sharing can no longer be tolerated. The people of Northern Ireland deserve better from all its elected representatives and its Government.

9.12 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): It is now more than two years since there was an Assembly and Executive in Northern Ireland, which now has the proud achievement of holding the world record for the longest time a country has gone without a Government. We members of the Select Committee have heard about the difficulties that has caused. We have listened to the Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland tell us about the daily struggles and not knowing whether he has enough money in his budgets to pay his officers, to order equipment or to make sure that the vital work that the PSNI needs to do can be done.

The Select Committee has listened to headteachers across all communities tell us about not only the school funding issues they face but the political reforms that

need to happen to enable schools in Northern Ireland to teach the next generation of children. The Salisbury review that was commissioned when the Northern Ireland Assembly was sitting is now gathering dust on tables because there is no one there to take the decisions forward. Northern Ireland potentially faces a teachers' strike because teachers there have not had a pay rise since the Assembly fell and are now being paid 6.6% less than teachers in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Civil servants from various Northern Ireland Departments have told the Select Committee that they are doing their best to keep things going but cannot take the key political decisions that need to be taken by Ministers. The Department of Health's suicide strategy could be saving lives as we speak, but is still on hold, and there is still no legislation on mental capacity in Northern Ireland, even though not only did the rest of the United Kingdom have the original Mental Capacity Act 2005, but the House passed the Mental Capacity (Amendment) Bill only a few weeks ago.

The MLAs who come before the Select Committee tell us there is no way there is going to be an Assembly any time soon. It is indeed depressing. Although extension after extension seems to be in vogue in this place on a variety of issues, we cannot carry on like that in Northern Ireland—we cannot carry on representing all the communities of the wonderful Northern Ireland in that way. It is ironic that on 22 April 1969, almost 50 years ago to the day, Bernadette Devlin stood in this place to give her maiden speech. It was a controversial maiden speech from a controversial Member of Parliament who, I am sure, would be no fan of me or of Members of the Democratic Unionist party. She stood as a Unity candidate and as a civil rights activist, campaigning for one man, one vote for all communities in Northern Ireland. How sad it is that 50 years later, when everyone in Northern Ireland has the right to vote, there are some communities that do not have representation either in this place or in the Assembly.

None the less, so much has been achieved in Northern Ireland. Despite the terrible incidents over the holiday weekend, we finally have peace. My concern is that, without an Assembly, a vacuum is being created, which paramilitary organisations on all sides are starting to fill. Those organisations are starting to indoctrinate young people who were not around at the time of the Good Friday agreement. Those young people do not have anyone speaking up for them, whether it is on health, education or crime. The vacuum is being filled by people who do not have the best interests of Northern Ireland at heart.

I really would like the Minister to outline what will happen in August if no Assembly has been formed. Will we see another election? Will we have an Assembly of the willing, or will we have an independent chair of talks to get things going? We need to have those answers this evening before we decide on the motion before us.

Northern Ireland is a wonderful place, notwithstanding what we have heard today both in the statement and in the motion before us. Despite not having an Assembly, Northern Ireland has the best performing education system for primary maths in Europe. Belfast is the world's top destination for FinTech development. Northern Ireland has the highest availability of broadband in the United Kingdom, something that I am personally very envious of, because in Lewes we have multiple notspots so any advice that can be given to East Sussex would be

very welcome. There are also beautiful coastlines in Northern Ireland; I visited the Giant's Causeway over Christmas. The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) was very generous in recommending hospitality in his constituency.

There is so much good news that comes out of Northern Ireland and so many wonderful people—whether they identify as British or Irish, Protestant or Catholic, of any faith or none, or as nationalist or Unionist, they are the most friendly, hard-working people one could ever wish to meet. Although there are tough decisions to be made, I urge all sides to get back around the table and form an Assembly and an Executive as soon as possible. There are some great stories to tell about Northern Ireland. Without an Assembly, we are missing some of the good news as well as the bad.

9.17 pm

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) who has spoken very eloquently about the attractions of Northern Ireland. She is right to point out, as we consider the dark news of the weekend's events, the many tremendous assets that Northern Ireland has going for it, which include, most of all, its people despite everything that has happened in recent days. We have seen the worst of what can happen in Northern Ireland, but we have also seen the very best, with people coming together in a very, very strong way to send a powerful message about the future that we all want for our beloved country. Although we may have our disagreements—our strong disagreements—we all hail from Northern Ireland. We were born there, we live there, and our families grew up there. Our grandchildren, those of us who have them—I am blessed to have two young grandchildren—will live their lives there, and we want to see the very best for them. We are united in that great hope of wanting to see the very best for the future of our country.

Part of the sad fact of what we have to deal with is not just the human tragedy, which we spoke about earlier, and the terrible events in Londonderry, but the fact that we do not have a functioning political Assembly or a functioning Government in Northern Ireland. That is deeply regrettable. I remember the evening when Martin McGuinness came and told Arlene Foster, me and a number of our aides that he was going to resign. Even at that stage, we urged him to think again. We said to him, "If you collapse everything, it will be much, much harder to build it up again." It was throwing away 10 years of progress over something that, by comparison with all that we have been through in Northern Ireland and have overcome, was a comparatively minor issue—important, but not the sort of issue that we had dealt with previously and had overcome. We urged him to think again, but Sinn Féin was determined to take this course of action. In the full knowledge of what might be at stake, it plunged Northern Ireland into a needless election. We have all seen what unnecessary elections sometimes bring about: very much unintended consequences. These elections have outcomes. Martin McGuinness called that election; Sinn Féin effectively called that election in the belief that it would strengthen its position and things would carry on with it in a more important, dominant position. Of course, it did not work out that way.

We are where we are, and this statutory instrument is a necessary one. Of course, we will not oppose it, but we do not believe that it is at all satisfactory in terms of the government of Northern Ireland. Quite frankly, we cannot go on like this for much longer, and I think the Secretary of State knows that. Indeed, the House needs to be reminded that when the Conservative party manifesto was written in 2017, the Government said that they wanted to

"avoid any return to direct rule, but in the continued absence of a functioning devolved administration, a Conservative government will do all that is necessary to provide the good governance and political stability that Northern Ireland needs, including political decision-making from Westminster".

That was in the Conservative party manifesto in 2017, and it bears repeating today because what we are being offered in Northern Ireland is the worst form of government that can possibly be imagined anywhere in a modern, civilised, developed, democratic country.

The people who are running the Government in Northern Ireland are effectively senior civil servants. David Sterling, the head of the civil service, made it clear on 23 March last year that it was totally and utterly unacceptable for senior civil servants to be put in this position. Not only is this SI—and the primary legislation that underpins it and give it its locus—wrong in principle by having Northern Ireland governed in this way; it is also a flagrant breach of the Conservative party manifesto, on which this Government stood and on which they are supposed to be proceeding.

Dr Murrison: I do not disagree with anything that the right hon. Gentleman has said, but he himself said that when the institutions collapsed, he pointed out to the late Martin McGuinness how difficult it would be to rebuild them. Is it not also the case that it would be less likely that the institutions would be capable of being re-established were powers to be brought back to Westminster?

Nigel Dodds: We are now two years into this limboland, which is utterly unacceptable in its own terms, but it is not correct to suggest that this is having the effect of bringing about the restoration of devolution. The people of Northern Ireland deserve proper government, with accountable decisions being made. These are normal, democratic, basic fundamental rights.

Let me give the House a couple of examples. We were talking earlier about violence and paramilitarism in Northern Ireland—about the still pernicious role of paramilitaries on both sides of the community in Northern Ireland. I have experience of that in my constituency of Belfast North, on the loyalist side as well as the republican side. The head of the Organised Crime Task Force says that not having Ministers taking decisions is hampering its pursuit of paramilitary and criminal assets. The unexplained wealth orders, whereby people are forced to provide evidence as to how they have gained their wealth, cannot be implemented in Northern Ireland. These are common-sense measures that would empower the security forces and the agencies of the Government to tackle criminality and paramilitarism in Northern Ireland, but they are simply left to wither on the vine. That is utterly unacceptable. These things are now well past the time when they need to be brought into force, and that has to be done, one way or another, through Ministers.

[Nigel Dodds]

The Chairman of the Select Committee referred to the impact of Brexit. I have heard the argument that if we leave the European Union, direct rule will have to be implemented in Northern Ireland. I have read reports that apparently this has been considered such a terrible prospect that the UK should remain in the European Union for as long as it takes to avoid direct rule in Northern Ireland. I point out to the House that we had periods—considerable periods—of direct rule after the 2003 Assembly elections when Sinn Féin refused to decommission its weapons. It was in government but it was still murdering people on the streets through the direct action against drugs, I think it was called. It was still holding on to its arms; it had not decommissioned them. So the Government of the day—a Labour Government—had to introduce direct rule in order to deal with the matter. Of course, people accepted that there had to be proper governance. It was not permanent; it was interim. It was not intended to last for ever. It was designed to give some semblance of good governance to Northern Ireland while these issues were resolved.

Arlene Foster, our party leader, has made it clear that she is prepared to form the Executive in Northern Ireland tomorrow, along with the other parties entitled to seats in the Executive, if the Assembly is called. I would agree with what Members have said in the House tonight about calling the Assembly. Let us see who is willing to go into government and who is not. Let us test it with people who talk about wanting to get government in Northern Ireland. Arlene Foster made an offer last year in which she said, “Let’s get the Assembly up and going, to deal with the issues that need to be dealt with—health, education, schools, the environment, roads, infrastructure—and let’s talk about the other issues”, which had suddenly become evident after the elections were called, “in parallel.”

In case anyone thinks that this is an open-ended process designed to lure Sinn Féin into the Executive and the Assembly without any kind of finality or prospect of getting agreement on these issues, we can time-limit it and say, “Well, the Assembly will fall again if we do not get these matters resolved.” That was dismissed within 30 minutes of the offer being made. This week we heard what Sinn Féin’s position was. This was said on Easter Sunday by Mary Lou McDonald: “Let us have a British-Irish partnership—a joint authority between the Irish Government and the British Government—to get things implemented, and then call the Assembly.” Let us be clear in this House tonight about what is happening in terms of the willingness of parties to enter government.

People have talked about what will happen on 25 August. The Secretary of State is clear that under this SI she will be under an obligation to call elections, but then she was under an obligation to call elections in 2017, when nearly a whole year went by and then we introduced retrospective legislation to extend the date to March 2019. So let us not get too excited about what might happen on 25 August. One thing that should certainly happen by then is that good governance should be returned to Northern Ireland in one shape or form.

I am intrigued that the explanatory memorandum, which was prepared by the Northern Ireland Office, says in paragraph 12:

“There is no, or no significant, impact on business, charities or voluntary bodies.

There is no, or no significant, impact on the public sector.

An Impact Assessment has not been prepared for this instrument because there is no, or no significant, impact on business, charities, voluntary bodies or the public sector.”

How can the Northern Ireland Office seriously suggest that there is no impact on business, charities or voluntary bodies? There is a massive impact in Northern Ireland every single day as a result of the failure to do not only what is right but what the Conservative party promised to do in its manifesto.

9.30 pm

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I am reluctant to see this legislation come forward. Like all my colleagues, I have been out on the doorsteps in my constituency over the last few days and most of the Easter period. I have been in Lisburn, Moira, Hillsborough and Dromore, talking to people about politics in the local government elections and supporting our DUP candidates. At door after door, the message has been clear: “When are we getting Stormont back? When will we have a functioning Assembly and Executive?” At one level, I am encouraged by that, because it clearly demonstrates that the people of Northern Ireland have taken ownership of the devolved institutions, flawed though they may be and difficult though they are to operate. There is no doubt that a strong majority of people in Northern Ireland recognise that governance in Northern Ireland on the day-to-day issues—the bread and butter issues—is best done by local politicians in the Assembly and the Executive. I know that the Secretary of State and the Minister of State agree with that.

That is not to say that when we had direct rule in the past, we did not have a form of government that functioned in Northern Ireland. It was not the preferred form, but I echo the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds); I disagree that direct rule is somehow undesirable or undemocratic. When I was first elected as a Member of Parliament, Northern Ireland was under direct rule. As my right hon. Friend said, even since the 1998 agreement, we have had periods of direct rule, and government is provided.

At the moment, like all my right hon. and hon. Friends, I am frustrated, because I encounter on a daily basis issues on which decisions need to be taken at ministerial level and are not being taken. The people I represent are being affected in terms of healthcare provision, education funding and a multiplicity of other areas. Justice is another such area—appointments need to be made but cannot, and decisions are required but cannot be taken, and it is having an impact on the people whom my party and I represent. My right hon. Friend is right to point out that there is an impact. We cannot say, as the explanatory memorandum suggests, that there is no discernible impact, because there is.

I thank the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) for her comments. Despite all this, Northern Ireland is doing well. I am tired of listening to some political commentators who have never done politics talking Northern Ireland down all the time, despite the fact that we have the lowest unemployment we have had for years, that we are still attracting investment and creating jobs and that we have more visitors coming to Northern Ireland than we have for decades. There is a lot of positivity, but we need a functioning Government at Stormont.

Lady Hermon: I am quite sure the right hon. Gentleman will agree with me when I say, as we watched the leaders of the political parties in Northern Ireland such as the Alliance party, the DUP and Sinn Féin coming to the Creggan at the weekend after Lyra McKee's murder—and it was murder: it was not an accident; it was murder—that there was an expectation throughout the community that she would not have died in vain, and she cannot be allowed to have died in vain. The people of Northern Ireland would love to see—I am speaking as an independent Member, but I reflect this to the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues—a genuine, sincere coming together of the political leaders of all the parties in Northern Ireland to get our Assembly back again, which would be a wonderful memorial to Lyra.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I am absolutely happy to reassure the hon. Lady that if the Secretary of State were to convene the Assembly on Thursday, the day after the funeral of Lyra McKee, the Democratic Unionist party from its leader down would be there, and all our MLAs would be there and ready to take up office and to get on with the job of providing good government for Northern Ireland. I say that to the hon. Lady without any preconditions whatsoever.

We are ready to do the job; this party is ready to act; and I long for the day when we see local Ministers back in Stormont again. However, that does require leadership, and when I consider the issues that need to be dealt with, they pale into insignificance compared with the issues that we have dealt with in the past. As I have often said, the mountains in front of us are no higher than the mountains we have already climbed in Northern Ireland. Yes, I agree with the hon. Lady that the best and strongest message we can send—to that masked gunman in the Creggan, to those who cheered him on and to those who walk the streets of Dublin in their paramilitary garb, wanting to drag us back to the dark days of the past—is to get Stormont back up and running. That is absolutely the case, and it is echoed in the *Belfast Telegraph* editorial this very day.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), the parliamentary leader of our party, has said, as our party leader said in the Creggan and as we as a party say in unison on these Benches today, we are ready to govern and we are ready to take our places in the Assembly and Executive. We do not want what has been brought before the House this evening; we want to get on with the job and sort out the issues, as we provide good government for Northern Ireland. I hope that day will come before we reach the expiry date in this. Let us not operate on the basis that that is a target date. Let us operate on the basis that we need government back in Northern Ireland tomorrow. The sooner we get it, the better for all the people of Northern Ireland, and we renew our commitment to do that.

9.38 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am very pleased to speak in this debate and to follow my colleagues, who have made some very good contributions. I believe we cannot continue to do what we have been doing for the past six months, because here we are, asking for yet another extension—an extension to the indecision, an extension to the miry clay, an extension to the freeze on

moving forward, an extension to the cessation of legislation, an extension to the absolute power of unelected civil servants and an extension to the misery of the people of Northern Ireland, who are crying out for leadership, for a working Government and for their appointed—I say that very respectfully—Secretary of State to start making decisions.

Yesterday, I had the privilege and the honour to walk with the Apprentice Boys of Derry in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), and we had what I would refer to as a cultural extravaganza. Somewhere in the region of 10,000 people walked and were watching the parade, and there was not one bit of bother. Compare that with the balaclava-ed, military-uniformed marching in parts of Northern Ireland and in Dublin—my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) mentioned that—with complete disregard for the other cultures across the Province, and it is understandable that we get annoyed.

We cannot ignore the issues that are brought to us on the doorsteps. I made it my business, during the time I was off, to be on the doors with my local councillors who worked for me in previous Assembly elections and in Westminster elections. I wanted to return that accolade and support them, and I will continue to do so this week. To be fair, my hon. Friends have done likewise. I say with the greatest respect that the key issue raised with us on the doors is not the Irish language. The key issues for the people I speak to are quite simple: education, health, roads, farming and fishing. Those are the things that the people of my constituency want, so you will understand, Madam Deputy Speaker, why we get ourselves a bit annoyed with Sinn Féin's intransigence.

The agri-food sector in my constituency contributes greatly to jobs, with more than 2,000-odd in the factories and probably double or triple that on the farms and in the businesses that feed into the process. We cannot ignore the issues of that sector. Because we do not have a working Assembly, opportunities are being held up for those in the sector who want to apply for grants to extend their factories.

I understand that time is of the essence, so I want quickly to give two examples of things that have happened to me in my constituency office over the past two weeks that explain why people are frustrated. While I am saying this, I am aware that I will be trotting through the Lobby with the Secretary of State because we have no option other than to extend the provisions, accept continual stalemate, and sit and watch our people crying out for action to be taken.

Picture this: a young teacher has a baby on 1 July. The baby is four weeks premature, with the little issues that come from that. In England, the child's parents would be allowed, in co-operation with the health visitor, to hold back the little one for another year so that he was not so far behind. The mother, who just happens to be a teacher, would be able to use her expertise to say, "My son is not far enough caught up, so we will let him do a year in nursery." That would not be an issue on the UK mainland.

The Northern Ireland Assembly began the legislation process to enable informed parental consent to play a part in the education of premature babies in Northern Ireland as well, but because Sinn Féin has pulled out and consistently been allowed to hold the entire country—

[*Jim Shannon*]

every other person in Northern Ireland—to ransom, this mother, who, as a teacher, understands her son's educational needs, must sit idly by and watch a massive schooling mistake being made, without being able to do anything about it. That is not okay. Will the Minister of State come with me to that lady's door and take the time to explain to her how his inability to make this hard decision will impact on her child's experience in school? Will he or the Secretary of State do that? I say to them: "Be ready for a roasting when you get to the doorstep."

Will the Secretary of State come to the Ulster Hospital and explain to a family why the desire to placate a republican agenda means that their grandmother must lie in a corridor in the Ulster Hospital for 36 hours before she is seen? I say to the Secretary of State with the greatest respect that she was happy to make the trip to Northern Ireland to court businesses for the remain agenda, but nothing has publicly been done, as far as I can see, to make things better in the Ulster Hospital, and my constituents cannot see things getting any better.

Will the Secretary of State, the Minister of State or whoever has the time to do so explain to the people of the Province the justification for this placation of republican terrorism, which has not kept peace intact but has seen the murder of an innocent bystander, Lyra McKee, despite her appeasement of that community? Sinn Féin obviously have no control over dissident republicans in Londonderry or anywhere else.

Will the Secretary of State or the Minister of State do what we need them to do and take control? Will the Secretary of State determine to have her legal advisers find a way to hold a democratic election and allow those who will take their seats with no red lines whatsoever to do so, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), the DUP's leader in Westminster, has said? Will she freeze out those who hold us to ransom and stop decisions being made? People are dying needlessly in our health service due to the lack of decisions. Some of my constituents have been waiting for over two years for operations. I have to say this, Madam Deputy Speaker: some have waited but have never had their operation, because they have passed on in that time.

Will the Secretary of State determine that Northern Ireland is not to be held hostage, and that only those willing to work with other democratically elected Members with no conditions are allowed to stand? It is time we think outside the box. It is time we did something different. It is time we urged our Secretary of State and her Minister of State, who is here to answer the debate, to do just that. I fear that I already know the answer, but please prove me wrong. I will vote for the extension—I will support it, because I must—but for the sake of my people in Strangford and the people of Northern Ireland, please do something to help my nation.

9.45 pm

John Penrose: I am delighted that everybody accepts, with a degree of reluctance and frustration, that the statutory instrument, while not wanted, is necessary. I thank everybody for saying, albeit with a heavy heart—I think that goes for all of us—that they will support it. I appreciate and recognise the degree of cross-party support. It is more powerful because it is cross-party.

That is not say that the frustrations are not real, or that those frustrations have not been clearly and effectively expressed this evening. We have heard a whole litany of examples, from all sides of the House, from the lengthening list of decisions not being taken because Stormont is not currently operational. We have heard examples from all sorts of people. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who just spoke, gave the examples of a lady with a premature baby and a grandmother left waiting on a hospital trolley for too long. There were other examples. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) gave a long list of missed opportunities, as did the Select Committee Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison). The repeated refrain from all sides is that we cannot keep on, in the Chair's phrase, kicking the can down the road. The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) said that the mountains in front of us are no higher than those we have scaled in the past, but he also said that bread and butter issues are far better done by locally elected politicians in Stormont.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): In light of recent legislation relating to the Buick case and permanent secretaries needing cover to allow them to make decisions, permanent secretaries are still not signing off non-controversial decisions. They are using the frustration of no Assembly as an excuse not to do business.

John Penrose: I am sure everybody here would appreciate that the senior civil servants in the Northern Ireland civil service are faced with a very, very difficult position. They are being required to keep the wheels of good government turning. The Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 equips them to do that, but clearly they have to be extremely careful not to take new policy decisions which should rightly and constitutionally be taken by elected politicians in Stormont. That would clearly be wrong and outwith the powers in the 2018 Act.

That perhaps answers the question asked by the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) about the stresses on the Administration. The answer is simply that: people are being asked to operate up to the limits of what they can decently and constitutionally do. It requires a great deal of care and civil service professionalism to ensure they go up to those limits but no further. I do not think we can reasonably ask them to continue doing that for any great deal of time longer, not least because, as people have been rightly pointing out, the list of problems left unsolved because they require a political decision is getting longer every day.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Just to re-emphasise the point that my hon. Friend the Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) made, I understand the caution in the Minister's response and the balance that senior civil servants have to reach in the public interest. There is a matrix in the Act for how those decisions should be made, but the truth is that some permanent secretaries and Departments are more willing to use the powers afforded to them under the Act than others. There needs to be a fair appreciation of that and an encouragement to the head of the civil service to say that for as long as the Act pertains, for as long as we do not have active devolved institutions, and for as long as

there is a democratic deficit and decisions can be made, they should be made. I encourage him to meet us to go through that in finer detail, because some permanent secretaries are using it to its full force. Others are not and they should be encouraged to do so.

John Penrose: I share the frustration on both sides about this issue. We need to be extremely careful. It may be clear to one person on one side of the House, or to another person on the other side, that a particular Department in the Northern Ireland civil service is acting to the full extent of its powers or perhaps drawing back a little further from using those full powers, but the point is that at some stage, that becomes a political judgment rather than a professional civil service judgment. When it becomes a political judgment, the answer at that point, of course—as many people on both sides of the debate have rightly said so far this evening—is for there to be an Executive at Stormont and for the devolved Assembly to come back into play. Ultimately, until that happens, the judgment of the civil servants has to be just that—within the scope of the Act. It is very hard for politicians to say that this civil servant is doing a good job and that civil servant is doing a bad job unless we get the politicians in place in Stormont who have the natural legal locus and the democratic mandate to do so.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Although the Minister has stated that this could become a political judgment in terms of civil servants, the reality is that the law is there. There are parameters around the exercise of the powers given within that legislation. We would like to see consistency in the discretion that each of the permanent secretaries or senior civil servants has. I asked the Secretary of State on a previous occasion to consider looking at guidance being issued to permanent secretaries to get that type of consistency. What all of us are finding at the moment is that there is a disparity in the way that permanent secretaries and civil servants are operating the powers that they have been given objectively in the Act.

John Penrose: I accept that there will be different views about whether some Departments are using those powers to their full extent and others are not. To coin the phrase used by the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who spoke for the Labour party, we are being asked to tread down a primrose path in saying that this particular part of the Northern Ireland civil service is using those powers to its full extent and this one is not. Ultimately, this has to be something that is decided, led and ultimately arbitrated by the devolved Assembly and devolved Ministers. All of us feel this frustration, but it is becoming a rather circular argument if we say that we should be trying to push them one way or the other. We have to set those rules, but ultimately, if people are not happy with the way that they are being applied, provided that they are being used within the rules of the law that we have set in the EFEF Act it is then up to the Northern Ireland Assembly. I am afraid that it is as fundamental, as simple and as difficult a truth as that. The only answer is for the Northern Ireland Assembly to come back.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): The Minister has said a number of times that he shares the frustration of what my colleagues have said tonight, but why will

the Government not go ahead and call the Assembly? Those who turn up can get it moving and working for the people of Northern Ireland—why will the Government not do that?

John Penrose: I bring the hon. Gentleman good news. My colleague the Secretary of State has many, many talents and powers but one of them is not to “call the Assembly”, to use this sort of portentous phrase, which a number of us have been using so far this evening. In fact, the Assembly is still legally in existence. If MLAs want to turn up tomorrow, or perhaps the day after tomorrow, given the sad and tragic events that are happening tomorrow, nobody needs to call them to do so. They have a legal right to turn up, open the doors and do so. When they do turn up, they will be entitled to select a Speaker and then choose a First Minister and Deputy First Minister. It does not require the Secretary of State to call them. We have heard several calls this evening for a trial to see whether people would turn up and do that. If MLAs from any side of the community and from any political party are so minded, they can do that. I will leave it up to them, of course, as directly locally elected politicians, to decide if they wish to do that, but they are legally entitled to do so.

I do not want to detain the House any longer. I am conscious of the passage of time.

Nigel Dodds *rose—*

John Penrose: I will give way very briefly and then try to answer one more question before sitting down.

Nigel Dodds: I admire the Minister greatly. He is doing a valiant job with the only two regulations in the SI, which he mentioned, so I understand that he does not have a lot of material, but he is trying to put everything on to other people, saying it is up to the parties to call the Assembly and so on. Does he not take any responsibility for the state of affairs in Northern Ireland, which his Government are responsible for, in breach of their own manifesto commitments? Will he not answer that point?

John Penrose: The right hon. Gentleman leads me on to my next point, which is a response to the several people who asked for a road map. Clearly, it will depend on the actions of the individual parties, but one of the things the Government are responsible for, which we have been trying to do and will continue to try to do, is to get the talks to bring Stormont back together again started, get them continued and get them successfully concluded.

Several people asked about the road map. As the Secretary of State set out to the House on 21 March, she has spoken to the Northern Ireland parties and the Irish Government several times in recent weeks. In those discussions, all the parties have been consistent in their commitment to restoring a power-sharing executive and the other political institutions set out in the Belfast agreement. We believe that the five main parties are in favour of a short and focused set of roundtable talks to restore devolution at the earliest opportunity, and the Irish Government also support this approach. Any such talks process would involve the UK Government, the five main parties and the Irish Government and would take place in full accordance with the well-established three-stranded approach.

[John Penrose]

During the statement earlier, several people said, without wishing to prejudge or anticipate anything with the funeral of Lyra McKee due to take place tomorrow, that there might just be a glimmer of light—a change of view and tone in Northern Ireland—which is tremendously important. If it is the case, this kind of approach will be necessary. I completely accept what the right hon. Gentleman said. We need to convene those talks, if we possibly can, and thereby create the breathing space in which that change of tone and approach can flourish and develop.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind) *rose*—

John Penrose: I was about to sit down. I have one minute, but then I really must conclude.

Lady Hermon: I am grateful to the Minister for allowing me to take his one minute. Earlier this evening, no one in the Chamber could have been unmoved by the dignified and moving tribute the Secretary of State paid to Lyra McKee. How will she and the Northern Ireland Office translate that tribute into tangible change in Northern Ireland? People have a right to know. We want change in the Northern Ireland—led by the Secretary of State.

John Penrose: I think I just set out the next steps. Clearly, it will then be for the people involved in the talks to bring them to fruition. They have to be led and convened by the Government, but they will require everybody else's involvement too. I have laid out what the process will be. I agree that no one could have failed to be moved. There is an opportunity here, and we must grasp it if we can. The SI creates the moment—that breathing space—that might allow it to happen. I hope that everybody will grasp the opportunity thus created with both hands.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Northern Ireland (Extension of Period for Executive Formation) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 616), which were laid before this House on 21 March, be approved.

Exiting the European Union (Agriculture)

10 pm

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): I beg to move,

That the draft Animal Health, Seed Potatoes and Food (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 3 April, be approved.

Let me first echo the points that were made during the last debate, not least by the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson). I too would much prefer decisions of this type to be made by a functioning democratic Executive in Stormont.

This is one of a number of affirmative procedure statutory instruments to be considered as the United Kingdom leaves the European Union. It will ensure that legislation concerning the control of salmonella in the poultry sector, beef and veal labelling, and seed potato inspections and marketing will continue to function in Northern Ireland after exit.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Will the legislation apply only to Northern Ireland; is this a separate order for us?

Mr Goodwill: I entirely take the hon. Gentleman's point, but this applies solely to Northern Ireland. Obviously, it applies under different legislation, but the instrument applies specifically to Northern Ireland in the event of a no-deal exit from the European Union.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): The subject of seed potatoes has been raised with businesses in my constituency, which have been told that if there is no deal they cannot export them to the Republic of Ireland.

Mr Goodwill: That is indeed the case. Seed potato production in Northern Ireland is less important than it used to be, but 318 hectares of certified seed are still grown there by about 50 growers. Of the 4,000 tonnes marketed, 2,000 were marketed in the Republic, 1,000 were marketed in Northern Ireland, and 1,000 were exported to countries including Egypt, Morocco and the Canary islands. In the event of a no-deal scenario, 2,000 tonnes will be lost. The main varieties grown for the southern market, including Kerr's Pink, Maris Piper and British Queen, are not generally in demand in the UK market, and in the event of no deal an adjustment will therefore be necessary. Growers may wish to switch to new varieties such as Miranda and Opal.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Has the Minister had an opportunity to engage in any discussions with the Ulster Farmers Union or the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association? It is important for consultation to be wide enough to involve those organisations, which represent the farming community throughout Northern Ireland.

Mr Goodwill: There was no need for formal consultation, because this is a "no change" piece of legislation. It allows the current situation to continue in the event of a no-deal Brexit. However, conversations took place with many stakeholders, including representatives of the Ulster Farmers Union, who were content that the regulations maintained the status quo.

Ian Paisley: Did the Minister speak to the companies that process potatoes in Northern Ireland? The two main processors are Glens of Antrim Potatoes Ltd, which is in my constituency, and Wilson's Country Ltd. It is essential for them to know that this is going to happen, and that their interests have been taken into consideration.

Mr Goodwill: The hon. Gentleman is right: the potato processing sector is very important. Seed potato production in Northern Ireland is worth about £2 million a year. Ware potatoes are not grown solely for ware, but are also a by-product of seed potato production. Potatoes that are too big to use for seed purposes go into the ware market, which is worth £20 million, but the processing will value-add £200 million. In Scarborough, in my constituency, McCain Foods processes potatoes and slices 1,000 tonnes per day. The processing sector is vital, not least because of the employment that it provides not just for UK citizens but for EU citizens who come here to work in the sector.

