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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 23 May 2019

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

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

Horse-racing

1. **Conor McGinn** (St Helens North) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the contribution of horse-racing to (a) social, (b) cultural and (c) economic life. [R] [911063]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): Our world leading horse-racing industry employs over 17,000 people and contributes around £3.5 billion to rural economies across Britain each year. The Government support British racing, and our reforms to the horse-race betting levy have established a firm financial basis to support the sport.

Conor McGinn: I am very proud to be the joint chairman of the all-party parliamentary racing and bloodstock industries group. Like many Members across the House, I strongly support our fantastic sport and our fantastic British horse-racing industry, but the sport does face challenges. Given that the yield from the levy is £17 million less than forecast, what measures will the Secretary of State and the Government take, working with British horse-racing to ensure its long-term financial sustainability?

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, not just for what he says, but also for the valuable work he does with the APPG to support the industry. He is right that the levy receipts this year will be lower than expected, but he will recognise that there was a very substantial increase last year because the Government reformed the levy in order to bring offshore bookmakers into scope. That was an important change to give the industry a broader and more substantial financial base. We will look at future changes to the levy that may be appropriate to deal with any change in circumstances, but it is right to allow the substantial changes that we made last year to bed in. We will of course discuss with the hon. Gentleman and the APPG what further action may be appropriate.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): As the other co-chairman of the APPG, may I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests?

I am sure that the Secretary of State is aware of the recent Racing Together Community Day. Does he agree that, with 60 racecourses across the country, horse-racing has a wonderful opportunity to reach out to very many people, including schoolchildren, and can he help us to support that action?

Jeremy Wright: In order to be even-handed, I should offer equal thanks and congratulations to my hon. Friend for the work that he does with the APPG. He is right that horse-racing can make a significant contribution—not just to our sporting life, but to our broader community life. It is important that young people understand the sport and understand horses, and we welcome any opportunity that the industry has to support that.

Digital Skills: Older People

2. **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support older people to improve their digital skills. [911064]

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): Three quarters of people who lack basic digital skills are over the age of 65, so we have launched a digital inclusion innovation fund specifically to help older people and people with disabilities. We are also tackling digital exclusion via the £15 million future digital inclusion programme, which since 2014 has helped more than 1 million adult learners to develop their basic digital skills.

Stephen Metcalfe: We all know how important it is to have digital skills in the modern world. Will the Minister therefore join me in congratulating the South East local enterprise partnership on being awarded funding to set up a local digital skills partnership, and wish it well in its new task?

Margot James: I certainly congratulate the South East LEP on gaining this initiative. We have now launched six local digital skills partnerships, and they will match provision to the very local needs of people, particularly in my hon. Friend's constituency.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I hold regular discussions about digital inclusion with a group called Young At Heart in Cefn Cribwr in my constituency—a group of women who are, in the main, over the age of 80. One of their biggest complaints is being unable to make face-to-face appointments to see their doctor, and they also have complaints about the telephone services at doctors' surgeries. What more support could the Minister provide to allow GPs to have funding to teach and upskill those women to be able to use those services?

Margot James: I congratulate everyone behind Young At Heart in the hon. Gentleman's constituency; it sounds like an excellent initiative. NHS Digital has the widening digital participation programme, which will enable people in the hon. Gentleman's constituency and elsewhere to make better use of digital services, as well as the face-to-face appointments that will always be required.

TV Licences for Over-75s

3. **Mr Stephen Hepburn** (Jarrow) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support the maintenance of free television licences for the over-75s. [911065]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): The Government have guaranteed the over-75s licence concession until 2020. After that, the future of that concession is the BBC's decision, but we have been clear that we would want and expect it to continue. We expect the BBC's decision next month.

Mr Hepburn: It was a Labour Government who introduced free TV licences for pensioners, in the vital battle against isolation, loneliness and severe mobility problems. Next year, up to 6,000 pensioners could lose their licence in Jarrow. Half of them class the TV as their main source of company. What is the Minister going to do about that?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman is right that television is important for many older and more isolated people, but the key word in his question was "could". We do not yet know what decision the BBC will make, and it is sensible to wait until we have the proposal before commenting upon it.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What deal have the Government come to to compensate the BBC if it decides to continue with free television licences, bearing in mind that this was in the Conservative party's manifesto for the general election?

Jeremy Wright: We have made it quite clear that we will continue to fund the concession until 2020. It is worth noting that, over the last two years, the funding has been managed in a transitional way. The Department for Work and Pensions transferred £468 million in 2018-19 to the BBC and £247 million this year. It is important to make that point, because it means that the remainder of the cost is now being borne by the BBC. We have been clear that when the BBC takes on this responsibility, it is important for the concession to continue.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): As this is the last Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions before the women's World cup in France, I want to take this opportunity to wish Scotland, led by Shelley Kerr—another Livingston lass—all the very best, as well as England, who we look forward to taking on on 9 June.

Research by Age UK shows that more than 2 million over-75s will have to go without TV or cut back on heating and food if free TV licences are scrapped. The scale of loneliness in the UK is becoming apparent, and the UN rapporteur on extreme poverty, Philip Alston, concluded that unless austerity is ended, the UK's poorest people face lives that are

"solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short".

Why do this Government want to heap more misery on to the elderly and poor and think it is worth removing what, for many, is the only source of information, company and link to the outside world?

Jeremy Wright: First, let me mostly endorse what the hon. Lady said about the women's World cup and wish a huge amount of luck to England and almost as much luck to Scotland.

I disagree with the hon. Lady's description of the position. We do not accept the characterisation in the report that she refers to. In relation to TV licences, as she has heard me say this morning, I think it is important to wait until we see the BBC's proposals, and we will then be in a position to comment. That principle applies more broadly—it is always sensible to wait and see what is proposed before you decide you do not like it.

Gambling-related Harm

4. **Ronnie Cowan** (Inverclyde) (SNP): What steps his Department is taking to ensure adequate funding for (a) education, (b) research, (c) treatment and (d) support to minimise gambling-related harm. [911066]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): I am pleased to say that the NHS is expanding specialist support for gambling addiction in its long-term plan. Public Health England is reviewing evidence, and GambleAware will publish a needs analysis this autumn. Building evidence is key to future funding decisions. We want the industry to be responsible in all ways, which includes funding support for people experiencing harm.

Ronnie Cowan: According to the Gambling Commission, the gross gambling yield of Great Britain's gambling industry is £14.4 billion, yet the amount donated through the levy for gambling-related harm was less than £10 million. A statutory levy of 1% would equate to £140 million. I know that such a levy is being considered, but what alternatives exist to raise a guaranteed amount over a period?

Mims Davies: GambleAware was fully funded last year. As the hon. Gentleman said, it almost reached the £10 million target, and another £7 million was brought in through financial penalties. We expect targets to be increased in the future and welcome commitments by operators to substantially increase the amounts they give. However, as I said at the Gambling Commission strategy launch, if the voluntary system cannot meet current or, more importantly, future needs, we will look at alternatives. Everything is on the table, including a mandatory levy.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Some gambling companies sponsor football clubs to the tune of hundreds of millions of pounds, and in return, they get branding on T-shirts and around grounds, seen by thousands in stadiums and millions on TV, including millions of children. Yet we found out recently that some of those sponsors gave as little as £50 to GambleAware—the charity that funds research and treatment of gambling addiction. Currently, just 3% of gambling addicts get the treatment they need. When the stakes are so high and contributions so low, how can the Minister justify refusing a mandatory levy?

Mims Davies: I think every sport, but particularly football, has a responsibility to those enjoying the game in relation to the amount of sponsors they have and

they experience the fans have. In particular, on the size of football shirts, children may be a young adult size, and that should be looked at appropriately.

As I say, if this voluntary system does not work, everything is on the table. However, I would say that of those people who come into contact with GambleAware, 70% come through a life-changing experience and get on to a better future, and I would advise anyone experiencing harm to contact it.

Mr Speaker: I call Jim Shannon—not here.

Hon. Members: Oh!

Leaving the EU: Performing Arts

6. **Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on the performing arts of the UK leaving the EU. [911070]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): We have consulted widely with a diverse range of stakeholders from across the performing arts to ensure the potential impacts of Brexit are understood and to ensure that future opportunities can be realised. We are pursuing a wide-ranging agreement with the EU on culture that will ensure all parties can continue to benefit from international collaboration.

Robert Neill: As my hon. Friend the Minister will know, the UK has the most vibrant performing arts sector in the whole of Europe. An important part of that is the ability of UK companies to work collaboratively with European companies and for UK artists to visit and tour venues in the EU and vice versa. However, to achieve that, will he tell us what specific steps are being taken to ensure that there is frictionless travel for performing artists and musicians, as well as their equipment, including musical instruments?

Michael Ellis: DCMS is engaging extensively with the performing arts sector. My hon. Friend is right about the importance of the sector to our culture, but also to our economy. For example, more people go to the theatre than go to football matches in this country. I did have a meeting with UK theatres and the Home Office; we set up that meeting to give them the opportunity to express their concerns. We are working very closely with the Home Office and others on that. I very much recognise the importance of touring for the cultural sector, and we will work on that.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I have a personal interest in that my daughter is a poet and playwright, and my son is an actor and scriptwriter. They thought they were being brought up as citizens of Europe, and they are deeply worried about the future in relation to artists coming here and their ability to tour across in Europe. This is a sad, sad day for Europe.

Michael Ellis: The reality is that our UK theatre and performing arts community is an excellent example of how we work collaboratively throughout the country and around the world, and that is going to continue even after Brexit.

Mr Speaker: The multi-talented character of the Sheerman family is, frankly, not a surprise to the House.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The chief executive of the Edinburgh fringe has expressed serious concern about the cost and complexity of artists coming to Edinburgh, and fears they will go elsewhere. Does the Minister really believe that losing access to Creative Europe funding, ending freedom of movement and pulling up the drawbridge will culturally enrich the people of these islands?

Michael Ellis: We are not pulling up any drawbridges. The political declaration agreed between the UK and the EU specifically acknowledges the importance of mobility for cultural co-operation. Indeed, the Government have announced plans to negotiate reciprocal mobility arrangements with the EU, which will support businesses to provide services and to move their talented people.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): May I recommend to the Minister the RSC production of “As You Like It” that my brother is appearing in at Stratford-on-Avon?

As part of the preparations for leaving the EU, the EU has indicated that there will be an opportunity for reciprocal agreement for up to 90 days in the event of a no-deal Brexit. Given the importance of the EU for our performing artists, and for our world-leading musicians as well, can the Minister give us the strongest possible indication that the Government will honour that reciprocal deal with the EU—whoever ends up in charge?

Mr Speaker: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman's brother is a magnificent performer, but I hope he will forgive me if I add that my daughter, Jemima, will be performing in “As You Like It” at her primary school in a matter of days, and it is a key priority for me to observe her at work.

Michael Ellis: There are clearly several performers in the family, Mr Speaker.

In answer to the question, we are working very hard, and I am extremely confident that the UK theatre and performing arts community will continue to perform as excellently as it has been doing. Our performers and theatre are world-renowned, and that will continue after Brexit.

Mr Speaker: I asked for that.

Society Lottery Reform

7. **Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): What steps he plans to take in response to the consultation on society lottery reform. [911072]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): As outlined in the consultation, we are considering changes to the sales and prize limits for society lotteries. The regulatory framework for lotteries must be appropriate, and both society lotteries and the national lottery should be able to thrive. We hope to respond to the consultation by the summer recess.

Tommy Sheppard: In February last year I wrote on behalf of the People's Postcode Lottery to ask for the limit on charity lottery sales to be raised to £100 million. On 7 February I was told that the Department was

“considering” that proposal. There have been 15 months of consideration and deliberation, so is it not now “make your mind up time”? Many of those charity lotteries are trying to fill the gaps left by the Government’s austerity policies, and it seems unfair to continue to hold them back. When the Minister announces the response to the consultation, will he commit to raising that limit in line with inflation?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman will not be surprised to hear that I will not announce the result of the consultation until we have that result. We have been saying for some time that we would seek to do that by the summer, and that is what we will do. It is important to consider carefully the balance of arguments. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that society lotteries make a considerable contribution, but he will understand that I also have a responsibility to protect the interests of the national lottery. Getting that balance right is not straightforward, and we seek to do it so that a contribution to the life of this country will continue to be made by both society lotteries and the national lottery.

Heritage: Cultural Importance

8. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What assessment he has made of the cultural importance of heritage to towns and cities throughout the UK. [911073]

9. **Victoria Prentis** (Banbury) (Con): What assessment he has made of the cultural importance of heritage to towns and cities throughout the UK. [911074]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): As set out in the Government’s heritage statement, heritage is an essential part of our cultural economy, our cultural landscape and our country. Our heritage is globally renowned and world leading. The importance of heritage to towns and cities includes the creation of a better place to live in, work in, and visit.

Peter Aldous: Heritage will be a vital component part of town centres as they reinvent themselves, and the high street area in Lowestoft is now a heritage action zone. What steps are being taken to ensure that such good initiatives are nationally co-ordinated, so that we best promote the UK as a world heritage visitor destination?

Michael Ellis: The Government’s comprehensive plans for high streets are a nationally co-ordinated initiative that will help high streets to adapt to change, and promote our heritage. Some £42 million of funding from the Government and Historic England will create dozens of high street heritage action zones, including Lowestoft, and £3 million will come from the National Lottery Heritage Fund and £15 million from the Architectural Heritage Fund to support social enterprise. Lots of money is going to heritage, as it should do.

Victoria Prentis: As it says in “As You Like It”:

“Time travels in diverse paces with diverse persons.”

Our cultural heritage is important. Banbury has a long cultural heritage, and I am delighted that the Government have pledged more than £60 million for the heritage high streets fund. How will we use local heritage to benefit our towns and cities?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady really is an impressive culture culture.

Michael Ellis: The heritage high street fund will restore and adapt our high streets, drive consumer footfall, increase further investment, and generate greater pride in our high streets. By reviving older buildings that are in a state of neglect, we will ensure that high streets remain at the heart of our communities for years to come. That will help to bring about the regeneration of high streets and the communities they serve, including in my hon. Friend’s wonderful constituency of Banbury.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): The stunning FOCUS Wales music festival highlighted the importance of music worldwide when it brought artists from across the globe to Wrexham for three days last week. It used our magnificent St Giles’ parish church, which is the resting place of Elihu Yale, who founded Yale College, and a superb venue. May I extend an invitation to the entire Front-Bench team to come next year and see what a superb venue Wrexham is?

Michael Ellis: The hon. Gentleman is very kind to issue such a generous invitation. I commend him for his support for his constituency and for that important event. The Government announced almost £500 million of funding between 2016 and 2020 for a diverse portfolio of music and arts education programmes. The rewards from that include support for the festival in Wrexham.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): A big part of Newport’s heritage is the Chartist Rising, which happened 180 years ago this November. In Newport, we commemorate it every year. What more can we do in this place and nationally to recognise the Chartist movement’s critical role in shaping our democracy?

Michael Ellis: Historic events such as the Chartist Rising, and many others in communities around the country, are a part of what makes this country’s rich cultural tapestry so endearing and so rewarding to our society. I commend the hon. Lady for her support for that event. She will no doubt take many opportunities to continue to remind Members of it and attract attention that could indeed bring tourist footfall to the area.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Cleethorpes currently benefits from coastal communities funding to improve its many Victorian and Edwardian buildings. Will the Minister give an assurance that the Department’s various funding streams will continue to benefit our coastal communities?

Michael Ellis: We are certainly looking very carefully at our coastal communities, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right that we want to support them. They bring in tourist visitors, but we want to see their number increased. We will definitely take the point he makes under advisement.

Commercial Radio: Wales

10. **Ben Lake** (Ceredigion) (PC): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Wales on the regulation of commercial radio in Wales. [911075]

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): We continue to support the growth of radio services in Wales. A number of new community and digital stations have launched in recent years, including those offering programmes in the Welsh language. The BBC has also improved its Radio Wales FM coverage and last year it launched BBC Radio Cymru 2.

Ben Lake: I thank the Minister for that answer. She alludes to Wales as a proud bilingual nation. At present, Ofcom has no power to introduce safeguards in relation to the provision of Welsh language content when awarding licences. Given that existing localness requirements may be weakened as radio transfers to DAB, does the Minister not agree that the regulator should now be empowered to ensure the Welsh language is not abandoned in the process?

Margot James: We are very committed to programmes in minority languages. We have launched a new audio content fund and we expect 5% of that fund to be devoted to Welsh and Gaelic programming. I urge the hon. Gentleman to be cautious about mandating programmes in minority languages, because we have to balance that with overall choice. He needs to bear in mind that with the Radio Ceredigion application, which I know he supported, Nation Radio was the only applicant to replace it. By stipulating more and more regulations, we might reduce overall choice.

Works of Art: Retention in the UK

11. **Sir Hugo Swire** (East Devon) (Con): What advice his Department provides to institutions seeking to retain pre-eminent works of art in the UK. [911076]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): My Department, in partnership with Arts Council England, delivers and advises on various statutory schemes that are designed to keep items of particular cultural significance in the UK, such as the judge's copy of "Lady Chatterley's Lover" from the obscenity trial in 1960. The statutory schemes include various tax incentives to assist UK public institutions in acquiring pre-eminent items.

Sir Hugo Swire: Seeing as we are all in the business of burnishing our thespian credentials this morning, may I refer back to the time at my little-known secondary school when I was a very convincing Badger in "Toad of Toad Hall"? It was somewhat safer to be a badger in those days.

Will the Minister ensure that in the event of a foreign purchaser refusing a matching offer, an absolute ban on future export can be enforced by compelling him or her to keep the item on display in a recognised public institution and pay any insurance, rather than expecting Government indemnity?

Mr Speaker: Might there be photographic evidence of the right hon. Gentleman's performance that could be made available to Members of the House?

Michael Ellis: Well, in school I played Sir Roderic Murgatroyd from Gilbert and Sullivan. I felt that I had to mention that.

The Government are currently considering the results of a consultation on strengthening the process for retaining national treasures. When an owner or foreign purchaser wishes to export a national treasure and does not accept the matching offer from a public body that has taken the trouble to raise the funds to purchase it, that will be taken into account when making a decision on the export licence application and a licence will normally be refused. However, the owner is not currently compelled to display the item. We are looking at that in greater detail at the moment through the consultation.

Public Libraries

12. **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What steps he has taken to protect access to public libraries. [911077]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): Local authorities have a statutory duty to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service. My Department monitors proposed changes to library service provisions by local authorities, and if DCMS receives a complaint that a council may be failing to meet its statutory duty, we challenge those councils and carefully consider the evidence before deciding if a local inquiry is needed.

Dr Huq: The Manic Street Preachers said "Libraries gave us power", but since 2010, 230,000 library opening hours have been lost and 127 libraries in England have completely shut their doors. I have three under threat in my constituency. I listened to the Minister's answer. What advice or assistance can he give Ealing Council, which is struggling to keep its statutory services going with a 64% cut from the Government, to keep these engines of social mobility alive?

Michael Ellis: I would ask Ealing Council, as with other councils, to look at local authorities that are investing in libraries. Local authorities around the country of every political hue are opening, expanding and developing libraries. The first reaction to those facing budgetary challenges ought not to be to cut cultural items, but to provide support for them, and other local authorities have proven that they can do it.

Topical Questions

T1. [911081] **Bim Afolami** (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): I congratulate the four English football teams, one of whom I know you take a particular interest in, Mr Speaker, who have qualified for the European finals. It is the first time that one nation has ever provided all the major European finalists in a single season. We have seen success elsewhere in my Department's portfolio, too, with the Tech Nation report showing that our digital economy is leading the way in Europe, with 35% of Europe and Israel's tech unicorns being created here in the UK. We have the cricket world cup to look forward to, with the opening match at the Oval next week. I am sure the House will join me in welcoming the nine visiting teams and in wishing our

cricketers the very best of luck. Perhaps I also ought to congratulate the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson), the shadow Secretary of State, on climbing Snowdon, which he recently achieved. All of us in the House are used to uphill struggles; I am pleased that he has completed that one successfully.

Bim Afolami: The access to cash review recently published a report setting out that 17% of the adult population—about 8 million adults—would struggle to manage in a cashless society, with the majority of those people in rural areas. Will the Minister explain what the Department is doing to improve the situation for those in rural areas to bring the standard up to that in more urban areas?

Jeremy Wright: My hon. Friend is right that we face two challenges: one is skills and the other is access to broadband. On broadband, he will know that we have succeeded in achieving our initial objective of 95% of the country being covered by superfast broadband, and in fact, exceeding that somewhat, but we now need to move on to rolling out full fibre. When we do that, it is important that we focus on those areas that the market will not reach unaided—an outside-in approach, as we have described it. I believe that will benefit rural areas predominantly.

Mr Speaker: The notable athlete himself: Mr Tom Watson.

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): Good morning, Mr Speaker, and my very best wishes to Jemima and all colleagues' family members in their thespian endeavours, including my daughter, Saoirse, who has just successfully auditioned to play Nancy in the school production of "Oliver Twist".

UEFA's inclusion and diversity policy says the following:

"Everyone has the right to enjoy football, no matter who you are, where you're from or how you play."

But next week, Henrikh Mkhitaryan will miss the match of a lifetime because he is from Armenia, and Arsenal fans with Armenian names are being denied visas to travel to Baku. This is a scandal. It is a deeply ugly side to the beautiful game, and if I was Secretary of State, I would make it clear to UEFA that it is completely unacceptable. Will the Minister demand that UEFA ensures that countries that force players to choose between their sport and their safety and that discriminate against travelling fans will never be allowed to host future events?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman is right: if football is to be for everyone, and we all believe that it should be, that should apply to football in our own country and to football in places where we want our fans to be able to travel. It is important that we engage with UEFA, as we have been doing, to send the very clear message that places where football travels to should be welcoming to those who support football, and politics should have nothing whatsoever to do with it.

There is, as the hon. Gentleman says, the related challenge of whether British fans who are of Armenian descent are able to have a visa to travel to Azerbaijan. That is something that my colleagues in the Foreign Office are picking up, because it is important that all those who want to travel to support their team should be able to do so. If they cannot, football is not achieving what it should.

Mr Speaker: Quite right.

Tom Watson: A woeful ticket allocation means that the vast majority of fans will not travel to that match or, indeed, to the Champions League final, because UEFA has favoured corporates over fans. Will the Secretary of State condemn UEFA with me today? On this day when the House is divided over Europe, can we unite to condemn UEFA for its disgraceful treatment of football fans?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman is right that there are not enough tickets available for fans, either on Saturday or next week in Azerbaijan. I think we can agree that as many people who are passionate about their team as possible should have the chance to see them succeed and compete on the European stage, just as they can on the national stage. We believe that it is important to say to UEFA that that is a message we all support. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising it, so that we can communicate that message with clarity.

It is important that we spread the benefits of the major European competitions around Europe. I do not believe it is right that they should be held in only a small subset of European countries. There are huge economic and sporting benefits to be derived from them, and countries should have access to those benefits, but only if they are prepared to give access to passionate football supporters.

T2. [911082] **Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): I add my best wishes to the England women's team for success in the forthcoming World cup. Will the Minister give them the best possible send-off by ensuring that the Government commit increased funding to football facilities at grassroots level?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): I thank my hon. Friend for raising the exciting summer of women's sport that is coming up, which will include the Ashes and the Solheim cup. Today, the netball squad is being announced for Liverpool. It is a very exciting time for sport across our nation and many people will be coming to our shores to enjoy it. I will be sending off the women's team, because I will see them at Brighton and Hove before they go on their final warm-up. It is absolutely right that we prioritise grassroots opportunities for everyone to enjoy.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): Next month, UEFA will start the process of recruiting 12,000 volunteers from host countries, including Scotland and England, for Euro 2020. They will be expected to give a huge time commitment and to work for free in complex roles that involve huge responsibility, including anti-doping. Is that not just exploitation dressed up as an opportunity, and will the Secretary of State raise it with UEFA directly?

Mims Davies: I feel we have a number of conversations to have with UEFA and I am happy to add that to the list. As we approach the Commonwealth games in Birmingham in 2022—10 years on from London 2012, where people derived incredible experiences from volunteering—I think we should support this. However, if there are challenges in recruiting people due to their responsibilities, we must look at that.

T3. [911084] **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): For what it's worth, I recently appeared in panto as Sir Lancinglot in the North Lancing residents

association's version of "Robin Hood". [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh no you didn't!"] Oh yes I did! Also in Lancing, I am attempting to arrange a programme of midnight football over the summer, which I did a few years ago in another part of my constituency that is affected by antisocial behaviour. With the help of Adur Athletic football club, the local police and the local council, we laid on football between 10 and midnight on Saturday evenings for teenagers who otherwise, as they admitted themselves, would be getting up to no good on the streets. It completely changed the dynamics between those kids and the police, who came and joined in enthusiastically. Does the Minister agree that that is a constructive way of dealing with antisocial behaviour, getting kids engaged in sport, and engaging those kids with the police and other local people in a positive way?

Mims Davies: I am very pleased that I can mention that my daughter, Jemimah, is going to be a barnacle in her next production. [*Laughter.*] She is going to be really unhappy about my saying that. [*Interruption.*] She'll stick at it.

On the broader point, as we approach a really important time for our young people in terms of bringing forward the youth charter for our next generation, we absolutely have to think about the positive activities, engagement and participation of our young people. On my patch, we have Friday night football, which gets people off the streets and gives them the chance to have free wi-fi and some toast afterwards, and to enjoy being part of the community. We need to make sure that there is that participation, at any time of the day or night. As Sports Minister, that is what I like to hear.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Last week, Wolverhampton Wanderers became the latest football club to commit to rail seating at its stadium. Football fans want safe standing, clubs do, and the governing bodies are on board as well. It has been eight months since the Government announced their consultation and a review of this. When will it come to a close?

Mims Davies: The Secretary of State and I have had the results of a review come to us that we are considering very carefully. In this Chamber over a number of months, it has been very clear that fans and MPs alike want to know what the next stages are. We are considering the review appropriately and will be coming forward with the next steps.

T4. [911086] **Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): If we are talking about our acting accolades, Mr Speaker, mine was winning a national best actress award with the Young Farmers—a strange dichotomy, but true.

Yesterday, the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee went to the Chelsea Flower Show and carried out an inquiry into the value of garden tourism to the nation—it is already some £4 billion. Does the Minister agree that if we put garden tourism in the tourism sector deal, we could double this money, at least, and benefit the economy?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): Indeed. Garden tourism contributed billions of pounds to national GDP in 2017. The proposed sector deal has been in negotiation for some time now. There has been wide consultation with the sector, and it has come forward with a list of

proposals for key areas to target within the industry. My hon. Friend is right to focus on the value of our garden tourism. At Alnwick castle, for example, and elsewhere, there are very special gardens for people to visit. I would be happy to hear of any further proposals from her afterwards.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know that Coventry will be the city of culture in 2021. Will he meet me to discuss the future of the Priory museum in Coventry? In that area, under Henry VIII, the old church was destroyed. The Parliament of Devils was held there.

Michael Ellis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for supporting Coventry city of culture 2021, which is a very exciting project. I would very happy to meet him to discuss the matter further.

T5. [911087] **Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The video games industry is a beacon of success in the British economy. It is particularly strong in the west midlands, especially around the so-called Silicon Spa area of Warwickshire. What is the Department doing to support this industry—in particular, to provide it with people with the right skills to enable it to grow?

Jeremy Wright: As my hon. Friend would expect, I am very proud of Silicon Spa in the area of Warwickshire that I represent. I visited one of the games-designing companies very recently. I accept that having one's picture taken under a big sign saying "Rebellion" is not a sensible thing to do at the moment. None the less, I thought it was important that I made that visit, and I was impressed by what I saw. My hon. Friend is right that it is important that we give these companies people with the skills that they require to continue to be successful. He will know about our creative careers programme, which gives 160,000 children an opportunity to learn about careers in video games and elsewhere.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I am very proud that I supported the millennium dome, which became the O2 and is a great success. The other night, I heard Elbow play there. Will the Secretary of State help me get a performing arts centre of international quality in Huddersfield—an O2 for the north?

Jeremy Wright: As it happens, when I am in London I live very close to the O2, so I hear all kinds of people playing there. The hon. Gentleman is right that we should be looking to deliver the benefits of these kinds of performing opportunities to the whole country. I am happy to talk to him further about what we might do to bring this opportunity to the north, and, of course, all parts of the UK.

T6. [911088] **Dr Caroline Johnson** (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Since we are celebrating the achievements of our families today, I would like to wish my daughter Rosie good luck with her grade 5 singing exam and my younger daughter Matilda good luck with her grade 1 piano exam—and, since a mother never leaves out any of her children, congratulate Wilfred on winning his very first swimming badge this week.

Barclays released a report this week showing that more Britons are taking holidays in the UK—staycations—which is a great boost to local economies. As the Member of

Parliament for Sleaford and North Hykeham, I am very fortunate to represent an area that has many fantastic tourist attractions including the International Bomber Command Centre, the National Centre for Craft and Design, Belton House and Doddington Hall. What more are the Government doing to support tourism in Lincolnshire?

Michael Ellis: VisitBritain works very hard to promote the UK internationally, including all our regions, and promotional images from across the country demonstrate our wonderful tourism offer. In addition, VisitEngland has a brilliant programme called the Discover England fund, which helps to ensure that visitors explore all of England, including Lincolnshire. A number of Lincolnshire projects are a part of the initiative including The Explorers' Road, The Friendly Invasion and the England's Originals products.

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

Legal Professionals: Pro Bono Work

1. **Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): What steps he has taken to encourage legal professionals to undertake pro bono work in the last 12 months. [R] [911052]

3. **Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): What steps he has taken to encourage legal professionals to undertake pro bono work in the last 12 months. [911055]

7. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What steps he has taken to encourage legal professionals to undertake pro bono work in the last 12 months. [911059]

The Solicitor General (Lucy Frazer): May I start by acknowledging the work of my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Robert Buckland), my predecessor in this role? I wish him well in his new post in the Ministry of Justice.

I would also like to acknowledge the tremendous work that legal professionals up and down the country do for free every day to help people who are in need and require legal support. The Attorney General and I are the Government's pro bono champions—I am delighted to take up that role. Earlier this month the Attorney General's pro bono committee met and discussed how the Attorney General's Office can help to raise awareness of pro bono work, and I am greatly looking forward to building on this work.

Alex Chalk: The sheer volume of legal advice and assistance that lawyers offer free of charge too often goes unremarked, but is remarkable. It rights wrongs, protects rights and strengthens the rule of law; it deserves our immense gratitude. Will my hon. and learned Friend join me in paying tribute to those lawyers who give up their time to offer support to others, in particular to victims of atrocities such as the Manchester Arena bombing?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is a very well respected criminal barrister and has done a great amount of work here as a member of the Justice Committee.

He is absolutely right to highlight the incredible work that lawyers undertake for free, which does go unrecognised. He is also right to highlight the Manchester attack. We are in the anniversary week of that terrible tragedy and my thoughts are with all those who have suffered. The Manchester Law Society did a call for support and over 100 firms and barristers offered free advice and representation.

Maggie Throup: I welcome my hon. and learned Friend to her new role and wish her every success.

As has already been said, pro bono law work is an important resource for all of us as constituency MPs. Given that fact, as well as the message we have heard that lots of pro bono work is being carried out, will my hon. and learned Friend outline what more can be done to encourage law firms and universities outside London to provide more pro bono work?

The Solicitor General: That is a good point, because students can play a critical role in giving support, and of course both London and the regions need to help and support those in need. In my role as a constituency MP, I was at the Anglia Law School law clinic only few weeks ago. It brings law firms in Cambridge together with those studying at the local university to help to support people.

Peter Aldous: I thank the Bar pro bono unit for its work advising constituents who have found themselves in some very difficult situations. The unit is being rebranded as Advocate, and it would be great if the Minister could support Pro Bono Week in November and encourage MPs and their caseworkers to make referrals as early as possible.

The Solicitor General: I am pleased that my hon. Friend has mentioned the work of Advocate, which used to be called the Bar pro bono unit. As a barrister, I was pleased to volunteer for the unit. In fact, more than 3,500 barristers are now registered as volunteers for Advocate and, like my hon. Friend, I would encourage Members to refer cases to it. I do so as a constituency MP. I know that Advocate, among others, is involved in the planning of this year's Pro Bono Week, which will commence on 4 November.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): I welcome the Solicitor General to her new position. Solicitors and barristers in towns up and down the country can provide pro bono advice, as I did when I was in practice as a solicitor, only if the practices are there. There is real pressure on the provision of advice in desert areas, because private sector firms are going out of business. What is she going to do about this?

The Solicitor General: I am pleased to hear that the hon. Gentleman also did pro bono work; he is to be commended for that. As he will know, the Ministry of Justice is carrying out a review of the market at the moment. There are some areas in which there are not as many law firms offering legal aid as there could be, but that review is already being undertaken.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I warmly welcome my hon. and learned Friend to her new position and wish her well. She will know that the importance of legal advice is a theme that occurs in Gilbert and

Sullivan's opera "Iolanthe", in which my wife Anne-Louise and my two stepchildren Victoria and James will be singing principal roles with the Grim's Dyke Opera this Sunday. Does my hon. and learned Friend recognise that the valuable and magnificent pro bono work done by lawyers is there as a supplement to properly funded legal advice—from public funds as well—and that the two go together? Does she agree that one is not a replacement for the other?

The Solicitor General: It is always a pleasure to hear from my hon. Friend, who is an excellent Chair of the Justice Committee. I wish Victoria and James every success on Sunday. He is absolutely right to highlight the fact that there are many elements to the legal profession. There is of course private work, as well as legal aid and the free service provided through the pro bono work that lawyers provide. We spend £1.6 billion every year on legal aid, and we are continuing to look at how we can best support people in need through legal aid.

CPS Engagement with Local Communities

4. **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of CPS engagement with local communities on the judicial process. [911056]

8. **Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of CPS engagement with local communities on the judicial process. [911060]

The Solicitor General (Lucy Frazer): The Attorney General's Office has regular engagement with the Crown Prosecution Service, and we know that the issue of community engagement is of key importance to the CPS. In May 2018, it launched its inclusion and community engagement strategy in addition to the existing consultation groups and scrutiny panels, all of which are pivotal in building trust with all communities in relation to CPS decisions.

Damien Moore: I welcome my hon. and learned Friend to her post. Can she give an example of community engagement in my local CPS area?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend's constituency falls within the Merseyside and Cheshire CPS area, and the inclusion and community engagement manager there is Jennifer Friday. She manages an ambitious programme of community engagement that includes sessions in high schools and a community conversation with people with learning disabilities, and I commend her work. The local criminal justice board has set up a sub-group to focus on hate crime, which is chaired by the CPS and includes Sefton Council.

Eddie Hughes: Does the Minister agree that local engagement with religious and minority groups helps to build public confidence in the criminal justice system?

The Solicitor General: It is absolutely vital that the CPS engages with all communities in the region where it operates. There is a variety of local engagement strategies, including through the local scrutiny boards, and I am aware that the local chief Crown prosecutor for the west midlands has specifically engaged with the Muslim community to help to build local relations there.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): Having spoken to victims of crime and to police officers, I feel it would be hugely beneficial for the promotion of engagement and understanding of the CPS if it had the ability to explain charging decisions directly to the victims of crime. Does the Solicitor General agree, and how are we resourcing the CPS to do that work?

The Solicitor General: It is absolutely vital that the CPS talks to victims and understands both them and local communities. In fact, the CPS produced an inclusion and community engagement strategy in May 2018, which has been widely recommended. Hate crime and violence against women and girls strategy boards can discuss such issues locally.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I wish the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, the hon. and learned Member for South Swindon (Robert Buckland), well in his new role. Of course, I welcome the hon. and learned Lady to her new appointment.

One area in which community engagement by the Crown Prosecution Service is vital is the terrible crime of rape. The latest Home Office figures show that the proportion of reported rapes reaching prosecution is now at a pitiful 1.7%. In January, the proportion was 1.9%. Why does the Solicitor General think that an awful figure has got even worse in recent months?

The Solicitor General: Rape is an absolutely terrible crime, and those who suffer it need to be supported through the criminal justice system. I am pleased that the reporting figures for rape have gone up over the years, and that more people are feeling able to report rape. We have managed to improve those figures through the pilots that we have run in various regions, which are going to be rolled out. Conviction rates still need to go up, and we are looking at how to improve them.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: That percentage was not for convictions, but for the proportion of rapes even reaching charging stage. The Law Officers are presiding over a situation in which more than 98% of reported rapes are not even getting to that stage. We desperately need action, so may I make some suggestions? Let us stop the cuts to the investigative capacity of the police and the CPS, let us get the balance on disclosure right, and let us invest properly in victim support. I say seriously to the Law Officers that the figures are appalling—they must get a grip.

The Solicitor General: As the hon. Gentleman will know, rape is one of the most difficult offences to prove, with cases often relying on say-so and the testimony of individuals—the evidence of two people. I recently met the Director of Public Prosecutions to discuss the issue, and he reiterated the importance of collecting evidence in these terrible crimes so that we can bring successful prosecutions.

Prosecution Rates: Electoral Fraud

5. **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the CPS on prosecution rates for electoral fraud. [911057]

The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox): The Crown Prosecution Service works closely with the police, including by providing early investigative advice, to consider any

allegations of electoral fraud in accordance with the code of Crown prosecutors. The Crown Prosecution Service recognises the importance of protecting democracy, and all cases involving election offences are referred to specialist prosecutors within the Crown Prosecution Service's special crime and counter-terrorism division.

Dr Hug: Of 266 reported electoral fraud cases last year, only one resulted in a conviction. The Vote Leave campaign dropping its appeal is as good as its admitting the illegality and illegitimacy of the 2016 referendum result. When will electoral law breaking be treated as a serious crime? Will the Attorney General also ensure that there is a full, transparent, independent inquiry into the foreign funding of Nigel Farage's new vehicle?

The Attorney General: The hon. Lady is quite right that electoral fraud is serious. From whichever side it comes—a referendum campaign or a political party—it must be dealt with according to the law, and it is dealt with unflinchingly. We have an independent Electoral Commission that investigates electoral fraud, and it is right that the Government should allow the commission to be independent, as it must be. However, if a case is referred to the Crown Prosecution Service, it is dealt with precisely according to the code in the same way as any other offence. It is dealt with by trained specialist prosecutors, and a single point of contact in each police force is also trained in election offences. While there may be many allegations, those that are fit for prosecution will be prosecuted—I can give the hon. Lady that assurance.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I think that we all agree that electoral fraud should be rooted out and tackled, but the question is one of priorities. Many of us fail to understand why the Government appear obsessed with personation and individual electoral fraud, spending so much time and energy on a problem that is virtually non-existent, at a time when the Electoral Commission finds Vote Leave and other campaigns guilty of electoral fraud and is currently investigating the Brexit party. Is it not time that the Government reassessed their priorities and focused on the organised campaigns that try to thwart our procedures?

The Attorney General: I cannot comment on any ongoing investigations that may be carried out, as the hon. Gentleman will understand, but the Electoral Commission, as he knows, is independent and is charged with responsibility for ensuring the integrity of elections. The commission has a full range of powers that it is able to use, and it takes its decisions with full independence.

I assure the hon. Gentleman that if any prima facie case of electoral fraud is referred to the Crown Prosecution Service, it will be dealt with with complete and utter impartiality, and will be prosecuted.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Very briefly, the remaining questions.

Support for Parliamentarians (Intimidation and Harassment)

6. **Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): What steps the CPS is taking to support parliamentarians in responding to intimidating behaviour and harassment. [911058]

The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox): Everyone should be free to go about their business without facing abuse or harassment, and the Crown Prosecution Service recently published an information pack to help Members of this House and the other place to recognise possible criminal conduct and to report it to the police. Criminal offences committed against Members of this House imperil the democratic process and public service, and the Crown Prosecution Service is fully committed to pursuing prosecutions in these cases, wherever appropriate.

Rebecca Pow: Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that it is important that colleagues and members of staff who think they have been abused or harassed come forward to report those cases so that we can get this exemplary system working here in Parliament?

The Attorney General: I do agree, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. It is vital that everybody should have the courage and confidence to be able to come forward. The pack that was given to all Members of this House indicates how to report such cases and the process that will be followed, and that publication is a good guide, I hope, to the way in which both staff and Members should deal with the matter.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): This is deepest complacency. These are supposed to be topical questions. Lord Neuberger has said that the justice system is in crisis because of legal aid cuts. Does the Attorney General accept that the Crown Prosecution Service is so under-resourced that it cannot do its job?

A man drove into a bus queue in my constituency, killing a little girl and injuring two other people. The CPS did not even charge him with careless driving. Something is deeply wrong with the CPS, and the Attorney General should wake up to it.

The Attorney General: I admire the hon. Gentleman's passion, and I am sure it is entirely well grounded and sincere. The Crown Prosecution Service applies the code of conduct for prosecutors. In those circumstances, it is completely right that it does so impartially. I do not know the case to which he refers but, if he writes to me, I am certainly willing to look into it. Question 6 is on the abuse and harassment of Members of this House and the other place, and I hope we can both agree that any such abuse and harassment is deplorable and contemptible, and is an attack upon democracy.

