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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 12 June 2019

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

Welfare Policies

2. **Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the effect of that Department's welfare policies on women. [911294]

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): The welfare system treats individuals of all genders equally. It provides support and incentives to claimants to enter employment and progress in work. The Department for Work and Pensions and indeed the whole Government are committed to ensuring that all claimants have access to the right tailored support when they need it.

Chris Law: This question is about to completely contradict what has just been said. Under universal credit, lone parents under the age of 25 receive a lower payment than under the legacy system. This is totally arbitrary and discriminates heavily against women, who make up 90% of lone parents. Will the Minister urge the DWP to rethink the policy?

Alok Sharma: As the hon. Gentleman will know, over the last two Budgets, we have put in an extra £6 billion to support the most vulnerable in universal credit. Sadly, he and his colleagues did not vote to support those changes.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that ensuring that universal credit is fair and flexible for women is a vital part of supporting women's economic empowerment?

Alok Sharma: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. In the universal credit system, we have one-to-one support provided by work coaches, and it is working. We have just seen the figures released yesterday by the Office for National Statistics showing that the rate of women in employment is at a record high.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The Minister is also wrong with respect to national insurance contributions being attributed, or rather not attributed, to women who have more than one period of maternity

leave within two years. Will he go back to look at the correspondence I have sent to the Department about this very serious problem?

Alok Sharma: Of course I will look at the correspondence and make sure that the appropriate Minister meets the hon. Lady.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): With regards to the DWP's pensions policy, this Women and Equalities Minister—the fourth—has had the opportunity to reduce the gender pay gap and tackle discrimination against those with disabilities, women and LGBT and BME people before another Prime Minister and another reshuffle. What is she going to achieve in this term?

Alok Sharma: We in the DWP have introduced a range of measures across the whole Government to make sure that we are supporting those across all sectors of society into work. As I said, the hon. Lady just needs to look at the jobs figures: we have joint record high employment, record high women's employment and record high ethnic minorities in employment.

Hate Crime Action Plan

3. **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Home Secretary on the timetable for the publication of the next four-year hate crime action plan. [911296]

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): The current action plan runs from 2016 to 2020 and it was refreshed last year to ensure that it remained fit for purpose. The Government are delivering on these commitments, but we will of course continue to review what needs to be done to tackle hate crime, including what will follow the current action plan.

Paul Blomfield: I thank the Minister for that reply. She will know that, disturbingly, the latest police figures record a 17% increase in hate crime. Does she accept that this is at least in part encouraged by the casual racism of some in public life, and does she agree that anyone who compares Muslim women with “letter boxes” and describes African children as “piccaninnies” is not fit to be Prime Minister?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to remind us all that our use of language is very, very important in public life. There are many examples across the House, it is fair to say, where, for example, people have liked Facebook pages which they then come to regret. I think there is a particular duty on all of us to ensure that the language we use is respectful, tolerant and reflects 21st-century Britain, which is a vibrant, multicultural, diverse country with much, much talent and potential among all our people.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Queer bashing is still a fact of life in modern Britain, depressingly, however we have changed the laws, and it is still a fact that young gay boys and girls are six times more likely to take their own lives than their straight counterparts. Does the Minister accept that every time somebody in public life—not necessarily an MP, but in the Church or wherever—spouts language that undermines the fundamental sense of respect that there should be for every different form of

sexual identity in the UK, they increase the poison in the well and that leads to more queer bashing and more suicides?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to focus on this. Of course, recent events have shown just how despicably some people will behave when confronted with a relationship or situation with which they clearly do not feel comfortable. That is not what our country is about. Our country is a diverse, tolerant, welcoming country, and each and every one of us can play our part in making sure that that message is clear in the way we behave and speak and the words we use.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): First, can I ask or perhaps suggest that all this whataboutery is parked, because it does not suit this House? Perhaps my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) had access to my question, because I would also like to ask the Minister this. As we are speaking about the hate crime action plan, will she distance herself from people whose comments directly lead to an increase in hate crime, such as her colleague who described gay people as “bumboys”, black people as “piccaninnies” with “watermelon smiles”, and Muslim women as “bank robbers” and “letter boxes”, which, according to the Government’s own funded reporting centre Tell MAMA, led to an increase in attacks on Muslim women?

Victoria Atkins: Again, I am genuinely sorry because I am afraid I am not familiar with some of the instances the hon. Lady has just set out. *[Interruption.]* Really. But the point of the action plan is that it focuses on the five themes of preventing hate crime by challenging prejudicial beliefs and attitudes, responding to hate crime within our communities, increasing the reporting of hate crime, improving support for victims of hate crime and building our understanding of hate crime. Again, each and every one of us in this House and beyond can play our part in tackling the hate and showing that we are a modern, diverse and welcoming country for everyone.

Census: National Minorities

4. **Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with the Minister for the Cabinet Office on ensuring that all UK national minorities are given equal status in the next census. [911297]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Kevin Foster): I respect the passion of my hon. Friends from Cornwall in their campaign for Cornish national identity. However, the Government will be guided by the ONS’s recommendations to the Government and Parliament regarding particular questions in the next census. Everyone who wishes to identify their chosen national identity will be able to do so in the 2021 census.

Steve Double: I thank the Minister for his response, but the Cornish continue to be the only UK national minority unable to identify themselves in the census by way of a tick box. Does the Minister agree that this falls short of equality of recognition for the Cornish?

Kevin Foster: Ultimately, as I have just said, the Government will be guided by the ONS’s recommendations, and ultimately the final questions will be decided by this House.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the Minister agree that while it is important that all recognised national minorities should receive their place in the census, we do need to be very careful that we do not put forward nominations for what are not recognised national minorities and be accused of social engineering?

Kevin Foster: When filling in the census, particularly given the fact that we have moved mostly to online filling in, everyone will be able to use either one of the tick boxes or the search and type facility for common responses that people may wish to use. Everyone will be able to fill it in in the way they wish and to identify their own identity. As I say, the Government will be guided by the ONS’s recommendations about what should be the suggested ones in the form of tick boxes.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I note the Minister’s response about the online versions, but people filling in the paper version, particularly religious minorities, will not be prompted what to fill in—for example, the Jain community. Will he do everything he can to make sure that those from religious communities can fill in their religion?

Kevin Foster: I recognise the demands that have been made about a Jain religion tick box, but it is worth noting that the religion question is a voluntary one. Again, there is an opportunity to put in on the paper form what religious identity people have. Most people use that seriously, but as many of us will know, some people decided to declare they were Jedis.

Female Employment

5. **Mrs Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase the rate of female employment. [911298]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): The female employment rate of 72% is a record high. The industrial strategy is transforming our economy, ensuring that everyone can access, and progress at, work. We have a range of parental and other leave entitlements, and we are working with businesses to promote flexible working. We will invest £3.5 billion in early education this year, making childcare more accessible.

Mrs Miller: We have record numbers of women in work, but more than 50,000 women a year feel they have no choice but to leave their jobs simply because they are pregnant. Will the Minister look carefully at my ten-minute rule Bill, which is a way to try to provide proper protection for pregnant women, so more of them can stay on in work when they are pregnant and continue to work when they have young children?

Kelly Tolhurst: I commend my right hon. Friend for her passion, and for her work as Chair of the Select Committee and her ten-minute rule Bill. As she will

know, we recently conducted a consultation on maternity and pregnancy discrimination in the workplace, which finished at the beginning of April. We are currently reviewing more than 600 responses, and we hope to publish the results as soon as possible.

11. [911304] **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I am very keen on women—[*Laughter*—]in good jobs, because I have a wife, three daughters and five granddaughters, but may I urge the Minister to pay more attention to getting women into management training? Women indisputably make better managers than men, so let us have more of them training as managers in order to reach the top levels of management in our country.

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Gentleman for highlighting that issue. I am proud to be a Minister sitting on the Front Bench among many other females: that just shows that women can do it. One of our priorities has been getting women on boards, and we are on track to reach our target of 33%, but it is crucial that we feed into the pipeline and get women into those executive positions. Hopefully, some of us in the House will be good models for them.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): The huge success of the Conservative approach to apprenticeships has enabled many women to secure well-paid jobs in manufacturing. Will my hon. Friend join me in commending the work of companies such as Jaguar Land Rover, which trains equal numbers of men and women as engineering apprentices, despite the challenges that they face?

Kelly Tolhurst: I strongly commend the work of organisations such as JLR. In my constituency, BAE Systems has high-level apprenticeships for women engineers, which is great. We need more women in higher executive roles, and an apprenticeship system is one of the great vehicles that we can use to achieve that.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): As was pointed out by the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), 54,000 women lose their jobs each year because of maternity discrimination. The Women and Equalities Committee has long recommended an increase in the employment tribunal time limit for maternity discrimination claims from three to six months to break down some of the barriers. Why have the Government not implemented that?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Lady will know that the consultation, which finished in April, dealt with that very issue. However, we also sought views on the position of parents who have been on adoption leave or shared parental leave and are returning to work. As I have said, we are looking through the 600 responses to the consultation and are keen to publish the results as soon as possible. Let me emphasise, however, that the law is clear: discrimination against pregnant women coming back from maternity leave is unlawful.

Period Poverty

6. **Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to tackle period poverty (a) in the UK and (b) overseas. [911299]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): Let me begin by saying that I hope the whole House will join me in wishing good luck to England and Scotland for their world cup matches this Friday.

We have set up a taskforce, which I co-chair with Plan International and Procter & Gamble. It will improve data and evidence on period poverty, and improve access to period products for all women and girls. Internationally, we have committed the United Kingdom to leading a new campaign of action to end period poverty and shame globally by 2030.

Eddie Hughes: Will the Minister join me in celebrating the great work done by the Red Box project, which is helping me to distribute sanitary products to schools across my constituency?

Penny Mordaunt: I do congratulate Red Box, and also the many organisations throughout the country which Members will know well in their own constituencies. As well as bringing together the manufacturers, the taskforce brings together a network of all those organisations so that we can combat period poverty across the UK.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister may or may not be aware that Derry City Council is one of the few councils in Northern Ireland that have taken steps to address period poverty among their staff. Has the Minister had an opportunity to discuss these matters with local councils, which have a responsibility to their staff?

Penny Mordaunt: The Departments of Health and Education have initiatives involving schools and colleges and people in hospitals, but there are many other settings in which we need to combat period poverty, and the workplace is just one of them. That is the purpose of the taskforce, and we shall be talking to all employers in the public and private sectors.

State Pension Age: Equalisation

7. **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the effect of the acceleration of the equalisation of the state pension age on women born in the 1950s. [911300]

9. **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the effect of the acceleration of the equalisation of the state pension age on women born in the 1950s. [911302]

13. **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the effect of the acceleration of the equalisation of the state pension age on women born in the 1950s. [911307]

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): The Government of the day decided more than 20 years ago that they were going to make the state pension age the same for men and women in a long overdue move towards gender equality, and this change was clearly

communicated. We need to raise the age at which all of us can draw a state pension so that it remains sustainable now and for future generations.

Martyn Day: We know from House of Commons Library data that the number of women aged 60 claiming out-of-work benefits has increased since 2013 by more than the total number of claimants of all other ages, so what further evidence do we need that this UK Government have totally failed this cohort of women?

Alok Sharma: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that additional money was put into the system—an extra £1.1 billion—which means that women in this cohort will benefit.

Alan Brown: The fact is that 1950s-born women suffered discrimination and lower pay leading to smaller or no private pensions to fall back on, so it beggars belief that they then had to suffer the equalisation of the state pension age. Given the past injustices, the lack of notification of the Pensions Act 1995 and the way the Pensions Act 2011 has been rolled out, who in this Government is going to take responsibility for fair transitional arrangements?

Alok Sharma: As I said, additional money was put into the system, but ultimately this is a question of fairness between generations. We need to make sure that we keep the state pension sustainable, and of course we have to reflect improvements in life expectancy.

David Linden: It will not be lost on those in the Chamber that the Minister has again repeated the myth that these changes were “clearly communicated”. The Work and Pensions Committee said in 2016 that the Department did not live up to expectations and that communication “was very limited”, so can the Minister look us in the eye and genuinely say he thinks he did communicate this to women and did not lead them up the garden path?

Alok Sharma: At the risk of repeating myself, this is a question of making it clear that we have provided extra support, but this is a question of fairness and I know the hon. Gentleman will want to make sure that intergenerational fairness is reflected in these changes.

Women entering Custody

8. Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to provide a co-ordinated approach to supporting women at risk of entering custody. [911301]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Paul Maynard): Last summer, our female offender strategy set out priorities for supporting women at risk of entering the criminal justice system. As part of that strategy, we will be publishing a national concordat shortly, setting out how public services should co-operate to protect these vulnerable women.

Bambos Charalambous: The number of prison officers leaving within a year of starting their role has risen dramatically since 2010, so what are the Government doing to ensure that prisons have experienced staff to

assist female prisoners, who often have complex needs, and what steps are the Government taking to support women's centres, which play a huge role in preventing vulnerable women from entering the criminal justice system?

Paul Maynard: That is two questions for the price of one, which I will seek to answer. As the hon. Gentleman will know, we are recruiting significant numbers of prison officers—over 2,000 more—but also significantly increasing our spending on women's centres to make sure that every police and crime commissioner area has a centre.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): As a welcome reform of probation services is ongoing, now is the time to look at how we can improve delivery of these services. Will the Minister commit to looking at making specialist gendered support such as women's centres, female drug rehabilitation clinics and women's refuges mandatory as part of the probation services across the country?

Paul Maynard: The hon. Lady makes an important point. We know that women leaving prison have a range of quite distinct needs: they have higher reoffending rates than men, 39% go into unsettled accommodation, and a third are not on out-of-work benefits a month after leaving prison. There is a wide range of issues that we need to look at, and we will take the hon. Lady's point seriously on board.

Flexible Working

10. Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support women to access flexible working. [911303]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): All employees with 26 weeks of continuous service have the right to request flexible working; that accounts for over 90% of employees. We will consult on creating a duty for employers to consider whether a job can be done flexibly and to make that clear when advertising. We have also established a flexible working taskforce with business groups and employee representatives to promote wider understanding and the implementation of flexible working practices.

Luke Hall: Lots of women working in industries such as retail return from maternity leave to find that they are held back from progressing in their careers because their new caring responsibilities are interpreted as a lack of flexibility. What more can the Government do to challenge this short-sighted behaviour in a minority of employers?

Kelly Tolhurst: I note my hon. Friend's expertise in the retail sector before being elected to this House. The retail sector gender pay gap is 9.1%, compared with 17.9% overall, but the Government are not complacent and the sector continues to take steps to tackle gender inequality, including through the British Retail Consortium's “Better Retail Better World”. This has involved more than 30 leading businesses committing to reducing inequality as part of the sector's contribution to the sustainable development goals.

Workplace Discrimination

12. **Shabana Mahmood** (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): What steps she is taking to reduce workplace discrimination against people from black and ethnic minority communities. [911305]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): The Equality Act 2010 makes it unlawful to discriminate against employees or people seeking work based on race. The Government are committed to a society where everyone can enter work and progress on merit, regardless of their background. That is why the Prime Minister has launched a consultation on mandatory ethnicity pay reporting alongside the new race charter.

Shabana Mahmood: I thank the Minister for her answer, but 35% of black and ethnic minority workers in the west midlands have been encouraged to adopt a western work name by their boss at least once in their career. That is a truly shocking and unacceptable state of affairs in 21st century Britain, so what is the Minister prepared to do to stamp out such discrimination in the workplace for BME workers?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Lady is quite right. Let us be clear that discrimination of any kind in the workplace is not tolerated, and is unlawful in some cases. The Prime Minister has a strong commitment, which is why she introduced the mandatory ethnicity pay reporting consultation. I would also like to highlight to the hon. Lady that the business diversity and inclusion group, which I recently chaired, very much wants to ensure that no one in the workplace will be discriminated against because of their colour or gender.

Topical Questions

T1. [911308] **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): This year's Pride takes place at a time when LGBT issues are firmly in the public consciousness. It is a reminder, 50 years on from the Stonewall riots in New York, that Pride is just as important today as it was then. Still today, LGBT couples fear holding hands in public. Still today, LGBT people are the victims of prejudice and violence, and still today, some people think it is inappropriate to teach children that other children might have two mums or two dads. I ask all Members of this House to support Pride in the coming weeks and to continue to work towards equality for all.

Martyn Day: Women overwhelmingly bear the brunt of domestic work, spending an average of 10 hours more per week on household work than men. The Office for National Statistics has estimated the value of this work at £1.24 trillion, which is more than the UK's retail and manufacturing sectors combined. What work is the Department doing to quantify and value this household work?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. We have been working on a women's economic empowerment strategy, which looks at the responsibilities that women take on at every stage of

their lives and at the impact of that on their financial and physical wellbeing. We will publish the strategy very shortly.