Ian Paisley: Does the Minister realise that the scale of potato production on the British mainland is so much more vast than it is in Northern Ireland? In fact, one processing line in England could probably take over the entire capacity of the Northern Irish processors. They have to be protected; otherwise, we will see our potato industry in Northern Ireland diminished.

Mr Goodwill: The hon. Gentleman makes another very valid point. That is why it is so important that we get this piece of legislation through to enable the current situation to continue.

Northern Ireland people are keen to support the crisps produced locally in Northern Ireland. If I may, I will also just touch on Comber new potatoes. They are renowned throughout Northern Ireland, which grows the variety Maris Piper in the main. They are a protected designation of potato, and I gather that they are grown in the constituency of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). That is another important part of the Northern Ireland potato market.

David Simpson: The Minister talks about protected species, and my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is also a protected species. However, on seed potato, my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) mentioned Wilson's Country in my constituency. It will lose £60,000 per week if it cannot export seed potatoes to the Republic of Ireland.

Mr Goodwill: That explains why it is so important that we get a deal across the line. Indeed, having had at least three or four opportunities to vote for that deal, we certainly need to see an orderly way forward.

Let me just comment on the point about the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) needing some sort of protection. I do not think he needs any protection at all. My experience of him in this Chamber is that he can very much stand up for himself and indeed for his constituents, who are involved in not only the agricultural industry but the fishing industry in a very important way.

Jim Shannon: Obviously, in my previous job in the Northern Ireland Assembly, one of the things we tried to do was to ensure that the EU had a protected

position for the Comber potato. It is renowned not just across the whole of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, but across the UK mainland as well. Other Members here may say that their potatoes are good; I can only say that ours are the best.

Mr Goodwill: Who could possibly argue with that? I have to say, however, that the new potatoes from Jersey and Pembrokeshire do hit the market slightly sooner than the Comber potatoes. However, the protection of particular locally grown produce is very important. Indeed, we have Lough Neagh eels, which are protected, and Armagh Bramley apples, which also have a great following, not only across the water in Northern Ireland, but here on the mainland too.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the importance of seed potatoes in respect of Northern Ireland and Brexit is because of the possibility of no deal? In that case, growers in Northern Ireland, whose seed potatoes are world renowned, not least because of their disease resistance, will have to change the kind of seed potatoes they produce—he touched on this in his remarks—if they are to export to markets outwith the European Union. That is because what is good for the European Union is not necessarily going to be appropriate for markets in, for example, north Africa. Despite the two years cited in the regulations, it is absolutely imperative that we get this measure on the statute book. If we do not, it is going to be very important for growers in Northern Ireland to be able to diversify in the way I have just described so that they can address markets outside the European Union, which presents a huge opportunity for them.

Mr Goodwill: My hon. Friend, who chairs the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, is absolutely right as regards the importance of getting this piece of legislation through and on the statute book. Indeed, the quality of seed potatoes produced not only in Northern Ireland but in Scotland and on the higher ground in England is world renowned. Virus diseases can be controlled using propagation methods and the strictures on growing potatoes for seed. That means that we have a world-class standing in terms of the quality of seed that we can produce, with very low levels of the virus diseases that can affect potatoes. That means that we have to continue to keep those standards up.

Let me turn to the other measures in this statutory instrument. The Control of Salmonella in Poultry Scheme Order (Northern Ireland) 2008, the Control of Salmonella in Broiler Flocks Scheme Order (Northern Ireland) 2009, the Control of Salmonella in Turkey Flocks Scheme Order (Northern Ireland) Order 2010, the Beef and Veal Labelling Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 and the Seed Potatoes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 are the measures being amended under this instrument.

These regulations make technical, legal amendments to maintain the effectiveness and continuity of UK legislation that would otherwise be left partially inoperable. Those adjustments represent no changes of policy; nor will they have any impact on businesses or the public. The sifting Committees considered this draft legislation on 21 February 2019. The Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee recommended that this instrument be debated

[Mr Goodwill]

in Parliament as it contained proposed amendments to the Plant Health (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which was in draft at the time. However, this element was laid before Parliament on 5 April 2019 and has been approved by the House.

Due to the decision of the Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee, parts 5 and 6 of the draft regulations have been omitted and included in the Plant Health (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, and the draft regulation has been renamed the Animal Health, Seed Potatoes and Food (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019. So all the contentious or controversial aspects have already been removed, leaving this important but rather hollowed-out measure, which lacks the points that were of interest when it was referred. The draft instrument is being introduced under the correcting powers in sections 8(1) and 14(1) of paragraph 1 of schedule 4 and paragraph 21 of schedule 7 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. Principally, it makes amendments to address technical operability issues as a consequence of EU exit.

This instrument applies to the fields of animal health, the marketing of seed potatoes and the labelling of beef and veal, which are devolved matters for Northern Ireland. The Scottish Government and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs are making similar changes by means of their own secondary legislation within their areas of legislative competence. I know that Opposition Members will mention consultations—indeed, they were mentioned earlier by Democratic Unionist party colleagues—so I will address this question for them. Although there was no statutory requirement to consult publicly on the instrument, officials engaged with key stakeholders covering different sectors to discuss the amendments that would be required and provided the opportunity to gain views on the draft instrument before it was laid. Stakeholders principally included the Ulster Farmers Union.

In regard to the structure of this SI, part 2 of the instrument amends the Control of Salmonella in Poultry Scheme Order (Northern Ireland) 2008, the Control of Salmonella in Broiler Flocks Scheme Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 and the Control of Salmonella in Turkey Flocks Scheme Order (Northern Ireland) 2010, to maintain and ensure high standards of poultry health. Part 3 amends the Beef and Veal Labelling Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010, providing for the provision of information for non-prepackaged meat of bovine animals aged 12 months or less at the point of sale, establishing a system for identification and labelling of beef and beef products. This ensures the maintenance of the marketing standards of meat and bovine animals. Part 4 amends the Seed Potato Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016, to ensure that high plant health and marketing standards are maintained. It also provides for a one-year interim period during which EU seed potatoes will continue to be recognised for production and marketing in Northern Ireland to ensure the continuity of supplies of seed potatoes.

What are the main changes? When I talk about changes, I mean changes to the text to cater for Brexit, rather than any substantive or policy changes. As with other instruments, various terms in the regulations or the directives that relate to the EU are amended to be relevant to the UK. The instrument updates references

to retained EU legislation in parts 2, 3 and 4. Part 4 also introduces legislation that ensures that the legal requirements for producing and marketing seed potatoes are in place after the UK has left the EU.

There are three main changes. The first involves grade names. The current legislation is the Seed Potatoes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016, which includes all the requirements from the EU directive on seed potatoes—that is, directive 2002/56/EC. In those regulations, seed potatoes are sold in various grades, called union grades, depending on the age and quality of the seed. The instrument renames the union grades as “UK grades”. The actual names of the grades—PB, S, SE and E—are unchanged, as are the requirements to be met for each of the grades.

Secondly, if the UK leaves the EU without a withdrawal agreement, UK seed potatoes will be prohibited from being marketed in the EU. In those circumstances, the UK could also prohibit the marketing in the UK of seed potatoes produced in the EU and Switzerland.

However, the varieties currently purchased by UK growers from the EU are not currently available within the UK. England, Wales and Northern Ireland have therefore agreed that EU seed potatoes will continue to be permitted to be marketed for a period of one year after exit day. That should give the UK industry some time to produce some of these varieties themselves. The instrument gives effect to that change.

For a variety of seed potato to be marketed within the UK, it must be listed on the UK national list or the EU common catalogue. After the UK has left the EU, the instrument will permit the marketing of varieties that are on the EU common catalogue, but not on the UK national list, for a period of two years. That will give the companies that control such varieties time to enter them on the UK national list and will also allow UK growers to continue to have access to those varieties in the interim.

This instrument will ensure that the high biosecurity and marketing standards achieved in both animal and plant health in Northern Ireland are maintained when we leave the European Union, and I commend it to the House.

10.15 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): This legislation is important for the protection of human, animal and plant health and for maintaining important safeguards to ensure food safety information for consumers. The Government can easily ensure the maintenance of such safeguards by agreeing with Labour that there should be a permanent and comprehensive UK-EU customs union, close alignment with the single market, dynamic alignment on rights and protections, and clear commitments on participation in EU agencies. That would ensure that we continue to share knowledge and expertise with EU bodies, avoiding extra costs and burdens for business, saving jobs and protecting our livestock, trees and plants from pests and diseases.

This statutory instrument is another in the series of Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs EU exit SIs, of which there have been over 120 to date, using powers in the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 to make technical changes to retained EU and domestic legislation. This SI covers salmonella in poultry, labelling of beef and veal, and seed potato marketing,

all of which are devolved matters for Northern Ireland, and it is a real shame that there is no functioning Northern Ireland Assembly to scrutinise it.

Labour believes that it is vital that we maintain protections for imported eggs and poultry food products. Despite the discreditable chlorinating process that is supposed to prevent infection, citizens in the US still suffer around 1.2 million cases of salmonella food poisoning a year, and there were 450 deaths last year. What is the current assessment of the level of risk of salmonella in poultry in Northern Ireland? What assessment has been made of the level of risk of salmonella in eggs and poultry food products expected to be imported into Northern Ireland after the UK leaves the EU?

Northern Irish seed potatoes are highly prized and commercially valuable, so it is important to maintain the EU classification and certification regime and protect them from imports that might be of inferior quality or bring in pests and diseases. Similarly, the high quality of Northern Irish beef needs continuing protection via the EU labelling regulations.

Ian Paisley: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that Northern Ireland processes about 2.6 million birds every week. The poultry industry is one of our most vital and supplies about 30% of the entire UK market. Protecting the sector is much more important to our farmers and processors than anything else, and we do not want to implement anything that would damage our local UK market.

Sandy Martin: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his strong point. Clearly, where the major market is within the UK, that needs to be protected. However, there is always the danger not just that other markets will be lost, but that the UK market may be lost if inferior and cheaper poultry were able to be imported into the UK. The protection of good-quality food from the EU is one of the major planks that it has operated and this SI is an attempt to try to salvage some of that, but whether it will be successful largely depends on all sorts of other issues.

The succession of different versions of this statutory instrument, each with errors and omissions, does not inspire confidence. Despite now being on its fourth version, there may still be an error in regulation 9(b), which amends regulation 4(3)(b) of the Seed Potatoes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016. Can the Minister confirm that the substitute wording should have two “where”s, rather than one “where” and one “were”? It is a minor point but, with the vast amount of work being done on all these SIs over a very short period of time, there have been grammatical errors that might lead to them being difficult to enforce.

Why was Regulation (EC) No. 2160/2003 not included in the three Northern Ireland poultry salmonella orders referred to in regulations 2, 3 and 4 when they were originally made? Numerous changes have been made between the four different versions of this SI that have been presented to Parliament so far. Can the Minister explain whether there is any significance and why the wording of regulation 8(f) and (g) in the previous version has been omitted, why the reference to point A7 of annex III was added to proposed new paragraph (b)(iii) of regulation 2 of the Seed Potatoes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 and why the wording in regulation 9(a) and (c) was omitted in this version? Various changes

have been made, and it is extremely difficult to follow them and to work out why they have been made. Will the Minister commit to correcting any errors that are identified and to ensuring Parliament has the opportunity to consider how stakeholders can be better engaged in the scrutiny of secondary legislation in future, as suggested by Green Alliance?

After 120 different statutory instruments over the past three months, I put on record my admiration for the stupendous amount of hard work done by civil servants in producing all this necessary work, and I crave the Minister’s indulgence in also registering my profound thanks, and the profound thanks of my hon. Friends, to our Opposition staff for their enormous work in preparing us for these statutory instruments. In particular, I thank Roxanne Mashari, Rob Wakely, Will Murray and Eliot Andersen.

We take all these matters extremely seriously and intend to do everything we can to maintain and enhance this country’s record of high standards and scientific excellence as we prepare to leave the EU. I hope the Minister will respond seriously on the matters I have raised. Having said that, we do not intend to vote against the regulations on this occasion.

10.22 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I have a few points to add to what has already been said in this important debate. I commend the Department for bringing forward these regulations and for being on top of it.

The hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) spoke about the issue of scrutiny, and of course we would prefer all these matters to be taken through the Northern Ireland Assembly. I used to chair the Assembly’s agriculture committee, and this place has probably given the seed potatoes bit of these regulations just as much scrutiny as they got from the Northern Ireland Assembly, so the House should not take as punishment the criticism that seed potatoes are not getting enough scrutiny tonight. It is usually just two or three Members who care about these issues when they are addressed in the Northern Ireland Assembly. That is not to shirk the responsibility we would like the Assembly to have once again for these matters.

Northern Ireland produces the best, the tastiest and the most traceable food in all the United Kingdom. It is what we are expert in doing, and any Member who visits Northern Ireland, whether they are drinking liquids from Northern Ireland—Coca-Cola, of course—or indulging in our best food, knows we produce really good food. It is in all our interests to make sure that our primary industry is protected and assisted at this time of immense, radical change.

10.23 pm

Mr Goodwill: I will briefly wind up and answer one or two points that have been raised. I agree with the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) about the quality of Northern Ireland’s food. Indeed, I believe the Ulster fry is the pinnacle of Ulster cuisine in the ingenious way in which it manages to incorporate both potatoes and lard. I always look forward to an Ulster fry when I visit Northern Ireland.

A number of points made by the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) are not specifically relevant to what is before us today, which is about the quality of

[Mr Goodwill]

produce produced in Northern Ireland. Matters relating to chlorinated chicken or other issues as regards future international trade deals are important, but they are not specifically before us today. He raised a couple of technical issues where we may or may not have made errors. I would be pleased for us to look at those again and correct any errors we may have made. As I said in relation to an earlier statutory instrument, the quantity of legislation we have had to go through means it is almost certain that we would have made some mistakes, and if they are brought to our attention—or if we notice them first—we will make sure they are put right.

I repeat that this statutory instrument is a “business as usual” SI. It does not make changes; it allows a continuity of the situation should we fall into a no-deal Brexit. If, as I seem to gather from what the hon. Gentleman was saying, he is concerned that we may leave the EU without a deal, the matter is simple: he should, together with his colleagues in the Labour party, vote for the deal to ensure an orderly departure from the EU and to ensure that we move into the implementation period, when many of these sorts of issues can be dealt with in the fullness in time and be properly dealt with. I am disappointed that, particularly in the north of England, where so many constituencies that elected Labour MPs actually voted to leave the EU, some MPs are not listening to their constituents.

Sandy Martin: Does the Minister accept that, if we were to have a permanent customs union and to move in the direction that the Labour party has been calling for, the Government would not need to have a backstop and they might get the support of the party on this side of the House as well?

Mr Goodwill: Staying in the customs union is not what the people in Scarborough and Whitby voted for when they voted—62% was the figure—to leave the EU. In any case, I ask that this measure be approved.

Question put and agreed to.

Business without Debate

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (24 APRIL)

Ordered,

That at the sitting on Wednesday 24 April, paragraph (2) of Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments) shall apply to the Motions in the name of the Leader of the Opposition as if the day were an Opposition Day; proceedings on those Motions may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption and for up to six hours from the commencement of proceedings on the first such Motion and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Jo Churchill.*)

Looe Flood Protection Project

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Jo Churchill.*)

10.27 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): It is a pleasure to see the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) on the Front Bench to respond to my debate. The town of Looe, in my constituency, will be familiar to many right hon. and hon. Members, and to millions of people across the country, for its glorious scenery, fishing heritage and working port, and for summer holidays on a golden sandy beach. I know and love the town and its community. It was my late husband's home port for his fishing business, and it is now a privilege to represent the people of Looe in this House. However, behind the picture-postcard image, the very existence of Looe is under serious threat from flooding.

We will all be aware that many parts of the UK have experienced flooding in the recent past, but Looe is different. It is the most frequently flooded town in the UK. If scientists are correct about the impact of climate change, the risk to the town and its future prosperity can only be increased. Modelling for the Cornish south coast regeneration project has suggested that within a generation floods will be one metre worse, increasing the flooded area from 2.5 hectares to 16 hectares. That would be catastrophic for the town and the wider local economy.

I can testify to the resilience of Looe's residents and businesses in the face of regular, devastating floods, which I have witnessed. I have seen at first hand their remarkable fortitude and inventiveness in dealing with the aftermath of floods, including the awful foul water pollution. But the impact is now so severe that it is threatening the viability of the local economy, with damages amounting to £39 million over the past five years alone, deterring investment and reducing opportunities for growth.

It is shocking that 65% of businesses in Looe have been flooded, costing each an average of £31,000. Many cannot get insurance so cannot, or understandably will not, invest further in their businesses. Worryingly, nearly a quarter of those businesses—the lifeblood of the local economy—have considered their future in the town. The flooding also deters new businesses from locating in Looe and shoppers and holidaymakers from visiting, and there is a detrimental effect on the wider community, as Looe's economic footprint stretches far beyond the town and into communities, holiday parks and businesses right across South East Cornwall.

Looe is located in what can only be described as a geographical perfect storm. It sits at the bottom of the narrowest part of the Looe valley, where the river meets the sea. Numerous storms and predicted rising sea levels, combined with high tides, are making flooding commonplace. Typically, flood events occur several times a year. During the 2013-14 winter season, the events were particularly severe, and considerable damage occurred to the quay walls as waves surged over the harbour. The frequency of floods and their severity are clearly getting worse.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I sought the hon. Lady's permission to intervene. She referred to the winter of 2013-14; in my constituency of Strangford there are some 96 coastal erosion locations, including a number of villages. That indicates the severity of what is taking place. I have written letters to Westminster Ministers on this matter. Does the hon. Lady agree that it is essential that a UK-wide fund is set up to address this matter now, before it is too late and we end up losing villages, which is possible, down my Ards peninsula and in towns throughout the UK because of an inability to deal with the pressures from flooding?

Mrs Murray: I do agree with the hon. Gentleman and am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister has heard his concerns.

Currently, flooding extends over 2.5 hectares. This at-risk area includes essential services and facilities such as the GP surgery, the police station, main food stores and cafes, as well as the fish market, which accounts for 10% of landings in Cornwall and is a national centre for the inshore day catch of high-quality, high-value fish, which is used to support many London restaurants. The fire station is also under threat—so much so that the fire engine has to be moved to the top of the hill during a flood. Essential transport links are at risk, including the main road bridge connecting east and west Looe, the railway station, and two miles of railway track, on which there have been 141 flooding incidents to date.

According to Looe Harbour Commissioners, flooding because of high sea-water levels, possibly combined with wave action in the inner harbour, is the dominant cause of water damage. High sea levels can occur when high tides coincide with storm surges, causing water levels in the inner harbour to rise and sometimes overtop the quay walls and/or adjacent low-lying parts of the town. When flooding incidents occur, the owners of a lot of the fishing boats put a plank along their vessels' fenders to prevent the staffs that hold the quay in place from staving in the sides of their vessels. Wave action can speed up the process of flooding by causing waves to overtop the quay walls to lower-lying areas of the town adjacent to the inner harbour. In addition, wave action can cause structural damage to the harbour walls and structures adjacent to the inner harbour.

Also, surface water flooding from intense rainfall affects part of Looe. In addition, high tide levels prevent the discharge of water into the harbour, further exacerbating flooding associated with surface water. It is apparent from the surface water flood maps that floodwater accumulates on low-lying areas near the harbour. These risks are multiple and complex but must now be mitigated, and the huge potential for future investment and growth seized.

A partnership-based approach in consultation with the local community has been key in developing an economically viable and environmentally friendly solution to the flooding challenges. I must put on record my thanks to the lead partner, Cornwall Council, the Environment Agency, Looe Harbour Commissioners, Looe Town Council and East Looe Town Trust for all their work on the proposal, which I will outline briefly later.

I am also grateful to the commissioners and the council for funding the initial expert study, which has enabled the proposal to be produced, and it is supported

by both the local community—with more than 95% of the respondents in favour of the scheme—and landowners and aligned with the Looe neighbourhood plan. The proposal, if fully developed, funded and delivered, will allow Looe to protect key infrastructure, including removing more than 200 properties from flood risk and creating opportunities for investment. It is anticipated that there will be in excess of £47 million of growth benefits.

Briefly, phase 1 involves five projects: a tidal barrier installation to stop tidal flooding; an extension to the Banjo pier to improve river flow and bathing water quality; flood protection of east Looe beach to address wave action; an inner breakwater tidal barrier protection; and a new walkway from Pennyland in the town to Hannafore, restoring the missing link of the south-west coast path. Phase 2 will look to investigate the development of an outer breakwater and create a new working harbour.

Given my very personal interest in sea safety, I am also delighted that Looe Harbour Commissioners believe that the proposals will improve health and safety in the port and support the work of the emergency services such as the RNLI. I am pleased that at the heart of the proposal is the improved access to water for all, including for children, disabled people and the elderly through an all states of the tide easy access landing stage. There is also massive potential for enhanced recreational facilities and marine biology innovations such as mussel beds or even a lobster hatchery such as the one at Padstow. The possibilities are endless.

A further benefit from investment in flood defences will be to realise the growth of integrated travel and leisure opportunities. This includes a cycle network in the same vein as north Cornwall's cycle links such as the very popular Camel Trail, which attracts half a million visitors a year. It is expected that the potential revenue from an integrated cycle network could be as much as £10 million per year. I am sure that many cycling businesses across south-east Cornwall would be delighted to get a spoke of this particular wheel.

Now for the challenging aspect of funding, which is why I am delighted to have secured this debate with the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal, responding. The cost of the overall scheme is currently estimated at £41 million. Further work is now required on the detailed design and bid for funding to integrate the Looe neighbourhood plan and develop plans for both the Looe Valley branch railway line and network of cycle paths. Cornwall Council has committed £2.3 million to undertake the detailed design and prepare the business case. It has also agreed terms to purchase land to increase the capacity of Looe railway station which links the town to the mainline at Liskeard. Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly local enterprise partnership has also committed funding to assess the wider economic benefits of the project to south-east Cornwall. I want to put on record my thanks to the LEP for its financial commitments and work thus far.

My hon. Friend will appreciate that the work to date has been a great example of cross-organisational working, financing and community engagement. I am aware that DEFRA's flood defence grant in aid funding cannot be provided for this initial stage of the scheme, which is why funding from Cornwall Council and other local partners is so welcome. I accept that the delivery of the

[Mrs Sheryll Murray]

scheme is not a role for the Department and central Government alone. That is why I have been so keen to stress that this is about a partnership with all the authorities, as well as the local residents and businesses doing their bit every step of the way. However, given the significant economic, environmental and social benefits, I hope that this approach can be replicated across Government Departments to secure the necessary capital funding for construction once the business case is submitted. This is expected to be in the next financial year of 2020-21. It is very encouraging that the Environment Agency has confirmed that £3.7 million of funding is eligible for a scheme that reduces flood risk in Looe, and has said that it will assess whether this can be increased to reflect the wider socioeconomic benefits of the project.

The benefits of the project reach far beyond the key objective of flood prevention and protection. It will safeguard the entire town centre, fishing fleet and harbour. Without it, the town centre is unlikely to remain viable beyond 20 to 30 years due to persistent and recurrent flooding. It is envisaged that the project will be a regeneration hub for the wider area, forming part of the strategic coastal transport hub for South East Cornwall and beyond. It will enable homes and jobs for local people, with the development of around 670 homes and more than 1 hectare of employment land. The scheme will protect Looe for a generation as the focal point of the local area. It will be able to flourish and grow. According to the Cornish south coast regeneration project, it will also support the wider economy of Cornwall.

Support and capital funding for the delivery of the Looe flood protection project will secure a sustainable future for Looe and harness the economic benefits for the town, surrounding communities, South East Cornwall and the wider county of Cornwall as a whole. I look forward to hearing what my hon. Friend has to say.

10.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) on securing this important debate. In fact, this is the first time that I have spoken to her in this House since I had the privilege of attending her wonderful marriage to the wonderful Bob Davidson less than a month ago. May I—on behalf of many people, I am sure—wish them both many years of happiness to come?

My hon. Friend has been a passionate advocate for the Looe flood protection scheme and generally for growth in Cornwall and the south-west. We have discussed this issue before, when she also brought along people from Cornwall Council and commissioners from Looe harbour, and I welcome the opportunity to do so again. I take this opportunity to recognise the work that she has been doing to raise awareness of the flooding experienced by people and businesses in Looe. I commend her for taking a long-term view to managing flood risk and recognising how flood risk management infrastructure can contribute to the future prosperity of the people she represents.

I am mindful of my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raising this issue again on behalf of his constituents. Although he will accept that

this is a devolved matter, the amount of money that this Government have put into protecting flood defences around the country is reflected in the Barnett formula. I hope that he will continue to put the case on behalf of his constituents.

I am also mindful of the challenges faced by the town in that it regularly experiences flooding. The town centre, harbour and key transport and community infrastructure are all located within the main flood zone. As a fellow MP for a coastal community, I recognise the national importance of our coast and the challenges that these areas face. Flood and coastal risk management is a high priority for the Government. I know very well the impacts that flooding can have on lives and livelihoods. Compelling evidence suggests that climate change may lead to increases in sea levels by the middle of this century. Both present significant risks, so we are putting in place robust, long-term national strategies to protect our coastal communities.

I am aware that the Environment Agency has identified a potential option for a flood risk management scheme in Looe, using demountable defences, at a cost of approximately £10 million. My hon. Friend referred to schemes costing £40 million, and we need to consider those carefully. I am also aware that the local community prefers a wider socioeconomic regeneration scheme, to which she referred extensively, that includes a tidal barrier to manage flood risk. Cornwall Council is now leading on the delivery of this preferred option, with support from the Environment Agency that she generously recognises. The preferred scheme to which she refers consists of five elements that would all need to be delivered to meet the strategic objectives of the scheme. These include tidal barriers, beach protections and a pier extension. In terms of the flood defence grant-in-aid funding, my hon. Friend recognised that on today's formula that scheme would qualify for only £3.7 million, which would not fully fund the proposal. However, I commend her and Cornwall Council, which is using £2.3 million of its economic development match funding to deliver the detailed design work for the scheme. The designs will be used to attract funding from wider sources. As she points out, she hopes, rightly, to continue to make the case on why this may attract further central Government funding as well.

As well as protecting communities, flood risk management systems create improved confidence in a local economy, encouraging growth and supporting environmental improvements. It is vital that we take a long-term view of the environment, as outlined in our 25-year environment plan. I commend Cornwall Council, Looe Harbour Commissioners and the community for taking a wider regeneration approach that has a high level of public and business support. While the proposal would reduce the risk of flooding, there are further benefits in enabling development, generating growth and improving the bathing water quality. The improvement of the travel network and cycle networks would also contribute to the economic prosperity of the region and further encourage tourism. My hon. Friend talked about a spoke in a wheel. I wish it were as cheap as a penny-farthing, but she will recognise, as will the hon. Member for Strangford, that that is not necessarily the case.

These benefits tie in with a number of wider Government aims. I encourage my hon. Friend and the local partners to continue their efforts to identify further funding from

the full range of available sources. The partnership funding policy that this Government introduced clarifies the level of investment that communities can expect from the Government so that it is clear what levels of partnership funding they will need from other sources to allow projects to proceed. The overall call on the grant-in-aid funding exceeds the total amount of funding available, so we need to prioritise to optimise the overall outcomes from the investment of taxpayers' money. The current formula takes into account the impacts of flooding, including the frequency, severity and depth of potential floods and the impacts on health. It is people-centred in the sense that it weighs the Government support more towards households, and hence the impacts on people, than on other economic benefits, including the impacts on businesses. As it stands, there are no plans to change the current funding formula before 2021, though I am very conscious of the demands on, in particular, coastal communities and more sparsely populated communities. I am therefore considering what we can do within the next spending review and the funding formula change to consider the impact on local employers and, in turn, on local communities.

Overall, the Government are investing £2.6 billion to better protect the country from flooding, and this, through partnership funding, will attract more than £600 million of additional investment. That will fund well over 1,000 flood defence schemes, which will better protect 300,000 homes by 2021 and is projected to save the economy more than £30 billion in avoided damage. As well as capital for new flood defences, between 2015 and 2020 we will spend more than £1 billion on the maintenance of flood defence assets.

Partnership funding, to which my hon. Friend referred, can be secured from a range of sources, including local beneficiaries, partners and growth funds. Early indications suggest that up to 25% more schemes will go ahead in the coming years than if project costs were met by the Government alone. As my hon. Friend will recognise, it

is not possible to deliver every scheme in the current programme that would reduce flood risk, and it is my duty as Floods Minister to take a national perspective on flood risk management. However, I assure her that I am fully alive to the issues she has raised regarding the businesses and residents of Looe.

The Environment Agency will continue to support and work with local partners on a positive solution for Looe, and I encourage the council and partners in their bids to secure additional funding. I very much look forward to seeing how the scheme develops, including its potential to develop local tourism in an environmentally sustainable way.

I thank my hon. Friend again for raising this issue. The Government, the Environment Agency and our flood defence delivery partners entirely understand the challenges present in Looe, and we will continue to support Cornwall Council and its partners in developing the flood scheme. I commend the long-term view to managing the flood risk in the town and considering wider socioeconomic regeneration. I encourage people to continue to work together, with my hon. Friend's leadership, to identify a solution that meets Looe's long-term needs.

As I said, I am looking at the funding arrangements ahead of the next capital programme, and we are working closely with the Treasury to consider future investment needs and the Government's role in supporting the resilience of communities. I take on board what my hon. Friend has said. While I recognise that I have not been able to sign a cheque to guarantee the future of these flood defences, she continues to make me aware of what matters to our coastal communities, and we will continue to have those discussions.

Question put and agreed to.

10.51 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 23 April 2019

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

Hormone Pregnancy Tests

11.30 am

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Expert Working Group report on hormone pregnancy tests.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am also pleased that the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), is here to respond to this debate.

To establish the context of the debate, I will begin by acknowledging the extraordinary hard work and determination of Marie Lyon, who is here with us in Westminster Hall today. She has led the campaign on behalf of the victims of hormone pregnancy tests, and alongside her husband has travelled the length and breadth of this country, and even been to Germany, to support victims.

It has been my pleasure to work with Marie since the beginning of this campaign, alongside others including Jason Farrell, who has pursued this story for Sky News from the start; Professor Neil Vargesson of Aberdeen University; and Professor Carl Heneghan and Dr Jeffrey Aronson, both of Oxford University, whose recent work is the basis of this debate.

By way of providing more background, I remind the House that Primodos, the hormone pregnancy test drug, was taken by approximately 1.5 million women in the 1960s and 1970s to test for pregnancy. The dosage contained in those Primodos tablets was 40 times the strength of an oral contraceptive that would be prescribed today. There is considerable evidence that many women who took this drug either gave birth to babies with serious deformities, or miscarried, or had stillbirths. Those babies are now in their 40s and 50s, and they have had to live a lifetime with serious disabilities.

To this day, not one Minister or one review has been able to answer some very simple questions. First, why were no official warnings issued about this drug until eight years after the first major report that indicated possible dangers? Why were some doctors still prescribing this drug for pregnant women after official warnings were issued by the Committee on Safety of Medicines? And why were some GPs able to pull out Primodos tablets from their desk drawers and hand them to women?