Mr Speaker: Finally, and briefly, Mr Jim Cunningham.

Prosecution of Sexual Offences (Criminal Gangs)

9. **Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Director of Public Prosecutions on ensuring more effective prosecutions of cases of (a) rape and (b) other sexual offences where the victims are involved in criminal gangs. [911061]

The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox): The offences of gang-related rape and other sexual violence, including child sexual exploitation, are dealt with by specially

trained rape and serious sexual offences lawyers who work closely with police investigators to build strong cases. The training is regularly updated, as is the legal guidance, to support the effectiveness of rape and sexual offences prosecutions, including building awareness of victims and the issues connected with victims in the context of gang-related violence.

Mr Cunningham: I draw the Attorney General's attention to the fact that organisations such as the Coventry rape and sexual abuse centre are struggling to be funded. These organisations play a major role in advising victims. When will these organisations be properly funded, and will he meet me to discuss it?

The Attorney General: Whether the hon. Gentleman is referring to organisations inside or outside the Crown Prosecution Service, I am very happy to meet him if the matter is within my sphere of responsibility. I can assure him that the Government are now reviewing why there is a problem of reported cases of rape going up and the number of convictions and prosecutions going down. We are concerned to tackle it, which is why we are seeking to get to the bottom of the factors that affect it, but they are complicated factors. It is not as easy as saying, "Well, the prosecutors are not prosecuting enough." There are many factors affecting this question, and we all need to come together to inquire into it and to reach the right solutions.

Speaker's Statement

10.34 am

Mr Speaker: Colleagues, today marks the last day in the service of the House of the Principal Clerk of the Table Office, Philippa Helme. Philippa began in the service of the House on 3 October 1983, so she has served for 35 years, seven months and 20 days. I hope colleagues will agree that she has been a diligent, personable, efficient, ever-helpful and outstanding servant of the House as an institution and of individual Members who have sought her guidance.

I first came to know Philippa in 1997, when I joined the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs, of which she was the brilliant Clerk. [*Interruption.*] Happy days, as the Attorney General pointedly observes from a sedentary position. She has done wonders for this place. She retires after that magnificent tenure and, as she approaches her retirement, we wish Philippa, her husband, Robin, and all the family every possible success, good health and happiness long into the future. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"]

Whorlton Hall

10.36 am

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Minister if she will make a statement on the treatment of people with learning disabilities and complex needs at Whorlton Hall.

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): Many of us here today, and many of those listening and watching this urgent question, will have seen the very disturbing footage shown on the "Panorama" TV programme last night. It was footage detailing the incredibly traumatic experiences of vulnerable people with learning disabilities and autism at Whorlton Hall—somewhere they should have been safe, somewhere they should have been cared for. The actions revealed by the programme are simply appalling—there is no other word to describe them—and I condemn any abuse of this kind completely and utterly.

I want to begin by saying that I can only imagine the impact of those experiences on the people themselves, and the lasting damage and trauma that it will have caused to them and their lives. It must also have been incredibly distressing for their families, watching what has been happening to their loved ones, unable to step in and unable to do anything to help them. It is utterly, utterly tragic. On behalf of the health and care system, I am deeply sorry that this has happened.

As hon. Members will be aware, unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident; we have heard reports like this before. That is why there have been a number of reports published even this week on the care of people with learning disabilities and autistic people in in-patient settings. All those reports have been commissioned directly or indirectly by the Government, and all of them have found very clear evidence of care that has fallen way below the standard we expect and the standards that people absolutely deserve.

The allegations of abuse at Whorlton Hall were shared with my Department, NHS England, the Care Quality Commission and the provider ahead of the programme airing yesterday. Immediate steps were taken to ensure the safety of patients, including ensuring that safe staffing levels were maintained following the suspension of a significant number of staff by the provider. A Whorlton Hall incident co-ordination group was established, involving NHS England; NHS Improvement; Cygnet, as the owner; the CQC's regional head of inspection; the local clinical commissioning group; and the local authority.

Durham constabulary opened a criminal investigation earlier this month, and the CQC and NHS England are supporting its enquiries. While that investigation is ongoing, I cannot comment on the specific incidents or individuals depicted, as Members will understand. The evidence presented, including but not limited to the "Panorama" footage, must be thoroughly examined, and where those investigations find that allegations of abuse are substantiated, action will be taken.

One thing we can all be clear on is that what was shown last night was not care, nor was it in any way caring—suffice it to say that I am clear in my mind the nature of what was occurring at Whorlton Hall.

There are three questions that we need to consider urgently. First, was the activity in Whorlton Hall criminal? The police investigation is looking into that. Secondly,

is the regulatory and inspection framework working for these types of services? We want to know why, after whistleblowing concerns had been raised, was the outrageous culture and behaviour at Whorlton Hall not identified? What went wrong? We will be working to understand in detail the timeline of events, the actions taken and where things might have been addressed earlier. Thirdly, was the oversight of commissioners fit for purpose? Where were the CQC and NHS England in this?

More broadly, there is a range of questions about whether these types of institutions and these types of in-patient settings are ever an appropriate place to keep vulnerable people for any extended length of time and why community provision is not sufficient. Work is continuing on all those subjects as well. We know the problems that exist in the system and we are utterly determined address them.

Norman Lamb: I thank the Minister for that response. Last night's "Panorama" was deeply shocking and particularly distressing for any family who have a loved one in an institution and are worried about their safety. We saw people with learning disabilities and autism mocked, intimidated, taunted and provoked, and care workers admitting to deliberately hurting patients—behaviour appropriately described as psychological torture. The individuals responsible must be held to account, but so must the provider that allowed this dreadful culture to persist. Will there now be an investigation by the Health and Safety Executive into the possibility of criminal prosecution against the provider?

The truth is that, seven years on from Winterbourne View, the system continues to sanction a model of care that is outdated and wrong. If people are contained in institutions a long way from home, awful things will happen behind closed doors. Will the Secretary of State now take personal responsibility for closing down institutions that provide the wrong model of care? Why does the CQC continue to register new institutions that offer inappropriate institutional care? Does the CQC need new powers? What lessons must we learn from the fact that the CQC rated this place as good? Is this another case of whistleblowers not being listened to? How much was Cygnet charging the NHS per week for this awful abuse and neglect?

This horror comes in the same week as a damning CQC report on segregation, an equally scathing report by the Children's Commissioner on children being wrongly placed in institutions where force is routinely used and the LeDeR—learning disabilities mortality review—report confirming the extent to which people with learning disabilities and autism are fatally failed by the system. Does the Minister accept that we are tolerating widespread human rights abuses? Is it true that the Government moved forward the publication of the CQC report to pre-empt the "Panorama" report? What families want is not another review; they want action to protect their loved ones.

Will the Government take action to end the endemic use of restraint—including face-down restraint against adults and children—five years after I issued guidance to that end? When will the Government tell us what will replace the transforming care programme? It ended in March and we are still waiting—there is hardly a sense of urgency. Finally, will there now be substantial investment

in the development of community facilities, so that people with learning disabilities and autism have the chance of a good life that the rest of us take for granted?

Caroline Dinage: These exchanges reflect the views that I am certain we all hold, and I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising all those questions. The culture and behaviour shown on yesterday's television programme are absolutely abhorrent and we must stamp them out. More broadly, it is clear from the reports published earlier this week, which the right hon. Gentleman refers to, that we need to do much more to improve the quality of care in mental health wards for anyone with a learning disability or autism. I want to reassure the House that we absolutely recognise that, and steps are being taken to address it.

Societies are rightly judged on the way we treat our most vulnerable citizens. This is not just about reviewing a few individual cases in which things went wrong; it is about a system across health, education, social care and criminal justice—it all needs to change. Today, people will rightly be very angry about what has happened and what was shown on last night's television programme, and they will want answers. They will also rightly be very angry that, eight years after Winterbourne View, we have another scandalous case in which vulnerable people with learning disabilities or autism are on the receiving end. They will rightly ask what action has been taken and what more we need to do.

As the right hon. Gentleman will know, six months ago the Secretary of State commissioned the CQC report on segregation, seclusion and restrictive practices. It was published earlier this week simply because the original publication due date of 31 May is during a recess, and he will know that the Department has come in for enormous criticism in the past for publishing reports when Parliament is in recess, post elections or when the House is not sitting and for publishing late. We wanted to avoid all those things. That is why the date was brought forward. The publication was ready and we took the view to publish it. The publication of the LeDeR report was a matter for NHS England, of course, it being an independent document.

The action we announced in response to the CQC report on Tuesday confirms how seriously we take this issue. We are adamant that no stone should be left unturned in identifying problems, poor practice and care that falls short of what we would expect for our own family members. That said, this is not about segregation or seclusion or failings at specific hospitals, but about the need for far better oversight more generally. Where it is essential that somebody be supported at a distance from their home, we will make sure that those arrangements are supervised. We will not tolerate having people out of sight and out of mind. Where someone with a learning disability or an autistic person has to be an in-patient out of area, they will now be visited on site every six weeks if they are a child and every eight weeks if they are an adult.

The host clinical commissioning group will also be given new responsibilities to oversee and monitor the quality of care provided in their area. This is an issue not just for the regulator, but for those who commission the care. We must be clear that improving the quality of specialist in-patient care is critical, but we are committed to preventing people from entering crisis and having to

[*Caroline Dinenage*]

be admitted to in-patient care in the first place, and that is what the transforming care programme is about. This programme has not finished. As was highlighted in the NHS long-term plan, the transforming care programme and the building the right support plan continue, and we are renewing and redoubling efforts to reduce the number of people in an in-patient setting by 35%. So far, it is down 22% from 2015, but that endeavour continues. The right hon. Gentleman highlights the report from the Children's Commissioner on Monday. We take the issues they spoke about very seriously.

The right hon. Gentleman asked lots of questions, many of which I think were answered in the three questions I highlighted earlier—the questions that we will be addressing over the coming weeks: criminal liability, oversight and commissioning. Where there have been failings, these will be addressed. Autistic children often have a range of needs or supports that must be joined up, which is why we are reviewing our entire autism strategy and will extend it to include children. As part of the NHS long-term plan, there will be a concerted effort to implement arrangements to ensure that those at the highest risk of admission to a specialist hospital get the help they need, and we will ensure that every area has a dynamic support register in place.

We think that staff in these settings must be much better trained in awareness of learning disabilities and autism, which is why we conducted a thorough inquiry and public consultation on training for learning disabilities and autism. In the coming months, we will set out our response to that consultation and proposals to introduce mandatory training for all health and care staff. We will continue to bring those in-patient numbers down and take every step to take the best practice in health and care and make it the norm everywhere. We will root out toxic cultures and behaviours of the type we saw last night so very painfully on our television screens, but I am fully aware that there is no room for complacency.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. This is an extremely important and sensitive matter, but I am looking to move on to the business question at 11 o'clock, so short questions and short—though, I am sure, informative—replies are required.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What happens at the Care Quality Commission's headquarters when a story such as this emerges? Are the inspectors who so recently rated the facility summoned in for a meeting without coffee, or perhaps with the rough end of a pineapple?

Caroline Dinenage: The Care Quality Commission is taking the situation incredibly seriously. Some massive concerns were raised last night, and Paul Lelliott from the CQC apologised and said that the matter would be very thoroughly addressed and investigated by its team.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I appreciate the Minister's response, but the Secretary of State really should be here to deal with this. The abuse shown on the BBC "Panorama" programme last night was appalling, and it should never have been allowed to happen. The fact that it is eight years since the Winterbourne View scandal and nothing has changed should be a

source of shame for the Government. Rather than warm words—the Government seem to be getting good at warm words these days, but little else—will the Minister take personal responsibility and tell us what she is doing to ensure that this never happens again?

The abuse that was shown was tantamount to psychological torture, with residents sworn at, threatened and intimidated. Other residents were violently restrained or deliberately hurt by care staff. As the Minister has mentioned, other cases—such as Mendip House and Thors Park—show that this is not an isolated incident; it is part of a pattern of cruel and callous behaviour in such institutions. There is only one sure way to end this abuse, and that is to close down the institutions and move people into supported placements in the community.

Many of the people who were abused at Whorlton Hall were hundreds of miles from their families. Does the Minister recognise that cutting people off from their support networks allows such abuse to carry on without anyone noticing? Labour has pledged £350 million extra per year to ensure that people can move from such institutions and be supported in the community instead. Will the Minister match that commitment?

In 2011, the Government pledged to end the use of units such as Whorlton Hall. Eight years later, however, there are still more than 2,200 people detained in inappropriate institutions. More recent targets, which were less ambitious, were also missed. After years of broken promises, autistic people, people with learning disabilities and their families cannot trust the Government to deliver on their promises. Is it not time the Government brought in an independent commissioner to oversee the closure of such units?

Caroline Dinenage: I do not agree with the hon. Lady that what I have said today is about warm words; it is about action. The CQC report that came out on Tuesday was commissioned by our Secretary of State to really shine a light on the matter. We are shining a light on some of the most distressing information so that we can address it—so that we cannot brush it under the carpet and speak warm words about it. Not only did we accept all the CQC's recommendations, but we made more recommendations of our own that we intend to put into practice.

In answer to some of the hon. Lady's questions, I am very clear that as far as possible, people should be treated in a community setting. If they have to go into an in-patient setting, they should be as close to home as possible and they should be there for the shortest possible time, with a very clear route out and plan for their future. To help to deliver that, we have committed £4.5 billion to community funding as part of the NHS long-term plan, and I expect a good proportion of that money to be spent on investing in the community settings that we need.

Barbara Keeley Why not close them?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady is saying from a sedentary position that we should close settings, but we are talking about very vulnerable people who have complex needs and require special care, and we need to make sure that there are sufficient services in the community to support them. It would be a complete dereliction of our duty and responsibility to take people out of one setting that is not working for them and put them into another setting that will be as bad, or worse.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I thank the Minister for her robust efforts to get to grips with the matter. I have heard from my constituents overnight that they have no confidence in the CQC if it thought it could get away with assessing Whorlton Hall as good. If it takes an undercover investigator to highlight a message that whistleblowers are not getting through, why are the Government not taking immediate action properly to investigate every single in-patient centre so that the Minister can look us all in the eye and say, “I know which places are safe and which are not”?

Caroline Dinéage: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that point. I think the CQC itself admitted to this. In fact, some of its social media engagement over the past 24 hours has been unprecedented in its level of frankness and openness, and in the way in which it has shown a desire to change and make this situation better. It has been very disturbing for everybody concerned, and it is true that NHS England has started enhanced oversight and scrutiny of this particular group's other learning disability and autism settings to try to ensure that we are not going to uncover any more stories of such horror.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): What was revealed on “Panorama” last night was truly horrific. This was public service broadcasting at its best, but it should not have taken the BBC to uncover the case; the CQC got this totally wrong. However, whatever the failings of the CQC, ultimate responsibility must lie with those who own and manage these homes and make money out of them. I am therefore extremely concerned to hear that the Minister has put Cygnet on the body that is to look into this matter. There is a clear conflict of interest because Cygnet may end up needing to be prosecuted. Finally, the Government need to fund these services properly. It is no good having people who are not qualified and not properly paid working with the most vulnerable people in society.

Caroline Dinéage: Let me clarify what I said, because I think the hon. Lady might have slightly got the wrong end of the stick. I did not say that Cygnet was being put on a group that is investigating this situation. I said that a group was established to deal with the immediate problem as soon as the issue came to light. That immediate problem was the safety of the individuals living in this particular setting and the conduct of those whose behaviour had been so outrageous. At that point, we were told that 21 people had been suspended. The safety of the individuals living in the setting was therefore our immediate concern, as well as finding alternative places for many of them to go. At that point, there was an incident co-ordination group that included Cygnet because it is the owner, but that group was set up to deal with the immediate situation that needed to be dealt with very promptly.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The NHS has been using a system of ambulatory care, particularly to deal with elderly patients by treating them in their home, plus a hospital visit. Why has this not been rolled out quicker to those with learning disabilities and autism?

Caroline Dinéage: That is what we are looking towards, which is why the Government are putting so much more money—£4.5 billion of the extra investment in the NHS—into the sorts of community services that we

need to make exactly that a reality. There are cases where people do end up in an in-patient setting, often because services have failed and their situation has almost reached crisis point. The transforming care and building the right support system that I spoke about earlier is all about ensuring that we get people out of those settings as quickly as possible and into the right kind of support in the community.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Change UK): Too many people are ending up in terrible institutional care hundreds of miles from home for the want of much more appropriate community care, including social care. The Minister has spoken about not wanting to delay the publication of reports, but she will know that the delay to the social care Green Paper has been unaccountably prolonged. Will she bring forward the social care Green Paper, because this issue lies at the root of inappropriate admissions?

Caroline Dinéage: The hon. Lady knows that I listen very carefully to what she says. I completely share her frustration about the delays to the social care Green Paper, but I do not think that we should ever be held back from making progress on all the things that are wrong in society that we care very deeply about because we are awaiting the publication of such documents. We will therefore be pushing forward with all the work on a lot of the issues that I have spoken about today as a matter of great urgency.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Mencap has called for a cross-Department ministerial working group to review the system, and a taskforce made up of people with real-life experience of dealing with people with learning disabilities and autism. Will my hon. Friend confirm that she will set up both such groups so that we can get some action in helping people who are suffering?

Caroline Dinéage: There is already a cross-departmental working group on disability, and quite rightly, this could be part of its work. In addition, as part of the response to the CQC report published on Tuesday, the Secretary of State has committed to set up a group made up of academics and experts, including experts by experience, to look at exactly that.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I chair the Westminster Commission on Autism. The Minister will know that people on social media are asking why it took a television programme to reveal this. Can we learn the lessons quickly? I make no party political point—these crises have happened under other Governments, but we have to learn the lessons and reappraise the whole sector. Some people have said this morning that we should keep these children and adults close to home, in their communities, and that is right. We should also look at something that has really worked, which is the Children's Commissioner, especially with someone like Anne Longfield in the role. That has been an enormous success, and perhaps we need a commissioner for autism, who would give a voice and a personality to this kind of crisis.

Caroline Dinéage: I greatly respect all the work that the hon. Gentleman does with autistic people, and I know he is passionate about this. He is right. We have committed to review the autism strategy. The Autism

[*Caroline Dinenage*]

Act 2009 is the only condition-specific piece of legislation in British law, and we want to ensure that it continues to be fit for purpose. The consultation on the autism strategy review has just closed, and we will look carefully at everything that comes out of it.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What protection is in place for those who come forward to shine a light on allegations relating to such grave care? What is the Minister's message to people who have concerns?

Caroline Dinenage: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that, because it is the whistleblowers who have brought these concerns to everyone's attention. It is deeply regrettable that whistleblowers brought this to people's attention before, and it was investigated, but this abuse was not rooted out and stopped. We need more protection for whistleblowers. We have accepted some of the CQC's recommendations on encouraging whistleblowers to come forward, and we are always looking at more ways to offer protection and encourage them to do so. It is always wrong when deeply disturbing practices have to be brought to light by those who shine a light on them.

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): Children with autism and learning disabilities are still being pinned face-down on the floor, tied to beds or locked up in seclusion rooms. The Government promised five years ago to publish guidance to prevent that kind of abuse, but they still have not done it. After Whorlton Hall, we desperately need a date. When will the Government publish that guidance?

Caroline Dinenage: The Secretary of State commissioned a report on exactly that—segregation and restrictive practice. It was published on Tuesday, and we have accepted all the recommendations. We are working very hard on this. There will be guidance, but it is more important than that. As shown in the TV programme last night, there was training and guidance on the restrictive practices to be implemented, but it was ignored, and restraint was recorded incorrectly. This is a much bigger issue than the one the hon. Gentleman highlights.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I see more and more families in my surgery with loved ones who suffer from autism or learning difficulties being failed by the system. Will the Minister give an assurance to my constituents and their families that there will be a genuine focus in the NHS long-term plan on these vulnerable people?

Caroline Dinenage: I thank my hon. Friend for that question; she is right to raise it. Autism and learning disability are both mentioned as clinical priorities in the NHS long-term plan. That is absolutely right, and we must relentlessly continue that focus.

Business of the House

11.3 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): May I welcome the hon. Gentleman to business questions and ask him to give us the forthcoming business?

The Comptroller of Her Majesty's Household (Mark Spencer): Although the House will realise that I am not the Leader of the House, I welcome the opportunity on behalf of the Government to set out the business and to take questions from colleagues today. Mr Speaker, it is a pleasure once again to have my voice heard within this Chamber, without being chastised by you for doing so.

The business for the week commencing 3 June will include:

MONDAY 3 JUNE—The House will not be sitting.

TUESDAY 4 JUNE—Remaining stages of the Wild Animals in Circuses (No. 2) Bill, followed by a debate on a motion on the mineworkers' pension scheme. The subject of this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

WEDNESDAY 5 JUNE—Motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 (Exceptions) Order 1975 (Amendment) (England and Wales) Order 2019, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2019, followed by a general debate on invisible disabilities and accessibility challenges. The subject of this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

THURSDAY 6 JUNE—General debate on the response to the Grenfell Tower fire, followed by a debate on a motion on mortgage prisoners and vulture funds. The subjects of these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 7 JUNE—The House will not be sitting.

We will update the House on the publication and introduction of the withdrawal agreement Bill on our return from the Whitsun recess.

Before I sit down, I would like to pay tribute to a superb outgoing Leader of the House. I think the whole House, across all Benches, will agree with me that my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) was a dedicated Leader of the House who was passionate about her responsibilities in this Chamber. She made a real difference during her time in post. As the Prime Minister recognised yesterday, she leaves a legacy of championing reform in this House. She was unfailingly dedicated to changing the culture within Westminster. She introduced a new complaints system to this House, was pivotal to the introduction of proxy voting and took on the challenge of setting the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster in train. She is an excellent colleague, she was a formidable Leader of the House and I wish her the very best for the future.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the hon. Gentleman for stepping up and giving us the forthcoming business. I do not know what I have done wrong, but it seems there is some sort of relationship with my hon. Friend the

Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), who has got two extra Back-Bench days; I am obviously going to ask for our Opposition day back.

I, too, want to place on record my thanks to the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), whom I have shadowed for I think nearly two years. She has made a huge contribution in pulling together new policies on bullying, harassment and sexual harassment, with the establishment of the independent complaints and grievance scheme, and in working with all colleagues across the House and across parties to ensure the system for the first proxy votes for our colleagues has been put in place.

The right hon. Lady's commitment to the restoration and renewal programme culminated in the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill, which passed its Second Reading on Tuesday. I want to place on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami), who made a wonderful debut at the Dispatch Box, for opening and closing the debate for Her Majesty's Opposition; I had a long-standing personal commitment, which involved wearing a hat. I also want to thank the deputy Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington), who has also enabled us to get to this place on restoration and renewal. The non-execs are always going on at us that we and our staff do not do the fire safety and safety training, so I encourage all Members to do that, and also—as the outgoing Leader of the House would say—the training on the behaviour code.

We are in “Brexit paralysis”—the words of a Government Minister. The Government have had three years, with five major speeches and red lines which never changed, and that have brought us to this position. Yesterday, the Prime Minister told the House that the Second Reading of the withdrawal agreement Bill would be in the week commencing 3 June; we now hear it is not, so in less than 24 hours the Prime Minister has broken her word. This is yet another broken promise by the Prime Minister on Brexit. Will the hon. Gentleman confirm why the Bill is not coming forward for its Second Reading as promised, and when is it likely to do so? Why is the Prime Minister incapable of keeping her word? Will it actually be published on 24 May, as the Prime Minister told the Commons yesterday, or will this be another broken promise? Why did the Prime Minister raise the issue of EU election purdah, when last week the Leader of the House said that there was no such issue and that the Government had received advice to that effect? Will the Bill be published in draft form so that hon. Members can amend it? When will it receive its First Reading? How long will we have to debate it, and how many days will it be in Committee, if it achieves its Second Reading?

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Prime Minister has become part of the problem? Even Ministers in her Cabinet know that she must go. Yet again, she has put her own political survival ahead of the national interest. It is clear that she does not command a majority for her approach to Brexit, and she has failed to accept that political reality. The Prime Minister has failed in the central policy of her Government, and the continuation of the current political situation leaves our country without the leadership it needs. The country cannot continue without an effective Government, and a fresh approach to leadership is clearly required.

It is not just with Brexit that there is paralysis—there is paralysis everywhere else. British Steel is among the UK's most important manufacturers. It is one of Network Rail's largest suppliers, and 95% of rails are supplied by the Scunthorpe plant. More importantly, this is about the lives of nearly 4,500 people and their families, mainly in Scunthorpe but also at the Teesside plants, and there are as many as 20,000 more people in the supply chain. This issue will not just affect people now—it will affect future generations. My hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) asked whether the company is a good steward for that vital business, and the Government are in paralysis, which will affect future generations.

In the run-up to International Children's Day on 1 June, two alarming reports have highlighted that the Government are failing in their duty to protect the most vulnerable children. The report by the Children's Commissioner for England, Anne Longfield, is entitled “Who are they? Where are they? Children locked up”, and for the first time it gathers together all the data about children living in children's homes, youth justice settings, mental health wards, and other residential placements. In England, 1,465 children were detained in 2018, and the report found that an additional 211 children were locked away and their whereabouts in the system is invisible.

In 2016 the Health Committee, of which I was a member, produced a report on this issue, but no action has been taken. A Care Quality Commission report published this week found that 62 people are living in segregation in mental health settings, and 20 of those are children or young people. In 16 cases people had spent more than a year in isolation, with children and young people staying for up to two and a half years. The Minister said earlier that the Government are setting up a taskforce. Will he come to the House and update it on what is going on?

Human Rights Watch has said that the Government are breaching their international duty to keep people from hunger by pursuing “cruel and harmful policies” with no regard for the impact on children living in poverty. The United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, published his final report, stating that child poverty in Britain today is

“not just a disgrace, but a social calamity and an economic disaster.”

If the Government are challenging that, why can we not have a debate in Government time to consider those statistics and hear about their next steps? Those are independent reports.

This week we heard harrowing testimony about the London attacks, and about the heroic actions of doctors and nurses, and of people helping each other, including Ignacio Echeverria, who went towards the attackers with his skateboard trying to save lives. It is also the second anniversary of the Manchester bombings and those young people who went to a concert. At a concert, and on a Saturday night out, that loss of innocent lives will never be forgotten.

Finally, Philippa, thank you very much, and good luck.

Mark Spencer: I welcome the hon. Lady's comments about the former Leader of the House. They enjoyed a sparky relationship across the Dispatch Box, but I

[Mark Spencer]

know it was one of mutual respect. My right hon. Friend has a great deal of respect for the hon. Lady, and she enjoyed her time opposing her at the Dispatch Box.

We plan to publish the withdrawal agreement Bill in the week commencing 3 June. We had hoped it would have its Second Reading on Friday 7 June, but at the moment we have not secured agreement for that through the usual channels. We will, of course, update the House when we return from recess.

The hon. Lady is right to draw the attention of the House to the steel industry. Hon. Members from across the Chamber will have listened to the urgent question and ministerial statement this week. The Business Secretary is currently engaged with Greycell and British Steel to try to find a resolution. The Government recognise the importance of that and recognise that our constituents' jobs and livelihoods depend on it. We will do all we can to assist and try to secure a way forward.

On vulnerable children, the hon. Lady is right to draw the attention of the House to this challenge. The Government recognise that we need to find a way forward. We need to work together and continue the battle against poverty. We need to drive in the right direction as fast we can, but we can only do that if we have economic success. We need to use the economic success the Government have created to resource and move forward.

Turning to the rapporteur the hon. Lady referred to, I wholly reject that report. The report actually talks about Governments from the second world war onward, including Governments that Opposition Members were members of. I reject the notion that this country since the second world war has not made significant progress. Governments of all colours have tried to tackle these issues and move forward. This Government continue in that direction and are doing all they can to move forward.

The hon. Lady made reference to the Manchester bombing. That was a terrible event and I think that is one topic that unites the whole House. When children and young adults go out to a concert they expect to do so in safety and for someone to commit an abhorrent act, as they did on that evening, is beyond words. We should be grateful to the emergency services who have to deal with the aftermath of such events and pay tribute to them.

Before I sit down I would like to add my voice to those who have paid tribute to the retiring Principal Clerk of the Table Office, Philippa Helme. I wish Colin Lee success as he takes over the role.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I join you, Mr Speaker, and others in paying tribute to our retiring Clerk, Philippa Helme. She and I joined the House at roughly the same time. Throughout her time here she has given wise advice. If only it had been taken by everyone. I wish her a happy retirement sailing and with her dogs. The tragedy, Mr Speaker, is that she leaves this place when in my judgment Parliament is at an all-time low.

Moving on to more pleasant things, will my hon. Friend or whoever will be Leader of the House find time for a debate—there is plenty of time for a debate

on anything and everything—on the enforcement of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and the Protection against Cruel Tethering Act 1988, of which I was the promoter? I find it very disappointing that a number of local authorities do not, for whatever reason, employ animal welfare inspectors. There is no earthly good this place legislating unless our laws are enforced by someone.

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who is a vociferous campaigner on animal rights. The Government uphold our high standards on welfare, including in relation to tethering. Under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, it is an offence to fail to provide for an animal's welfare or to cause it unnecessary suffering. If anybody is concerned about the way in which an animal has been tethered or treated, they can report that to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals or World Horse Welfare. They can investigate and, if necessary, take out prosecutions. This topic would make an excellent suggestion for an Adjournment debate. I am sure that Mr Speaker would be sympathetic to such an appeal.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for announcing the business for the week that we come back. May I too wish you, Philippa, all the very best in your retirement? Enjoy yourself. You deserve it.

I was not sure whether there would even be a business statement this morning and it is certainly a novelty to have business questions without a Leader of the House, but may I start by wishing the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) all the best? I enjoyed our banter on Thursday mornings. I think we will all miss her good-natured and convivial approach at business questions. I think we should all thank her for the very determined leadership she offered on a whole range of issues across the House, from tackling bullying and sexual harassment to proxy voting for baby leave. We wish her all the best.

I, Mr Speaker, will now be going on to my fourth Leader of the House in four years. I am looking forward to seeing who will be at the Dispatch Box when we return, but it has to be asked: who would want the job? We have a Prime Minister hanging on by her fingertips, barricaded into No. 10, and a Government collapsing around her ears, as we speak.

Just what on earth is this so-called business for the week after next? We were promised the withdrawal agreement Bill on the Tuesday and Wednesday that we return. Unless it has been renamed the Wild Animals in Circuses Bill, which was always quite likely, I am afraid I do not see it anywhere in the business statement. Can the temporary Leader of the House tell us when we will see the withdrawal agreement Bill? I heard him say something about a Friday, which I did not quite understand. Perhaps he can flesh that out a little, because the House wants to know when and if we are going to have it.

The business is all Backbench business. The Government should make my friend the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) the new Leader of the House, given that they are taking all their business to him. He would make a very good job of it, too. [Interruption.] He says, "Taking coals to Newcastle"—indeed. What is intriguing about the withdrawal agreement Bill is that it seems to offer the prospect of a second referendum. The Tories

in Scotland are running around today saying that they are the party that is resolutely against any future referendums, so what has happened with the withdrawal agreement Bill is that the Government have deprived these one-trick ponies of their one trick.

It is hard to believe that we are having an EU election today, but the Government should be commended for one thing: the Tories' attempts to make sure that no one votes for them look like being extremely successful. But in Scotland it is entirely different: people can vote to keep Scotland in the European Union and to make our decisions for ourselves—and they will get that when they vote SNP today.

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his warm words about the former Leader of the House. I know that she enjoyed the sparky relationship that she had diagonally across the Chamber with him.

We are hoping to publish the withdrawal agreement Bill in the week commencing 3 June. During discussions with the usual channels, we will see when that comes forward, but at the moment we have not secured agreement through the usual channels and we will update the House when we return after recess. The hon. Gentleman is able to feed into the usual channels and I am sure that he will use his influence to do so. I also say to him that he jumps in and starts to condemn the withdrawal agreement Bill before he has even read it. He should wait until it is published. He can take the opportunity to read through it and then form his opinion, instead of jumping the gun and deciding that he is going to oppose it.

Of course, I wish all the candidates standing in the European elections the very best for election day today. I hope that everybody will go out and vote. I have voted Conservative already and I hope that many other people will do the same.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I welcome the excellent acting Leader of the House to the Dispatch Box; his clarity on these occasions is up to the previous Leader's clarity. Will he explain to us how the usual channels have anything to do with when a Government Bill is debated in the Chamber? I just do not follow that. However, my main question to the excellent acting Leader of the House is this: there is some speculation, however remote, that the Prime Minister might resign tomorrow. Could we have a statement on what mechanism there is to recall the House? Surely whether the House is recalled during the recess should be up to the House, and not up to the Government.

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend will be aware that any decision to recall the House is a procedure that is set out and which everybody understands. There are currently no plans to recall the House at any point in the future. I am sure that he will be engaging with all the usual channels, including the Whips Office, to make sure that his views are listened to and heard. I am sure that he will take every opportunity to make sure that his vociferous and well known views are taken fully into account.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the acting Leader of the House for announcing the very first Backbench business week in this place—it is very welcome. With the assistance of the Clerks and members of the Backbench Business Committee, we managed at very

short notice to pull together business to fill the void that the Government highlighted to us, so that there are debates to be had on the 4 and 5 June. There are still significant concerns among Members and we have a long list of unheard Backbench business debates.

May I echo your comments, Mr Speaker, about Philippa Helme? Philippa, I wish you a long, healthy and happy retirement. It is undoubtedly deserved and you go with my very best wishes.

I also echo the comments that have been made about the former Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom). In my role as Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, she has always been a pleasure to work with. She has been approachable and open to discussion about developing Backbench business as an entity within this House, and I thank her for that.

Mark Spencer: I support the hon. Gentleman's comments about the retiring Clerk. I had hoped that the hon. Gentleman would be a little more grateful: I have been in this role for nearly 20 minutes and I have already secured him three debates. He turns up every week asking for more time for Backbench business debates and when he gets it he is still not happy. We can only provide that service to him. I know that Backbench business debates are valued across the House, and he does a fine job of making sure that we get the right topics at the right moment.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): It is good to hear a Nottinghamshire accent at the Dispatch Box—almost as good as a Lincolnshire one. You and I know, Mr Speaker, that levity is sometimes virtuous here, as it lightens the burden of the work we do, but it is with a heavy heart today that I must challenge the flawed decisions of the perverse Parole Board that let vicious criminals—indeed, heartless murderers—back on to our streets. The Government promised to act to introduce a reconsideration mechanism by which victims' families could ask for a review, but that has not yet come in. Will my hon. Friend therefore ask the Law Officers to enact an immediate review of all Parole Board decisions? It is vital that the liberal establishment grasps what our constituents know: that there is a world of difference between kind hearts and soft heads.

Mark Spencer: My right hon. Friend is a long-standing campaigner on matters of law and order. I know that he will take the opportunity to raise his concerns at Justice questions on 4 June, when a Minister will be able to respond to him directly.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Change UK): Brixham Trawler Agents in my constituency recently invested £107,000 in rooftop solar for the fish market. It applied in good faith and in advance of the deadline, but unfortunately fell the wrong side of the cap. It therefore faces considerable unexpected costs. Given that the House has now declared a climate and environment emergency, may we have a debate about how we can properly reward those who are doing the right thing by trying to reduce their carbon footprint and serve their communities?

Before I finish, I join others in thanking Philippa Helme for the remarkable work she has done. I thank her personally and on behalf of Select Committees for

[Dr Sarah Wollaston]

everything, and I wish her a long and happy retirement. Will the Minister also send my personal good wishes to the retiring Leader of the House? I thank her for the constructive work she has done to support Select Committees.

Mark Spencer: Of course I will pass on the hon. Lady's good wishes to the former Leader of the House. In January, the Government published a consultation, "The future for small-scale low-carbon generation", on a smart export guarantee to follow the feed-in tariff scheme, which closed to new products on 31 March, with some limited grace periods and extensions. The SEG will ensure that small-scale generators, including those using solar, can export to the grid and receive payment. We are analysing the results of the consultation and aim to publish the Government response in due course.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I shall be seeing the Azerbaijan ambassador later today, and I will pass on the views of the House to him about the situation with Chelsea and Arsenal fans, and Arsenal players.

We have just witnessed in India the historic, landslide re-election of the BJP, and Shri Narendra Modi as Prime Minister. Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating him on his re-election? Can we have a debate in Government time on our relationship with India and how we have forged this friendship that goes back over 300 years?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is right to draw the attention of the House to what is, I think, the largest democratic vote in the world. I congratulate the new Prime Minister of the Indian state. This would be an excellent topic for an Adjournment debate or a Backbench business debate. I encourage him to take the opportunity to make representations to the Backbench Business Committee so that we can all celebrate our relationship with the Indian state.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Last Saturday, I attended a community iftar at the Salfia centre in Dewsbury. It was a fabulous evening with people from all walks of life coming together to understand and celebrate Ramadan with our Muslim friends. At a time when it feels like division and hatred are on the rise, does the hon. Gentleman agree that these events are more important than ever? May we have a debate on how we promote love and understanding among our neighbours?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I think she is actually out there doing the job herself in attending such events. In raising this topic in the House today, she has almost started that process. Again, it is an ideal topic for an Adjournment debate to draw people's attention to how we all need to co-operate and get on with each other. Such community events are a great way to assist with that process.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): This weekend, thousands of football fans will be heading to Wembley for the football league play-off finals. As a fellow east midlands MP, I am sure that my hon. Friend will want to wish Derby County every success in their match against Aston Villa. Many supporters will be travelling

by train. Will he consider a debate in Government time about the capacity of the rail network and how HS2 will benefit football fans in future?

Mark Spencer: As a committed Nottingham Forest fan, I can honestly say that in all my time as Leader of the House, that is the worst question I have had. The fans who are travelling to Wembley clearly need to get there in good time—they do not want to miss the match—and those train links are absolutely vital. I know that my hon. Friend has been vociferous in pursuing improved links to Derbyshire for her constituents. I take this opportunity to wish those supporting Aston Villa all the best.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I add my congratulations to Philippa, who is retiring? I have known her for all her career here. She is a wonderful woman because she can combine ruthless efficiency with being really kind, pleasant and supportive. That is a very interesting synthesis. I thank her for all her work and all the help she has given me.

I had an eerie feeling after the two Front Benches had spoken, because the E-word was not mentioned. Here we are in this democratically elected House, but no one seemed to have the courage to mention that the European elections are taking place today. [Interruption.] In response to SNP Members, it was mentioned by their spokesman. Could we have an early debate on how we tackle the issue of democratic participation in this country? Even in a good year, the turn-out in European elections is poor. The turn-out in general elections is not that good. Some people argue for compulsory voting. It is a very important day today. People should go out and vote, because when they do not, good people do not get elected, and nasty and even nastier people do get elected. Let us have a good democratic vote today, and let us have a good discussion about how we increase participation in democracy.

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: we have a responsibility as politicians to make sure that as many people as possible engage in the political process—I have certainly done my bit by voting today. I hope the colour of the hon. Gentleman's tie does not indicate a change of political allegiance—he is looking very green. A Westminster Hall debate might be the ideal vehicle to discuss these issues, and I know that Members on both sides of the House would want to join in trying to find a solution to get more people engaged in politics and democracy.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): One of the many things that I would like to thank the former Leader of the House for was her passionate support for the "give up plastic for Lent" campaign, with the leadership she gave and the game way in which she took that on. One of the campaign's recommendations was the ban on straws, stirrers and cotton buds that came into effect yesterday, although sadly other news might have overtaken that. While this is a busy time in Westminster, can we make absolutely sure that our focus on the environment is not second stage and that proper time continues to be made available for debates about the environment and how we all can build a cleaner, greener planet?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend often champions environmental issues and she is right to draw the House's attention to the recent progress that has been made.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is committed to improving the conditions for generations to come, and my hon. Friend is right to call for a debate along those lines to once again highlight the environmental improvements that this Government continue to make.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Ind): Now that we are going to get a new Leader of the House, perhaps we can have another look at the proposals to refurbish the parliamentary estate, because I think people will think we have gone mad if we are to spend billions of pounds refurbishing this place. I was shocked to discover we are going to spend £1.5 billion on a fancy new Chamber at Richmond House. Imagine the impact that money would have in a community in the Black Country that sorely needs extra investment in schools, housing, roads, the police and so much more. Let us have another look at this proposal. I think we should take the opportunity to move Parliament out of London to the midlands, preferably the Black Country—to somewhere in the middle of the country. [*Interruption.*] This is a serious proposal. Let us do something radical and ensure that the metropolitan London-based elite running this country finds out what life is like in the rest of Britain. Unlike any other country, we have Government, politics, the media, finance and business all concentrated in the capital. Let us take this opportunity to move Government and Parliament out of London and rebalance our country and economy.