T5. [911314] **Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What is the Minister doing to help girls to reach their full potential in the light of their being taken from school at this time of the year at or below the age of 16 for early marriage abroad?

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): I thank my hon. Friend for her unrelenting campaign to ensure that this issue is brought before the House. Forced marriage is a terrible form of abuse, and this Government and this Prime Minister have made protecting women and girls from violence and supporting victims of forced marriage a key priority. We have introduced a range of measures to tackle this crime, including creating a specific forced marriage offence and criminalising the breach of forced marriage protection orders.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): Earlier, one of the Ministers said that they were unfamiliar with some of the comments made by the Conservative candidates for the leadership, so I would like to do my public duty. The right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab) has refused to lift non-disclosure agreements that he has entered into with some women, and he wants to abolish the Government Equalities Office. The right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) referred to black people as "piccaninnies" and Muslim women who wear the niqab as "letter boxes" or "bank robbers". The right hon. Member for Tatton (Ms McVey) says that there is a problem with kids learning about LGBT+ issues. The right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) said that having children would make her a better Prime Minister. The right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) said that he did not condemn all paedophiles. Finally, the Minister for Women and Equalities' preferred candidate, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), is going to halve the abortion limit to 12 weeks. In the light of all that, will the Minister confirm whether equalities will progress or regress under the new Prime Minister?

Penny Mordaunt: On the accusations that the hon. Lady makes against my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, may I gently point out that it was under his tenure that the scheme for Northern Ireland was introduced, funded from England's NHS budget? I also gently say that the hon. Lady may like to concentrate on her own side's performance on equalities. The Conservative party has had two female Prime Ministers, and we may have our third in a few weeks, so I encourage the Opposition to get their own act together before casting aspersions on ours.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): The Government intend to require businesses to consider whether a job can be done flexibly, but will the Minister argue for flipping that question, so that jobs are flexible by default and that employers must make the case for any job not to be flexible?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): Flexible working is just as important to men as it is to women

when they seek to strike a balance between family life and a career. I thank my hon. Friend for welcoming our intention to consult on the duty on employers to advertise jobs as flexible, where possible. The Government are not considering making all jobs flexible, but I spoke at the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's festival of work this morning, and making flexible working the norm was very much the topic of conversation.

T2. [911310] Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Despite York being a human rights city, the gender pay gap has increased by a staggering 225% since 2010, with women predominantly in low-paid, part-time and insecure work. How will the Minister invest in an adequate number of jobs for women in our city?

Penny Mordaunt: There is still a lot more to do on levelling the gender pay gap, and I am delighted to announce today the next round of grants to support women who face significant barriers when returning to work. The Adviza Partnership, the Regular Forces Employment Association, which is the forces employment charity, Mpower People, Westminster City Council, the Shpresa Programme, Beam, and Liverpool City Council are some of the awardees, and they will create opportunities for the most disadvantaged women in our society to achieve their full potential.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Climate change is not gender neutral and will impact the poorest countries most, exacerbating inequalities. Will the Minister for Women and Equalities join me in congratulating the Prime Minister on ensuring that our country is the first in the world to legislate for net zero?

Penny Mordaunt: This is an incredibly important issue that plays into all the factors that determine whether women and girls around the world are able to reach their full potential. I am extremely proud that our Prime Minister—a female Prime Minister—has been the UN Secretary-General's resilience champion on climate change and has taken this proposal forward.

T3. [911311] Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Will the Minister tell us how many women hold senior rank in the UK armed forces and what she intends to do to increase the number of women holding high rank?

Penny Mordaunt: I have committed myself to that cause in ways that previous Defence Secretaries have not by wearing a uniform myself. There has been considerable progress, and I refer the hon. Lady to some statistics that will be published tomorrow that are encouraging in that respect. We now have women on the boards of all three services, and I hope to make some further announcements shortly.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Will the Minister join me in welcoming the fact that the UK was recently announced as one of the best places in the world for female entrepreneurship under the Dell scorecard?

Victoria Atkins: I join my hon. Friend in welcoming the fact that this country is a great place for women, indeed everyone, to do business. This is one of the challenges

facing us in our new future outside the European Union and, with women like us in our country, we have a very bright future indeed.

T4. [911313] Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Women who are in a car crash are 17% more likely to die than men, so will the Department consider a legal requirement on car manufacturers to have female dummies to test their cars?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady makes an extremely good point, and I will take it up with the relevant Department.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to support women facing multiple barriers on returning to work after taking time out for caring duties?

Penny Mordaunt: In addition to the returners programme that we have announced today, we have ring-fenced some of that money and an additional £100,000 of funding to particular areas for women who face immense barriers to getting into work or who may have never worked but wish to do so. That includes learning English for those who have not previously had the chance.

T6. [911315] Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The suspects arrested in relation to the vicious and horrific attack on a same-sex couple on a bus in Camden last month are secondary school age children. Does the Secretary of State appreciate the link between sex and relationships education in schools and the prevention of LGBT hate crime? What is she doing to ensure that schools across the country can teach the new curriculum, in line with the law, without fear of intimidation?

Victoria Atkins: I am sure the whole House shares our concern at the recent events we have seen not just in London but in Southampton. As I have said before, we are clear that this is a modern, diverse society, which is precisely why we are introducing sex and relationships education to schools across the country to ensure that our children learn tolerance and understanding.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Domestic abuse and modern-day slavery are two issues that disproportionately affect women. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking the Prime Minister for everything she has done to improve the legislation in this area and to help those women affected by these issues to have better prospects and a better future?

Victoria Atkins: It is my great privilege to agree with my right hon. Friend, whom I thank for all the work she has done recently to scrutinise the draft Domestic Abuse Bill. I thank the Prime Minister for her commitment to women's issues and to addressing domestic abuse and modern slavery. Only yesterday, I was at an important event at which we discussed the impact of domestic abuse on male victims. People in the room said that they would like me to pass on to the Prime Minister their thanks for everything she has done to put women on the agenda of this country and this Government.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Employment: West Midlands

Q1. [911278] Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with the Mayor of the west midlands on the creation of employment in that region; and if she will make a statement.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): Before I answer my hon. Friend's question, let me say that Friday marks two years since the devastating Grenfell Tower fire. The survivors and bereaved, many of whom lost everything, have endured so much with such dignity. Our highest priority has been to ensure the survivors receive the support they need, and we must learn all we can to make sure no one ever has to go through their experience again.

This week is also Carers Week, which gives us all the opportunity to pay tribute to the enormous contribution that paid and unpaid carers make to our society.

Turning to my hon. Friend's question, I met the Mayor during my visit to the Kings Norton headquarters of the adi Group, which was an excellent opportunity to see a successful west midlands company doing its part to give young people a career. Yesterday's job figures show that employment has risen by over 300,000 in the west midlands since 2010, which is something to be celebrated.

I also celebrate my hon. Friend's birthday today and that of the Mayor of the west midlands, who I believe had a birthday yesterday.

Michael Fabricant: May I associate myself with my right hon. Friend's earlier comments, if not the birthday greetings, for which I thank her? The west midlands was the first region in the country to launch its industrial strategy, and I think it is the best regional industrial strategy. As this strategy is a shared endeavour between the region and the Government, what further help can she and the Government give to realise its full potential?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the Government's industrial strategy and to recognise the shared work that goes into those industrial strategies between government, the region and business. We will be investing £20 million towards this region becoming the UK's first future mobility zone—that will be introducing new technologies to encourage more seamless and efficient journeys; investing up to £50 million to put the region at the forefront of 5G developments, as the new innovative home to the UK's first multi-city 5G test bed; and £332 million from the Government's transforming cities fund to extend the city region's Metro system. This shared vision for inclusive growth shows how we can reach our potential and do so in a way that benefits all communities.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Today would have been the 90th birthday of Anne Frank had she survived, but she died in the Nazi Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1945. In her diary, she wrote many things, but one that really applies to all of us at all times is:

"Human greatness does not lie in wealth or power, but in character and goodness."

We should remember her life and all that she has inspired in so many others ever since the second world war.

Later this week, I will be joining those families and survivors commemorating the second anniversary of the Grenfell fire, in which dozens of people died. As Sunday's fire in the flats in Barking reminds us, there is still much more to do to ensure that people are safe in their homes in all parts of this country.

As is traditional, I am sure the whole House will join me in welcoming the new Member for Peterborough, my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Lisa Forbes), who is sitting behind me today.

The country is in crisis over Brexit. Manufacturing is in crisis. The Prime Minister's Government have brought us to this point and now the Conservative party is, once again, in the process of foisting a new Prime Minister on the country without the country having a say through a general election. This Prime Minister created the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy in July 2016. Has the Prime Minister actually delivered an industrial strategy since then?

The Prime Minister: First, may I echo the comments of the right hon. Gentleman in recognising what would have been the 90th birthday of Anne Frank? Nobody can have read the testimony of Anne Frank in her diary without being deeply moved and deeply shocked by what she had to live through, and that is another reason why everybody across this House and across our society should do everything we can in the fight against antisemitism. May I also take this, my first, opportunity to welcome the new hon. Member for Peterborough I (Lisa Forbes) to her seat in this Chamber?

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and our industrial strategy. It is obvious that he had written his question before he heard the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant), which of course referred to not only our national industrial strategy, but our regional industrial strategies, which are making a real difference in creating the record levels of employment we see in this country.

Jeremy Corbyn: The answer the Prime Minister gave has a sort of unreality about it all really. *[Interruption.]* Let me explain, as I am trying to help Conservative Members. If they could contain their excitement for a moment, I thought I would remind them that the labour force survey shows that compared with 2016, when BEIS was set up, there are now 147,000 fewer people working in manufacturing in Britain, that apprenticeship starts are down 25% and that manufacturing output fell by 3.9% between March and April this year, which is the largest fall for nearly two decades.

In the last year, Jaguar Land Rover, Honda, Vauxhall, Ford and Nissan have all announced UK job losses. Does the Prime Minister think her Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has been good for that industry?

The Prime Minister: This reveals an awful lot about the right hon. Gentleman's and the Labour party's approach to these issues. The point of the industrial strategy is to make sure that we have the economy with the jobs of the future, which is why it is good to see that,

in that industrial strategy, we have key challenges such as artificial intelligence and data, which will underpin the work we are doing in clean growth, mobility, the health service, and so much more.

On Monday, I was pleased to attend London Tech Week, to speak at the event and do a roundtable with tech businesses in this country, to welcome the tech unicorns developed in London and the five tech unicorns developed in Manchester and to welcome the over £1 billion of investment in the tech sector in this country announced at that time. We are looking to the jobs of the future. That is where the high-skilled, high-paid jobs are, and that is what this Government are delivering.

Jeremy Corbyn: Last week, Ford announced it would end production at its Bridgend plant. UK car production has been virtually halved in the last 11 consecutive months. Ford has also said that a no-deal Brexit would put a further 6,000 UK jobs at risk, with thousands more at risk in the supply chain. Nissan, Toyota, BMW and JLR have all made similar statements. Will the Prime Minister take this opportunity to reiterate her Government's assessment that a no-deal Brexit would be disastrous for Britain? I think some of her colleagues sitting behind her and alongside her need reminding of that.

The Prime Minister: Obviously, the announcement by Ford is very worrying. It is an uncertain time for workers and their families in Bridgend. Ford has committed to supporting employees throughout the consultation process and beyond, including with redeployment opportunities to other Ford sites in the UK. My right hon. Friends the Business Secretary and the Welsh Secretary have spoken to Ford, and we are working closely with them and the Welsh Government—the First Minister of Wales spoke to me as well. We are also working with local stakeholders and trade union representatives to ensure that those skilled and valued workers are supported throughout the process.

The right hon. Gentleman went on to talk about no deal and his concerns about a no-deal situation. It would come a little more sincerely from him if he had not gone through the Lobby regularly and consistently voting to increase the chances of no deal by voting against the deal.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister may not have noticed, but her deal was rejected three times by Parliament.

Another industry failed by the UK Government is UK steel. Why did the Government not agree a deal to support our steel industry?

The Prime Minister: I think the point the right hon. Gentleman makes is exactly the point I was making. Had he really believed that we should be leaving the European Union and doing so with a deal, he would have voted for the deal. We could have left the European Union and moved into that brighter future already.

We did work with British Steel. We worked with its owner, Greybull Capital, and lenders to explore all the potential options to secure a solution for British Steel. As the emissions trading scheme agreement the Government put in place shows, we were willing to act. We continue to work with the official receiver and with the British Steel support group, which includes management,

trade unions, companies in the supply chain and local communities, to pursue every possibility and every possible step to secure the future of the valuable operations at sites in Scunthorpe, Skinningrove and Teesside. I am to meet a group of Members of Parliament from the region whose constituencies are affected later today.

Jeremy Corbyn: Since the Government did nothing to protect the steel industry in Redcar, I hope that they will do a bit better in Scunthorpe, where 5,000 jobs are at risk. The Select Committee on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy raises questions about whether the Government actually entered into the negotiations in good faith.

Another sector that has been failed by the Government is the renewables industry. Solar installations are down by 94%; onshore wind is coming to a grinding halt; and they have failed to back the very important, very exciting and innovative Swansea bay tidal lagoon. They are failing on cars, on steel and on renewables. I know that the Tory leadership candidates have been falling over themselves to confess to their past indulgences, but can the Prime Minister name an industry that is legal that her Ministers have actually backed?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about solar power, but let us look at the facts: 99% of solar power deployed in the UK has been deployed under a Conservative Government, and last year, renewables generated a record amount of electricity. That is indeed a record that this Government can be proud of. While he is talking about renewables, I am very surprised that he has not taken the opportunity to stand up and thank this Government for our announcement today that we will legislate for net zero on emissions by 2050.

Jeremy Corbyn: The legacy of the Prime Minister's Government is one of failure. They claimed that they would tackle burning injustices; they failed. They told pensioners that their benefits were safe; now, they are taking away free TV licences for the over-75s. They promised action on Grenfell; two years on, there is still flammable cladding on thousands of homes across this country. They promised a northern powerhouse; they failed to deliver it, and every northern newspaper is campaigning for this Government to power up the north. They promised net zero by 2050, yet they have failed on renewables, and are missing—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman will not be shouted down; it is not going to happen. Do not waste your breath. It is not productive, and it is terribly boring.

Jeremy Corbyn: They promised net zero by 2050, yet they have failed on renewables and are missing their climate change targets. They promised an industrial strategy; output is falling. Which does the Prime Minister see as the biggest industrial failure of her Government: the car industry, the steel industry, or the renewables industry? Which is it?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman can pose for his YouTube clip as much as he likes, but let us actually look at what this Government have delivered. What we have delivered is a racial disparity audit that deals with the inappropriate inequality of public services

for people from different communities; record investment in transport infrastructure in the north; a record employment rate; the lowest unemployment for 45 years; wages growing faster than inflation; a record cash boost for the NHS; better mental health support; more homes being built; stamp duty cut; higher standards in our schools; and we are leading the world on climate change. That is the record of Conservatives in government, which we are proud of, and we will never let him destroy it.

Engagements

Q9. [911286] Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): May I congratulate the Prime Minister on introducing legislation for net zero? It is a fantastic achievement, and we can all be proud that we are passing on the planet to our children in a better state. Does she agree that whoever follows her at the Dispatch Box—some of them may be sitting on the Front Bench today—must place policies to achieve that at the heart of their programme for government?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her words. I am very proud that we are committing to ending that, to ensure that we make our contribution to dealing with climate change, by today laying the legislation for a net zero emissions target by 2050. This puts us on the path to become the first major economy to set a net zero emissions target in law. Once again, this is the United Kingdom leading on the issue of tackling climate change, and delivering on the Conservative promise to leave the environment in a better state for the next generation. This is about long-term climate targets and we are proud of our world-leading record, but I absolutely agree that it is vital to continue this work to ensure that we protect our planet for generations to come.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is right that today we mark what would have been the 90th birthday of Anne Frank, a young woman who got a diary for her 13th birthday. We should never forget the trials and tribulations of those who paid the utmost price in that genocide and in the genocides that have followed since.

An attack on women's rights, tax breaks for the rich paid for by raising national insurance in Scotland, closing down Parliament to ensure that a catastrophic no-deal Brexit can be imposed—does the Prime Minister think that any of those policies are respectable, never mind acceptable?

The Prime Minister: The time will come when the right hon. Gentleman will be able to ask my successor questions at this Dispatch Box. He raises the issue of people paying in Scotland, but I remind him that only one party in Scotland has a policy to ensure that people in Scotland pay more tax, and that is the Scottish nationalists.

Ian Blackford: You would have thought, Mr Speaker, after the time that the Prime Minister has spent at the Dispatch Box, she would have realised that she is supposed at least to try to answer the question.