I secured this debate to seek answers in respect of the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency-led expert working group. That was the scientific review set up on the instruction of a former Minister, the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), following my Backbench Business Debate on this issue in 2015. He had clearly stated to us that this review would “thoroughly” consider all the evidence.

Such is the depth of concern about this issue that there have already been three debates on the expert working group’s review—this is the fourth. Each and every time, Members from across the House have urged Ministers to consider our concerns about the methodology, the independence of the panel members and the conclusions of the report. On each and every occasion, however, our concerns have been dismissed.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and on the absolutely focused way in which she has conducted this campaign, with other Members here today and with Marie Lyon. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), the former Minister: it is not easy for Ministers to override the advice of their civil servants, but he did on that occasion. That, however, makes it all the more concerning that, on 24 October last year, Lord O’Shaughnessy wrote my hon. Friend a letter that was rather confusing and defensive, and did not make any reference to enforcing a rethink by the MHRA.

We know that there are issues about how the meta tests are done, and I am sure that my hon. Friend will come on to that. However, at this stage does she still find it very concerning that Ministers have not grasped the nettle?

Yasmin Qureshi: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention and I absolutely agree with him; he can probably hear in my voice some of my frustration about the fact that this issue has not been grasped by Ministers and dealt with.

In recent months, the all-party parliamentary group on hormone pregnancy tests, of which I am the chair, has written to Ministers several times to ask for meetings so that we can discuss these concerns, but each time our request has been declined. Perhaps the Minister here today could shed some light on what exactly the Government are so intent on hiding each time they refuse the request by a group of MPs for a meeting.

Let us not forget that the review was cloaked in secrecy from the very start. As an observer, Marie Lyon was forced to sign a “gagging clause”, which, if breached, could have resulted in a prison sentence. Families who gave evidence to the panel reported being treated appallingly by the MHRA. Despite the MHRA’s insistence that the expert working group was independent, two panel members had to be removed after Marie Lyon discovered conflicts of interest.

Perhaps the most shocking fact was that this review was set up with terms of reference that stated very clearly that it would seek to find a “possible association”, but the review panel and the Commission on Human Medicines chose to ignore that and instead concluded that a

“causal association could not be found between the drug and birth defects.”

Each time that Ministers have been questioned about this review, we have been told that it was

“robust, comprehensive, independent and scientific”.

If that really is the case, I hope that the Minister can provide us with answers today as to why we now have evidence, which I will set out, that clearly proves that the expert working group review was anything but robust and comprehensive.

[Yasmin Qureshi]

Last November, a team of experts led by Carl Heneghan, the Professor of Evidence-Based Medicine at Oxford University, conducted a systematic review of all previous human studies. They discovered that when the data is pooled properly it shows “a clear association” with several different forms of malformation. The results were clear that there is an association that is significant. That tells us that the expert working group’s review completely failed to adopt the right approach for a systematic review. Why did it not pool all the data together and properly collate it to show an overall effect? I should also point out that Professor Heneghan’s study has been published in a peer review journal, whereas the expert working group’s review was not even scrutinised.

However, Professor Heneghan did not stop there. Marie Lyon obtained raw data used by the expert working group via a freedom of information request. It is worth noting that despite the MHRA’s claim of “transparency”, this data was not already in the public domain. The cynical among us might ask: why was that? Why hide it?

That raw data was then assessed by Professor Heneghan and his team, who carried out a meta-analysis on it, and again they found that there is an association between the drug and birth defects. Let me just repeat that point again—raw data used by the MHRA for the expert working group review was assessed by independent experts at Oxford University and it was found that Primodos causes deformities.

Can the Minister appreciate why that has led to suspicion that key elements of the research were removed from the report in order for the expert working group to reach its conclusion, and why campaigners feel that Ministers and Parliament may have been misled, given that it appears that key information was being withheld from the report in order to suggest that there is no link between Primodos and deformities?

Gordon Marsden: My hon. Friend is being gracious in allowing interventions. Does she not consider it confusing that the group, and indeed the MHRA, seem to be reluctant regarding meta-analysis, when only recently the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence used it to reinstate surgical mesh in the treatment of prolapse? It is widely understood to be a common method—the US Food and Drug Administration and the European Medicines Agency have adopted it. Why are we lagging behind? Perhaps the Minister would like to comment on that in her reply.

Yasmin Qureshi: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and I come on to explain how other bodies use meta-analysis to carry out assessment.

Does the Minister understand why we are asking why the data was not even properly assessed? When I tabled a parliamentary question to inquire whether the meta-analysis of the studies had been carried out, I was told that it had not. Can the Minister explain why not? One of the experts on the panel, Professor Stephen Evans, recently made a poor defence of meta-analysis not being used in the review, by relying heavily on a paper called, “Meta-analysis. Schemata analysis”, which was published 25 years ago. The expert working group seems not to have considered meta-analysis an appropriate way in which to assess the data. Why not? Why did it refuse to take an evidence-based approach?

Neither the Minister nor I is a scientist, but she is aware that meta-analysis is the statistical procedure that combines data from multiple studies. When treatment effect is consistent from one study to the next, as with Primodos, it is completely appropriate and evidence-based to use a meta-analysis to assess the data. Pharmaceutical companies use it to approve new drugs. The US Food and Drug Administration uses it. The European Medicines Agency uses it for the approval of drugs, and clinicians and researchers in medicine, education and the criminal justice system use it to determine whether a treatment works. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence uses meta-analysis, and it is the cornerstone of Cochrane—previously known as the Cochrane Collaboration. The only group that discounts meta-analysis is the MHRA. Why? To say that meta-analysis was not the appropriate method is completely incompatible with an evidence-based approach.

Let me take up the matter of the independence of the expert working group. We have been told several times, by a number of Ministers, that the entire process was completely independent. It is my view that the Government are not well served by their current processes, the lack of independence and the lack of impartiality. What is in doubt is the question of whether the Government have the independent expertise required to hold Government bodies such as the MHRA to account and provide us with independent evidence with which to make informed decisions.

As the Minister is aware, in February 2018, Baroness Cumberlege began a joint non-scientific review into Primodos, sodium valproate and mesh implants, and we expect it to conclude in the next few months. Baroness Cumberlege invited the expert working group to give oral evidence to the review team, and this is how Ailsa Gebbie, the group’s chair, described herself at the beginning of an evidence session:

“I’m also the chair of the MHRA and the expert working group on hormones and women’s health that reviews all products and medicines and drugs related to women”.

What does independent mean if the chair describes herself in that way?

In 2015, the Commission on Human Medicines agreed to establish an expert working group to review the available data on a possible association between the hormone pregnancy test, Primodos, and adverse outcomes in pregnancy, and to make a recommendation. The commission appears to have commissioned the MHRA to do an independent review. Perhaps the independence of the MHRA can be summed up in its response to Marie Lyon, who in conversation with the agency had reminded it of its responsibility to the public interest. She was immediately corrected:

“No, the job of the MHRA is to represent Pharma”.

Of course, the agency is correct—it is substantially funded by the pharmaceutical industry and cannot be considered independent by any stretch of the imagination. Can the Minister explain why we are expected to have confidence in the independence of a review that was run by an organisation part-funded by pharma? How can we be expected to trust claims that Bayer, the manufacturer of Primodos, has no links to the MHRA? Yes, we had a review, but I am not sure we can call it independent. Will the Minister do the right thing and withdraw the expert working group report?

If the Minister needs any further evidence, perhaps I can point her to the testimony of Sandra Malcolm, a recent whistleblower. Mrs Malcolm worked for the manufacturer of Primodos, which is now owned by Bayer. While at the company in 1971, she discovered she was pregnant and spoke to colleagues:

“I was in reception one day and there were two guys there. One may have been a medical rep and he said to me ‘you want a dose of Primodos’ and the other said ‘I think it’s been taken off the market’, and the other one said ‘no, you can get it’. So with that information I went upstairs to see one of the doctors. I said ‘I’m a week overdue and can I have some Primodos?’ And he said ‘I can’t give it to you because it may not work and it may cause deformities’, so I thought that was a definite no.”

Mrs Malcolm said that after the conversation she decided not to take the drug “for obvious reasons” and that she assumed it was no longer on the market. However, many years later, when she saw a report about Primodos causing deformities, she was shocked to discover it had remained on the market for many years after problems had been listed.

Vast swathes of evidence clearly point to a cover-up by the drug company and the Government regulators at the time. It is utterly disgraceful that until this day the evidence has been ignored, as it was by the expert working group review.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend, not just for securing the debate and for the way in which she has conducted it, but for her leadership on the issue over a long period. One of the more modern—I say modern; I think it was in the 19th century—versions of the Hippocratic oath is the principle, “Do no harm”. Does she agree—and she has made a powerful case for this—that as harm has been done we should acknowledge the consequences and deal with them appropriately?

Yasmin Qureshi: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention, and I absolutely agree with him. He may have realised what the ending of my speech was going to be, because that was a point I was going to make.

Not once did the expert working group mention the historical evidence in its review; not once did it look at those documents and acknowledge that there are questions to be answered. Primodos has been the cause of devastating effects, and much of the current suffering is the result of ongoing uncertainty. We must accept that we cannot achieve certainty in all things, but we can admit our failings. Victims of Primodos need an acknowledgement of liability, and it is time that we gave them an apology. When will the Government stop wasting time and public money by setting up these so-called independent ad hoc expert working groups each time scientific evidence clearly shows that the use of Primodos caused birth defects, just so they can dismiss the evidence and continue to cover up what one lawyer has called the biggest medical and legal cover-up of the 20th century?

On behalf of my four constituents and their families, and on behalf of thousands of families across the country and over 130 members of the all-party parliamentary group on hormone pregnancy tests, I urge the Minister to listen to these concerns, as well as those of other Members present. I urge her to be brave, and to have the courage to say “Enough is enough.” From today, let us stop putting our heads in the sand. Let us look at the evidence that Professor Heneghan has presented, and give Primodos victims the justice they deserve.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate can last until 1 pm. I am obliged to call the Front-Bench spokespeople no later than 12.27 pm, and the guideline limits are 10 minutes for the Scottish National party, 10 minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister. Yasmin Qureshi will then have three minutes at the end to wind up the debate.

We are in Back-Bench time until 12.27 pm. Six Members are seeking to contribute, so please do not speak for more than six minutes. Unhelpfully, only one of the monitors is working—the one to my right—so to assist Members, I will gesticulate at them in a friendly way when they have a minute to go.

11.52 am

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for securing this vital debate on what, for many people, has been a long journey.

Sir William Osler, an eminent Canadian physician, once said:

“Medicine is the science of uncertainty and the art of probability.”

My constituents who took the hormone pregnancy tests of the ’60s and ’70s, including Primodos—which was removed from the market in 1977—have to date been met with uncertainty. They placed their trust in those involved in manufacturing, testing, prescribing and dispensing—trust that in their view, and in mine, was betrayed. With dogged but dignified determination, they still seek to confirm the probability of a possible connection between those drugs and birth defects and/or fatalities.

I understand that Professor Carl Heneghan carried out a meta-analysis that backs up the findings of Professor Vargesson’s zebrafish study. While I appreciate that meta-analysis is a complex and comprehensive tool, my layman’s understanding is that it may be undertaken to review and reconcile multiple research studies on the same topic with different results. In doing so, it may uncover a study that has different results due to systematic error or bias in the research process. In response to a recent question posed by the hon. Member for Bolton South East, the individual answering on behalf of the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care stated that the Commission on Human Medicines expert working group did not undertake a meta-analysis as part of its review, citing different designs, lack of robustness and the extensive limitations of studies as the reasons therefor.

Dan Mayer’s text, “Essential Evidence-Based Medicine” advises the reader:

“Some common problems with meta-analyses are that they may be comparing diverse studies with different designs or over different time periods.”

However, importantly, the author does not appear to suggest that such circumstances should automatically rule out proceeding with meta-analysis. Rather, he states that such apparent divergence may be addressed by incorporating various checks and balances as part of that analysis. It appears that professors at the University of Oxford who have had sight of data recently recovered through a freedom of information request are yet again persuaded that there is an association between hormone pregnancy tests and birth defects, thereby casting doubt on the robustness of the EWG’s work and the material that it has published to date.

[Bill Grant]

I note that the Government's response referred to the European Medicines Agency's ongoing independent review of the publication by Professor Heneghan and others, and I await the EMA's conclusions with interest. Hopefully, those conclusions will finally bring some comfort to my constituents and many others. I ask the Minister to provide greater clarity as to why meta-analysis was ruled out by the EWG, and to confirm whether the EMA's conclusions will be published next month. Finally, I make a passionate plea—which I am sure many others share—on behalf of the victims of hormone pregnancy tests in the '60s and '70s. Let us introduce honesty, openness and, above all, humanity into the long-standing journey that those individuals have been on.

11.56 am

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I begin by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for having secured this important debate, and more widely for her leadership of the all-party parliamentary group on hormone pregnancy tests and her incredible campaigning on this issue. I pay tribute to all the families who, for many years, have been campaigning tirelessly to uncover the truth about Primodos, particularly Marie Lyon, who is an incredible campaigner. She has worked hard on this issue, and I hope we can do something to make sure we get to the truth about what happened all those years ago. I also place on record my thanks to Professors Neil Vargesson and Carl Heneghan, and to Sky News reporter Jason Farrell for his determination to get to the truth. Many of his reports have been seen by families who have come forward as a result of the testimony and campaigning of others.

One of the families affected by Primodos lives in my constituency. My constituent Steven Bagley was born severely brain-damaged after his mother was given Primodos as a hormone pregnancy test in 1967. Steven needs 24-hour care, cannot communicate, and suffers from a severe form of epilepsy, which means frequent seizures that have become steadily worse with age and happen throughout the night.

I have got to know the Bagley family over the past few years: Steven's parents Pat and Ted, and his sister Charlotte, who has been a tireless campaigner for justice for her parents and brother. She has recently moved from Southampton back to Wolverhampton to help look after Steven. His parents have lovingly looked after him for 50 years, but are now in their 80s and 70s with their own health problems, and are finding it a real struggle. What I find particularly heartbreaking about the case of my constituents, which is similar to many others, is that like other mums affected, Pat still says, "If only I hadn't taken those pills." However, she was doing what we all do: trusting our GP and following their advice. Like many others affected by Primodos, Pat was not given a prescription, but was given the pills directly by her doctor.

It is thanks to the tireless campaigning of families such as my constituents, and of my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East, that the Government asked the Commission on Human Medicines to set up an expert working group to examine the scientific evidence linking Primodos to birth defects. However, from the start,

serious concerns were raised by the families, the APPG on hormone pregnancy tests, individual MPs and scientists about how that group went about its work. Those concerns have only grown as evidence of missing analysis has come to light, and questions have been asked about the methodology used.

I will raise four particular concerns about the expert working group. First, the group reinterpreted its terms of reference. It was asked to look at a possible association between the drugs and the foetal abnormalities. Despite that, it decided to look for a higher standard of proof of a causal association between Primodos and birth defects, even though it was not asked to find a causal link. It has never been clearly explained why the group chose to interpret and change the terms of reference in that way. Perhaps the Minister will reflect on that when she winds up. If not, will she take that away, consider it and come back to us?

Secondly, the report was altered before publication in several ways. Apparently the draft report, provided to Marie Lyon, stated:

"Limitations of the methodology of the time and the relative scarcity of the evidence means it is not possible to reach a definitive conclusion."

That line was removed before the final report was published. The draft also stated that

"there is insufficient evidence to determine whether taking the medications at the doses found in Primodos tablets, for two days during the first trimester of pregnancy could have reached and had an effect on the fetus."

However, in the final report, that was substantially changed. That uncertainty was replaced by the claim that the evidence indicated that any exposure

"was unlikely to have had an effect on the developing fetus."

In short, the conclusion in the draft report changed from

"the evidence is insufficient to form a conclusion",

to, in the final report,

"the evidence does not support a causal association".

Again, there has been no satisfactory explanation for those changes. Will the Minister reflect on that in her winding-up speech or go back to the Department and convey to us why the changes were made?

Thirdly, there was no consideration of possible regulatory failures at the time Primodos was given to mothers by doctors as a hormone pregnancy test. That seems to be a huge omission. Will the Minister explain why such a vital question was excluded? It would surely help us to understand what concerns were raised or should have been raised about Primodos at the time.

Gordon Marsden: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. She is taking us necessarily into the past. What we know about the past is that how the drugs were marketed in the 1960s and 1970s would be totally unacceptable today. Does she not find it concerning that the context of how the drugs were delivered has not been looked at properly by the report? Some of the potential consequences of that, such as what women took as gospel from doctors, have not been addressed either.

Emma Reynolds: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is incredible that the burden of proof seems to rest on the families. That is what is being suggested in debates—not our debates, but others—but the burden of proof actually lies with the pharmaceutical company that made the

products in the first place and did not do the testing required. The drugs subsequently had horrific effects on the babies who were born, yet we still have not got a Government or a Minister to accept that there is a link. We are looking for the truth to be uncovered.

I am conscious of time and your advice, Mr Hollobone, but allow me to make a fourth point about the expert working group. The credibility of the group has been further undermined in the eyes of the families and of the Members here today by its not including a meta-analysis—a pooling of all the data from previous studies. It is not clear whether such a meta-analysis was carried out and not divulged, or was just not done. Marie Lyon obtained the raw data used by the expert working group though a freedom of information request. Professor Carl Heneghan of Oxford University used the working group's own data and found strikingly similar conclusions to his review. Both reviews showed significant associations of the use of Primodos with all congenital malformations and congenital heart defects. Both systematic reviews show that the use of Primodos in pregnancy is associated with increased risk of congenital malformations.

In conclusion, we know that Baroness Cumberlege is carrying out a wider review into independent medicines and medical devices safety. I place on the record my thanks to her and her team for listening to the testimony of Pat and Ted Bagley and their daughter Charlotte. For the first time, they feel like they have been heard and listened to sympathetically. I hope that the Cumberlege review will get to the truth of what happened, but before we do that, it would be useful for the Government and the Minister to get to the truth of why the expert working group has presented the evidence in such a way and to respond to the concerns I have expressed. The sooner we get to the truth of what happened in the '60s and '70s with Primodos tablets—they were taken not only by expectant mums in our country, but by others in countries around the world—the better.

12.5 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): It is a pleasure to be involved in this debate, to be part of one of the largest all-party parliamentary groups in the House, and to look after my constituents and speak for them and the others who have been so dramatically affected. They trusted the NHS and the drug company and so thought that the drug they were taking was safe. As was suggested, these ladies went to their GP surgery perhaps because they had missed their period or had some of the other symptoms of pregnancy. It was such an important time in their lives. Often the GP just opened a drawer, gave them the tablets and said, "This will tell you whether you are pregnant or not." There were no pamphlets and no advice, even though the risks were known to nearly everyone, apart from those ladies who took those tablets.

In this excellent debate, we have touched on a lot of the science. I am not a scientist or a lawyer; I am just a dad who is trying to help out some constituents in this area and as part of the group. In the debate that followed the publication of this so-called independent review, I said that it was a whitewash, but it was not; it was a cover-up, and we have to discover what is being covered up. Is it the legal side of the NHS giving a drug to a woman on its premises when it knew there was not only a risk, but an effect? Is it the drug company having

undue influence on the report, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, the Department of Health and Social Care, or a bit of everything?

I say to the Minister that this is not about this Government, but Governments. The issue was being discussed when I was the shadow public health Minister, not least by thalidomide campaigners. They were supportive of this campaign, and they had to rely extensively on evidence that was there, but that the Government and the drug companies had ignored over the years.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Is it not the case that we do not need to be lawyers or medical experts to realise that a drug that is 40 times the strength of the contraceptive pill—it was being given in such countries as Germany as an abortive—would surely have profound impacts on unborn fetuses, or children who were born after their mothers had taken Primodos?

Sir Mike Penning: No one in this room or anyone listening to this debate could disagree with that, unless they were a lawyer working for the drug company, the Department of Health and Social Care, or perhaps both.

Believe it or not, Mr Hollobone, 70% of me, you and anyone else in the room is the same as a zebrafish. I swim really well, but I did not realise that until this morning. We chuckle, but the point is that the effects of an experiment on zebrafish will be similar to those on a human being. There are many studies, but the link is important. Professor Neil Vargesson's report in 2018 supported Professor Heneghan's report. What does that mean? We all know about the disgrace of thalidomide. Through experimentation on zebrafish, it was proven that thalidomide damaged children. We do not want to experiment on humans. It appears that that is exactly what has gone on here. It is obvious that the mechanism of the action of thalidomide is the same as that shown by the Primodos tests. Everybody can read the technical stuff. There was an effect on zebrafish, who share 70% of their genes with humans. Does that mean it could have had an effect on humans? Of course it does; it is not rocket science.

Gordon Marsden: The right hon. Gentleman is taking us through the history. Does he not agree with me that it is extraordinary? We need to remember the chronology. The thalidomide episode took place in the 1960s and was exposed by *The Sunday Times* and Harold Evans in a great step forward, but the drugs continued to be supplied afterwards. Even now, 40 years later, there is, in the statement of Lord O'Shaughnessy, doubt about whether such things should still be used. We should surely say that they should not be used.

Sir Mike Penning: I cannot understand how a drug company, now owned by Bayer, could know what was going on and continue to supply the drug in an underhand way to GPs. As a father—as a human being—I simply do not understand it. What on earth was going on? The MHRA, which gave evidence to us, was in complete denial. We did not ask for a cause. I was lucky enough to be a Minister in seven Departments. If I had said, "This is the review that you are going to do, and these are your terms of reference," and those terms of reference were changed by the review group without my permission, I would have smelled a rat. I would have thought something was going wrong.

[Sir Mike Penning]

We can go through all the science, which cannot be denied. I do not blame any Minister—I can feel the special advisers' eyes on my back—but something went dramatically wrong, and it has been covered up by several Governments. That must stop now. If compensation has to be paid, fine. Most of the families simply want an apology. Why is there no apology? Because there would then be the threat of legal action. Mistakes happen. When we make mistakes, we should admit it, no matter what Government are in power. We should sort it. We did that over Hillsborough when I was a Minister in the Home Office. It was a really difficult decision to make, but we made it, and the right conclusion was reached. That should be the case in this instance.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I am afraid I will have to impose a five-minute limit on speeches, or we will run out of time.

12.12 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) on securing this debate, and on all the work she has done on this subject.

In the small geographic area of Makerfield, I probably have the most constituents affected. There are at least eight, including Marie Lyon, who has been a wonderful chair of the Association for Children Damaged by Hormone Pregnancy Tests and a tireless campaigner. Whenever I have tried to speak to Marie about any issues, she has been restricted by an incredibly strict gagging agreement. I have asked questions and she has said, "I can't answer that. I can't mention that. I can't give you any information about that." Why can she not give me, her Member of Parliament, the information that I need?

Minutes of meetings have been recorded, but were destroyed straight after. Marie has told me that they do not reflect her notes. Positive comments have been left out, and some of the minutes have been changed after her intervention. That is surely not normal practice.

I have heard the same story as many of my hon. Friends here: constituents were given tablets from an office drawer in the doctor's desk. The women have lived with the consequences and the guilt of taking the tablets. One mother was told that her son's severe mental and physical disability was probably her fault, and she had no more children. That has stayed with me, because she said to me, "We have such a lot of love to give." She and her husband, who has sadly died, dedicated their lives to looking after their son. She is now worried about what will happen when she is gone, and that is why it is so important that we get to the truth. We want proof that she has been let down by the people she trusted. The statement made on behalf of the MHRA that families could already have had previous congenital abnormalities is appalling. The statement was made by a representative who had worked with a leading member of the expert working group and who would have been aware of his conclusions. Again, it raises issues about impartiality, independence and people who all know each other working together.

Women already blame themselves, and that is simply reinforced. Throughout the whole sorry affair, attempts have been made to shift the blame to women. It has been said that they did not want to be pregnant and used

the tablet as a means of aborting. That was emphatically not the case with my constituents, who were delighted to think they could be pregnant. The study clearly places the blame where it should lie: with the manufacturers and distributors of Primodos, who were aware of the potential effects of the drug long before it was withdrawn in the UK. It was not withdrawn for commercial reasons, and the withdrawal of the indication of pregnancy was strongly requested by the Standing Joint Committee, which threatened to take Primodos off the market if the indication was not removed.

Looking at the review, I believe Professor Heneghan fully answered all the questions. His persistence shows how much he believes in the conclusions in his review, and in a demonstrable link between hormone pregnancy tests and foetal abnormalities, which obviously differ depending on the stage of development at which the test was administered. The families have been failed throughout the process, right from the moment that they were given the pill, often from the doctor's desk drawer. There is now an opportunity to give some peace of mind and redress to the families, but yet again there is a cloak of secrecy and obstruction, and they feel let down by the agencies in place to protect them.

12.16 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I add my thanks to the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for securing this hugely important debate. I congratulate her not only on winning this debate, but on the way in which she forensically exposed the failings of the expert working group—how it changed the terms of reference of the inquiry; its failure to report properly, if at all, on its meta-analysis findings; and the serious questions about the independence and impartiality of the group. She finished by rightly describing the issue as the biggest legal and medical cover-up of the 20th century, but that cover-up has individual victims.

I have met Wendy Brown, a constituent from the Isle of Mull, on numerous occasions. She knows that her disability was brought on by her mother's use of Primodos when pregnant. Wendy has been a formidable campaigner for the victims of Primodos over the years, and last week she wrote to me, saying:

"My hands and both feet are deformed, which was very hard as a child due to the constant bullying. I also had damage to my neck at birth and was baptised at home as I wasn't expected to live. The older I am getting the more...pain I am in, especially in my feet which can really wear me down, as no matter what shoes I get they are always painful. I am now getting a very painful wrist, which is due to the way I have held my hand in order to conceal it because it has unnatural motion. This is a growing concern for me because...I work in the Post Office in Tobermory and am not sure how much longer I could keep going."

That is the day-to-day reality of people living with the effect of Primodos.

Wendy and other members of the campaign group rightly demand justice. We owe it to Wendy and all the other victims never to abandon them in their fight for justice. It is scandalous that the people whose lives have been so badly affected and who, day in and day out, have to live with the physical, social, emotional and psychological pain are being denied natural justice. They will continue to be denied natural justice as long as the United Kingdom's medical establishment continues to deny the link between hormone pregnancy tests and serious foetal abnormalities.

If justice is to be seen to be done, surely it is time for a statutory inquiry, similar to that for the contaminated blood scandal, in which every single piece of evidence is examined forensically and transparently. If the Government are so sure of their case, they have nothing to fear from such an inquiry. At the very least, it would restore public trust in a system in which it is lacking right now.

Sir Mike Penning: The key is for evidence sessions to happen under oath. That is what we called for in the House, and what should happen now.

Brendan O'Hara: I wholeheartedly agree; they have to be under oath. Justice would also be served if the Secretary of State were to appear before the Health and Social Care Committee to answer detailed questions about the way the inquiry was conducted, and to explain and defend its findings.

I sincerely hope that the Government are not simply playing for time with this scandal, hoping that in time it will go away. Thankfully, there are people in this House, such as the hon. Member for Bolton South East, the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), and many others in the all-party parliamentary group on hormone pregnancy tests, who will not allow that to happen.

Finally, I put on the record my thanks to the members of the APPG for their work to continue to shine a light where some vested interests would rather one not be shone, and for their tireless work in advocating strongly for justice for the victims of Primodos and other hormone pregnancy tests.

12.21 pm

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I agree with all colleagues who have spoken. My friend, the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), is right about a cover-up. He could have gone further; there is a danger that it is a criminal cover-up. I say that to the Minister in all gravity, because if she and her colleagues do not get on top of this issue, it will end up in the courts. The Government and the medical establishment will be defeated, and a lot of money will have to be paid. It will be a national scandal. It is one already, but it is not as well known as it ought to be. It will be on the front pages. I say to the Minister that it is time to act.

When I last spoke on this subject, on 14 December 2017, I used material from the Berlin archives, thanks to the amazing Marie Lyon and the Sky journalist Jason Farrell. I showed that lawyers and the scientific advisers from Schering knew about this in the 1960s. Minutes from meetings in '68 and '69 showed that they knew that there were problems, and that they would be found guilty in a court of law. I used long-standing evidence that the people involved knew there was a problem.

Today, I will focus on the science—first, on the association between HPTs and deformity, and secondly, on the issue of causal links. The 2017 expert working group report said that there was not an association. It is interesting, however, that when members of the EWG gave evidence to the review, they had a different story. The Minister needs to think about why that is. Professor Stephen Evans, for example, in evidence on 28 January 2019, at 28 minutes and 46 seconds into the video, said that

“Dr Olszynko-Gryn says this: ‘More optionally the authors’—this is Heneghan... ‘the authors might consider reflecting on the extent

to which the association they identify implies a causal association. An association between the use of HPTs and birth defects has long been recognised and was rarely in dispute.’ Well, we don’t dispute that; there is an association.”

He did not say that in 2017. Ailsa Gebbie from the EWG, at the same oral hearing, said:

“But everybody admits there is a possible association, and that’s why the report was carried out in the first place.”

I think it is more than a possible association.

Let us go to the meta-analysis that has been quoted, which is where lots of studies are brought together to see whether together they tell a consistent story. I am not a scientist or a mathematician, but I have spoken to academics who really understand this. They say that when the studies are brought together, their homogeneity, and the consistency of the findings, is extraordinarily striking. They all show an association.

The EWG wants to dismiss that. Professor Evans does not want to accept that methodology. As we heard from the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden), Professor Evans is going against the Food and Drug Administration—the US authorities—the European Medicines Agency, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and clinical researchers in this area across the world, who accept meta-analysis for this type of risk analysis. The Minister needs to ask her officials why the EWG refuses to accept the analysis, because it is strong, overwhelming and proves the case, I personally think, in legal terms, beyond reasonable doubt. The Minister must leave the Chamber knowing that there is an association, because that is what the science shows.

We have heard about the desire for a causal link to be shown. I urge the Minister to ask her experts and officials what is needed to prove a direct causal link. That test is very rarely met. If a recognised poison that is known to be lethal is given to someone, they will die; that is a binary issue. However, most other pharmaceuticals and drugs are not like that. The balance of probabilities is the test that is normally used. All the evidence that we have shows that, on the balance of probabilities, there is no doubt that there is a link.

It is sometimes difficult to show causalities. It has been suggested to me that I mention the Fairchild case, to show how difficult it is to establish causation. The Fairchild exception is a relaxation of normal tests for causation. A mesothelioma victim can prove that a particular exposure to asbestos caused the mesothelioma by proving that the exposure was such as to create a material increase in risk of the victim contracting the disease.

Has a material risk been proven? According to the meta-analysis, there is a 40% increase in risk of all malformations from taking HPTs. There is an 89% increase in risk of congenital heart malformations—more than a doubling. I say that because a doubling of a risk is material in court. There is nearly three times the risk of nervous system malformation. There is a 224% increase in risk of musculoskeletal malformation, and a 747% risk of vertical defects. That is what the evidence shows. I bring that to the Minister’s attention. She must know that. She should go back to the Department and challenge her officials, because they are getting this wrong and letting people down.