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that important issue. Of course, we had a vigorous debate about this only on Tuesday and I hope he took the opportunity to engage in it. The future of this building is important to the nation. I think that people recognise the iconic status of this building as not only the home of Parliament, but a treasure for the nation. We have a responsibility, as the incumbents of the House, to make sure it is maintained for many generations to come. I hope the hon. Gentleman will continue to engage in this debate. He is one of a number of colleagues who have made representations to move Parliament to their own constituency, but the House has decided that the best course of action is to remain here, within this secure area, and we have to move forward in that direction.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): The residents of North Hykeham have to put up with terrible traffic congestion. Does my hon. Friend agree that what is needed is the completion of the Lincoln bypass and that that should be a priority for the Government? May we have a debate on that matter?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend will be aware that Transport questions are on 13 June, when she will have the opportunity to raise that directly with the relevant Minister. I know she is a campaigner for the people of North Hykeham and that they will be delighted that she has taken the trouble to raise the Lincoln relief road here today. She continues to represent her constituents very well.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Imam Şiş, a member of the Kurdish community in Newport, is on day 158 of a hunger strike, along with thousands of others around the world. We understand that the Turkish Government might be moving on some of the campaign demands, so please may we have an urgent statement

from a Foreign and Commonwealth Office Minister on what the Government understand the current situation to be?

Mark Spencer: I am very sorry to hear that that gentleman finds himself with no option but to pursue that course of action. I know that the hon. Lady will want to represent the ongoing campaign directly with the Foreign Secretary, and if she would like me to assist in that process of direct communication with the Foreign Secretary, I will do all I can to help her to register the points that she wants to raise.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): In Redditch, we are proud of our heritage. We make needles, fish hooks and springs, and we have led the world in those industries, but Members might not know that we are also famous for Royal Enfield motorbikes. Will the Minister pay tribute to Royal Enfield for returning to Redditch, and will he thank the borough council for all the work it has done to secure this historic achievement? Will he also push his friends in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to look again at how business rates can be used to support such projects in order to revitalise our high streets?

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to all those in Redditch. This demonstrates that, with the right support and by working with local authorities, we can help and support the high street and manufacturing so that we retain jobs and keep the economy moving forward, meaning that we can generate tax and spend it on the nice things we want to spend it on, such as more doctors, nurses and police officers.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): May we have an urgent statement on the Government's policy regarding the surveying of coastal areas for potential oil and gas deposits? This is in the light of widespread concern at a proposal to conduct seismic surveys in areas of Cardigan bay, which is home to the largest resident population of dolphins and porpoises in the UK. A statement clarifying that the Government do not support such a venture would be welcome, and it would also demonstrate the integrity of the Government's commitment to achieving net zero carbon emissions.

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this important issue. I know that seismic surveys—certainly for shale gas—are a topic that many colleagues want to engage in. It is vital that any such survey is regulated by the Environment Agency, that there is scrutiny of all the issues as plans are moved forward, and that the planning process is completely robust so that his constituents can be confident that the right process will take place and no environmental damage will be committed.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): “Channel 4 News” has revealed that in the past two years the Northern Ireland Office has spent just £318 on advancing LGBT rights in Northern Ireland, a part of the UK where people are still denied the right to marry if they are in a same-sex relationship. I do not think that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has done anything on this since she took office. May we have a statement from her in which she can explain exactly what action she is taking to advance LGBT rights in Northern Ireland?

Mark Spencer: I know that the hon. Gentleman is a renowned campaigner on these issues—I pay tribute to him for that. The Secretary of State does take these issues seriously, and I suggest that he writes directly to her to express his views and to hold her to account.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): First, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his well-deserved meteoric rise. I want to ask a question following a meeting that I had with a constituent last week. He has been a victim of fraud and, over several months, he has been sending information to the police about the circumstances behind that. However, he has now been told that the police are not going to investigate the alleged offence because they do not have the resources to do so. In fact, they have a policy that they do not investigate allegations of fraud under £15 million, which is absolutely disgraceful. Is this something that the Government endorse? Will the Home Secretary make a statement to clarify whether this is now Government policy?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words about my trajectory, but of course what goes up must come down—I think that if he watches this space, it will come down quite rapidly. We will have Justice questions on 4 June, and I know that he will be in the Chamber to try to raise that topic again. I am also informed that the Treasury Committee is looking into the issue. I would ask him to submit any evidence to that Committee to ensure that it is as fully informed about that investigation as possible.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The dwindling ranks of the Conservative party membership will soon elect a Prime Minister with no public mandate to lead a Government without a majority to try to enforce a policy that is way past its sell-by date. With House business now in suspended animation, does not the hon. Gentleman agree that the people of the United Kingdom deserve an urgent statement from what remains of the Government to tell them exactly what the hell is going on in this place?

Mark Spencer: The one thing that the hon. Gentleman cannot accuse the Prime Minister of is not keeping this House informed. No one has stood at this Dispatch Box more than the Prime Minister; she has always kept the House informed about the progress being made. Of course the hon. Gentleman is completely within his rights to make any party political point that he wants, but we need to work together as a House of Commons to find a solution to deliver on the Brexit challenge we face, and I would expect him to approach that in a mature and co-operative way if we are to try to assist our constituents.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): My constituency has a high-rise tower block called Lydstep Flats. Its cladding was recently removed, and the residents are living in fear of their health because no one is taking responsibility to re-clad it. The UK Government recently announced funding for English residences and high rises, so will the Minister assure me and the Welsh Government that there will be fair funding so that my residents do not have to live in fear of their health?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Lady is right to draw the House's attention to the matter. Some people living in high-rise blocks clearly have great concerns about their safety, and the Government are doing a great deal to try to solve that challenge in the aftermath of the terrible Grenfell fire. I know that the hon. Lady will take part in the Grenfell Tower debate on 6 June, which presents an ideal opportunity to make such points and to register her concerns, which she rightly highlights on behalf of her constituents.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): I join colleagues in paying tribute to Philippa Helme for the advice she has given and wish her a happy retirement.

Many people who turn up at polling stations today will be told that they are not able to vote. Even though they are legally entitled to vote, they will have not received postal vote envelopes from their local authorities in time, or they may be EU nationals who have not been able to get the extra form that they are required to sign. Postal voters living in France, Spain and other parts of the world are also not entitled to vote because they have not received their postal vote forms in time because of the incompetence of some local authorities. May we have an early debate on the role and responsibilities of the Government, the Electoral Commission and local authorities in ensuring that people who are legally entitled to vote are able to do so?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to draw the House's attention to that important matter. As I said earlier, we have a vital responsibility to ensure that people are able to engage in the political process. He will be pleased to know that Cabinet Office questions will be on Wednesday 5 June as they are the ideal opportunity for him to raise the matter directly with Ministers. I am sure that he will continue to champion the cause of all those who want to participate in our democratic process.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister consider holding a debate in Government time on the important role of community-led master planning in charting the future of our communities? In Glasgow North East, the Springburn regeneration charrette took place in March and over 1,000 people in the community were involved in looking at master planning. It was masterminded by Helen Carroll and the Springburn Community Council, and there has been a great effort to try to achieve the regeneration of our community. Will the Minister commend that work and the work of architects Kevin Murray Associates? I hope that the report, which will be published next week, will offer a great way forward for the rebuilding of the community of Springburn.

Mark Spencer: I would welcome that. I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for trying to engage in that process and for ensuring that his constituents have the opportunity to make representations about the development of their community. The towns and villages in which we live have developed over hundreds of years, and the more that we can engage people in that process, the more ownership and pride they will feel in their communities. I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for all the work that he is doing.

Point of Order

11.49 am

John Howell (Henley) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. One thing was omitted from the congratulations paid to Philippa Helme by Mr Speaker, and I take this opportunity to congratulate her on her work over the past few years as a trustee of the Industry and Parliament Trust. I happen to be the trust's deputy chairman, so it is appropriate for me to congratulate her on an enormous amount of hard work.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order, not least because it gives me the chance to give my own thanks to Philippa. I have found her cool, calm advice, which is obviously always right, to be absolutely invaluable, and all the Deputy Speakers are so grateful for her dedicated service to the House. Philippa, we will miss you. Happy sailing.

Backbench Business

Yemen Peace Process

11.51 am

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes that 22 May 2019 is the 28th anniversary of the unification of Yemen, when that country emerged from a long and painful civil war; further notes that today Yemen is once again in a deep and pitiful state of conflict, having entered the fifth year of its current, tragic war; acknowledges that the most recent estimate places the death toll in excess of 70,000, of which 10,000 have died in the last five months alone; notes that Yemen remains in the midst of the world's worst humanitarian crisis, in which at least 85,000 children have starved to death and almost 200,000 have contracted cholera in 2019 alone; commends the work of the UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths, who brought opposing sides together for agreements including on a ceasefire in the Al-Hodeidah Governate; regrets that the implementation of those agreements has been slow or non-existent; and calls on the Government to take every possible measure to support an immediate ceasefire, the flow of humanitarian aid and further peace talks in Yemen.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee and its excellent Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), for granting time in the Chamber for this important debate. I am pleased to see so many Members in the Chamber despite this being election day.

I congratulate the Minister for the Middle East, the right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), on his appointment. He knows this area well, and I wish him well. I hope he can continue the diligent work of his predecessor, the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt). I am glad to see the shadow Foreign Affairs Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), and the shadow Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), whom, of course, I met many years ago in Yemen—she was born in Yemen.

Yesterday was a special day for many Yemenis. It was Yemen Day, their national unity day: 22 May, the day on which the country's unification took place in 1990, is a national holiday in Yemen and should have been a day of festivity, yet no one was celebrating in that troubled land. And why should they have been when their country is being destroyed and fragmented, town by town, street by street and house by house? We are in the midst of a terrible war in Yemen, and in March we passed the grim milestone of the war's fourth anniversary.

Yemenis are losing their lives every single day. According to the Foreign Secretary, a hundred children die every day. So far, at least 70,000 children have been killed in the fighting since the war began. This will rise to 100,000 if the war ends this year, according to the United Nations. We can add to that 130,000 more who will die from starvation and disease.

Women and children are suffering and bearing the brunt of this war. A child dies every 12 minutes in Yemen, and at least 85,000 have succumbed to starvation. The all-party parliamentary group on Yemen has heard time and again from aid agencies and Yemeni organisations about the episodes of brutality, which range from the indiscriminate detonation of landmines laid by the Houthi militias to the aerial bombing of the hospital in Kitaf, northern Yemen, by coalition forces. Yemenis are literally being blown apart from the skies above and from the ground below. This must end.

[Keith Vaz]

An agreement was made in Stockholm in December 2018. It included three key proposals: first, the deployment of forces from Hodeidah; secondly, the exchange of prisoners; and, thirdly, humanitarian access to Taiz. In each of those areas, there has been little progress. Prisoners have not been exchanged, and talks broke down in February this year. Taiz remains in the grips of a humanitarian disaster. It is likely to have shrunk to a city of just 200,000 people, which is one third of its pre-war population of 600,000. It is as though the city of Sheffield had lost two-thirds of its population. The Taiz-Aden highway, along which much-needed aid can travel, remains cut off by the fighting. The redeployment of forces from Hodeidah has been dragged out. The original deadline for troops to leave was 1 January 2019, almost half a year ago. The implementation process was only agreed in principle on 17 February, and the detailed plan of how this would take place only accepted on 15 April. This is painfully slow, while people continue to die. Finally, on 10 May, just 13 days ago, Houthi forces finally began their redeployment.

The Houthis withdrew from the key ports of Ras Isa, Hodeidah and Salif. That of course has to be welcomed by this House, and we hope it is an indication of a path to peace that both sides will travel along. Around Salif and Ras Isa, there are minefields that can now be cleared—these minefields have cost so many lives, including those of aid workers. The House will be aware that about 80% of Yemen's humanitarian and other goods are imported through the port of Hodeidah. We are now at a critical juncture. There have been reports of rising violence away from Hodeidah. In the al-Dhale governorate in southern Yemen, there has been a sevenfold increase in air raids in recent months. In Hajjah, in northern Yemen, fighting near the border with Saudi Arabia has caused the displacement of 100,000 people. If the agreement is not implemented in full, and if these recent developments break down, it is likely that the peace process will irretrievably falter and come to an end, with catastrophic consequences. For the sake of the people of Yemen—for humanity—we cannot let this take place. Before it is too late, this Government and the international community must grasp this chance for peace.

On 26 February 2019, the United Nations, and the Governments of Sweden and Switzerland, hosted their annual high-level pledging conference in Geneva. Donor states pledged a total of \$2.6 billion in aid to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian supplies to the people of Yemen. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates each donated \$750 million. We donated £200 million, bringing the UK financial contribution since the war began to £770 million. This support is most welcome. However, Sir Mark Lowcock, the head of the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs—OCHA—told Members of this House recently that it has received very little of this promised funding, with only 7% of the \$4.1 billion required delivered by 24 April. From Saudi Arabia and the UAE, it has received less than \$240 million of that promised. Saudi Arabia's impressive Foreign Minister, Adel al-Jubeir, assured hon. Members in a robust exchange at the Saudi embassy recently that it was ready to transfer the rest of the funding. Will the Minister confirm that the rest of that funding has been transferred?

The UN reports that it has received only £30 million from the UK; will the Minister explain why we have not delivered exactly what we promised? The pledging of aid is one thing, but the promises have to be delivered on. Delays in payments are costing lives.

I thank the Foreign Secretary for his engagement with Yemen. In particular, his visit to Aden, the city of my birth, on 3 March this year showed that he cares for the people of Yemen and that he wants to see a solution to the conflict. He met members of the all-party group on Yemen on 4 February this year and hosted a meeting of the Yemen Quad in London on 27 April. All that is by marked contrast to the engagement of his predecessor, but, as he knows, much more needs to be done.

I welcome the new Secretary of State for International Development, the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), with whom the all-party group worked during his previous period at the Department. These ministerial changes show that we have two friends of Yemen in key Front-Bench positions, and I hope we will hear from a third when the Minister responds to the debate.

Our message to our friends is that they need to tell our partners to stop the bombing, and to do so now. We need seriously to consider the issue of arms sales to our coalition partners. The United Kingdom has sold at least £4.7 billion-worth of arms to Saudi Arabia and a further £860 million to its coalition partners since the war began. The issue must be addressed.

We need to talk to other regional powers. We know that the Government are not friendly with Iran—they have made that clear—but they need to talk to the Iranians. Of course, Iran denies involvement in Yemen, but only last week the Houthis, backed by Iran, struck Saudi oil pipelines. This violent act had to be, and was, condemned. But just three days later, exactly a week ago, the coalition retaliated with an air strike that hit central Sana'a, killing six people, four of whom were children. This is the never-ending cycle of death that happens whenever there is an act of violence and whenever we do not engage in the peace talks. That is why we must have an immediate ceasefire.

I commend the work of Congressman Ro Khanna of the 17th congressional district of California, and Senators Bernie Sanders of Vermont, Mike Lee of Utah and Chris Murphy of Connecticut for their passion on and commitment to this issue. The US Congress has been more active on the Yemen peace process than we have been—to be frank, in some areas it has been more active than our Government. On 4 April this year, Congress passed a resolution, which was previously passed in the Senate, calling for an end to US involvement in the Yemen war. Regrettably, the measure was vetoed by President Trump, who, as we have heard, is making a state visit to the United Kingdom from 3 June to 5 June. The House will expect the Yemen conflict to be on the agenda for his meeting with the Prime Minister; will the Minister confirm that that will be the case?

We owe a debt of gratitude to the UN special envoy, Martin Griffiths, for all that he has done. He has brought the parties in the war together and has initiated the trust-building measures that led to last week's troop withdrawal. We know how busy he is, but we hope he will meet members of the all-party group when he comes to London. Members of the group have been diligent in raising awareness of the Yemen peace process

both inside and outside the House. In particular, the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who sends her apologies for not being able to attend this debate, the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) and the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman), who I see is in his place, have all worked tirelessly on this issue.

The humanitarian impacts of the peace process have been the focus of the Chairman of the International Development Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), who is in his place, and of the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). Other Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) and the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins), have considered Yemen because of the plight of constituents with family members caught up in the conflict. I am so delighted to see the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) in his place. He is the only senior politician in Europe to have visited Sana'a during the conflict. From his time as one of the great International Development Secretaries, he has shown himself to be a great friend of Yemen.

Yesterday afternoon, the all-party group hosted its annual Yemen Day event. We heard from charity representatives about their work in Yemen and the devastation they encounter. International humanitarian organisations continue to do so much to help the people of Yemen. These include Oxfam, the Norwegian Refugee Council, the International Rescue Committee, Human Rights Watch, Médecins sans Frontières, CARE International and Save the Children. I have presented the Foreign Secretary with a letter signed by 86 hon. Members from both sides of the House, as well as Members of the other place, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. It calls on him to use every tool at his disposal to push for peace in Yemen. We urge him to use our considerable influence—that great soft power that Great Britain is so good at wielding—in the region to stop the bombing. It has to remain at the top of his agenda.

On the 20th of next month, the all-party group will host an international conference on Yemen. Parliamentarians from across the world will join us in Edinburgh and Glasgow for the conference being hosted by the hon. Members for Dunfermline and West Fife and for Glasgow Central. This follows the first international parliamentary conference for peace in Yemen held in Paris in November last year and hosted by Sébastien Nadot, a Member of the French Assembly. I extend an invitation to the Minister, who has not yet been to a Yemen event—he has just been appointed, so I forgive him—to come to Edinburgh and take part in that meeting.

Here are our key asks. The Stockholm agreement was a vital staging post, but it did not go far enough. We should have had an immediate nationwide ceasefire in Yemen. We have played an important role in the peace process. We secured the passing of UN resolution 2451 on 21 December 2018 and resolution 2452 on 16 January 2019. Just last month here in London there was a meeting of the Quad. The US was represented by David Satterfield; Saudi Arabia, by Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir; and the United Arab Emirates, by Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed.

As we all know, the UK is the penholder at the Security Council, but we need to do much more. I have an idea for the Minister. Why do the Government not host a peace conference in London in the next eight weeks? Why do they not use their position on the Quad, as the penholder, to organise such a conference, as we have done in the past, to keep this right at the top of the agenda? Key parts of the agenda should be the facilitation of unimpeded access for food, fuel and medicines through the key port of Hodeidah and through Taiz and implementing the demand for an immediate nationwide ceasefire. What better way to show a commitment to peace?

In successive debates in this House, I have lamented the fact that Yemen is bleeding to death, while all we do is make speeches in this House. One cannot look at the pictures of what is happening to our fellow citizens of the world and not be overcome with emotion. As I have said many times before, I want one day to return to the country of my birth to show my children where I was born and where I spent the happiest days of my life. I want to live long enough to see Yemen peaceful, prosperous and united, free from violence and free from hate. We have reached a critical juncture in the peace process that will be of historic significance if we seize the moment. From the bottom of my heart, I beg the Minister to save the children of Yemen. I beg him to stop the bombing and the killing. I beg him to stop this war. This is in our Government's hands.

12.9 pm

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): It is right to congratulate the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) on securing this debate, and on his powerful and compelling contribution. He and I have known each other for very many years, and there are not many political issues on which we agree. On the question of Yemen and Britain's role, however, you cannot get a cigarette paper between his opinion and mine. He set out clearly for the House the profound jeopardy of what is going on in Yemen, and Britain's complicity in it. He spoke of the tens of thousands of young Yemenis who are being radicalised, and who know where the death and destruction that rains down from the skies night after night comes from.

I welcome the new Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), to his position. He will cast a fresh pair of eyes on the problems of Yemen and Britain's role in tackling them. I hope that he will speak out in the Government if his fresh view suggests that there are other ways of handling those problems. The purpose of my speech is to pose four questions to him, although I do not expect him to answer them from the Dispatch Box. I must apologise to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, as I have already done to him, for the fact that I may not be able to stay until the end of the debate, because I have a very important engagement in my constituency.

I hope that the Minister will consider what he hears today. Britain is a beacon of light in some very dark places in the world, standing up for values that really matter to us and around the globe. On Yemen, however, I believe that Britain has lost its moral compass, and I say that with deep regret. I praise the new Foreign Secretary—he is not that new—who, immediately on taking office, went to Riyadh and Tehran. He has made it very clear that Britain's contribution to solving the

[Mr Andrew Mitchell]

problem is right at the top of the agenda. That was made rather easier by the profound change of sentiment towards the war after the murder of the journalist Mr Khashoggi in Turkey. The values that were displayed in that despicable act led to considerable rethinking.

I also praise Martin Griffiths, a distinguished international civil servant. As the UN special representative, he is clearly giving everything he can to finding a solution, and his energy and endeavours on the ground are helping. I pay tribute to Sir Mark Lowcock, the head of the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs and former DFID permanent secretary, who has been equally tireless in his efforts to help. Above all, this debate is a good opportunity for the House of Commons to pay tribute to the bravery and effectiveness of humanitarian workers. Many in the sector are very young, and they often put themselves in harm's way to assist their fellow human beings who are caught up in such jeopardy.

I went to Sana'a and Sa'dah, as the right hon. Member for Leicester East mentioned. I think I remain the only European politician who has been into Sana'a and Sa'dah. Many have been into the comparative peace of Aden in the south, but you have to go to the north, Madam Deputy Speaker, and see for yourself the extraordinary damage that the bombing has caused to infrastructure and people's lives. When I was there, I met British aid and humanitarian workers from Oxfam, in particular, who were doing brilliant work for some of the most dispossessed and miserable people in the world.

My purpose today is to encourage the Government in their apparent change of emphasis, and to urge them to move away from their former position of complicity in what is happening in Yemen. The blockade of the country by land, sea and air with British support has effectively created a famine, which is on Britain's conscience. It is incredibly important that the Government move away from a partisan position and towards a neutral one by seeking to achieve a ceasefire, a negotiated settlement and an end to the violence.

I echo the urgent concern that the World Food Programme raised yesterday about corrupt Houthi leaders blocking humanitarian access to civilians. The arbitrary denial of humanitarian access is an unconscionable violation of international humanitarian law, and everyone should condemn it. It is no less concerning to see an intensification of violence in Yemen, including aerial attacks by the Saudi and Emirati-led coalition. When I recently asked a Yemeni human rights defender about the well-being of her family in Sana'a, she replied that "in Yemen we are only safe by accident".

That reflects the position of millions of men, women and children on the ground who suffer these air attacks, which I heard and saw for myself when I was in Sana'a, night after night.

Last week, on Thursday 16 May—I think the right hon. Member for Leicester East also referred to this incident—at least five children were killed and 33 civilians, including 15 children, were injured by coalition airstrikes in Sana'a. That attack was on a residential area with no military targets anywhere near—another clear violation of international humanitarian law. One of the houses belonged to journalist and writer Abdullah Al-Sabri, who lost two of his children. He and his parents are

now in hospital in a critical condition. My first question to the Minister is: what conversations has the Foreign Secretary had with his Emirati and Saudi counterparts about potential violations of international humanitarian law, specifically during the airstrikes in Sana'a on 16 May?

I approach this matter more as a humanitarian than as a politician. In spite of the discomfort of this position, I have never called for an arms embargo. That is because, first, I do not think it is for politicians individually to make judgments about the sales of arms. It is for the Committees on Arms Export Controls to reach judgments in accordance with the laws that are made by this House. Secondly, quite apart from the undesirability of politicians waving their moral consciences around at the expense of high-quality jobs in the north-west of England, I think it is likely that the Saudis will continue to procure weaponry from some in Europe. Saudi Arabia is a rich country surrounded by opponents and enemies, and it will be able to secure such weapons. When it comes to protecting the people on the ground—the children in the school I saw in Sa'dah—an arms embargo from Britain will not have a direct effect, and it may not even have an indirect one.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP)
rose—

Mr Mitchell: I know exactly what the hon. Gentleman is going to say, and I fully accept that my position is an uncomfortable one. The point I make to the Government is that those of us who have resisted the lure of calls for an arms embargo have done so in the hope that the Government will change their policy, as I have suggested, and make an arms embargo unnecessary. The longer the situation goes on, the more likely it is that an arms embargo will follow.

Douglas Chapman: For SNP Members, the question of an arms embargo, or stopping arms sales to Saudi Arabia, is more about messaging. I know that there are jobs at stake, but does the right hon. Gentleman accept that we have to give a special message to the people in the region? Arms sales are part of the problem, and we should be trying our very best to ensure that they do not contribute further to the existing heartache and humanitarian crisis.

Mr Mitchell: Well, I am going to come back to some aspects of that point, but I think we can agree that the case for an arms embargo is going to get stronger and stronger unless Britain moves to a position of neutrality in this dreadful conflict.

It has been just over two years since I stood in a funeral parlour in Sana'a where more than 100 people were killed by a Saudi airstrike. It is shameful—a profound political and moral failure—that Britain has been unable to convince our Saudi and Emirati allies to end the bombing of innocent Yemeni civilians. On that occasion, the aircraft that killed the mourners in the parlour came around again for a second attack after the devastation of its first strike. In my view, the Government continue to take an imbalanced approach, rightly criticising Houthi transgressions but wrongly remaining silent when our Saudi and Emirati allies commit violations. There has been no response by the British Government to the strikes on Sana'a last Thursday that killed five children—not even an expression of concern.

Quiet diplomacy with the Saudis is clearly the Government's preferred approach, but the continued bombing of civilian areas demonstrates that this approach is simply not working. That brings me to my second question to the Minister. Does he not agree that incidents in which innocent children are killed warrant a public expression of concern and condemnation by the United Kingdom? An imbalanced approach to the conflict in Yemen risks undermining efforts to bring parties to peace negotiations. The idea that the Hadi Government hold true democratic legitimacy in Yemen is clearly fundamentally flawed. President Hadi was elected on a ballot paper with only one name on it, his term has long expired and he spends most of his time in Saudi Arabia, so I do not think that the British Government should camp on the legitimacy of President Hadi's Government.

It is high time for the UK to correct this imbalanced approach—not just in our public statements, but in our capacity as penholder on the UN Security Council. Resolution 2216 is widely seen as imbalanced and unhelpful, yet it still underpins efforts towards a peace process. The United Kingdom should demonstrate strong leadership to unite the United Nations Security Council and ensure that Yemeni civilians do not pay the price for increased tension between the US and Iran, which threatens to undermine Security Council unity on Yemen.

Let me be clear: I am no apologist for the Houthis. Violations are being committed by all parties to the conflict and all violations should be condemned, but it is the Saudi and United Arab Emirates-led coalition that the UK is backing, and this is where we can yield serious influence in order to prevent needless civilian casualties and push for revitalised peace negotiations. That brings me to my third question. Does the Minister agree that the UK should urgently lead action at the UN Security Council to call for a nationwide ceasefire and a swift move to inclusive peace negotiations?

The United Kingdom can play an important role supporting impartial investigations of violations by all sides in Yemen, and promoting accountability for perpetrators. Relying on the Saudi-led coalition's Joint Incidents Assessment Team to conduct credible investigations into incidents is like trusting children to mark their own homework, and it simply will not carry any international credibility. That brings me to my fourth and—the Minister will be relieved to hear—final question. Does he agree that we need a strengthened UN mechanism for investigating human rights violations in Yemen, and that the UK should support the creation of a commission of inquiry in September's session of the Human Rights Council at the UN, so that a truly independent body is established with a strong mandate to collect and preserve evidence of possible war crimes and other violations of international law?

As I said at the outset, Britain needs to be seen at the United Nations as a force for the constructive conclusion of these dreadful events in Yemen, moving to a comprehensive ceasefire on the ground and meaningful peace negotiations at all levels in Yemeni society. Britain's reputation at the United Nations is challenged at the moment, and this situation is one part of that. The Minister will have noticed that only six countries supported Britain on last night's vote in respect of the Chagos Islands, which was a very significant change of tone by the UN. He will also be aware that Britain was unable to procure, for the first time since 1947, the election of a

judge to the International Court of Justice—a position formerly held by the highly respected jurist Sir Christopher Greenwood.

In spite of the quite outstanding work that the current British permanent representative to the UN, Dame Karen Pierce, undoubtedly carries out, our reputation is damaged. If we are to hold the role of penholder on Yemen, we owe it to the United Nations and the international community to be in a far more a neutral position. It is unsatisfactory that the Russians and the Scandinavian countries had to amend the British-drafted presidential statement on these matters. For as long as we are maintaining the planes that are used for the bombing runs, supplying the armaments and advising the targeting cell in Riyadh, Britain's complicity is unavoidable. Britain's role is also still quite extraordinarily confused. When I was in Sa'dah, I had the opportunity to meet the very brave unit that was demining and defusing armaments, some of which were British. The unit was largely paid for by British taxpayers' money and led by a former British major. That seems to put the confusion of the matter in very clear sight indeed.

I want to end with the words of the chairperson of Mwatana for Human Rights, Radhya Al-Mutwakel, who visited Britain recently and met the Foreign Secretary and the Chair of the International Development Committee. She is a very powerful and independent Yemeni voice on what is happening, and she said:

"Since March 26, 2015, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates...have led a coalition of countries in a military campaign against...rebels in Yemen. As documented by multiple human rights organizations as well as the UN, the Saudi/UAE-led Coalition has consistently attacked civilians and critical civilian infrastructure—including hospitals, schools, school children, weddings, farms, and water wells—in violation of the laws of war...Four years into the conflict, around 20,000 Yemeni civilians have been killed or wounded and half the population—14 million people—are at risk of famine, according to the UN. Other estimates, however, range much higher: ACLED"—

the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project—"has recorded over 50,000 reported deaths as a direct result of the fighting, and according to Save the Children, 85,000 children may have died of hunger and preventable disease."

That is the situation. Britain's position needs to move and intensify, away from what it was, to a new place.

12.27 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who has shown great leadership in speaking up on the Yemen issue. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz)—my good friend—who led the debate, for his very long-standing work on Yemen and for his role, with others, in the all-party parliamentary group. I echo his thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate. I also welcome the new Minister to his post, as Minister both in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and in the Department for International Development, and I look forward to working closely with him in that capacity—on Yemen specifically, on the broader responsibilities he has for the middle east and north Africa, and on his important work on global health.

The scale of the humanitarian catastrophe has been well described already and is thankfully now widely known about. I echo what my right hon. Friend the

[Stephen Twigg]

Member for Leicester East said about the pledging conference that was held in February. The head of OCHA, the UN humanitarian relief agency, Mark Lowcock—to whom I also pay tribute—has pointed out that we face an 80% gap in terms of the funds that were pledged in February. I support the question that my right hon. Friend put to the Minister. It is important that the House is updated today on what the United Kingdom is doing to press the donors who pledged funds to deliver those funds, to assist the humanitarian relief effort.

We know that millions in Yemen face malnutrition. Save the Children, in its excellent briefing for the debate, estimates that 85,000 children under the age of five may have already died from extreme hunger or disease during this conflict—85,000 children under the age of five. We know about the scourge of preventable diseases. We have seen a recent increase in cases of cholera—it is estimated that around 1,000 children a day are contracting cholera—and the emergence for the first time in this crisis of swine flu in Yemen.

We also know that the breakdown of public services in general, and health services in particular, has a major and disproportionate effect on women, and in particular their access to maternal healthcare and family planning services. I want to talk a little bit about restrictions on access for humanitarian aid, because it lies at the heart of the humanitarian crisis that Yemen faces.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. What is happening in Yemen is truly heartbreaking, and it has rightly been described by many as the largest humanitarian crisis on our planet. In his highly considered and expert opinion, what key event should occur to allow aid to pass through the port of Hodeidah?

Stephen Twigg: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He has anticipated something that I am about to say, so I will say it now. If implemented, the Stockholm agreement, about which I will say a little more later, is crucial to achieving that. While we have seen fragile progress in that regard, were that agreement to collapse, the consequences could be disastrous. The International Rescue Committee's country director in Yemen, Frank McManus, says that the cost of the deal collapsing "cannot be overstated", that almost 10 million people are "on the brink" of starvation in Yemen and that fighting in Hodeidah and disruptions to imports through the port

"could propel the country into a full-fledge famine."

That is why implementation of the Stockholm agreement is so important.

The focus on Hodeidah is understandable, but there are challenges elsewhere in Yemen. The International Rescue Committee tells us that in Aden port, cargo is being delayed for months due to five different departments of the authorities there having to approve customs clearance, and in the north—the Houthi-controlled area—there are delays in getting the Houthis to agree to aid operations and increasing efforts by the Houthis to influence where aid is delivered to.

Stockholm is a hugely welcome development, but as both my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East and the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield

pointed out, progress is fragile. As we have heard, last week we saw Houthi attacks on the oil export pipeline linking eastern and western Saudi Arabia, then a retaliatory strike by the Saudi-led coalition in Sana'a and further clashes in Hodeidah. The Yemen Data Project points out that the latest figures from April marked a record monthly low in the number of Saudi-led coalition airstrikes. Despite that, the number of civilian casualties from airstrikes in April was 131, which was up from the previous month.

I want to emphasise, as the two previous speakers have, the vital role of the UN special envoy and to welcome the diplomatic leadership of the United Kingdom, which I have no doubt has contributed to the progress we have seen in recent days, with the Houthis finally agreeing to redeployment from Hodeidah, Ras Isa and Salif.

Let me comment briefly on the wider regional context. We are seeing greater tension between the United States and Iran. Iranian links to the Houthis are well documented, but this rising tension makes it even more important for the United Kingdom, in our role as penholder, to retain an absolute focus on Yemen and its people. It would be a further risk to the prospects of peace if Yemen were simply seen through the lens of Iran versus the west. That is why, as the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield rightly said, we should be clear in calling out both sides for any alleged violations of international humanitarian law. I endorse his call for an independent commission of inquiry to be established through the UN Human Rights Council, and I hope the UK Government will support that.

Last year, the UN group of experts on Yemen said:

"There is little evidence of any attempt by parties to the conflict to minimize civilian casualties."

We have heard about the Houthis' appalling and widespread use of landmines, which are laid right up the western coast of Yemen, resulting in hundreds of deaths and injuries and inhibiting access for humanitarian aid. I thank Human Rights Watch for the excellent work it has done in exposing the Houthis for their use of landmines.

Looking at the other side in the conflict, the Yemen Data Project points out that there have been almost 19,000 air raids by the Saudi-led coalition during the conflict. That is one air raid every 102 minutes. In March this year, five children were killed in a Saudi-led coalition attack on a hospital in Kitaf supported by Save the Children. At the time, the Government said that the UK had

"raised this matter with the Saudi-led Coalition, who have announced an investigation."

My understanding is that no public statement has yet been made by the coalition about an investigation, and neither the hospital nor the families have been contacted. Can the Minister update the House—ideally in responding to the debate, but if necessary after it—on any progress towards a genuine investigation into that attack, which resulted in the deaths of five children in March at a Save the Children-supported hospital?

Let me comment briefly on the issue of child soldiers. There is huge concern about the number of children who have been recruited into this conflict, mostly by the Houthis. It is well documented and must be condemned, but there are also reports that children have been recruited by the Saudi-led coalition. Can the Minister comment

on that? Yesterday I had the opportunity, as others did, to meet the Yemeni Minister of Information. He raised with me the Houthis' use of child soldiers, and I agreed with him entirely in his condemnation. I asked him about allegations of there being child soldiers on the Government side, and he said there were none. I would be interested to hear the UK Government's assessment of whether that is actually the case.

Let me say a little more about what needs to happen with the peace process, and in particular the importance of peace-building efforts that engage Yemeni society, empower women, give a voice to young people and reach local community organisations. As we have heard, women and children have borne the brunt of this crisis. We have a responsibility to put women and children at the heart of efforts to build peace in Yemen. In the financial year that just finished, £7 million of the conflict, stability and security fund was spent on stabilisation and peace building in Yemen. What plans do the Government have to scale up support for peace building and to include as part of that engaging with Yemeni civil society, and especially women, young people and marginalised groups?

Let me comment briefly on the issue of UK arms, because I very much agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East that we need to see a major rethink. This is the only issue in the speech of the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield with which I disagree. I respect his point of view, but I do disagree, not least because our sale of arms has contributed to the issue that he so eloquently described as our not being seen as a neutral player diplomatically. I also feel that the example of the arms that are being used in Yemen has undermined the claim, which is still made by the British Government, that we have the most rigorous arms export control regime in the world. I think it is now, sadly, very difficult to justify that claim, so I urge the Government to think again. They should follow the example of a number of European countries, including Germany, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East rightly said, the resolutions that were passed with cross-party support—bipartisan support—both in the House of Representatives and in the Senate in the United States.

An important element in our debates on Yemen is the Yemeni diaspora here in our own country. It has been an honour for me over the last three or four years to get to know the Liverpool Yemeni community, and we formed the Liverpool Friends of Yemen to enable people across the city to show solidarity with the people of Yemen. I was pleased to join the shadow Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), at an excellent event in Birmingham in March, which engaged with the Yemeni diaspora from across the country but particularly from the west midlands. I am very pleased that we have formed the Labour Friends of Yemen, of which I am the chair. May I ask the Minister to give an undertaking when he responds that when Martin Griffiths is next available in the United Kingdom, he could meet representatives of the Yemeni diaspora so that their voice can be heard as part of his efforts to build peace in that country?

Let me finish by joining in the tributes paid by both my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East and the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield to the amazing, brave work that is done by human rights organisations and humanitarian organisations on the ground in these

dangerous circumstances in Yemen. I welcome the leadership the Foreign Secretary has shown since he took the post, and in particular the support of the United Kingdom for the efforts at the UN of the special envoy, Martin Griffiths.

As the motion sets out very clearly and very powerfully, what is needed now for Yemen is a nationwide ceasefire. The whole country needs a ceasefire. We then need a peace process that, yes of course engages the combatants, but also engages civilians and civil society. We need a sense that there will be justice for victims on all sides in this conflict. Perhaps most importantly of all—I hope the Minister can give this commitment today—we need to demonstrate that the United Kingdom's commitment to Yemen is not just during this conflict, but will be a long-term commitment to rebuild a country that was always poor and always faced many challenges, but one that has come close to destruction because of this conflict.

12.43 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Let me start by saying how pleased I am that the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) has brought forward this debate, and how pleased I am to participate in it and follow what he has said. I think we all agreed with his feelings, which he set out very clearly and quite emotionally in his speech, for the people of Yemen, who have suffered so tremendously. I thought his description of that was very powerful indeed. I may be only the fourth speaker in this debate, but the three speeches before mine have covered so much of the ground and so many of the points that there are only a few additional points I want to comment on.

First, I think it is a cause for celebration that we do have the outlines of a truce. We should take great comfort from that. I know it is just the outlines and that it could always go further than that, but in this sort of conflict one has to grab whatever one can to try to keep some sanity in the whole process. The peace process is now more akin to a mediation than to a conference set up to tell the Yemenis what to do. In any mediation, the system only works if there are two people who are genuinely prepared to sit down and talk to each other. Only then can the essence of a mediation, which is for the participants to agree and to bring out themselves the solution to the problem, actually come through. That is a very important point to bear in mind, including for the role the UK may want to play.

A lot more work needs to be done on the triggers that can bring two warring sides to the realisation that they need to come together to agree a peace. I do not think we have done enough work on that internationally. We have done a lot of work on conferences that can take place to cover these issues, but I do not think that they are as important as trying to get the people themselves to agree. The triggers may be very different for different conflicts. The trigger may be the crisis of hunger in the country. The triggers may be external, such as stopping arms sales, in which case we need to stop arms sales to both parties. There may be a whole range of things that we need to look at to make sure that we can really get to grips with this.

It is worth remembering that this whole war started as a result of a Houthi rebel insurgency. I know that some speakers have particularly said that they need to

[John Howell]

condemn and we all need to condemn the faults on both sides. However, the Houthis are a very unsavoury group of people. The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) raised the issue of boy soldiers. Whether the Saudis are also generating boy soldiers is a separate issue, but we know that the Houthis are employing boy soldiers, and that has to stop because it is a great attack on everything that we all believe in. We must bear in mind that they killed Saleh, the former Prime Minister, and the hon. Gentleman has already mentioned landmines as well.

Mr Mitchell: Part of trying to move the Government to a better place is to accept that there are no good people in this conflict. My hon. Friend mentions the murder by the Houthis of Ali Abdullah Saleh, but the Saudis murdered al-Sammad, who was the President of the Houthis. I had met him, and he was a dove who wanted to negotiate. Part of moving the Government's mindset is just to accept that there are no good people in this, and that includes the Houthis and the Saudis.

John Howell: I have a great deal of sympathy with that statement, but I am trying to make sure that we achieve some sort of balance from our perspective when we look at the situation there. It should not be seen solely as a Saudi exercise in the bombing and intimidation of the Yemeni people; it started as a result of a particularly unsavoury group of people among the Houthis. I cannot remember who mentioned it, but I think the drone attack on the Riyadh pumping stations is very important because sources from the region state very clearly—very clearly—that this was inspired and paid for by Iran and Hezbollah. I think that is really unchallengeable and we would be unable to go against it, and I want to come back to that in a minute.