The state of politics in this place is humiliating. The Tory leadership race is a total horror show. The EU was clear: use the time wisely. Yet the Tories are obsessing with themselves at the expense of people across these

islands; just when we thought that things could not get any worse, they are lurching even further to the extremes. The Prime Minister once described her party as the “nasty party”, but with leadership candidates such as the one announcing today, it is about to get a whole lot nastier. Does the Prime Minister agree that the fantasy fairy stories of the Tory party's candidates are nothing more than an assault on our common sense? Tonight, will she vote to stop any no-deal madness?

The Prime Minister: The motion on the table tonight is about whether the Government should hand control of business in this House to the Labour party and the Scottish National party. That is something we will not do. The right hon. Gentleman talks about the need to use this time wisely when he could have been using the time wisely. Had he voted for the deal that we negotiated with the European Union, we would have left the European Union and would have been out with an orderly exit.

Q11. [911288] Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Prime Minister has led the fight against human trafficking and modern-day slavery, and her Modern Slavery Act has led the way in Europe. There are now more prosecutions and convictions of traffickers. However, the scourge of human trafficking continues worldwide. The Prime Minister's efforts to end human trafficking have been superb. What efforts has she been able to make to encourage other leaders to follow her example?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for the work that he has done over the years on this particular issue. I was pleased to be at the International Labour Organisation conference in Geneva last night to speak about our campaign against modern slavery and to recognise that 90 countries have now signed up to the call for action against modern slavery which I launched in the United Nations. We see other countries following our legislative example—for example, the Dutch Senate recently, Australia, and President Buhari of Nigeria showing great leadership in sub-Saharan Africa on this issue. I am very pleased to see the impact that the Modern Slavery Act 2015 has had, such that a British citizen has been convicted in British courts for being part of a gang who trafficked Nigerian women to Germany, despite the fact that none of that crime touched the UK. She was a British citizen; she was prosecuted here, thanks to our Modern Slavery Act.

Q2. [911279] Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): In the event that a Prime Minister asked Her Majesty the Queen to prorogue Parliament against the express wishes of the majority of the House of Commons, whose advice would the Queen be obliged to follow—the advice of her Prime Minister or the express will of this House?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman knows that I will not stand at this Dispatch Box and speak about decisions that Her Majesty the Queen might make. What I would say is that we see a situation this afternoon, in a motion, where the Labour party and the SNP are trying to take control away from the Government of the business of this House. Governments are able to govern by having control of the business of this House, and that is what everybody should recall.

Q15. [911292] Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Last week, I had the privilege of meeting my 109-year-old constituent, Mrs May Willis, who is still living independently in Bexhill. She asked me to pass on her sentiments to the Prime Minister—so from one May to another, as it were. She asked me to express how much she admires the Prime Minister's dedication to public service and everything she has done in putting her country first and regrets that she has been let down by people in this place—sentiments I share. She is concerned about democracy. I know the Prime Minister loathes this concept, as both she and I voted three times for her deal and also to keep no deal on the table, but at what point in time will we need to put this back to the people to finally deliver Brexit?

The Prime Minister: I first ask my hon. Friend to pass on my best wishes and thanks to May for her comments and to congratulate her on a long life and on the interest that she has shown in politics and in what is happening in this country. On the second part of his question, I simply say to him that I have not changed my mind. I believe that we should be working to deliver on the result of the first referendum, where we gave the people the choice and they chose to leave the EU. I continue to believe that we should do that with a deal because I think that is in the best interests of this country.

Q3. [911280] Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): This logjammed and underworked Parliament could become one of the best if we chose to work across the parties to fix our broken social care system. Through free votes, good will and hard work, we could design and then enact a new deal for social care that would bring hope for the future to millions. So in her last few weeks as Prime Minister, will she agree to meet me and to establish a cross-party group so that we could bring this social care new deal to fruition?

The Prime Minister: We do indeed need to ensure that we can see a sustainable future for our social care system. That is why, at the earliest opportunity, the Government will bring forward a social care Green Paper, and it will be open to all across this House to be able to contribute to the consideration of that.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Does the Prime Minister share the growing sense of alarm both in Hong Kong and internationally at the potentially destructive effects of the new extradition law on civil liberties in Hong Kong? Does she further agree that we in the United Kingdom have a special obligation to Hong Kong and should never be fearful about speaking up for freedom and values on that island?

The Prime Minister: This is an important issue. We are concerned about the potential effects of these proposals—particularly, obviously, given the large number of British citizens in Hong Kong. It is vital that the extradition arrangements in Hong Kong are in line with the rights and freedoms that were set down in the Sino-British joint declaration. We have been unequivocal in our views. We have been very clear, from the outset, in engaging with the Hong Kong Government and with the members of the Hong Kong Legislative Council and Executive Council—at all levels—about our view

on this issue. As I say, it is vital that those extradition arrangements are in line with the rights and freedoms that were set down in the Sino-British joint declaration.

Q4. [911281] Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): The Prime Minister has always said that she believes in fairness, so can I ask her: would it be fair to have a taxation policy that massively benefits the top and richest 10% in our country by introducing tax cuts for them? Does she think that is fair?

The Prime Minister: What I think is fair is what this Government are doing: under this Government, we have seen the top 1% paying more in income tax than they ever did under a Labour Government. What is more, we have been delivering tax cuts, with over 3 million people taken out of paying income tax altogether and over 30 million people with a tax cut. That is what is fair: more money in people's pockets. That is what we, as Conservatives, have done for people.

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): The Prime Minister will remember that, just two months ago, I raised the case of Nicola Morgan-Dingley. Nicola was 36, a marathon runner and a fit and healthy woman when she was diagnosed with triple negative breast cancer. Just two weeks ago, she came to see the Health Secretary to talk about what more could be done to help women suffering from breast cancer. Sadly, on Sunday, Nicola lost her battle. Charities such as Breast Cancer Now are demanding that women in families with a history of breast cancer should have access to testing earlier. Will the Prime Minister leave a real legacy by ensuring that those women have the opportunity to beat cancer by accessing testing earlier?

The Prime Minister: May I first extend my deepest condolences to Nicola's family and friends? The news that my hon. Friend brings to the House is terrible. I am sorry that this has happened, particularly so shortly after Nicola was able to speak with the Health Secretary. I will look at this issue with him. One of the benefits of the 10-year plan that we are putting in place and the cash boost we are giving to the national health service is the ability to put more emphasis on early diagnosis, which is so important. We will certainly want to look at that element.

Q5. [911282] Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's commitment to net zero, but it does not go far or fast enough. It must include aviation and shipping, and it must not shift our problem to developing nations through offsetting. When will we see the urgent and radical steps needed to address this climate emergency?

The Prime Minister: We are taking what will be seen by many as a radical, key step in dealing with this issue. We have been making good progress as a Government over the years. It is important that we give this commitment. We are about 2% of the problem across the world, so it is important that others follow our lead. That is what we will be working to see.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): There can be little doubt that this Prime Minister knows what a feminist looks like and I would like to thank her for all she has done to progress equality. Does she agree that there is still a long way to go?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. I agree that there is still a long way to go. That is why we continue to take action. That is why my right hon. Friend the Minister for Women and Equalities continues to look at what more the Government can do to help women in the workplace with their responsibilities, to ensure that women are able to take their full place in our society and that as a country we are able to benefit from the enormous talents that lie in our female population.

Q6. [911283] Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister knows that I have tracked her impressive career for 22 years, from the June day when I heard her maiden speech. With her integrity, her experience and her moral compass, will she change her mind about cutting and running? This parliamentary democracy is in crisis. Why can she not stay here and even come on the Back Benches and give some of the people who will take over from her a bit of the medicine that they have given her?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman refers to my staying here. I will indeed be staying in the Chamber of the House of Commons, because I will continue as the Member of Parliament for my constituency. I am a woman of my word. I gave my party my word as to what I would do, and I stand by that. He says that he does not want us to be in this position. I am tempted to say that we would not be in this position if he had voted for the deal.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): In the light of yesterday's Charity Commission report and today's report by the Oxfam independent commission, does the Prime Minister agree that there is a role for the Government and other major donors in ensuring and enabling a strong, ethical structure for the whole aid sector, with good governance, so that as well as doing good, these important bodies do no harm?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and learned Friend has raised a very important issue. The former International Development Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), took action immediately when concerns about the actions of non-governmental organisations first became public, and she and the UK have led the way. I know that the current International Development Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), is looking very closely at the report and at what further action we can take. The action that we as the UK have taken is not just about our interaction with NGOs; we have brought the international community together to look at that issue and we will continue to lead.

Q7. [911284] Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): On 16 May last year, the Prime Minister said that she expected a "speedy resolution" to the row between Vertex and NHS England over the cystic fibrosis treatment Orkambi. The Prime Minister is aware of my seven-year-old constituent Oliver Ward, who wrote to her recently. In his letter he pleaded with the Prime Minister:

"Why am I still waiting? I need these medicines....before I get too sick."

Will the Prime Minister please meet him and his mother Emma to discuss what she can do personally to end this burning injustice, so that Olly and other CF sufferers can live long and healthy lives?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has indeed raised this issue with me previously. My thoughts and those, I am sure, of the whole House are with Oliver and his mum, Emma. I understand that my right hon. Friend the Health and Social Care Secretary has in fact this morning written to the hon. Gentleman about the issue. Obviously, we have the process whereby NHS England looks at these issues. I understand that NHS England has made a revised and improved offer to Vertex Pharmaceuticals. Vertex should have heard the concerns and very real case studies that have been raised by Members in this House. I believe that Vertex should now accept the offer that NHS England has put on the table, so that this drug does become available to Oliver and others.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): Until recently, the probate registry has provided an excellent service, but that is no longer the case. There are extensive delays due to proposed rationalisation, the introduction of new technology and the prospect of increased probate fees. This poor service is causing difficulties to practitioners and distress to families due to the loss of house sales. Will the Prime Minister do everything she can to ensure that the service improves rapidly, and can she confirm that the proposed probate fee increases will now be withdrawn?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the situation described by my hon. Friend and the delays it must be causing for many people dealing with these issues. I will ensure that the relevant Minister looks very carefully at the issue and responds to him.

Q8. [911285] Sir David Crausby (Bolton North East) (Lab): The people of Bolton have suffered years and years of a dreadful train service, made worse by Northern rail and not helped by the Department for Transport. In some respects it is sad to see the Prime Minister stepping down, but as she is going, could she please take the Secretary of State for Transport with her and devolve the running of northern trains to the north?

The Prime Minister: We have been clear—I have said it and the Secretary of State has said it—that performance in the north is and has been unacceptable following the timetable changes on 18 May last year. Passengers in the north deserve better, which is why are working closely with a variety of organisations, including Network Rail, Northern, TransPennine Express and Transport for the North, to improve services and punctuality. We have also appointed an industry expert, Richard George, to look at the issue, review the performance and make recommendations to improve reliability. That should drive improvements, but we will not hesitate to take the action necessary.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): When I meet constituents over 75 years old, I see a lifetime of contribution to our economy, society and Great Britain. Can the Prime Minister do anything at all to reverse the decision to take away their free TV licence?

The Prime Minister: I believe that the BBC got a good deal in 2015. Indeed:

“The Government’s decision here to put the cost of the over-75s on us has been more than matched by the deal coming back for the BBC.”

Those are not my words, but the words of the director general of the BBC after the deal in 2015. I think that taxpayers now expect the BBC to do the right thing.

Q10. [911287] **Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): In February 2018, a homeless man tragically died outside Parliament. Ten months later, another homeless man died in exactly the same place. Will the Prime Minister deal with that terrible Dickensian situation and, in the dying days of her premiership, address the “burning injustice” of homelessness, whereby we have to step over bodies to enter Parliament?

The Prime Minister: Of course we are all concerned about homelessness and rough sleeping, and when we hear and see the stories that the hon. Lady cited. The latest figures on rough sleeping show that the number of people sleeping on our streets is down for the first time in eight years. That is because action has been taken. It is a step in the right direction, but of course we need to do much more. That is why we have set up the new strategy to end rough sleeping altogether, which is backed by an initial £100 million. We are determined to make sleeping on the streets a thing of the past.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, for the families who have worked hard all their lives to own their own home, like many people in Stoke-on-Trent South, we must resist Labour’s attempts to threaten their livelihoods with a pernicious land tax?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree. Sadly, that is an idea that the Labour party has brought forward in the past. We rejected it wholeheartedly then and we must continue to reject it. As my hon. Friend said, many people in his constituency and others have worked hard to achieve that dream of owning their own home, and we should support them.

Q12. [911289] **Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Many people who responsibly recycle plastic are unaware that supposedly recycled materials are shipped to the developing world, where they are stockpiled or burned. The Prime Minister has talked tough on climate change. Will she now leave a true legacy as an environmental champion and follow Canada’s lead in banning single-use plastic?

The Prime Minister: Actually this Government have taken a lead on single-use plastics. We have been taking action on plastics and I am pleased to say that we are also encouraging other countries around the world. Our alliance with a number of countries in the Commonwealth on this issue is also seeing action being taken. We are particularly concerned for small island states in relation to marine plastic. We will continue the fight against single-use plastic, but this Government have a record to be proud of.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Our national health service is brilliant because of the people who work in it. The new people plan recognises

that and the importance of investing in training staff and truly valuing them, from the top to the bottom of the NHS. Will my right hon. Friend do all she can to ensure that that is put into practice so that our constituents get the healthcare that they need and want?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to recognise the fact that our NHS depends on the excellent people working within it. I would like to thank all the staff across the NHS for all they do day in, day out. The people plan is a very important opportunity to take action now and in the long-term to meet challenges of supply, reform, culture and leadership and to make the NHS a better place to work. The interim plan sets out several practical steps that the NHS will now take to increase the supply of clinical staff, and the final people plan will be published after the spending review. This is a very important element of the 10-year plan for the NHS and I wholeheartedly support the efforts to improve the NHS as a place to work for its staff.

Q13. [911290] **Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): When researchers recently screened all the women prisoners at Drake Hall prison in Staffordshire for brain injuries, they found that nearly two thirds had a serious brain injury before they committed their first offence and that, of those injuries, two thirds were the result of domestic violence. There is a real danger that we are criminalising the victims of domestic abuse. The Domestic Abuse Bill is going through pre-legislative scrutiny at the moment. Would not it be a good idea to change it by adding a clause to provide that all female prisoners will be screened for brain injury, and that all female prisoners who have had a brain injury will have proper neurorehabilitation, so that we can rescue their future and prevent crime? If the Prime Minister has some spare time, will she co-sign that amendment with me, perhaps as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on acquired brain injury?

The Prime Minister: We take the issue of prisoners’ brain injury very seriously and, indeed, action is being taken by the Ministry of Justice to look very carefully into the issue. Obviously, I look forward to the debate that will take place—[*Interruption.*] Well, I have had many invitations across the Chamber in the past. I have never quite had this invitation from the hon. Gentleman and I have to say, I think I will approach the invitation to work with him with caution given some of the arguments that we have had in the past, but I welcome the fact that I will be able to—or expect to be able to—contribute to the debate on that Bill when it goes through this House. It is a very important piece of legislation, which I want to see genuinely transforming what we can do to deal with domestic violence.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I recognise that cancer survival rates are at their highest in this country, but it remains an inconvenient truth that we are failing to close the gap with international averages. The last Government estimate suggested that 10,000 lives are being needlessly lost because we are failing to close that gap. I know that my right hon. Friend recognises the importance of early diagnosis, but when she has the discussions with her Health Secretary, will she look at a key recommendation from the all-party group on cancer, and many others in the sector, to put

the key one-year outcome indicator into the heart of our cancer strategy? The only way that we can improve our one-year figures is to diagnose earlier.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has been campaigning long and hard on that issue and I congratulate him on the passion with which he has done so. As I said earlier, it is right that, in the 10-year plan for the NHS, early diagnosis is one of the elements and, particularly on certain aspects of cancer, they are looking very carefully at what can be done to ensure early diagnosis, so I am sure they will look at my hon. Friend's proposal.

Q14. [911291] **Ian Austin** (Dudley North) (Ind): We have ambitious plans for Dudley, with the new technical skills centre to provide technical apprenticeships and university-level skills in industries such as advanced manufacturing, digital technologies, low-carbon industries and autonomous electric vehicles. Before the Prime Minister leaves office, will she accelerate the stronger towns fund and enable us to bring new investment, new industries and good, new, well-paid jobs to the Black Country?