12.27 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I give huge credit to Marie Lyon and all the campaigners from the Primodos group; I have got to know them very well in the four years since I was elected in 2015. I have rarely met a more tireless and dedicated group. The same goes for the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi). She, with her staff, has run the all-party parliamentary group with incredible veracity and determination, and it is a pleasure to be part of that. I also give credit to Jason Farrell of Sky, who recently did a documentary on the impacts of Primodos, shining a light where no one else, frankly, has gone.

I have campaigned for my constituent Wilma Ord and her daughter Kirsteen, who was born deaf and with cerebral palsy. Like so many women, as many Members have mentioned, Wilma believed that the deformities that her child was born with were her own fault. Let us call it out for what it is. As the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) said, there was a criminal cover-up. Some 1.5 million women were treated as human guinea pigs for the pursuit of profit by the company Schering, now Bayer. I hope that it is listening today.

I know that the Minister and the Government are listening. There is clearly consensus, the likes of which few of us will have seen, across the House on this issue. We are not going away, the campaigners are not going away, and this issue is not going away. Until I am no longer the elected Member of Parliament for Livingston, I will campaign on this issue and pursue it, as I know everybody in the Chamber will.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I, too, am pleased that this debate is happening, but I am really sad and frustrated to be here. I have re-read my speech from our October 2016 debate, at which I think all hon. Members in this Chamber were present. I spoke about two constituents who had been affected.

Most of the speeches in that debate articulately raised such cases, but basically they were asking for a process to find answers. Three years later, we have fewer answers and most of us are more suspicious and angry. On that basis alone, this cannot be the end of the matter. I thoroughly agree with the hon. Lady's comments.

Hannah Bardell: I absolutely agree. I share the hon. Gentleman's despair and sadness that we are in this position so many years after the group was set up—a process into which the Government put public money and in which medical experts took part. As I have said, we are not necessarily criticising the people in the expert working group, who are medical professionals, but they have fallen victim to a process that was at best opaque and at worst corrupt, given the influence of the companies involved.

Who knows why we ended up in this mess? On the day the report was due to be published, the hon. Member for Bolton South East and I went to an event that we thought was supposed to be public—or at least open to Members of Parliament. We were stopped at the door; some of the press were allowed in, but we were not. We know that there was due to be a press conference and a public event, but they were both cancelled.

Members have spoken passionately about the lack of independence and impartiality, the gagging clause that Marie Lyon had to sign and the heavy-handed

approach taken, all of which have caused serious concerns. What does it say to those in the medical community who may be invited to be part of future Government working groups that a group that was supposed to be open and transparent and get to the truth of an issue has turned out to be a cover-up? It raises serious concerns that their credibility will be called into question. That is a very dangerous situation.

As well as looking at the wider issue, we need to look at the mess that the expert group became, so that we can give confidence not only to the families and to our constituents, but to medical professionals.

Gordon Marsden: The hon. Lady points out precisely the contextual things that we need to learn. Does she agree that there seems to have been an element of Jekyll and Hyde in the Government's approach over the past three years? On the positive side, I have confidence that Baroness Cumberlege—with whom I have served on another all-party group—and her team are moving in the right direction. However, everything in the statement that the then Secretary of State made in February 2018 was about the future:

“drive forward...the recommendations of the expert working group...offering the families...a full and up-to-date genetic clinical evaluation...better training and support for obstetricians”.—[*Official Report*, 21 February 2018; Vol. 636, c. 165-166.]

Those are all good things, but they do not address the past 40 years, offer an apology or express any sense of regret, nor do they address any of the issues raised in this debate. Would it not be a good idea for the Minister to go back to the Secretary of State and say that we need to look again at that 2018 statement, go back to that context and make the necessary decisions? People will not put up with just a broad range of recommendations—we need to get to the heart of the matter.

Hannah Bardell: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. How many times must the families and the victims of Primodos have their hopes built up and then completely dashed? Is it not bad enough that they have gone through the trauma, the blame and having their children live with deformities and disabilities—as my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) so precisely and devastatingly highlighted in the case of his constituent—without also having their hopes built up for a review that turns out to be a whitewash? That gives people no confidence at a time when, let's be honest, confidence in politicians and the political process is not particularly good. We have an opportunity here to do something good, to do it well and to do it properly.

I have to say that my exchanges with the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency and with the expert working group have not been good. I wrote directly to the chair of the expert working group about people's feelings and concerns, but the response that I received did not fill me with hope.

I am pleased that Baroness Cumberlege has taken on her new role of looking at hormone pregnancy tests, sodium valproate and medical mesh, but when she sought evidence, she did not include Scotland. I have now written to her, and that issue has been rectified, but it is important to remember all the devolved nations of the UK and ensure that they are appropriately included. We know what the academic studies have shown—the work of Carl Heneghan and Neil Vargesson has been

exceptional—but there is now new evidence and we should ensure that it is included in any future plans or reviews.

What we need from the Minister is an acknowledgment of the power of the views across this Chamber and across both Houses, and of the serious impact of this issue on people's lives. How many parents need to die without knowing what happened to their children because of a pill that they took? As the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) said, these were women who believed that they were in the care of the NHS, that they were being given something that had been properly medically checked, and that they were not being put in danger. However, their health and the health of their unborn children were put in danger. Let us not forget that many women miscarried—there are many children who were not born because their mothers took this pill. This drug was used in Germany as an abortive and in another country as a pregnancy test. It does not take an expert to work out that that was absolutely wrong.

We have a choice, and we have an opportunity. There is a very powerful body of medical evidence that needs to be properly looked at. The Government also need to take a long, hard look in the mirror and think very carefully about why the expert working group failed so badly and why its terms of reference changed part of the way through. They need to make sure that that never happens again; that the victims of Primodos, including my constituent and all the constituents mentioned today, never have to go through any more pain and suffering; and that those victims will get truth, justice and answers to their questions. Do they need compensation? Yes, absolutely, but what they really want is an apology and an acknowledgment.

As the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead said, when something goes wrong, the right thing to do is put your hands up and say, "Do you know what? We got this wrong." It is about time that that happened. I hope that now the Minister and her Government will finally do the right thing.

12.37 pm

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. Like other hon. Members, I sincerely thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for securing this debate. I also thank Marie Lyon, chair of the Association for Children Damaged by Hormone Pregnancy Tests. Without those two strong, brave women and their pursuit of justice, truth and answers, we would probably not be having this debate. I think we can all agree that the personal stories that we have heard today are very powerful indeed, and that these people and their families deserve definitive answers to their questions, especially after so many years.

Although I am pleased that the Government have committed to the ongoing review, I hope that on this occasion all available data will be analysed and all research will be taken into account, so that the review's conclusion can satisfy those who have campaigned so vociferously for so many years. It is alarming to read the report from experts at Oxford University, led by Carl Heneghan, Professor of Evidence-Based Medicine. The report appears to identify huge gaps in the expert working group's 2017 study.

To find that huge areas of research were left untouched is nothing short of an insult to the campaigners who have devoted their lives to seeking justice. Some reports suggest that key elements of research were removed on purpose to support the conclusion and mislead Government and Parliament. If so, we as parliamentarians must do our utmost to right those wrongs; I hope that today the Minister will pledge to do just that. Indeed, the Prime Minister herself said in January that she would

"listen very carefully to any recommendations that come out of the review".—[*Official Report*, 16 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 1160.]

The results of animal testing from a 1979 study released by the pharmaceutical manufacturer Schering, now owned by Bayer, found strong links between the drugs and malformations, as well as the death of embryos, and yet the expert working group in 2017 declared that those results provided insufficient evidence. The expert working group examined human studies, and the majority similarly favoured an association between Primodos and deformity, but still the working group felt that the evidence was not strong enough. Was the evidence not properly assessed, or was it simply omitted? Either way, that conclusion has undoubtedly prolonged the agony of those who have lived for 50 years without answers.

There has been much talk about whether meta-analysis should have been used by the expert working group in 2017. When Professor Heneghan carried out a random-effects meta-analysis, the results were opposite to that of the expert working group report and found that there was an association between the drug and the malformations, which was consistent with his own study.

Sir Edward Davey: I think I am right in saying that when the raw data that the expert working group had used was rerun by Professor Heneghan, it showed that if the expert working group had done that, it would have reached similar conclusions. That makes the group's conclusions even more worrying.

Paula Sherriff: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very important point, which gives further credibility to the view that the review by the expert working group was completely insufficient.

One thing that I have been utterly appalled about during my research on this subject is the inhumane and patronising way in which women were treated and spoken about during the period that Primodos and other hormone pregnancy tests were available, and subsequently, when a possible link between the drugs, early abortions and birth defects was identified. As the chair and founder of the APPG on women's health, I am often asked why I feel it necessary to have a group that looks exclusively at women's health. This is a prime example of the inequality that women have faced over the years when they have sought help on major health issues.

One senior medical officer from the Committee on Safety of Medicines said in 1969:

"It is somewhat difficult to summon up enough enthusiasm to place a high priority on this, when so much other and possibly more important work is pressing."

In 1968, Dr N.M.B. Dean, of the Royal College of General Practitioners, stated:

"With regard to the rather high incidence of abortions in the Primodos group, I think it must be borne in mind that women going to their doctor for this type of test often hope that they are not pregnant and it is not impossible that these women took other steps to terminate their pregnancies".

Emma Reynolds: Those quotes are breathtakingly horrific. My constituent gave birth in the late 1960s to Steven, who had severe abnormalities thanks to Primodos, and she then went on to conceive two healthy daughters. My constituent wanted to be pregnant, and she wanted a family.

Paula Sherriff: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Time has not been a healer in this case. We need to understand what has happened and we need to get answers for the affected groups.

The quote from Dr Dean goes on:

“In view of these findings tentative though they are, it would be my own view that, since there is in any event no very sound medical reason (in my opinion) for the use of such hormonal preparations, Primodos should be withdrawn from use.”

To suggest that women going through the pain of dealing with a miscarriage had perhaps taken steps to terminate their pregnancies is nothing short of abhorrent, especially given that Dr Dean went on to suggest that Primodos should be withdrawn from use. That indicates that he did see a link between the drug and the miscarriages. Sadly, the suggestion was completely ignored.

Then there are the poor women whose babies had such severe health issues that they did not survive. Reports from those women include the following:

“1971: the words ‘Monster child’ were written on my medical notes. My baby was born alive. I was not allowed to see her. I was drugged. My baby was taken away. I never saw her again.

1971: Anencephaly. Stillborn 2 weeks early. No funeral allowed. Not allowed to name her. My daughter was put in a coffin with a stranger. Searched for 18 years to find where her remains had been left.

1973: I was 16. Just married and excited about my first baby. Just before my baby was born the doctor said my baby did not have a properly formed head. She had no skull and no brain and would die at birth. I was then heavily sedated and my waters broken. I tried to wake up when my baby was born and begged to see her. They refused as her birth defects were too distressing to see.”

I am sure we all agree that those reports are nothing short of heartbreaking. They are incredibly demeaning for the women involved.

To be put through the most horrendous of situations and made to suffer for all these years without answers has been like a life sentence for some, and those living with complex disabilities face an uncertain future without carers or financial support, should their loved ones die before them. If Primodos and other pregnancy hormone tests were to blame, the answers need to come now, and financial support needs to be given before it really is too late to help those living day to day with the effects of innocently taking a drug after putting their trust in clinicians and drug companies all those years ago.

On listening to stories from those affected and researching the issue, the greatest point that sticks with me is the uncertainty that surrounds all the reports that have been published—the lack of evidence used, the lack of research analysed, the lack of questions answered. I think 50 years is long enough for campaigners to wait. I hope that the Minister will today pledge that she will ensure an end to that wait, and that she will make sure that the findings of the latest review, when published, are acted on thoroughly and comprehensively.

12.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): I thank all hon. Members who have participated in the debate, with real passion and determination to get to the truth. I fully accept the perception held by all Members present that we have waited a long time for answers.

One of the reasons I have pushed so hard for the Cumberlege review is exactly those arguments that have been made here this morning. It is important that everybody who has been affected is able to get answers. We have heard lots of talk today about a cover-up, and there clearly needs to be confidence in the review's outcome. That is why I wanted Baroness Cumberlege to take an objective look at exactly what has happened, as well as recognising that the way in which the regulatory system has dealt with concerns has seemed very inhumane, process-driven and extremely insensitive to patients. The response on issues of patient safety must be improved. I am really looking forward to receiving Baroness Cumberlege's recommendation in that regard, because so many people's experiences have been entirely unsatisfactory. I know that she has considered the evidence brought to her by Marie Lyon and Jason Farrell. I will be taking the recommendations extremely seriously and I hope that she can draw some conclusions on where everything has gone wrong.

The hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) and others raised the issue of the independence of the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency. It is entirely appropriate that regulators are funded by the community that they regulate, through fees. That in itself does not lead to questions on the regulator's independence, but we need to offer some challenge in order to see whether the processes have sufficient integrity in terms of the response on issues of patient safety. I do not think we tackle the question of independence solely by shifting the funding on to taxpayers. It is entirely appropriate that the industry should meet the cost of regulation, but the review will bring some conclusions on whether that medical regulation is operating properly.

While we await the review's conclusions, we have had the expert working group. It is clear that hon. Members are not entirely confident in the processes and conclusions of that group. To put the work in context, the group gathered evidence from around the world and met seven times over an 18-month period. It concluded unanimously that the totality of the data reviewed did not support a causal association between Primodos and adverse pregnancy outcomes. It also did not conclude that there was not, and we clearly need to consider any further evidence when it is brought forward.

Hannah Bardell: I appreciate the comments that the Minister is making. She must recognise that the MHRA had ultimate control over what the expert working group saw, and that many documents that Sky's Jason Farrell had uncovered in Berlin and which Members have cited were not included in the work of the EWG. We need a fully transparent review—as the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) said—under oath. Does she agree that that would be sensible?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I come back to my opening comments: we brought forward the Cumberlege review to give an independent challenge to what is currently

being done by a regulatory system. We need to look at whether that system is appropriate, given the concerns.

Gordon Marsden: The Minister is being very generous with her time. She is seeking to persuade us, perfectly reasonably, that she and the Government have been acting in a measured way to try to look into all these things. As I have said, we welcome Baroness Cumberlege's report. Has the Minister at any time asked the members of the expert working group why they changed the definition that they were given?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I am not satisfied that that is actually what happened. When we receive drafts of reports that are circulated to committees, they often go through amendment.

Let me continue going through the chronology of events. As I said, the evidence did not support a causal association, nor did it disprove one. We will of course continue to review evidence as it arises.

Sir Mike Penning: I think this is a really fundamental point. I apologise if it seems like I am going to give the Minister a hard time, but I am. They were not asked to look for a causal link; they were asked to look for an association, and we have now seen evidence that they knew it was there. I know what happens when the notes are written for the Minister. They were not asked to look for a causal link, but for an association. They decided among themselves to change what they were supposed to look at, which is why they came out with the results that they did. That is a really fundamental point.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I hear what my right hon. Friend says. There has to be some element of cause, otherwise there is no scientific basis for a judgment. I will have to agree to disagree with him on that point.

Sir Edward Davey: I have to intervene on the Minister on that point. In many cases, drugs are looked at on the probability of risk, not on causality. Causality is a much stronger test. In science, it is very difficult to prove. If her officials are telling her that about a causal link, they are wrong. I urge her to get separate independent advice on that.

Jackie Doyle-Price: The drugs are no longer available because of association, due precisely to that balance of risk. The issue that we are looking at now is to what extent that was understood at the time, and to what extent there is a liability. That is what the group is ready to look at.

Sir Edward Davey: The Minister is being very generous with her time. I refer her to the evidence that was in the Berlin archives, which goes back to 1968 and 1969, and to the meta-analysis, which proves that on the balance of probabilities there is no doubt. That became known not this year, but years ago.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I am answering on behalf of the working group. That is an independent process and I will try to do my best. The right hon. Gentleman raises the issue of the meta-analysis and the suggestion that Parliament has been misled about why that was not done. The expert working group discussed the merits of doing a meta-analysis at its fifth meeting. In its view,

the studies were very different, not sufficiently robust and suffered from extensive limitations. The group concluded that conducting a meta-analysis was not the most appropriate way to analyse this type of study. Instead, the group developed a set of quality criteria and presented its assessment of each study in a series of plots. To reconfirm, the data was not considered sufficiently robust for meta-analysis to be used. One of the real problems we have is that we are talking about data that, as we have mentioned, is 50 years old and not sufficiently robust.

There have been some suggestions that the expert working group has been less than transparent. In line with the Government's commitment to publish the report of the review and all the evidence considered by the group, all documents have been available for public scrutiny since November 2017. We have been very grateful for the involvement of Marie Lyon throughout that process.

There has been some criticism of the lack of an external peer review of the expert working group report. The Government's independent scientific advisory body on the safety of medicines, the Commission on Human Medicines, acts as the peer reviewer for all expert working groups. It reviewed the draft report on two occasions before it was published. I know that Baroness Cumberlege will be looking at whether there has been sufficient peer review of that report, and I look forward to receiving her recommendations. As with any issue, new evidence can emerge in the meantime. I reassure the House that the Government have made a commitment to review any important new evidence, and we have honoured that commitment.

Emma Reynolds: The Minister said a moment ago that the crux of the matter is what was known at the time about the balance of risks. Will she look at international comparisons? In other countries, this hormone pregnancy test was banned much earlier than it was in the UK.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I hear what the hon. Lady says. We have taken this work forward with the working group and have been looking at the totality of evidence around the world, particularly in Europe. Last year, Ministers asked the MHRA to convene a group of experts who have been completely without any agenda on this issue in the past, to consider the work by Professor Vargesson and ensure that it was sufficiently independent. That work, which has been referred to, concluded that Primodos caused malformations in zebrafish embryos. We have also asked for an independent European-level review of that evidence to be undertaken, so that everyone can have more confidence in the outcome. Both the UK and European reviews concluded that the results of the zebrafish study had no implications for the conclusions of the expert working group's report, and the findings of both reviews have been published.

I turn finally to the data published by Professor Heneghan. Although this analysis does not contain any new data, it found the use of hormone pregnancy tests in pregnancy is associated with a small increased risk of certain congenital malformations. The Government have therefore asked for a completely new expert group to be convened in order to consider Professor Heneghan's work, and for a review to be conducted in parallel with the European review. Those reviews are ongoing, and I look forward to receiving that advice.

[Jackie Doyle-Price]

I appreciate that I have not been able to satisfy all the representations made by right hon. and hon. Members this morning. As I said, the Government will continue to review evidence in this area. We are still considering the evidence from Professor Heneghan, and we look forward to implementing any recommendations that Baroness Cumberlege brings forward in this regard.

12.58 pm

Yasmin Qureshi: I thank the hon. Members for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) and for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), my hon. Friends the Members for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) and for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue), and the right hon. Members for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) and for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey). I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) for his helpful interventions.

I am very disappointed with the response the Minister has given. The questions and interventions that my colleagues have voiced suggest their disappointment as well. She has said what all the Ministers have been saying, which is basically reading out the civil service line—Sir Humphrey-speak. We have raised a number of serious questions. We raised the constitution of the expert working group—the people who sat on the panel. In meetings I had with the then Minister—the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb)—and civil servants, we sat and discussed what they would be looking at. They assured us that all the documents and available evidence would be looked at. Clearly, some of it has not been looked at, yet there is no promise to look at all the evidence in this case.

The scientific studies by Professor Vargesson have been mentioned. As the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead said, the human body shares about 70% of the genetic code of the zebrafish. They were found to be damaged. Most of us listening to the Minister are just gobsmacked by what we are being told. None of the issues that have been raised today has really been taken on board.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Waste Water Treatment Works: Odour Nuisance

1 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered odour nuisance from waste water treatment works.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I recognise that it could be the source of some humour to be discussing a somewhat malodorous whiff or a pungent, noxious odour in the air—that is not a reference to this place, obviously—but I have received a number of complaints from residents in my constituency of Great Grimsby, particularly in the West Marsh ward. Frankly, their lives are being blighted, on an irregular basis, by repeated unfortunate smells coming from the Pyewipe sewage treatment plant a few hundred yards from their homes.

I want to talk about some of the issues that my constituents have raised with me, and some of the general problems relating to standards and enforcement in the water treatment industry, which I am sure affect Members from across the House, particularly if they have water treatment works in their constituencies.

None of us would want to experience the smell originating from sewage treatment plants, even for a short period. I was knocking on doors in the area only about two or three weeks ago, and the smell was overpowering. People did not want to open their doors, not because I was knocking on them—it is completely the opposite when I knock on their doors—but because of the smell. People are completely fed up with it. It was so noticeable and present that I thought I had perhaps stepped in something unpleasant, but that was not the case. Perhaps, I thought, it might be because of the increasingly warm weather, and it might be coming from the river that runs alongside the area—a very pretty river, now that the Environment Agency has cleared up that space—but it was not coming from there either. The only place it could have been coming from was the water treatment works.

Council environmental health officers are obliged to investigate complaints of nuisance smells and take action if they adjudge them to be a statutory nuisance. However, in recent years, there has been an increase in reports of odours from Anglian Water-managed Pyewipe sewage treatment centre. Records that Anglian has shared with me show that there were no reports of odour between 2014 and 2017, which I find remarkable; fewer than 10 reports in 2017; fewer than 15 in 2018; and fewer than five in 2019. Given that we are only coming towards the end of April, that is quite a significant number. That leads me to question whether the reporting mechanism for local residents is well known. I suspect that one of the reasons why there were no complaints between 2014 and 2017 is that people were not aware of how they could make complaints.

Nuisance smells affect residents' ability to open their windows on hot days, enjoy their gardens and walk along the River Haven. They make them feel uncomfortable about inviting friends or family to visit their homes. Ultimately, they make our streets and communities far less open and enjoyable, as people choose to stay inside to avoid the odour, try to mask it with air fresheners or avoid the area altogether and go elsewhere. It is not right that my constituents are forced to put up with putrid

odours in their homes, which can have a negative effect on their lives. We should take that seriously. I remember talking to two constituents, one of whom had been undergoing some form of cancer treatment. They wanted to make sure their home was properly ventilated, but it became impossible to open their windows, and they were incredibly frustrated about that.

Water companies and environmental health departments must make it a key aim to ensure that water plants do not create nuisance smells, and that any reports of a smell emanating from one of their plants is dealt with in a serious and timely manner. Unfortunately, the experience of one of my constituents suggests that that is far from the reality for those suffering from nuisance smells in our area.

After corresponding with representatives of Anglian Water and visiting the site, my constituent sent a spreadsheet to Anglian Water in July 2018 that recorded all the times he had experienced a bad smell. Anglian's figures say that there were fewer than 15 odour reports in 2018, but I am fairly sure my constituent had more than 15 entries on his spreadsheet. I am not sure how that recording is done, but I will take it up with Anglian Water.

My constituent sent Anglian the spreadsheet in July 2018, having done what it requested him to do, but he attended one of my surgeries in January to seek my help in getting a reply because he had received absolutely nothing from the company—certainly nothing looking like any kind of solution. That is why he found himself visiting his MP to try to resolve the situation. People come to see their MPs as a last resort when they have been unable to get any kind of resolution through the normal channels. For an issue like this, the normal channels should be easily accessible, not surrounded by a kind of wall of bureaucracy that makes it impossible for individuals to get answers to simple, straightforward and genuine questions.

After my office chased Anglian Water for nearly a month, it finally replied to my constituent's concerns last month—eight months after his original complaint. That is wholly unacceptable.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. Depending on the wind direction, the issue could also affect my constituency. She referred to West Marsh ward but, as she will acknowledge, if the wind is blowing in the right direction, Freshney ward or—over the border in my constituency—Wolds ward could equally be affected.

This has been a very long-running issue. In the years I spent on Grimsby Council and North East Lincolnshire Council, it was almost an annual event. I sympathise with the hon. Lady's constituents, and I fully support all actions that she is taking. I urge the Minister to lean on the responsible authorities.

Melanie Onn: I thank my constituency neighbour for raising that issue. He was a member of the local authority in its various guises for a number of years, so has vast experience of this issue. If it has been going on for this long, why has it not yet been resolved? The responses that Anglian Water sent recently to councillor colleagues responsible for the ward, Gemma Sheridan and Karl Wilson, have been dismissive to say the least, which is incredibly disappointing. This issue clearly comes up time and again. Why cannot Anglian get a grip and sort it out, to make the lives of people in the vicinity of its treatment works much more pleasant?

The reply that Anglian Water finally sent to my constituent said that, although the Pyewipe centre does produce odours, there are a lot of industrial sites around the area, and that he should report problems to the council's environmental health team as they occur. To my mind, that is passing the buck. It is a significant and particular odour. It is not one of general industry, of the very well-known fish processing industry or of farming. However, when my office contacted North East Lincolnshire council's environmental health department—as Anglian Water advised my constituent to do—we were told that an agreement had been made with Anglian Water that the company would be the first point of contact for odour-related complaints and that constituents should get in touch with it.

That means that my constituent was told by Anglian Water, the responsible body, to go to the local authority, which said, "No, no, no! We already have an agreement with Anglian Water. That's where the complaint should be issued." None of that excuses an eight-month delay when somebody lodges a formal complaint with an organisation, whether Anglian Water or a local authority. Frankly, residents do not care; they just want their concerns responded to.

That is far from being an isolated incident. Some streets of West Marsh are particularly negatively affected by the smells from the site. It has taken tireless work by local councillors Gemma Sheridan and Karl Wilson to chase and follow up residents' concerns about the nuisance and get some kind of response from Anglian Water. After those concerns were raised, Anglian invited the councillors over. On that day, miraculously, there was no smell, no issue and no problem. If that can be done for the councillors' visit, it can be done the rest of the time.

It is not good enough for my constituents to be passed from pillar to post when they try to report a problem that has a real effect on their lives and on their enjoyment of their communities. I understand the economic benefits for both parties of a first-instance reporting agreement between the local authority and Anglian Water, but that cannot come at the expense of constituents, who pay the cost of poor responsiveness and a lack of accountability and responsibility for sorting out the nuisance odour to which they are subjected.

In response, Anglian Water and North East Lincolnshire's environmental health team have agreed to meet me at the start of next month to try and sort out some of the problems in the system—I am very grateful and thank them for that. The experience of my constituent, however, as well as the fact that my office and local councillors have had to get involved so that the council's environmental health team and Anglian Water discuss the problem together, speaks to some fundamental problems with the governance of nuisance smells from sewage treatment centres and how that is allowed to function across country.

Although some level of casual, voluntary or first-response enforcement may be used efficiently within environmental protection enforcement against nuisance, it is no substitute for creating an accountable and fair system. Any system of that type needs checks and balances from the regulator to ensure that the companies operating them carry out the work up to a required standard and behave in a responsible manner. Clearly, that has not happened in the case of Pyewipe sewage treatment centre. The company

[*Melanie Onn*]

should not take eight months to respond to a detailed complaint about odour nuisance, and nor should the council or Anglian Water simply pass the buck rather than work together to solve the problem.

What can the Government do to help take action against such companies, which have a responsibility to local communities? Perhaps the Government will consider issuing guidance to local councils that use private-public voluntary partnerships in the environmental sector about how they can effectively ensure that the agreements that they make with companies to comply by environmental standards are actually met. Will the Minister also examine how much such schemes can be divorced from the accountability of official local and national bodies, without having a negative impact on the communities that pay the cost for mismanagement?

The hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) raised the issue of strong winds. That is exactly the response that Anglian Water gave to one of the councillors when the issue was raised three weeks ago. It blamed the wind and the direction of the wind, rather than getting to the heart of the matter and using the technology that I know is out there to solve some of those problems.

The situation is not the fault of the local council or environmental teams. When we talk about environmental enforcement, we cannot ignore the impact of the massive budget cuts experienced by councils across the country since 2010. I recognise that when councils have to choose between statutory duties such as adult social care, anti-social behaviour, homelessness, children's social care and libraries, that comes at the expense of non-statutory functions, such as enforcement or, in this case, an environmental health team that is stretched across numerous responsibilities. That team makes sure that the air that we breathe is safe; deals with fly-tipping complaints and safety and hygiene standards in the food sector; and ensures that home and businesses do not contain major faults and hazards. That is a lot of responsibility and many duties for a small team of people.

Although there are a number of solutions, which I will raise with Anglian Water and the enforcement team when I meet them next week, can we look at what actually counts as a statutory nuisance? I understand that there has to be a certain frequency and level for something to be considered a nuisance, but a lower threshold might encourage companies to take their responsibilities more seriously. Can something be done to ensure that water companies are required to use the most up-to-date technology available to deal with these problems or, if they are going to blame the direction of the wind, to provide a barrier to prevent that smell spreading across a wider area?

Anglian Water's response to me, which gave the figures for the complaints that the company had received, said:

"We recognise that these figures demonstrate there has been a recent increase in odour reported to Anglian Water at this time, with a particular spike during summer 2018. We are aware that the long, hot dry spell may have contributed to a temporary increase in odour on the site."

I do not know whether others enjoyed the Easter weekend, but it was the hottest on record, and last year's was the previous hottest Easter on record—there seems to be a pattern. A number of the people currently in Parliament Square would tell us time and again that we are likely to

experience a pattern of increasingly lengthy dry spells. The whole of London has been brought to a standstill over the last two weeks by climate change protestors, which tells us that there is a steady increase in temperature. That means that there will be increasingly lengthy and hot dry spells. If that is the case, the problem will only get worse, and local residents will continue to suffer if Anglian Water does not take action.

The hon. Member for Cleethorpes has dealt with or recognised the problem for the last 15 or 20 years—

Martin Vickers: Even more than that!

Melanie Onn: Forty or 50? If so, the issue is longstanding and needs to be resolved before the weather plays an increasing role and the problem becomes uncontrollable. I saw in my research ahead of the debate that if the problem remains unresolved, it will limit how people live their lives, down to not being able to open their windows, have visitors or rent out properties. If residents cannot sell their homes because the area becomes undesirable, that presumably leaves them in a position to seek some form of legal action or compensatory claim. That would be the worst of all worlds: I do not think that anybody wants that outcome.

I ask the Minister to point me in the right direction and suggest some pointers ahead of my meeting with Anglian Water and the local authority, for the sake of the West Marsh residents on whose lives the issue has a significant impact and to solve the problem once and for all.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can last until 1.30 pm. We go from the fragrant hon. Lady to the sweet-smelling Minister.

1.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): It is always a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone, in particular with comments such as that, which do not happen often—thank you very much. I am sure that the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) also feels the benefit of your kind remarks.

I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. She is a formidable spokesperson for her constituency and works hard in the main Chamber and here in Westminster Hall. It is good that she was able to secure this debate on the odour nuisance from waste water treatment works on behalf of the many constituents whom she represents. It is also good to hear the authoritative voice of my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) who has, dare I say it, decades of experience. He does not look old enough for that, but he smells sweetly enough to represent those views.

I sympathise greatly with the residents of West Marsh. The issue is clearly unpleasant and, as the hon. Lady described, distressing. It significantly affects their quality of life, and I particularly appreciate the concerns expressed about the potential for the problem to become worse in the summer when residents need to be able to ventilate their homes. Both Members highlighted concern about the summer, so it is important that we get to grips with the problem as quickly as possible.