First, however, let me comment on the scale of the humanitarian crisis, which I think could be a trigger for getting the sides to agree. Some 71% of the population are living in extreme poverty—an enormous number—and 84% are malnourished. The loss in economic output from the country is enormous at something close to \$700 billion, which is a phenomenal amount. UNICEF has estimated that more than 12 million children are in desperate need, and the number of internally displaced people is also large and must be considered.

I completely agree that in this case it is not good enough just to pledge aid, although the almost three quarters of billion pounds that we have pledged should not be sneezed at. We must, however, keep the pressure on and ensure that that money is paid, and used in a good way, in particular to help children in that area. The British Government are helping with the creation of the UN civilian co-ordinator in the area, which is a good thing for us to be involved with.

Let me return to my earlier point about Iran. It is true that we do not have the sort of relationship with Iran that we have with Saudi Arabia, but we are not the United States. We have a better relationship with Iran than the United States does—it would be impossible to have a worse one—and we should use that to talk to the Iranians about the geopolitical situation. In addition to what is happening in Yemen, a geopolitical discussion between Iran and Saudi Arabia is being played out, and I view this as a proxy war that is taking place against Iran.

As I said, the attacks on the Riyadh pumping stations appear to have come from drones that were supplied by Iran through Hezbollah.

Will the Minister redouble his efforts in negotiating with Iran, so as to take this forward in a positive way? We must ensure that as part of the complicated discussions that must now take place between the Houthis and the internationally backed Yemeni Government, and between Saudi Arabia and Iran, we try to find a trigger point that could solve this conflict.

12.52 pm

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell). He raised important points about the Houthis, which I will come to in a moment. I am also grateful to the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) for securing this debate. Even though we in this country are obsessed with Brexit, and with who might be Prime Minister in three days' time, other important issues deserve our attention. The ongoing failed state that is Yemen is a major threat not just to its neighbouring countries but to the whole world, and it could be the powder keg that sparks a wider conflagration.

I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, because a year ago I went to Saudi Arabia and visited Najran. I saw buildings, a school, and a power plant that had suffered extensive damage from missiles fired into Saudi Arabia from Yemen by the Houthis. For those in Saudi Arabia, this conflict is seen as a threat to their state.

Let me add a little history to this debate. First, this conflict is not just between the internationally recognised and living in exile President Hadi and the Houthis, because Yemen has other conflicts within it. Since 2009, there has been an insurgency by the Southern Movement—its Arabic name is al-Hirak—and an area in the south of Yemen is controlled by tribal groups and militias, and has a transitional council that is supported, ironically, by the United Arab Emirates. Everybody talks about Saudi Arabia, but the UAE is also a key player within the internationally supported and recognised coalition that is led by Saudi Arabia. The UAE also has strong views about resisting all forms of influence in the Arab world from Iran and what it perceives to be its proxies.

Secondly, elements in the south of Yemen are linked to al-Qaeda, and there are real dangers to that happening in any failed state. We have seen in Afghanistan, Somalia and Libya that if there is no state with power, the vacuum is filled by non-state actors, including extremists who are prepared to act totally ruthlessly, and who have no principles or regard for international law or what their international partners think. That is what we could have in Yemen—indeed, we already have it, but it could be much worse.

The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) spoke about having a new approach to whether we should continue to recognise President Hadi, given that he does not have any real locus within Yemen. That is a big issue and a fundamental question, because if there are to be talks, and if any real progress following the Stockholm agreement is to be made, the voices from the south of Yemen must also be heard. Such talks would not involve just the backers of President Hadi and of the Houthis, but other voices from within Yemen.

Yemen is a complicated country with a complicated history. There were once two Yemens, and with the end of the cold war they became one. Now we seem to have more than two, as there are several disparate groupings. Since last year there has been some hope—the efforts of Martin Griffiths have been referred to so I will not repeat them. There was an agreement to remove forces from Hodeidah and to have a neutral policing operation in the city, but we have not had that. The unilateral claim of withdrawal by the Houthis has been disputed by some people. We have also seen that even if the problem of the port of Hodeidah is somehow solved, that does not necessarily mean that the starving people in Yemen will be any better off.

The World Food Programme, which supplies food aid to 12 million people in Yemen, stated on Monday that it is thinking of suspending its operations in certain areas that are controlled by the Houthis. Of those 12 million people, 9 million are in Houthi-controlled areas, and the World Food Programme referred to a series of problems, including intimidation, corruption, extortion, insecurity and fighting, that are presenting great difficulties in getting that aid through. The Houthis are effectively taxing and extorting. Food and other aid is not getting through to the poor people, because these organisations are using their power to prevent it. That absolute scandal deserves wider publicity.

Keith Vaz: The hon. Gentleman is very experienced. He is a distinguished former Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee and his presence for this debate is extremely important. I remain puzzled, however, so perhaps he can help me with his vast knowledge of international affairs. The coalition admits that it cannot win the bombing war and the Houthis cannot win the war. People are starving. From looking at this problem from the outside, with a lot of knowledge about the tribal nature of Yemen, what does he think is stopping everyone saying that this has to end?

Mike Gapes: In short, it is because the conflict has become a proxy. The Houthis are perceived by a large number of countries in the Arab world to be either proxies or puppets of the Iranian regime. I do not think that that is absolutely an accurate description, but it is clear that the Iranians are arming the Houthis. I have seen the remains of missiles with Iranian markings on, which were on display in Najran, and the Saudis have a lot of such material. Nevertheless, the reality is that this is an internal conflict that outside countries are exploiting.

The problem we have is that in the past few days the United States has decided to send a carrier group into the region. The US has always had aircraft carriers in the region. In 2000, flying with the Defence Committee, I landed on the deck of the USS John C Stennis, named after the Chairman of the US Senate Defence select committee. Bruce George, the then Chairman of our Defence Committee, was hoping that the Ministry of Defence would do the same, but that never transpired. We landed, with the wire, on the deck. This aircraft carrier was in the Gulf of Hormuz. We could see all the aircraft movements in Iran up to the horizon from the bridge of the vessel. The US is reinforcing its military capability with carriers in the region because of its tensions with Iran. I do not want to be diverted on to

issues relating to the joint comprehensive plan of action, the Iranian nuclear programme and so on, but there is the potential for Saudi Arabia and the UAE to get America into a regional conflict with Iran.

There are good reasons to be critical of Iran: internally, it has the highest number of executions of any country in the whole world apart from China—much more than Saudi Arabia, actually—its bad behaviour in Syria; its support for Hezbollah; its consistent attempts over decades to undermine any prospect of a middle east peace process; and what it is doing in Yemen. At the same time, the Arab League has just sent an invitation from the Saudi Government to an emergency Arab summit on 30 May in Mecca. The terms of the invitation refer to “recent aggression”, which refers to the attacks on the two Saudi oil tankers off the UAE coast. No one has claimed responsibility. Blame has not yet been attributed, but the assumption is that that was done by either Houthis, people from Iraq or, potentially, those from Iran as part of the proxy regional conflict.

A year ago, as our plane was flying back from Najran and was about to land in Riyadh, there was an alert. We could see, from a distance of probably just a few miles away, an incoming missile fired into Riyadh airport. When attacks start on oil tankers and pipelines, and missiles are fired into airports as planes are landing, that gets into the mindset of the Saudis. If we are to get peace and to get the Saudis out of this conflict that the then Defence Minister, now the Crown Prince, got them into in 2015—I am sure they never thought that four years later they would be sucked into it in such a manner, and I am sure they would like a way out—the problem, as has been said, is that the Houthis also have to want a way out. However, they are doing very well out of taxing the aid that comes in, controlling the ports and all the rest of it. They are not a big group. As a percentage of Yemen’s total population they are a very small group, but they have maximum power and leverage at this time.

I do not have a message of easy solutions. I know it is fashionable for some people to say, “Well, if we stop supplying arms to Saudi Arabia, there would be no conflict in Yemen.” No one who has spoken in this debate has said that, but I have seen leaflets going out from groups such as the Stop the War Coalition that seem to imply that that is the reality. The reality is that we must use our position in the United Nations, as we have been. We must back up Martin Griffiths and his efforts. We must try, even though it is difficult, to talk to the Iranians and say, “This pattern of bad behaviour is not helpful to you if you want us to stop the pressure for more sanctions.” We also need to find ways to get support internally in Yemen for a dialogue between all groups. I flag up the fact that it is not just about the Houthis and Hadi’s Government. There are other factors in Yemen and they all have to be brought together.

1.7 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow so many distinguished gentlemen who are very knowledgeable about Yemen, led of course by the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who is originally from Yemen. I do not pretend to be an expert on Yemen, but for the reasons that have been very ably set out, I have become increasingly interested in Yemen following my original interest in the Syrian area. I do

[Victoria Prentis]

feel, as the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) just told us, that the powder keg worry is very real, which was why I wanted to take part in the debate. I will, however, confine my remarks to the plight of civilians in Yemen, especially children. It is important that we focus on what it is really like to be a child in Yemen today.

As we have heard, it is now four years since hostilities escalated in Yemen, and the suffering of millions of children and their families has grown worse and worse. Millions of Yemenis are malnourished, with an estimated 85,000 children under five—that is as many people as I represent in my constituency—who may already have died from hunger or famine. About 360,000 children under five are currently suffering from severe acute malnutrition for which they require treatment. Those are eye-watering numbers and it is important that we stop and try to imagine the level of suffering, which has been exacerbated by the denial of access to humanitarian and commercial goods, the destruction and shut-down of much of the country's medical and educational facilities, mass cholera and diphtheria outbreaks, and almost four years of still-escalating conflict.

The situation is estimated to be causing a child to die every 10 minutes—that was what I read, although the right hon. Member for Leicester East said it was every 12 minutes—from a completely preventable cause. It should be said that because there is so little infrastructure and because, in certain areas, so little notice is taken of who is dying and what is happening to them, the figure could be much higher. More than half of all health facilities are closed or only partially functioning. Preventable diseases are flourishing, with cholera cases increasing in recent weeks. About 1,000 children are being infected with cholera every day. In the last two weeks of March, 40,000 children contracted cholera.

Yemen has seen the emergence of swine flu for the first time. That is not something to be dismissed, because those of us who got swine flu when we had the outbreak in Britain know just how difficult that disease can be, particularly for the young. My daughter was desperately ill with swine flu. We need to think back only to what happened to a weakened population after a serious conflict of our own, the first world war, to know what flu in its worst state can do widely across weakened populations.

Long-term conflict has other implications. In the worst-affected areas of Hodeidah, only one in three children go to school and less than a quarter of the teachers that are needed are still in post. The closure of schools creates an exploitation crisis as child marriage, child labour and military recruitment—several hon. Members have mentioned this—fill the void that schools should be taking up in children's lives. It also stores up a very real problem for the future, as we will not have educated a whole generation of Yemenis.

In 2018, a fifth of all armed violence casualties were children and nearly half those casualties were from airstrikes. Several hon. Members have mentioned that two months ago, a hospital in Kitaf was bombed. Five children were killed; the youngest was eight. This was almost certainly an airstrike and it was not an isolated incident. It is comprehensively estimated that a fifth of all armed casualties are child casualties.

Since the escalation of the conflict in March 2015, the Yemen Data Project has counted around 19,000 air raids—one every 102 minutes for almost four years. Approximately half the known targets have been against non-military sites, which usually include places where civilians are, such as hospitals, schools, markets, factories and farms. While the ceasefire in the port means that the situation is perhaps better than it was, there has been an increase in violence in other parts of the country. Last week, four more children were killed by an airstrike in Sana'a. Across the country, children continue to be killed and maimed by shelling and mines.

We must make sure that there is humanitarian access into Yemen so that aid and commercial goods, including food, medicine and fuel, get into the country and to everyone who needs it. Children do not ask to be involved in these conflicts, and we should do everything we can to ensure that they get the protection that they need. It is our obligation to protect them.

The Stockholm agreement was the first diplomatic breakthrough and the first real source of hope. Of course, the agreement needs to be implemented, as many people have said across the House, so that the UN can continue to conduct its role in monitoring and facilitating it. I praise the Secretary of State and the new Minister for the interest that they are taking in this region and for the work that they are doing. I look forward to hearing about the Minister's plans later this afternoon.

It is simply not acceptable that children face these risks. Charities and doctors do their best to pick up the pieces, but it is incumbent on Governments around the world to prevent the atrocities from happening in the first place. The UK Government have taken a welcome first step by promising to review our protection of civilians strategy—something that has been widely called for across Parliament and by the UN. Updating the strategy and urging our allies to follow suit presents an opportunity to consider the changing nature of warfare. As conflict inevitably becomes more complex and more urban, we must update our policies, practice and global norms to protect civilians. Of course, terrorists may not read that review, but we still must continue to take the lead on it and to encourage our allies to follow suit. We can start by introducing new measures to protect children, such as ending the indiscriminate use of explosive weapons in populated areas. More than that, we must champion the protection of children globally, demanding that the UN and our allies do more to uphold the international rules-based system.

1.15 pm

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): The debate on Yemen seems to focus very much on arms sales, and it is an important debate that raises many ethical problems, some of which are rather complex. However, like the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), I think that denying sales to Saudi may not achieve a great deal because it will simply buy the bombs from elsewhere. I would rather have our people in there targeting cells to minimise casualties.

It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis). She makes a very important point about ensuring that targeting in built-up areas is given an intense priority because of the potential for

civilian casualties. As I am sure she knows, when we were running the ISIS campaign, if there were any civilian casualties, even in ISIS territory, we simply could not drop a bomb. For Saudi, it may be that those restrictions on battle damage assessment—BDA, as it is known in the military world—are somewhat looser or perhaps they justify it by going after particular individuals. There is an issue over BDA and the levels of BDA allowed by Saudi as opposed to other people.

I do not intend to talk for long, but I want to raise a few issues about the internal dynamics in Yemen and to ask questions of the Minister, in part because I am curious about the subject and covered it a bit in a previous employment. For me, the most concerning issue is the proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Oman in the south and east of Yemen. All three countries are important allies of ours. I fear that those proxy dynamics are being played out through tribal forces in Hadhramaut and Mahra. A worsening conflict between those major states will increase civilian casualties in formerly more peaceful parts of the country, such as Mukalla, Hadhramaut and Mahra. It will also worsen the dynamic between our allies—the Saudis, the UAE and especially the Omanis—and Iran. The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) was absolutely right when he said that we should not just see this through the prism of a proxy war. Unfortunately, that is an important part of great power politics. Clearly, that proxy battle, as we are seeing with the Houthis, and the dynamic between the Houthis and the Saudis in other parts of the country—around Sana'a and in the major ports—is driving the civilian casualties. Solving the civilian crisis and solving the great power politics around Yemen are very much one and the same thing.

I am concerned about the Iranian dynamic and about the Saudi desire to put a pipeline through parts of Yemen when there is no central Government to negotiate on behalf of the tribes in Hadhramaut and Mahra provinces. I would like to hear what the Minister thinks we can do to use our limited influence—we should remind ourselves that our influence is limited—in certain parts of the country for stabilisation. I ask that for a specific reason: about five years ago, we had a plan—not for all of Yemen, but the MOD and other bits of Government put together a plan for the south and east of Yemen. I vaguely know about it because I was very vaguely involved in it. It was a good plan, which looked at linking up a bit of military support with peace-building measures, a bit of development, a bit of media work, education work and a clean-up along the coastline, because the place was a bit messy. All these things were designed to stabilise south and east Yemen to prevent the Iranian smuggling routes of drugs and weapons into Yemen that were fuelling the conflict, especially from Mukalla. I cannot quite remember when, but about 15 or 18 months ago, the UAE special forces cleared out Mukalla—the Saudis came in as well—with the local tribes. I understand from my contacts with the local tribes, especially in the Mahra tribal federations, that they have, to a certain extent, welcomed outside forces, because they have helped to clean out al-Qaeda. Yemenis fear UAE attempts to cut off Aden from the rest of the country. The tribes fear that the Saudis are simply going to put a pipeline through eastern Yemen and not ask too many questions. The Omanis, who may not be our most powerful ally in that part of the world,

but are one of our best allies, fear that they are being dragged into a proxy conflict with Saudi tribal federation groups and the UAE.

I am very keen to hear from the Minister how our influence is being played out, either locally or in our diplomatic relationships here and elsewhere, to ensure that our allies do not come to blows, and that they and we can be part of a solution that seeks to stabilise. Specifically in Hadhramaut and Mahra, that would look like engaging a broader tribal federation or tribal council—I think in Afghanistan it is called a Loya Jirga, but I cannot remember what the Yemeni version is called. There should be a wider tribal federation plan than the one that exists at the moment, whereby some tribes accept Omani support and some accept Saudi support. I know that I am asking some detailed questions, but very often the devil is in the detail with these things. If the Government could say what they are doing as an honest broker between our allies, I would really appreciate it.

Will the Minister also say whether there is a new joined-up strategy to replace the at least partial joined-up strategy that was attempted a few years ago, which for various internal governmental and agency reasons sadly never saw the light of day? I regret that because it was a decent plan. Are the Government concerned about the posture of the UAE in Aden? Are they concerned about the posture of Saudi in other parts of the country and about whether it wants a more permanent presence in Yemen? If it does, what would that mean for the delicate internal dynamics in that country?

1.21 pm

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) and other experienced Members around the Chamber for their comments. There is obviously a huge amount of knowledge about Yemen in the House. I hope the Minister is in a position to listen to the comments that have been made today and to act on the good suggestions that we have heard.

My starting point is that the humanitarian crisis in Yemen is one of the greatest tragedies of our time. Can the UK do more to alleviate the dreadful humanitarian situation in that country and that region?

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for supporting this debate in Yemen Week. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) on securing the debate and on the assiduous way in which he has pursued such a complex issue through the all-party parliamentary group on Yemen, which he chairs with the support of the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who sadly cannot be with us as she is on manoeuvres elsewhere. All Members share their passion for peace and prosperity in Yemen, both in the short term and in respect of its long-term success.

The pressure that the APPG has brought to bear over the past four years has been something to behold, particularly the number of parliamentary questions that have been put down by our members and the number of early-day motions that have detailed every twist and turn of the process. As the bombs have rained down on the people of Yemen; as food, water and

[Douglas Chapman]

medicines have been in exceptionally short supply; as the humanitarian crisis has deepened; and as the Government have blatantly ignored our calls to stop UK-built weapons being exported to Saudi Arabia, the APPG has been there, influencing, making the case and highlighting the deficiencies of the Government. We have praised the good work that has been done where we can, but overall we have been hugely frustrated by the slow progress that has been made over recent times. The APPG has worked assiduously with the non-governmental organisations that have a presence in the country. We keep ourselves as well informed as we can. We keep in contact with Yemeni groups here in the UK and those who work every day to bring some sense of normality within the country itself.

The biggest thing for the APPG has been to support the work of the UN envoy, Martin Griffiths, and the peace process that he has put in place. Despite some setbacks, we wish him well in all his efforts, because the only solution in this dreadfully war-torn country will be a political solution. I look forward to those issues being discussed in Edinburgh and Glasgow at the inter-parliamentary conference on 20 June, which follows a similar event at the French National Assembly in Paris last November. Most of all, I look forward to Martin Griffiths' efforts being successful. I doubt there is even one Member of this House who does not want that peace to be won for the people of Yemen and the security of the region.

I will say a bit more on the peace process later, but I will begin by looking at an issue that some other hon. Members have veered away from: the sale to Saudi Arabia of arms that are subsequently deployed in Yemen. I believe that those exports still play a significant negative role in the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. By continuing with this policy, the UK is now "out of step" with the rest of the EU member states and its position is

"becoming ever more absurd, to the point where Jeremy Hunt claimed at the end of March that it would be 'morally bankrupt' not to sell weapons to the Saudis."

So wrote Anna Stavrianakis in a recent article for *The Guardian*.

Agreeing licences for arms sales is not the good news the Foreign Secretary thinks it is; it is a blot on our reputation. When Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Rights Watch UK are supporting a legal appeal brought by the Campaign Against Arms Trade, and when we know that many of our European counterparts have not fallen into the arms trade trap, it is clear that a serious message on arms sales is not getting through to the most senior levels of our Government—a Government who have the power to stop or suspend arms sales to Saudi Arabia until Yemen is firmly on a path to peace and stability.

There is an even stronger warning from Amnesty International's extensive and credible report, which has "demonstrated that British-made weapons have been repeatedly used—and continue to be used—to commit serious violations of international humanitarian law, including possible war crimes."

That is a dreadful legacy for any Foreign Secretary and, indeed, any Government to leave to those who come after them. Someone, someday will have to be around to clear up the mess that has been left behind.

The Netherlands, the Flemish part of Belgium and Greece have all suspended arms sales to Saudi Arabia, and Austria, Ireland, Sweden and Switzerland have put restrictive measures on exports to Saudi Arabia. In the aftermath of the murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi, several EU states announced that they would suspend arms sales to Saudi Arabia, including Germany, Norway, Finland and Denmark. I hope that the Minister accepts in his response that many of the countries I have just mentioned are our friends and allies. Why have they seen the light, and why is the UK out of step with them?

The Government have said many times that they are friends with the Saudi regime and that they have influence in the region. In a good friendship, sometimes one has to be a critical friend. I therefore hope that the Minister will listen to the views that have been expressed in this House and explain to his Saudi counterparts that many Members of the House are unhappy with the arms sales and the way in which British arms are being deployed by Saudi Arabia in Yemen.

Many hon. Members have highlighted the dreadful humanitarian crisis affecting Yemen. Women and children are on the frontline of that crisis. Their difficulties have been well documented by UNICEF, Oxfam, Save the Children, Islamic Relief and the Red Cross. Some of the statistics that we read are chilling: 80% of Yemenis are in need of humanitarian aid; 50% of children between six months and five years old are chronically malnourished; half the population, or 16 million people, wake up every day hungry; there have been, to date, 17,000 UN-documented civilian casualties, 10,000 of which are attributed to Saudi-led coalition assaults; 85,000 children have died of starvation; and 20 million people do not know where their food will come from in the next week.

Those are just numbers, and it is easy for them to trip off our tongues as Members of Parliament, but the House must recognise the lives, the families, the education and the wellbeing of those who lie behind them. While we are the fifth-largest contributor to aid to Yemen, which is to be welcomed, we are the second-biggest arms exporter to Saudi Arabia. It might be a start if the those two areas were transposed and we started putting more into aid and much less into arms sales—if, indeed, we are to have arms sales at all.

The peace process is of course where much of our hope for the future lies. As I said, I think the whole House is united in our support for the work of Martin Griffiths and Sir Mark Lowcock, whom many hon. Members have met in recent months. The UK is the penholder for Yemen in the UN, which means that we have a special role—a significant responsibility to the people of Yemen to help to lead them to a situation where they live in a peaceful and prosperous country. We support UN resolutions 2451 and 2452. I thank the Foreign Secretary for travelling to Stockholm to engage in these peace talks, but we need to do more. I also thank the previous Minister, the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), for everything that he did in this area and the way that he kept Members informed. I hope that the new Minister will step seamlessly into his shoes and do an equally good job.

There are five areas critical to peace where the UK could do more. We need to do much more to apply pressure to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to bring about an end to this conflict and to secure

peace and a lasting ceasefire. The special relationship must be made to work towards peace and stability. I would like to hear the Minister's views on how he is working towards that. We ask that the UK stops, or at least suspends, arms sales to give a really strong signal that we are serious about a ceasefire and bringing peace to the region. The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) made a good point about allowing us to find some space to rethink what our position is on arms sales. We should send a message that we want to bring peace and stability to the region. This is not a long-term position that the Government need to adopt; we just need to provide a bit of space to make sure that progress can be made.

Having a diplomatic presence in Sana'a would give a clear message that we are serious about the long-term future of the country and help to focus the international efforts to bring about an immediate and lasting ceasefire. I do not know if there are any plans to do that or if it has already been done, but it would send a very strong message to people on the ground that the UK was playing a major part and respecting our penholder status.

I hope that we can listen a lot more to the people of Yemen on the ground—particularly women—who have a crucial role to play in the future of their own country. The solutions must be found by the people of Yemen and not just done to the people of Yemen. I hope to hear from the Minister about how he would hope to encourage that sense of inclusion across communities and groups that currently operate in Yemen. I look forward his response.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I recognise that the Front Benchers usually speak for about 10 minutes, but as this is such an important debate and we do not have time pressure, I suggest 15 minutes for both sides.

1.34 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): First, I welcome my opposite number, the Minister, to his place. He has big shoes to fill but I know he will do it effectively and efficiently.

I thank my right hon. Friend—my good friend; my dear friend—the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) for bringing this debate to the House today. He is a fine, fearless and forthright advocate for Yemen. For as long as I have known him, he has provided that advocacy, but never more so than in these past four years when it has been more necessary than ever before. He opened our debate by talking about the unification of Yemen in 1990, when it was a country that was being destroyed and fragmented, to use his words, after four years of appalling conflict, echoes of which we have heard from many hon. and right hon. Members. We know that 100 children die every single day and 70,000 have been killed or have died since the war started. This is the largest humanitarian disaster since the second world war and a shocking testament to our inability to stop this needless slaughter of innocents. A child dies every 12 minutes, he told us, and many have echoed that.

My right hon. Friend referred to the Houthis' indiscriminate use of landmines, which we have condemned over and over again. He mentioned the Stockholm agreement that was agreed in December 2018, but the

implementation process of which has been sadly and woefully slow. On 10 May—at last—Houthi forces began their redeployment. We hope, like him, that that is a path to peace. As we know, 80% of goods come in via Hodeidah, and they are much needed—more needed than ever before. There has been \$2.6 billion pledged in aid, but only \$770 million in aid has been received. Sir Mark Lowcock says that much more must be done to try to ensure that those pledges turn into reality. The most important message that he gave us was, “Stop the bombing now”—something echoed by every hon. and right hon. Member who spoke.

We then heard from somebody who has really shown his mettle over the past few years and has acted where many others just speak—the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell). He is somebody we should always listen to. I agreed with everything he said, bar one thing that I will come to in a moment. He posed four pertinent questions to the Minister, and I know the Minister will do his best to answer them. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield has visited Sana'a, Sa'dah and many other towns and cities in Yemen, and has shown his knowledge and understanding from those visits. He said something very important—that the United Kingdom has been complicit in this war. He mentioned the corrupt Houthi leaders blocking food aid, and the aerial attacks by the Royal Saudi Air Force and the United Arab Emirates, which I will say a little more about later.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), the Chairman of the International Development Committee, has also taken up the cause of Yemen and spoken again and again, with passion and with feeling, to try to make sure that we play our part in this country to stop the slaughter. He said that the scale of the humanitarian catastrophe has been widely described. He emphasised the 80% gap between the funds pledged and the funds actually paid, and asked what the United Kingdom is going to do to ensure that the push for the pledges to come forward is made. Like every other Member, he mentioned the effect on children, especially those under five, and the 1,000 children a day—a day—who are contracting cholera. He welcomed, of course, the diplomatic leadership by the United Kingdom. Importantly, he agreed that there should be a major rethink on arms sales to Saudi Arabia. He said that although we do have rigorous arms sales licensing, as the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield mentioned, our sales of arms to Saudi Arabia undermine that rigorous set of rules. He said that a nationwide ceasefire is of course vital, but, more than that, we must have a long-term commitment by this country to rebuild Yemen. We would all agree with that, I hope.

The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) said that it is a cause for celebration that the truce outlines are there, and that the peace process is akin to a mediation, but much more needs to be done to build peace. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby mentioned peace building, a role close to my heart as our shadow Minister for peace.

We then heard from the former Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), a close friend. I served under him on the Committee when he was Chair. His knowledge, understanding, interest and passion came through very strongly. He is a Member we should always listen to,

[*Fabian Hamilton*]

especially on this subject—especially with his lifelong knowledge and expertise of the middle east and of the conflicts. Not only does he talk about these things, but, as he made clear to all of us this afternoon, he acts, too; he visits the regions—he is fearless in doing that.

The hon. Gentleman made some important points. The UAE is also a big player in the coalition against the Houthis, and of course Iran's role in this proxy war is extremely important and we need to tackle the Iranians on it. He also said something I would certainly agree with: while we listen to what the Americans say about Iran we need to play a much stronger role because we have a warmer relationship with the Iranians. In that regard, I hope I will be having some contact myself with the Iranian ambassador, as I am sure the Minister does regularly. The final point the hon. Gentleman made was that there are more than just two Yemens; this is a multifaceted country and we have to make sure all parties, all tribal groups and all the groups playing a role in this terrible conflict are brought into the peace talks, not just the main contenders.

The hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) again talked about the plight of children. I know that she is concerned and always passionate about trying to stop conflict. She mentioned the increase in violence in other parts of Yemen now that there is a relative ceasefire in Hodeidah.

Finally, we heard from the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely), who also clearly has a great deal of knowledge about the region. He said, again backing up comments of the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield, that this is not just about weapon sales, and stopping weapon sales will not solve the issue. He also emphasised once again that this is a proxy war.

The Houthi rebels have started to comply with a UN-led agreement to withdraw their forces from the key port of Hodeidah. Before talking about that, however, I want to mention a “*Dispatches*” documentary by journalist Sue Turton shown on Channel 4 recently. It underlined the role our country is playing and that many personnel, both military and non-military civilian staff, are playing in ensuring the Royal Saudi Air Force is able to operate. They do not touch the bombs—that would be against the law—but they do make sure the aircraft are airworthy and able to go on bombing missions. That is why Labour pledges absolutely to push as hard as we can on this, and if in government to stop all arms sales to Saudi Arabia while we ensure there is a UN investigation into the role those arms sales have played. I accept that, as some Members have said this afternoon, it will not stop the war necessarily, but I urge everybody who has not seen that documentary to watch it; that journalist's credentials are excellent and her sources impeccable, so it is worth watching because it might change Members' views about this.

While UN figures estimate over 10,000 people have been killed in the last two years, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project claims that the figure is closer to 60,223, many of these being children as we have heard so often today. Save the Children claims 85,000 may have died from starvation since 2016. I know that figure of 85,000 has been mentioned a few times this afternoon, but we need to remember it. These are children; not only are they the innocent victims of

war, but they have no say in trying to stop this war. They were never consulted, and nor were most of the civilian population for that matter.

While we on this side of the House welcome—as I am sure we all do—the progress finally being made under the auspices of the Stockholm accord and the Houthi decision to withdraw from the port of Hodeidah, it is now vital that all sides adhere to the terms of the peace plan. Over 80% of humanitarian aid enters Yemen through the port of Hodeidah. The Yemeni people have suffered enough, and the chair of the Redeployment Coordination Committee, Lieutenant General Michael Lollesgaard, is right to say that the unilateral withdrawal of the Houthi rebels must be followed by

“the committed, transparent and sustained actions of the parties to fully deliver on their obligations”.

We believe that there must be a full investigation into why there are reports, such as in the documentary I have just mentioned, of British weapons and even SAS soldiers being used in Yemen—it may not be true, but there have been reports. The fact that British weapons may have been used to kill innocent civilians, including many children, is extremely sickening, but we want to make peace in Yemen possible.

Mr Seely: I do not say the hon. Gentleman is wrong to argue the point he is making, but does he understand that insurgency theory specifically suggests that insurgents put their kit and their people where, if attacked from the air, there will be civilian casualties? This has been practised as long as insurgency wars have been going on. So the insurgents are deliberately trying to induce the Saudis to bomb them where civilian casualties will be an outcome. Therefore this is not a black-and-white scenario, but is a very complex one about risk versus reward on targets. I am not saying the Saudis are not getting it wrong sometimes, but it is not a black-and-white situation as they are trying to target a justifiable target that specifically goes into civilian areas.

Fabian Hamilton: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's intervention, and I hope I have not suggested for one minute that there is a simple solution to this conflict and it is simply a matter of stopping UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the whole thing stops, although I would recommend that, if the hon. Gentleman has not seen it, he watches that “*Dispatches*” documentary because there is certainly a hint in it—although I do not necessarily agree with it. Of course this is a complex situation, but, as the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield hinted, there may come a time when we all call for the withdrawal of UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia as a way of trying to stop the conflict escalating further or of trying to bring about a peace deal. But Labour thinks those arms sales should stop immediately.

We think that in order to make peace in Yemen possible we must end those arms exports to Saudi Arabia immediately. Following in the footsteps of our European allies—Germany, Spain, Italy and Denmark—we think that that will give the Stockholm agreement and the United Nations the best chances of achieving peace, although I do accept that there are the complexities that the hon. Member for Isle of Wight legitimately raised in his intervention. We on this side of the House have consistently called for that immediate cessation of arms sales and of the conflict—of course we all want to

see that. We feel that, as other Members have mentioned this afternoon, we are complicit unless we act more neutrally and diplomatically in the conflict in Yemen.

We have also called for an independent UN-led investigation into allegations of war crimes in this terrible conflict. An open letter to the Government sent a few weeks ago by colleagues of mine in the shadow Cabinet and other Opposition parties states that

“it is morally reprehensible that the UK government is not only not considering changing its policy”
on arms sales

“but is actively lobbying other foreign governments, as it did with Germany, to resume arms sales to Saudi Arabia.”

I also want to briefly refer to the House of Lords International Relations Committee recent report that stated that the UK was

“narrowly on the wrong side”

of the law by allowing arms exports to Saudi Arabia for the war in Yemen. The report noted that it was concerned that the Saudi-led coalition’s misuse of weaponry bought from the UK has been deliberately or accidentally causing civilian casualties. The report stated:

“Relying on assurances by Saudi Arabia and Saudi-led review processes is not an adequate way of implementing the obligations for a risk-based assessment set out in the Arms Trade Treaty.”

My colleague, the shadow Foreign Secretary, claimed in *The Guardian* earlier this year that as many as 40% of the soldiers in the Saudi coalition and the Houthi rebel army were children, and the United Nations has documented 1,702 cases of child recruitment for which it has clear evidence. As we have heard, Saudi forces have bombed vital infrastructure and innocent civilians, and starvation has been used as a weapon of war through the blockading of ports. A UN human rights investigation in August 2018 noted that Saudi coalition airstrikes might constitute war crimes. I have posed a number of questions to add to the list that the Minister already has, and I will end my remarks here to allow him the chance to answer the questions that have been put to him this afternoon.

1.50 pm

The Minister for the Middle East (Dr Andrew Murrison):

The unfolding crisis in Yemen reminds us, as we struggle with our own domestic issues, that they are as nothing compared with the disaster that is unfolding in that country. It gives us a sense of perspective. Set against that, of course we can never do enough. I have been in this job for two weeks, and I am already enfolded by a sense of frustration and inadequacy. The hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman), who speaks for the Scottish National party, hopes that we might have an embassy again in Sana’a, and so do I. That would be a litmus test of real progress in Yemen, but we are a long way from there at the moment. I thank the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) for bringing this matter forward. I am sorry that the turnout has not been greater, but what we lack in numbers, we have made up for in quality today. No one in this House knows more about Yemen than he does. He is a tremendous advocate for the people of that country, the place of his birth, and I salute him for a really high-quality speech.

As right hon. and hon. Members have said today, there has been some progress. It is always a good thing in debates of this sort to try to find something positive

to say. The Stockholm peace process has progressed, in baby steps, over the past several weeks, and General Lollesgaard, the head of the UN mission to support the Hodeidah agreement, confirmed on 14 May that Houthi forces had redeployed away from those vital ports that have been cited in the debate. Progress is painfully and disappointingly slow. Nevertheless, the United Nations has rightly described Hodeidah and Salif as a lifeline. Last month, they were the entry points for well over half of all the food imported into Yemen. Given that more than one in three Yemenis rely on aid as their only source of food, those ports are truly vital.

As I have said, there is still a lot to be done. Our country is one among many, but we do punch above our weight. I have only been doing this job for two weeks, but I have been struck by how much effort this Government have put into trying to make a difference in Yemen. Hon. Members have generously mentioned the contribution made by the Foreign Secretary, who has been to Yemen very recently. He has assembled the Quad, and we are the penholder at the United Nations in this matter. I am proud of that fact. I am also proud of the amount of aid that the United Kingdom has given to Yemen, and I will come back to that if I may. A number of Members have asked questions about aid, and I should like to describe and enumerate that issue a little more.

Central to all this is the work of the UN special envoy, Martin Griffiths, who I spoke to yesterday. I am grateful for the support for him that has been expressed today by a number of contributors to the debate, not least the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife.

Let us be clear that only a political solution can end this situation. It is the world’s worst humanitarian crisis. It might not seem that way to the general public, because it does not get the kind of coverage in our media that I think it deserves, but that remains the case nevertheless. Millions of Yemenis are experiencing the most appalling suffering. I am not keen on statistics, because they can sometimes betray and let down the sheer scale of some of these ghastly tragedies, but 24 million people—a staggering 80% of the population—are now in need of humanitarian assistance. UN Security Council resolutions 2451 and 2452, proposed by the UK, were unanimously adopted in December 2018 and 2019. It is important to understand that the UK has been right at the heart of trying to resolve this desperate situation—with the assistance of others, of course.

As the right hon. Member for Leicester East and others mentioned, we do not currently have a diplomatic presence in Yemen, but let me assure them that we monitor the situation on the ground closely, and this assessment is reviewed on an ongoing basis. As soon as it is safe to do so, we will ensure that we have proper diplomatic and, importantly, consular representation on the ground. I know that a number of right hon. and hon. Members are concerned about constituents who are wrapped up in this situation, and not being helped by the fact that the normal assistance that we would give to UK citizens is being hampered because we simply cannot have normal diplomatic or consular relations at this time.

With regard to the right hon. Member for Leicester East’s question about the upcoming state visit, I should like to remind Members of the remarks that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary made only yesterday at the Yemen Day meeting of the all-party parliamentary

[Dr Andrew Murrison]

group on Yemen, where he said that he would raise Yemen with President Trump and that he had already discussed it with Secretary Pompeo. It would be remarkable if that were not the case. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his suggestion of a UK-hosted conference for peace in London. As I have said, we are just one country among many, but we are influential and we have taken a lead on Yemen. In the spirit of the soft power that he cited, I will certainly consider his suggestion very carefully indeed.

I should like to make a few remarks about the UK's response to the humanitarian crisis. We are providing a further £200 million this financial year, bringing our total humanitarian contribution since the start of the conflict to £770 million. I have checked with officials this morning, because I know that several Members are concerned about the roll-out of that money, and I am told that more than £600 million of that sum has already been paid. I will go further and say that in my early conversations with my interlocutors over the past two weeks, I have made it clear that those who have pledged aid must give that aid. I have underscored the fact that it is not good enough simply to pledge money, and that they must hand it over.

This is slightly complicated because most of those interlocutors, including the UK, disburse most of those funds through non-governmental organisations. That is quite right and proper, and it is the best way to achieve our aims, but the process means that there could be some delay in disbursing funds. According to the programmes and schedules of the NGOs, donors must hand over the cash as soon as they possibly can, and that has been the burden of my conversations with my interlocutors over the past few days. I hope that that gives right hon. and hon. Members the reassurance that they were rightly seeking from me.

Our latest disbursement of funds will help to meet some of the immediate food needs of the people in Yemen. It will enable us to feed people, to treat them and to ensure that they get better access to water and basic sanitation, which leads me to the subject of cholera and watery diarrhoea.

Almost 300,000 suspected cases have been recorded by the World Health Organisation. Our support is saving lives, and the British public need to know that, but it goes beyond simply giving people vaccines—simple though that is in the case of cholera. It has to mean a much wider public health approach to tackling what we in this country would call an “antique disease”—a disease that should not be affecting people in the 21st century—and that means instructing people in proper hygiene. We need teams who can do that, and we must ensure that people have proper access to clean water. GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance, understands that full well, which is why we are supporting it and UNICEF and other partners to help vaccinate over 2 million people in high-priority districts.

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to talk about cholera. It is a truly terrible medieval disease, and the outbreak is the largest in the world. Does he understand that the cause of the outbreak is the smashing up of the infrastructure through the nightly bombings by the Saudi and Emirati air force? If infrastructure is smashed up like that, and if sewage is

mixed with clean water, cholera emerges. Will he bear that in mind as he makes progress in the Foreign Office on this difficult issue?

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, and I will come on to address some of his remarks in my contribution, but he is quite right that poor, broken infrastructure inevitably means cholera, particularly in a country like Yemen.

There is some good news in that the instances of cholera in Yemen have fallen for the fourth week running. That is positive and shows the difference that British and international support is making, and although it is early days, I very much hope that that positive trend continues.

Several right hon. and hon Members spoke about what we do next—what happens in the event that the conflict is resolved to the point that we can start rebuilding Yemen. I think we have actually started that. We have to look at Yemen's economy and see what we can do to support it—even in its current desperate state and even at a time when the priority clearly has to be to stop people fighting and to resolve issues relating to the humanitarian crisis. We need to ensure that what passes for a Government in Yemen is able to disburse funds to public servants, and we have been working on that. By that, I mean disbursing funds to public servants right across the country, not just those in the parts that are controlled by the Government of Yemen. We have made it clear that the Government must pay public sector workers, some of whom have not been paid for two years.

The hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) made a balanced speech. He forensically dissected the conflict in Yemen, rightly pointing out that it is not just one war, but several conflicts. The principal one that we are engaged with today is clearly the conflict between the Government of Yemen and the Houthi insurgency, but there is also the war in the south between the Government of Yemen and the so-called Southern Movement. Most worryingly for those who live some distance from the middle east, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula continues to be active. We may not hear a great deal about that in the context of Yemen right now, but it remains there, and we must be alive to the threat that it poses, both to Yemen and to the rest of the world.

I share the hon. Gentleman's concerns about the World Food Programme. The protection of NGOs in general is a matter of the utmost importance, and they must be allowed to do what they do safely. The World Food Programme is absolutely essential to resolving the situation in Yemen right now, and its work—for example, to ensure the safety of grain in the Red Sea Mills—is vital to unlock those stores and to ensure that people have food. I salute the World Food Programme and all the NGOs that put themselves at considerable risk. Looking around the world today, there is a real risk that those people's lives are often in peril, but they continue never the less.

As for the hon. Gentleman's remarks about southern voices in Yemen, I am absolutely clear that any process needs to include all the people of Yemen, including those vital southern voices. Indeed, the UN special envoy Martin Griffiths reaffirmed that in his most recent briefing to the Security Council on 15 May. It is right that the UK continues to engage, so far as it

possibly can, with a wide range and diverse group of Yemeni individuals, and we will continue to do that wherever we can.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) made several vital points in his important contribution. The evidence stands in relation to child soldiers. We are appalled by the presence of child soldiers, some of whom we are told are as young as eight years old on the Houthis side of this conflict. The evidence is clearer for the Houthis, but the accusation stands that both sides are employing minors in this conflict. That must stop. It is a truly terrible thing, and it must stop.

I entirely agree with the need to involve women in that process, and Martin Griffiths made that clear in his remarks. It is always important to point out that conflict leads to an increase in gender-based violence, and that is certainly happening in this case. I am pleased that we continue to support the UN, particularly the Yemeni women's pact for peace and security, which is extremely important. As far as we can, we will ensure that all groups within Yemen are involved in this process.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman that our commitment to Yemen must be long standing. As he will know as Chair of the International Development Committee, the important thing is that we do not consider the job done when one way or another this conflict inevitably grinds to a halt—although may that be sooner rather than later—because we need a plan for the future. We have also heard about the dusting off of old plans where they may be of assistance. He is also right to call for a ceasefire, which we of course want. Goodness me, wouldn't that be good? We must plan for what might come in the future while doing everything we can with all our interlocutors to impress the importance of dialling down and stopping the conflict, and I will come on to why that is important not just for Yemen, but for the wider region.

My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) rightly concentrated on the impact that the conflict is having on the most vulnerable: the children. I am pleased that UK aid means that the screening and treating of 30,000 children for malnutrition is going ahead this year. That will always be inadequate, but these are big numbers, and it means so much at a human level for people who would otherwise be left to face their fate. Of course, that action comes from the £770 million previously cited, which puts the UK in the premier division—head and shoulders above all the other countries with which we can reasonably be compared.

People in this country are sometimes said to be parsimonious when it comes to international development. I do not believe that to be the case, but they want to know that their money is being spent properly. I do not think there will be many objections to spending money in Yemen today. Incidentally, I agree with my hon. Friend's insistence that the UK must be a champion of the international rules-based system. It is something that goes without saying, but she is right to make that important point.

I think my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) has probably left, but I will nevertheless deal with his points because he is an acknowledged expert in this area. He is obviously concerned about Saudi Arabia's purchasing of arms from the UK, and we have been around this buoy many times. The hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton),

who speaks for the Opposition, knows pretty much what I am going to say. The Labour party, with all respect, is an expert in this matter, because it was famously involved in some of this when in office. However, this is not something that can by any means be attributed to any particular political party. We do comply with the EU consolidated criteria and with the tenets of the Export Control Act 2002, which is so important. I am absolutely clear that this country must ethically pursue whatever we do. I am prepared to argue, though this is probably neither the time nor the place—you may call me out of order, Mr Deputy Speaker—that if the United Kingdom did not sell arms in the way it does, for legitimate self-defence in accordance with international law, other countries would do so, and probably a lot less ethically.

The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield is concerned about the investigation of things that have gone wrong in the prosecution of Saudi Arabia's operations in Yemen, and there have been some horrible examples. The UK is heavily involved in ensuring that when that happens, as it regrettably does in conflict, it is properly investigated. It is not right to dismiss the Joint Incidents Assessment Team, which has produced over 100 reports on incidents during this conflict. We will clearly hold the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's feet to the fire in relation to the investigation of these matters, as we will with all our partners in the region. I hope that gives some reassurance.

I am being hurried along, and it is absolutely right that the Whip on duty should do that, but, needless to say, the speeches by my hon. Friends the Members for Henley (John Howell) and for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) were superb. I agree with much of what they have to say. The latter, of course, has an extensive geopolitical understanding of the region, for which he is famed, but both speeches were balanced and highly commendable.

The Government are fully committed to ending the devastating conflict in Yemen. We believe that supporting the work of Martin Griffiths and the UN-led process is the best way to do that, for which I heard general assent in the Chamber today. It is in the interests of all parties, but especially of the Yemeni people themselves, that we work together to find a lasting solution to this appalling situation. For our part, the UK will do everything we can, both through our determined diplomatic efforts and through our generous humanitarian support, to help find the solutions about which the right hon. Member for Leicester East spoke so passionately.

2.12 pm

Keith Vaz: This has been an excellent and passionate debate, fully justifying the decision of the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), to give us time, for which we thank him.

I thank the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), the hon. Members for Henley (John Howell), for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) and for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman), and my hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) and for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton). And I thank the Minister, who will always remember his first speech from the Dispatch Box as a Foreign Office Minister. He has responded very positively.

[Keith Vaz]

It is often said that the war in Yemen is a forgotten war, but it is not forgotten in this House. Today we have remembered Yemen, but another 12 Yemeni children have died since the start of this debate. What we want is not great speeches but great actions. A ceasefire is not a mantra but an objective. We need this ceasefire, and this country needs to make sure it happens. We need to seize the moment and bring peace to this sad, troubled but beautiful land.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes that 22 May 2019 is the 28th anniversary of the unification of Yemen, when that country emerged from a long and painful civil war; further notes that today Yemen is once again in a deep and pitiful state of conflict, having entered the fifth year of its current, tragic war; acknowledges that the most recent estimate places the death toll in excess of 70,000, of which 10,000 have died in the last five months alone; notes that Yemen remains in the midst of the world's worst humanitarian crisis, in which at least 85,000 children have starved to death and almost 200,000 have contracted cholera in 2019 alone; commends the work of the UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths, who brought opposing sides together for agreements including on a ceasefire in the Al-Hodeidah Governate; regrets that the implementation of those agreements has been slow or non-existent; and calls on the Government to take every possible measure to support an immediate ceasefire, the flow of humanitarian aid and further peace talks in Yemen.

Whitsun Adjournment

2.13 pm

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

It is always a privilege to lead such debates as Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, not least at the moment, as I am delighted to have the opportunity to talk about something other than our withdrawal from the European Union. I promise not to utter the B-word in the Chamber this afternoon. Instead, I will use the next few minutes to remind you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and colleagues on both sides of the House why I represent the best constituency in the United Kingdom, with a few policy complaints thrown in.

I can say with absolute certainty that austerity is not over in Gateshead. Despite the Government's proclamations to the contrary in recent months, and despite their promise to shake the magic money tree for the north-east of England, we have seen more damaging cuts coupled with welfare reforms and chronic, continually rising unemployment in my constituency. I say that advisedly. Unemployment in my constituency now stands at 7.2%, and it has risen month on month every month without fail. There are 470 more unemployed individuals that at the same time last year, so unemployment has not gone away in the north-east of England.

We see local authorities being forced to turn away vulnerable people from their doors. In my constituency, the employees of social housing providers are creating their own ad hoc, unofficial food banks to help tenants who simply cannot make ends meet.

I am not sure whether we should be delighted that the UN rapporteur on extreme poverty, Professor Philip Alston, chose to visit Newcastle and Gateshead while gathering evidence. Believe me, we would much prefer not to be of interest to an investigation into extreme poverty. None the less, it was finally an opportunity for members of the communities I serve—those communities are bearing the brunt of successive Government policies—local authorities and voluntary organisations to share their experiences with officials from outside the region who care enough to listen.

The report, published yesterday, is a damning indictment of how this Government treat some of their citizens and of how they view their role in office. Sadly, nothing in Professor Philip Alston's report should come as a surprise to Members. Opposition Members have repeatedly highlighted how this Government are driving constituents into abject poverty while slashing the support services that were once available to help the most vulnerable.

We have just had a great debate about Yemen. It is ironic that Ministers are quite happy to accept UN evidence on Yemen but are openly dismissive of an objective UN report on what is happening here in terms of domestic policy. That is rather strange. This is, and rightly should be, a national embarrassment. How many more of our constituents will be starved and frozen out of their homes before this Government decide to change course?

I believe that the existing council tax system contributes to the difficulties of local authorities like mine in Gateshead when it comes to raising enough money to meet increasing demand. The system is flawed and requires urgent reform to establish some equality across the UK.

The vast majority of properties in my Gateshead constituency—over 70%—are in council tax bands A and B, unlike in some parts of the south-east, where the average banding is C, D or, in some cases, E. Having a high proportion of band A and B properties significantly reduces how much money can be raised through the council tax system. As a direct result, Gateshead Council has no alternative but to continually raise council tax by the highest percentage allowed. That, in turn, has resulted in Gateshead having one of the country's most expensive council tax bills for band A properties.

In Gateshead, it costs nearly four times more in council tax to live in a one-bedroom band A flat than it costs to live in a band D property here in Westminster, which is clearly unfair. The system is punitive, outdated and regressive, and it should be replaced at the earliest opportunity. Withdrawing the revenue support grant without reforming and amending the council tax side of the local government funding system is causing hardship and suffering to our constituents, and it must be considered almost criminal because of the way in which it impacts on individuals.

We have now had council tax for almost 30 years—let us remember that it was meant to be a temporary stopgap after getting rid of the poll tax, or the community charge, as it was known—and it does not work. The band D national median is meaningless in a place like Gateshead. Unilaterally taking away the revenue support grant without altering the other side of the system was a harsh decision that has clearly affected some areas much more than others.

I promised some positivity, and I realise that my speech so far has set out a pretty bleak picture, so let me say that despite revenue support grant cuts of more than £100 million per year, my local authority continues to promote Gateshead as a great place to live, work and invest. Gateshead Council has already attracted hundreds of millions of pounds in investment in recent years. It has ambitious plans for further investment of £1.5 billion in the next 10 to 15 years, starting with ambitious plans for Gateshead quays and the Baltic quarter to develop a major new state-of-the-art conference centre and performance arena. There are to be exciting ancillary facilities and, we hope, even a new railway station to service the development, as well as our excellent and outstanding Gateshead College.

I am proud to have been a member of Gateshead Council for 27 years during our process of moving the borough forward on a long line of flagship projects: the iconic Sage Gateshead; the turning of the Baltic flour mill into a gallery of contemporary art; and our Gateshead millennium bridge across the Tyne to the village across the river. Members on both sides of the House will recognise the importance of sensitive investment and development in our communities, and how that often acts as a driver for regeneration. We have a long-standing flagship projects policy that started in the 1970s with the Gateshead stadium and Brendan Foster. Who could ever forget the way in which we turned Gateshead into a hub of athletics? We were an exemplar of Britain in bloom. We built the Metrocentre, with John Hall and Cameron Hall Developments. We turned the old Derwenthaugh coke works site into a wonderful country park. We built our civic centre in Gateshead, which was a huge success because we brought the project in vastly under budget, meaning that the residue of the development grant we got from Government, via Lord Bellwin, was

then used as a sort of development fund. That allowed us to do so many different things. We turned Saltwell park, an ageing Victorian municipal park, into “the people's park”, and it became the favourite park in the north of England—it was voted the best park in Britain on two occasions. We also developed Gateshead quays, built the Angel of the North and redeveloped Gateshead town centre.

Although Members of my political persuasion believe that investment for regeneration should come directly from Government, because that works, I also recognise that there is more chance of me watching Newcastle United win the premier league next year than this Government changing course on public investment in the regeneration of areas in the north-east of England, which, sadly, continue to be left behind, as the unemployment statistics show graphically. If any Member has a spare million or two burning a hole in their pockets, I would be delighted to welcome them to Gateshead for a look around, to meet the people and see the massive potential that exists—they will be given a very warm welcome and be under no illusion that it is a great place to work, invest and live.

As I touched upon earlier, council tax takes up an ever-increasing proportion of people's income. We have all seen the reports of local authorities pursuing residents through the courts with bailiffs to recover insignificant sums of outstanding tax, adding significant charges and fees—and misery—in the process. I am therefore delighted to talk about the excellent work that my local authority is doing to identify and support some of our most vulnerable residents. The Thrive initiative uses council tax arrears as one of the trigger points for increased support. If residents fall into arrears with council tax, it is often a tell-tale sign that there may be other significant issues on which they need support. As a result, instead of multiplying debt through the recovery process and causing no end of distress to constituents, the Thrive team in Gateshead contacts residents who fall into arrears to offer them additional support.

We know all too well that very often those in our communities who are most in need are the least likely to seek help or even to know where to go to for help. The Thrive initiative does that work for them: it reaches out and tries to engage proactively with residents who may be having difficulties, with the aim of preventing the situation from deteriorating. Not only is this holistically an excellent initiative—giving assistance before people reach the point of crisis—but it is actually beneficial to the people themselves and financially beneficial to the council. So I congratulate Gateshead Council on developing such schemes in the most difficult economic circumstances.

I feel that I have spoken for long enough but, although this does not directly affect my constituency, it would be remiss of me not to mention the ongoing abandonment of British Steel. We wish every success to all initiatives to try to retain steel production in this country, as this is so vital. While I was growing up, I watched deindustrialisation along the Tyne, with the loss of shipbuilding and heavy engineering, and the closure of coal mines, so we need to do something to retain a strategically vital industry here in Britain. Time and time again, we have seen Governments allow the deindustrialisation of the north of England, which has devastating long-term effects on communities, some of which will never recover. It is about time that industries

[*Ian Mearns*]

that are vital to not only our economy nationally, but our local economies, workers and their families across the UK, were afforded the same protections as those in the square mile in the City of London. We managed to find £500 billion to bail out the City after the financial crash, so we must be able to find a few hundred million pounds to save vital industries for the future strategic interest of our country.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish you, Members on both sides of the House and all staff a very restful Whitsun—we all deserve it.

2.26 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Before the House adjourns for the Whitsun recess, I wish to make a number of points. I am so glad that we are having this debate, because the previous one was cancelled. Unless I get a stare from the Chair, I am probably going to take a little longer than I normally would, but I assure the House that I will not squeeze colleagues out—I know that you, Mr Deputy Speaker, would intervene.

The first thing I want to say is about this place. I am very worried about Parliament—indeed, I am frightened about it. I realise that everyone else knows better than I do, but since I have been here I have never seen this place in such disarray. As we work here, we have our own view, but this is playing very badly with the general public out there—every minute, every hour, every week and every month, damage is being done to our democracy. I have never seen incompetence at the level that we are experiencing at the moment, with Ministers coming and going—it is a complete fiasco. We all know that the terrible 2017 general election messed everything up, but we have had tight results before and we have legislated—we have been here, done our work and got on with our job. That is not happening at the moment.

I say to colleagues, perhaps those on my side, that very few human beings have what it takes to be a leader of a party and indeed a Prime Minister. That does not mean to say that someone is a wonderful person because they end up as Prime Minister; I am just saying that few people have the qualities needed. So many of us seem to be unaware of our own limitations. Since I have been here, I have seen colleagues become more and more ambitious. They think, “Oh, forget the constituency, it is just a vehicle to get here. I want to lead my party. In fact, I even wanted that before I was elected.” That is how ridiculous the situation is at the moment, and it plays out there very badly indeed.

We have the poorest set of world leaders I have seen in my lifetime. I struggle to point to someone who I think is at the top of their game. Let me say something to the House, although it will not take a blind bit of notice of me—after all, who am I? I am of no importance; I am a has-been. I want to say this: this is a really serious crisis and I hope that on Sunday, when we get the results of today’s vote, we will get a grip on this place, because we need to reassure the general public that the democracy that was hard fought for means that it is worth going out to vote. That ends that Victor Meldrew rant.

Ambassadors continually visit Southend, and why would they not? We have had ambassadors from Taiwan, the Philippines and Qatar, and we are shortly to have

visits from the Indian Economics Minister and the German ambassador. They all arrive in Southend and just cannot understand why we are not a city.

On 5 March, I hosted a meeting with our excellent Minister for School Standards, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb), and the headteachers of secondary schools in Southend to discuss the thorny issue of school funding. The meeting was constructive and I believe it helped both sides to understand the difficulties. We will have a similar meeting with primary school headteachers in July.

For those who were there—I was delighted to be present with my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), the Secretary of State for Defence and other colleagues—the wonderful Music Man project really put life into perspective. When I first became an MP, I had never seen anyone in a straitjacket before. It was fantastic to see the pride on the faces of the families as they saw these people with learning difficulties perform so wonderfully well at the Albert Hall. The musical was called “Music is Magic in Space”, and the performance followed the one at the Palladium. The founder of the project, David Stanley, has been awarded the Winston Churchill fellowship, which will allow him to travel to America in November to study similar projects. That is why the show will be taken to Broadway. That is definitely going to happen next year. I am sure that Essex colleagues—I see my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris) on the Front Bench—will have constituents who took part in the project.

I recently had a meeting with our former colleague Helen Clark, who was the Member for Peterborough, and she had some wonderful ideas on children’s mental health. She met me with a lady called Monika Jephcott and a chap called Jeff Thomas, who were from Play Therapy UK, and we discussed proposals for a new approach to child mental health, including work to put the interests of children at the centre of the mental health Bill that we have been promised.

There may be a divide in the House on the governance of independent schools, but the past nine years have seen a huge shift in education, and specifically an increase in independent schools. As far as I am concerned, it is imperative that the leaders of independent schools are held to account, especially by the Independent Schools Association, because it is at school that children learn human values and life lessons. Independent schools cannot be allowed to get away with substandard conduct.

Earlier this year, I had the pleasure of meeting Southend resident and fibromyalgia campaigner Billy Mansell. More than 2.7 million people in the UK live with fibromyalgia, yet the condition is little understood. Billy is leading the way and I fully support his efforts to raise awareness and the understanding of this chronic condition and to ensure that patients throughout Essex get the right support.

Some people think I am obsessed with animals, but I know that you, Mr Deputy Speaker, have even more animals than me. The Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation and its wonderful co-founder Lorraine Platt continue to work hard on spearheading campaigns to improve the lives of animals in the United Kingdom and around the world. There has been lots to celebrate this year, with Lucy’s law having brought an end to puppy farming and Finn’s law getting Royal Assent, but

there is still a long way to go on live exports, trophy hunting and the fur trade. I look forward to working with Lorraine and her colleagues on many more successes. We had a wonderful gathering in the Attlee suite, with all these wonderful dogs and many colleagues. It is good to see that the House has reacted well to issues of animal welfare.

On the same subject, more than half of all pets in the UK are exotic species. Unfortunately, 90% of exotic fish and 75% of exotic reptiles do not survive their first 12 months in captivity as domestic pets. There are numerous reasons for those sorry figures, but the pet labelling scheme is a series of proposals that seeks to address the problem. The hope is that by providing a labelling scheme to promote informed decisions at the point of sale and evidence-based guidance on husbandry and inspection, the number of pets dying will be reduced.

The House of Commons is sometimes parodied as a place where one can get alcohol in abundance. I recently chaired a meeting of the all-party group on liver health at which we were given some shocking figures. We were delighted to learn that the steps that have been taken relating to hepatitis C and alcohol are now being looked at seriously, but I wonder how many colleagues realise that the most common cause of liver disease in England is a person having had too much drink. One person dies every two hours because of alcoholic liver disease—it kills more people than diabetes and road deaths combined. This under-reported problem costs the national health service £3.5 billion a year. There are so many ways to address the problem. The issue of alcohol labelling needs to be looked at again, as does pricing and NHS support. The good news for colleagues is that in a few months we will host a parliamentary drop-in event, which colleagues will be able to attend and, without any embarrassment, get their livers tested.

For 20 years I have been dealing with a constituent called Mr Nicholas Markos—this is a true story; he comes regularly to my surgeries. He lived with his mother, Milica. The issue was that his neighbour shifted the fence three and a half inches over their property line. That resulted in a horrendous legal situation. I am sure the House will be shocked to learn that the person who moved the fence got away with it all while Mr Markos lost everything, including his house—his mother is now in a home and he now lives in a car—because of the legal fees and bad advice. I am not going to stop Mr Markos coming to my surgery, but it costs the taxpayer a huge amount of money when I write to Ministers and get the same old thing passed backwards and forwards from the legal profession. Of course, Mr Markos cannot even get legal aid because it is so complicated. I am pretty determined and am not going to give up until we get justice for Mr Markos and his mother.

I continue to support Edwin and Janet Woodger as they try to resolve a dispute with the Co-op. My constituents have been reasonable throughout the process and I hope that the matter can be brought to a resolution at the earliest opportunity. The financial ombudsman is currently trying to help.

Many of my constituents are unhappy with the roll-out to the private sector of IR35 rules on off-payroll working. I know that the Minister who was dealing with it, my right hon. Friend the Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride), is apparently now the Leader of the House, but

I hope that he will brief whoever has taken on his previous job. It is a significant development, and although I am glad that the Government appear to have been interested in the views of stakeholders thus far, I urge the Treasury to continue to work with small businesses to ensure that any unnecessary damage to individuals' livelihoods in the transition is avoided.

Sir Jack Petchey—I see the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) nodding away; he represents a part of London near my old home town—is in his early nineties and is an absolute legend. Rather than sit on all his largesse, he has given his money to an organisation called Speak Out. I think that some constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point are involved in this wonderful organisation. I pay tribute to Sir Jack Petchey.

Section 21 of the Housing Act 1988 is a significant piece of legislation. I recognise the need to support tenants, but I also acknowledge the impact that the proposed changes will have on landlords. I take this opportunity to call on the Government to ensure that landlords and tenants alike continue to be consulted on the changes. I realise that it is a difficult issue.

I voted against the way we have proceeded on the restoration and renewal of this building—we lost by 17 votes. No one told us that the work would start immediately, meaning that every time we turn up here there is more scaffolding going up and more wires to trip over, and we cannot go down into the Crypt or up to the top of Big Ben. I should tell colleagues, though, that along with another colleague I went to the top of Big Ben three weeks ago and the restoration of the clock face is absolutely fantastic. After the Notre Dame disaster, we obviously have to address things in this place. My colleague on the all-party group on fire safety, the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse will agree that fire safety is imperative. It was mentioned in business questions this morning. It is imperative that as many colleagues as possible click on the link and go through the fire safety procedures. It does not take long. When I mentioned it last time, several colleagues complained that it was not working properly, but it has been fixed now.

Fresh information has recently come to light on the so-called Prittlewell Prince, a discovery of major significance to the history of the United Kingdom. The body is thought to belong to a prince or aristocrat, and archaeologists are calling it the UK's answer to Tutankhamun. And where do you think it is, Mr Deputy Speaker? It's in Southend. It is yet another reason Southend should be declared a city.

Anna Baldan, a constituent of mine, lost her husband, Alessandro, after he fell from his mobility scooter and sustained fatal head injuries. Now Mrs Baldan wants laws to be re-examined regarding mobility scooter safety. Specifically, she would like it to become a legal requirement for all mobility scooter users to wear a safety helmet. Perhaps the Department for Transport could look at that.

Dr Zaidi is an outstanding local GP. The Kent Elms health centre is an established primary care site that has just gone through a major redevelopment. They have kindly asked me to open the centre. The development supports the principles of the NHS 10-year forward vision in providing more accessible high-quality services, and it is hoped that these newly refurbished premises

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will encourage newly qualified medical professionals to remain in Southend. I pay tribute to Dr Zaidi and his wonderful wife, who is also a GP.

I cannot for the life of me understand the way the local authority—whatever political party has been running the council over the past years—has overseen the Kent Elms improvement road safety network. I cannot see any improvement, and now they have put back that huge monstrosity over the road, even though there are now traffic lights. It is incredible.

Angela Halifax is a lady who provides assisted living. Such places play a fundamental role in local communities, but she is concerned that the recent increase in service VAT will prove detrimental to those individuals who are most vulnerable. Angela would like Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the Treasury to re-examine their decision to bring forward this change.

My constituent Colin Baldwin has pledged to cycle 1,000 miles to raise £10,000 towards the rebuilding of St Stephen's church. The £1,000 by 1,000 initiative—1,000 people raising £1,000 each over two years—hopes to raise enough money to rebuild the church.

I turn now to Network Rail and c2c. A number of Essex residents are fed up with the situation at the moment, with the maintenance works going on morning, noon and night. I do not understand it at all, and suddenly we are told that the trains are not running from Fenchurch Street and one has to scoot down to Liverpool Street. It is going on and on. These people do not seem to be accountable to anyone. The latest fiasco is that the old system for buying tickets whereby passengers put their credit card in has been changed and the queues with the new system are endless. It is ridiculous.

Alan Hart, a local constituent who has now become a Leigh town councillor, has been corresponding with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and other stakeholders about water companies and other organisations that he believes should re-examine the use of rateable value to determine water bills.

In February, the Kings money advice centre in my constituency, led by the wonderful Rev. Gavin Dixon, celebrated its 10th anniversary. I pay tribute to the wonderful support it gives to people in enormous financial difficulties. The Salvation Army centre recently reopened its day centre in the area I represent. It does a fantastic job on behalf of the community. As I am always telling people, the people there are not just wonderful at Christmas; whatever they do, they always have smiles on their faces. It does not cost anything and it raises spirits.

I am sure that all colleagues will agree that we owe a huge debt of gratitude to our veterans. We heard much about that at Prime Minister's Question Time yesterday. Unfortunately, my constituent Darren Turner has not been receiving the support he deserves from the Department for Work and Pensions. I expect the Government to support former servicemen and women in any way they can, and I would ask the relevant Minister to re-examine the specific case.

I come now to what is a terrible tragedy. A constituent of mine, Mrs Rayner, came to my last surgery. In March 2018, the body of her grandson, who I had met—wonderful chap—was pulled from a river after he had been missing for three months. She and the mother of this poor boy

are in meltdown. In August of the same year, the autopsy was completed and as it stands there is still an open verdict, which is obviously very distressing to the family. I believe the case needs to be looked at.

What is awful is that Mrs Rayner has been told by the DWP that she is not suffering from bereavement and as a result her personal independence payment has been reduced. This is absolutely ludicrous. It was clear to me that my constituent was suffering and I know that her GP agrees. The DWP needs to look at this case urgently. Adam's mother, Clare, is hopeful that all future missing persons cases will be treated equally and that the parents of missing individuals will be listened to. I very much support the family.

Many colleagues say, "David, we've been to Southend airport. Isn't it fantastic?" It is, but the residents whose houses adjoin it did not expect these huge jets now to be literally at the back of their fences pouring out noxious fumes. Recently on "The One Show" residents of Wells Avenue complained about having these jets with all their fumes in their back gardens. The dialogue with the airport authority goes on and on. It has reached a point where they might as well have a compulsory purchase order, buy the whole road of houses, give them a decent return and settle the matter. The airport is suggesting the installation of a noise barrier and other such things, but I do not think that any of us, over what I am sure will be a beautiful summer, would want to sit out in our garden with a jet at the back ready to take off.

Now is the Time for Change is a company set up by an inspirational constituent called Kelly Swain. As she continues her personal journey, she is working with colleagues to ensure that local people, especially children, have access to the wellbeing and mental health services they need. I am going to see her at the weekend. We were all encouraged by a meeting that recently took place with the mental health Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), and we now look forward to meeting the chairman of our local clinical commissioning group. It is about time we had a meeting with José Garcia.

My constituent Robert Hubbard recently attended one of my constituency advice surgeries. His daughter-in-law, Lucianna, lives in Mombasa. When she has spent time in the UK, she has always obeyed the conditions of her visa. She is now looking forward to obtaining a visitor visa to come and see her children, but the Home Office and UK Visas and Immigration have not granted the application. I have received assurances that Lucianna would obey all the conditions of her visa, and I call on the Home Office and the Immigration Minister, with whom I am in dialogue, to re-examine the case.

Mojo and the The Vine are two shops that have been converted into bars, and they are causing mayhem. When I was canvassing in the area during the last local elections, I turned around and a car pulled up with its lights on, even though it was during the day. An electric window was lowered, two chaps appeared and a plastic container was passed over—drugs. Nothing is being done about Mojo and The Vine. I want action from the council and the police on this matter.

I was very surprised that in the elections for two of the wards of Leigh-on-Sea Town Council, there were 153 spoiled ballot papers, some of which had "Abolish Leigh Town Council" written across them. In another ward—these are very small areas—there were 50 spoiled

ballot papers bearing the same words. We do not talk about what is written on spoiled ballot papers, because it is usually something offensive about the local Member of Parliament, but on such occasions we need to reflect on what is going on.

It was a great pleasure to attend the 50th anniversary of Southend and Leigh bridge club this year. To keep any club going for 50 years is truly amazing.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I hope I am not interrupting the hon. Gentleman's excellent speech, but I sense he is coming to the end of it, and I wonder whether he has included on his last page congratulations to West Ham United on finishing in the top half of the premiership this year. I only mention that because it will save me, as a fellow West Ham supporter, doing so in my speech; and because the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee mentioned Newcastle United, so we will beat them 2-1 on this occasion.

Sir David Amess: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. My goodness, I was relieved that Southend United won their last game, so we were not relegated. As a staunch West Ham supporter, I think that having got off to a bad start and lost the first four matches, to finish 10th in the league was a tremendous outcome. My youngest daughter plays for Arsenal ladies, and they are a great team, but I am a dyed-in-the-wool West Ham supporter and I join him in congratulating them on their season. Onwards and upwards, and—who knows?—just like Leicester, they might win the league.

With my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) sitting nearby, I am thinking about the spring clean. I took part in our local spring clean, led by a wonderful local councillor, Meg Davidson, who is now deputy leader of the Conservative group. I think it is a wonderful opportunity.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I join all other Members in wishing you, the other Deputy Speakers, Mr Speaker and all the staff of the House a wonderful, joyous, restful and Brexit-free Whitsun.

2.50 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): We have been privileged to hear a masterclass from the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess)—I will call him the hon. Member for the city of Southend—on how to speak in the end-of-term Adjournment debate. I am a mere apprentice to his great talent.

I take this opportunity to pay tribute to steelworkers and their families across the country, and across the ages, for their contribution to our nation. They have been in the vanguard of its growth, prosperity and development. They are amazing men and women, and they have had some tough times and tough years. The last few weeks have been some of the toughest. Yesterday, British Steel, which employs 4,500 people in Scunthorpe and across the local area, with probably 20,000 people working in the supply chain, went into compulsory liquidation. Steelworkers and their families, the contractor base and people who work in the supply chain will understandably be worried and concerned, as I am. But I know that we have a good business, and the country needs this business. Despite the challenge, I am confident about the future.

A few months ago, after a public fundraising campaign, a statue dedicated to steelworkers across the ages was unveiled in Scunthorpe town centre. That iconic statue is a beautiful piece of public art, and people swarmed to the town centre from across the community to recognise it. It demonstrates how the industry cuts through everything that the local area is about.

Steelmaking and steelworkers belong to place. Place is very important in our past, present and future. Many new industries, including digital industries, have been established, and it is good to see that, but they are not as located in place; they can move quickly and freely across boundaries and countries. That creates a huge challenge for us all as policy makers. Place is important, and steelmaking has helped to create the place of Scunthorpe. The discovery in the 1850s of iron ore resulted in iron ore being mined for a long while and eventually led to the building up of the steel industry.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am pleased to hear about the steelworkers' monument that the hon. Gentleman has just mentioned. There is a firefighters' memorial at St Pauls and a construction workers' memorial at Tower Hill, but they have been there for only 20 years. It is important that we recognise the contribution of ordinary men and women—that may be in their industry, rather than as individuals—so I am pleased to hear that there is such a memorial in Scunthorpe for steelworkers.

Nic Dakin: And memorials to people who have helped to build this country; and memorials that include women as well as men. Most memorials to women in this country are actually to Queen Victoria, but the memorial in Scunthorpe includes a female steelworker and a male steelworker, recognising that it is through men's and women's work across the ages that this country has been built.

Steelmaking is the beating heart of the community that I am proud to represent. It is what gives the community its character and strength. Everyone has friends or family members who work in the steel industry or its supply chains. It provides high-skilled, well-paid jobs that drive the local economy, and has always been passionate about and committed to apprenticeships, training and investment—investing in community causes and the community effort. The supply chain and the contractor base are also hugely important.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) said, this is not just an industry that is important to places around the country; it is an industry that is important to our country and it is part of our national asset. The strategic value of the steel industry is massive. It is a foundation industry that underpins our manufacturing and economic performance. If we are serious about being an independent and modern country, we need to have our own independent steelmaking capacity so that we have defence and infrastructure security, otherwise we are vulnerable to the whims and vicissitudes of others.

The strongest economies in the world have strong steel industries. Look at the countries with the strongest steel industries: No. 1—the USA; No. 2—China; No. 3—Japan; No. 7—Germany. The UK currently comes in at No. 30. Do we want to drop further down the league table? No, we do not. If we are serious about punching above our weight and being a leader in the world, we

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cannot slip further down that league table. If we want to be a proud, modern, independent nation, we need to have our own independent steelworking capacity.

People care about steel, and we can see that in the response to the current crisis. Outside this House, there is a consensus that our steel industry is necessary for our future as a nation. Inside this House, we saw the solidarity expressed from all corners of the Chamber yesterday. I pay tribute to all colleagues in the House for speaking strongly with one voice about how important this industry is, and for saying that we need this industry for our national strength and national benefit. There was a chorus of support across the House for the Business Secretary in his commitment to find a positive outcome through the current set of challenges, and a willingness to explore, from all corners of the House, whatever future ownership models are necessary to secure our industry for the future. One voice, one message—to save our steel because we need it for our nation's future.

Steel is one of the most productive industries, and its productivity has increased massively over the last 20 years. It is also a hugely sustainable industry. Steel is highly recyclable—one of the most recyclable products. We may be able to do more to ensure that we recycle all our steel and use the best of what we have got, but steel made in the UK reduces the carbon footprint of production, so it is a sustainable product. If we are forced to import our steel from outside the UK, that will affect our ability to reduce our carbon footprint. The upsurge in desire to do better on tackling climate change is another reason why we need our own independent steelmaking capacity. That is incontrovertible and irresistible.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an extremely important point about the steel industry. I am reminded of the closure of Ravenscraig in Lanarkshire in Scotland in 1992. That was a massive steelworks. I was born in 1989, and nearly 30 years on, the vast bulk of that site is still wasteland. A whole generation have grown up with the impact of that. The idea that we can just turn these industries on and off and that the people around them are not affected is totally wrong-headed. That is the economic vandalism that this Government's *laissez-faire* approach is doing to communities if they do not intervene to save nationally strategic industries such as steel.

Nic Dakin: My hon. Friend makes a good point about the need to act and the cost of not acting.

We had the steel crisis in 2015-16, when we lost the SSI site in Redcar. My hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) talked yesterday about the strategic assets that have been lost. The blast furnace at Redcar, which was probably the best in the country, is now of no value to the country. The blast furnaces in Scunthorpe are not only necessary for us to deliver our steelmaking capacity and contribution to the economy; they are national assets, and it would cost a huge amount to bring them back on stream. I welcome the Secretary of State's strong comments at the Dispatch Box yesterday, when he made it clear that these national assets need to be secured for the future.

We do not want another Ravenscraig or another Redcar, because the costs are too great. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney)

reminds us that Ravenscraig is still costing the nation money, and it is the same with Redcar. The clean-up costs of these great industries are uncountable. The costs of keeping them going, keeping people economically viable and keeping our country proud and independent in what it can do are chickenfeed compared with the costs of not doing so. He makes that point extremely well.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): Hearing my hon. Friend speak, I recall what happened when Brymbo steelworks in my constituency closed in 1990 and part of its infrastructure was shipped to China. That was extremely traumatic for people, and sometimes it is not recognised what happens within a community when a steelworks closes.

Nic Dakin: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Already, during my short contribution to the debate, we see the way in which the steel industry connects with people in a way that some other industries do not. People know that this industry is a throbbing heart of the country. We need it if we are to be a proud, strong country, and closures such as the one she mentions have a detrimental impact on not only communities but the nation.

I called on then Prime Minister David Cameron to convene a steel summit in October 2015, which brought together unions, steelmakers, partners in the industry, key stakeholders and Government. At the summit, we focused on five asks. While applauding the Secretary of State for his urgent action, I am critical of the Government for not progressing those fundamental asks more strongly. There has been some movement, but not as much as we would like. Those asks need to be addressed to get the industry on to a level playing field, so that we can be not 30th in the league but battling for the top spot.

The first of the five asks was energy costs. Energy costs for the UK steel industry are much higher than those in Europe and elsewhere, and we still need to do something about that. There was mitigation through the carbon price floor tax, but it took about three years to come in. There is still a gap, and the energy required to support our steel industry is still far more expensive than elsewhere in Europe. We need to work on that if our steel industry is to move on to a level playing field where it can have a sustainable and strong future in the lifeblood of our nation.

The second ask was about procurement. The Government have taken some steps on procurement. In 2016, they brought in new procurement guidelines. It has been a struggle to make sure that those public procurement guidelines bite and are effective. It is one thing to have something that is nice on a piece of paper, but it needs to have some traction in terms of action. Earlier this year, the Government published their analysis of where we are on that, and their own figures show that only 43% of the £158 million of procurement by the UK Government last year was produced in the UK.

Obviously, there is still work that can be done there. I am thinking of things such as the Royal Fleet Auxiliary, and would it not be good if that was all made with UK steel? I am thinking of things such as Heathrow, and I would like to commend Heathrow for the commitment it has made throughout to using UK steel wherever possible in its procurement processes, while of course meeting proper procurement guidelines. Heathrow has

had the best practice in the way it has approached this, as indeed has Network Rail if we look at its performance. HS2 is another public procurement programme that could strengthen the messages it is putting out on procurement.

I was pleased on Monday to sign the steel charter, which is the work of steelmakers and the steel unions, and that the Government have also signed the charter. The charter points out that the UK Government steel procurement pipeline has been analysed as amounting to over 3 million tonnes over the next decade. That is a lot of steel: 3 million tonnes of steel is worth upwards of £2.5 billion in value. That shows the opportunity of steelmaking, and it also shows the degree of risk and vulnerability we will be exposed to if we do not have our own steelmaking capacity. I was very pleased to sign the charter, and I was pleased that the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), also signed it. The Secretary of State has made it very clear that the Government intend to push forward with doing everything they can to improve performance on procurement.

The third ask was about business rates. The plant in Scunthorpe—this goes back to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East about the size of these industrial sites—it is actually about the size of the town of Scunthorpe itself, and is bigger than the borough of Chelsea and Kensington, so this is a big bit of land. The site in IJmuiden in the Netherlands, its sister site when we were part of Tata, is even larger—I think it is about three times as big—but the site in the Netherlands pays lower business rates than we do here in the UK. The playing field is not level, and we need to level this playing field. Despite the actions of North Lincolnshire Council to try to ensure the most effective business rates regime, the current framework of business rates means that the penalty for steelmakers is still very high.

Again, I come back to the point I made earlier about how these are businesses and industries that are in places: we cannot move the asset around the world to dodge taxes. That makes it easy for them to be taxed, but, frankly, why should these businesses be paying more of a burden than companies such as Amazon, Google and Facebook, which are fletter of foot because their assets are of a different nature and they are not place-bound? That is a challenge, and it is one we still have. This playing field needs to be level.

The fourth ask was to take action to make sure that steel could not be dumped in the UK from markets where it is being produced at below the rate of production. To be fair, the UK Government did support the European Union in putting stronger tariffs and stronger defence instruments in place to protect steel from coming in—particularly from China, but from elsewhere as well—and that has had an effect. However, as we come out of the European Union, it is important that the Trade Remedies Authority remains vigilant on dumping, and that the current 40-plus trade defence instruments in place in Europe move across to protect our steel industry. That is particularly the case given the actions we see being taken in the United States and the problem of steel displacement, with steel that would be going to the United States trying to come into the UK and Europe.

My fifth ask was about research and development, and the environmental improvements that are needed. The Government have done some things on that, but they could do more. It is important that our steel industry is efficient compared with steelmaking elsewhere in the world. Indeed, it must become ever more efficient so that it can be part of a future green industry, and contribute to our future in an effective way.