The Prime Minister: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman will get an opportunity to ask me another question at PMQs over the coming weeks, but I take this opportunity to recognise the significant work that he has done with the Holocaust Educational Trust. As we recognise that this would have been the 90th birthday of Anne Frank, it is very important that we recognise the work that is done by that trust, and his contribution to it.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of the stronger towns fund and he is absolutely right. We have a notional allocation of £212 million for the west midlands. I understand that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government met him to discuss the design of the fund when he made a recent visit to Dudley. We intend to publish a policy prospectus on the stronger towns fund before the summer recess, but it is there exactly so that places such as Dudley can harness their unique strengths and grow and prosper.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend found time today to look at the ombudsman's report on mental health services in my region, with its worrying criticisms of leadership failures? And I have now been involved in 10 leadership parliamentary elections, so will she reflect on the fact that I will be supporting my colleague who respects the referendum result, makes Southend-on-Sea a city and continues to prioritise mental health services?

The Prime Minister: Ten leadership elections and never a candidate! My hon. Friend has missed his opportunity again. I am sure that all the candidates have heard the point that he made.

I have not had a chance to look at the ombudsman's report. I am concerned—we have seen over the years a number of parts of the NHS where the mental health services have not been delivering what they should be delivering for individuals. It is important, as we have put mental health as a central part of what we want to see developing and improving in the health service, that we look at not only the money that is being put in, but how, at local level, trusts are operating and delivering services.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman might not have been a candidate so far, but he is scarcely at the midpoint of his parliamentary career, and we know not what awaits us, or him, in the future.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): On the climate emergency, the Prime Minister will know that I want her to go further and faster, but I congratulate her on facing down the Chancellor by legislating for net zero by 2050. However, if she wants a positive climate legacy, we need deeds, not just words, so there are three things that she could do in the six weeks she has left. Will she cancel the expansion of Heathrow airport? Will she divert the money for more road building into public transport? And will she scrap fracking once and for all? That is the way that she would show us she is serious: will she do it?

The Prime Minister: I said a few weeks ago that I hoped the day would come when the hon. Lady would welcome action that the Government were taking on climate change and I thank her for her comments on what we have announced today. This decision was taken across the Government and it is supported across the Government. It is an important decision for the future. She says we need action, not just words. She will have noticed that we have not just said that we are going to have this net zero target—we are actually introducing legislation to put that in place. That is action, not just words.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We come now to the statement from the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, Dr Greg Clark. If the right hon. Gentleman wishes to await a quieter and more appropriately respectful audience, I am happy to play ball with a little bit of judicious delay—[*Interruption.*] And filibustering, as the Chancellor observes, helpfully and I think good-naturedly from a sedentary position.

Net Zero Emissions Target

12.55 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): I am very grateful, Mr Speaker, for your permission to give this statement on the proposed legislation I have tabled today to end our country's contribution to global warming. There are many issues in this House on which we passionately disagree, but there are moments when we can act together to take the long-term decisions that will shape the future of the world that we leave to our children and grandchildren.

Just over a decade ago, I was the shadow Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change when the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) secured Royal Assent for the landmark Climate Change Act 2008. I was proud, on behalf of my party, to speak in support of the first law of its kind in the world, setting a legally binding target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 80% by 2050 relative to 1990 levels. Today, I am proud to stand on the Government side of the House to propose an amendment to that Act that will enable this Parliament to make its own historic commitment to tackling climate change—a commitment that has been made possible by many years of hard work from Members across this House of Commons on both sides, and beyond. I thank in particular Lord Deben for his leadership as chair of the independent Committee on Climate Change, as well as its members and staff, and the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) and my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) for their recent Bills that paved the way for today's proposed legislation. I also pay tribute to the extraordinary work of my friend and ministerial colleague, the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth.

Today, we can make the United Kingdom the first major economy in the world to commit to ending our contribution to global warming forever. The United Kingdom was the home of the first industrial revolution. Furnaces and mills nestled in English dales, coal mines in the Welsh valleys and shipyards on the Clyde and in Belfast harbour powered the world into the first industrial age. We now stand on the threshold of a new, fourth industrial revolution—one not powered by fossil fuels, but driven by green growth and clean, renewable technologies. Once again, the United Kingdom and all its parts stand ready to lead the way. It is right that economies such as ours, which made use of carbon-intensive technologies to start the first industrial revolution, now blaze a trail in the fourth industrial revolution. Whether it is through our global offshore wind industry, our leadership on green finance, or our unrivalled research base that is leading the charge on electric vehicles, we are showing the economic benefits of how cutting emissions can help to grow our economy.

Through our industrial strategy, the UK is already forging that future, leading the way in the development, manufacture and use of low-carbon technologies. By responding to the grand challenges we have set, including on the future of mobility and clean growth, we are already creating thousands of new jobs right across the country. We are showing that there is no false choice between protecting our planet and improving our prosperity: we can and must do both.

Indeed, low-carbon technology and clean energy already contribute more than £44 billion to our economy every year. In 2017, energy-related carbon dioxide emissions in the UK reached their lowest levels since 1888. Last year, we secured more than half of our electricity from low-carbon sources. Just last month, we set a new record for the number of days we have gone without burning any coal since the world's first public coal power station opened in London in 1882.

We have said that we will completely phase out unabated coal-fired power generation by 2025, ending the harmful impacts to our health and environment for good. Together with Canada, we have launched the Powering Past Coal Alliance, which has now seen 80 national and local governments, businesses and non-governmental organisations join together in a pioneering commitment to phase out unabated coal.

However, if our actions are to be equal to the scale of the threat, nations across the world must strive to go further still, and we in the United Kingdom must continue to fulfil our responsibility to lead the way. That is why, in October, following the latest evidence from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the Government wrote to the independent Committee on Climate Change to seek its advice on our long-term emissions targets. Just last month, it issued its response, recommending that we legislate for the UK to reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, taking into account our emissions from international air travel and shipping. So I am today laying a statutory instrument—in fact, it is already before the House—that will amend the Climate Change Act 2008 with a new, legally binding net zero emissions target by 2050.

Ending our contribution to climate change can be the defining decision of our generation in fulfilling our responsibility to the next, but it will require the effort of a generation to deliver it. I am grateful to all those business leaders, faith leaders, scientists and climate campaigners who have written to the Prime Minister, me and many Members in this House to express support for this landmark proposal. It will require Governments and political parties of all colours to work with all sectors of business and society. We must fully engage young people, too, which is why a new youth steering group, led by the British Youth Council, will be set up to advise the Government—for the first time giving young people directly the chance to shape our future climate policy.

The assessment of the independent Committee on Climate Change is based on the latest climate science. It drives our ability to take action on the international stage, and it considers current consumer trends and developments in technology. The committee has concluded that a net zero 2050 target is feasible and deliverable, and can be met within the exact same cost envelope of 1% to 2% of GDP in 2050 as the 80% target when that was set, such has been the power of innovation in reducing costs.

It is, however, absolutely right that we should look carefully at how such costs are distributed in the longer term, as Professor Dieter Helm recommended in his report to the Government. The Government are also today accepting the recommendation of the Committee on Climate Change that the Treasury lead a review into the costs of decarbonisation. This will consider how to

achieve the transition to net zero in a way that works for households, businesses and the public finances. It will also consider the implications for UK competitiveness.

In fulfilling the scale of the commitment we are making today, we will need technological and logistical changes in the way we use our land, with more emphasis, for example, on carbon sequestration. We will need to redouble our determination to seize the opportunity to support investment in a range of new technologies, including in areas such as carbon capture, usage and storage, and in hydrogen and bioenergy.

However, as the committee also found, the foundations for these step changes are already in place, including in the industrial strategy and the clean growth strategy. Indeed, there is no reason whatever to fear that fulfilling this commitment will do anything to limit our success in the years ahead—quite the reverse. In our industrial strategy, we have backed technology and innovation, including the UK's biggest ever increase in public investment in research and development.

The International Energy Agency's report on the UK, published last week, found:

"The United Kingdom has shown real results in terms of boosting investment in renewables, reducing emissions and maintaining energy security".

By doubling down on innovation in this way, we can expect to reap the benefits as we move forward to meeting this target by 2050.

I believe that by leading the world and harnessing the power of innovative new technologies we can seize the full economic potential of building a competitive, climate-neutral economy, but we do not intend for a moment for this to be simply a unilateral action. If we are to meet the challenge of climate change, we need international partners across the world to step up to this level of ambition. While we retain the ability in the Act to use international carbon credits that contribute to actions in other countries, we want them to take their own actions and we do not intend to use those credits.

We will continue to drive this, including through our bid to host the COP 26 conference. As the IEA report found last week, the UK's efforts are

"an inspiration for many countries who seek to design effective decarbonisation frameworks."

Just as we have reviewed the 2008 Act in making this amendment today, so we will use the review mechanism contained in the Act, within five years, to confirm that other countries are taking similarly ambitious action, multiplying the effect of the UK's lead and ensuring that our industries do not face unfair competition.

Finally, I do not believe that this commitment will negatively affect our day-to-day lives. No G20 country has decarbonised its economy as quickly as we have. Today, the UK is cleaner and greener, but no-one can credibly suggest that our lives are worse as a result—quite the reverse. We are richer, in every sense of the word, for being cleaner, for wasting less and for cherishing, not squandering, our common inheritance.

We may account for less than 1% of the world's population and for about 1% of global carbon emissions, but by making this commitment today we can lead by example. We can be the ambitious global Britain we all want our country to be. We can seize this once-in-a-generation opportunity to tackle one of the greatest threats to humanity, and we can make this a defining,

unifying commitment of this otherwise riven and often irresolute Parliament—one that is agreed by all, honoured by all and fulfilled by all.

In the first industrial revolution, we applied the powers of science and innovation to create products and services in which this country came to excel, but which came at a cost to our environment. In this new industrial revolution, we can innovate and lead all over again, creating new markets and earning our way in the world in the decades ahead, but in a way that protects our planet for every generation that follows ours. When history is written, this Parliament can be remembered not only for the times that it disagreed, but for the moment when it forged this most significant agreement of all. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: It is very good indeed to see the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth, the right hon. Member for Devizes (Claire Perry), in her place in the Chamber, and we welcome her here.

1.8 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I echo his thanks, not least to the Committee on Climate Change, and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) and the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk). I, too, would like to welcome the right hon. Member for Devizes (Claire Perry) back to her place.

I begin by welcoming the statement. The Chancellor of the Exchequer was just wrong, in my view, recently to exaggerate the costs of achieving net zero, and it is good to see the Government listening instead to the experts at the Committee on Climate Change. The Labour party committed to a target of net zero emissions before 2050 at its 2018 conference, and it is welcome to see the Government move in a similar direction.

Now that the Government are prepared to legislate their duty, it is now imperative that they urgently take the strategic decisions necessary. Sadly, at last week's Prime Minister's questions, the Minister for the Cabinet Office, referring to the UK's carbon budgets, said:

"We are not off track"—[*Official Report*, 5 June 2019; Vol. 661, c. 136]—

in meeting those targets at all. It is, however, a matter of fact, confirmed by the Committee on Climate Change and official BEIS statistics, that the UK is off track to meet its fourth and fifth carbon budgets. It would be helpful if the Secretary of State took this opportunity to correct the record, and to tell the House—if the Government are off track to meet their existing carbon budgets—what immediate strategic decisions he will make to ensure that the public can have confidence in the Government's ability to meet even more stringent targets. That confidence can certainly be restored, but the Secretary of State must recognise that urgent commitments to investment and new legislation will be needed

Today's statement is a welcome first step, but the Secretary of State has already recognised the scale of the task that lies ahead. Since 2015, when the Conservative Government secured a majority, they have systematically dismantled the policy frameworks that were designed to

[Rebecca Long Bailey]

tackle climate change. They have effectively banned onshore wind, reduced almost all support for solar power, scrapped the zero carbon homes standard, sold off the UK Green Investment Bank, removed support for tidal power, and relentlessly pushed fracking—fracking, of all things! Moreover, there has been a 98% fall in home insulation measures since 2010.

At this point the Secretary of State will mention offshore wind, so let us be clear about that. The Government have committed themselves to bringing 30 GW of offshore wind on stream by 2030—well done!—but that is significantly less than the 50 GW that the Labour party has pledged, and dramatically less than the 75 GW that the Committee on Climate Change says we could need by 2050. Greenpeace has described the slow pace at which the Government have made contracts for difference available as “bewildering”, and analysis by Green Alliance has found that the Government are pushing the sector into a boom-and-bust cycle.

I could go on—these policy decisions have put the UK back by years—but, as climate change is still reversible, so is the Government’s track record. I am trusting the Secretary of State today to promise the House that, as one of his lasting legacies, he will turn that record around. I welcome his collegiate tone, because there are many—not least the Committee on Climate Change, the Labour party, other Members of Parliament, numerous industry groups, and energy and climate organisations—who have the ground-breaking ideas that are necessary. The Secretary of State need only reach out to those who are desperate to help him.

Achieving net zero before 2050 is necessary and affordable, and there is no need to rely on international offsets, which—let us be honest—does look like cheating. At this point, may I ask the Secretary of State whether aviation and shipping are excluded from the net zero targets, and if so, why? To achieve net zero, however, we will need huge levels of investment. We will need co-ordinated planning and new laws, and, as with any emergency, we will need significant Government intervention. I do not believe that that is ideological, or even party-political; it is just common sense, and that is why it is at the heart of Labour’s plans for ushering in a green industrial revolution.

I welcome today’s announcement, but I must ask the Secretary of State when he will start to act in accordance with it.

Greg Clark: I thank the hon. Lady for her welcome. It contained some caveats, but it was there nevertheless, and I am grateful for it.

I think that the hon. Lady should take this opportunity to reinforce the joint determination—which is noted around the world—of parties in this House of Commons to commit themselves to leading the world. We have delivered on that. I do not know whether the hon. Lady has seen this week’s report from the International Energy Agency, but it is something of which she, and all of us, should be proud. The IEA—the world’s foremost body in commenting dispassionately on energy matters—says in its report:

“The United Kingdom has led the way in the transition to a low-carbon economy by taking ambitious climate action at international and national levels.”

That is its headline conclusion. As I said in my statement, it has also commented that the Government’s efforts—and I think we can include the efforts of successive Governments—are

“an inspiration for many countries who seek to design effective decarbonisation frameworks.”

This is a moment at which, for all the fractiousness of current debates, I think the House can be proud of the decisions that have been made.

The hon. Lady asked about carbon budgets, which were established by the Climate Change Act. As she will know, for the two carbon budgets that have been met—most recently in 2017—we have achieved surpluses of 1.2% in the first and 4.7% in the second, and we are on track for a surplus of 3.6% in the current one, which will end in 2022. As for the carbon budgets that follow, which run until 2032, at this stage—and we are talking about 15 years or more from now—we are already 90% of the way there.

An important feature of the report from the Committee on Climate Change is its recognition of the astonishing returns from investment in innovation. When the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) and I were debating the Climate Change Bill across the Dispatch Boxes—the right hon. Gentleman will remember this—the Opposition came close to defeating the then Government on the question of imposing an emissions performance standard on new coal-fired power stations: we were defeated by just a few votes. The need for such a performance standard is now cast into history, because we have no new coal-fired power stations and we are closing the existing ones. Such is the pace of change. So I am absolutely confident that we will meet the ambition that we have set today.

The hon. Lady mentioned solar power. The Committee on Climate Change has commended the action we have taken through the feed-in tariffs. They were always intended to kick-start the solar industry. The scheme cost £1.2 billion a year, and £30 billion has been spent on supporting the industry. It has been successful, as intended, in bringing prices down. Just as in every other advanced economy, as intended from the outset, it has now closed, but has been replaced by an export guarantee that allows those supplying surplus energy in the market to be paid for it.

Proposals of that kind have been endorsed by commentators around the world. In choosing to make this big increase in research and development, we can be confident that we can maintain and fulfil our ambition not only for the environment, but for the job creation in every part of the country that comes with a consistent and determined act of leadership. I am grateful for the support of the Opposition in that regard.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Today’s announcement has been broadly welcomed—by, among others, the Confederation of British Industry—but our energy-intensive industries such as steel, ceramics and cement are currently paying a higher price for energy than is paid in comparable countries. What reassurance can the Secretary of State give such industries that other industrial economies will follow our lead and that the measures that will have to be introduced if we are to meet the zero target by 2050 will not place those industries at a competitive disadvantage?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. One of our requirements, which has been recognised by the Committee on Climate Change, is our need to invest in the energy-intensive industries in particular, to improve their energy efficiency so that they can compete effectively and also to enable us to capture, store and, in some cases, use the carbon they generate. The commitment to carbon capture, use and storage is one of the steps we must take to meet those ambitions.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I also welcome the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth, the right hon. Member for Devizes (Claire Perry), back to the Chamber—although she is no longer present—and echo others in thanking the Committee on Climate Change for its work.

We welcome the statement. It is important that we all work together to address this challenge. We especially welcome the intention to follow the Scottish Government by including aviation and shipping in the targets, but why not have the ambition to match the Scottish Government's emissions plan? In Scotland, the target date for zero net emissions is 2045 rather than 2050, and the carbon-neutral target date is 2040. So let us see if we can step up that ambition.