Statutory nuisance legislation provides the mechanism for communities to raise concerns of this nature with their local authority, requiring it to investigate and, where necessary, to take measures to resolve the issue.

Section 79 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 places a duty on local authorities to inspect their areas from time to time to detect statutory nuisances, and to investigate complaints made by local residents about issues that could be a statutory nuisance. Smells from industry, trade or business premises, which include waste water treatment works, are among the statutory nuisances listed under the Act.

To be a statutory nuisance, an issue must either unreasonably and substantially interfere with the use or enjoyment of a home or other premises, or injure or be likely to injure health. It is not essential for local authorities or environmental health practitioners to witness the nuisance themselves—that point was made by the hon. Member for Great Grimsby because, unfortunately, when they came to visit with the councillors, there was no smell—but they need to be satisfied that the statutory nuisance exists or is likely to occur or recur, as seems to be the case with the issue raised by the hon. Lady.

Any decision will take into account a number of factors, including the reasonableness of the activity, the time of day of the occurrence, and its duration and frequency. Local authorities and environmental health practitioners need to decide whether they have enough evidence to justify a view that statutory nuisance exists before they take enforcement action. It sounds as if many of the hon. Lady's constituents are taking the right steps, and we must ensure that the information is being provided not just to the local authority but to Anglian Water—we will come on to that.

The decision as to whether a particular issue constitutes a statutory nuisance is normally made by the local environmental health practitioner on a case-by-case basis. Section 80 of the Act imposes a duty on local authorities to serve an abatement notice where they are satisfied that a nuisance exists, or is likely to occur or recur in that area. The notice may require whoever is responsible to stop the activity, or to limit it to certain times to avoid causing a nuisance, and may include specific actions to reduce the problem.

It is an offence not to comply with an abatement notice without reasonable excuse. Someone who does not comply with an abatement notice can be prosecuted and, on conviction, in the case of industrial, trade and business premises, fined an unlimited amount. If local residents experience an odour problem that they believe might constitute a statutory nuisance, I urge them to contact their local authority without delay, describing the nature of the odour and providing any other details that might be helpful.

If it should prove to be the case that the odour nuisance that is the focus of our attention now originates from the waste water treatment works, the hon. Lady should be assured that we have strong rules in place not only to protect and improve water quality in England through proper collection, treatment and discharge of waste water, but to prevent unacceptable odour. Certain activities at waste water treatment works are regulated via appropriate environmental permits, depending on the nature of their operations. Conditions attached to the permits include those regarding odour. In 2018, the Environment Agency received 21,600 reports of odour pollution—I am pleased to report that not all of them

were in the constituency of the hon. Lady—which were investigated by the agency where it regulated the activity. The remaining cases were investigated by the relevant local authority.

I understand that a significant number of industrial premises in the West Marsh area have the potential to cause odour, including waste-management and fish-processing facilities, and it may therefore not be straightforward to establish the odour origination point, although the hon. Member for Great Grimsby seems to have a pretty good idea of that—she has been forthright in her view. The local authority, in this case North East Lincolnshire Council, is responsible for identifying the sources of the odour that is causing a nuisance in the local area, and for issuing an abatement notice where it concludes that a nuisance is occurring. The Environment Agency has been working with North East Lincolnshire Council and Anglian Water to support improved odour monitoring, including a joint site visit and training for the council staff. The agency has also worked to facilitate effective local communications between the two parties.

The hon. Lady made an important point about reporting mechanisms. Local residents with ongoing concerns about odours associated with the treatment works at Pyewipe operated by Anglian Water Services should contact the main number, 0345 714 5145, in the first instance. If necessary, they may then contact North East Lincolnshire Council to follow up. I trust that Anglian Water is listening to and following the debate. Eight-month delays are completely unacceptable in any public body. It is absolutely clear that any approaches to a complaint and follow-up action need to be transparent and easy to use. I hope, if nothing else comes out of the debate, that it will become clear where the first point of contact should be—Anglian Water.

While being odour-free in all circumstances may not be possible, nevertheless there are many options for abating odour nuisance. I therefore encourage the hon. Member for Great Grimsby to continue to work with the local authority and Anglian Water to establish the exact source of the odour and to ensure that action is taken to mitigate it. I understand that Anglian Water is happy to convene a meeting with the hon. Lady, the local authority and the Environment Agency to discuss the concerns that have been expressed and to identify a way forward. I am pleased to hear that that meeting has been arranged for 1 May. I also gather that there is a desire on all sides proactively to improve communications and to resolve the situation as far as possible in advance of the summer months. The timing is good.

It is not the role of Government to intervene in local nuisance cases of this kind, but I assure the hon. Lady that the local authority has all the powers necessary to tackle the problem. I hope that this debate and my words on behalf of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will assist her in her efforts to resolve the issue and to address the concerns of her constituents, whom she seeks to serve well with all her dedication.

Question put and agreed to.

1.28 pm

Sitting suspended.

Proportional Representation: House of Commons

[MR NIGEL EVANS *in the Chair*]

4.30 pm

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Change UK): I beg to move,

That this House has considered proportional representation in the House of Commons.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I begin by thanking the House of Commons digital engagement service for its work in preparation for this debate. It engages with voters on Facebook to great effect. Between 15 and 23 April, its Facebook post on proportional representation was seen by 29,448 accounts and had 7,936 clicks and 1,803 engagements. Of those engagements, 496 were Facebook users who wanted to comment on the issue, clearly demonstrating that there is a lot of interest—such is the interest that the debate is being streamed on the House of Commons Facebook page. I was impressed by the quality of insights made on the post and humbled by the number of them, and I thank all those who took the time to share their thoughts on proportional representation on Facebook.

In trying to do justice to the online discussion I can do no better than to begin by admitting that for many years I remained stubbornly resistant to the arguments for proportional representation, but no longer. Recent events have forced me to rethink my stance. In other words, I am happy to admit that I was wrong to defend first past the post for so long. My epiphany came in the wake of the 2017 election, when it became painfully obvious that the current electoral system is no longer fit for purpose. That was the third general election in a row in which our voting system failed to secure the strong, stable government that we all see as its key strength. It gave the Tories just under 50% of the seats available, with 42% of the vote. According to the Electoral Reform Society, 22 million voters had no impact on the result because they remained loyal to their tribe, despite knowing there was no chance whatsoever of securing victory for their candidates.

Many online respondents felt despondent and angry that living in a safe seat could mean that their vote counted for nothing. One respondent, Jamie, said:

“No one could possibly condone a system that essentially makes hundreds of thousands of voters redundant, and even worse reinforces the feeling of apathy that puts many people off from participating in the political process in the first place.”

On the other hand, 6.5 million voters decided to vote tactically in order to empower their choices, to give themselves a small but nevertheless important opportunity to help shape the outcome of the election. The situation was summarised beautifully by one of the contributors to the Facebook page, Adrienne, who said:

“I would like a proportional representation system so that I could vote for the party whose policies I agree with. At the moment my choice is either to vote tactically for a party I don’t want but whose policies I object to less, or to ‘waste’ my vote on the party I like—I live in a safe seat and can’t ever see my preferred party being successful. I think this question is more pertinent than ever following the political mess that has been Brexit. I have lost all faith that my voice will be heard in the current system.”

At this point, many hon. Members will be thinking, “Yes, we’ve always argued that the current voting system is unfair.” Quite fairly, they would accuse me of having remained willingly blind to its iniquities. I have believed throughout my adult life that first past the post is justifiable because it promises strong government and a democratic basis for the implementation of the winning party’s manifesto. However, as I conceded, the key defence of first past the post has crumbled and is no longer credible, leading to my road-to-Damascus moment.

Three elections in a row failed to deliver strong government. Why? What is going on? Let us begin with the deep and ongoing crisis afflicting the two biggest political parties. Brexit is seen by many as the cause, but I would contend that it is a symptom of a newly emboldened populist discourse that has fractured our politics. As a consequence, both the Tory party and the Labour party are struggling with widening ideological divides that threaten to become an existential threat. That development is important because in a two-party system, voters need to be sure that the party they support is capable of delivering the realistic, pragmatic politics vital to the effective governing of the country.

There is a strong sense that both major parties are failing to maintain an approach to policy making based on consensus within each party and with the electorate, because the broad churches they represent are evaporating in the face of a blistering assault from the far reaches of the right and the left. We face a serious and possibly terminal decline in the ability of the two major parties to process political options, sift them and present them as a meaningful choice at an election. It is no wonder that long-term trends in voting behaviour indicate that the case for reform of the voting system is getting stronger, not weaker.

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): The hon. Lady makes some powerful points, but the only time that the British National party has ever been elected was through the d’Hondt system of proportional representation in the last European elections.

Angela Smith: I do not intend to go through the different PR models available, because I am establishing the principle, but I believe there are models of PR that prevent the accession of small extremist parties to a parliamentary system. Germany has such a system.

The recent British Social Attitudes survey found that only 8% of voters identify strongly with a political party. Polls regularly report not only diminishing support for the two parties, but a sense that “none of the above” is an increasingly attractive choice for British voters. That is best expressed by a gradually reducing turnout. In 1950, 84% of voters cast their preferences at the ballot box. In the 2017 election, turnout was 68%. There is other firm evidence that voters are losing confidence in our representative democracy. The report by the Institute for Public Policy Research on the 2015 election established that less than half of 18 to 24-year-olds voted, compared with nearly 80% of those aged 65 and over. That is a worrying trend.

The past 30 years have seen the emergence of a dramatic divide in how people vote, especially as far as the age demographic is concerned. The evidence is clear: voters increasingly demonstrate that they no longer trust the two main parties to manage the democratic process. Both Labour and the Tories have traditionally held a

huge responsibility under first past the post. In an electoral process that offers only limited opportunities to change the political colour of a constituency, we have relied on the two major parties to provide candidates who are capable of taking on the coveted role of Member of Parliament, and to provide a well-thought-through programme for government that is realistic and promises to meet the needs of the country. Increasingly there is a feeling that both parties are failing to take those responsibilities seriously, to the extent that voters are no longer content to be managed by political parties. They increasingly seek plurality, so that they can sift for themselves the range of policy choices available in any given election. Voters no longer want to be patronised by the democratic process; they want to be empowered by it.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I commend the hon. Lady on her speech and on the candour and force with which she makes her points. What she says is true not just of national government but of local government. May I offer her the example of local government in Scotland where, since 2007, councils have been elected under the single transferable vote? We have seen the end of single-party monoliths across Scotland, and that has been absolutely rejuvenating for local democracy in Scotland.

Angela Smith: I completely accept the right hon. Gentleman's point. I restricted this debate to Westminster, but that does not mean that I believe these principles do not apply to local government—they do.

Our 19th-century voting system is unfit for the 21st century. As one respondent wrote on the Facebook page accompanying this debate, the system acts as a straitjacket, denying voters the multiplicity of choices they crave. Another respondent, Benny, commented that PR

“would make sure that every vote counts, enabling all voters to feel more involved in the democratic process.”

If we are serious about changing our politics, we must start with how we elect our Parliament. We need reform to ensure fairness and integrity in the electoral process, and that means acknowledging the case made by events in the past few years for a more pluralistic system that gives back control to voters.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. Will she tell us which system she favours? There are a number of systems we could use, but it would be very interesting to know which appeals to her.

Angela Smith: What I will say is that I do not favour a system that removes the constituency link. We must have a system that keeps the constituency link in place. One of the reasons the alternative vote referendum failed is that AV is not proper PR. We need proper PR, but we need the constituency link.

If we win approval in Parliament for implementing a new PR system, we should begin the process of establishing a proportional system by holding deliberative discussions—citizens' assemblies—across the country to develop the right option for our country. That is the way we should do this. I am not going to say which system I want to see. That is not for me to decide. The country has to decide which system suits us best. That is the best way of approaching the implementation of a change in the voting system.

As I said, we need a more pluralistic system that gives back control to voters. That is what the democratic process is about. The days of patronising voters and managing their choices for them are over, and we need to recognise that. No longer can excuses be made to avoid change. Indeed, every new legislature created by this Parliament uses some form of PR. Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the London Assembly all use proportional systems. STV, Mr Evans, is even used to elect the Deputy Speakers of this House.

I am convinced that change is coming. It is overdue. I apologise for my tardiness in acknowledging the strength of the argument for PR, but better late than never. Let's get on with it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Order. Members can see how many people are standing. The wind-ups will start at half-past 5, so please show enormous constraint—just make your points and then allow others to get in. I call Vicky Ford.

4.44 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I am one of the few parliamentarians to have been elected under both the first-past-the-post system, as a Member of this Parliament, and a proportional representation system—I was elected twice to the European Parliament.

Some people say proportional representation will lead to a more consensual approach to decision making. I have seen that consensus sometimes does occur more in the European Parliament than people occasionally perceive to be the case here, but in my experience from the past couple of years, there are many areas of Westminster in which decision making happens along consensus lines; I think especially of the work we do in Select Committees and on all-party parliamentary groups. On the other hand, I have seen fundamental flaws in the proportional representation system, and we should be very careful when thinking about adopting changes to our system.

Let me take Members back 10 years to 2009, when European elections were held at the height of the expenses scandal. The turnout was very low, which meant people could get elected with only a very small number of voters turning up to support them. Two members of the British National party were elected, with fewer than 3% of the voters supporting them. At the time, that party would not allow someone to join as a member unless their face was white. Those people were given seats in the European Parliament. They were given credibility and respectability.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): Does the hon. Lady not accept that part of the problem with that election was the closed-list d'Hondt system, which discriminates? In certain regions it allows extremist parties to get through, but in other regions it requires parties to reach a much higher figure. Would it not be better to move to a national form of proportional representation for European elections, such as the one that the French use?

Vicky Ford: We could use the German system—a national system with a national list, which means that a candidate needs 0.7% of the vote to get a seat. My point is that, especially as turnout is low, a very small number

[Vicky Ford]

of votes can give people with quite extreme views credibility, funding and access to support, so we should be very wary.

In my experience, proportional representation also really changes a Member's relationship with their voters. Because there are multiple Members for each seat, there have to be wider constituencies, meaning that Members do not have the same close relationship with their voters. *[Interruption.]* I will not give way, I am afraid, because lots of people want to speak. Under proportional representation, Members do not have the same intimate relationship with their voters, in which the voters know, "That is my MP; I can hold that person responsible," and the Member knows they are responsible to those people. Proportional representation breaks the link between the voter and the elected representative. I would be very wary of doing that to our democracy.

Democracy, as Winston Churchill said, is the worst form of government, apart from all the rest. Trust in our politics is very low, but I do not believe that changing our electoral system is a miracle cure or a silver bullet that will solve that problem.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): I am extremely grateful for the hon. Lady's brevity.

4.48 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. As I represent a Scottish constituency, I work alongside Members of the Scottish Parliament who were elected under both constituency-based and regional-based systems, as well as local councillors who were voted in under the STV system, as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) mentioned. We come from a culture where there is reasonably fair cohabitation of proportional representation and majoritarian systems.

I am fairly open-minded about the idea of different electoral systems. The key thing is for us to agree that there needs to be a thorough constitutional convention. It is high time that every aspect of the entire structure of Westminster's governance was reviewed. I am sure we have a litany of ideas about reform of the structure—not just the electoral system, but the second Chamber and the way Westminster interfaces—and that is certainly what the Labour party advocates.

There are certainly problems with the way the Scottish Parliament's structure works. Combining regional lists and constituencies creates an imbalance between the different types of MSPs, which often leads to problems. When we talk about PR, we have to take cognisance of the fact that there are different methods of PR. The system can also lead to distortions. Even in the last Westminster election in 2017, Labour gained 27% of the vote in Scotland but only 11% of seats. That is a clear imbalance. The Scottish National party achieved, I think, 36% of the vote and won 59% of the seats. Those clear imbalances could be corrected within regions under a more proportional system.

I supported the alternative vote compromise, introduced as a condition of the coalition Government agreement. That would have maintained the benefits of the constituency link, which have been mentioned, while allowing at least

a majority to be established in support of electing a Member of Parliament. That seemed a reasonably sensible staging post towards a further review, but it was a great disappointment that that was rejected in a referendum.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I do not know whether my hon. Friend did A-level politics as I did, but we were always taught that the current system delivers stable and clear results. However, two out of the last three general elections have shown that it does not. The current Government are the least satisfactory of all, with £1 billion given to the Democratic Unionist party; pulled votes; meaningful votes that were anything but; and indicative votes that were far from that. Does he not agree that all that points to first past the post being past it? The old saying, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," does not hold. It is broken and it should be fixed.

Mr Sweeney: I am sympathetic to that point. Indeed, who voted for first past the post? Was a referendum ever held on that? Why is it assumed that the burden of proof must lie with those who oppose the existing system? We need a thorough root-and-branch review of the entire structure of our politics as part of a constitutional convention and national conversation. Hopefully we can achieve some consensus among the parties about what needs to change. That could be delivered through a manifesto and a general election.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend not agree that we are in the midst of a constitutional crisis, and that a national debate, as he suggests, with a constitutional convention and citizens' assembly, might help our broader understanding of how the country operates, and ensure greater democratic participation? The problems around low turnout were highlighted by the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford); surely changing the system, following a national debate, would raise turnout.

Mr Sweeney: I thank my hon. Friend for that important point. This is the issue with referendums: they present simplistic answers to very complex questions, and binary referendums in particular often lead to contentious and unfortunately hostile arguments being made. A spirit of conflict rather than consensus envelops such contests. We must cut across those points and develop a much more consensual method.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): In Ireland, the referendums on equal marriage and abortion rights, which were preceded by a constitutional convention and citizens' assemblies, are widely thought to have delivered such decisive results because of the deliberative democracy that took place in advance. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that on this issue, a citizens' assembly or constitutional convention preceding a final decision would be the best way forward?

Mr Sweeney: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for that important point. It is critical that that spirit underpins any test in a plebiscite. Another example is, of course, the establishment of the Scottish Parliament, with the Scottish constitutional convention. She may say that the Scottish National party was not always supportive of that process, but in the end we arrived at consensus and an overwhelming result in the 1997 referendum, and we delivered a Scottish Parliament in 1999. It is a tried and tested model. That is in stark contrast to the rather more contentious referendum in Scotland in 2014 and across the UK in 2016.

We must think carefully about how referendums are framed, how they are delivered and how they are presented to the people for discussion. If they are unnecessarily contentious, we see no resolution and no popular consent; if we get a very narrow result, a large cohort of the population feels that it has been cheated.

I am open-minded about what we could arrive at in electoral system reform. The current system is clearly not fit for purpose, but I am not hung up on any one model. For example, there are problems with the Scottish Parliament system, which could be reformed and further enhanced. The combination of the list and the constituency link is not entirely coherent, and after 20 years of devolution, that question ought to be considered. The fundamental thing we must all agree on is an urgent need for a constitutional convention across the UK, to provide a root-and-branch review of our entire political system. Hopefully, through that, we can arrive at a system that is fit for this century.

4.54 pm

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I rise to speak in support of the motion. Undoubtedly, this country's current voting arrangements do not adequately reflect the diversity of opinion that there now is among the electorate. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) for raising this issue for debate.

There are many different forms of proportional representation, some of which have been touched on briefly. We had a referendum on AV, in which AV was universally defeated—rightly so, because under that system the candidate who comes fourth could become the Member of Parliament if they were the least disliked. That may be an argument in favour of AV, but those who believe in a constituency link find it difficult to argue that the person who came third or fourth should eventually go on to become a Member of Parliament. We also have single transferable vote, and then we have proportional representation.

We have talked a little about the merits of first past the post. It was traditionally argued that that system tends to deliver strong government—arguably, that is not the case at the moment. It maintains a constituency link, but some forms of proportional representation also do that. It also—this is the strongest argument in its favour—tends to be a bulwark against the entryism of extremist minority parties. In the 2015 election, even though the UK Independence party received 13% or 14% of the vote, it gained only one seat, which to my mind shows at least some benefit, in that first past the post keeps some of those minority parties out.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Is not one of the issues that because UKIP got something like 4 million votes but did not get many Members elected to this House, tensions boiled up? We saw that, with a Member of Parliament having been murdered before the EU referendum. Is not the fact that we do not look at having a fair, proportional representation system part of the issue?

Dr Poulter: I do not entirely disagree. Certainly that 13% or 14% of the electorate may have felt disenfranchised by the result to some extent, but during that election I think we all recognised the extremist nature of some of the views held by that party and some of its candidates.

The hon. Gentleman is correct on the broader issue. We now have a much more fractured politics than we did half a century ago, when there was a stronger argument for first past the post, and many groups do not feel represented in their constituencies. For example, I received more than 60% of the vote in my constituency at the last election, but consistently about 15% to 20% of that electorate have voted for the Labour party. Indeed, in Suffolk as a whole in 2010 and 2015, 25% of the electorate voted for Labour and yet seven Conservative MPs were returned. That is not representative of the general feelings of Suffolk residents.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an important point. Does he recognise that proportional representation is about more than electoral outcomes and that, actually, proportional systems change political culture in a way that delivers more effective social outcomes? Societies with PR are more likely to have lower income inequality, better developed welfare systems, higher social expenditure, better distribution of public goods and better environmental controls. It is a much wider issue.

Dr Poulter: The hon. Gentleman is right. Broadly, there is a strong case and good evidence that in countries with proportional representation, or a more proportional system, there tends to be more consensus government, which tends to recognise certain common goods. Today, there is an urgent question in the main Chamber on climate change. In many other countries in Europe, climate change's importance in the legislative agenda is reinforced by that sort of consensus politics.

For example, the work done by the former leader of the Labour party, the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), when he was Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change in the latter part of the last decade, was broadly supported across the House, but if there had been a sudden lurch to a Government who perhaps did not believe in climate change, a lot of that work could have been undone under the British system. That is much harder to do under a proportional system, under which there has to be much more work through consensus between political parties. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to make that point about the sort of politics that many of us here would like to see.

I want to allow other hon. Members to speak, so I will be very quick. In my view, if we are to have a PR system that is effective, it has to maintain the constituency link. It also has to ensure that we deal with the issue of having a potential threshold, even under PR, for election, be it 5% of the electorate in a particular area or whatever. The best way of doing that, I believe, is by doing something broadly along the lines of what we have currently for the European elections—perhaps not on the basis of a large-scale region, but on a county basis or a city-regional basis. That would allow people in, for example, London, where boroughs identify together, to elect from those boroughs a proportional number of MPs from different parties, according to how those electors voted.

That strikes me, in comparison with our current political settlement, as a much fairer way of electing people. It certainly would have given a voice in 2010 and 2015 to the 25% of constituents in Suffolk who voted for the Labour party but did not have any MP to

[*Dr Poulter*]

represent them. I hope that, going forward, it would also give rise to the more consensus-based politics on the big issues of the day, such as climate change, and other forms of policy making that all of us here, I hope, believe in.

5.1 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I start from the point of view that our electoral system is not one that I could, hand on heart, say is democratic perfection. It is clear that our winner-takes-all format means that millions of people feel that their vote does not count, and of course there is the unquantifiable number of people who vote for something other than their first choice because they see the vote in their area as a choice between the lesser of two evils, rather than as a positive vote for the party that they want to support. Proclaiming that I have won an election because I am the lesser of two evils has not yet made it into any of my acceptance speeches, but I have been called a lot worse, particularly recently.

As politics in this country is in crisis, it is not surprising that the news that a comedian has won the Ukrainian elections has been met by comments in this country that we had beaten them to it. Such is the contempt that people feel for us all now that it would not surprise me to see, if we had an election soon, more than a few of us being replaced by unlikely candidates: having no previous political experience is definitely a selling point right now. What I am talking about is not just a new name for old faces, but a new type of politician, an anti-politics politician, the likes of whom we have seen springing up all over the world in recent years.

It is evident at every election that millions of votes end up counting for nothing and some votes, depending on where they are, can literally be worth their weight in gold, so I want reform of the current system. However, I am sceptical about constitutional changes coming forward from the existing set of politicians, because there is almost always going to be some element of political calculation with such proposals.

Let us take the 2011 AV referendum. I voted in that referendum to change the system, but I was under no illusions: the only reason why it came forward was that it was politically expedient for the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats at the time to hold a referendum to keep the coalition agreement going. I appreciate that AV is not the purest form of PR and that it is possible that in landslide years it can exaggerate the winning party's dominance even more, but at least in that set-up everyone should be able to vote for their preferred choice, at least in the first instance.

However, the real attraction of AV for me is the retention of the constituency link. I believe that the best element of our current system is that each Member has to answer to his or her constituents at every election and that there is no hiding place for the decisions that they take. PR systems and lists remove that vital link and can lead to a lack of direct accountability between voters and those who represent them.

I wonder whether the 2016 referendum result would have been different if MEPs had individual constituencies to represent. Obviously, the factors behind that vote

were many, and it would probably be stretching things too far to say that the outcome would have been different, but it is clear that one reason why leave won was that people did not think that the European Parliament was representing their interests. The lack of an identifiable local representative was part of that.

Mr Sweeney: My hon. Friend is making a really important point about the constituency link. That is a critical thing that ought to be protected. Since the Scottish Parliament was created, the number of constituencies in Scotland represented from Westminster has been reduced, so the size of the constituencies has increased. My constituency takes in two Scottish Parliament constituencies, so there are two MSPs. Having to cover the same ground as the MSPs often means that it is very difficult to maintain the same degree of link with the geography. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a flaw in the system that needs to be looked at if we are proposing to move to a more proportional system?

Justin Madders: Yes, I do agree. Of course, one weakness in the Government's proposals to reduce the number of MPs from 650 to 600 is that that would create very large constituencies that in some cases were unmanageable and did not have geographical communities of interests.

On the subject of MEPs, although we have some excellent hard-working Labour MEPs in the north-west, the track record of people sent by this country to represent us in the European Parliament is not a great advert for PR. Of the 73 MEPs elected in 2014, 25 are no longer in the party that they were in when first elected.

We have had a few defections in this place, but on nothing like the scale that we have seen in Europe. More than one third of all the UK MEPs no longer represent the party that they were elected to represent. Let us be clear: if one third of Members in this place swapped parties, that could easily lead to a change of Government. Any system that allows so many politicians to denude the voters of their voice needs to be seriously challenged. Of course, politicians can change party under first past the post—we have heard today from some Members who have done that—but at least they have to face their constituents when they do it. Under PR, those people who ride under one banner of convenience can easily find themselves on the list for their new party at the next election with no apparent consequences for their actions. That does not sound like a democratic system to me.

Whatever system we have, we also need to look at whether this place is truly representative of the people whom we wish to represent. According to the Sutton Trust, 29% of MPs were privately educated, compared with just 7% of the general population. That is an improvement on the 32% from the 2015 election, but there is still a long way to go.

In conclusion, we need a massive overhaul in how politics is conducted in this country. How our economy and society works has massively changed in the last decade. Any item that we desire can be ordered from the comfort of our own home and be on our doorstep the next day, but our political system, both in the way elections are held and in the way Parliament operates, is stuck in a time warp.

One of the most commonly used arguments in favour of first past the post is that it enables there to be "stable" majority government. In recent times, that theory has

been tested to destruction. Every day that we spend here without making any progress on the big issues of the day is another day closer to a far more radical change to the way we do politics, which will come from outside, not from in here.

What will happen with all the excellent arguments that we are hearing in favour of different systems today? I will tell you, Mr Evans: nothing will happen. Nothing will change. Nothing is changing. Parliament seems incapable of changing anything, incapable of tackling the big issues that we face in this country. That is why we all need to wake up and fundamentally challenge the way our democracy works—not just how we vote but, more importantly, what we actually do once we are elected.

5.8 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. I recognise that there is a need to look at our electoral system and to explore electoral system reform. Why do I believe that?

I first stood for election in 2009, in the midst of the expenses scandal. We cannot blame this system for the expenses scandal but, despite having never been in this place before, I knew what it was to face people who had completely lost trust in MPs and the system that elected them to this place. As a result, ever since I was elected, it has been important to me that we find ways to restore trust in politics. The problem is that that has not been very successful; since that time, we seem to have continued to erode trust in British politicians and the democratic system. We have a job to do and we need to look at whatever is necessary to restore trust in Great Britain and Northern Ireland, with all our history and heritage and all that we stand for, for the future.

I say to my hon. Friend the Minister and the Government that they would do well not to ignore this issue. I have tried to raise it a few times and, although I do not want to be unfair, it is kind of dismissed because there are more important things to be doing. However, we exist at a time in this place when huge chunks of our constituents have almost given up on us and what we stand for. It is really important for the United Kingdom that we do something about that. I urge the Government not to ignore the issue and to look at what can be achieved.

As has already been said, it will not be for the main political parties to come up with the answer; that will not restore trust either. I recommend that the Minister and the Government find a completely independent means of looking at what answers, options and opportunities there are, and to consider them when the time arises. As we are in the middle of Brexit, I suggest that that time is not now.

I agree that votes should matter. Since I have been elected, an organisation called Make Votes Matter has sent representatives—in fairness, not a huge number. As they have spoken to me, I have recognised that they do not feel represented or that their voices are being heard. In Cornwall in 2017, sadly, many of the smaller parties, which did reasonably well in 2015, felt that there was no purpose in even putting forward candidates, so they refrained from even standing. That meant that the three main political parties shared about 98% of all the votes that were there to be had. It was a shame to me that people across Cornwall, including my constituents, felt there was no point in engaging in the 2017 election.

People must have the opportunity to feel that they have a stake in their democracy, as well as a voice. Once we are elected as MPs, we must work to make sure that people have a voice. I never use the word “Conservative” in constituency work—not because I am ashamed of it, but because I know full well that I represent every single person. I work hard to get that message across to people who might think I would have no interest in what they care about or what affects their lives. I work hard to make sure that I am approachable and accessible, and I want to make sure that my constituents’ voices are heard.

I met representatives of Make Votes Matter to understand what an alternative voting system could and would look like. I agree that serious consideration should be given to electoral system reform. When I discuss the subject with people, I make it clear—and it has been made clear here this afternoon—that we must retain the local constituency link. We could jump from a situation where people have lost trust in their politicians for whatever reason, but at least they still can go and see them on a Friday or Saturday, to a point where they no longer have access.

We have referred to MEPs this afternoon. Since the Brexit referendum, very few MEPs have been anywhere near Cornwall; when they have been, some—although not all—have taken part in anti-Brexit meetings. At the moment, we have lost access to some of our MEPs, which is a real shame. It is important that if we move to another system we maintain that constituency link and the ability for people to come and speak to us, and effect change.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way; he is making a thoughtful speech. Has he considered the single transferable vote system? He rightly says that the constituency link is important. We use that system to elect local councillors in Scotland. The link is maintained, but there is also greater proportionality.

On the problems that the hon. Gentleman identifies, would he accept that the two-party dominance of the first-past-the-post system is being stretched to breaking point, with broad churches forming that are beyond having meaning? Part of the problem that we are seeing in our politics is down to the voting system itself.

Derek Thomas: In Cornwall, the Conservatives polled about 49% in 2017 and the other two parties each had about half of the remainder, so I agree with the hon. Lady. There could have been a different way of representing Cornwall, although I probably would not have been elected if that had been the case.