After the new Government were elected, in 2016 they created—to applause from Opposition Members and, I hope, from Government Members—a Department that included the phrase “industrial strategy” in its title, and recognised the need for such a strategy. I had hoped for fast progress on a sector deal for steel to address some of the underlying issues, but sadly, such progress was not as brisk as one would have wished. We are still talking about the need to progress a sector deal for steel, and we now have this crisis in our midst. Had we had such a deal to address some of the underlying issues, I am optimistic that we would have been less likely to have this crisis. The Secretary of State needs everybody’s support and commendation for his efforts to ensure a positive outcome to the current crisis, but I hope that he and his team will also move forward with work toward a proper sector deal, so that the fundamental issues can be addressed.

Let me conclude by considering the current crisis and challenges. British Steel is a sound and effective business, and it has made a lot of progress over the past three years since the change of ownership. It has become much slicker. Steel is a cyclical business—enough money must be made when at the top of the cycle to get through the bottom of the cycle, but the business will make money. Steelmaking also needs a lot of investment to keep it at the edge of best production. It is a hungry business, but it is a good business.

The uncomfortable truth is that this current crisis would not have happened if we had not decided to leave the European Union, and then made a mess by not getting on with it. That has created uncertainty, in particular with the threat of a no-deal exit, which everyone in steelmaking agrees would be bad news for our ability to keep our steel industry in good shape. I shall not linger on that, however, because the important point is to focus on where we go next.

Other questions probably need to be asked. For example, people have raised various questions about whether Greybull Capital has acted as a good steward of the business, and there are concerns about why the UK appears to find it more difficult than some of our European neighbours to provide support within the state aid rules. Those questions have been raised, and the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee might wish to consider them, as that would be the appropriate vehicle to look into and scrutinise those issues.

Now is not the time for looking backwards; now is the time to look forwards. British Steel has a team in place from the official receiver to run it, and we need to keep the business going until new owners are found. From listening to the Secretary of State yesterday, I understand that his interest is to take this business forward as a going concern into the future. The management team, trade unions and the Government are working urgently with the receiver to ensure that this business goes forward strongly. Leadership at a local level is provided by the management team, led by Gerald Reichmann. The unions have also provided support,

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and Paul McBean, Ian Smith, Martin Foster and other colleagues have made a real difference in taking forward a difficult situation, and building a determination to ensure that this business, this industry, has a positive future.

The last thing I want to say is that I would like to thank all the people who have contacted me and the steelworkers, locally and in the supply chain, to express their support and solidarity from across the country and across the community. That means a lot to people. It means a huge amount to people that everybody cares. And because everybody cares, I am confident about our future: I am confident about steelmaking in Scunthorpe, in Teesside, in Skinningrove, in the United Kingdom in the future. The emblem on Scunthorpe Borough Council's mast was "The heavens reflect our labours". Let us hope the heavens are on our side as well.

3.15 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin). He described what we had experienced in the Chamber to the point at which he stood to speak as a masterclass. And that masterclass continued. This is the first time that I decided to attend a recess Adjournment debate and I have learned a great deal about how to make the best use of the time afforded by such debates. The hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) gave us a very thorough commentary on his constituency. I know a little about Gateshead and I have to say that the people of Gateshead are some of the friendliest and most welcoming in these islands. I always look forward to my visits to Gateshead to visit friends who live there.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) gave a tour de force. I am taking notes about what I observed in how he conducted himself. I share his concerns about the state of our democracy. I am really concerned about the esteem in which people hold this place and I am deeply concerned about some of the comments I pick up every Saturday when I knock on doors in my Stirling constituency. We desperately need to consider the reputation of Parliament and the way in which we have conducted ourselves over the past little while.

There was a mention from across the Chamber of sporting triumphs. It would be remiss of me not to wish my namesake Shelley Kerr, the manager of Scotland's World cup team, all the very best when the tournament starts next month in France. I am sure that all of us will have marked in our diaries a very important date and time, Sunday 9 June at 5 o'clock, because that is when England will be beaten by Scotland in the women's World cup. I wish the Scotland team well. It is fantastic, as a Scot, to be able to have a national team in a World cup—in fact, in any kind of tournament at all. I rejoice in their success in being in it and I know they will do us proud.

The hon. Member for Scunthorpe mentioned steel and the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee. I note what he said. I am a member of the Committee and he asked some very valuable questions.

As I mentioned, this is the first time that I have attempted to speak in a recess Adjournment debate. If you do not mind, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to

reflect on the fact that, just after we come back from recess, it will be a few days more to the second anniversary of my election to this place as the Member of Parliament for Stirling, and the election of the other Members who first came to the House in 2017. I want to use this opportunity to thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, Mr Speaker and the other Deputy Speakers, the officers and staff of the House, and our Members for the many kindnesses and considerations I have experienced and been shown over the past two years. I am absolutely certain that I speak for the whole 2017 intake when I say that.

I never tire of the privilege of being a Member of this House and representing the people of the Stirling constituency. What can I say about Stirling? Every day when I walk to this place, I choose, whenever I can, to walk through Westminster Hall. There are several plaques in the floor of Westminster Hall. I always take time to reflect on and show my visitors the plaque that designates the spot where William Wallace stood when he was sentenced to death by this English Parliament. I mention that because Stirling is the home of the National Wallace Monument, where I recently witnessed the reality of the Union, which is my main topic this afternoon. At the monument, which will be 150 years old this year by the way, there is a 14-foot-tall statue of William Wallace, which has been in place for 132 years. It bears the effects of being that old, so it was recently taken down from the monument and repaired. That was a very worthy project and I salute all who were connected with it, but the repair—bear in mind the history of William Wallace and the nature of the plaque in the Westminster Hall floor—took place in Wigan, in England. I am not sure what the spirit of William Wallace would make of that; nevertheless, I felt that it surely represented something about our United Kingdom.

The hon. Member for Gateshead reminded us, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West, that we are in this place not for the purposes of self-aggrandisement, but to serve others, without a selfish motive or agenda, and to seek to do good to all people. We are reminded of that every day that we attend Speaker's Prayers and by this building and everything about it. We need those reminders, because passing laws, holding the Executive to account and speaking truth to power and patronage is fundamentally about serving people and seeing that their needs are best served by the actions of Government.

I will take a few minutes of the House's time to speak about good governance. I have said many times in this House that I do not always feel that my constituents and the people of Scotland are being best served when it comes to governance. When I say governance, I mean the system of government at all levels and how they work together to serve the best interests of the people. There are many examples of where Government serve the people well. I specifically mention the dedicated and skilled public servants that I have witnessed working hard in various activities. This includes teachers, people who provide care in our health service, the police and the fire service, and we undoubtedly have the best armed forces and the best consular network that we could imagine around the world. We have a great deal to be grateful for. However, my concern is that when Government do not work together and when they pass the buck—when citizens are told, "It's not my job to do this or that"—that is when people are poorly served. Whether that is different Departments or arms of a

single Government, or different levels of Government not acting together, it amounts to poor service and poor governance.

In Scotland, we have a situation where the idea of disharmony and not working together is the aim of public policy. The Scottish National party Government delight in telling the people of Scotland what cannot be done. They love to tell us that they do not have the power to do this, that or the next thing and they delight in telling us that it is someone else's fault. They love to tell us, "Actually, it is Westminster's fault." I refer to my earlier comments in reflecting that what the people of Scotland have witnessed in this Parliament in recent months and years has added evidence, unnecessarily, to support these spurious claims about blame. The manufacture of grievance is what nationalists are all about. We should remember that the only reason they manufacture grievance and the reason they love to blame is that they wish to use it to advance their argument for independence. They exist only to create division and sow discord. It is their *modus operandi*; it is the means to the end that they seek.

Let me say straight away that it is simply not good enough for me, as a Scottish Conservative and Unionist, to point that out and to despair at the SNP, the way it wants to do Scotland down and its incessant negativity. That is not enough. The SNP may be seeking to build walls between people, but we in this place must be determined to build bridges. We need to be the people who engage positively with the issue of governance throughout the United Kingdom. I believe that it is time for a positive Unionism to be active in the lives of my constituents and the people of Scotland—a positive Unionism that is designed to make life better for our citizens; a positive Unionism that shows the people of Scotland and the people of Stirling that there is a real benefit to being part of the Union.

For me, the key to unlocking that demonstration of benefit is to work together across all Administrations in the United Kingdom to create partnerships. We have seen that for ourselves in Stirling, where the city region deal brings together local authorities and the Scottish and UK Governments. They have to work together, to sit down together, to talk to each other and to make agreements about how to transform the Stirling economy and the lives and life prospects of the people of Stirling. I should mention that that also applies to the constituency of my near neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham).

What we need is more joint enterprise between Governments. To make that happen, I believe we need reform. It is imperative that we view such reform not simply as a fix for process and bureaucracy that allows people to fall between the stools, but as a bulwark against grievance-based nationalism. In short, we need to modernise the Union, and the emphasis should be on the delivery of good governance.

I am grateful that my views on good governance are not my views alone, but are shared by many Members on both sides of the House. Just a couple of weeks ago, I was very pleased to join the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray)—a Scottish Conservative, a Scottish Liberal Democrat and someone from Scottish Labour—to publish a joint article in *Scotland on Sunday* about good governance for Scotland.

I would like to share with the House some of our conclusions about what good governance means. We said that we share a common interest in making a

"passionate, positive and heartfelt case for Scotland's integral role in the United Kingdom".

We see it as a fundamental part of our jobs as Members of this House to make that positive case. We concluded that it has never been more important to make the positive case for the Union because the SNP, under Nicola Sturgeon, is once again making reckless demands for another independence referendum. We said in the article:

"We believe in the UK not just because it is the most successful union the world has ever seen,"—

and it is—

"but because of how we see it improving and responding to the political, cultural, and social demands of a new era."

That new era is being brought about because of our departure from the European Union and the new powers that will be transferred from Brussels to Holyrood. More than 80 powers will be transferred from Brussels to Holyrood, and that is on top of the other powers that the Scottish Parliament has been granted in recent years, including powers on welfare.

If I may, I will conclude with a short extract from the article. I believe that these words are worthy of the House's attention because they are cross-party and, above all else, they are heartfelt words from Scots who care deeply about the Union and the future health and prosperity of the United Kingdom.

Our article said:

"We must be creative in finding solutions to modernising the Union. As a result of our asymmetrical devolution, one challenge is that with many of the powers which may come back to the UK from the EU we will find that some ministers in Westminster will be responsible both for UK common market cohesion, as well as the specific policy framework for England. It creates a conflict of interests, to which"—

to some of us—

"federalism is one solution. The other would be the creation of a Department for the Union to act as an arbiter."

I would ask those on the Treasury Bench to seriously consider this policy idea.

Mr Sweeney: The hon. Gentleman is making an interesting series of proposals and he opens up an interesting discussion. However, the integrity of the United Kingdom is dependent on its being functional and serving a real purpose that means something in people's lives, and the ongoing constitutional Punch and Judy show that is going on in Scotland right now is ill serving that objective. Does he not agree that we need to move away from the yah-boo polarisation of constitutional obsession in Scotland and focus on delivering policies that improve the quality of life of people in Scotland, and then demonstrate the value of solidarity?

Stephen Kerr: I welcome that intervention. In fact, that is exactly what I am saying. Speaking as a Conservative and a Unionist, I wish that we could get past all the unending and, frankly, fruitless discussions about constitutional arrangements, and talk about policies that improve the life opportunities of people in Scotland. I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman, but we need to address the issue of the governance of Scotland to be able to bridge the gap, in constitutional machinery

[Stephen Kerr]

terms, that allows the SNP the breathing space to fester the grievances that it is busy manufacturing while he and I are sitting here.

Our article goes on to say that the Department for the Union

“could be part of the constitutional jigsaw that would solve some of the problems the country will face in the future if they are not addressed. This department would be of such importance that we suggest the leader of it should be one of the five great offices of state: joining Prime Minister, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Home Secretary and Foreign Secretary. They would be supported by a group of senior ministers representing Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland.

A Department for the Union at Whitehall would be responsible for maintaining and enhancing the regulatory and governmental framework of our United Kingdom. Hearing the voices of English, Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish ministers, businesses in each sector, and civic bodies would allow for a regulatory framework which works for our whole United Kingdom. Within this framework, devolved governments would be able to adjust policies to suit the individual needs of each country of the United Kingdom whilst protecting the cohesion of the single market of one of the largest economies in the world. This department could work closely on future constitutional change and make informal arrangements such as joint ministerial committees more formal and effective. One of the SNP’s arguments for independence is that the Scottish Government is not treated with respect by the UK government. We reject that claim, but a Department for the Union would put it to bed, and would encourage a better working relationship between the two governments in the interests of all the people of Scotland.”

I am very grateful for the indulgence of the House in being able to share these ideas today.

I worry not just about our democracy, in the way that was referenced earlier, but about the fragility of the Union. I sometimes think that what the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) said about Punch and Judy constitutional politics is replicated in this House, because some people think that the Union is something that the Scots debate, or is about the issue of a border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. The fact is that we all have a vested interest in the health, wellbeing and future security of the Union. This is a time to end the division and rancour that the Scottish Government have consistently created, and to end the building of walls between people in Scotland and people in the rest of the UK. It is a time for the UK Government and this Parliament to put their shoulder to the wheel in Scotland and help to bring people together.

3.34 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): May I begin, as a fellow member of the all-party group on steel and metal related industries, by paying tribute to our chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), not just for his passionate and thoughtful speech today, but for what he is doing to support his community and to fight for our industry following this week’s announcement about British Steel? The support and solidarity of my steel community is with his. Our steel industry is again in very difficult times and Members who represent steel communities will do all that we can to press the Government for all they can do on the things they can influence: energy prices, the sector deal, procurement—all the things my hon. Friend mentioned earlier. Along with the unions, we will never stop in our fight to save our steel. I also pay tribute, like my hon. Friend, to the dedicated steelworkers at Cogent Orb, Llanwern and

Liberty Steel in my constituency. They are a very dedicated workforce making world-class steel and they deserve our support.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate, and I want to use it—partly because I did not secure an Adjournment debate—to talk about the EU settlement scheme and to raise some points that I hope the Minister will pass on to the Home Office and the Department for Exiting the European Union. EU citizens contribute a huge amount to our society, our culture and our economy, and it is very important that people who have made their lives here, been born here and grown up here are able to continue to live here with as little difficulty and disruption as possible.

The Government announced the EU settlement scheme in June last year to regularise the immigration status of EU nationals and their family members who are lawfully living in the UK according to their free movement rights. That scheme has been opened fully since March this year. A number of constituents and community groups have raised problems with the scheme, with many being put off from applying so far. I do not think that that has shown up in the Government’s reports on the testing they have undertaken so far, but a lot of people are slightly wary of the process.

The first issue is the language barrier. Although some people may have exceptional spoken English, not all of them will be confident in reading and their written English. This is leading to a misinterpretation of some parts of the process, which seems, as it is described to me, to be quite complicated. People are therefore providing the wrong information. Those who are less confident are not likely to have rushed to complete the process so far, and there is a worry that older people, or those who are more vulnerable and with more complex circumstances, might be very reluctant at this point and may need help.

Representatives from the Polish community association in Newport tell me that only a very small percentage of the residents they support have attempted to fill out the application as their understanding is that if they make a mistake, their future in the country may be in jeopardy. Some have informed me that a number of people have paid £40 or more for someone to do the application for them, and a representative from the Polish community told me that one of their major concerns is the lack of friendly and trustworthy information in Polish. This needs to be addressed.

I have also heard concerns in Newport that people who have been here for more than five years are being granted pre-settled status due to errors in the automatic checks, or issues linked to people being unable to provide evidence to the satisfaction of the Home Office to prove their five years or more of residence. Those people are finding the document-gathering quite difficult as what they need to provide is not clear. This could mean that people may need to apply again in the future and end up having different rights, even when they have lived here for five years or more.

Another issue is that people still do not know about the settlement scheme. Some people in my communities worry about this, and local authorities are concerned as well. The Home Office talks about widely communicating information, but clearly much more needs to be done. The Home Office needs to keep in mind those who are more isolated and vulnerable, and to do more to reach out to people in this group so that they are aware that they need to apply and of what steps they need to take.

There are volunteers out there helping—particularly volunteers from the 3 million in my area—but local advice and digital assistance for those who need it must be put in place as soon as possible. The applications are almost entirely digital, which can present barriers to those without digital skills. Community associations have provided me with a number of examples of applicants being unable to upload documents and being removed from the system at various stages due to technical difficulties. The system does not appear to be easy to navigate. I understand that an announcement was made yesterday on grants for organisations that can provide help, but they will need time to prepare and the services might not be available until the summer. Also, the announcement did not include smaller community groups, and it would be really helpful if the Minister would ask the Government whether a separate announcement could be made on this.

One piece of feedback that I would urge the Home Office to take notice of is that the first three stages of the application are in English, whereas the remaining stages are available in EU languages. If all the stages were available in EU languages for those who want them, that would go some way towards removing these barriers. I hope that it will be possible to get more information from the Home Office about that. The Government clearly have confidence in how the scheme is running so far, but they need to be aware of the fear and uncertainty among those who were not first off the line to try the application, and among those who have tried it and struggled. Please can these comments be passed on to the Home Office so that we can improve the system and help those who are struggling?

Given that there has been lots of talk about football today—I missed out on that at Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions—and that I had the great pleasure of welcoming Norman Parselle and Dan Williams from Newport County in the Community to Parliament yesterday, I should like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Newport County's season and wish them all the best in the play-offs at Wembley this Saturday. Whatever happens, they have done our city proud.

3.41 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden). She gave us a second commentary on the plight of the steel industry, and also made a powerful case for her constituents' ability to stay, work and live in the United Kingdom. I hope she has a good weekend with the football. The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) made an excellent speech, and I was pleased to hear about the joint article from him and other colleagues in *Scotland on Sunday*. He has saved me having to look it up in *Scotland on Sunday*, because I have heard it now! He made a powerful argument, and I was pleased to hear it.

I want to take this opportunity to raise a number of issues, but I will do so briefly. First, I want to talk about the British sign language GCSE. Many colleagues have been campaigning alongside the deaf community for that qualification, but I have to say that the Government have been resisting it for a number of years. They recently signposted some progress, but there are now suggestions of some element of delay. I hope that that is not the case, because the lack of such a qualification discriminates against deaf children, for whom British sign language is their first language. Their colleagues at

school can learn Russian, Chinese, Spanish, Italian and French, but they cannot learn British sign language. This deprives them of an opportunity to further their education, and it prevents the UK from getting many more qualified signers, of which we have a shortage. I would be grateful if the acting Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), could comment on this. I have to say that he made an impressive debut at this morning's business questions. He said he was re-finding his voice, and I am glad that he has done so. It was a very good performance, and I wish him every success in his position. I would be grateful if he could pass on my concerns about the BSL GCSE to the Department for Education.

Ian Mearns *rose*—

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am happy to give way to the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee.

Ian Mearns: I have been campaigning with Jim on this very issue. Young people who are deaf can communicate in British sign language, but they are not allowed to take a GCSE examination in their own first language. That is plainly anachronistic and wrong, and the situation needs to be rectified. The Department has been working on this, but if there is some kind of fly in the ointment, it needs to be sorted out quickly. We need to give those young people the opportunity to take an examination in their own language.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Will the hon. Gentleman clarify that, when he mentioned who he had been working with, he meant the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick)?

Ian Mearns: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker. I did indeed mean that I had been doing some work with my hon. Friend.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thought that that was who the hon. Gentleman meant, and I am glad that he has clarified that.

Jim Fitzpatrick: Madam Deputy Speaker, I am grateful for being given the appropriate title, but that was a commentary on the familiarity of the Toon Army. You just cannot teach some people—[*Laughter.*] No, I should not say that.

I am grateful for the excellent support from my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) and so many other colleagues in the House who have been pressing the Department for Education on the BSL GCSE. We hope that we will follow Scotland and be able to deliver it in due course.

I chair Fire Aid, which offers fire and rescue service and fire industry support for emergency services in 50 other countries. I know that the Department for International Development recently reviewed its policy on support for small charities such as ours that do invaluable, life-saving work, but we cannot deliver more without revenue support, which DFID will not provide. I hope to meet the appropriate Minister soon to discuss the matter. I know how difficult it is to get revenue support from the Government, but small charities and soft diplomacy can deliver for UK plc, so the Government and DFID need to review the situation.

[*Jim Fitzpatrick*]

What a disappointment it is that the opening date of Crossrail—the Elizabeth line—has been put back by at least a year. Canary Wharf Group took responsibility for the construction of the station at Canary Wharf in my constituency, and it has been ready for some years. If the rest of the line had been constructed with the same speed and efficiency, Crossrail would have opened on time.

There is an ongoing issue with the Charity Commission and the Island Health Trust in my constituency. Charity commissioners have been monitoring the charity's governance and financial administration since February 2017, when concerns were raised about the use of the charity's funds and the potential private benefit to one or more of the trustees. The then chair, Suzanne Goodband, was paid nearly £350,000 through a company of which she was the sole director, with that amount representing 68% of the charity's income over two years. At the same time, GPs and the health practice were being priced out of their building through rent rises. I secured an Adjournment debate in March last year and have been in regular contact with the charity commissioners, but after 18 months, the Charity Commission still cannot provide a final timetable for when it will publish its findings. I hope that we will get something within the next week.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government made a welcome announcement on 9 May about funding for the removal and replacement of defective cladding on private tower blocks. The all-party group on leasehold and commonhold reform, the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership, the National Leaseholders Campaign and many other stakeholders have been tirelessly campaigning for a resolution. Questions about the scheme remain unanswered, including what the money will cover and how to apply for it, and a number of letters have gone to the Housing Minister to seek clarification, but I commend the Secretary of State for his decision. I know that he had to give direction to civil servants, which demonstrates his personal commitment, and we look forward to more information soon.

That brings me on to the governance and regulation of housing associations. The current position would benefit from more transparency than exists at present. Post-Grenfell, the Government have engaged in a complete overhaul of much of the regulation of housing tenure, and the focus on leasehold is welcome. However, a review of housing association accountability would be equally welcome.

On leasehold reform, there is growing anticipation that something is about to arrive after 30 years and various attempts by both main parties to improve rights and protection in regulations for leaseholders. I thank the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee and campaigning organisations for their reports. The Committee's excellent recent report has been welcomed by the Government, and I look forward to their response and to a debate, either in here or in Westminster Hall, before the summer recess.

The 52:48 result meant that Brexit was never going to be easy, and diametrically opposing views—from hard Brexit to wreck Brexit—have only exacerbated the situation. I said in the Chamber on 11 December that I was moving to support the Government's deal, and I eventually

did support it when I felt that the Labour's five points were met—first there were six, but then it was five. We wanted a customs union—not the current customs union—a trade arrangement, protocols for security, protection for the Good Friday agreement, and an implementation period, and all that had mostly been met by the Government. From that point, there should have been closer alignment between the two Front-Bench teams, but that has not been the case. Now, with the spectre of a second referendum being much stronger for Opposition Members, 31 October looms. That is not a good position to be in, and hopefully the Prime Minister, or the new Prime Minister, will be able to move on and avoid a no-deal scenario, which is the worst of all positions as far as I am concerned, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) articulated earlier.

The Government have announced the fair funding review. My local authority, the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, has lost £148 million—64% of its revenue—since 2010. Mayor Biggs, Councillor Ronald, Chief Executive Tuckley and their colleagues and staff are doing an excellent job of trying to provide services, but they need resources to do the job properly. I hope that the Government will look again at support for urban local authorities and not just for the English shires.

I commend Tower Hamlets for its efforts to keep the borough clean. I congratulate the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis)—I apologise for not informing her that I would be mentioning her—and Keep Britain Tidy on the Great British spring clean, which is an excellent initiative. Support has been growing exponentially among local authorities, and I look forward to supporting her again next year. Keep Britain Tidy's strong work continues, especially on fly-tipping.

The hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), as Minister for road safety, had been expected to make a renewed road safety statement soon. The fall in the number of people killed and seriously injured on our roads has stagnated for a number of years, and the new statement is anticipated eagerly. It has been promised for some months, and it is certainly imminent. We look forward to it.

I have notes of congratulation on two retirements. Colonel Dick Harrold has served as governor of the Tower of London since 2014, and he ends his service next year. The Tower of London is in my constituency and forms its western boundary. I could not have a stronger redoubt than the Tower of London to protect me from the rest of the capital. Dick Harrold has done an excellent job, and I wish him every success and happiness, and a long retirement.

I also congratulate Philippa Helme, one of our Clerks. Many tributes were paid to her earlier. She stopped me in the corridor this morning to wish me well on a piece of work I have been engaged in for a number of years, and it is a measure of her kindness and generosity that she wished me good luck. She is going to sail around Britain for the next three months with her husband, and I wish her every happiness in her retirement and safe sailing.

Philippa Helme is escaping at a good time. As the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) said, the House is not a very nice place at the moment. This is the longest Session since the 17th century and the least productive since 1926, according to recent media

reports. I am reassured by his comments that it is not just me, because I do not think this is a good place to work at the moment. I have loved my job more than I do at present, just as I loved my job at London fire brigade. The stress, the pressure and the expectations on all of us are very great. Relationships are fracturing and there are all kinds of fallout. I think we are letting down our citizens, and we need to do better.

I somewhat echo the words of the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) in saying that good governance is not assisted by pointing our finger at others, whether that is within our parties or across the Chamber, or whether we are blaming somebody else. We are paid to sort out these problems, and we are not doing our job, which reflects badly on all of us. Perhaps when we come back after Whitsun—I mean no disrespect—the Conservative party and Parliament will sort themselves out and we can provide the leadership that this great nation needs and that we are currently failing to deliver.

3.54 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I am grateful to you for the opportunity to take part in this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a good number of years since I last spoke in one of these Adjournment debates. In one of the first ones I spoke in, we were squeezed out to such an extent that I got to speak for 30 seconds at the end of it. The right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) was the Deputy Leader of the House at the time, and I managed to give 30 seconds on the subject of powdered whisky, an abomination then and today, I am sure. Returning to this debate after some years, it was refreshing to see that the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) still sees it as an opportunity to catch up on his casework. In an ever-changing world—others have spoken about the difficulties in the House at the moment—that one small piece of continuity provides a small measure of reassurance for us all.

I had hoped not to be here today—I mean that in the nicest possible way—but unfortunately an air traffic controllers strike is taking place in the highlands and islands so I was moved to take part in this debate, as a consequence of a meeting I had this morning. The hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) spoke in detail and with great knowledge about the steel industry, which is undergoing a moment of crisis. I very much associated with the way in which he spoke about that industry, because my communities in Shetland and in Orkney feel much the same about the fishing industry as his communities obviously do about the steel industry. In many ways, fishing defines what we are, because we are, of course, island communities. It pains me that I have to return today to a subject I have spoken about in the House previously—at numerous Question Times and in the two Adjournment debates I have had on the subject, one in July and one in April. I refer to the issue of visas for non-European economic area nationals seeking employment in the fishing industry.

We are reaching a point of crisis. The dependence on non-EEA nationals for crew of many of the small inshore boats is such that the boats are being tied up; they cannot get the crew and they are looking at being sold on. When that happens, no fish are being landed in the individual ports, which means that the fish processing factories will eventually find other things to do. In that way, an important part, economically and culturally, of

our coastal and island communities around the UK is under threat. I fear that this is the sort of thing that in normal politics would have been sorted out months ago, but unfortunately we are in this phase where things that ought to be routine and capable of being managed somehow just do not come out the other end of the sausage machine.

At the moment, the only non-EEA nationals who have been able to get in to crew fishing boats are ones who come into the country on transit visas and who are then fishing outside the territorial waters. There is an irony here, in that these fishing boats are forced to fish outside the territorial waters but Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs is now saying that their crew will be treated as though they were fishing within the territorial waters, so they are being taxed even though they are not being allowed to work within this country. For the white fish boats and the pelagic boats, which are bigger, go away for longer and work outside the 12-mile limit, these things are manageable, because they are bigger boats. The small inshore boats simply cannot work in that way, so, again, they are the ones being pushed out. Even the white fish boats and the pelagic boats are now being pushed into fishing where immigration regulations will allow them to fish, not where they know the fish are there to be caught. If ever there were a case where regulation was the tail wagging the dog, it is this.

Along with other Members—the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) has been with me on many occasions, as have the hon. Members for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I have been on delegations that have gone through the revolving door that has been the Immigration Minister's in recent years, but we have been pushed from pillar to post. Most recently, the current Minister for Immigration, the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), explained that the Government had decided not to change their position on these visas because of the advice given by the Migration Advisory Committee.

The Migration Advisory Committee is an independent body, and I have recently taken some time to consider its composition and work. This morning, I was delighted to welcome to the House of Commons the chairman of the committee, Professor Alan Manning, and several of his advisers and staff from the committee's secretariat. Initially, I was encouraged by their willingness to come to Parliament to meet me and others who represent coastal and island interests. I was grateful for the work of the Fishermen's Welfare Alliance on bringing together the case to present to them. I suppose that, after all these years in the House, I should have known better than to have allowed myself to get my hopes up. The two-hour engagement—if that is what I can call it—this morning was unfortunately dispiriting and disillusioning. I had hoped that if we were able to explain our position to them, they might have been able to explain their working to us, and we might then have achieved a meeting of minds, or at least a better understanding of what both sides were seeking to get out of the exercise.

On the basis not only of this morning's interaction but the Migration Advisory Committee's most recent work, I am exceptionally disappointed. The body is comprised almost entirely of academics—in fact, I think they are probably all academics—but their work demonstrates a remarkable lack of intellectual rigour,

[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

and I have seen demonstrated a worrying lack of intellectual curiosity. It simply defeats me to consider why academics who pursue their expertise in this area of public policy are not more curious to know the impact of the recommendations they make on communities throughout the country.

We were told this morning that the Migration Advisory Committee's concern is people and communities, which should be a good starting point, but it is apparent to me that there is simply no understanding on the committee of the communities that I represent and that others in coastal and island communities represent, and as a consequence, the committee concludes its work by saying that its aspiration is to create a level playing field in this policy area. I just do not see how that is going to be possible in any meaningful way. How is it going to be possible to create a single level playing field—a single size that fits all—right throughout the country? My particular working example of the fishing industry is so distinctive and so different, economically, socially and culturally.

With regard to the most recent piece of work on which the Government now rely for their policy, the "EEA migration in the UK: Final report" from September last year, it concerns me that the Migration Advisory Committee will not recommend the introduction of

"separate employer-led sector-based routes...with the possible exception of seasonal agriculture",

which is discussed later in the report. The report also says:

"In low-skilled jobs little training is required and thus it should be possible for employers to hire workers from other sectors."

It is the definition of low-skilled jobs that most people in and around the fishing industry find most offensive. The idea that just because a deckhand is not undergoing a university-validated qualification their work is low skilled is offensive and demonstrates to me a quite fundamental lack of understanding about the work these people do.

That impression is further reinforced by the MAC's conclusion that to fill these "low-skilled jobs"—its term, not mine—we can rely on tier 5 youth mobility visas. It says:

"Tier 5 (Youth Mobility) is a cultural exchange scheme for people aged 18 - 30 from the following participating countries: Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Japan, Monaco, Taiwan, South Korea and Hong Kong. Individuals can stay in the UK for up to 2 years to experience life in the UK – they can work and study but are not allowed to bring in dependants. The scheme operates on a reciprocal basis with opportunities for young British people to live and work in participating countries...Tier 5 workers can work in all jobs and, although we have little information on where they currently work, it seems likely that many are in lower-skilled jobs."

If anything illustrates the lack of understanding of these great and eminent minds of the industries for which they are supposed to be formulating public policy, that surely is it. The idea that Australian, New Zealand and Canadian backpackers are going to come here and take jobs as deckhands on whitefish boats and prawn trawlers is, I am afraid, simply laughable. It grieves me to say it but we have come to a place where either Ministers have to be honest about their reliance on the advice of this body or else the body itself has to be reformed fundamentally.

According to its own annual report last year, the MAC cost 893,467 taxpayer pounds to run, which is not insubstantial. Its membership comprises three professors, two doctors and one lonely individual who does not seem to have any academic title to append to her name. Two are based in London, one in Southampton, one in Warwick, one in Oxford and one in York—the most northerly of its members. This body, which is supposed to advise the Government on how to regulate immigration policy in relation to my community, has no member who works north of a point that is some 500 miles south of the southernmost point of my constituency—and remember that the southernmost point of my constituency is some 200 miles south of the northernmost point of my constituency. Does that not hint at the problem? This is an advisory committee composed of academics, not one of whom is based anywhere north of York. That surely has to change.

I hope that this message will be heard in the Home Office. One of the principles that apparently guides the work of the MAC is diversity. I am afraid that a committee of six academics, all of whom are based between Southampton and York, whatever the gender balance, is not one I could regard as being diverse. I hope that within the Home Office the message will be heard today that the problem of fishing visas, which I have spoken about many times, is not going away but is getting worse. Ministers have got to take responsibility because it is apparent to me that the advice they are getting from those whom they pay to give that advice is not of a quality that is fit for purpose.

4.9 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow many interesting speeches, which have focused on great priorities that we ought to debate in this House. My time in this Parliament has been dominated by one massive issue—a constitutional impasse—and I lament the fact that it has displaced so many fine, pertinent and vital matters that should be the focus of our democracy and national life. I hope that improvements to our leadership and the country's governance will help us to get back on track. I hope that our focus will shift from that constitutional impasse back to meaningful societal improvements that will determine our quality of life.

I am well aware that there is an election going on today, and Members of the House are thinner in number than they would otherwise be. We should pay tribute to the thousands of activists who are out there pounding the pavements for their respective parties as we speak. It is easy to forget the huge amount of unpaid, and often uncredited, work put in by so many people who are committed to our political life. Although it is fashionable to be cynical about politics, we should take the time to pay tribute to all who put gargantuan amounts of effort into participating in our political life and political parties, of whatever colour.

I am thinking particularly of Angela Bretherton, a local activist from Dennistoun, in my part of the world, who is standing for the first time as a Scottish Labour MEP candidate. She is an amazing Unison trade union official who fought for equal pay for women workers in Glasgow who were denied justice for many years, and she was integral to achieving that gain for women workers. That is a small flavour of the huge, rich tapestry of our democracy, and I give all credit to those involved.

While we are focused on the Punch and Judy show of constitutional politics, I was intrigued by some of the proposals from the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr). There is ongoing debate in the Labour party about how to cut through the binary discourse that has dominated politics in Scotland for so long. The nationalists are focused on one political objective alone—destroying the United Kingdom—but there is a danger that another form of nationalism will feed off that nationalism, and it is important that we guard against that. To be frank, I think the Conservative party in Scotland has often benefited from defining itself in opposition to the nationalists by merely bringing nationalism of another colour into the debate, and it is important for the party to be conscious of that.

I was very moved by what Gordon Brown said this week, namely that that Punch and Judy show is destroying the fabric of our political discourse, particularly in Scotland. We need to get back to discussing the important issues, including performance in public life. The reality is that the current situation is a function of two Governments that are failing the public by obsessing about constitutional issues to the exclusion of other things. I hope that we can move beyond this impasse and reboot our politics. If we can focus on something other than constitutional issues, perhaps we can turn the tide.

In my time in the House, I have tried to focus on representing my constituents as best I can, because I understand why they sent me here. As I alluded to in my maiden speech, I understand that they yearn for a political system that shifts power, wealth and control in their favour, and that is what we should focus on. The bulk of my casework stands as testament to that. Most of it relates to political failure and failure of governance—primarily at the Home Office, with the huge amount of suffering caused by our dysfunctional and appallingly callous immigration and asylum system, which I have to deal with on a case-by-case basis as an MP. I resent having to do that because it is actually a symptom of me having to firefight the failure of the Government. They are causing so much hardship to people, who have a sword of Damocles hanging over their heads every day. These people do not know whether they will be sent back to their torturers and the people who killed their families. It is appalling. I represent one of the few areas in the country with an asylum dispersal area, so I have to deal with these issues all too frequently.

I also have to deal with a lot of failure of the Department for Work and Pensions. The transition to universal credit and changes to disability benefits have been disastrously managed and are visiting a lot of harm on people. The barometer for me is to ask, “Who is coming to see me? Who is suffering? Why did they resort to seeing their MP about these issues?” The answers to those questions tell me that there is a real problem with the way in which the Department is functioning, and we need to focus on how to fix that problem. We cannot simply be here to reflect prejudices and reactionary politics. We should be led by evidence and an understanding of what will improve the general happiness, contentment, wellbeing and prosperity of all parts of our country and society. If we can agree on that, we should recognise and be aware of the failure of current policy; I hope that we can do that.

After that rather despondent sermon, it is also important to recognise that there are lots of people and organisations working really hard to do what they can—in whatever

small way they can—to improve the condition of our communities and society. I can think of a few in my own constituency. This work happens in the face of huge cutbacks to councils, which were seen to happen disproportionately to councils in Scotland. Since austerity, amplified by a Government in Edinburgh, Glasgow City Council has seen a percentage cut seven times the size of that to the Scottish Government. A big part of that has been the withdrawal of services such as music tuition in schools, but there is a great organisation in my constituency called the Beatroute Arts Centre, which has been providing huge opportunities for young people, including creative outlets and tuition in the face of the funding cuts.

Bolt FM is part of a local church in my constituency and has been around for 18 years, involving young people in opportunities that they might not otherwise have—for example, presenting their local community radio station and going to Africa to work with local communities there on how to build their resilience. It is a wonderful, fantastic example.

We often tie together cuts with the problems faced by constituents who have a low disposable income and might be suffering poverty, but there is also the issue of trying to be environmentally friendly. How do we turn that into a positive thing for those people? My constituent Donna Henderson set up the Balornock Uniform Bank. Donna’s idea was to give back to her community by organising the donation of good-as-new school uniforms and other children’s clothing, and offering them to other families for free in an exchange. Young people are growing at a very fast rate, and quickly grow out of their school uniforms, which are often perfectly good to be reused. Rather than throwing these things out, why not recycle them? Donna has actually turned something that might be a source of shame—to have to exchange clothing—into something that is entirely sensible to do. All credit to her for thinking of a great practical intervention that is benefiting my community.

Speaking of credit, I want to mention the urgent need to debate and focus more on the need for credit unions in this country. This House often discusses the transition from banking services to a more cashless society, and the impact that that transition is having on those who are left behind. The extraction of banking services from poorer communities, which is a disproportionate fact of life in this country, has seen a litany of branch closures in my constituency. The latest announcement was the closure of the Santander branch, so I have seen credit unions becoming ever more critical.

I pay particular tribute to the Carntyne and Riddrie Credit Union, which is run by John Lyons. And not only does he run a credit union; he has also set up Glasgow’s first non-referral food bank. When he went to see how a food bank works, he was appalled that one of the questions asked of a lady who went there to seek food with her children was, “Are all the children from the same father?” Does that matter? What on earth is the relevance of that question? Why was that food bank trying to create a source of shame for someone looking for need in the most vulnerable situation? It is already embarrassing for many people having to seek help like that, before having to go through some sort of ritual humiliation by people who just want to exercise power over others in a vulnerable situation. The fact that John Lyons has set up a non-referral food bank is remarkable.

[Mr Paul Sweeney]

He is also trying to connect people into accessing financial services and has set up a credit union service that is delivering much more than just those services to the community. It is a hub for the community, and he practically lives in that facility. It has been really inspiring to see the work going on there. As MPs, we can be born, live and die in an area but never know half the stuff that is going on. Being an MP is a journey of discovery, as we find out about all the amazing things that are happening, and that is just one example I have encountered in my time.

In my maiden speech—you were in the Chair on that occasion, Madam Deputy Speaker—I mentioned the amber nectar of Tennent's, which is the oldest business in my constituency and a fine Scottish business. It has been around since 1556, brewing beer on the banks of the Molendinar Burn in Glasgow, and it is one of Scotland's most iconic brands. It has bred another business adjacent to it: the Drygate brewery. That brewery has been contributing significantly to the local economy, and it is lining up a number of events to celebrate its fifth anniversary this year, which is fantastic. I have been impressed by not only the trade union traditions of that business, but the amazing community work it does quietly to support local people facing hardship. That is just another example of a fantastic, innovative business going hand in hand with compassion for the community.

Businesses face significant hardship in my constituency. Lots of businesses are thriving, and local entrepreneurs are flourishing, despite the hardships, but one big problem they face is punitive business rates. That issue was mentioned in relation to the steel industry, but it also affects small businesses. Business rates are often a blunt instrument that do not reflect a business's performance. They can often sink a business that would otherwise be entirely viable. I think of Tibo in Dennistoun, a fantastic bistro that celebrates its 10th anniversary this year. It has been tenacious through difficult times, and it is flourishing and doing a great job. When I visit, I am reminded of the looming threat of a revaluation of business rates, which could sink the business overnight. It is difficult for business owners to plan year to year when facing that potential change.

Many of the groups I have mentioned also face a gamble year to year. They spend so much of their time not focused on delivering the services that the community relies on, but thinking about where the funding is coming from for the next year. They spend a huge chunk of their resources and time applying for grants from local councils or Government, just to stay in business. They are living hand to mouth. Would it not be far better to give those organisations certainty by saying, "You're doing a great job in the community. We know you add value and are integral. You have security of funding for a much longer period, so you can focus on delivering your service"? That would be a fantastic change, and I feel it is worthy of debate in this House.