Even before the actions contained in Scotland's climate change plan, actual emissions were down 3.3% between 2016 and 2017 and down to nearly half of the emissions levels of 1990. The Secretary of State's Government must be more ambitious. The Committee on Climate Change said that this is "feasible and deliverable", as was mentioned in the Secretary of State's statement. Will he also accept the committee's recommendation which agrees with the CBI on the National Infrastructure Commission's call that in the 2020s we really need to push ahead with renewables to meet the 2050 target?

The Secretary of State said that he is taking these actions to

"tackle one of the greatest threats to humanity",

yet the Committee on Climate Change, the National Infrastructure Commission and the CBI all say that investment in onshore wind and solar has stalled for political reasons. The CBI has said we should take the politics off the table for onshore wind, so will the Secretary of State drop the Tory ideological opposition to onshore wind?

Finally, there is another choice other than nuclear: carbon capture and storage utilisation. St Fergus near Aberdeen could be operational quickly, by 2023 with the right investment and commitment. At minimum it could capture 5.7 gigatons, equivalent to 150 years-worth of all of Scotland's 2016 gas emissions, so will the Secretary of State reverse the betrayal over Peterhead and that carbon capture programme being withdrawn and commit to investing in St Fergus, to deliver these benefits, not only for Scotland but for the UK and the rest of the planet?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He seemed to be welcoming the committee's report but criticising the Government for not agreeing with its recommendation to set a date of 2045 for Scotland and 2050 for the United Kingdom. That was its clear advice and we are following it. There were particular reasons,

such as the greater potential for afforestation in Scotland, why it regarded a 2045 target as appropriate. I hope the hon. Gentleman will not take it amiss when I agree with the first part of what he said—that we should follow the committee's advice—rather than the second part, which is that we should then disagree with it.

On the points about carbon capture and storage, part of the opportunity and requirement for net zero is that it is possible to take carbon out of the atmosphere, especially from industrial processes, and of course Scotland and its industrial clusters will have an important part to play in that.

The hon. Gentleman mentions the National Infrastructure Commission, and again I welcome his respect for its expert analysis. We support what it says about increasing renewables. I hope that in the same spirit he will support its recommendation that we should have more new nuclear power—something he opposed. I do not want to be excessively partisan on an issue that I know from my discussions with the Scottish Government is a common commitment that we make to maintain and increase our ambition and at the same time create jobs in every part of the UK including Scotland.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Yesterday, I was in Washington, where I was reminded that this is a fiercely partisan issue there that divides politics, perhaps more than any other. It is something to rejoice in that here there is a very bipartisan view on it. I am very proud that this Government have taken this decision today. They have listened to the scientific evidence and are acting on it, but does my right hon. Friend agree that this is the easy part? We have to carry our population with us as we decarbonise our economy further, change the way we travel, farm and move around, and be a beacon for other countries to do the same.

Greg Clark: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend and pay tribute to him for his leadership both as a Member of this House and a Minister in DEFRA in pursuing this at a national and international level. He is absolutely right that we need to change the way we do things, but the prospects of leaning into technology mean that we can do that in a way that does not make our lives more miserable or more constrained. No one could look back on the last 20 or 30 years and think that, having achieved what we have in terms of emissions reductions, we have done so at the expense of our quality of life. That is the guiding philosophy we should take: we should harness technology to make sure our lives can be better and greener and cleaner in the future.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Secretary of State's announcement and join those who have paid tribute to the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth, because this idea had been lying around for a couple of years in the long grass of government and it was she who took it out of that long grass and helped make it happen. I also welcome the five-year review mechanism because we might well need to bring forward the net zero date from 2050; that might not be the original intention of the review mechanism but it may be necessary. May I however ask the Secretary of State to recognise that in its advice the Climate Change Committee said very specifically that as well as setting the target itself, the Government must put in

[*Edward Miliband*]

place the policies to meet the target? That means, as it said, a 2030, not 2040, cut-off date for new petrol and diesel vehicles; a proper decarbonisation plan for our 27 million homes, which we do not have; and an end to the moratorium on onshore wind—a moratorium I believe is now economically illiterate as it is now our cheapest fuel available? Can the Secretary of State assure us that henceforth there will be leadership not just on targets but on action?

Greg Clark: I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman for his own leadership in this. I think he will recognise that we are not credited simply with leadership in terms of legislation and targets but with achievement. Of the major industrialised countries we are the world leader in decarbonising our economy at the same time as growing that economy. We should be proud of that.

The right hon. Gentleman is quite right: the inclusion of the review mechanism in the Climate Change Act was a prescient one because it has allowed me to write to the committee, which has resulted in the report to which we are responding today. I think five years is a good period in which to see how we and others are doing against that target and whether the pace of implementation is what is required.

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that policies to support that will be required. The essence of good policy is that it should not have unintended consequences. In terms of the automotive sector for example, I and Opposition Members know that car companies need to be able to generate the returns to make the capital investment to install the new capital equipment that is needed to make electric powertrains, for instance, so getting that pace right so that they can have the returns to be able to reinvest is crucial; otherwise, there could be unintended consequences. The right hon. Gentleman talked about homes and wind, and of course all these things make contributions to meeting that target. The action from now on, including in the energy White Paper, is to set out the policy framework that supports our ambitions.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I warmly welcome the Minister's statement today and his beautifully articulated ambition for the UK. Cornish engineers, scientists and miners were at the forefront of the first industrial revolution, and the Cornwall and Isles of Scilly local enterprise partnership clean growth strategy shows that we want to play a pivotal role in this fourth industrial revolution. Will my right hon. Friend congratulate a team from Cornwall that yesterday won money from the Faraday challenge? Cornish Lithium and Wardell Armstrong came together to make sure we can set a path for extracting lithium from Cornish mines and create a supply chain here in the UK for the batteries we will need to power up this fourth industrial revolution.

Greg Clark: I agree with my hon. Friend and I am grateful for her warm words. She is absolutely right to point out some of the possibilities for Cornwall, including the sources of lithium that will be in demand as we decarbonise and electrify cars and other forms of transportation. There are great opportunities for Cornwall and I know that companies there will be creating new jobs on the back of that prospect.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): May I start by welcoming the statement and the commitment that the Secretary of State and the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth have given to this? May I also say how proud I am to be a Member of a Parliament that continues to lead the way globally in tackling climate change? I am pleasantly surprised that the Bill I presented to Parliament yesterday has been adopted so quickly by the Government. However, I would say to the Secretary of State that if we are going to will the ends, we also need to will the means, and I urge him to go back to the reports from the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and look again at bringing forward the target date for phasing out petrol and diesel vehicles, getting on with the demonstration projects for carbon capture and storage, improving the energy efficiency of our homes by genuinely ensuring that all new homes are zero carbon, and asking more from our house builders. If we do that, we have a chance of meeting the targets that we are now signing up to.

Greg Clark: The hon. Lady is a very influential member of this House, and when she publishes a Bill, the Government respond with alacrity. I will draw on the expertise of colleagues on her Select Committee, who have participated in the preparatory work that is needed to review the policy framework to support our ambition, and I dare say that her Committee will hold me and the ministerial team to account in terms of our implementation of the work that is needed.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): Today is a fantastic day, and this commitment will be warmly welcomed by my constituents in Winchester and, I hope, by the young people watching in the Gallery who have picked a good time to come in. May I ask my excellent right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, who has spoken so passionately on this, what role he sees local authorities playing in this new zero ambition and what targets we as a Parliament might set them so that they can match their words with action—not on everything, but on things like retrofitting existing housing stock and protecting the natural environment from developers? What targets can we set them?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend answers his own question in giving me some examples. It is important to acknowledge that each place has different challenges and different opportunities. My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) talked about the potential for the exploitation of lithium in Cornwall, for example. Every part of the country will have its role to play. One of the areas in which local authorities have a signal role to play is charging for electric vehicles. If people have the confidence to accelerate the take-up of electric vehicles, that will make a big contribution to decarbonising the economy.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I, too, welcome this announcement. This is a significant day on the journey that our country must make towards a zero carbon future, although we recognise that some of the steps we have yet to take will be a little more challenging than the ones we have already taken. May I pick up the point that the Secretary of State just referred to? Part of the green revolution will have to be built on electric vehicles, not least because a third of our remaining

emissions come from transport. We are seeing new electric cars being developed and the range extending, but having talked about responsibility of local authorities, will he explain who is going to pay for the charging infrastructure, particularly in residential areas, as this will be essential if consumers are to have the confidence to buy the cars, which will lead the manufacturers to make more of them?

Greg Clark: The right hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. This is a shared responsibility, and part of the funding that we have made available—more will be needed—is to ensure that both the private and public sectors contribute to establishing a network that is not only available but dependable and also rapid in its ability to charge. That network needs to cover every part of the country—cities as well as rural areas.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The Secretary of State will recall the green deal. Will he ensure, now we have a new target, that we have a commensurately robust plan to incentivise households?

Greg Clark: I do recall the green deal, and it is fair to reflect that as we take decisions and adopt policies in this area, not every one of them is going to work in the way that is intended. It is an area in which we are innovating, and my view is that we should innovate in technology as well as in policy. I hope that the House will not be too harsh when innovations are attempted that perhaps do not work out in the way that was predicted. However, my right hon. Friend is right to say that we need to give incentives to individuals as well as companies to participate in this roll-out, and through the clean growth strategy and the forthcoming energy White Paper, he will be able to see more of that in the weeks ahead.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I welcome this historic announcement by the Secretary of State and congratulate him and the Minister of State on this achievement. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that any transition must be a just transition for the communities that are experiencing this if we are to avoid the social devastation that we saw in coalfield communities such as mine, where the mines were abruptly closed in the 1980s and 1990s with no plan? Given that there is no accompanying policy to today's announcement, may I suggest that he follow the advice of the Environmental Audit Committee's report, published on Monday, which is to phase out taxpayer subsidies for fossil fuel exports so that we are not exporting carbon dependency into low and middle-income countries while preaching about our own virtues here at home?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. The work of her Committee will be important in scrutinising the policies that are set in place to meet our ambitions. I have not seen the report to which she refers, but it will be my bedtime reading this evening.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I very much welcome this announcement. In two weeks' time, the EYE—eco, young and engaged—project that I founded in 2008 will hold its 11th eco-summit in Worthing, attended by 250 local schoolchildren, to share environmental

best practice. Does my right hon. Friend agree that those who most enthusiastically embrace the need to take urgent action on climate change are our youngest citizens? If so, what more can we do to turbo-charge plans to do more in their schools and to lead by example on becoming more carbon neutral by doing more on renewable energy, energy monitoring, understanding food miles and environmentally friendly school transport plans?

Greg Clark: I am grateful for the support of my hon. Friend, and, as I said in my statement, we have created a particular role for young people to advise on the policy framework in the knowledge that the consequences of climate change will be felt most particularly by the younger generations. There is a further opportunity. If we succeed, as I hope we will, in hosting the conference of the parties next year, that will provide a big opportunity for young people across the world, and especially in this country, to participate in the deliberations on some of the most important decisions that the world will take. I very much hope we will be able to give that opportunity to young people.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Well! There is an embarrassment of riches. The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) is of course a former Secretary of State, and he is a Kingston knight, but just today, I am going to call before him a Norfolk knight, Sir Norman Lamb.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Thank you very much indeed, Mr Speaker. I warmly welcome this statement. It is a significant milestone, but does the Secretary of State agree that we now need to significantly increase the sense of urgency, particularly in decarbonising the heating of buildings and transport? We have no incentive at all to increase energy efficiency in the heating of homes other than for the most vulnerable households; we are still waiting for the consultation on building regulations to deliver zero carbon; and the plug-in grant for vehicles has been cut. This surely is not good enough, and we need to increase that sense of urgency.

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman and I congratulate him on his well-deserved knighthood. I think everyone will recognise the reasons for it—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) will have to wait in line, I fear. The right hon. Gentleman is correct to say that we need to decarbonise all parts of the economy. That means reviewing our policies in every area, and it is important that we should do that. He mentioned the plug-in grant for electric vehicles, and one of the desirable features of policies is that a commitment can be made to kick-start the development of an industry to bring costs down, with the intention of withdrawing that commitment when the market has taken flight. We must not get into a position where we can never propose something without it needing to be there in perpetuity, because that would reduce our overall potential for innovation, which, as he knows from his work as Chair of the Select Committee on Science and Technology, would not be good for the UK or for science and innovation.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Anyone who truly cares about passing on a cleaner, greener, better globe to our children and grandchildren will warmly welcome the content of today's statement and will be glad that the whole House has risen above party-political bickering to do just that. The Secretary of State mentioned the manufacturing of electric cars, so will he congratulate Dyson in my constituency on investing £250 million in research and development at Hullavington in my constituency? Will he seek to try to persuade Dyson to make good use of vacated automotive manufacturing facilities nearby, perhaps by manufacturing vehicles at the Honda site in Swindon?

Greg Clark: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I congratulate and praise Sir James Dyson. He is one of our most brilliant inventors and entrepreneurs, and he makes a big contribution to our country, not only through the people he employs, but in the education training that he gives. I share my hon. Friend's ambition for us to be able to attract Dyson to locate manufacturing facilities in the United Kingdom. We have the research, the brains, the skilled workforce and the facilities. I hope, in time, that we will be able to celebrate further opportunities that Dyson may have in the United Kingdom.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I do welcome this report, but I would welcome it a lot more if the Government had followed all the recommendations of the Committee on Climate Change, not just the ones that do not cause ideological indigestion. In particular, the committee recommended that the emission reduction effort needs to be done here at home, not outsourced to poorer countries. Carbon offsetting basically slows decarbonisation, and it deprives poorer countries of the low-hanging fruit that they need to meet their own reduction targets. Will the Secretary of State therefore review the decision to rely on dodgy loopholes, and will he ensure that the domestic action is all done here at home?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for welcoming the commitment, but she knows that the Climate Change Act 2008 includes the use of credits. The Committee on Climate Change has not recommended that we should repeal that part of the Act, just that we should not aim to make use of them. We support, accept and agree with that recommendation, so we will not be making use of credits.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): The Crawley-headquartered Virgin Atlantic had its first biofuel flight last year, and the Gatwick-based easyJet is now flying the new A320neo, which has a much-reduced carbon output. In moving towards net zero emissions, what support can the Government give to the world-leading UK aviation industry, so that it can play its part in ensuring that we can be an island trading nation while leading the world on environmental protection?

Greg Clark: The aerospace sector deal that was concluded as part of our industrial strategy includes the research and development of electric power for aeroplanes, which positions us at the forefront of the development of that technology. That has the obvious benefits of contributing to the reduction in omissions and creating further success for what my hon. Friend correctly describes as an important and successful industry in this country.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): The UK is making good progress on clean electricity thanks to policies introduced by successive Governments, but we are not yet making the progress we desperately need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from transport. What does the Secretary of State think the key problems and challenges are, and what we are going to do about them?

Greg Clark: If the hon. Lady reflects on the progress that is being made, she will see that the accelerating take-up of electric vehicles makes a major contribution. Through the industrial strategy, we have funded the research and development of new electric powertrains for commercial vehicles—vans, lorries and agricultural vehicles—which will be important. We need to double down on that commitment, but we made the right strategic judgment three years ago when we targeted the future of mobility, including electric vehicles, as being one of the principal contributors not just to tackling climate change, but to creating jobs in the economy.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on this important announcement. As he says, the challenge is now all about implementation. May I therefore encourage him to look closely at the Marine Energy Council's proposals for how to stimulate the production of that side of green energy, which is still the Cinderella of the sector? In addition, may I ask him to work closely with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to reduce the amount of illegal plastic waste currently being exported in a disgraceful way to Malaysia and elsewhere in south-east Asia, which will, if not stopped, damage our strong environmental commitments?

Greg Clark: I agree with my hon. Friend and recognise his long-standing campaigning and his contribution to creating a clean environment. In the quest to pursue the possibilities of new technologies and their research and development, I agree that marine and tidal technologies have an important role to play. Since 2010, we have made available over £90 million in grant funding, and we will continue not only to do that but, working with our universities and businesses, to accelerate the research and development that is taking place in all parts of the United Kingdom.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): In wholeheartedly welcoming this statement, may I ask the Secretary of State to do two things? First, will he reverse the Government's decisions to abolish the zero-carbon homes regulations, to ban onshore wind and to proceed with a third runway at Heathrow? Secondly, will he agree to meet me to discuss how we can decarbonise capitalism, particularly in the City of London? Given that the City funds 15% of global fossil fuel investment, if we can decarbonise the City, that can have a massive impact on the whole world.