If there were a general election in a few weeks’ time, it would be interesting for us on both sides of the House to find out what we could agree on in a manifesto. When people say to me, “Do you think there will be a general election?” I say, “I hope so, because at the moment I don’t know what the manifesto would even look like.” The hon. Lady is right; we need to clarify again what we stand for and give people a reason to believe. I agree with her and I welcome her intervention.

It is important to maintain the constituency link, and I will give an example of that. As a Back-Bench Member, I was encouraged early on by one of my colleagues in Cornwall to get as many Back-Bench debates as I could, mainly in this Chamber. I have done that. Every single debate that I have sought to secure has been

[Derek Thomas]

driven by a conversation with a constituent who has come to see me. It has been a privilege to meet someone 300 miles away and talk about an issue that matters to them, and then bring it to the Floor of this House.

I am talking about important issues: community pharmacy, which was raised by a pharmacist who told me about changes to funding that would affect rural areas and which became my first ever debate; the post office network, which is a big issue for rural communities; fuel poverty, which is a concern in my constituency; the environment, which as we know from the last couple of weeks is important to many people and about which I have recently secured a debate; horse and rider safety, which was raised with me early on because where I live people on horses take their lives in their hands when faced with cars coming around corners; and employment opportunities for people with disabilities. We need to maintain the opportunity for people to turn up and say, “Can you raise this on my behalf?” and for us to get on and do that.

Our system encourages conflict and aggression; people are shocked to see the adversarial nature of this place. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) that proportional representation or any type of electoral system reform will not be the silver bullet that some believe it would be. However, something must be done to secure a more constructive and productive, and less adversarial, Parliament. I would love that: as a Back-Bencher, I find that working with colleagues across the House, through Select Committees or all-party parliamentary groups, can be really constructive. The idea that we sit opposite each other, trying to pull the most curious faces that we can, seems peculiar to me.

As I have said, it is not for the main political parties to sort this out. I suggest to the Minister that the Government find an independent means to review our current system and see what opportunity exists to improve public trust and public engagement through electoral system reform. It is right that we look at this seriously, that we take voters seriously and that we listen to what they have to say. I believe there is a sea-change in Great Britain and a desire to find a different way of moving forward. The time is not now, but I imagine that in the near future we will be forced to look at doing things differently. It would be better for the Government and the main Opposition parties to be ahead of the curve.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): There are four people wishing to speak, so if they all stick to about three minutes, we will get everybody in.

5.17 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans.

I confess right away that I am not a recent convert to PR; there has been no damascene conversion for me. One of the reasons why I joined the Liberal Democrats when I did was that it seemed obvious to me that the current system has a fatal flaw. That was obvious to me from a young age, because my parents lived in a safe seat, but did not vote for the party that won every single time for as long as that party existed, until 2015. I learned at an early age that first past the post does not represent everybody.

I am not one of the Members in this House who has been elected by proportional representation, although there are many. My hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) was elected to the Scottish Parliament by proportional representation, as were many Government Members, yet this place remains the only national Parliament in the EU that uses first past the post. We often get caught up in talking about percentages, representation and types of PR, but if we look at first past the post, there is only one figure that really matters: 44% of the votes cast are meaningless. Those people are failed by a system that sets one party against another.

Living as I do in Scotland under a PR system at every level—except the Westminster level—I see the difference. I see the difference in a Scottish Parliament that has had, with one exception, minority Governments, and has been forced to find consensus and a way that suited the majority of the people represented in that Parliament. As was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), who is just leaving, we also have PR at council level in Scotland, and a direct link between the voters and their representatives.

Next time we find ourselves in deadlock in Parliament, where one side cannot win over the other—I am sure it will not be long in the current political climate—we should think how different it would be if we had a proportional representation system, in which we all had constituencies and constituents watching what we were doing, but also had a way of being forced to find consensus, and had more than two big power brokers that had everything at stake and no reason to listen to anybody else.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Earlier, when I counted the Members standing, I did not notice that Chris Heaton-Harris was one of them. We will allow three minutes each for those who are standing, which will eat very slightly into the winding-up speeches.

5.20 pm

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): I am sorry that I did not stand at the last point, Mr Evans; I thought there were more people behind me. I congratulate the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) on the way she introduced the subject, and I welcome the Minister to his seat in this room, and to his new post as a Minister in the Department. I wish him all the very best.

I stand to speak because, like my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), I was a Member of the European Parliament, so I was elected twice by proportional representation. I was also a student union politician and was elected once by single transferable vote—thank you very much indeed, Socialist Workers party, which managed to flip six votes into my pile at one point to get me elected. I want to raise some points of criticism—constructively, I hope—in this debate.

I understand that democracy has to evolve. It always will, and it absolutely should. I am slightly wary of raising this, but there is an elephant in the room: 52% of people voted in a referendum quite recently, and the democrats in this room are now ignoring it. I would say that is a bit of a problem. The hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) talked about 44% of votes cast in the last general election being meaningless,

but at this point, I think that 52% of people are feeling that way about their vote in the greatest expression of a democratic vote. As democrats, we should be looking to work out how we can represent people.

I am not in favour of proportional representation. I am in favour of more direct democracy. As a Member of the European Parliament, I saw how proportional representation of a type meant that Belgium could not find a coalition Government for more than a year, because it could not find the group of people who would sit with all the other groups of people in a room to form a proper Government. I sat in a European Parliament to which fascists had been elected because of the type of list system. I sat in a European Parliament where I knew that everyone in the place, including myself, was probably talking to their selectorate, rather than their electorate, because of the way people are selected for list systems under all types of proportional representation.

I fear for the constituency link that so many of us in this place prize. One of the reasons I desperately wanted to get into this place was to represent a community I lived in and truly love. There are other systems that can evolve democracy. I like direct democracy. I have no problem with referendums, though I think we have probably seen the last of them in my lifetime. I have no problem with the California system, or with the direct democracy that the Swiss have. There are other ways of evolving our democracy; proportional representation is not the only one.

5.23 pm

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Change UK): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) on initiating this debate. I will try to make three quick points in the three minutes that I have.

First, while I do not want to repeat the points made in favour of proportional representation—hon. Members can take it as a given that I agree with them all—the big problem, which the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) mentioned, is that our system is a two-party system. It is essentially rigged in favour of two parties. That worked, one could argue, in a Britain of a different age, when our country was essentially divided between the interests of business and capital on the one hand, and the interests of labour on the other. We cannot divide up our country in that way in this day and age. I do not see how two political parties can possibly do justice to the modern tapestry that is Britain, and to the range of interests within it. Traditionally, the response to that argument has been that they are closed coalitions of interests in any event—that they are broad churches. They are not broad churches. I know, because I used to be a member of one. They are straining to keep those divisions and different interests in one place.

We therefore end up with the absurdity that on an issue as crucial as the national security of our country—“What would you do with the future of our nuclear deterrent?”—we have a whole group of people in the Labour party, which I know well, who are committed to retaining the nuclear deterrent, but a leadership and a potential Prime Minister saying that they will never use that nuclear deterrent. I use that simply to illustrate the unsustainability of the system, and how impossible it is for the two main parties in British politics to do the job in the way they used to.

Surely it is better and more honest to have open coalitions governing together. Perhaps each of the two main parties in this country should become two or even three parties. In practice they might govern together, but at least everybody would know where everybody stood and people would not have to pretend that they agreed with each other when they did not. It would make for an altogether more honest system of politics.

Secondly, the other problem with the system is that millions of people in this country vote for a party not because they want to, but because they think they have to in order to keep the other lot out, or because it is the least worst option. How can we go on with a system that forces people to make that kind of choice? If I am wrong about that and people do want to vote for those parties, why does poll after poll show that when we have the Leader of the Opposition, the Prime Minister and “Don’t know” lined up as the options available to people, “Don’t know” scores much more highly than any other option? Thirdly—

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry, but your three minutes is up. In fact, you have gone over the limit.

Chuka Umunna: Can I finish the sentence?

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Go on, then.

Chuka Umunna: I am very grateful. Thirdly, to address the point about extremism, we can get around that in any system of proportional representation—as they do in Germany, where they know those dangers all too well—by having a threshold that parties must exceed in order to be able to stand in an election. That is all I wanted to say; I am grateful for your indulgence, Mr Evans.

5.26 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans.

I am a Lib Dem partly because I believe that we need extraordinary change in our political system. I am delighted by the damascene conversion that has happened, but as hon. Members have eloquently said, when someone is under the umbrella of a party that helps to deliver the safe seats, it is all too easy for them to forget that they are not necessarily representing everyone in the constituency. While I appreciate what some have said about ensuring that they as MPs are there for everyone, I think we all know of Members of this House who do not always behave that way, and who, because they are in a safe seat, choose instead to campaign to and speak to only the part of their electorate that they feel will deliver them the next election. Whatever proportional system we end up delivering, it must fundamentally challenge that situation.

I say that having won a marginal constituency at the last snap general election. We were nearly 10,000 votes behind the Conservatives in Oxford West and Abingdon. I will be perfectly honest: I did not think I would win. When I found out the election was happening, I called up a future employer, with whom I had taken a job as a deputy head—it was my first deputy headship, and I was really excited—and said, “If you want to make some money, put a bet against me. There’s no way I can make that up in one election.” I am sorry to say that they lost money, but I will go to their prize-giving in a few weeks’ time, so that is the quid pro quo.

[Layla Moran]

The question is how we did it in Oxford West and Abingdon. Anyone who has ever campaigned will have seen Lib Dem election leaflets saying, “X can’t win here,” and that is what we did in my constituency. The Labour party vote came over. I was in a pub the other day, having a pint with some of the chaps who are often there, and one said, “I’m a member of the Labour party, and I can’t tell you I voted for you, because I’d get thrown out of the party.” He should not have had to make that confession. He should not have to hide that from people. The fact is that we won because of a broad church of voters. I appreciate and understand that I was not his top choice, but he was happy to say, “I’m proud to have voted for you anyway.” We had to get to the point where the Green party stood down in Oxford West and Abingdon to send that message, so that we could win. Yes, we made up that difference. I live in a marginal constituency, and am I happy about that.

What kind of system would I want? I advocate something like alternative vote plus. A lot of work was done on this a long time ago. We need a root-and-branch reform of the whole way that we do politics. That should cover not just proportional systems, but overseas electors and votes at 16. We need a proper look at the entire convention on how we do politics in this country—not just the x in the box, but everything, including how we campaign and how we represent people. That is why we need a more proportional system.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Order.

5.30 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I will give two examples of proportional representation working and helping democracy in this country. As my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) pointed out, I served in the Scottish Parliament. Both before and after I was a Member of the Scottish Parliament, I was a highland councillor. When I was first a highland councillor, I was a single member for a ward, and I had the ward discretionary fund—a pot of £40k or £50k—which I could dish out to good causes in my ward without really checking with anyone at all. It was like having the power of a medieval prince.

When I became a councillor again after having been in the Scottish Parliament, there was this thing called the single transferable vote, and I had to share the ward with two other members. Oh, horror! How difficult! My favourite charities did not necessarily get the money I wanted to give them; I had to argue it out with the other two members of the ward. To me, that is an improvement in democracy and in the representation of the people. I was more accountable under the wider PR system than before. That was my experience of local government.

In between those times, I was an MSP. I was an additional Member, elected under PR. I will give two slightly off-the-wall reasons why that system is good. First, anyone who knows about Scotland, and anyone who was in this place long enough ago, will remember one Margo MacDonald. She graced Westminster and Holyrood. She was a member of the Scottish National party, and also went independent. She was elected in Edinburgh through her own merits and her own character. Holyrood would have been a much poorer place without Margo.

I have waited a long time to put that on the record. She was a splendid lady, and I feel greatly enriched to have known her.

Secondly—I will shut up in a second, to make it easier for you, Mr Evans—the 1997 election had a result that I am sure gratified many people, including people like me in Scotland, but did not gratify others: the Conservative party got precisely no seats north of the border. It was wiped out. That was bad news for those now on the Government Benches. However, in 1999, under PR, the Conservatives came back with 18 seats in Holyrood, which was a bit of a shock to me and others.

I will continue to argue to my dying day that although I do not approve of the good fortunes of the Conservative party—no offence to the Minister—PR rescued the Tories in Scotland, and that, for those who believe in plural democracy and the right of different sections of society to be heard, was a good thing. At the end of the day, that will be one of my concluding and strongest arguments as to why PR worked: I did not like the result, but it was good for democracy in Scotland that the Tories came back.

5.33 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. Before I start, on behalf of the Scottish National party, I offer my warmest congratulations to English colleagues here, and wish them a happy St George’s day.

All of us in this room consider ourselves democrats, although we may have different interpretations of what that means. For me, two things stand out. First, the elected Parliament ought to, in the broadest possible terms, represent the people who take part in elections to it. Secondly, the country ought to be governed with the consent of a majority of its citizens. By any test, the current first-past-the-post system fails palpably on both counts.

I say that because I note that others who have spoken are from minority parties in the Chamber. They rightly feel aggrieved because they have been punished and penalised by the first-past-the-post system and are under-represented in the Chamber. I say that the system is wrong on behalf of a party that has probably been, in recent years, the greatest beneficiary of the distortions of first past the post. The hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) referenced the 2017 general election results, but remember what happened in 2015 when, with 50% of the vote, the SNP took 95% of the available seats in Scotland. I cannot defend that as a democratic system. My only defence is that we did not make the rules, and that we were playing by the rules that we were given. However, that is clearly not a sustainable system.

There are other drawbacks, as people have mentioned. First, many people living in a seat that might change hands—a swing seat—feel under a great deal of pressure to vote tactically, which means that they compromise their vote. They do not vote for the person or party who they think represents them, but for somebody who they agree with slightly more than the person they are trying to keep out. Those people do not, under this system, have the opportunity or right to express their political aspirations in an election. Of course, it is even worse in safe seats, where people feel that their vote is simply wasted—that there is no point to it. They could go out and vote for a lifetime—some do—and the party that they vote for will never represent them in this Parliament.

All that would be bad enough, but it cannot go on, because as more people see that this is not the natural order of things, and that people elsewhere in the world do things differently, it begins to fuel great disillusionment with our entire political process. In some parts, that results in people being apathetic and not taking part in the system. However, much more worrying is the building resentment that people feel about the futility of the system and the way in which it denies their democratic expression. That is why it is urgent that we begin to review, and to consider change.

I am pleased to note that, in comparison with many constitutional debates in Westminster Hall, this is a relatively well-attended discussion. It is also a thoughtful discussion, in that colleagues—I note, in particular, from the two major parties—have spoken about the need to consider change, and have said that things cannot continue as they are. Before we debate the practicalities of what system might replace the current one, we have to agree on the principles. I always find it strange that when we state the principle that a party's representatives in Parliament ought to be in proportion to the votes cast for that party in the election, nobody disagrees; they tend to say that it is a noble idea, but that for various practical reasons, it will never work, so we should never bother doing it. If we believe that that principle is worth defending, it is incumbent on all of us, cross party, to begin at least looking at whether we could change the system in order to express that principle in our constitutional arrangements. I think that we could.

Some arguments about practicalities, when examined, are not the great hurdles that people pretend. People talk about a break in the constituency link, for example. There are proportional systems that explicitly maintain a direct link between a constituency and its representative. Indeed, we have that system—the additional member system—for the Scottish Parliament, and it works. One representative in the Scottish Parliament for the area where I live is Kezia Dugdale, an MSP for the Labour party. She is elected on a Lothian-wide list along with seven other people, but she has no hesitation in describing herself as the MP for Edinburgh, and in popping up everywhere, trying to represent and advocate on behalf of the city. That works with other parties as well. As the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) said, STV was a lifeline for the Scottish Conservative party, allowing it representation that it would not otherwise have had.

The argument is put about that PR leads to unstable government, but the last few years have shown that the current system does not do very well in that regard either.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I will be very brief, Mr Evans. The hon. Gentleman and I have long been on the same side on this issue, and I agree that it is heartening to see support growing for the case for reform. However, it is not only the last few years that have shown the fallacy of the strong government argument for first past the post. If we dip into history, there is the 1970s and the Lib-Lab pact, or the relationship between Sir John Major's Government and the Ulster Unionist party. It has not been the case that first past the post has delivered stable Governments for the UK. Where it has been stable, it has not always been good government, when that majority has been artificially put in place.

Tommy Sheppard: The hon. Gentleman makes the point well, and I agree with him.

First past the post does not allow for political dialogue and discussion, but keeps it under wraps and prevents it. Compromises are made behind closed doors within major parties and are not expressed in public debate. That seems very unhealthy for our democracy. It is also unsustainable, given the 24-hour news cycle; people need only pick up their phone to find out what is happening in every aspect of their life, in great detail. Those arrangements might have been satisfactory for the 19th century, but they certainly are not for the 21st century. I think they have to change.

Let us get the political debate out in the open; that is what a proportional system would allow. There would be more parties, and they would have to form alliances in order to govern, but it would be transparent. People would see what deals were being made and what policies were being jettisoned in order to allow others to come through.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tommy Sheppard: I will not, because I have only two minutes left.

Others have remarked that all these practical obstacles to PR suggest that nobody has ever tried it, but the truth is that we have proportional representation systems—not just in Scotland, but in Wales, in Northern Ireland and in this city, for the London Assembly. It does not lead to the catastrophe that many suggest; indeed, it works fairly well.

I want to suggest what we can do. I welcome this debate. I am sure that the Minister will take a good stab at defending the Government's position, but I know what he will say, if I am honest. I am more interested in what the Opposition spokesperson will say. All the opposition parties in this Parliament of minorities need to begin a dialogue among themselves, because if the Government will not offer change, we need to prepare to see what a new election and a new Parliament might do. That dialogue needs to happen. In that regard, I commend the work of Make Votes Matter, which has begun to focus on not just particular systems, but the guiding principles behind the systems, so that we design a system to achieve our objectives. I hope that the Labour party will join the other minority parties in this Chamber in advocating those principles.

5.45 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), to his new position, and wish the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) all the best on her maternity leave. I am sure that he will ably cover her post.

Before addressing proportional representation, I want to highlight the feeling, which has come up in the debate, that the current political system is in need of change. The Minister will be getting to grips with the brief, but he will be well aware that our electoral laws are out of date and need looking at as a matter of urgency. Millions of people are missing from the electoral roll, dark money is influencing politics and public trust is at an all-time low.

[Cat Smith]

This debate is about proportional representation. It is important to acknowledge that, as with every electoral system, there are pros and cons to first past the post. Simplicity is the key benefit of first past the post, because it gives the electorate one vote for the candidate or party they support. The other great benefit is the constituency link. As Member of Parliament for Lancaster and Fleetwood, when I go out and speak to my constituents, as I did over Easter, many of them greet me by name—they know me. I do not think they have the same relationship with their MEPs, whom they probably could not name and would not recognise if they fell over them in the queue for the bus.

I have outlined the advantages, but there are cons to first past the post, which have been outlined by many speakers in this debate. The current voting system has been under growing scrutiny. A traditional argument in favour of first past the post was that it had a history of returning stable single-party Governments. That has been well and truly debunked since 2010. Analysis of the 2017 general election also demonstrates the limitations of our voting system. That election saw a rise in marginal seats: 11 seats were won by fewer than 100 votes. Analysis by the Electoral Reform Society found that less than 0.0017% of voters choosing differently would have given the Conservative party a majority.

Moving on to proportional voting systems, proportional representation has a number of good arguments in its favour. It is right for Parliament to reflect the political will of the people—who would not argue that a country should have a Parliament that looks like the politics of its people. I do not think that anyone can disagree with that principle. A proportional voting system would give voters the opportunity to vote for people they believe in, rather than voting tactically to stop the party that they like least.

I am sure that every political party taking part in this debate has at some point or another said to a voter, “Please support me, because if you don’t support me the other guy will get in.” As well as smaller parties standing aside in some seats at the last general election, the Electoral Reform Society estimates that 6.5 million people voted tactically. As I said, they were voting for parties that were not necessarily their first choice in order to stop the party that they perceived to be more likely to win in their area.

PR is of course well established in the UK. There are forms of it in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and here in London, for the Assembly elections. They all use proportional systems, which means that most voters in this country at some point have used more than one electoral system. In Scotland, where STV is used in local government elections, voters have demonstrated that they are capable of using more than one system and more complex systems than first past the post. Finally, all the UK-based proportional systems—except for the closed lists used in European elections—have the strong constituency basis that is incredibly important for any voting system.

Personally, I am on the record supporting PR. However, a major constitutional change such as this must have the support of the public. For example, in the 2011 AV referendum, to which I am sure the Minister will refer in his speech, 32% of voters supported AV, but the

vast majority rejected it. AV is not, however, a form of proportional representation, and public opinion may well have changed since then. What has not changed is that our democracy is still fundamentally broken. I do not believe that changing our voting system alone is some magic wand that will fix the problems or mend the disconnect felt by so many voters in this country.

Millions of people across the UK feel that politics does not work for them, and it is not hard to see why. Communities are often affected by decisions over which they have no say or, even when they think they have a say, a Government can come in to override it, as in Lancashire in the case of fracking. Many people feel that what goes on in Westminster is a world away from the reality of their lives. Research published by the Hansard Society found that the UK public are increasingly disenchanted with the system of governing.

To move on to Labour’s position, Labour is committed to root-and-branch transformation of the archaic political structures and cultures of this country which work for the few and not the many. At the last general election, our manifesto committed to establishing a constitutional convention to examine and advise on reforming the way in which Britain works at a fundamental level. We will consult on the convention’s forms and terms of reference, and invite recommendations on extending democracy. The convention will bring together individuals and organisations from across civil society, and will act as the driving force behind our democratic agenda.

As well as looking at different voting systems, the convention will look at extending democracy locally, regionally and nationally, and will consider the option of a more federalised country. Of course, a constitutional convention could look at other issues to do with democratic accountability, including whether MPs who change parties and cross the Floor should face by-elections. This is about where power and sovereignty lie in politics, in the economy and in the justice system, as well as in our communities. The convention will build a popular mandate for the deep-seated political change that this country needs.

As I said, it is important that we look at different voting systems as part of a wider package of constitutional and electoral reforms, to address the growing democratic deficit across Britain. That is the change that we must see.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): In welcoming the Minister to his place, I ask him to leave at least one minute for the proposer, Angela Smith.

5.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Kevin Foster): Thank you, Mr Evans. I will make sure to follow your guidance and leave a minute at the end. I thank hon. Members, particularly the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) and the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), for their warm wishes for my first debate in this role.

The Government welcome this debate and the opportunity to address the important issues that have been raised by hon. Members, as well as the online engagement around the debate. Unsurprisingly, hon. Members have made their arguments eloquently, but given the time, I will not have a chance to analyse each individual point—not least given the myriad systems

that have been suggested, which could take some time to explain. Ultimately, how we select our representatives in Parliament is of fundamental importance and hon. Members rightly have strong views. The voting system used by voters is central to that concern and goes to the heart of our democracy. The Government are committed to ensuring that the laws governing our elections are clear and accessible, and generate the greatest degree of confidence in the outcome of elections.

Under the first-past-the-post system, electors select their preferred candidate for their constituency. The candidate with the largest number of votes wins and the party with the largest number of elected candidates may form the Government, if they achieve the confidence of the House.

Layla Moran: Does the Minister accept that people are often voting for someone who is not their preferred candidate? Under first past the post, they are voting for someone they like best and who they think can actually win, which leads to large numbers of people feeling as if they have been cheated of their first preference.

Kevin Foster: Everyone has a choice as to how they use their vote. Even under the alternative vote system, which the Liberal Democrats argued for in the referendum seven years ago, people would find themselves having to make a decision when they got to their second or third choice, and in fact, their vital choice might be the fourth or fifth one, which they did not believe would necessarily be the vital one.

People have a choice and they know the impact of their vote and how it might choose a Government. Under any voting system, people have a choice to make about how they wish to use their vote: do they wish to vote for a major party that may select and put forward the Prime Minister or for a minor party so that it can be represented in the House of Commons? I do not think that any voting system, particularly if we want to maintain the constituency link, which many hon. Members have said is important, or if we have single-Member constituencies and a Member of Parliament already secures more than 50% of the votes cast, will change the overall outcome.

The first-past-the-post system is a clear and robust way of electing Members of Parliament. It is well understood by the electorate, and they know how their representatives in Parliament are selected and the impact of their vote. Crucially, it ensures a clear link between elected representative and constituent in a manner that proportional representation systems do not. That ensures that MPs can represent the interests of their constituents when debating national issues. The Government therefore do not support proportional representation for parliamentary elections because they consider it to be more opaque and complicated without delivering the clear benefits of the first-past-the-post system.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I welcome the Minister to his place. One point that I do not think has been made is that first past the post gives a clear link between the elector and not only the individual, but the manifesto, so people can see whether that is delivered.

Kevin Foster: I agree that first past the post creates a clear link that sometimes proportional representation systems do not.

As we committed in our manifesto to retaining first past the post for parliamentary elections, we have no plans to change the voting system for elections to the House of Commons. As we have touched on, under first past the post, individual Members of Parliament represent electors in a defined constituency. The link between hon. Members and their constituents is a core feature of our parliamentary democracy.

Constituents have a distinct parliamentary representative who is directly accountable to them and can be clearly seen to represent them. The representation is less obvious when someone is elected under a proportional representation system where larger multi-Member constituencies are used. In such circumstances, smaller communities are likely to be subsumed into a larger area and there is a risk that their particular interests and concerns will not be fully taken into account.

[STEWART HOSIE *in the Chair*]

Furthermore, proportional representation systems can still result in outcomes that many deem undesirable. A party that does not win the poll, and that potentially even loses seats, can still end up forming the Government, so voters have a Government that they did not vote for. Under proportional voting systems, voters may not really know what policies they end up voting for, as the successful parties will be those best able to negotiate a deal in a coalition after an election, rather than necessarily those that secure the most support from the electorate.

Crucially, given the party of the hon. Member who secured the debate, party list systems give parties and their leaders the most control over the make-up of lists of candidates, and ultimately, who will end up in this place. As my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) said, that can result in elected representatives who are more focused on the selectorate than the electorate, compared with single-Member constituencies under first past the post.

First past the post provides for a clear and straightforward count that usually needs to be conducted only once, or repeated only if it is tight, and that produces a clear outcome on the evening. Electoral systems used to achieve a proportionally representative outcome are often more complex than the first past the post system, which makes the impact of one person's vote less clear. Systems such as the single transferable vote require ballots to be counted multiple times to allocate seats, which potentially obscures the impact of each vote on the result.

The ability of the first-past-the-post system to produce an uncomplicated and accurate count means that a result is produced more quickly, normally during the night following the poll, with an overall result early the next day. A timely, clear and secure result is in the interest of all parties and the country as a whole. Given the significant advantages of a first-past-the-post system, there would need to be compelling policy reasons for the Government to embrace a system that is less clear for voters and more complicated, and that could see someone's third, fourth or even fifth choice for their constituency being the crucial choice they make, as I have touched on.

The current closed-list voting system for European Parliament elections was first used in 1999 and the turnout at that poll was 24%. That was significantly lower than the turnout of 36.4% at the previous European

[Kevin Foster]

Parliament election held under the first-past-the-post system. Although turnouts have increased in more recent European Parliament elections, that is because they have been combined with first-past-the-post local elections taking place on the same day. It is clear that just shifting to a new voting system does not necessarily boost turnout, despite the arguments in 1999 from people who stated that the system would do that.

Jonathan Reynolds: Will the Minister give way?

Kevin Foster: I will not, given the time. I want to allow time for the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) who secured the debate.

The first-past-the-post system is well established in the United Kingdom. Consequently, elections using first past the post produce lower numbers of rejected ballot papers compared with other systems, including proportional representation systems. For those reasons, the Government support the continued use of the first-past-the-post system for the House of Commons.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Will the Minister give way?

Kevin Foster: I will not, given the time. I want to allow time for the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge who secured the debate to wind up.

In 2011, the United Kingdom conducted a referendum on whether the voting system to elect Members of Parliament should be changed from first past the post. The system on offer was the alternative vote system, which would allow electors to rank their candidates in order of preference, and if one candidate received more than half the votes, they would be elected. The point was made that it was very similar and would not affect seats where people already had more than 50% of the vote.

Electors voted overwhelmingly against changing the system. More than 13 million people—more than two-thirds of those who voted—voted in favour of retaining first past the post. It would be hard to justify ignoring the democratic verdict in the referendum, and equally hard to make a case for a further referendum on a more

radical reform such as proportional representation, when that more modest AV proposal was defeated so resoundingly.

This has been an interesting debate and I thank hon. Members for their contributions. Hon. Members from all parties have talked about the importance of ensuring popular engagement, transparency and integrity in our electoral system. I take on board the comments of the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood. There is work to be done to ensure that people feel engaged in our democratic system—that they feel they have a stake and a voice in it.

I tentatively say to hon. Members present that one of the times when people felt they had a direct say in the future of their country was when they voted in the June 2016 referendum and every vote in every part of the United Kingdom counted for exactly the same. Many feel that the way to restore and introduce trust to our electoral system is to deliver the result of that referendum.

For now, the Government have no plans to change the voting system for elections to the House of Commons. Although the debate has been of interest, the Government will focus their time on other areas to build wider democratic engagement and the faith in our democratic system that we all wish to see.

5.59 pm

Angela Smith: This has been a thoughtful and good-humoured debate, to which it is impossible to do justice in one minute. Various hon. Members have contributed and I have listened carefully to what has been said.

On the points about extremism and our electoral system, I will say just this. No electoral system can resist the power of ideas indefinitely. We can put thresholds in place, as in Germany, but in the end, nothing can stop it. With an open, honest approach, however, we can at least fight extremism at the ballot box, as my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) pointed out.

What do we do if the two major parties in a two-party system are captured by the extremists? What does the voter do then? They are left powerless in the system that we have. That risk feels more real to me now than ever in my lifetime. It is time for change, and we need to deliver it now.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Mental Health Services: Leeds

6 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered mental health services in Leeds.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie.

I requested this debate with some reluctance, because I did not want to believe that mental health services in my city—a city that I have lived in for 40 years and which I have been privileged to represent for the past 22 years—were so appalling, especially when compared with other cities and regions in this country. Sadly, however, when I met my constituent Charley Downey two months ago at a routine advice surgery, the evidence that she presented to me on behalf of her husband was so damning and shocking that I felt that there was no other option than to bring their concerns to the attention of this House and hopefully to the attention of the Government, so that appropriate action could be taken to put right a gross injustice being done to so many of my constituents, as well as those of my seven fellow Leeds MPs from across the House, and those of MPs in the broader area, such as York MPs.

The Government have acknowledged on many occasions over the past few years that mental health services across the country are under-resourced and they have promised remedial action, but one of the biggest problems is the uneven distribution of funding, as I have mentioned. The waiting list for treatment in Leeds is approximately 48 to 52 weeks, once a patient is actually put on the waiting list. However, that requires a prior diagnosis by a qualified nurse, or a “formulation”—because nurses are not permitted to make diagnoses. If a patient is suicidal, then even a few hours on a waiting list may be too much, or in the worst cases possibly fatal, but to wait for a year is simply appalling. Compare that waiting-list time with, say, that of East Lancashire, which is 12 weeks, or that of the London Borough of Hillingdon, which is six weeks, or that of Cheshire, which is nine weeks, and I am sure that the Minister will understand my concern and the deep anxiety of my constituents.