Fantastic work is going on to help people in all walks of life. People with disabilities are often disproportionately excluded from our society. The Glasgow Disability Alliance is one of the UK's largest disability charities, and it is thriving in the community. I pay tribute to one of its stalwarts, John Paul Donnelly, and his family, who organised a successful fun day on 11 May to ensure that

people in Milton have access to peer-to-peer support and understand all the organisations that can help them. Disabled people are often particularly excluded because of the way our society is constructed.

That event could only be put on through participatory budgeting, which is becoming more fashionable. It involves people voting for what they want funded, but it is often a cover for asking them, "What do you want to be cut?" It passes the buck for who makes cuts. While it has some positive aspects, it should not be regarded uncritically. Disabled communities are often the ones who are excluded, and it is those with the sharpest elbows who have access to resources and can mobilise their people—it is a popularity contest. That is another example of a problem we need to deal with.

I mentioned at the business question the huge effort going on locally to regenerate the community. Springburn saw 80% of its built environment demolished during the 1960s and 1970s, with a motorway cut through the area and high-rise tower blocks built. A huge amount of physical damage has been caused to it due to wrong-headed urban planning decisions of the time, but the community are determined to fix that. It has been fantastic to see grassroots efforts come to the fore, with the Springburn Regeneration Forum and the Springburn community council set up in the last couple of years. The Springburn Winter Gardens Trust is focused on regenerating the A-listed Victorian glasshouse in Springburn, which was once a great symbol of civic pride in the community and was built at the height of Springburn's industrial success, as the centre of Britain's locomotive building industry. We hope that will rebuild some of the civic pride in the area, with a great effort being led from the grassroots in the community. It is fantastic to see that all happening, and it is something we take as a great source of hope.

There are also organisations helping those in need, including from minority ethnic communities, such as the Glasgow Chinese recreation centre. There is a huge Chinese community in my area whom I have got to know over the last few years, and it has been fantastic to see the rich diversity in the schools in Glasgow, some of which have over 40 languages in them. That is a huge change even in my lifetime—the diversity and the change that has happened in my community—and it has been fantastic to meet those at that the Chinese recreation centre. Indeed, they had a visit from the Leader of the Opposition last year, which they loved. They had their annual general meeting on 22 May. They have made a fantastic contribution, particularly in celebrating the Chinese new year in Glasgow, but also in helping those with issues, particularly those with asylum issues. The Asylum Seeker Housing Project is one example, and it continues to provide essential support to asylum seekers in exerting their housing rights, and to conduct research into living conditions for asylum seekers in Glasgow. That is so often overlooked, particularly given the scandal of potential mass evictions by Serco last year, at the behest of the Home Office. We do need to tackle those issues in our community.

This shows the wealth of all the really positive things that are going on in our communities. We can get hung up on the constitutional impasse in this country, but we need to focus on how we harness the potential of our communities and help all those organisations that are so desperately in need.

4.26 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): May I again welcome the Comptroller of Her Majesty's Household, the hon. Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), to the Chamber for this debate? I echo what other hon. Members have said in that he was excellent at the Dispatch Box this morning. Given that he had such a short time to prepare, I think he should have Whitsun off.

This is always a great event in the House, and it is good that the Backbench Business Committee has given hon. Members such an opportunity this time. The number of hon. Members who wanted to speak and raise important issues shows that it was the right decision.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), who is the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, mentioned the United Nations rapporteur, and I hope the Comptroller of Her Majesty's Household will raise this issue with his colleagues. He should not just throw it back to the Backbench Business Committee to have a debate, but actually look at the reports that have come from the United Nations rapporteur and give us a debate on that in Government time.

My hon. Friend rightly raised the issue of council tax, and he knows as he has done the hard graft as a councillor, so it is right that we should look at it at some stage. He has an amazing array of concert halls in Gateshead. I have not visited Sage Gateshead, but I would like to. *[Interruption.]* Yes, perhaps I can now. It is good that the council is investing in Sage Gateshead. He also mentioned the steel industry and the impact on his constituency.

In relation to the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), what can I say? He is right to raise our work in Parliament, and with his 36 years here, it is important to hear his views. The way in which the business is brought forward in the House is a matter for the Government, so I hope the Comptroller of Her Majesty's Household will take that back. However, hon. Members are hard-working, and they do their work in lots of different ways and in different places.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about the excellent music service he has in his constituency, and about these wonderful visitors to his constituency. He talked about people wanting to be Prime Minister, but he has been here for 36 years, and he could throw his hat into the ring. Just imagine: if he did that, he could sign the decree that would make Southend a city—instantly. He should get all these international visitors to sign a letter, and I am sure many hon. Members could sign a letter, to make Southend a city, particularly as he has an important archaeological find in his city. We want everyone to visit Southend West.

The hon. Gentleman is right. I raised earlier the issue of fire and safety, and I would like to remind hon. Members to take that test. It only takes 20 minutes, and it would be very good if everyone could do that during the Whitsun recess and make this place safer.

What can I say about my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) and his fantastic speech? He paid tribute to steelworkers, who are the infrastructure, in all senses of the word, of his constituency and our society. How difficult must it be—he wears it well—to hear the sad stories from some of those workers who do not even know whether they will have a job next week? He has regularly engaged with the steel industry and

has regular conversations with Tata Steel, which is also based in my constituency. He is a real fighter for his constituents and the steel industry. His constituents have a great MP, who they know will never give up on saving the steel industry.

This may be the first time that the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) has attended such a debate. He says that he has been in the House only since 2017, but he is a regular heckler. Indeed, he has been admonished by the Speaker—“Mr Kerr, calm yourself!” He may not know this, but between 2010 and 2015 the Whips used to give a bottle of champagne to every Member named by the Speaker. The hon. Gentleman should raise that issue, because he definitely deserves it. He rightly raised the issue of governance, and it is 25 years since the death of John Smith, who was also interested in that issue and took forward devolution. Perhaps he can do something on that issue—we have all-party groups and Select Committees, and he has a platform as a Member of Parliament should he wish to bring forward new ideas. And of course, as I say to everybody: visit Stirling.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) had to leave to catch a train, but she paid tribute to the steel industry in her constituency and raised the topical issue of EU citizens and the difficulties they face under the settlement. I hope the Minister will take that issue back for the Home Secretary to look at again. There are no tolls on the way into Wales any more, so people should be encouraged to visit Wales and Newport—they do not need visas for that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) is a serial attender of these Backbench Business Committee debates. Sign language is important, and I also pay tribute to him as the chair of many all-party groups, including on leasehold and commonhold reform, and on tidy Britain. I join him in paying tribute to the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis)—she is no longer in her place—and her good work as Parliamentary Private Secretary to the former Leader of the House. I am not sure whether she will continue in that role, but I wish her well as she performed it assiduously. I say to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) that the strike of the air traffic controllers has been to the benefit of the House. He also raised the important issue of visas for non-EEA citizens. The fishing industry is important not just for Scotland but for us all, and especially coastal constituencies. He highlighted a flaw in the current criteria for visas—other hon. Members have also raised that issue, and I hope the Home Secretary will take it up. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe, I hope that the right hon. Gentleman never gives up on those issues. Those coastal constituencies are wonderful. “Local Hero” is my favourite film, and my daughter used to love reading about Katie Morag—indeed, I sometimes dip into those books now, just to remind myself how wonderful they are. They are very nice.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney)—we seem to have an over-representation of Scottish MPs today!—rightly mentioned the elections today, and once we have finished this debate, any second now, I will leg it up to Walsall to cast my vote. He was right to raise important issues of democracy in his constituency, and we must reflect on that after this election, and consider how to go forward and give everyone a voice as part of our democracy. He was right to say that arts and culture are very important, and he

[Valerie Vaz]

showed how one person can make a difference. The uniform exchange is a huge thing and will make a big difference to people's lives. Although he said that not many Members are around, this debate was oversubscribed and we are nearly at the time limit. It has been a well-subscribed debate, and I am pleased that hon. Members have stayed to take part.

Everyone has mentioned their favourite football club. I was at the Valley to watch Charlton Athletic go through on penalties, which was very exciting. My husband Paul and my father-in-law John Townsend are both supporters of Charlton Athletic, so I feel I must wish them well on Sunday in the play-offs. Charlton Athletic were the club of PC Keith Palmer. I hope, with him watching down, they do well on Sunday.

Finally, I wish everyone a very happy Whitsun recess. Remember, we do not just finish work, but go back to our constituencies and work. We are constantly looking at our mailboxes. I wish the staff of the House and everyone here a very happy recess.

4.35 pm

The Comptroller of Her Majesty's Household (Mark Spencer): As a Forest fan, I don't think I will talk about football at all today.

I thank the shadow Leader again for her kind words, and the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for his kind words on my brief appearance this morning during business questions. I am sure the House will be aware that my right hon. Friend the Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride) has been appointed to the position of Leader of the House. I am particularly proud of my political career's ending without any political shenanigans or scandal.

We have had a fantastic debate this afternoon. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), the hon. Members for Newport East (Jessica Morden) and for Poplar and Limehouse, the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) for their contributions.

I particularly enjoyed the start from the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, who in his tour de force told us all that is great about Gateshead and made an early commitment not to talk about the "B" word. It was not actually mentioned until much later in the debate, by the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse. The hon. Member for Gateshead mentioned a lot of the challenges he faces in his constituency and the work he has done. I pay tribute to him not only for his work for his constituency as a Member of Parliament, but for his work as a local councillor. His work demonstrates his commitment to his community and he should be enormously proud of everything he has achieved. He managed to squeeze in references to the Angel of the North and Brendan Foster, who, when I was a young boy growing up, was a real hero of mine; we should recognise his achievements as a UK athlete.

We then moved on to my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West. I think we can only describe the delivery of his speech as being in the style of a Gatling gun.

It would be impossible for me to reference all the things he spoke about, but it really was a tour de force. He said that he started off in the style of Victor Meldrew. I think he concluded like Victor Meldrew on speed, frankly, as he took us through all the challenges he faces and much of his casework.

My hon. Friend did not miss the opportunity to talk about Southend not becoming a city. I am unsure whether colleagues are aware that he may have raised this issue before in this Chamber. [Laughter.] I am sure that one day that will drip through. He started by telling us that everybody on the Government Benches wanted to be the party leader. I noted that he did not rule himself out. I will take an intervention from him if he wants to rule himself out right now.

Sir David Amess: The shadow Leader of the House tempted me with the thought that if I were to become leader and Prime Minister I would have the power to grant city status to Southend, but, as I think I said in my speech, it is such a shame that people are not aware of their limitations. On this occasion, I admit that I am aware of my own limitations.

Hon. Members: No, no.

Mark Spencer: We live in historic times, Madam Deputy Speaker. I believe my hon. Friend is the first Member from the Government Benches to rule themselves out.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his amazing work on animal welfare. His record stands above that of most Members. He went on to talk about the challenges of alcohol abuse and how we need to make sure we work better. I will be interested to know when the liver test will take place. That might be something I could attend myself, just to make sure I am not in any danger. We are occasionally flippant about some of these things, but they are really important. If we pick up health problems at an early stage, it can have a real impact on the prognosis for people's health and mitigate some of the impact that such diseases, if undetected, can have later in life.

The hon. Member for Scunthorpe made a very eloquent speech. His reasonable approach and tenacity and his pride in the steel industry are a real credit to him. He is viewed warmly on this side of the House. The Secretary of State shares his passion for the steel industry and genuinely wants to try to solve the challenges that it faces. Government Members recognise how important it is that, as an international country, our steel industry will still be there in 20 or 30 years' time. As a Government, we have a responsibility to make sure, with the procurement decisions that we make, that we use British steel and support the industry, so that we are not held to ransom at some point in the future by countries such as the US, China, Germany and Japan, which will have stronger steel industries than us if we do not commit to supporting ours during this challenging time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) started by putting a date in my diary: 9 June, 5 pm, which is when Scotland and England play each other in the women's World cup. He said that Scotland will beat England, and for a moment I nearly shouted "Division!" until I looked around the Chamber and saw that there were more Scots than English here. Sport builds bridges between people. Over the last two or three years,

women's football has had a meteoric rise. We should be proud of that and I wish all the home nations luck in the upcoming World cup.

The hon. Member for Newport East has gone to collect her children, highlighting that this Parliament is accommodating of all those who have families. I pay tribute to her just for being a working mum and for being an excellent MP for Newport East. She made some very interesting points about EU citizens, and not only the positive contributions that they make but the challenges that the Polish community face, particularly with filling out forms. These are things that we take for granted—the ability to fill out forms in what would be a second language.

Mr Carmichael: In the course of this afternoon, we have heard various reports of a substantial number of EU citizens being denied the right to vote at polling stations. I invite the hon. Gentleman to take this opportunity to make it clear from the Dispatch Box that anyone who is properly registered should be turning up and voting.

Mark Spencer: That is a really important point. At times, we take our democracy for granted. For someone to turn up at a polling station when they have the legal right to vote but to be refused is a very serious matter that we all, across the House, should try to address. I hold my hands up and say to the hon. Member for Newport East that I could not fill a form out in Polish. We need to recognise that we need to assist people in those communities in trying to engage in the system.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse is an assiduous contributor to these events. He is also very hard-working and is involved in a number of all-party groups, and I pay tribute to him for his work. He educated me in this debate—I was not aware of the British sign language GCSE and the challenges faced by those for whom sign language is their first language. I will try to pass that on to the relevant Departments to make sure that they can see the challenges and try to support people through them.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the Elizabeth line, which we are all desperate to see open as soon as possible. It is an enormous engineering feat that is happening right below our feet as we speak. I hope that we will see it open very soon, so that we can all speed up our journey east to west across this great city. The hon. Gentleman was the first person to mention Brexit. I think he just said that we need to get on and get it done. Very few Members would disagree with that view.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland is only here because of the air traffic control strike. I seriously hope that that is resolved before the end of the Whitsun holiday, or he will have quite a drive and a row to Orkney if he undertakes the journey. He made some serious points about the need for support in the fishing industry. He recognised the annoyance his constituents must feel when work on a fishing trawler is described as low skilled. I challenge any Member of this House to jump on a fishing trawler and try to operate it. It is a skilled and dangerous occupation.

Those who make decisions on the Migration Advisory Committee should take into account the challenge in that industry. I will do all I can to assist the right hon. Gentleman in making sure that the Home Office recognises the challenge and engages with him. I know that he has had a number of Adjournment debates. My advice to him, as Mr Speaker would say, is to persist and to keep pushing so that eventually the arguments he is making drip in.

Finally, I turn to the hon. Member for Glasgow North East, who started by paying tribute to the thousands of volunteers from all parties who are out there banging on doors and getting people engaged in our democratic process. I join him in congratulating and thanking people from all political parties who try, unpaid, to keep people engaged in our political process.

The hon. Gentleman paid tribute to arts centres and churches for all the work they do and the positive impact they have. We sometimes take for granted all the volunteers who work in our communities free of charge, but they do have a really positive impact. We should also pay tribute to the work that he is doing on regeneration, working with planning authorities to make sure that people feel engaged in and have ownership of their communities.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman made reference to Tennent's brewery, to which I am enormously sympathetic—I may have sampled its products in the past. I was not aware of Springburn glasshouse before today, but it sounds absolutely fascinating. Next time I travel north via Glasgow, I may well be tempted to visit it and to see the impact it is having locally.

We have had an excellent debate and I thank all those who have stopped to participate in it. I pay tribute to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the work that you have done this term, as well as Mr Speaker and the other Deputy Speakers. I pay tribute to all the House staff—the catering staff, the parliamentary security team who keep us safe, the cleaners, the librarians and everybody else who assists us in our work in the Houses of Parliament. I pay my own personal tribute to the staff in the Tea Room, who make my day and lift my mood every morning when I come in for a bit of breakfast.

I wish everyone a restful Whitsun recess. I know that many Members will not be on their sun loungers; they will be out in their constituencies working hard for the communities they hold so dear. I pay tribute to all of them.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I think the House should pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for stepping in with no notice and for entertaining and informing us so well today. Thank you.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

Excessive Speeding and Driving Bans

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Freer.)

4.48 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): The subject of my Adjournment debate—excessive speeding and driving bans—is very serious. I do not like reading out speeches, but this is a pretty technical issue and there are many factual points that I want to raise, so I apologise in advance that I will be doing a little more reading than I would like. I emphasise that this is an immensely serious issue of great concern around the country. I will be asking three questions at the end of my speech. I hope that the Minister will be able to answer them directly, but if, for any reason, she cannot do so in the detail that we would all like, I would appreciate a written response from her.

I want to emphasise two key points about excessive speeding and driving bans: first, the need for tougher action to tackle speeding offences; and, secondly, the need to explore how technology can be used to improve road safety and reduce the number of unnecessary deaths that occur on our roads. According to the most recent official statistics from the Department for Transport, in 2017, in the UK, there were 24,831 serious injuries in road traffic accidents reported to the police, with 1,793 people killed in road traffic accidents—nearly five people a day. I am worried about the 9% increase in fatalities among motorcyclists and the 5% increase in pedestrian fatalities between 2016 and 2017. While I welcome the slight fall of 4% in fatalities among car drivers, we all know that the figure is still far too high. Any fatality on our roads is one fatality too many.

In 2017, the custody rate for motoring offences was 1%. When an offender was sentenced to immediate custody, the average length of a custodial sentence was only 8.2 months. In 2017, the number of offenders directly disqualified from driving actually decreased by 8%—from 63,000 in 2016 to 58,000 in 2017. This concerns me, and I know it concerns many others, too.

I do not think that any of us will be surprised by the fact that speeding is the most common driving offence on UK roads. It currently accounts for around one fifth of road fatalities. In 2017, across Wales as a whole, 500 drivers a day were caught speeding. I appreciate that velocities differ, and I am concentrating on the highest speeds, but that is still a worrying statistic. In 2017, according to House of Commons Library statistics, just under 20,200 speed limit motoring offences were recorded by North Wales police alone—a 73% increase on the number recorded in 2011. About 86% of the speed limit offences were recorded through cameras, such as fixed-place speed cameras. Of the 20,200 or so speeding limit offences recorded by North Wales police, most resulted in a fine, with fewer than 3,000 leading to the driver facing court action. The sentence for the vast majority of those who were subsequently convicted at court was just a fine.

It is my strongly held belief that collisions and road traffic accidents are not inevitable and that we should not accept them as such. Cycling UK has stated that whereas society expects high safety standards in various aspects of our lives in which there are inherent risks, there sometimes seems to be a different culture on the

roads. I agree with its calls for greater use of lengthy driving bans, both as a penalty and in order to protect the public. Convicted drivers consistently avoid driving bans by resorting to claims that such a ban will cause them “exceptional hardship”. In January 2017, according to Cycling UK, almost 10,000 drivers were still allowed to drive even though they had amassed 12 points or more on their licence, and that is despite the fact that those who accumulate that many points should automatically face disqualification from driving.

Brake, the road safety charity, has echoed calls for those who have 12 points on their licence to be prevented from invoking the argument of “exceptional hardship” and instead face an automatic driving ban. This is something I strongly agree with. Drivers who have accumulated more than 12 points on their licence have, in my view and that of many others, been given ample opportunity to comply with the law. They have instead shown a repeated disregard for driving safely and legally. I believe that they should not be allowed to continually flout the law and face little more than a fine.

Guidance from the RAC states that if someone has been caught speeding and the offence is referred to court, they could face an instant driving ban. However, magistrates will generally consider imposing a ban only if someone has been caught driving at more than 45% over the speed limit. That means that they would need to be driving at more than 51 mph in a 30 mph limit, 85 mph in a 60 mph limit or—for heaven’s sake—100 mph in a 70 mph limit. There is little uniformity between the speeds offenders drive at or the offences they commit, and the punishment imposed.

Many examples could be cited, but let me set out a couple from north Wales. A motorcyclist who was caught driving at 138 mph in a 60 mph area on the A5 not far from Corwen got a fine of just over £600 and a 90-day driving ban, so he was back on the roads three months later. There was also the driver of what the press referred to as a “supercar”. He was banned from driving for 56 days for driving at 122 mph, again on a single carriageway road with a 60 mph limit.

Last year I submitted a written parliamentary question to ask the Ministry of Justice how many drivers who have been subject to a driving ban go on to commit further driving offences after their ban has expired. I am concerned that the Department’s response was that it does not hold such data.

In the road safety factsheet that it published last year, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents made a very important point:

“There is no doubt that inappropriate speed is one of the most serious road safety problems on Britain’s roads, and causes death and injury to thousands of people each year. Unfortunately, the public has not yet accepted the danger caused by speeding drivers in the same way as the danger caused by drink-drivers.”

Many of us will remember the 1970s and 1980s when there was quite a different culture surrounding drink-driving. None of us would ever want to return to that, but a real case can be made that we are in the same place today in terms of excessive speeds on our roads.

I think it is time for us to review and increase the length of driving bans. I also believe that we need more police monitoring of rural roads. According to the Institute of Advanced Motorists, those are the roads on which most fatal crashes take place. We should also take note of a recent report by Brake, which was based on an

extensive survey of drivers. The report questions whether the legal limit on single carriageway roads should be 60 mph. The Brake report noted that fewer than a quarter of drivers—23%—stated that 60 mph was a safe speed for a vehicle on a road on which there may be people on foot, bicycles and horses. The report also noted that drivers either wanted, or were ambivalent about, a reduction to the default 60 mph limit on rural roads, with fewer than one in five—19%—objecting to a reduction. That survey gives us food for thought.

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Freer.)

Susan Elan Jones: The motion lapsed at an extremely convenient time, Madam Deputy Speaker, as I am now moving on to the second part of my speech.

I turn to technology, and specifically what technology now makes possible. I believe that we can and should do a lot more to effectively utilise technological developments so that we reduce the number of driving offences and the casualties that result from them. I know that Ministers have made positive statements in this regard, and I really hope that we can progress well on this.

Intelligent speed adaptation—ISA—is a system that compares the local speed limit to the vehicle speed. As well as advising the driver when they are exceeding the speed limit, an ISA system can limit engine power when necessary to help to prevent the driver from exceeding the current speed limit. The European Transport Safety Council has described intelligent speed adaptation as

“probably the single most effective new vehicle safety technology currently available in terms of its life-saving potential”.

The council expects that, with mass adoption and use, ISA could reduce collisions by 30% and deaths by 20%. In June 2015, the London Mayor and Transport for London announced that ISA would be trialled on 47 London buses. According to the results of the trial, which were announced in March 2016, TfL found the technology to be “particularly effective” when buses drove through zones with a 20 mph limit, and the technology ensured that the buses taking part in the trial remained within the speed limit between 97% and 99% of the time. In the light of the trial, TfL has required all new buses entering service from 2017 to have this technology fitted.

The technology is not just applicable to commercial vehicles, and the European Transport Safety Council is calling for ISA to be fitted on all new vehicles as standard. I think that that is an extremely good idea. In France, it is mandatory for all motor vehicles to carry a breathalyser, and fines are imposed on drivers who are found to be in breach of that obligation. A step up from that is an alcohol interlock. Alcohol interlocks are breathalysers that require the driver to blow into a breathalyser before they can begin to drive. If the driver tries to start the car while over the drink-drive limit, the vehicle is immobilised. Let me be clear that I am not suggesting this for all drivers, but there is a strong case for making it a condition that people who have been convicted of drink or drug-related driving offences must use the technology when they get their licence back.

Alcohol interlocks are already mandatory in Belgium for repeat drink-drive offenders. Many other European countries, including Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Poland and Sweden, have introduced either compulsory or voluntary alcohol interlocks for drink-drive offenders. In the UK, the Durham police force is carrying out a voluntary trial of such devices for those convicted of drink-driving. The Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety—PACTS—suggested in its October 2017 report commemorating 50 years of the breathalyser that the UK Government should review the potential role of alcohol interlocks. I strongly agree with that.

According to Wasted Lives, an award-winning young driver education programme, road collisions are the biggest killer of 15 to 24-year-olds in the UK. House of Commons Library research shows that, despite making up only 7% of drivers, young people aged between 17 and 24 represent nearly 20% of people killed or seriously injured in car crashes. Those statistics show that we need more action to keep younger drivers safe. There is also a serious case for a graduated driving licence, and I welcome the UK Government’s pilot scheme in Northern Ireland.

A further measure that could be implemented is the greater use of telematics devices, which track and score individual driving behaviour, with the information then used to calculate insurance premiums. Telematics insurance offers an incentive to drivers to drive carefully and safely, because the better the policyholder’s driving, the lower their premium. Telematics devices can record maximum and average speeds, acceleration, braking, cornering and impact. Research by LexisNexis Risk Solutions concludes that telematics insurance has done more to cut accident risk than any other road safety initiative aimed at the young driver market.

Perhaps the Minister will also consider the merits of using telematics devices to monitor the driving behaviour of those who have previously been banned from driving. It could be made a condition of a licence return following a driving ban that a telematics device is fitted in the offender’s car. Any driver found to be repeatedly driving carelessly or dangerously, and hence continuing to pose a danger to other road users, could then have their licence revoked.

In 2015, a driver on the A495 near Bronington in my constituency was filmed performing two dangerous overtakes on a blind bend. Video evidence of the dangerous manoeuvre was captured by the dash camera of a car behind him, and the footage was used as evidence to secure the overtaking driver’s conviction for dangerous driving. In response to the increasing number of such submissions from members of the public, Operation Snap was launched in December 2017. The initiative was initially devised and piloted by North Wales police and the Road Casualty Reduction Partnership, and has now been adopted across Wales. The campaign allows the public to submit footage from helmet or dash cameras and smartphones to Welsh police forces via a website. The police can then use such footage to investigate and prosecute driving offences.

Since the official launch of Operation Snap, an average of 140 videos and images a month have been uploaded through the website, with the footage used in a number of prosecutions. It is an important initiative. The Transport Committee’s 2016 “Road traffic law enforcement” review concluded that if there is to be effective enforcement of

[Susan Elan Jones]

speed limits as the number of dedicated road policing officers falls, the use of technology will be essential—I totally agree.

I conclude my speech with three main questions for the Minister. First, what will she do to ensure that tougher action is taken to tackle speeding offences, and will she ensure that more lengthy driving bans are awarded? Secondly, will she consider removing the “exceptional hardship” argument as a way for drivers who accumulate more than 12 points on their driving licence to avoid deserved driving bans? Thirdly, what will she do to explore ways in which technology can be used to improve road safety, particularly with regard to European Transport Safety Council recommendations? I look forward to hearing from the Minister, and to us all working together to do whatever we can to stop accidents and fatalities on our roads. It is very important that we tackle this issue.

5.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): It is good to see you in your place, Madam Deputy Speaker, for this final debate before the recess, which is a good omen for when we return.

I thank the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) for raising the important subject of excessive speeding and driving bans. I also thank her for extending the opportunity for us to continue working together on an issue on which she has not only campaigned for a long time but has been given an award.

Susan Elan Jones: The Minister mentions the award from Brake, the road safety charity, and I pay tribute to the community of Overton in my constituency. There was a terrible road traffic incident, after which the community came together to campaign on this issue. I feel that this very important award belongs as much to my constituents as it does to me.

Ms Ghani: The hon. Lady, true to form, shares the praise with all those who have worked behind the scenes, which has been noted.

The hon. Lady was probably expecting my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), who has been promoted, but I hope she will be pleased with my response. I do not want *Hansard* or any journalists to be confused: I have not been promoted for long, just for the next 15 minutes.

Road safety is a top priority for the Government. Road deaths are a tragedy for all affected, and injuries can cause suffering and life-changing misfortune. Much of that harm is avoidable, and it is not an inevitable consequence of road transport. As the hon. Member for Clwyd South mentioned, all available research shows a link between excessive speed and the risk of collisions. Increased compliance with speed limits, as part of a wider package of road safety measures, will play a significant role in reducing the number of collisions on our roads.

I share the hon. Lady’s concern that people who drive at appalling speeds, risking the lives of others as well as their own, are too often back behind the wheel too soon. However, sentencing is a matter for our independent courts and is based on the facts of each case. A driving ban,

the length of which is at the discretion of the judge, is already an option, and guidance is issued by the Sentencing Council. This is not something on which the Department can intervene. The judiciary are constitutionally independent of the Government, and it is important that no action is taken that may undermine this fundamental principle.

It may help if I say something about the totting up of points. If an offender amasses 12 penalty points or more within a three-year period, a minimum six-month disqualification must be ordered. An offender disqualified in this way may also be ordered to take an extended driving test. Offenders who are disqualified for 56 days or more have to apply for a new licence.

However, courts have the discretion not to disqualify, or to impose a reduced disqualification, if there are mitigating circumstances or exceptional hardship—the hon. Lady raised that issue. This is wholly up to the courts and, again, is not something that the Department can influence, but the Department always notes what is raised in the Chamber. We know the media have reported cases where drivers with many points are still behind the wheel.

At this point I ought to say something about the relative responsibilities of the Department for Transport and the Welsh Assembly. Much road safety legislation and policy is devolved to Wales and Scotland. As well as being responsible for their own trunk road networks, they set policy on safety cameras and issue guidance on setting speed limits. They have legislative competence on all the substantial provisions of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 concerning speed limits and traffic signs.

The enforcement of speed limits is an operational matter for the police. Policing in England and Wales is divided into territorial forces, with the Westminster Government setting policing policy. It is for chief police officers to decide how to prioritise enforcement in accordance with their local priorities and demand. Their police and crime commissioner’s police and crime plan can also be used to address this issue. Individual police forces may also work with local communities and local volunteers to tackle speeding, taking specific local needs into account.

The penalties for excessive speed start with informal advice—the hon. Lady has campaigned on this—because, of course, the more that people are aware, the more they will hopefully monitor their speed. Where such advice is not appropriate, drivers are prosecuted by means of a fixed penalty notice or, in the most serious cases, a postal charge bringing them before the court.

Current guidelines issued by the National Police Chiefs’ Council allow police the discretion to take account of the individual circumstances of each speeding offence, and to take the action they consider appropriate. This ensures that the focus of attention is on the most serious offending and those individuals who clearly and deliberately break the law. The guidelines also seek to provide consistency of treatment from forces in different parts of the country and to set out the principles that underline the police’s approach to enforcement of the law on speeding. However, these are only guidelines, and there are no plans to change this or advise the police how to enforce speed limits.

The hon. Lady mentioned Operation Snap, and I agree with her on the outcomes of that programme. The police have introduced Operation Snap, which has used

media such as dashcam evidence, helmet cameras or personal video for the detection of road traffic offences that do not involve a collision. I agree that this is an example of innovation that tackles those driving offences that the public want the police to deal with. It also significantly reduces the time for the police to make a decision on an offence. The aim of Operation Snap is to improve driver behaviour. This is important to note, because she spoke about the anti-drink-driving campaigns back in the day, which changed people's attitudes completely. If drivers perceive that they could be prosecuted for driving poorly, we hope that they will not drive poorly to begin with, thus reducing the likelihood of a collision.

The hon. lady also talked about sentencing and penalties. After a full consultation, in October 2017 the Ministry of Justice confirmed Government plans to introduce life sentences for drivers responsible for the deaths of other road users. The proposals that were confirmed include: increasing the maximum penalty for causing death by dangerous driving from 14 years to life; increasing the maximum penalty for causing death by careless driving while under the influence of drink or drugs from 14 years to life; and creating a new offence of causing serious injury by careless driving. Sentencing remains a matter for the courts, but raising the maximum penalty will give the courts the tools to deal with the most serious cases. The legislation will be brought forward as soon as parliamentary time allows.

The hon. Lady also made powerful points about drink-driving, and I wish to confirm that the Government currently have no immediate plans to lower the drink-drive limit in England and Wales. Our approach to tackling drink-driving is through rigorous enforcement, penalties and changing the social acceptability of drink-driving in the first place.

The hon. Lady made some good comments about the Brake report, which we welcome as it highlights the important aspects of road safety. Last June, the Government announced their intention to publish the refreshed road safety statement and the two-year road safety action plan later this year, to address four priority user groups: young people, rural road users, motorcyclists and older vulnerable users.

The hon. Lady made some important points about technology. We are currently engaged in negotiations as part of the EU's third mobility package, which will

introduce intelligent speed-adaptation devices in vehicles in the future. She made a powerful point about telematics. I do not want to stray into another Minister's area of responsibility at the Dispatch Box, so I will offer the hon. Lady the opportunity to meet the relevant Minister once they have settled into their post.

I emphasise that we are determined to improve safety on our roads for all road users, and to see to it that offenders receive the justice that they deserve. I do not doubt that, just like the previous Minister, the new Minister will take this issue incredibly seriously. If I have not covered all the hon. Lady's points, I will ensure that any that are outstanding are covered in a written response. I congratulate the hon. Lady on being a strong campaigner on this issue and on bringing this important debate to the House.

I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for all your work, and I thank the Clerks, the Doorkeepers, and everyone who works in the Tea Room and the Library and keeps us going, as well as the wonderful team from the Department for Transport, who keep the Ministers going. I hope that everybody has a wonderful recess, although I am a little nervous because I am being joined by my parents-in-law, Tim and Wendy Wheeldon. They will be spending time with their daughter-in-law in the constituency of Wealden. I am pleased to be spending the recess with my husband, David, but my daughter, Farah, is going to become a teenager, as she turns 13 on 1 June, so this might not be a quiet recess and I may wish to get back to work sooner than my colleagues.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Just before I adjourn the House, I wish the Minister, all her family and everyone who serves this House so well in many, many capacities, a peaceful recess. I also add to the many accolades that have been expressed about Philippa Helme, my most sincere thanks for her calm, wise counsel on many occasions here in the Chamber and behind the scenes. Once again, on behalf of everyone who works here and who serves this place, I thank Philippa for her many decades of dedication to this place and wish her well for an exciting future.

Question put and agreed to.

5.21 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 23 May 2019

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

[DAVID HANSON *in the Chair*]

Clinical Trials and Clinical Research Capability

1.30 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of supporting clinical trials and the UK's future clinical research capability.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for this important debate on supporting clinical trials and the UK's future clinical research capability.

This is an immensely important sector. Any generation wants its successor generation to be healthier and have a better standard of living, whether the treatments that are produced are life-enhancing ones or life-saving and life-protecting ones. That is increasingly important: there is an ageing population, not just in the UK but globally, so there is an increasing need for a variety of new treatments coming through the life sciences sector. Clinical trials play such a large part in that.

Monday was international Clinical Trials Day, marking the anniversary of the first clinical trial, conducted by surgeon's mate James Lind on HMS Salisbury in 1747. Scurvy was a huge problem at that time, not just for the Royal Navy but for navies all over the world. Lind set up a clinical trial with 12 sailors who had scurvy, and in groups of two he administered cider, sulphuric acid, vinegar, seawater, oranges and lemons, and a spice paste washed down with barley water. The sailors who took citrus fruits made good progress, but the other participants did not make any progress, so Lind had evidence that citrus fruits worked to help those sailors recover from scurvy. Notably, there was a small, incremental improvement in the health of those sailors who drank cider; no doubt there are other, wider health benefits that come from cider, but it was a reasonably clear trial. Although it took many years, the Royal Navy later adopted the approach of compelling sailors to take lemon juice initially, and lime juice later on, to protect against scurvy. That is why American sailors began to call British sailors "limeys".

Clinical trials have evolved substantially since that time. In 2017-18, there was a record number of participants and trials in the UK. It is so important, not just for people's healthcare but for the life sciences sector of which clinical trials are such an important part, that Britain wants to maintain that position. People find fascinating, incredibly rewarding jobs in that sector.

As in all things, all sectors and all times, funding is of immense importance, and we have to ensure that our clinical research environment is properly funded in a number of different ways. My favourite part of the 2017 Conservative manifesto was the commitment to increase research and development spend in the UK from 1.7%

to 2.4% of GDP by 2027. That is an important target, taking us up to the top quartile of OECD countries. The scientific community more broadly would like to see that increase as a stepping stone to a target of spending 3% of UK GDP on R&D. That would really enhance our position, which is world-leading at the moment; however, in an increasingly competitive world, we need to focus and enhance that contribution.

In the previous Parliament, I was a member of the Select Committee on Science and Technology, which was a very positive Committee. There was a huge amount of consensus across the party divide about the agenda that we wanted to set and pursue, and an important agenda to increase our R&D spend came out of that Committee. It was very positive to see that commitment in the 2017 Conservative manifesto; however, we have to deliver on it. At a time of funding challenges across all Departments and all areas, we have to maintain that level of investment.

It is important to recognise the Government's commitment, outlined in the life sciences sector deal 2, with the Government working in conjunction with industry to strengthen further the environment for clinical research in the UK, and the infrastructure for the safe and responsible use of patient data through the digital innovation hub programme. We should also recognise the contribution that can be made to the continued development of the National Institute for Health Research, which should receive an uplift in line with the increases to funding through UK Research and Innovation, as recommended in the life sciences industrial strategy.

There are also further considerations when it comes to funding, such as whether the UK will fully participate in the EU's flagship framework programme 9. At the moment, we participate fully in Horizon 2020; we are committed until the end of that project, and to any ongoing research projects beyond the end of that programme. However, we do not yet know whether the United Kingdom will participate in Horizon Europe, either fully or partly, post Brexit. That is a huge concern to so many people from the scientific community, as it is for many sectors and industries, not only because we want investment in buildings and laboratories and the development of skills and talents in the UK, but because we want to bring in people from abroad. People need that confidence. This is not just about funding, which is immensely important, but about the networks, the communications and the community that go with participating in that group.

I am certainly sympathetic to the idea that Brexit, no matter how well we deliver it, will be a challenging time for the United Kingdom and for organisations, whether in the charitable sector, business or academia. Delivering a healthy research clinical trials environment post Brexit will pose a challenge, and if we could make a commitment to—or at least express sympathy towards—our participation in Horizon Europe, the scientific community would appreciate being given that kind of confidence.

Funding is of great importance, and that topic may be further developed by other hon. Members present, but regulation is also an enormous priority for the UK. There is perhaps no other area like life sciences, clinical trials and the wider research community; it is such an international undertaking. Often, clinical trials are UK-only, but in many cases—especially those that deal with rare and very rare diseases, or with paediatrics—the potential

[Chris Green]

population within the UK may be too small to deliver an effective trial. Nearly 30% of Cancer Research UK's clinical trials involve an additional EU member state, showing the importance of international collaboration to that organisation. More widely, 50% of all UK cancer research is international.

The global direction of travel is towards the harmonisation of regulations and standards. The EU-UK relationship is of immense importance; it makes it easier and faster to set up trials, and to deliver on the conclusions of those trials. It would be useful if the Government could highlight what they were doing with regard to the clinical trials regulation, which is superseding the clinical trials directive. There is a concern in this. One concern that I have with the EU is that it can be slow to advance and assess what it has done, where it is and how it needs to move on. The clinical trials directive was first developed in 2001 and implemented in 2004. The decision to change, and that the regulation should supersede the directive, should have been taken in 2016, but there have been delays from that time. There is an ambition to deliver the regulation later this year, but there is concern as to whether that will be achieved. I appreciate that the Government's position is that they will seek to fully participate in the regulation and adopt it wholly, but that is only part of what needs to be done.

Data from the trials will be collected in a variety of countries. While we may be able to contribute our data, there is no guarantee that we will be able to access that data in that international network post-Brexit. It is immensely important that we have certainty that we can use the portal post-Brexit and access the data to ensure that our scientific community has that information. It is an important part of providing confidence and a strong ongoing position for our research community.

Mobility of people is immensely important. It truly is a global undertaking to have an effective life sciences sector and the clinical trials that go with it. The people who contribute to the sector are very mobile. Our charitable sector is incredibly strong—stronger than it is in many other countries—and is a huge asset. We can go to any charitable organisation, business or university and see a wealth of talent that comes not only from the UK but especially from the EU. We also have people from America, Africa and Asia. We have people from across the world, but our close physical proximity to EU countries lends itself to a large number of people from the EU coming here.

We have to value our relationship with EU nation states. Post-Brexit, we want people to be able to go to EU countries, because people leaving the UK to go to France or Germany make an immense contribution to those countries. There is huge value in the sharing of ideas. When people perhaps come back later in their careers, they have that wealth of knowledge that they can bring with them, which may be lost if we do not allow and support mobility. There is particular concern over the £30,000 income threshold that people coming to the UK would have to meet. There is ongoing debate about the threshold and whether it will stand and suggestions on how it will be amended. It is worth noting that it is a challenge for post-doctoral researchers and their research technicians, who may not be above that threshold. The threshold is more of a challenge

outside London and the south-east, and other parts of the country and other nations within our United Kingdom will see a greater impact. The Government need to consider that.