Greg Clark: I acknowledge the right hon. Gentleman's experience and contribution to the cross-party efforts that have been made in this area. When it comes to wind, we sometimes have to make some strategic calls, and the decision we took to provide funding and incentives for the development of the offshore wind industry has allowed it to develop to the extent that we are now the

world leader, creating jobs right across the country, so it was right to champion offshore wind. He also mentions the City, and it is important to recognise the contribution and the leadership that the green finance expertise in the City of London offers to the world. The City will be extremely important in financing many of the investments that will be needed in the years ahead.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I note that this statement marks 30 years of global British leadership on this issue, under both parties. Margaret Thatcher was the first P5 leader to devote the entirety of her speech to the United Nations General Assembly to this issue. Turning to the cost estimates, does the 2% envelope include the likely benefits that will come from the technology that will be generated from investment in this area? On the flipside of that, if British leadership fails to take the rest of the world with us, what kind of estimates have been made of the costs of protecting our country from the consequences of climate change?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Mrs Thatcher was the first world leader to declare a climate emergency. I recently reread the speech that she made to the UN, and I would commend it to any Member of this House. Its prescience and rigour are remarkable, and it bears reading again today.

The 1% to 2% cost estimate of the Committee on Climate Change is exactly what the House voted for in 2008. It is a gross figure, not a net figure, and does not include the benefits. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that it also does not include the consequences and costs of a failure to tackle climate change, although the committee's report sets out in great detail some of the negative consequences were we and the rest of the world to fail to act.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I, too, welcome today's statement as an important step forward. I hope the Secretary of State will join me in congratulating Birmingham City Council, which last night declared a climate emergency and a much more ambitious date to achieve zero carbon status. I hope he will also congratulate Birmingham Youth Strike 4 Climate, which has helped to lead this campaign in our region.

It would be a misreading of economic history if the Secretary of State forgot the mission critical role of a creative, active state in making industrial revolutions happen. In our region that means we need municipal energy companies to drive forward solar in the cities, green development corporations to help us build green council houses, an office of community wealth building to target the procurement spend we put into the market each year, a national education service to make sure we have the skills, and a regional investment bank to make sure we have the capital.

Will the Secretary of State work with us to help our region be the first to become zero carbon? That is the target we would like to set because, of course, we sparked the carbon revolution in the first place.

Greg Clark: As the right hon. Gentleman says, the west midlands has a distinguished role not just in the history but in the future of industrial production in this country and around the world. He is right that that

sense of place is important and that it is crucial the Government play an active role in this at every level. We just need to look at the success of offshore wind, which was driven, in part at least, by a framework in which private companies could invest with confidence, knowing that they would be supported.

It is open to local authorities and to companies to take decisions themselves on when they can be carbon neutral, and many have done so. I am interested to hear that the right hon. Gentleman's council has followed suit. He knows that the west midlands industrial strategy, which was mentioned in Prime Minister's questions, has a substantial recognition of the opportunities across the region not only for participating in solving climate change but in reaping the benefits of the technologies.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I welcome the announcement. My right hon. Friend will appreciate that this has policy implications right the way through central Government, devolved authorities and local government. Can he reassure the House that central Government will lean forward and engage with every part of the United Kingdom to make sure we deliver this target so that we avoid negative targets such as the zero landfill target in Scotland, which sees opportunities lost and waste shipped to northern England, and so we see positive initiatives like the international environment centre in Alloa and, hopefully, geothermal in Clackmannanshire?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have set out a global ambition, and it would be absurd if we were divided within this United Kingdom on how we achieve it. We will work together to take advantage of all the opportunities, including in Scotland, to achieve the transition we need.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Change UK): This is an important commitment, but will the Secretary of State make sure he publishes the impact assessment and the cost-benefit analysis so that, if we want to bring this forward to 2045, we can continue to review it and do so? Is it not a glaring omission that Brexit is not mentioned at all in this statement? There are a number of ways in which the European Union helps us to reduce carbon emissions. Will the EU emissions trading scheme continue? What will happen to the EU funding for low-carbon projects? Many of us believe that we should remain in the European Union if we want to leverage our impact on carbon reduction.

Greg Clark: Sometimes I agree strongly with the hon. Gentleman, and on climate matters we have a record of leading in the European Union. The legislation that was passed and the achievements we have made are in advance of other European countries. It is within the capacity of this Parliament and this Government to make the necessary changes. I want us to lead Europe, as well as leading the world.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I warmly welcome this announcement. Will the Secretary of State join me in encouraging everyone inside and outside this House to see decarbonisation as an opportunity to be grasped, not a burden to be managed? Combining technology, particularly artificial

[Stephen Metcalfe]

intelligence, can lead to lower costs, economic benefits, efficiencies, cleaner energy and, of course, high-quality employment opportunities for our constituents.

Greg Clark: I agree with my hon. Friend, whom I congratulate on being reappointed as the Prime Minister's envoy on engineering, which makes a huge contribution. We need to have the skills to be able to take up the jobs and to implement the changes that are being made here. Training the next generation of engineers will be crucial.

From his work on the Science and Technology Committee, my hon. Friend knows the importance of innovation in this. Innovation enjoys prominent billing in my response today, and with just cause because it will be one of the ways in which we succeed.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a simple fact that we cannot reach net zero without a change in diet, a radical rethink of land use, at least a halving of food waste and embedding sustainability in the food chain from farm to fork. It is all well and good for Ministers to talk about carbon sequestration from soil and planting more trees, but that is very much the safe ground. We need to see a far more ambitious strategy both from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to achieve the reduction in emissions from food and farming that we need to see. Will the Secretary of State start by endorsing the National Farmers Union's commitment to reach net zero by 2040?

Greg Clark: I am always strongly supportive of the NFU and its work to make food and farming not only sustainable but a source of prosperity for this country. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that there are challenges and opportunities in how we use land. Across the Government, and I hope across this House, we can work together to make sure those opportunities are reaped and applied so that we can benefit from them in this country and export them around the world.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): This is hugely welcome. A legal commitment to net zero will help to preserve our planet while encouraging the kind of tech and innovation that we can export around the world. It is hugely welcome in Cheltenham, too.

I congratulate the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State on their decisive and historic leadership on this issue. What is the plan to ensure that other countries face up to their responsibilities, too?

Greg Clark: I commend my hon. Friend for his well-supported Climate Change (Net Zero UK Carbon Account) Bill and for his fantastic speech in support of it, in which he urged us in this direction. It is a source of great pleasure to me that we can meet his ambitions.

We will have an early opportunity to advance this cause with our international partners and with all countries around the world if, as I hope, we succeed in hosting the next conference of the parties, which takes place next year.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): We would not be here discussing this today if not for Extinction Rebellion and the hundreds of thousands of young people who, week after week, grabbed this issue and brought it

back into the mainstream. With that in mind, and given that many local authorities have more ambitious targets, will the Secretary of State agree to include in his plan at least an opportunity to meet this target at a much earlier time?

Greg Clark: I have referred to the hugely important contribution that young people have made in advocating the action we are taking, and they are joined by many other campaigners in this country and around the world. The substantial report of the Committee on Climate Change, which I hope the hon. Gentleman will have a chance to study in detail, makes a proposal that is not plucked out of the air but is evidenced and referenced. In adopting and legislating for this target, we are doing so on the best possible advice. That is the best way to proceed.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I enthusiastically welcome today's net zero announcement, because this issue has an impact on us all, and especially on young people. I therefore particularly welcome the announcement of a youth steering group to advise the Government on this issue, and perhaps we could employ this model in other policy areas. When will we find out a little more about the role and purpose of this group?

Greg Clark: Everything my hon. Friend does is with enthusiasm. We will publish the details of the terms of reference and composition of the group in the next few days, and I hope it will meet with his approval.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State knows that the reason for our leadership on emissions is that we have relocated much of our manufacturing to China and elsewhere, and closed our coalmines. Is he aware of the predictions of Professor Yangyang Xu, published in *Nature* magazine, which simply show that because there is more methane production than originally projected and less sulphur, which has a cooling effect, we are expected now to reach the 1.5° threshold not by 2040 but by 2030? In the light of that, will the Secretary of State look again at the assumptions underlying the report on which he is predicating his 2050 target, with a view to bringing that forward? Will he listen to some of the pressure groups, such as Extinction Rebellion, which want firmer action, be it getting rid of fracking, or action on wave, solar or wind, and move forward more quickly, because there is a desperate emergency and this statement is simply too little, too late?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman is wrong in saying that the reduction in emissions comes simply from exporting our production; he does a disservice to the hundreds and thousands of men and women who work in our renewables industry and lead the world in the development of offshore wind. It is a source of great national pride and I hope he will join in that. The Committee on Climate Change is a serious and substantial body that has done an important piece of work. It was rightly established by his party when he was in government, and those on both sides of the House have respected its advice. The Committee references and is impelled by the latest climate science, which, as he says, requires a more urgent response than was previously committed to. That is exactly why it has provided this advice and exactly why we are legislating to implement it.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): Cornwall was early in declaring a climate emergency, and it will be glad to hear today's commitment, not least because of the opportunity to create well-paid, skilled jobs by doing the right thing. The Committee on Climate Change recommendations talk about a massive skilled jobs programme and we have seen the need for that today. We are talking about the roll-out of smart meters, which helps to address the climate change emergency; the need for storage, as we heard from my Cornish colleague; home efficiency improvements; and even the management of waste food. Those things all require new skills and existing skills that people do not have at the moment. Will the Secretary of State work with the Department for Education and, in particular, with the Treasury to make sure that further education colleges, which are well placed to deliver these skills, have the money and have it quickly?

Greg Clark: I will indeed do that. Let me give the example of the offshore wind sector deal, where one of the major commitments between the industry and government was to establish the skills needed in the supply chain to be able to create those jobs and allow the industry to flourish. This does not just apply to offshore wind; it applies across the clean energy sector. That is a good model for how to proceed.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I, too, welcome today's announcement. However, the Liberal Democrats are setting out more ambitious targets to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2045, together with clear interim targets to make sure that we do not kick the can down the road and avoid difficult decisions now. Does the Minister recognise that today's announcement somewhat contradicts Government policies on, for example, fracking, which is a fossil fuel, and on withdrawal from the European Union, which undermines international co-operation?

Greg Clark: No, I do not. I am disappointed that the hon. Lady seems to be speaking on behalf of the Liberal Democrats in withdrawing the support for the Climate Change Act 2008, which set up the committee to give advice to the Government. The committee has been clear in saying that the ambition of 2050 is the right one for the United Kingdom. If she reads the report, she will respect the evidence on which that is based. It is always possible—and in our exchanges we have said that the Act provides for this ability—to review that progress and for the committee to give further advice. I have said that in five years' time we will go back to the committee to ask it for an assessment of how we are doing.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): What are the Government doing to support bioenergy and carbon capture and storage technology to enable the energy estuary of the Humber to become the UK's first net zero industrial cluster?

Greg Clark: The hon. Lady knows that the Humber is one of the prime areas that can benefit from the capture of carbon by the high emitters of CO₂. We have a commitment to invest in carbon capture, usage and storage, and I know that across the Humber we have a strong contender for part of that investment fund.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Last night, at the Renewable Energy Association dinner, its chair, Nina Skorupska, said that the Committee on Climate Change should be renamed the committee for climate emergency. With that in mind, this net carbon zero statement is going in the right direction. A practical step to help what the Secretary of State is talking about would be to build a 600 MW interconnector to the Hebrides, rather than a 450 MW one. That would give us 33% more capacity for only 5% extra cost, and the extra electricity it would produce would probably drop wholesale prices and even eradicate that. Given today's statement, will he make sure that Ofgem sees the big picture and gives the 600 MW the green light? Ofgem is currently not fit for purpose in this regard, because if it keeps its blinkered formula, its policies will result not in 600 MW or 450 MW, but in net zero MW.

Greg Clark: I know that the hon. Gentleman is frustrated at the decision that Ofgem has taken. He and I had a successful and productive meeting in Stornoway a few years ago, as he will recall, to make it possible for remote islands to benefit from wind. He knows that Ofgem has an independent role, but I will follow up on his concerns.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): This morning, the all-party motor group, which I chair, met a wide range of senior representatives of UK automotive companies, and there was a real welcome for the announcement that the Government have committed to net zero by 2050. However, they also noted that there is so much more to do if we are going to get there. That has to include a step change in infrastructure investment, making sure that the rapid charging points are available in the quantities and places needed, and that they are interoperable, and ensuring that the grid can cope. They also noted that we have to manage the transition more effectively, which means ending the confusion in the Government's signals about intermediate technologies, about the regulatory frameworks to be put in place and about the kinds of incentives that can help to change consumer behaviour. In that context, may I gently say to the Secretary of State that cutting back on the plug-in car grant does not necessarily help, in a market that is not yet mature?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for conveying the support of the automotive industry, which has a crucial role to play in this transition. He is right about, and in earlier exchanges I have paid particular attention to, the importance of getting that transition right, so that it does not have unintended consequences of depriving of investment an industry that is crucial to making that change. Of course we will look at all the policy components. The plug-in grant was established and has been successful in launching an industry—or, at least, in expanding the early take-up of an industry. It was intended that it should come to an end when its budget was exhausted, but of course, through the spending review, decisions will need to be taken on how the industry can be supported in future.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State was correct to refer to the important role that the Clyde shipyards played in the first industrial revolution, but of course they will also

[Mr Paul Sweeney]

have an important role to play in the next green industrial revolution if there is an appropriate industrial strategy. That is why I am dismayed that in respect of the offshore wind sector deal that the Government announced, they buckled to the lobbying by large energy companies and diluted the requirement for 60% of manufactured content to be made in the UK down to 60% of through-life content. As a result, EDF is sending the £2 billion contract for manufacturing a wind farm off the coast of Fife to Indonesia, instead of building it in the BiFab yards that lie 10 miles away on the coast of Fife and employ 1,000 people. Will the Secretary of State address this glaring inconsistency in the offshore wind sector strategy and ensure that we maximise British manufacturing of heavy engineered products in British renewable energy projects?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that our heritage and skills in shipbuilding are now being put to use throughout the country in marine energy and offshore wind in particular, but he will acknowledge that the commitment in the sector deal was to increase UK content. That was the right ambition to establish and it was agreed between the industry and the Government, although it can of course be kept under review. We always want to see content produced in the UK, including in the very shipyards that the hon. Gentleman mentioned that were so important in our first industrial revolution.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Ind): I warmly welcome the commitment to net zero emissions. Does the Secretary of State agree that to help to achieve that we need to do far more to encourage people out of their cars where possible and to make more journeys by cycling or walking? We know what works to achieve European levels of cycling; will the Secretary of State commit to looking into the evidence and meeting me and the all-party group on cycling to see what further can be done to achieve those targets?

Greg Clark: I would be delighted to do that. I am a strong advocate and have campaigned for and achieved the establishment of some important new cycle routes in my constituency. They are a good example of something that makes a contribution to the environment as well as giving us all opportunities to enjoy the fresh air and in many cases the countryside, including in the hon. Lady's beautiful constituency.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): My Lancashire constituents want to step up and play their role in meeting the climate emergency, including by choosing greener transport options. Will the Secretary of State look into opening disused rail lines, such as the one into Fleetwood, as part of the strategy? Does he recognise that fracking locks us into a reliance on fossil fuels for years to come? Will he review the Government's support for fracking?

Greg Clark: I will of course talk to my colleagues in the Department for Transport. As the hon. Lady said, we need to look into all the options to give people a choice of how to get about that is environmentally sustainable. On gas, whether derived onshore or offshore,

the Committee on Climate Change has always been clear that in the transition to net zero there is a role for gas in all scenarios. In my view, if we have a domestic contribution to that, that helps with the resilience of our energy supplies.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): The Secretary of State rightly referred in his statement to the historic opportunity before Parliament to make real progress in tackling climate change by achieving net zero carbon emissions. In order fully to realise that opportunity, will the Government reconsider existing policies—such as those relating to maximising the extraction of offshore oil and gas deposits—to ensure that they comply with the aspiration outlined this afternoon?

Greg Clark: As I said to the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), the Committee on Climate Change, which advises not only the Government but the House and the country on this issue, recognises the need for a transition and that gas and oil will be required in that context. As we recognise the jobs and exports generated by gas and oil, it seems to me that we should do that as efficiently as we can and with the best deployment of technology that we possibly can.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): As the Secretary of State knows, I am usually supportive of our bid to host COP 26, on which I led on a joint letter with the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) that was signed by more than 100 Members, but I am concerned that we are due to miss the fourth and fifth carbon budget targets. The explanatory notes that accompany the statutory instrument laid this morning say that the Government will leave headroom for emissions from international aviation and shipping. When will we adopt a Norwegian-style plan on aviation and shipping emissions that will eradicate those emissions and mean that we can meet our carbon budget targets?