Andy Downey first attended his GP’s surgery on 8 November 2016 with serious concerns about his depression. He was given a leaflet about a service called “Improving Access to Psychological Therapies”, or IAPT, and he had a blood test, which subsequently showed that he had a folate deficiency, for which vitamin D supplements were supplied.

Ten months later, in October 2017, with his symptoms worsening and the supplements failing to help, Mr Downey attended his GP’s surgery again. A week later, after suffering a full panic attack and breathing difficulties, he was referred back to his GP, who suggested that Mr Downey refer himself to the IAPT through a website called Mindwell. The problem was that Mindwell has no mental health content or referral option to the IAPT, apart from a phone number. Andy rang that number, which went straight through to voicemail. His GP had told him that Mindwell was the only way to get a referral to the IAPT, but when Mrs Downey phoned the mental health trust—the Leeds and York Partnership NHS Foundation Trust—she was told that the GP had

given her husband the wrong advice, and the trust accepted Mrs Downey’s request for treatment as a referral. Therefore, Andy’s initial assessment meeting finally took place on 5 February 2018. Charley Downey has provided me with almost four pages of information about dates, times, meetings, appointments and lack of outcomes, all of which I can make available to the Minister, if she so wishes, or to the trust, which should already have this information.

When I first met Charley on 16 February, I was appalled not only at the way in which her husband had been treated but by the state of mental health services in Leeds, which this case seemed to typify. On 19 February, I wrote to Dr Sara Munro, chief executive of the Leeds and York Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, to express my concerns about the case of Andy Downey and to raise the issues of underfunding for mental health provision in general across the region.

I asked Dr Munro what her perspective was on the difficulty of accessing mental health care through the NHS at present and why the trust had decided to use online tools rather than face-to-face therapy, when it seemed to me—purely a layman—that mental illness is one area in which human interaction and sensitive expert clinical judgement might be essential.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): First, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman and my fellow Leeds MP for bringing this important issue to the House; we all have constituents who have suffered in a similar way to his constituent.

Recently, I visited Morley Newlands Academy in my constituency during mental health week. I, for one, think we need to tackle mental health issues at a young age. Representatives of Place2Be, a charity, were there, having come into the school to offer a variety of services. I saw the value of raising the awareness of mental health at such a young age. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need to ensure that children in schools, even primary schools, receive the support they need, and that we also support the charities involved, to ensure that they get the funding to continue their good work?

Fabian Hamilton: I thank my hon. Friend—if I may call her that—and my colleague from Leeds for her intervention, because she makes a very important point, namely that we need to begin at the earliest possible age. It is tragic to me, and I am sure to every Member of this House, that an increasing number of young people are showing signs of depression and other mental health problems, and that is evident in our schools. The role of charities is very important, but so is the role of the national health service. Although we need to support those charities, as she rightly says, we also need to ensure that we have the resources within our NHS too.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am really grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this debate, because the Leeds and York Partnership NHS Foundation Trust lost the main contract with our clinical commissioning group as the result of a litany of failures in my constituency, including ignoring three Care Quality Commission reports, which put mental health patients in my constituency at serious risk. My question today is this: will the Minister review the licence of that trust to operate, or not, in light of the consequences of its actions and the harm it has caused?

Fabian Hamilton: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. York is a city that I know well, and of course York and Leeds are united together through the partnership trust. I will now go on to detail my own experience with the Leeds and York Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, because my experience is similar to the experience that many of her constituents have discussed. The points she makes are very valid and I would be very interested to hear what the Minister has to say in response, not only to her intervention but to what I am about to say.

The reply to my letter to Dr Sara Munro, the chief executive of the Leeds and York Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, was dated 1 March, and it was written by Samantha Marshall of the complaints team, who said she was

“sorry that you have reason to make a complaint and, as a trust, we have failed to meet your expectations.”

Bear in mind that I had written on behalf of my constituent and that I had raised other issues. Ms Marshall went on to say that the trust has had no contact with Mr Downey since he was referred to the IAPT, which is provided by Leeds Community Healthcare, and that she would forward my letter to LCH if I wished. However, no reference was made to any of the other more general questions that I had asked Dr Munro, questions that I believe are highly pertinent to the treatment that my constituent received, and to the treatment that many of my fellow Leeds MPs’ constituents have received as a result of the severe underfunding of mental health services in our area.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend from Leeds North East is making an excellent speech. I had a similar case with one of my constituents, who visited her GP on 31 December 2018 to say that she felt suicidal. She was asked to go home and told that the crisis team would contact her. The crisis team did not contact her. Four hours later, she returned to her GP and then had to go by ambulance to Jimmy’s—St. James’s University Hospital. She waited in accident and emergency for 20 hours. Eventually, the acute liaison team gave her a leaflet. That was the level of intervention that she experienced. It was not until my office intervened with the IAPT that she got a referral, and by then she had already made another suicide attempt. That is how the services in Leeds were delivered in the case of my constituent.

Fabian Hamilton: I thank my hon. Friend, whose constituency is next door to mine. As I suspected when I requested this debate, there are cases all over the city of Leeds—probably all over the country, but certainly in the Leeds and York area—that highlight the inadequacy of mental health services and the maze that people have to navigate if they need them. That is a source of huge concern.

Andrea Jenkyns: A couple of years ago, I had a memorable case of a gentleman who was suffering from horrific mental issues and had attempted suicide several times. On one occasion, after he had slit his wrists, he went to A&E. There was no joint communication; his GP, who was supporting him, did not even know about the incident. Does the hon. Gentleman think we need to ensure that the NHS systems talk to each other a lot better and that there is a much more joined-up approach?

Fabian Hamilton: Yes. I thank the hon. Lady for her point. That is one of the problems: it is a maze. If people are told to refer themselves through a website, which can then refer them to another organisation that is supposed to allow them to make an appointment, and they then leave a message on voicemail and it is never responded to, that is shocking in itself. The example my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) gave of the ambulance and the waiting in A&E, and then the lack of credible resources and assistance from the mental health services, highlights the scale of the problem.

After the date for this debate was published, I was contacted by Healthwatch England, which told me that Healthwatch Leeds was about to publish a report on mental health in Leeds and that it would be happy for me to use some of the report’s data and conclusions in the debate. Unfortunately, owing to unforeseen circumstances, the publication of the report has been delayed, but to show that Andy Downey’s is not an isolated case, here is a quote from one of the 697 people in Leeds—I do not know his or her name—who gave evidence for the report during the first three months of 2019:

“I do not know what is wrong with the entire Trust. I had waited since February for a referral to the CMHT”—

the community mental health team—

“I was seen in August. I was discharged, told to talk to IAPT. IAPT has its own waiting lists. As a result of not being able to prove I accepted, I lost everything. I DID NOT REFUSE TREATMENT!! NONE WAS OFFERED!! Today I phoned the crisis team in tears, and they said ‘contact your GP in the morning’. I have no job, I have no money, I went through over 6 months waiting for a simple appointment. I am struggling, and the best the crisis team can do is say ‘contact your GP’. My GP referred me to the CMHT because I was suicidal. Can’t believe the crisis team said ‘tell your GP’. I have been telling my GP, who couldn’t handle it, so he sought help. Today I found out I lost my job, and I will soon be homeless, because my home is provided by my employer. I was suicidal and depressed before today... can’t the crisis team show some empathy and realise some things are a tipping point?”

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I am not a Leeds Member, but what the hon. Gentleman has highlighted in that moving passage is the need for GP training in this area, right across the country. Is it not time that we got that training right?

Fabian Hamilton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that important intervention. He is absolutely right. It is clear from what I, and all of us, have seen that all GPs need far better training in how to deal with mental health issues.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): It seems extraordinary that it is not compulsory for GPs to be trained in mental health. That is something that the Royal College of General Practitioners would like to change and something I hope the Minister will be able to pick up and work on. On the capacity in Yorkshire and the Humber, general and adult psychiatry at ST4 in 2017 had 20 places for trainee psychiatrists, only six of which were filled, and for dual general adult and older adult there were two places, none of which were filled. How much does the hon. Gentleman believe that a lack of staff resources contributes towards the poor care available to his constituent?

Fabian Hamilton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that important point. I know that staff—competent and qualified staff—are needed to fulfil the expectations and the demands, but I do not know why that is. Is it under-funding or under-resourcing, or simply that there are not enough trained personnel available to fill the posts? Or is it that the level of training, competence and experience is not sufficient for the demands of the posts? That is something we will have to explore and I hope the Minister will also make it one of her priorities.

The quote I read out is a truly damning condemnation of the trust, not in my words, but in the words of someone crying out for help and cruelly being denied it, through, I believe, a mixture of incompetence, complacency, under-funding and—I am reluctant to say this—a bit of callousness too. Lives are being put at risk by the crisis and the question I would ask above every other is: why is Leeds so inadequate and so poorly funded compared with many other parts of England?

Let me come back to my constituent, Andy Downey. Andy was placed on the waiting list for mental health treatment in April 2018, with an estimated date for his first appointment in November or December of that year. That was subsequently extended to March 2019. However, in the meantime he experienced an unrelated physical health issue, in November 2018, and was sent to a private hospital—Spire Leeds Hospital in Roundhay—to see a surgeon, as they were contracting NHS services. That appointment was in December last year. He was told that he needed exploratory surgery to resolve the issue, which would be scheduled “after Christmas”. When no update had been received by January 2019, Charley chased the matter, only to be told that the hospital had tried to call but “hadn’t got through”. However, no calls or messages had been received by the Downeys. The surgery was subsequently scheduled for May 2019—next month. Because Andy will apparently not be able to attend mental health treatment while waiting for surgery—I am not sure why—his mental health treatment has been cancelled and he has been placed back on the bottom of the waiting list to start the whole process again. The current waiting list is 10 months.

Let me summarise Andy Downey’s case, for the Minister’s benefit—I am sorry, I am eating into her time: it took longer than a year, and multiple GP appointments, just to get a mental health referral, and then only after an ambulance attended. Referral for assessment took four months. From assessment to recommending prescription for antidepressants to receiving a prescription took an additional two months. The waiting list from decision on treatment to first treatment session took 49 weeks. It took 18 months from first contact to get an antidepressant prescription. It took 29 months from first contact to initial treatment appointment. It then took another 10 to 11 months to restart treatment because of the failure of a private company to schedule unrelated surgery. I am sure that the Minister will agree that that is totally unacceptable. Mental health services are often as urgent and necessary as physical health treatment, yet they are treated almost as a Cinderella service. The fragmentation and under-resourcing of mental health services, especially in Leeds, means that lives are often at risk.

We have had several debates in the House over the past few years about depression and the effect that it can have on the individual and everyone who cares about that person, with a few brave MPs telling the House and

the public what they have suffered, but unless we make our mental health a priority, we will have more and more cases like that of Andy Downey and his wife Charley—who is present here today, and has had to carry the burden of incompetent and inadequate public services on her shoulders. Although we live in one of the richest societies in the world, we cannot, it seems, organise and fund the very services that will help to bring so many people afflicted with mental illness and depression back into mainstream society. It is a condemnation of us all that couples such as the Downeys have had to bring their shocking experience into the public domain through their Member of Parliament. I salute their courage, but feel angry on their behalf.

Finally, will the Minister answer these questions or, if she is unable to do so, will she write to me after the debate? First, what mechanism do the Government have to ensure that mental health services are delivered equally across the country? Secondly, does the Minister really believe that the private sector has a beneficial role in delivering mental health services? Thirdly, will she intervene by raising with the Leeds and York Partnership NHS Foundation Trust the issues that I have drawn to her attention in this debate? I hope, for the benefit of the Downeys and on behalf of the many thousands like them across our city, that mental health services can be given the priority and the resources they need in order to ensure a healthier and better society for us all.

6.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I thank the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) for the passionate and articulate speech he has made on behalf of his constituents.

I often get frustrated by debates about the NHS, which are all about inputs—how much money is being spent, or what the size of the workforce is—and not enough about the direct patient experience and whether what we have is delivering the right outcomes. The story that the hon. Gentleman has shared illustrates that, for a lot of people experiencing mental ill health, their journey towards getting care is not always optimal. That is for a whole host of reasons, including historical issues regarding process and how people interact with their services. I will go away and take a deeper look at what he has highlighted, because it is a very good example of how things can go wrong.

As I say, the issue is not just about money, because we have made money available to all clinical commissioning groups. The hon. Gentleman has asked why, when we are making money available at an increased rate across the board, mental health services are so much worse in Leeds than elsewhere. As is so often the case with these things, a lot of it is about leadership. One issue that has been specifically raised with me is that often, the person responsible for commissioning mental health services within a CCG is not as senior as others. They are not as experienced, and that can cause weaknesses in commissioning.

It is important that we take action centrally to make sure that we deliver services more consistently, and I expect that to be achieved through the Care Quality Commission. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) raised specific concerns about her

[Jackie Doyle-Price]

local trust. The CQC's inspection report last year said that the trust requires improvement, so I fully expect it to work collaboratively with the CQC to take the steps that it is advised to take, in order to improve its performance when providing care. That CQC scrutiny will continue until the relevant improvement in performance is delivered.

NHS England also demands that CCGs achieve the mental health investment standard. Under that criterion, CCGs are bound to spend more of the additional money they receive on mental health services than their overall increase in budget. We expect NHS England to take direct action to secure that. However, that is not the whole story, because it depends on what CCGs are commissioning.

One of the messages that I have been keen to give CCGs is that delivering good outcomes for people suffering from mental ill health is not just about clinical services; the voluntary sector can play a big role. I have challenged CCGs to use some of their budgets to commission services directly from the voluntary sector. When someone is suffering a mental health crisis, they need help to navigate the system. In the example that the hon. Member for Leeds North East shared, that help was clearly not forthcoming from the GP.

Having someone with an understanding of mental health who can help a person suffering a crisis navigate through the system is clearly beneficial and, frankly, is good value for money. We should not spend all our NHS budgets on clinical staff when that additional support can deliver so much. In the case that the hon. Gentleman outlined, the GP did not do as much as he could have done, so we perhaps need to consider what else we can do to make sure that GPs understand that system. Again, the voluntary sector has a role to play.

My hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) mentioned having more mental health education in schools, which is an issue that we are taking forward. She specifically mentioned Place2Be, which is a good example of how a third-sector organisation can work with the NHS to deliver the right outcomes. We are in the process of rolling out a whole new workforce in our schools to do exactly as my hon. Friend has challenged us to do.

On people who have attempted suicide, I readily concede that patients in such circumstances have not had a joined-up service between their GPs and their primary care providers. However, through the liaison psychiatry teams that we are rolling out in A&E, we intend to make sure that that wrap-around care is provided more readily.

Dr Poulter: Will the Minister give way?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I will, although I was just about to come to my hon. Friend's point.

Dr Poulter: Suicides are very unpredictable, and a lot of people who attempt to take their own life were not previously known to services—whether their GP or psychiatric services. The problem with mental health services in Leeds and elsewhere is that community services have been completely hollowed out by funding cuts over many years. Unless we invest in community services to stop people ending up in crisis in the first place, we are not going to solve the problem of suicide or deliberate self-harm, or provide help to those who really need it. I hope that the Government are going to get a grip on that problem and push it through NHS England and CCGs.

Jackie Doyle-Price: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. When we try to deliver a transformational step change in the level of service, one of the problems is that we end up raising expectations quicker than we can deliver on them, because we need a whole workforce that is able to deliver. I note my hon. Friend's points about the number of people applying for psychiatric posts; we need to do much more to encourage people. We have spent a lot of time raising awareness of mental health and put a huge amount of investment into psychological therapies. However, at the heart of the forward plan for the next 10 years is a recognition that we need much more service available in the community, and much more help for people with severe mental ill health. I hope that my hon. Friend is reassured by that.

As I have limited time, I will follow up in writing on the other points made by the hon. Member for Leeds North East. As I said, we have made money available in Leeds, but when we look through the prism of someone who needs help and whose journey in getting that care is less than optimal, we clearly need to consider what is going wrong with that care pathway. If someone is vulnerable and needs help, and perhaps does not have a good understanding of mental health or has no experience of it, the whole process is very confusing and distressing.

How we navigate people through the NHS can often feel very inhuman—it is very reliant on process. The hon. Gentleman gave an example of how people are sent online to register, which feels a bit uncomfortable. We need to make sure that we take every opportunity to ensure that the patient is at the heart of this process and that their experience is pleasant, at a time when they are going through great distress. To say, "Here you are: go to this website—you're on your own, so see you later," is not a good start for anyone looking for help.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Leeds North East for having brought this case to my attention, and I pay tribute to Mr and Mrs Downey for sharing their story, because doing so is incredibly difficult. I will look at the specific points that the hon. Gentleman has raised and come back to him.

6.29 pm

Question put and agreed to.

Plastics Recycling

6.29 pm

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I beg to move,
That this House has considered plastics recycling.

I am grateful for the opportunity to lead an environmental debate after an environmental weekend. I was lucky enough to be part of the Opposition leaders' meeting with Greta Thunberg this morning, which reminded us all that there is a world beyond Brexit.

I want to narrow the discussion to the issue of plastics recycling. I know it is well-trodden territory in many ways. In the past 20 years, a whole body of British legislation and policy has been built on the waste directive. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has four consultations in varying stages of completion. We will no doubt touch on some of those issues. There is also a great deal of very good documentation, including the excellent paper from the Library on plastic waste.

I acknowledge from the outset that the issue is superficially simple, but actually extremely complex. There are many different kinds of plastic, each with different approaches with different costs and benefits. There are many useful and necessary applications. For example, there is an enormous distinction between macroplastics and microplastics. The macroplastics that we talk about in public debate include plastic bottles. Microplastics are built into such things as our clothing and the wear of tyres, and may have even bigger environmental impacts.

I approach the subject from three different directions. First, like many Members, I have been lobbied, through vast numbers of letters, by local schoolchildren about the issues to do with plastics in the ocean. They asked me to raise the issue in Parliament, which I am now doing. In many cases, they were highly motivated by seeing the David Attenborough series, "The Blue Planet". Those arguments have been well rehearsed and I do not need to develop them.

In researching for today, I found some of the facts—perhaps we should call them factoids—surrounding the subject very striking. One was that while plastics are generally very light and buoyant, we are heading to a situation where the weight of plastics in the ocean will soon exceed the total weight of fish. Even more strikingly—it is authoritative, because it came out of a Government press release—every year, the ingestion of plastics by fish and entanglement result in the loss of a million seabirds and 100,000 sea mammals. That is extraordinary. Children have every reason to be very exercised.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Would the right hon. Gentleman agree—it is 25 years this year since I started the environmental organisation, the Socialist Environment and Resources Association—that we consistently have to go right back to the manufacture of plastics? I beg him to meet Professor Steve Evans at the institute for sustainable manufacture at Cambridge University. Changing what we manufacture is at the heart of a long-term resolution.

Sir Vince Cable: I would be delighted to meet the professor, if he is happy to meet me. The hon. Gentleman is right that we are often looking at the wrong end of the process. We should be looking at the origins.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I commend the right hon. Gentleman on his speech thus far. Picking up on that point on manufacturing, will he join me in congratulating Capital Valley Plastics in my constituency? It uses waste plastic as the raw material for its final product. That raw material would otherwise end up in landfill or the oceans.

Sir Vince Cable: The hon. Gentleman is right that that is a constructive response to the problem. If more manufacturers were like his, the economy in plastics would be in a much healthier state. I will come in a moment to some of the reasons why that company is one of the relatively few that are succeeding. It is extremely important none the less.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the packaging manufacturing industry. We have already spoken about manufacturing. Manufacturers take an entirely responsible attitude to plastic; it is people putting plastic in the wrong place that gives rise to the problem. The industry has a target of having zero to landfill by 2030, and has made great steps to get to 78% now. Will the right hon. Gentleman acknowledge the efforts that the industry is making to do the right thing and to avoid waste getting into the wrong place?

Sir Vince Cable: I acknowledge the will of the industry, but there is a lot of bad practice and a lot of products that are unnecessary and are produced in ways that do not help. I fully acknowledge that a lot of manufacturers are responsible, and I am sure they are the people with whom the hon. Gentleman is engaging.

The second direction from which I am approaching this matter is in relation to the global warming controversy, which we have been debating over the weekend. Plastics have a somewhat ambiguous role here. They save on air miles and other forms of transport because they are relatively light materials—I am sure the hon. Gentleman's manufacturers would make that point—but they are also hydrocarbons, so their manufacture and disposal add to global warming gases.

When looking at the material, I found little clarity about the net effect. There is speculation that in 2050, which is the end of our national statutory period for targets, we could have between 15% and 30% of the carbon allowance dedicated to plastic use. I do not know what the answer is. It would be helpful if DEFRA and the Minister commissioned a study, or brought together the studies that have been done, on the impact of plastics on global warming, because the area is ambiguous.

The third reason I secured this debate is that this is the time of year when I, like other colleagues, go to visit other constituencies in the context of local elections. This year I have noticed a particular interest in environmental issues and recycling in local elections. Councils are rightly trying to up their game and avoid the penalties associated with waste disposal.

The situation in my borough brings out some of the dilemmas. It is effective in recycling: it recycles 95% of bottles, cardboard, paper and cans, but it recycles only 50% of plastics. There are some inherent problems, such as food contamination, which clogs up machinery, is very bad for the people who have to do the picking and attracts vermin. Many members of the public do not

[*Sir Vince Cable*]

seem to appreciate that it is difficult to deal with. In the case of many plastics—this goes back to an earlier intervention—the manufacturers do not appear to appreciate that, for technical reasons in the manufacture, their product is non-recyclable. A little example is the devices we use for cleaning fluid: the bottles can be recycled, but the gadgets at the top to squeeze out the fluid cannot. The black plastics used in a lot of carry-out food cannot be recycled. Most people are not aware of that, and there is clearly a major public education task involved. Perhaps the Government should be focusing rather more on that.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): When I have gone around talking to various councils, one thing that has come back—notwithstanding what has been said in the debate—is that there need to be changes to packaging waste regulations. Does the right hon. Gentleman have an idea of what those changes might be? As my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) said, it is not about the good manufacturers, but the bad manufacturers and how we deal with them.

Sir Vince Cable: For a start, it would help if we had a properly, clearly defined hierarchy of plastic products. Some are clearly necessary, highly desirable and beneficial, while others are utterly trivial, wasteful and costly to the environment. If that hierarchy was clearly established by scientific inquiry and promoted by Government, that would be helpful to local authorities.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept the simple economic fact that if the cost and price of plastic were higher, less would be consumed and produced? It is therefore incumbent on the Government to introduce a tax system on plastic that differentiates between less recyclable versus more recyclable plastics, bans the worst and taxes the less bad—or taxes them all—so that people move to more cost-effective, sustainable alternatives.

Sir Vince Cable: That is right; it is basic market principles allied to the environment. The Government announced in last year's Budget that they would proceed with that. There is a consultation, which we will no doubt hear more about from the Minister.

Mr Sheerman: Before the right hon. Gentleman moves on from that very good answer to that very good suggestion, may I suggest that real waste experts—people who know about plastics and waste—say, “Make waste valuable and it will be recycled.” If there is no money and no reward for picking it up and recycling it, we are on to a loser. Greta Thunberg wants action now. Can we not make waste valuable quickly?

Sir Vince Cable: That is correct, but with one qualification: it also makes the export of waste valuable. I will come back to the particular problem associated with that in a moment.

In the short time that I have, I will put three specific issues to the Minister. The first concerns data, which has already been raised by the Environmental Audit Committee. There are vast disparities in the numbers that make it very difficult to make sense of what is happening.

To cite a few examples, I think the official figures are that 1.5 million tonnes of plastic waste is generated every year in the UK. The World Wildlife Fund estimates that it is about 5 million tonnes, and Economia, which does consultancy in this area, estimates that it is about 3 million to 4 million tonnes. Perhaps they are using different definitions, but we need clarity, because at the moment there is wild variation.

That also applies to what is being achieved in terms of recycling and waste disposal. I understand that the official figures are that 91% of waste is either recycled or recovered in other ways—the definition of recovery includes incineration and export—and only 9% goes to landfill. However, again, the World Wildlife Fund has wildly different numbers. It suggests that 48% goes to landfill, 20% to 30% is recycled, and 22% is used as an energy source. I do not know why there is that difference. Again, it may be a definitional question, but some clear and unambiguous statement from the Government about the position would be very helpful.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I recently visited Clean Tech in Lincolnshire, which is the largest recycler of PET—polyethylene terephthalate—in the UK. Clean Tech's representatives showed me their bales of plastic, inside which they find such things as bowling balls and car engines. They showed me the bales of plastic in France, and they were clean. They all said that when they go to buy the plastic, they are often outbid, and the plastic is then exported. We need to clean up our plastic, and then ban the export of plastic waste. Clean Tech said that it could recycle every piece of PET in the UK, but not at the moment, because the system is broken. Should we not ban the export of plastic?

Sir Vince Cable: That is exactly the issue that I am getting on to. As it happens, I think I visited the hon. Gentleman's waste plant when I was Secretary of State, so I have some recollection of it. It was a progressive development, but it has the anomalies that he describes.

My second question relates directly to that intervention; it is about the role of exports. We have somewhat flattering statistics that suggest that Britain is meeting, and indeed exceeding, the European waste objective—I believe that 48% is recycled. The definition of recycling does not equate to reprocessing. There are vast differences, and according to the National Audit Office, half of all products that are described as recycled are exported. Quite apart from the question that one might raise about the quality of the treatment in the countries to which such products are exported, there is a serious problem about what we are doing in this country, and in particular how we will respond to the closing of doors in China.

I think China now bans waste imports, and I believe that Malaysia has indicated that it is doing the same. If that is increasingly the pattern in the more developed of the emerging economies in Asia, where will this stuff go? Are we looking for cheap and nasty disposal in Africa, or will it be stocked and dealt with here, and if so, how? To deal with it involves incentives and support for the reprocessing industry—not just recycling, but reprocessing. As the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) pointed out, that requires tax, because at the moment it is unattractive to reprocess. It is much

more profitable to export. There will have to be a tax on the finished plastic products, which will have to be fairly substantial to level the playing field.

I ask the Minister what the Government have analysed the effect of the Chinese border closure to be. What impact will that have on the recycling and reprocessing industries, and how rapid an adjustment will we have to make to the closing of international markets?

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is making a very good speech. Does the issue that he has just raised not bring a wider and more important principle into the debate? Just as with energy production, the Government are beginning to meet targets through interconnectors and looking at importing renewable energy, perhaps from Denmark and elsewhere. Part of the issue is that the Government are potentially meeting recycling targets artificially by exporting goods, when we do not know that they are being recycled in the way that we would like them to be. That is not really in the spirit of addressing our carbon reduction targets as well as I hope that all of us in the Chamber would want.

Sir Vince Cable: The hon. Gentleman is right. I do not think that the Government are necessarily being disingenuous; it just happens to be that the way that recycling is treated has not traditionally distinguished between domestic processing and export. I hope that the Minister will explain how the Government are trying to redress that.

This is a relatively short debate, so I want to give others an opportunity to speak. My final point relates to how we deal with end-use consumption. Two of the Government's consultations are about that, but I think it is useful for Members to express a view at this stage. One obvious area is the plastic bag experience. We had a massive impact—an 88% reduction in demand—as a result of quite a modest 5p charge on bags. However, at the moment it is restricted to firms with more than 250 employees. I understand the reasoning; the Government do not want to expand the regulation to single-handed shopkeepers. However, there is surely a number in between—say five employees and above—that would be much more realistic and have a significant impact.

The second potential action, which the Government again are consulting on, is introducing deposits for bottles. One of the reasons the German experience in this area is so much better than the British experience is that the Germans have, in effect, a 20p tax on plastic bottles, which can be refunded, giving people a strong incentive to reuse as well as recycle.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): As kids, we used to collect bottles. Bellshill Nisa in my area collects plastic bottles and refunds money to charities. Perhaps the Minister could take that up. Kids could pick up plastic bottles, take them back to the local shop and receive money for them.

Sir Vince Cable: I am sure that the Minister will have an answer to that, since the Government are consulting at the moment. There is a whole variety of creative initiatives one could explore, such as installing water fountains or just encouraging people to fill their bottles with tap water, but it requires a change of culture as well as an economic levy.

In considering the issues, the Government have a following wind in public opinion. A very good survey by YouGov last week suggested that about 80% of the public are comfortable with the idea of an extra charge on plastic bottles, around 70% are comfortable with the idea of extending the plastic bag tax, and a large majority are willing to pay something like £2 a week more on £100-worth of groceries. For many hard-pressed households, that is not an inconsiderable sum, and one has to be sensitive to issues of family poverty. However, the majority of public opinion seems to be reconciled to the idea that to reduce plastic usage, there will have to be additional charges.

In conclusion, let me point out that the Government have a rather modest long-term objective of working towards eliminating unnecessary plastic use—I think that is the phrase they use—by 2042. In that year, I will be waiting for my 100th birthday card from Buckingham Palace. I suggest that if that objective were brought forward to, say, 2025, we would be dealing with a more realistic timescale. I look forward to hearing what colleagues have to say.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Order. Three Back Benchers want to speak and there are three Front Benchers to respond, so I would be very grateful if the Back-Bench speakers stuck to four to five minutes each. I call Bill Grant.

6.50 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I thank the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) for securing this important debate.

As an individual, I welcome the fact that the Government have already banned plastic microbeads in personal care and cosmetic products. Previously, each time someone showered with such products, tens of thousands of microbeads began their tortuous journey into our oceans, putting our marine life at risk. I also welcome the 5p charge that we have introduced for single-use plastic bags, which has reduced their use by approximately 88%, and the deposit return scheme that the Government propose for drink bottles. Such a scheme is not a novel concept for those who, like me, are of a certain vintage. I recall earlier schemes for glass, for bottles of milk, soft drinks or beer, and for jam jars—some hon. Members present may recognise the term “jeelie jars”—which had a value at the Co-operative.

The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) made the very good point that giving waste a value helps to reduce or recycle it. That theory stands up well. It is particularly encouraging that plastic bottles of mineral water are no longer on sale here in Parliament and that, to my surprise, the House recently introduced a 25p surcharge for disposable coffee cups. Being a Scots fellow—this may apply to those from Yorkshire as well—I paid it just the once and will not be paying it again, so the system works. Both measures are very sound.

The Chancellor spoke in his spring statement about the Government's commitment to help to protect critical habitats, including by supporting the Ascension Island Council's call to designate some of its waters as a marine

[*Bill Grant*]

protected area, having proposed in the 2018 Budget a new tax on the manufacture or import of plastic packaging of less than 30% recyclable material. As in many cases, however, there is a negative side. A recent article on marine conservation by Eleanor Church highlighted the “plastic soup” of waste in the north Pacific vortex, which potentially covers an immense 1.6 million sq km and weighs an estimated 80,000 metric tonnes, which is unimaginable—it is certainly beyond my imagination. Who done it? We done it.

Mr Sheerman: I am really enjoying the hon. Gentleman’s speech. I understand that a Scottish university—I think it is Edinburgh, but perhaps the hon. Gentleman can enlighten me—is doing some really interesting research into the possibility of solar-powered autonomous vehicles patrolling the seas and oceans, sucking up the plastic, chipping it and taking it to the nearest port for recycling. I really think that that is part of the future.