We need to re-examine the costly and burdensome visa process. In 2008, it was estimated that a five-year visa for a researcher with a partner and three children coming to the UK would cost more than £11,000. The same researcher and family could obtain a four-year French talent passport for a little over £1,000. We do not want the UK to have barriers to people coming here, participating and making an enormous contribution. Immigration is a very sensitive subject for the country as a whole. It is positive that in the two or three years since the referendum vote in 2016, tensions or concerns have come down ever so slightly. There still is significant concern, which is a problem, but when I talk to people and raise the UK's current approach or possible approach to immigration, they have immense pride in seeing our country as a destination for some of the most talented scientists and technicians from the EU and the wider world. They want to come to the United Kingdom and make an immensely positive contribution. We should be proud about so much in our immigration system and the people who come here. We should make more of how strong the scientific community is in the United Kingdom.

In my closing remarks, I want to highlight and repeat that the United Kingdom has a long and proud history of being a world leader in clinical trials. Not only were we the first nation to conduct one but we should be proud of the wealth of talent involved and the scale of our clinical trials. The Government are doing the right thing and are going in the right direction. We are being immensely ambitious with what we are doing for the future of medical research, but there are obviously challenges in making that a reality. Getting the regulatory framework is important, as is the immigration system. The national health service is immensely important as an organisation, but it is not quite playing up to its strengths and its potential with its data. That data is an incredibly valuable asset that is of increasing value as time goes on, both in how it can be used and how clinical trials can be held. Practitioners can access that data to develop the next generation of drugs to save lives and to enhance our lives.

We are going in the right direction, but more needs to be done. There are concerns about Brexit, but we can deliver a good relationship with the EU and the rest of the world. It can be a positive thing. The Government need to set out a more robust position. Academia and business in the UK want that, and I especially thank the UK's charitable research sector, which does such an immense amount of good work. I highlight and thank Cancer Research UK, Parkinson's UK and Breast Cancer Care.

David Hanson (in the Chair): I thank the hon. Gentleman for introducing the debate. We now move seamlessly to the Front-Bench responses.

1.47 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) on securing this important debate. I particularly

enjoyed his opening remarks on scurvy, and I thank him for reminding me about where the term “limeys” came from. He is obviously passionate and knowledgeable about this subject. I have quickly skimmed through some of the things he spoke about and, I have to say, I found very little to disagree with in his speech.

The hon. Gentleman said that Brexit will be challenging for many reasons, especially getting clinical trials properly conducted post-Brexit, particularly when, at the moment, no one knows what is happening. He pointed out something that had not crossed my mind: if we do not get those relationships right post-Brexit, the UK is too small a country to conduct positive and technically feasible trials in new and important areas.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the importance of harmonisation across Europe, and about something especially important to Scotland and to my party: the ability of people to move freely. We must take a European and a broader, transnational view at how much people working in the sector can bring to this country, and what UK nationals can bring back when they return from working abroad.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned visa costs, another highly important issue for Scotland and the Scottish Government. Astonishingly, a visa for a researcher and their family can cost 11 times as much in this country as it would in France. That would be a no-brainer for a clinical researcher looking at where to go to further his or her career.

Clinical trials are essential for bringing new medicines to people. They test whether new treatments are safe and effective, and allow patients to access new medicines earlier. The UK regulatory environment for clinical trials is led by the Health Research Authority and the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency. Wellcome, whose report I will mention later, found that more than 4,800 UK-EU clinical trials took place between 2004 and 2016. Around 40% of the trials currently run in the UK are being run with other member states. Clinical research supported by the National Institute for Health Research clinical research network has generated an estimated £2.4 billion and nearly 40,000 jobs. This is not an insignificant sector.

New legislation—the EU clinical trial regulation—will replace the EU clinical trials directive in 2020. Under the CTR, all trial applications, data and co-ordinated decisions from member states will be communicated through a single portal. Streamlined systems and communications will help to simplify compliance with the CTR, potentially saving researchers in the EU £600 million a year, as well as offering savings of £60 million a year to UK researchers.

Clinical trials are managed nationally in the UK by the MHRA, although some aspects of clinical trials are shared across the EU medicines regulatory network. For example, a clinical trial sponsor or legal representative for clinical trials in the EU should be based in the EU or European economic area. Currently, 40% of UK-based trials also have a site in the EU.

Wellcome’s report “Brexit and Beyond: Clinical trials” stated that the best option for trials is

“full UK participation in the EU clinical trials system”.

Wellcome found alternative options, but posited that all “involve significant trade-offs that would have an impact on UK–EU clinical trials.”

The Scottish National party advocates a second EU vote. However, failing that, and failing full participation, the UK should meet its commitment to put the EU clinical trial regulation into law, and should remain aligned to the EU framework.

The UK Government stipulate that in the case of no deal, the MHRA would take on responsibilities currently undertaken through the EU system. However, Wellcome found that, even if the withdrawal agreement is voted through, which after the last few days seems impossible, “the MHRA would not be able to lead on reviewing applications, a role known as being a ‘reporting Member State’.”

No deal would likely lead to significant uncertainty over the legal arrangements for clinical trials.

Brexit is already having a negative effect, with Reuters finding that the

“number of new clinical trials started in Britain last year was 25 percent lower than the average for 2009-16”.

It highlights Brexit as the reason for the fall in numbers. A total of 597 trials were initiated in Britain in 2017, against an average of 806 over the previous eight years. The UK Government have committed to exploring the option of full association to research and innovation programmes, but there are no guarantees of success.

Chris Green: As we were discussing before the debate, the United Kingdom is a world leader in research and development and, because of the excellence in the UK, we receive disproportionate funding from the European Union. Does the hon. Lady share my concern, and agree that, post Brexit, the UK Government need to maintain that enhanced level of funding?

Marion Fellows: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I agree. As we were discussing, Scotland punches above its weight per head of population. From memory, we receive 11% of Erasmus+ funding, which is more than we should. Again, that is because of the excellence of the research in Scottish universities, in conjunction with EU nationals and other universities across Europe.

Where are the UK Government currently in exploring the option of full association to research and innovation programmes with the EU? The Department of Health and Social Care wrote in August 2018:

“A scenario in which the UK leaves the EU without agreement (a ‘no deal’ scenario) remains unlikely”.

Again,

“facts are chieftains that winna ding”—

I will spell that for *Hansard* later. The ground is moving beneath our feet as we speak, just before the recess. It is vital that we do not leave without a deal, but—although we can all hope—a no deal is becoming more likely. We need to think very carefully. Can the Minister give us any reassurance that there will not be a no-deal Brexit? That is asking a lot, I know, but it has to be asked. The quote that I have been given is:

“Negotiations are progressing well and both we and the EU continue to work hard to seek a positive deal.”

Can the Minister provide an update on all negotiations taking place?

The Brexit Health Alliance brings together a range of health professional, patient, and health and care organisations. The highly influential group has called for a deal that delivers the closest possible alignment and regulatory co-operation between the UK and the

[*Marion Fellows*]

EU with respect to medicines and medical devices, to guarantee patient safety and public health. I do not think that anyone in the Chamber would disagree with that. We really need to ensure that it happens.

We believe in Scotland that, at least in the short term, the best way to protect clinical trials in the UK and their future is to vote for the SNP today in the EU elections. The Government's handling of Brexit could severely damage, if not ruin, the UK's reputation as a world leader in medical research, having produced around 25 of the top 100 prescription treatments. The UK currently benefits from access to research funding from EU funding programmes such as Horizon 2020 and the Innovative Medicines Initiative.

Innovation and progress are impossible without funding, and it can take many years to get from funding to outcome. Reducing funding now therefore has a negative effect for the future. The UK Government confirmed that Horizon 2020 provides about €80 billion of funding, available over seven years—that is, until 2020—of which the UK has secured €5.1 billion of funding to date, which is 14.3% of the total. Europe is therefore really important to us. Although it has been confirmed that the UK will participate for the remainder of the programme, what will happen in any future programmes remains undetermined.

The Innovative Medicines Initiative has committed more than £5 billion to support large-scale, ambitious research. IMI-supported projects have generated more than 4,000 peer-reviewed projects. From 2008 to 2016, the UK received 28% of total IMI funding from the EU Commission—the largest amount for any country, totalling €302.8 million. UK academic institutions and small and medium-sized enterprises receive the highest levels of IMI funding of any country.

The UK is very successful at conducting clinical trials. It sponsors approximately around 1,500 trials that include other EU countries. Half of those trials will still be occurring in 2019. It is important to collaborate internationally, particularly for rare disease trials, because there are not enough patients in one country alone. Without large-scale drug or medical device approval processes, the approval of drugs and devices could be delayed, resulting in slower access to new treatments for patients. None of us wants that.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Bolton West on recognising the work of charitable institutions such as Cancer Research UK. It is really important to people throughout the UK that funding and collaboration does not cease, because people are waiting for answers to diseases, some of which have not yet been named. The idea of UK Research and Innovation has not been dealt with; the delegated legislation to deal with it has yet to come to the Floor of the House. We wait with bated breath to see whether the Minister can answer any of my questions to her today.

2 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Hanson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green), my fellow London marathon runner. We have run three London marathons together and we always finish in roughly the same time.

Chris Green: Over the past three years, it has been a fantastic experience to be always about two or three minutes behind the hon. Gentleman.

Jonathan Ashworth: I think the hon. Gentleman beat me three years ago, although I have just beaten him this year.

David Hanson (in the Chair): I didn't run.

Jonathan Ashworth: I have not yet decided whether to run next year's marathon, but should we decide to run, it would be great to have you running with us, Mr Hanson—or indeed the Minister.

Marion Fellows: As a fellow Front-Bench spokesperson, may I withdraw from any suggestion that I might run the marathon next year?

Jonathan Ashworth: That is disappointing, but several SNP colleagues ran it this year. Anyway, today's debate is not about the London marathon—important though it is.

The hon. Member for Bolton West made an excellent speech. I understand that a reshuffle of junior Ministers is going on; based on the quality of his speech, he is very deserving of elevation to the Government Front Bench. He might not want to join it at the moment, but that is a different issue. He well deserves a call from Downing Street.

The hon. Gentleman made some points that muster consensus across the House, as we heard from the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows). We agree with what the hon. Gentleman said about R&D investment and the implications for medical research and trials post Brexit. If I may gently tease him, I think that he and I were on different sides of the debate in the Brexit referendum. I believe that some of the issues that he raised today were not given the prominence that they deserved in the referendum campaign the first time round. He may disagree, but I think that many of the concerns that he rightly raised will come to the fore and prove particularly damaging for our clinical research if we leave the European Union on World Trade Organisation terms. If that is the prospect that the country faces, I believe that we should have another opportunity to ask the British people whether that is what they want—but, again, I digress.

The hon. Gentleman made an interesting observation about the history of clinical trials. I did not know where the term “limey” came from, so I am pleased that he has educated me on that front. He could also have mentioned Edward Jenner, who was born 270 years ago and who discovered a vaccine for smallpox through a clinical trial. Because of Edward Jenner's work, the world was rid of smallpox; the World Health Organisation declared the world free of smallpox in 1980, its first and only such declaration about any human disease.

That example brings home the importance not only of clinical trials, but of understanding and being guided by the science, especially in an age when more and more anti-vaccination propaganda and disinformation is spreading far too rapidly on social media—typing in “anti-vax” on Facebook or Instagram brings up all kinds of disturbing, poisonous nonsense. Sadly, while more and more measles outbreaks are happening throughout Europe and in parts of the United Kingdom,

our measles, mumps and rubella vaccination rates are falling. I put on record the importance of being guided by science and understanding the impact and outcomes of clinical trials, which can make a huge difference to saving lives and improving health.

I entirely endorse the hon. Gentleman's well-made point about the £30,000 visa cap. It is not just that the cap will affect the country's science base and our ability to attract the best scientists, research technicians and so on to our shores; at a time when we have 100,000 vacancies across the national health service, including 40,000 for nurses and thousands for midwives and paramedics, and when hospital trusts are struggling to recruit, it is completely counterproductive for the Government to propose a £30,000 visa cap.

This country has a proud history of the national health service attracting people from across the world, including clinicians, nurses and technicians. Of course our international recruitment should always be ethical, but to hinder the NHS in this way will do huge damage to our ability to attract the staff we need in the future. We are told that the Dido Harding review of the workforce will propose that the NHS should recruit 5,000 international nurses a year. I presume that the Government would endorse that, but it suggests that one hand of Government does not know what the other is doing. I appreciate that this is a Home Office matter and not necessarily within the Minister's remit, but I urge Health Ministers to pressure the Home Office on it, because it is not remotely in the interests of our science community or of our NHS generally.

Throughout the 70-year history of the national health service, scientific research and innovation, of which clinical trials have been a part, has made great advances. Sixty years ago, the first mass immunisation programmes offered polio and diphtheria vaccines to under-15s. I think back to the hospital wards full of iron lungs for people suffering from polio; I was not born then, of course, but we have all seen them in grainy black and white photos. What was once an everyday occurrence for too many children in this country is no longer a feature of our national health service—a striking example of the importance of vaccines, research and clinical trials. An everyday aspect of doctors' and nurses' care—tending to people in iron lungs in hospital wards—has been completely transformed because of our research and clinical trials.

There have been all kinds of remarkable innovations in the NHS over the past 70 years. We pioneered the first heart transplants here. Forty years ago, we pioneered in vitro fertilisation. We developed CT scanners, MRI scanners and clinical thermometers. We made great advances with DNA. Seminal trials funded by the British Heart Foundation found that aspirin and clot-busting drugs can save lives after a heart attack. Extraordinary, amazing innovations have taken place in the United Kingdom because of the strength of our science base. We must celebrate that, build on it and give it all the support we can.

As the hon. Member for Bolton West rightly said, the issue has become ever more important in the context of an ageing population. In 1948, at the birth of the NHS, 11% of the UK population were 65 or over. Life expectancy was 71 for women and 66 for men. Today, those figures stand at 82 and 79 respectively, and the so-called "oldest old"—those with a substantial risk of requiring long-term

care—are now the fastest-growing age group in the UK. It is projected that by 2040 nearly one person in seven will be over 75; the number of over-85s is set to double over the next 20 years. The changing demographic profile of our society will demand greater investment in science to deliver medical advances.

Chris Green: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, with an ageing population, it is not just about additional support and individual treatments? One of the great challenges with an older population is multiple morbidities, where individuals need a whole series of different treatments. It is quite challenging to deliver, because there are side effects, and drugs and treatments have an impact on each other. The whole environment in which the older population gains that support is far more complicated than it is with younger people.

Jonathan Ashworth: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. Partly thanks to 70 years of advances in medical research, life expectancy has generally improved. We have seen huge advances—although there are some problems at the moment, as they appear to be tailing off. We have seen huge advances in tackling mortality rates for heart disease, stroke, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and so on, although there are still problems in the most deprived areas of the country, which is understandable. Medical research has helped to tackle some of the great killers, and people are living longer. That means we have to tackle a different challenge, which brings me to dementia.

It is Dementia Action Week and I pay tribute to all the volunteers across the country who have organised events for people living with dementia. Every three minutes, someone in the UK develops dementia. Almost all of us know someone who has been affected by dementia. Recent mortality statistics show that dementia and Alzheimer's disease were the leading causes of death in 2017 for the third consecutive year, accounting for more than one in eight of all deaths.

Some 1 million people in the UK will have dementia by 2025, and that figure will increase to 2 million by 2050. That is the equivalent of a 35% increase in the number of people with dementia by 2025, and a 146% increase by 2050. That large projected increase makes finding a treatment to slow or stop dementia as soon as possible absolutely essential. We will not find a cure or a therapy to slow its progress without real investment, innovation, research and clinical trials. There are no treatments yet that can slow the progression or delay the onset of the diseases that cause dementia, but clinical trials are proving crucial for cures and disease-modifying therapies. For example, the progress in understanding the structure of the relevant proteins, by researchers at the MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology, could help identify areas of the proteins that could be targets for future treatment.

Finding a cure for dementia would be revolutionary and it would touch the lives of every single person in this country. That in itself is enough to make the case for continuing clinical trials—to convince us that we should do all we can to continue to invest in medical research and to support clinical trials, as the hon. Member for Bolton West has said.

Across many types of different diseases and disease groups, the importance of clinical trials to finding cures is obvious. Let us take cancer. Cancer Research UK is

[Jonathan Ashworth]

currently supporting the international BEACON clinical trial, the first ever randomised clinical trial to treat children with first relapsed neuroblastoma across Europe. This rare form of cancer, which affects young children, has seen significant improvements in treatment owing to scientific research, meaning global survival rates are higher than ever. We should be proud that the UK is considered the leader in clinical trials, ensuring that the most innovative treatments are available to UK patients. We need to continue to hold that enviable global position.

As the hon. Member for Bolton West said, clinical trials are not just about treatments and cures; they are also good for the UK economy. KPMG has estimated that clinical research in the life sciences supported by the National Institute for Health Research clinical research network has generated £2.4 billion, and supports nearly 40,000 jobs.

Our strength in the UK translates into EU strength, because of our co-operation with the EU. The UK contributed to almost 20% of the total research work carried out in EU health programmes between 2007 and 2016. The UK helps maintain Europe's key registries and research networks on rare diseases. We co-ordinate the highest number of European registries of all EU member states, including those for childhood lung diseases, Huntington's disease and familial pancreatic cancer. In 2018, the UK accounted for 28% of all new applications for clinical trial authorisation in the EU.

Given the scale of trade and research between the UK and EU on medicines, and given that disease knows no borders and we share many similar health and demographic challenges, will the Minister reassure us that the effective joint working that we have developed with our EU partners over 40 years will be maintained and not hindered by whatever may be our future relationship with the EU? I appreciate that she may not be able to answer the question—things are moving very rapidly on the Conservative Benches, are they not?—but if she can give us some indication, that would be very welcome.

Developing new medicines depends on the international co-operation that is fundamental for access to clinical trials. At the moment, patients in the UK are able to gain access to EU-wide trials for new treatments and the UK has the highest number of phase 1 clinical trials across the EU, as well as the highest number of trials for rare and childhood diseases. It is so important to improving health outcomes in the UK and EU that the UK can continue to access those networks post Brexit. Again, will the Minister give us the reassurances we are looking for?

The Opposition have called for ruling out no deal, and the House supported that; I appreciate that things are going on in the Tory party and we may well get a new Prime Minister who wants no deal, but if that is where we end up, I remind the Minister that the Association of Medical Research Charities has warned that a no-deal, World Trade Organisation-based arrangement would:

“risk patient safety and jeopardise pioneering medical research in the UK.”

The association adds:

“Collectively, members of the Association of Medical Research Charities fund almost half of all publicly funded medical research nationally as well as over 17,000 researchers. A no-deal Brexit could irreversibly damage our relationship with our most important research partner.”

Will the Minister confirm that it is still her position and the position of the Department of Health and Social Care to rule out a no-deal Brexit?

Will the Minister also tell us about the EU clinical trials directive, which, as she knows, governs clinical trials? From 2020, the new EU clinical trial regulation will come into force. As I understand it, the Government have made a commitment to align with the clinical trial regulation, in response to pressure from campaign and charity groups such as Cancer Research UK, the British Heart Foundation and the Wellcome Foundation, which the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw mentioned, and to which I pay tribute.

Will the Government confirm that clinical research will remain a negotiating priority with the EU? Will the Minister also confirm that agreement will be reached in the negotiations on the UK's participation in the single assessment procedure and access to the shared central IT portal and database, which underpin the cross-national clinical trials regulation and come into operation in the next year? Not having access to the portal will severely reduce the ease of setting up UK-EU trials, and will hurt our thriving life sciences environment. As things stand, UK researchers will enter the implementation period unsure of what regulatory conditions they will face when they exit it next year. If the Minister can offer us some guidance on that, we would appreciate it.

The hon. Member for Bolton West and the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw also mentioned the EU's Horizon 2020 scheme, which is due to invest billions in health research across the UK over the next couple of years. It is significant funding and its long-term nature is vital to give security to those medical institutions and universities planning major research projects, but institutions are still waiting for clarity from the Government on where we stand with respect to Horizon 2020 post Brexit. Again, I would welcome some clarification from the Minister.

I wonder whether the Minister can say something about transparency. We must ensure there is transparency in all publicly funded medical research. What efforts is the Department making to ensure that UK Research and Innovation and the Medical Research Council publish the results of publicly funded research in a timely manner? She might be aware that a debate is currently raging at the World Health Assembly on an Italian resolution on the transparency of clinical trials, research and development costs, and medicine prices. I understand that the Minister in the Lords, Baroness Blackwood, represented the UK at the World Health Assembly.

The UK is not supporting the resolution that the Italians propose. It might well be that there are very good reasons—around intellectual property rights and so on—why we would not want to support that resolution. However, I would welcome some clarification or explanation from the Minister on why the UK does not support the resolution on transparency, which lots of EU member states including the Netherlands support—others in the EU are not supporting it, but a significant number of EU member states are supporting it. It would be helpful if we could have that on the record, because there is huge concern about the way the pharmaceutical industry operates. We should celebrate its contributions to the economy, but that does not mean we should not hold it to account.

The Minister will know about the very heated debate that has taken place, both in public and between NHS England and Vertex, on the availability of Orkambi for cystic fibrosis sufferers. Frankly, I think Vertex has behaved shamefully. I now understand that the NHS has made Vertex an offer on a two-year managed access arrangement, and I believe it is offering more for Orkambi. I really hope Vertex takes up the offer.

Time after time, we hear stories of pharmaceutical companies acting quite disgracefully. There was another story today, about four pharmaceutical companies colluding over an anti-nausea drug and causing the NHS to spend 700% more on the drug than it should have done. We need more transparency. It might well be that the Government have good reasons for opposing the resolution at the World Health Assembly, and I would welcome the Minister's explanation. If we cannot support that resolution because of the implications for our life sciences, what are the Government doing internationally to pursue a transparency agenda on R&D, drug pricing and so on?

I thank the hon. Member for Bolton West for securing the debate for this week—I believe we had Clinical Trials Day on Monday. It might well be that other things are going on elsewhere in our constituencies and in the Commons corridors, which is why only a few of us are present, but that does not mean it has not been a high-quality debate. I thank the hon. Gentleman and look forward to the Minister's response.

2.23 pm

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I start in a similar vein to my colleagues, by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) for securing this really important debate on such a vital issue. I also associate myself with the comments made by the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows)—I, too, have absolutely no intention to run the London marathon.

I thank my hon. Friend for taking us on a trip down memory lane back to the early days of our country's great historical legacy in clinical trials, and back to the days of James Lind. I am particularly grateful to the hon. Gentleman for mentioning Lind, because he is synonymous with my home town of Gosport. After his great initial work on the trials for scurvy, he worked at Haslar Hospital, which was one of Europe's largest institutions for treatments and a Royal Navy hospital. He continued a lot of his valuable work there between 1758 and 1774. He is well known in our area as one of the great stars of Haslar Hospital, and of whose work we are most proud. Once it was eventually rolled out across the Navy, his work undoubtedly saved lives and prevented immeasurable suffering. It was very interesting to hear about those early trials. I would have been very grateful to have been the one having oranges and lemons every day, and not the one having diluted sulphuric acid—I cannot imagine how that would have turned out.

Let me say from the outset that the Government absolutely recognise the importance of clinical research in this country, including clinical trials. As hon. Members have already said—I thank them for their contributions, too—it is appropriate to have this debate in the same week as Clinical Trials Day. Clearly, access to world-leading clinical trials and research can offer real hope to patients

who suffer from conditions with limited treatment options. We are absolutely committed to continuing to offer patients opportunities to access potentially life-saving treatments through clinical research. For many patients, participating in clinical research can be about more than improving their own condition. Patients feel empowered by having the chance to contribute to the search for a cure that might benefit other patients in the future. I pay tribute to such patients, and to all individuals and organisations working in this important field.

This country is a world leader in clinical research. We have a world-class science base and three of the top 10 globally ranked universities. Centres such as Moorfields, Birmingham, the Christie and the Royal Marsden are undertaking vital, world-leading cancer trials and research. UK-based scientists have won more than 80 Nobel prizes in chemistry, physics and medicine. Indeed, 25 of the world's 100 most-used medicines were developed in the UK, using a public and philanthropic research infrastructure that is, pound for pound, more effective than anywhere else on earth. We have to be very proud of that.

We continue to punch above our weight in many areas, and rank second globally—behind only the United States—in the number of clinical trials delivered. Our regulatory environment is forward-thinking and pragmatic, and it welcomes innovation. Through the National Institute for Health Research, the Government are investing over £1 billion a year to fund research and provide the skills and facilities to enable high-quality research in our health and care system. Through its people, programmes, centres of excellence and systems, the NIHR is the most integrated health research system in the world, designed to transform scientific breakthroughs into life-saving treatments. It is doing just that.

In 2017-18, the NIHR's early transitional research infrastructure generated more than £231 million of industry research investment, supported over 1,770 industry-collaborative and contract research studies, filed 199 patents and created five spin-out companies. The NIHR Clinical Research Network announced this week that a record 870,000 people took part in network-supported clinical research studies in 2018-19, including over 81,000 in children's research studies. That is a huge increase from the previous year.

The UK's life sciences sector contributes almost £74 billion a year and supports close to a quarter of a million jobs across the country. In addition, members of the Association of Medical Research Charities support over one third of all publicly funded medical research in the UK, investing over £1.6 billion in health research in 2016. Our NHS has a track record of being very active in research, with 100% of trusts and 38% of GP surgeries in England delivering some form of clinical research in 2018-19—acting on the commitment in the NHS constitution to conduct and use research to improve the health and care of the population. Clinical research does not benefit only the patients who participate; evidence has shown that NHS trusts that are active in clinical research deliver better overall clinical outcomes.

Strong clinical research unlocks a virtuous circle for patients, the economy and the NHS. Part of the stimulus for the growth of this sector is the Government's commitment to reach a target of investing 2.4% of GDP in research and development by 2027, and 3% in the long term. That places us in the top quartile of OECD countries, as we heard from my hon. Friend.

[*Caroline Dinenage*]

The life sciences industrial strategy sets out the vision to build on that and make the UK a top-tier global hub for biomedical and clinical research. The two life sciences sector deals, published in 2017 and 2018, have already transformed a significant part of the strategy into Government policy. They are no lightweight commitment. Taken together, they have leveraged more than £2 billion in private sector investment in the life sciences sector, supported by more than £500 million from the Government. The second sector deal set out the Government's clear ambition to see faster, more efficient clinical research. NHS England's long-term plan confirmed that the NHS endorses and will play its full part in delivering the life sciences sector deals, and set out our ambition to see 1 million people registered to participate in health research by 2023-24, and to treble commercial research in the health system over the next 10 years.

The Government are committed to creating the very best environment for clinical trials, both to achieve the ambition set out in the life sciences industrial strategy and to prepare for exiting the EU, about which hon. Members have spoken. The system is coming together to deliver that. The implementation of Health Research Authority approval has streamlined processes and led to improvements in the timelines for clinical trial approvals. It is now possible for efficient clinical trials to be set up in the UK within 100 days from first regulatory application to the first participant recruited.

This week, the NIHR published a policy on clinical trial transparency, about which my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West asked. The policy aims to improve practice in prospective registration and timely disclosure of results to ensure full transparency of clinical trials funded by the NIHR. It sits within and is consistent with the Health Research Authority's UK policy framework for health and social care research, and guidance on the publication and dissemination of research findings. The Government's arm's length bodies and partners are committed to clinical trials transparency. The Health Research Authority has an active work programme on transparency, and later in the year will launch a consultation to improve it further.

NHS England and the NIHR are implementing their "12 Actions to Support and Apply Research in the NHS", which sets out a vision for further simplifying and strengthening clinical research within the NHS in England. In the summer, the NIHR clinical research network will launch a competition to establish five purpose-designed centres dedicated to late-phase commercial research within the NHS, launched as part of the second life sciences sector deal. Increasing the NHS's capacity to deliver research will enable significant growth and will provide more opportunities for patients to benefit from early access to innovation. Our vision is to make the UK home to data-driven research, scientific advances and innovation in healthcare. It is all about improving patient outcomes. To help that, we have committed £37.5 million through the life sciences sector deals to develop up to five digital innovation hubs.

The UK is also leading the way in improving clinical trial designs, undertaking novel and more efficient trial designs that will develop new medicines, diagnostics and medical devices for patients. Although a record 870,000 people took part in the NIHR clinical research

network-supported studies in 2018-19, the network is also exploring mechanisms to ensure that all patients are offered the opportunity to participate in research that is relevant to them, whether or not it is delivered by their regular healthcare provider. With that in mind, the NIHR recently launched a new website called "Be Part of Research", which helps people to find out easily about health research of relevance to them taking place across the UK, not just in their own areas. NHS patients will be able to view opportunities to participate and register their interest in research via the NHS app by 2020.

As part of Brexit negotiations, which a lot of Members mentioned, we are working to ensure that we continue to have the best possible environment in which to support clinical trials. Our overall aim is to ensure that patients in the UK and across the EU continue to be able to access the very best and most innovative medicine. As part of our preparations for leaving the EU, the Government are working across a great number of areas to ensure that the UK has the best possible environment for basic, biomedical, health and life sciences research.

Chris Green: Does the Minister understand my concern that, although many people from the life sciences sector are involved in Parliament in one way or another and visit it, and are aware of what Brexit means and the challenges around it, for many people in the sector, which is very international in its nature and supportive of remaining in the EU, information about what the Government are doing and their intentions is not as widespread as it might be? Therefore, the Government need to do more and be more effective in communicating what we are doing on Brexit and why we are doing it.

Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend is quite right. We must do everything we can to communicate and reassure individuals in the UK and across the rest of the EU about our intentions. We have a strong track record of working together to tackle global challenges, and there are strong links in place between our research and innovation communities. We want to maintain that and build on it as best we can. We want to continue collaborating in areas of shared interest through the ongoing partnerships. We perhaps need to do a better job of communicating that. I hope that today's debate will help to that end, so I congratulate my hon. Friend again on securing it.

My hon. Friend spoke about access to global talent. Through the NIHR Academy, we are investing in the development and co-ordination of NIHR academic training, career development and research capacity development. Clinical trials training is supported from pre-doctoral training right the way through to senior post-doctoral research through a range of awards as part of the NIHR fellowships programme. More than half of the UK's research output is the result of international collaboration, and the most pressing global scientific challenges of today require scientists from around the world to work together across borders. The UK Government are absolutely committed to continuing to participate fully in all international scientific endeavours, including through pooling and sharing resources and infrastructure with other countries. Hon. Members have raised concerns about that. We are also making it easier to recruit and retain overseas researchers and scientists. We want to ensure that the new regime works for life sciences companies, and supports the recruitment of skilled and talented people without excessive bureaucracy, which often gets in the way.

In September 2018, the independent Migration Advisory Committee reported on the economic and social impacts of the UK's exit from the EU and on how the immigration system should be aligned with a modern industrial strategy. That includes removing the number cap on the skilled workers route and removal of the resident market labour test. Hon. Members will know that the White Paper currently retains the £30,000 minimum threshold, but the Government have committed to 12 months of extensive engagement with employers on the future of the immigration system to ensure that it works and to address any concerns that have been raised. The hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) mentioned other medical and health staff. He will know that nurses and paramedics are already on the exempted professions list. In the 2019 spring statement, the Chancellor announced that we would be completely exempting PhD-qualified migrants from visa caps.

On accessing EU funding, should Parliament pass the withdrawal agreement, the UK will continue to participate in EU science programmes until the end of 2020 through the withdrawal agreement, and the Government would very much like the option to associate to programmes beyond 2020, including the Horizon Europe programme, which has been mentioned. As a contingency in the event that the withdrawal agreement is not ratified, the Government have guaranteed funding for scientists and innovators who secure awards before EU exit and those who are successful in EU competitions on a third-country basis after exit.

The EU and the UK start from a position of close regulatory alignment. The EU has created a comprehensive scheme for the regulation of clinical trials of medicines through the clinical trials directive and the good clinical practice directive, both of which have been transposed into UK law through the Medicines for Human Use (Clinical Trials) Regulations 2004. The EU is planning to implement new regulations for clinical trials in 2020, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West knows, which will further integrate clinical trial processes and requirements across the EU. Ministers have stated that the Government have committed to align with the EU's new clinical trials regulation as far as we possibly can without delay when it comes into force in the EU, subject to usual parliamentary approvals.

Our preferred future relationship includes the UK's involvement in all of the elements of EU regulation that are not in the UK's gift—namely, the EU common portal and single assessment framework. Of course, that is subject to negotiations, which are ongoing.

Regardless of EU exit, the MHRA and partners across the UK healthcare ecosystem are already taking steps to improve further the clinical trials application process. That will ensure that those engaged in clinical

trials can continue to develop innovative and cost-effective treatments, and that patients recruited in trials can continue to have safe and prompt access to medicines.

Once the UK is outside the EU network, it will still be possible for sponsors to run multi-state trials involving the UK. Data generated in a UK clinical trial will also be admissible to support regulatory activity in the EU and globally. The MHRA and UK ethics committees will make every effort to ensure that any parallel submissions to the UK are streamlined and efficient, for example by accepting the same application dossier and offering competitive timelines for assessment.

For medical devices and in vitro diagnostics, the new EU regulations entered into force in May 2017, with three and five-year transition periods respectively. The MHRA leads on the UK regulatory framework for medical devices and IVDs, including the appropriate alignment with international standards.

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the Information Commissioner's Office and NHS England have all published EU exit operational readiness guidelines, including the actions that organisations need to take to ensure continuity of access to the processing and sharing of personal information and data.

I hope that I have made it clear to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West that we are fully committed not just to keeping pace with the rest of the world, but to taking strides ahead despite the uncertainty that we face with EU exit. The life sciences industrial strategy sets out the blueprint for that, and we continue to make rapid progress on implementation, to the benefit of the UK population, patients, the NHS and our economy.

2.41 pm

Chris Green: This debate has been very positive on both sides of the Chamber. We see the challenges ahead with Brexit. We do not know at the moment when, if or how we will leave, but all of us in the Chamber and more widely across the country recognise the immense contribution that our scientific community makes, whether that involves the private sector, academia or our fantastic charitable research sector. We have a very positive future. Our consensus on increasing and improving our investment in research and development and devoting a greater part of our national budget to it sends the very positive message, not just to the United Kingdom but across the world, that we are a place to invest in, locate in and move to in order to participate. I thank everyone who spoke in the debate very much.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of supporting clinical trials and the UK's future clinical research capability.

2.43 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 23 May 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Contingent Liability Notification: British Steel

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Today I lay before Parliament a departmental minute describing a contingent liability arising from an indemnity for the official receiver acting in the insolvency of British Steel Limited.

It is normal practice when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability of £300,000 and above, for which there is no specific statutory authority, for the Department concerned to present Parliament with a minute, giving details of the liability created and explaining the circumstances.

British Steel Limited entered into liquidation on 22 May 2019. The official receiver has been appointed as liquidator and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has provided him with an indemnity in respect of:

carrying out the proper performance of the official receiver's duties as liquidator of the company; and
maintaining, securing and funding the ongoing operation of the company's undertaking, and distributing the assets of the company in the ordinary course of the official receiver's duties as liquidator of the company.

It has not been possible to observe the usual waiting period for this contingent liability, since it only materialised when the company entered into liquidation yesterday morning.

HM Treasury has approved the proposal in principle.
[HCWS1585]

TREASURY

Financial Conduct Authority Investigation: London Capital and Finance

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): I have today laid a direction before Parliament requiring the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) to carry out an independent investigation into the events and circumstances surrounding the failure and placing into administration of London Capital & Finance Plc (LCF), using powers under Sections 77 and 78 of the Financial Services Act 2012.

Following a request from the FCA, I announced on 1 April the Government's intention to direct the FCA to launch an investigation into the events at LCF and the circumstances surrounding them. Today's direction orders this investigation and sets out the terms on which it will be carried out.

The direction requires the FCA to appoint an independent person to carry out the investigation on its behalf, with the approval of HM Treasury. I have approved the FCA's appointment of Dame Elizabeth Gloster to carry out the investigation on its behalf. The investigation is expected to run for 12 months.

The investigation will look at the actions, policies and approach of the FCA, as the institution with statutory responsibility for the authorisation and supervision of LCF during the relevant period. It will focus on whether the FCA discharged its functions in a manner which enabled it to effectively fulfil its statutory objectives, and may consider any other matter deemed relevant for this purpose.

This independent investigation is separate to the investigation by the Serious Fraud Office, working in conjunction with the FCA, into individuals associated with LCF.

I have also announced today that, alongside this independent investigation, the Government will separately review the wider policy questions raised by the case. This will include research into the wider market for non-transferable securities, such as mini bonds, and their role in the economy. The Treasury will begin work alongside this to consider the regulatory arrangements currently in place for the issuance of these investments, including the financial promotions order which governs the marketing of those products.

The Government are committed to creating a stronger and safer financial system. The independent investigation into the supervision of LCF will ensure that the events and circumstances surrounding the collapse of LCF are better understood. Its findings will help to properly protect those who invest their money in the future.

Copies of the direction are available in the Vote Office and Printed Paper Office.

[HCWS1584]

ECOFIN

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) was held in Brussels on 17 May 2019. The UK was represented by Mark Bowman (Director General, International Finance, HM Treasury). The Council discussed the following:

Early morning session

The Eurogroup President briefed the Council on the outcomes of the 16 May meeting of the Eurogroup, and the European Commission provided an update on the current economic situation in the EU. Ministers then discussed the possibility of the European Investment Bank developing country strategies. Lastly, the Commission updated on the state of play on negotiations on the definitive system of value added tax.

Excise duties

The Council discussed the directive on general arrangements for excise duty (recast), the regulation on administrative co-operation of the content of electronic registers, and the directive on the structures of excise duty on alcohol and alcoholic beverages.

Current financial services legislative proposals

The Romanian presidency provided an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

International meetings

The Council held an exchange of views on digital taxation in the international context, and the presidency and Commission updated the Council on the outcomes of the G20, IMF and World Bank spring meetings that took place in April. The Council then mandated the Economic and Financial Committee to approve the terms of reference for the upcoming G20 meeting in June. Lastly, the Finnish delegation briefed the Council on the first meeting of the Finance Ministers coalition for climate action.

European semester

The Council adopted conclusions on the outcomes of the 2019 in-depth reviews of macroeconomic imbalances in member states as part of the macroeconomic imbalances procedure; and the implementation of 2018 country-specific recommendations.

Institutional cycle priorities

Under the non-legislative AOB, the presidency informed the Council on the follow-up discussions in regards to priorities for the next institutional cycle in the ECOFIN area.

Working lunch

Following on from the discussions at April informal ECOFIN in Bucharest, EU Finance Ministers held a working lunch to discuss the challenges of labour mobility and their potential solutions, followed by an exchange of views on the way forward in areas of the economic and monetary union, specifically in regards to the reform support programme.

[HCWS1583]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE**FCO Services**

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): FCO Services operates as a trading fund of the FCO. I have set it the following performance targets for 2019-20:

1. Achievement of a return on capital employed of at least 3.5% (statutory commitment)
2. A productivity ratio of at least 80%, measuring actual billable hours v. available billable hours
3. In-year customer satisfaction results averaging at least 80%
4. A Your Say score for "Employee Engagement" of at least 60%
5. An average Your Say score for "My Manager" of at least 63%

FCO Services will report to Parliament on its success against these targets through its annual report and accounts for 2019-20.

FCO Services is a trading fund of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). It provides a range of integrated, secure services worldwide to the FCO and other UK Government Departments, supporting the delivery of Government agendas. Services include protective security, estates and construction, cloud computing, communications and monitoring, logistics, translation and interpreting. This is combined with a portfolio of global maintenance work. FCO services also manages the UK National Authority for Counter Eavesdropping (UK NACE), helping protect UK assets from physical, electronic and cyber-attack.

[HCWS1582]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT**Planning: Mineral Resources**

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): On the 6 March 2019, Mr Justice Dove handed down his judgment in the case of *Stephenson v SoS MHCLG* [2019] EWHC 519 (Admin). In accordance with the terms of the court order, paragraph 209 (a) of the national planning policy framework has been quashed.

For the avoidance of doubt the remainder of the national planning policy framework policies and, in particular, chapter 17 on "facilitating the sustainable use of minerals" remain unchanged and extant.

For the purposes of the national planning policy framework, hydrocarbon development (including unconventional oil and gas) are considered to be a mineral resource. Specific policy on the planning considerations associated with their development is set out at paragraphs 203-205 and the remainder of 209 of the national planning policy framework. In particular, paragraph 204 (a) of the national planning policy framework states that planning policies should "provide for the extraction of mineral resources of local and national importance" with paragraph 205 stating that "[w]hen determining planning applications, great weight should be given to the benefits of mineral extraction, including to the economy".

In addition, the written ministerial statements of 16 September 2015 on 'shale gas and oil policy' and 17 May 2018 on 'planning and energy policy' also remain unchanged and extant. The written ministerial statements sit alongside the national planning policy framework. Planning practice guidance is also unaffected by the ruling.

This suite of policies and guidance remain material considerations in plan making and decision taking for hydrocarbon development and they should be afforded appropriate weighting as determined by the decision maker.

We remain committed to the safe and sustainable exploration and development of our onshore shale gas resources.

[HCWS1586]

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