Greg Clark: We have followed the advice of the Committee on Climate Change and our plans for net zero cover the whole economy, including international aviation and shipping. We await the committee's advice on how to legislate. One opportunity that our hosting the COP would bring forward is the ability to accelerate international agreements. I hope the hon. Gentleman would welcome that.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): I join others in welcoming the legislation, but does the Secretary of State genuinely believe that the machinery of government is currently organised in such a way as to facilitate the type of ambitious policy response that we will need in this Parliament in order for the target to have credibility? He will know that we used to have a clean growth inter-ministerial group, but no such body now exists. Does he agree that, given the scale and pace of the transition required, we will almost certainly need to make changes to the institutional architecture of government to co-ordinate and drive progress across all Departments?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we should have the best arrangement. In fact, that inter-ministerial group does exist, and my hon. Friend

the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth chaired its most recent meeting just last week. The hon. Gentleman should reflect on the creation of my Department, which brought together the responsibilities for business and industry with energy and climate change, because that is a recognition that if we want, as we must, to take action to achieve the targets, we must make sure that the economy is run and companies operate in a way that supports that action. It is a practical example of just the kind of thinking and acting that the hon. Gentleman advocates.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): The 2050 deadline is of course important, but anyone who has seen how Parliament is squandering its time ahead of 31 October will understand that deadlines are not sufficient in and of themselves. What is the Secretary of State going to do on two critical issues: what is he going to do to rescue the Moorside nuclear deal and Wylfa; and will he meet the team behind the strategic business case that is being put together for the plan for a tidal barrage across Morecambe bay and the Duddon, which could be transformative?

Greg Clark: I am happy to meet anyone who has a contribution to make, both to reducing our emissions and to achieving technological advances. On the nuclear industry, the hon. Gentleman knows that the financing of new nuclear power stations has been done commercially, and we are reviewing the financing model to see whether a different approach might address some of the difficulties that private sector investors have had in financing the scale of investment required for new nuclear. That review will report soon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On behalf of the Democratic Unionist party, I welcome the Government's continuing commitment to deal with this vital issue. It is important that the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland does its bit to safeguard the environment for our children and grandchildren. Will the Secretary of State confirm that other countries are also committed and will do all that they can do to address the issue with equal determination?

Greg Clark: I am grateful for what the hon. Gentleman said; I know that he has regular discussions with the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth and is a strong advocate. Northern Ireland is one of the parts of the United Kingdom that has benefited strongly from clean energy and its deployment. We will continue that effort and I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's support.

Points of Order

2.19 pm

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): On a mundane but important point of order, Mr Speaker. The House of Lords Commission gave the following ruling on passes for parliamentary assistants in its last report:

"Members may not sponsor a pass for anybody whose primary role is to support an All-Party Parliamentary Group."

That may have been to deal with some problem of misuse—I do not know; I cannot speak to that—but I am concerned about it. I see the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable), the leader of the Liberal Democrats, is in his place; some years ago, he changed the law—under some influence from me, I think—to make Members of Parliament authorised people under the whistleblowing Act. Organisations such as the all-party group on whistleblowing therefore need staff in the House. Could the House authorities make representations to the House of Lords to make sure that that is taken on board and corrected?

Mr Speaker: I think this has some relevance to security, and the Chair would not normally pronounce on such matters in the Chamber, but I want to reflect on the right hon. Gentleman's point, because it is important and potentially has ramifications for other Members and groups. Rather than give a knee-jerk response that is insufficiently considered, I will give a considered response at a later date. I hope that will be helpful. If I may say so—and I will—"mundane" and the right hon. Gentleman simply do not go together.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In a brief answer in Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy topical questions yesterday, the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), who, helpfully, is on the Treasury Bench, announced that she intended to order the recall of 500,000 tumble dryers made by Whirlpool UK, an action that she described as "unprecedented". In fact, over 5 million such machines were manufactured with a fault that makes them liable to burst into flames without warning, and they have caused several hundred fires, including one in a 19-storey block of flats in my constituency that destroyed 20 flats and could have caused serious loss of life.

This is the most serious consumer safety issue for many years, yet we have had no statement from the Government on when and how the recall will take place, and why it has taken four years for them to act. I am wondering whether you, Mr Speaker—perhaps with the assistance of the Minister—can say how these matters will be addressed in this House.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: It is certainly open to a Minister to seek to respond, and it looks as though one is minded to do so.

Kelly Tolhurst: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I would like to clarify what I announced in the House yesterday. Since the Office for Product Safety and Standards

[Kelly Tolhurst]

review, we have kept Whirlpool's actions under review. A letter was issued to Whirlpool, which was given 28 days to respond, and it did just that. We have informed it of our intention to issue a recall. That is part of the regulatory process. That is what I was updating the House on. We had 10 days to inform Whirlpool of that, and I believe that Friday is the deadline for that. I hope that satisfies the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter).

Andy Slaughter *indicated dissent.*

Mr Speaker: It may well be the summit of the hon. Lady's parliamentary ambition to satisfy the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), but it may be that some years—or possibly decades, from my experience—are required before she can hope to attain that dizzy height. The hon. Gentleman does not look particularly satisfied. Nevertheless, the hon. Lady has discharged her obligations to the House, and we are grateful to her for doing so. If, as I surmise from the hon. Gentleman's countenance, he remains dissatisfied, he knows that there are means by which he can secure fuller ministerial attention to this matter, and the House's attention to it, in days to come.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): They are killing people.

Mr Speaker: This is indeed a matter of the highest importance, involving life and death, as the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) helpfully observes.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Welsh media today report that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will remove diplomatic support from the First Minister of Wales on his visit to Brussels today unless

he toes the UK Government line, whatever that is. There is no bigger critic of the Labour Welsh Government than me, but I am outraged, as I am sure the people of Wales are, at the complete lack of respect shown to the Government of my country by the British Government. Welsh people pay taxes, too, and the FCO is supposed to serve their interests, too. Could you, Mr Speaker, advise me on how I could raise this issue as a matter of urgency with those on the Treasury Bench?

Mr Speaker: To some extent, the hon. Gentleman has achieved his own salvation by airing the matter in the Chamber. That is not a point of order as such, but I am minded to observe that, although there is a lot of repeat business in the House in the form of attempted points of order, I can recall no occasion, during my occupancy of the Chair, in which such a concern has had to be aired, so it is indeed a most significant matter. I am taken aback by what the hon. Gentleman reported to me in advance and has now raised orally on the Floor of the House. He has achieved some satisfaction by alerting those on the Treasury Bench to his concern. My advice is that he should go to the Table Office and table questions on this matter. I know that the dedicated and highly capable staff of the Table Office will be happy to assist him in that important endeavour.

BILL PRESENTED

NON-DOMESTIC RATING (LISTS)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary James Brokenshire, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr David Lidington, Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Greg Clark, Jesse Norman and Rishi Sunak, presented a Bill to make provision to change the dates on which non-domestic rating lists must be compiled; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 402) with explanatory notes (Bill 402-EN).

Parental Leave (Premature and Sick Babies)

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

2.25 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to extend entitlements to parental leave for parents of babies born prematurely or requiring neonatal care; and for connected purposes.

As well as being the MP for Glasgow East, and above all else, I am Isaac and Jessica's dad. Both Isaac and Jessica were born prematurely and spent the early weeks of their lives in neonatal care so, from the outset, I declare a deeply personal interest in the issue that I am seeking to legislate on today.

My wife and I understood that having children at all might be difficult, but in February 2015, we learned, to our immense joy, that we were expecting our first child. Owing to a pre-existing medical condition, Roslyn was told that hers would be a complex, high-risk pregnancy with a higher chance of ending in stillbirth.

In the early hours of 26 June 2015, our son Isaac was born prematurely at the Southern General Hospital in Glasgow. During an aborted labour that evolved into an emergency caesarean section, Isaac's heart rate plummeted. His blood sugars were incredibly low and he could not breathe without assistance. Within a few moments of being born, he was whisked away from Roslyn and me and transferred to the neonatal intensive care unit, where he spent the earliest part of his life in an incubator, hooked up to countless machines and wires. In that unit, over a period, Isaac received amazing love, care and support from our national health service, which stabilised his breathing, allowed his heart rate to recover and built up his blood sugars. It would be days before we could even hold him. Our only contact with him was holding his tiny hands through holes in the incubator.

Three years later, just last September, we went through all that again for the birth of Jessica. Jessica's hospital stay was even longer, due to protracted breathing difficulties that culminated in her spending the first eight months of her life on oxygen. I still vividly remember watching her turning blue and having to be resuscitated by nurses in the neonatal intensive care unit.

I say all this because sadly this is the norm—the reality—for many parents across the United Kingdom. Each year, around 100,000 babies are born premature or sick and have an extended stay in neonatal care. I speak for every family on the neonatal unit when I say a heartfelt thank you to NHS staff for supporting our children, and us as families, through an incredibly distressing, uncertain and vulnerable time.

That stress, uncertainty and vulnerability show that current legislation is simply not fit for purpose. UK employment legislation takes no account of the fact that some babies will spend much longer in hospital after being born, especially if they are born premature or sick. As a result, parents, particularly dads, require extra paid parental leave beyond that covered under current arrangements. My statutory paternity leave had run out by the time Isaac and Jessica were discharged from the neonatal unit. Sadly, that is the case for so

many parents who face the brutal decision to return to work while their child is still in hospital. Research by the charity Bliss found that two thirds of dads had to return to work while their baby was still receiving specialist neonatal care.

The Government know that there are major challenges for us; that is why they commissioned a review on barriers to the labour market for parents of premature and sick babies. Unfortunately, despite that review concluding, the Government still refuse to publish the details or to take action, hence why I feel the need to bring a Bill here via the private Members' route.

One of the biggest problems is that so many families face an employee/employer lottery out there, a lottery that so many of us simply cannot afford to play. A number of employers in the public and private sectors have gone above and beyond to ensure that employees can be with their family on the neonatal unit and still receive pay. One such example is Waltham Forest Council. Employees there are entitled to an extra week of leave for every week their premature baby spends in hospital before their due date. In the private sector, another good example is Sony Music, which also ensures that employees are entitled to full pay during the period in which a baby is born before full term.

That is great if someone works for Waltham Forest Council or Sony Music, but the vast majority of us do not work for them. My Bill would therefore ensure that families no longer face an employment rights lottery when heading into the neonatal unit.

Across the world, other countries have already taken action to provide better rights and support for the parents of premature and sick babies. In Sweden, maternity leave commences at the point of discharge. In Ireland, maternity leave and pay are extended by the amount of time between birth and the original expected birth date. Here in the UK, however, we are seriously lagging behind and failing parents when they need us most.

Lawrence Quayle, a former retail worker, is just one of those parents. He was left with no choice but to be signed off as sick after his son Leo arrived 15 weeks early. Lawrence said:

"When I told my employer that my wife had gone into early labour, there was a dispute between my line manager—who was supporting me—and her manager about whether I could start my paternity leave early. I was dealing with HR when my son was just a few days old and needed me at his cot-side.

Eventually, I was given my paternity leave but because Leo was in intensive care at a hospital 60 miles from home, I knew I'd need more time with him and to support my wife.

Things with Leo were very touch and go and there were a number of occasions where it looked like we could lose him. I was told I couldn't take any annual leave and could only take unpaid leave—which I simply could not afford.

I ended up being signed off from work with stress for two months. The strain this put on my relationship with the managers at work meant that I chose to leave the company shortly afterwards."

Lawrence's story is a perfect illustration of how current employment legislation simply fails families when they need our protection and support most. By allowing the Bill to proceed today, we can right that wrong and truly tackle a burning injustice that could be so easily extinguished for the parents of all those future Isaacs and Jessicas who, too, will start their life in neonatal intensive care. I therefore commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

[David Linden]

Ordered,

That David Linden, Paul Masterton, Rachel Reeves, Ben Lake, Layla Moran, Jim Shannon, Alison Thewliss, Chris Elmore, Luciana Berger, Gavin Newlands, Maria Caulfield and Caroline Lucas present the Bill.

David Linden accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 403).

Opposition Day

[UNALLOTTED DAY]

Leaving the EU: Business of the House

2.33 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I beg to move,

(1) That, on Tuesday 25 June—

- (a) Standing Order No. 14(1) (which provides that government business shall have precedence at every sitting save as provided in that order) shall not apply;
- (b) precedence shall be given to a motion relating to the Business of the House in connection with matters relating to the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union;
- (c) if more than one motion relating to the Business of the House is tabled, the Speaker shall decide which motion shall have precedence;
- (d) the Speaker shall interrupt proceedings on any business having precedence before the Business of the House motion at 1.00 pm and call a Member to move that motion;
- (e) debate on that motion may continue until 2.00 pm at which time the Speaker shall put the questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on that motion including the questions on amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved;
- (f) any proceedings interrupted or superseded by this order may be resumed or (as the case may be) entered upon and proceeded with after the moment of interruption.

I move the motion in the names of the Leader of the Opposition and of the leaders of the SNP, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and the Greens, and I am thankful for the support of the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin).

This is a genuinely cross-party motion—so much so that for a short while at least it appeared even to have the support of one of the Conservative leadership candidates, the Secretary of State for International Development, but I assume that after a phone call from his Chief Whip he thought better of it.

The motion makes a simple proposition: that, on 25 June, Parliament and not the Executive will have control of the business of the House. That would ensure an opportunity for the House to bring forward a further business motion to set out, at that later date, a schedule for the stages of a parliamentary Bill relating to our departure from the EU.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer: I will in a moment, but I want to set out what we seek to achieve.

I want to be clear: the motion does not introduce legislation today; it does not specify what form any subsequent legislation should take; and it does not prevent the Executive from seeking to pass a Brexit deal. Instead, it is a first and limited step to ensure that Parliament cannot be locked out of the Brexit process over the coming weeks and months. It paves the way for Parliament to take further action, including to prevent no deal, should the House consider that necessary.

Crucially, the motion means that if the next Prime Minister were foolish enough to pursue no deal without gaining the consent of this House, or to prorogue Parliament to force through no deal, Parliament would have the means to prevent that. It is a motion to empower Parliament. It would introduce a safety valve in the Brexit process and be a reminder to all Conservative leadership candidates that this House will take every step necessary to prevent no deal.

Sir William Cash: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman be good enough to tell us exactly which constitutional authority he refers to? Every single constitutional authority that has ever been written is clear that we operate on the basis of parliamentary government, not government by Parliament. Can he cite an example of that being abrogated in any constitutional authority?

Keir Starmer: The Bill that we passed in March mandated the Prime Minister to seek an extension of article 50. We are in unprecedented times. Parliament has to have the ability to speak on this issue. When we face the suggestion by some leadership contenders that Parliament be prorogued and shut out of the process, we are forced to take action.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Is my right hon. and learned Friend as alarmed as I am by the cavalier way in which certain contenders fighting the election for the leadership of the Conservative party seem to think that they can cast Parliament aside to ensure that they have their no-deal Brexit, when this Parliament clearly would not allow a no-deal Brexit to pass? In those circumstances, is not the responsible and right thing to do to give this Parliament the chance to prevent such outrageous shenanigans?

Keir Starmer: I agree with every word of that intervention, and I am grateful for it.

The motion makes a simple but important proposition. Let me address why. Primarily, after nine years of austerity, a no-deal Brexit would make the huge social and economic challenges that the country already faces much worse. In the words of manufacturers organisation Make UK, it would be an act of “economic lunacy”. To quote the CBI, it would take a “sledgehammer” to the economy, and Toyota has said that “no deal is terrible” and would “create big additional challenges”. Only yesterday, I was with GMB representatives at the Ford plant in Bridgend. They were very clear about the appalling impact of no deal on jobs.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that it is in exceptional circumstances that the Trades Union Congress and the CBI say exactly the same—that no deal is utterly reckless and irresponsible?

Keir Starmer: I hope it is not the only time that the CBI and the TUC say the same, but they obviously do on this issue.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): We have spent many hours in this Chamber debating the Government taking Henry VIII powers; now Conservative leadership candidates are trying to take Charles I action.

Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that an internal conflict in the Conservative party is creating a constitutional crisis in this country?

Keir Starmer: It did not end well for Charles I. We find ourselves in a very serious position. Having been through the best part of three years of debate and argument about Brexit, there is a suggestion that Parliament should be shut out of the process, with no further business until November. That is completely unacceptable.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Some highly irresponsible Tory leadership contenders are traipsing around the country advocating no deal when before the referendum they were saying, for example,

“mutual self-interest suggests we’d cut a very good deal”,

or talking about

“a free trade arrangement that continues to give access to UK goods and services on the European continent.”

There are many other examples where those very same candidates, prior to the referendum, were offering the best deal possible, but now seem to be advocating crashing out—which would not affect them personally, financially speaking, I am sure, but would affect many of their constituents.