Bill Grant: Like the hon. Gentleman, I am not sure which Scottish university is doing that research, but I think it may be Edinburgh. Although it has not been proven, that is an innovative idea for recovering what we have polluted our oceans with, and I certainly hope that the researchers make progress with it. I wish them well and hope that the UK Government or the Scottish Government will encourage such research, because we really need it to work and materialise.

Regrettably, I understand that a vortex also exists in the north Atlantic. Such vortexes of waste are a shame on our society and on western society, because we are responsible for that pollution. Like the hon. Member for Huddersfield, I hope we can find a way to remove it, because it is a threat to marine life and to the humans who ply and fish the waters affected.

We need to seriously address our throwaway approach to life and our frequently irrational desire to cosset our purchases in excessive packaging that may not be entirely recyclable if it is composed of polymers, particularly given how much plastic waste we produce here in the United Kingdom. Even going by the middle figure, we produce a phenomenal amount: approximately 3.7 million tonnes annually. Nevertheless, by signing up in December 2017 to the UN resolution on marine litter and microplastics, the UK Government have taken a step, albeit a small one, in the correct direction, with the aim of further combating marine litter. I also applaud the Scottish Government for publishing a strategy and a plan to address marine litter.

It is worthy of note that retailers in the United Kingdom—I nearly said “Every little helps”—are attempting to do their bit for the environment. I understand that Waitrose has pledged to stop using black plastic trays by the end of this year. That is to be welcomed, as is the fact that other retailers have indicated that they will follow suit, thereby reducing the volume of such material that, regrettably, ends up in landfill.

In looking forward, we must reflect on past generations, who rarely bought pre-packaged goods. They coped with a minimalist approach, often relying on greaseproof paper or paper bags to take home the essentials; I am sure that in those days the paper would have ended up as fuel for the home fire. Similarly, the “make do and

mend” ethos that was applied to natural fabrics in bygone eras needs to be applied again, where possible, and we need to consider carefully our constant use of synthetic textiles with the potential to shed polluting microfibres.

I note that the UK Government are hopeful that their resources and waste strategy will lead to significant improvements, including by ending confusion over recycling. We have to make recycling simpler; I note that the Ayrshire councils make a great effort to provide receptacles, but as a nation we do not seem able to select the correct one.

Mr Sheerman: People have put forward some very simplistic solutions, such as not exporting waste any more, but does the hon. Gentleman accept the view from the industry that if we stopped exporting waste, especially for reprocessing in Europe, our country would be full of plastic? We would be up to our necks in it. Much of our reprocessing takes place in Europe, and if we come out of the European Union, those exports will be banned.

Bill Grant: The hon. Gentleman makes his point very clearly, but my answer is that as a nation we have to learn to reduce our use of plastic. Let us not produce so much in the first place—and if we do produce it, it should have to be recyclable. It was mentioned earlier that China is no longer accepting waste imports, but why should we burden other nations with our waste? Let us reduce our waste and live under a managed waste system that we can cope with, without burdening other nations. We also need to make the polluter pay and generally reform the packaging producer responsibility system.

It will be interesting in due course to digest the response to the Government’s call for evidence and the findings that emanate from the recent consultations. I know that lately the Minister and the Department have taken greater steps on environmental matters than ever before, but I would be delighted to see a special focus on plastic waste. In the meantime, can the Minister confirm what support, if any, the Government are providing for the various plastic initiatives such as the waste and resources action plan, the plastics industry recycling action plan and the UK circular plastics network? We have done a great deal, but there is no doubt that a great deal more needs to be done to reduce the dependency of this nation and others on plastic.

6.57 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hosie. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) on securing this timely debate—it is just a shame that so few hon. Members are present.

The plastics debate has been illuminated to us recently in the media, not least by Sir David Attenborough, and having Greta Thunberg among us in Parliament today has brought it very much to the fore. The reality is that plastic production and use continue to rise across the UK; according to the statistics I have, it rises by about 4% each year, but we know that the data need to be more reliable. Of course, we also send much of our waste—the things we do not want to deal with—overseas for others to deal with, which is clearly not acceptable.

This year, I took part in the Tearfund plastic challenge for Lent, which brought plastic into sharp focus for me. I thought that not purchasing any plastic for 40 days and 40 nights was a good idea when I signed up, but the plastic fast hit me on my first trip to the supermarket: everywhere I turned, plastic stared back at me. I was incensed. Had I been blind to the scale of the plastic virus until now? Having previously been frustrated by how much plastic I had seen, I was now angry. As a consumer, I was given no choice but to walk out of the supermarket and rethink my life. Try it—I recommend it.

My first respite was York's Shambles Market. Here I could buy fruit and veg and put them straight into my cloth bag for life. Other outlets in York, such as Alligator and Bishy Weigh, where customers fill their recycled pots with grains and groceries, provide an alternative to the plastic wrapping used by all the supermarkets.

My diet has changed—for the better, I have to say; it is now plant based. I bake my own bread and make my own coleslaw, but I have gone without some products as a result of wanting to source them plastic-free. Dairy is hard to source, and there are others. As a consumer, my choices were removed. If I have experienced that, people across the country are experiencing it today and there is therefore an obligation on us all to address the plastic challenge.

Mr Sheerman: Does my hon. Friend agree that, having heard Greta Thunberg speak today, it is time we took power back for the consumer? Would she join me in taking all our plastic from Marks and Spencer's or Tesco's back and dumping it in front of their stores, saying, "Look after that"? Is that not the sort of direct action that that young girl from Sweden is urging us to take?

Rachael Maskell: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. Absolutely—if we cannot see movement on the problem of plastics, we must move plastics to the places where they will make others move. I trust that we will take another step forward on the issue as a result of today's debate.

The plastics strategy must set tough targets for producers and manufacturers to provide alternatives. Research is under way, as I found out recently when I met Nestlé, a major manufacturer in York. I also spoke to local businesses, and it is clear that they are frustrated too. We have heard the Government trying to bring redress item by item—whether on bags, bottles or straws—but the reality is that we need to get to the top of the supply chain and look at what is happening.

In York, the council has really failed the people of my city. Plastics, apart from bottles, are not picked up at the kerbside, and therefore end up in landfill. This weekend, as I was doing my plastic walkabout, I was horrified to learn that much of York's recyclable waste ends up in landfill, not even going where residents believe it is going. That is not good enough. Unless the Minister sets really tough targets in her plastics strategy, it is clear that the Government will have failed. Labour in York has pledged to put in a water fountain system so that people can refill their bottles in the city and turn around the council's current abject failure to take the matter seriously.

I was impressed when I visited York's Biorenewables Development Centre, which uses high-pressure steam and autoclaving to separate household waste, drawing

out plastics from other waste to be able to deal with them. I was also impressed by nine-year-old Mollie Nicholl, who came to my surgery to teach me about ecobricks. She brought her empty plastic bottles, plastic wrappers and a wooden spoon, and showed me how to fill the bottle with the wrappers and then screw on the top, making an ecobrick, which would then be collected and made into either garden furniture or play equipment—new plastic capturing. She is York's plastic eco warrior.

York's climate strikers are incensed by plastic around them, as I found out when I met them recently. We owe it to all in our communities to take action, so I have five things I want to ask the Minister. Will she expand the role of the Grocery Code Adjudicator to take on the policing of cutting carbon and plastic from production and manufacturing in the supply chain? That seems an appropriate place to do it. Will she set stringent plastic targets, so that organic-based packaging rather than polymers are at the forefront, and polymers are phased out by 2025? Will the UK contribute to the plastic clear-up operations in the oceans, which we know has begun here at home? Will she champion ecobricks, as Mollie in my constituency has, and other forms of reuse for plastic, during the transition phase? Finally, will she set tough targets on recycling for local authorities and support them in driving change?

Our planet is breaking under the consumption-obsessed society we live in. As we have been elected to this place, we have been given a platform to radically change our world. Will the Minister use her power, as Labour will, to transform the local, national and global conversation and action, by being drastic on plastic?

7.4 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): I will be brief, Mr Hosie. We know that Extinction Rebellion are protesting outside, and I completely condone that. We know that by 2050 there will be as much plastic as fish in the sea. We know the fossil fuel manufacturers are given near trillion-dollar subsidies, and to a certain extent are diverting that money into plastic, because 80% of fossil fuels cannot be exploited. We know the only way to reduce the consumption of plastic is to raise its price. The way to do that is to tax plastic and to have cleaner, more homogenous plastic, which is more cost-effective to recycle.

The Government have paid lip service to a plastics tax—I welcome the comments from the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable)—but they will not bring it in until 2022. We need to be robust, assertive and immediate. On the timeframe for universal recyclability of plastic, we are looking at 2042, and in Europe, it is 2030. It should be 2025.

The producer responsibility obligations system is not working. I would welcome a deposit scheme. We clearly need taxes on bottles, and refill schemes in local shops, so that people can refill their bottle. People ask, "What can I do?" and throw away the bottles because they are so cheap. If we taxed them, we would be in a better situation.

There is emerging technology, such as gasification, that enables plastics to be broken down to produce energy in a way that does not impact on climate change. We should be investing in research and development. We should be putting more pressure on supermarkets. I completely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for

[Geraint Davies]

Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), who says that people should be encouraged to take their plastic and dump it back on the supermarkets. They would respond. It is all very well people being apologists for the supermarkets and saying that they are doing as much as they can; they pretend to do more than they do. They need to do much more. We cannot continue to export all our plastics, and sweep the problem under the table. We need to take action immediately.

By the time we have the tax that is proposed by the Government, an extra 70,000 tonnes of plastic will have been deposited. That is why I tabled my Plastics Bill, which would set out a fiscal strategy, and introduce a plastics agency and a global target for the overall amount of plastic, in which Britain's amount reduced over time. It would also give our nations an imperative to make sure that target was delivered.

7.7 pm

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) on securing this important and topical debate. I start by telling hon. Members that I went into Waverley station with an empty cup of coffee to get rid of. The girl said to me, "You can take that back to where you got it," because there were no bins there, but that was not going to work, as I bought it in King's Cross in London, so I just handed it to Costa.

For those of us who were born in the '50s, plastics have gone from being space-age wonder materials to underpinning modern life. Plastic pipes, containers and container liners provide hygienic and durable ways to transport water, foodstuffs and medicines.

If the whole lifecycle of the product is taken into account, plastics can be better for the environment, if they are recycled or otherwise disposed of safely. Lightweight, durable containers cut down on transport costs and reduce waste. The shelf life of perishable goods and products can be greatly extended with plastic packaging. Bagged bananas have a shelf life of 36 days, compared with 15 days if sold loose. A cucumber that lasts three days unpackaged will last two weeks if covered in plastic. Around 10 million tonnes of food is wasted in the UK annually, and that is associated with 22 million tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions, but 70% of that waste is absolutely avoidable. Plastic components weigh less and can last longer than non-plastic alternatives, and using plastic components where possible has allowed vehicle and aircraft manufacturers to reduce vehicle weight and improve efficiency.

Six per cent. of global oil production is used to manufacture plastic, but that is projected to rise to 20% by 2050, increasing its share of the global annual carbon budget from 1% to 15%. In 2012, plastic manufacture accounted for approximately 390 million tonnes of carbon monoxide emissions. The potent greenhouse gases methane and ethylene are released by most common plastics as they degrade. The durability of plastics and their resilience to biodegradation is a double-edged sword. It is key to their usefulness to us, but ecologically lethal.

Some 70% of the litter in the sea is plastic. Plastics fragment as they degrade and are a danger to all animals of all sizes, and they threaten our whole food chain.

Large pieces can entangle or choke animals and birds. Seabirds collect fragments of fishing gear when they build their nests. Strangled birds hanging from cliff sides are an ever more familiar sight in Scottish seabird colonies. Smaller fragments can be mistaken for food items and eaten, causing marine creatures and the animals feeding on them to starve while their stomachs are full. Some plastic products release chemicals as they degrade. Plastics can also absorb and later release persistent pollutants. The risk those microplastics pose to humans is absolutely unknown. A littered environment reduces human quality of life and deters visitors.

As has been mentioned, China and the rest of south-east Asia are no longer willing to be a dump for the world's dirty plastic. In January 2018, the Environmental Audit Committee, of which I am a member, heard that the Chinese decision to ban the importing of heavily contaminated plastic and paper waste reduced such waste exports from the UK to China by 40%. This caused a crisis in the UK recycling industry. The Chinese gave ample warning of their intent to restrict these waste types. The ban itself was announced by the Chinese Government in July 2017, but warnings of an impending crisis came from the British Plastics Federation as early as 2012. Furthermore, the Chinese Government have been cracking down on heavily contaminated recycling entering the country via a succession of programmes since 2006.

The EAC heard last January that the UK Government had their head in the sand. I asked witnesses from trade associations and professional bodies whether the UK Government had been pressed hard enough for action. Their view was that the Government were interested in meeting them and monitoring the situation, but would not act to help. Indeed, those trade bodies had seen more engagement with industry from the devolved Administrations.

The UN's climate experts tell us that we have only 11 years left to avert a total climate catastrophe. Transitioning to a simpler economy is an urgent and essential task, and waste management is an essential part of that. Has the Minister had any discussions on harmonised traffic-light labelling systems—matching product-to-bin systems—across devolved Administrations, local authorities and even industries? Having visited the Coca-Cola plant in East Kilbride, I know that it is very keen on having a harmonised product-to-bin system.

As has been mentioned, public awareness has never been higher. "The Blue Planet" and David Attenborough's latest calls to arms against climate change, "Climate Change—The Facts" on BBC 1 and "Our Planet" on Netflix, are must-watches for everybody. Scotland was the first part of the UK to commit to introducing a deposit return scheme for drinks containers. The Scottish Government are open to co-designing the scheme with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, being mindful that nothing happens in isolation. I believe the UK Environment Secretary, the Minister and the devolved Administrations met at a summit on this matter, and the principles—as far as I know—were agreed in July. The Scottish Government support the EU's targets for all packaging to be easily recyclable or reusable by 2030. They are a founding member of the Plastics Pact, which aims to deliver that target sooner and press the UK Government to commit to maintaining the current protections and standards on plastic packaging.

In January, *The Guardian* and Greenpeace revealed that the UK Government spent months behind the scenes opposing the EU's target to recycle 66% of urban waste by 2035. That is behind the Scottish Government's target of 70% by 2025, and throws into doubt the UK Government's pledge to develop ambitious new future targets and milestones, especially since—as far as I know—DEFRA has been singled out as the Department least well prepared for the UK's departure from the EU. That does not fill me with reassurance.

7.14 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) on securing this important and detailed debate. He was absolutely right to say that recycling and pollution are not necessarily linked. Indeed, climate change and pollution are not necessarily linked. We need to deal with both: we need to ensure that recycling is there to deal with the climate change impact of plastics, but also that we are preventing pollution.

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who made interventions, all of which were helpful in this particular case. I thank the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), who is absolutely right to mention that we had extensive deposit schemes in the past. In fact, I can remember the first time I ever got involved in any sort of political campaigning, when I was at school: we tried to persuade Corona not to stop using a deposit scheme for its bottles. It did stop, and went out of business—we can put two and two together. Most bottles are actually recycled in Germany, precisely because they still keep deposit return schemes.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) mentioned the incredible level of self-restraint that she has shown over the past 40 days and 40 nights. I do not believe it is possible or reasonable to expect the majority of our population to make that sort of choice. We need to make it more convenient for people to go plastic-free.

My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) outlined the importance of making reduction, reuse and recycling more financially viable than just making things and chucking them away. The hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) was right to point out that some applications of plastic are correct, but a lot are not. Where we use plastic, we must ensure that it is not just claimed to be recyclable, but is actually recycled. The convenience of plastic makes it the fastest-growing waste material, but its use is not always appropriate. Most plastic items have a limited lifespan and cannot be reused. However the most-used plastics, such as PET and HDPE, are readily recyclable, and the main difficulty is getting them from the point of use to the point of recycling.

Councils have been successful in establishing recycling infrastructure and services: 99% of local authorities in the UK currently collect plastic bottles, and 77% collect pots, tubs and trays in kerbside recycling. However, all of that costs money, and if we are going to increase our recycling rate at all we will need the people who do the work—the collection authorities, the disposal authorities and the recycling plant—to be economically viable. In the future, and I hope sooner rather than later, there

needs to be a mechanism for ensuring that the producers of the plastics pay for them to be recycled. For bottles, that may well be best done by a deposit return scheme, as in Germany. We welcome the Government's commitment to investigating deposit return schemes and to the principle of extended producer responsibility.

The requisite sense of urgency in the Government's resources and waste strategy appears to be lacking. Recycling in this country has flatlined. Between 2000 and 2010, under the last Labour Government, household recycling increased by 235%. However, after years of austerity, local government, which is responsible for waste and recycling, has been left underfunded and understaffed. While Labour-run Wales has accelerated ahead, achieving a national recycling rate of approximately 63%, England has flatlined at around 44% since 2011, and is set to miss Europe-wide targets of 50% by 2020.

It will take time to introduce an effective producer-pays system. In the meantime, our local authorities need the capital investment and revenue to maintain their recycling collections, let alone improve them. Local authorities currently have an £8 billion funding gap; unless that is filled, it is unrealistic to expect them to do anything additional.

The right hon. Member for Twickenham is right to say that there is high public interest in recycling, particularly plastics, and a greater awareness of where our waste ends up, in part down to "Blue Planet" and other programmes. Since China started to refuse the UK's poor quality recyclables and waste in 2018, the UK has been exporting waste to countries with some of the highest levels of ocean plastic pollution. Some south-east Asian counties are also moving towards a ban.

We need to encourage the UK to be more responsible for our waste closer to home, and to recycle in the UK—not export our waste. We need to take the opportunity of the current political support to drive a green transformation into an efficient and productive green economy with new, green jobs. We need to clean up our natural environment and halt the flow of plastic and other waste into our oceans. It is time to put actions behind the national waste strategy for England. It is time to show Government leadership.

7.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) on securing this important debate on plastics recycling. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) on being the only Member to intervene and stay to listen to the response. I am conscious that most of this issue is devolved, but I am aware of his passion for ensuring that there are improvements.

I welcome the other contributions to this important debate. A number of hon. Members highlighted that this is not a dilemma. We need less plastic waste, but we must recognise the benefits that plastic can bring in improving the environment, such as by lowering carbon and reducing the use of other common materials, including paper and glass. As the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) pointed out, the use of some plastic can reduce food waste. In other cases, it is not always necessary to use plastic. The hon. Member for York

[Dr Thérèse Coffey]

Central (Rachael Maskell) said she felt terribly frustrated when she went shopping. The Government have encouraged plastic-free aisles, and she will see that more and more supermarkets are making it more straightforward for people not to have to pick up a plastic bag, although for many consumers that is still convenient.

On the resources and waste strategy, to which hon. Members have referred, the Government are clear that we want to move towards a circular economy, in which raw materials are used efficiently and waste is minimised, so we have set high recycling ambitions. I am very conscious that, as the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) said, the amount of recycling has not increased greatly in the past few years. It has somewhat plateaued, although it has continued to increase in England.

Wales is leading the way, and Northern Ireland has made a big improvement, driven by its collection of food waste. England is third of the nations, and Scotland is fourth. I will not say that it is last, because that would be a bit insulting; I know how ambitious it is. Nevertheless, the nations continue to learn from each other. We continue to collaborate, and are consulting together on what we are doing about things such as the producer responsibility schemes, because we believe that there is a good reason to try to have a consistent approach across the UK, especially considering that, once we leave the European Union, this will certainly become a devolved matter. I am pleased that the Governments of the four nations have recognised why it would be sensible to collaborate in that regard.

We are setting a 65% municipal recycling rate by 2035 and a minimum 70% recycling rate for packaging waste by 2030. It is our intention that, by 2025, all plastic packaging placed on the market will be recyclable, reusable or compostable, and we want to eliminate avoidable plastic waste by the end of 2042. A number of uses of plastic are well considered. In particular, a lot of single-use plastic gets used in the NHS, and it would not necessarily be appropriate to want to get away from that. Nevertheless, there are ways in which we can manage it at the end of its life so it is more environmentally beneficial.

Geraint Davies *rose—*

Dr Coffey: I will take an intervention, but I have little time to respond to the points that have already been made.

Geraint Davies: Some people can recall a world in which we could go into supermarkets and buy meat and other products without plastic, such as in tins. Does the Minister accept that it is possible to envision such a world? If we tax things, we can move towards it more quickly. I obviously accept that some plastics are necessary, but all should be recycled more quickly.

Dr Coffey: Well, perhaps, but the hon. Gentleman should be aware that emissions would be generated because heavier goods would be transported around the country—around the world, in fact. That is why we need a balanced approach. This is not solely about plastic. The hon. Gentleman wants us to move back to just using paper bags and glass products, but that would be worse for carbon, so we need a balanced approach.

The important thing is to have a lifecycle approach that considers the production, consumption and end of life of the plastics that are placed on the market.

At the production stage, plastics should be designed to be easily reusable or recyclable. As it stands today, all plastic is technically recyclable. It is just that the economics do not necessarily encourage that, and sometimes the amount of contamination prevents that. At the consumption stage, we want consumers to be encouraged to use more reusable items. They should be able to identify easily how plastics should be recycled. At the end-of-life stage, more plastics should be reused, repaired or recycled.

As has been said, there are many benefits to plastic, which does not decompose and can last centuries. However, it can end up as litter in the natural environment, and there are concerns about the fact that litter on land often ends up in the oceans. There are problems with the pollution that can arise from plastics, so we want to prevent plastic waste from occurring in the first place, as well as managing it better when it does. Our strategy sets out how we intend to do that through a more sustainable use of resources to ensure we waste less and reuse, recycle and repair more. Moving away from a “take, make, use and throw” approach, and creating a circular model for plastics, means that the environment, the economy and society will all benefit.

As I have already said, one of the keys to this is design. The Government are currently consulting on extending producer responsibility for packaging. That is a powerful policy approach in which a producer’s responsibility for the product it places on the market extends to the post-use stage. Producers will pay the full net cost of managing packaging waste. The differentiation in the levy will incentivise products that are easier to reuse or recycle. As announced in the Budget last year, the Government are consulting on the introduction of a specific tax on plastic packaging with less than 30% recycled plastic content to stimulate demand for recycled plastic. That should encourage manufacturers to produce more sustainable packaging and will create demand for more recycled material.

The two schemes will work together coherently to improve recycling rates, and the revenue collected from these measures will enable investment in further action to address the issues surrounding single-use plastics, waste and litter, and help improve the waste system in the UK. We are working closely with the industry, businesses and consumers to ensure their views are taken forward in new schemes that may affect them. We are supporting businesses that are already taking on the challenge of reducing plastic waste and improving recycling.

The right hon. Member for Twickenham referred to the carrier bag charge. He will be aware that, in our consultation, we are discussing extending it to all retailers and increasing the charge. The deposit return scheme is a big challenge for our country. It is easy to imagine what could happen at the front end. We are consulting on two potential options relating to what people tend to consume on the go, as opposed to all plastic bottles and cans.

The back end of the system is more complicated. I have been on a learning journey to different countries in the European Union to look at how we might do that. We are consulting on that. The hon. Member for Falkirk is right to say that Scotland is taking steps forward in

that regard, and we are in discussion with it. We are also looking at how we can provide a new product labelling scheme, such as eco-labels, to help consumers make better decisions. We would like to see greater consistency of labelling so consumers know what they can recycle.

On households, we are not alone in the European Union in having kerbside collections, but we want to ensure that there is greater consistency in what councils collect—not necessarily how they collect it, but what they collect. We are having a further consultation on that at the moment, and are introducing separate food waste collections, which will improve recycling rates and, if they are treated appropriately, should be a better way of reducing carbon emissions. By creating a reliable, vibrant market, with Government support through the levies that will be introduced in the extended producer responsibility system, we should be able to support councils in making that innovation change.

Innovation by industry will continue to be necessary. We have helped by pledging £20 million to the plastics research and innovation fund, and a further £20 million to the plastics and waste investment fund. Those funds are aimed at encouraging innovation to boost recycling and reduce littering. Through the industrial strategy challenge fund, we are investing up to £66 million towards the development of smart, sustainable plastic packaging. We also support WRAP, which was asked about earlier, and the UK Plastics Pact, which bring together businesses across the entire plastics value chain to make the necessary improvements.

The Government have set ambitious targets. It is important that we work with consumers and industry to reduce plastic waste. Our strategy considers the whole lifecycle of plastics. In that regard, I believe that once we get through this consultation and introduce the necessary measures in the Environment Bill, where we do not have powers already, we can really work together to tackle this plastics challenge.

7.29 pm

Sir Vince Cable: I do not have a great deal to add in the last 30 seconds. We all understand the chemistry, and the technology is given. The Government's objectives are very clear, and there is a great deal of consensus around them. The main area of disagreement is about the urgency and pace at which this is being done. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), the hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) has a Bill to introduce a foreshortened timetable for dealing with unnecessary waste. I very much hope that through that or the Government's action, we will speed up the measures that we all agree need to be taken.

7.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Tuesday 23 April 2019

TREASURY

Informal ECOFIN 5-6 April

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):

An informal meeting of Economic and Financial Affairs (ECOFIN) Ministers was held in Bucharest on 5-6 April 2019. Ministers discussed the following:

Working lunch—multiannual financial framework

Ministers discussed the multiannual finance framework in the context of the European semester and financing of the EU budget.

Working session I

Central bank governors joined for the first working session.

a) Institutional cycle priorities

Following a presentation from Bruegel, Ministers and central bank governors discussed priorities for the next EU institutional cycle.

b) Capital markets union

Ministers and central bank governors then discussed the way forward for the capital markets union.

Working session II

a) Labour mobility in the EU

Following a presentation from the Centre for European Policy Studies, Ministers discussed the macroeconomic and fiscal impact of labour mobility in the EU.

b) Taxation and economic growth

Ministers discussed the role of taxation in supporting EU economic growth.

c) Preparation of the April G20 and IMF meetings

Ministers approved the EU terms of reference for the G20 meeting and international monetary and financial committee statement, ahead of the Spring meetings of the World Bank Group and the International Monetary Fund in Washington DC.

[HCWS1515]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Private Rented Sector

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): You will have seen that last week I announced reforms to the legislative framework governing how private tenancies can be ended in England to improve security in the private rented sector for both tenants and landlords. This announcement followed my Department's recent consultation on "Overcoming the Barriers to Longer Tenancies". I also published the Government's response to this consultation.

The private rented sector has changed dramatically in the last 20 years, and the sector needs to keep pace with these changes. The number of people who live in the private rented sector has doubled, and it is home to more families with children and older people. These households need stability and security in their home.

The current legislative framework leaves tenants feeling insecure. They can be asked to leave their homes, with as little as two months notice, without the landlord

providing any reason, using eviction proceedings under section 21 of the Housing Act 1988. This sense of insecurity can profoundly affect the ability of renters to plan for the future, to manage their finances or to put down roots in their local communities.

The Government intend to establish a fairer system for both tenants and landlords by legislating to repeal section 21 of the Housing Act 1988. Bringing an end to so-called "no fault evictions", would mean that a tenant cannot be forced to leave their home unless the landlord can prove a specified ground, such as rent arrears or breach of tenancy agreement. It would provide tenants with more stability and protect them from having to make frequent and short notice moves. It would also empower tenants to challenge their landlord about poor property standards where this occurs, without the worry of being evicted as a result of making a complaint.

The private rented sector must also remain a stable and secure market for landlords to continue to invest in. The legislation I intend to introduce will include measures that provide landlords with additional safeguards to successfully manage their properties. We will strengthen the existing grounds for eviction available to landlords under section 8 of the Housing Act 1988. This will allow the landlord to regain their property when they want to sell it or move into it themselves.

It is important that landlords can have confidence that the court system works for them in instances when there is no other option but to seek possession of their property through the courts. That is why this announcement includes improvements to court processes, to make it quicker and smoother for landlords to regain their properties when they have a legitimate reason to do so.

Removing no-fault evictions is a significant step. This announcement is the start of a longer process to introduce these reforms. We want to build a consensus on a package of reforms to improve security for tenants while providing landlords with the confidence that they have the tools they need.

We will launch a consultation on the details of a better system that will work for landlords and tenants. The Government will collaborate with and listen to landlords, tenants and others in the private rented sector to develop a new deal for renting. Ministers will also work with other types of housing providers outside of the private rented sector who use these powers and use the consultation to make sure the new system works effectively.

[HCWS1514]

PRIME MINISTER

Business Greenhouse Gas Reporting Guidance and Regulations

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): This written statement confirms that responsibility for business greenhouse gas reporting guidance and regulations will transfer from the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. This change will be effective immediately.

[HCWS1516]

WORK AND PENSIONS**Office for Nuclear Regulation Corporate Plan**

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): Later today I will lay before this House the Office For Nuclear Regulation corporate plan 2019-20. This document will also be published on the ONR website.

I can confirm, in accordance with schedule 7, paragraph 25(3) of the Energy Act 2013, that there have been no exclusions to the published documents on the grounds of national security.

[HCWS1513]

Petition

Tuesday 23 April 2019

OBSERVATIONS

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

Havering, and leaving the European Union

The Humble Petition of Lawrence Webb and the citizens of the London Borough of Havering,

Sheweth,

That in 1975 the British people, in a referendum, agreed to remain members of a Common Market, a group of equal and free European Nations trading together without barriers and tariffs. By default, the British people have, without their consent, become citizens of a European State run by a non-elected bureaucratic Commission in Brussels. This foreign power has suborned our legal system and the authority of our Parliament.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House do all in its power to re-establish our sovereign right to rule ourselves in accordance with the freedoms, liberties and rights granted to us and our heirs forever under Magna Carta 1215 and the Bill of Rights 1689, and that we leave the European Union, the Customs Union, the Single Market and that we end Free Movement of People on 29 March, 2019 as set out in law under the European Withdrawal Act 2018.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.—[Presented by Andrew Rosindell, Official Report, 27 February 2019; Vol. 655, c. 461.]

[P002429]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (James Cleverly):

When 17.4 million people voted to leave the European Union in the 2016 referendum, they provided the biggest democratic mandate for any course of action ever directed at a UK Government. It is our firm belief that the British people have made their view clear, and it is now our responsibility to uphold the result of the referendum and leave the EU, with a deal, as soon as possible.

The Government are committed to leaving the EU with a deal that honours the result of the referendum, while also protecting our economy, security and the Union.

On the current terms of the deal that we have negotiated, we would leave the EU, free movement would end and we would instead introduce a new, fair immigration system based on people's skills, rather than their nationality. As well as ending free movement, the deal would end the UK paying vast sums of money to the EU and removes us from the EU budget. In leaving the EU, the jurisdiction of the CJEU will end and all laws in the UK would be passed by our elected officials.

While the House has been unable to accept the Government's deal as it currently stands, the Government maintain that leaving with a deal is the best outcome for the UK. The Prime Minister continues to work closely with colleagues across the House to ensure that the result of the referendum is upheld and the UK leaves the EU in an orderly manner without undue delay.

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