Keir Starmer: I agree with that intervention and I am grateful for it. This translation, or attempted translation, of the vote to leave into a vote for no deal is to misrepresent the arguments and what was said at the time of the referendum.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) asked us to contemplate examples of where a Parliament helps to set its own business rather than just the Government doing so. Of course, he does not have to look too far—only to Holyrood, where business is set by a Committee of the House. When we are discussing an issue as grave as a no-deal Brexit, would it not be a gross abdication of all our responsibilities if Parliament did not act to stop this Government pursuing such a ridiculous policy?

Keir Starmer: I agree. It would be an abdication of our responsibilities not to support this motion and give this foothold to Parliament to have proper involvement in what happens next.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Some Conservative leadership contenders are of course in favour of no deal, while the former Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), seemed this morning to be hedging his bets—it was not even clear whether he is clear or not, as it were. Does the shadow Secretary of State agree that there is no such thing as a clean and simple no deal, or a managed no deal, any more than a fall from a high building is managed until you hit the ground?

Keir Starmer: There is no such thing as a managed no deal. No deal would be chaotic and highly disruptive—for the economy, as I have already set out, but also in other areas. I was Director of Public Prosecutions for five years. I worked in Europol and Eurojust, and I worked with the security services day in, day out. I know all too well that no deal would cause immense disruption to

[*Keir Starmer*]

judicial co-operation and to joint criminal investigations going on at the moment, and throw a wrench into vital arrangements on extradition and shared databases. I know the Secretary of State shares my concern about these issues.

No deal would make us less safe. I think, ultimately, that is why the current Prime Minister, whom I knew and worked with when she was Home Secretary, came to realise that no deal was never a credible policy. She did at one stage say that no deal should be the default and that it was her deal or no deal, but towards the end she recognised that it was not credible, for a number of reasons, but I think, ultimately, because of the impact, or likely impact, on national security and counter-terrorism provisions. These are not light issues for us to brush aside and not even have a voice on if we were to go down this route.

Then there is Ireland. The UK has a solemn vow to protect the Good Friday agreement and avoid a hard border in all circumstances. It is one of the most important treaties this country has ever entered into, and it is one that we cannot break or undermine. We should be clear that a no-deal Brexit risks that. I know how concerned communities on both sides of the border are about that.

The motion is simple and important. It is also necessary. Over recent weeks, we have witnessed the Conservative leadership contest descend into the disturbing, the ludicrous and the reckless. It has become an arms race to promise the most damaging form of Brexit or to make the most absurd and undeliverable promises. No wonder the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is the front-runner, against that criteria. But not to be outdone, the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), whom I shadowed for a short time when he was Brexit Secretary, has told us that he is so committed to protecting democracy that he is willing to close down Parliament to force through no deal. That is how strong his commitment is to democracy.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): What is my right hon. and learned Friend's assessment of the likely reaction in the palace were an unelected new Prime Minister with no mandate to close down Parliament when Parliament had voted time and again, overwhelmingly, against no deal?

Keir Starmer: I do not know, and I hope that that never has to be tested.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Does the shadow Secretary of State share my anger and frustration at the way in which those words around taking back control have now been cynically reinterpreted to mean a reckless new Tory Prime Minister taking all the control for themselves and certainly not sharing it with the people—and much less their parliamentary representatives?

Keir Starmer *rose*—

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I apologise for interrupting the flow of debate. I understand that the motion before us is about the business of the House on 25 June, yet we

seem to be having a far-ranging debate on the merits, or otherwise, of a no-deal Brexit and the outcome of the Conservative leadership election. Have I missed some additional paperwork on this matter, or is this now a debate on the principles of no deal, which I absolutely would not support?

Mr Speaker: No. The hon. Gentleman is a perceptive denizen of the House, and he has not missed any relevant paperwork. He is right about the procedural character of the motion. There is a degree of latitude as the background to the debate—the context in which it is taking place—is aired, but I am sure that ere long colleagues will wish to focus on the procedural specificity of the motion, both for their own sakes and possibly to satisfy the parliamentary palate of the hon. Gentleman.

Keir Starmer: I was about to respond to the intervention by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas). I do think it is fundamental that we deal with the argument that it is in any way proper to close down Parliament at such a critical stage of the exercise. The idea of Parliament not sitting and not having any business until November is unthinkable, and we have to take action to prevent that from happening. I double-took when the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton said that and wanted to check that it is actually what he said, but of course it is. My office did try to read more about the former Brexit Secretary's plan on his campaign website. However, they were met yesterday with this rather ominous message:

"Access to dominicraab2019.com is denied because it belongs to a category that we block to protect customers using the Parliamentary network."

Quite right, too. [*Laughter.*]

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I always knew that the parliamentary ICT people would get it right in the end.

After a few weeks' respite from this, we seem to be back on to it, but I am not sure that we have moved on. People have said that this House has expressed the view that we do not want to leave with no deal. However, there are only two ways in which this House can do that: it can either revoke article 50 or vote for a deal. It has done neither. When are the shadow Secretary of State and Opposition Front Benchers going to decide which they choose—revoke or a deal?

Keir Starmer: I just want to be clear about what today is about. It is not about the substance. It is about the business of the House so that the House can decide what to do next. The House can move forward only with a majority. If there is a majority against no deal, and I believe there is, that majority needs to be heard now more than ever. That is all that this motion is about. The alternative is simply to say that it is perfectly acceptable for an incoming Prime Minister to push Parliament to one side at the most critical stage of the exercise and say, "It doesn't matter if Parliament doesn't want no deal—I'm not going to listen to it. In fact, I'm not going to even let it sit."

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I am going to make some progress.

This is a serious point, because the Tory leadership race is now increasingly offering, as the Leader of the Opposition has said, a choice between no deal, no deal and no deal. Candidates are openly threatening to sideline or silence this House on an issue that would affect all our lives and the fabric of this country for a generation. That is reckless and it cannot be allowed to stand.

We may be using a novel parliamentary mechanism today—I accept that—but it is not the first time that I have had to make this kind of argument from the Dispatch Box. Time and again, I have stood here saying that Parliament must have a meaningful role in the process. When it got to the cross-party talks in April this year, there was a near consensus that they should have happened two years before. This pushing away of Parliament has been a huge part of the problem. The Prime Minister fought against us far too often, but every time this House fought back. Now we must focus on the next fight. We face the very real challenge that the next Prime Minister will force through a no-deal Brexit without the consent of this House or the British people.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I know there is a great deal of fear that the successful Tory candidate may be somebody who wants no deal, but it could also be somebody who wants to try to secure a deal. If that were the case, would it be the Labour party's position that we would re-enter negotiations, to try to get an agreement that this House can support?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention. As I made clear at the outset, this motion does not prevent a deal being passed by the House. It simply allows Parliament to have a say—a foothold—in the event that an incoming Prime Minister tries to force through no deal or shut Parliament out altogether.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): To return to the substance of the debate, does the right hon. and learned Gentleman accept that if Government cannot control the business in this place, we risk ignoring the wishes of the electorate when it comes to elections, and election manifesto promises will turn to dust if this sort of thing is allowed to continue?

Keir Starmer: If the Government cannot control the business of the House, the Government should go.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. and learned Friend is giving an excellent defence of parliamentary democracy. Government Members are trying to derive legitimacy from a very narrow and contentious referendum result, which under no circumstances specified that no deal carried majority support in this country. Is it not the case that, through this action, Parliament is standing up for the will of the majority of people in this country?

Keir Starmer *rose*—

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Before my right hon. and learned Friend moves on, will he give way?

Keir Starmer: I will take a double intervention.

Mr Sheerman: We have heard a lot about parliamentary democracy in the short time we have been having this debate, but this is surely about parliamentary sovereignty—our right to have a voice on all the great issues of state.

Keir Starmer: I absolutely agree with both interventions. That is why I started by saying that this motion makes a very simple proposition: that Parliament should not be shut out of the decision on no deal or shut out of the process altogether. I cannot think of why any parliamentarian would vote against that proposition—I genuinely cannot.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Is it not the case that we face a ludicrous narrative that there is the possibility of walking away from the EU with no deal, when the very first request, if there is any attempt at a free trade deal, will be dealing with citizens, dealing with the money and dealing with the border in Ireland?

Keir Starmer: I agree. The difficulty is that if I were to list every ludicrous promise and statement that has been made in the Conservative party leadership contest so far, there would be no time for other speakers in the debate. There is a ludicrous concept that the EU has always been willing to ditch the backstop, and it only takes the likes of some of the leadership contenders to go and ask for it, and it will happen. I do not know a great deal about the details of the current Prime Minister's negotiating strategy, but I do know that had it been possible to get an alternative to the backstop, she would have sought to secure it. That is what she was trying to do. The idea that a new Prime Minister can go across to Brussels and the EU will say, "Well, we don't bother about that any more. That's fine—if you're asking for it, the backstop will go" is simply ludicrous. The promises being made are ludicrous, and they are going to fall apart. The EU is not going to change its position, and this Parliament is not going to change its position on no deal. That is why we have to have a vote at this crucial time.

Mr Sam Gyimah (East Surrey) (Con): It strikes me that there are two principles at stake today. One of them is the convention in this House that the Government should be able to control the Order Paper, and the other is the constitutional principle of whether the Government can prorogue Parliament in pursuit of their policy objectives, with all that that means for the Crown and the Crown's involvement in politics. I believe that the latter principle is the weightier one and the one we should bear in mind when we vote today.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention. The prerogative powers always have to be seen and analysed in their political and historical context, and they always have been. As the House knows, prerogative powers have changed over time, and some of them have almost disappeared completely, because it has been recognised that what was a prerogative power needs to be a power that is vested in this House. We may well be at that point in relation to this prerogative power to push Parliament aside altogether, which needs properly to be tested.

The very idea of pushing Parliament aside between now and the next deadline for leaving, so that Parliament cannot have a voice, even to take preparatory steps for

[Keir Starmer]

no deal, only needs to be set out to be shown to be undemocratic. This motion is a safety valve. It is about providing certainty and empowering this House, and I urge all MPs to back it.

Speaker's Announcement

Mr Speaker: I will now announce the result of the ballot held today for the election of a new Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. Four hundred and forty-seven votes were cast, with three spoilt ballot papers. This means that 444 valid votes were cast, and the quota to be reached was therefore 223 votes. Simon Hoare was elected Chair, with 239 votes, after one round of counting. Maria Caulfield received 146 votes, and Mark Pritchard received 59 votes. Simon Hoare will take up his post immediately. I congratulate him on his success. The results of the count under the alternative vote system will be made available as soon as possible in the Vote Office and published on the internet for public viewing.

Leaving the EU: Business of the House

2.56 pm

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): May I be the first to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) on his election to that important Select Committee, at an important time for it?

I want to begin by picking up on a few of the points that the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) made in his opening remarks. The first passage of his speech covered what the motion does not do. He set out that it does not cover the legislation that it would unlock—it does not cover the substance, and it does not cover the form. So often in our exchanges at the Dispatch Box, he tells me how much he does not like a blind Brexit, and yet what we have before the House is, in essence, a blind motion. He devoted his opening remarks to the extent to which this is a blind motion, for it does not contain the detail on the basis of which the House will decide.

Interestingly, in the context of the Conservative leadership election, the right hon. and learned Gentleman went on to point out that a new Prime Minister would be limited—they would be unable to go to Brussels to secure a change of substance to the backstop—and yet his position is that a Labour Prime Minister would be able to go to Brussels to secure that. Within his remarks, one can see the contradictions inherent in the motion.

Let me deal with the substance of the motion. Section 1(b) gives precedence to any motion from any individual MP over Government business, and section 1(c) states that it is for you, Mr Speaker, to decide whether that motion is brought before the House over other motions. In essence, sections 1(b) and 1(c) say that an individual MP and the Speaker—two Members of the House—can override Government business. That is the effect of the motion. It puts in the hands of just two Members of Parliament the decision on which business takes precedence. That is what the text of 1(b) and 1(c) says.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The current Prime Minister has got stuck in a triangle composed of the Brexit that the Conservative party wants, the constitutional make-up of the United Kingdom, and the successor to the Good Friday/Belfast agreement and all it contains. She has not been able to sort out that triangle. What will be most important to the new Prime Minister when he goes to Brussels: the Brexit he is promising the Tory party, the constitutional make-up of the United Kingdom, or the legacy of the Good Friday/Belfast agreement?

Stephen Barclay: First, the hon. Lady says “he”, but there are a number of female candidates in the leadership election and one should not pre-empt the outcome. Secondly, we do not know who the Prime Minister will be. Thirdly, first let me deal with the text. [HON. MEMBERS: “Answer the question.”] I will happily come on to it, but I thought we were here, as per the direction of Mr Speaker and as the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) said in an intervention, to debate the motion. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) may chunter, but I am not surprised that she does not want to debate the

motion, because it is a flawed motion, for reasons I will come on to. Labour Members do not want to debate the text that is before the House.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab) rose—

Stephen Barclay: I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Sheerman: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have been in this House a hell of a long time, as most people know.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Kwasi Kwarteng): Too long!

Mr Sheerman: They always say that, don't they? The fact is that I have no idea what the Secretary of State is talking about when he mentions a “blind motion”. Could you tell us what he is talking about, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: I do not think that what I would call motion exegesis is a matter for the Chair. I think it is for the Secretary of State to explain the terms of his comments on the motion. I am saddened if the hon. Gentleman is befuddled. I would not want him to remain in a state of nescience for any length of time, so I hope the Secretary of State will elaborate, and then clarity will descend on the hon. Gentleman and all the people of Huddersfield.

Stephen Barclay: I will happily respond. The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) is right: he has been in the House a long time—so long that he was actually a Eurosceptic when he arrived.

Mr Sheerman: And I grew up!

Stephen Barclay: There is still time.

Let me return to the text of the Opposition day motion, whose scope is virtually unlimited for business in relation to the UK's withdrawal from the EU. Almost all aspects of our national life fall within that scope. Potentially, an individual Member could table a motion and it would be Mr Speaker alone who would determine precedence.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): If recent election results have shown anything, it is the complete frustration of the British people with a failure to solve Brexit, and with Members of this House constantly saying what they do not support and do not believe in. Did my right hon. Friend hear anything in the 30-minute speech by the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), or can he see anything in the motion, that remotely gives a positive or constructive solution or way forward to the Brexit impasse, rather than just more of what Members do not want?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. What we hear repeatedly from Opposition Members is what they are opposed to, not what they are for. That is reflected in the fact that the European Union—[Interruption.] The shadow International Trade Secretary chunters. The European Union has been consistent in stating its view that the withdrawal agreement is the only offer on the table, but Labour Members voted against the withdrawal agreement, just as they voted against the deal each time. Their manifesto said that

[Stephen Barclay]

they would respect the result, yet many Labour Members want a second referendum, which is clearly at odds with their manifesto.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I entirely understand and appreciate my right hon. Friend's tactics in trying to address procedural and textual points in the motion, rather than addressing the main point, which is rather difficult for the Government. I do not think those procedural and textual points would be raised if, by any sad chance, we were sitting on the Opposition Benches and telling a Government we opposed that the House as a whole wanted a debate and legislation on a particular issue.

Will my right hon. Friend move to the main point? Is he actually prepared to defend a situation where a new Prime Minister wishes to pursue a policy for which he or she knows there is no majority in the House of Commons? Does he believe it should be possible for that Prime Minister to prorogue and send away Parliament until he or she has exercised dictatorial powers to put the policy in place? That, I think, is plainly totally contrary to our constitution, and I do not see how any parliamentarian could possibly defend such a possibility.

Stephen Barclay: I and, I think, the majority of Members absolutely share the belief of the Father of the House that anything that brings Her Majesty into the politics of the House is to be avoided. I have consistently stated that position. However, may I pick up on the specifics? I always listen very closely to the Father of the House, and he said to concentrate not on the procedural and textual points but on the substance, yet the shadow Brexit Secretary said the exact opposite. He said that he did not want to get on to the substance because that is not in the text. Members who support the motion are saying, on the one hand, that we should look at the specifics put forward by the Opposition—*[Interruption.]* I do not support bringing Her Majesty into it; I have answered that question. But it is incoherent for Members who support the motion to say, on the one hand, “Don’t look at the substance,” and, on the other hand, that the House should consider the substance.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to focus on the procedural nature of the motion. There are 10 leadership candidates and they have not yet been whittled down, yet this is an attempt to preserve a slot, through potentially one Member, just in case there is no appetite for whoever may lead the Conservative party. This is a premature business of the House motion. There is no need to secure 25 June when we have absolutely no idea who will be our next leader. Therefore, this should be made to wait until that decision is made.

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. A number of senior Members are on the cross-party Procedure Committee, whose job is to advise the House on changes to procedure, but this proposal has not been supplied to it even for cursory consultation. What is the purpose of having a Select Committee to look at the procedures of this House if it is not consulted on such a fundamental change?

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Change UK): Can the Secretary of State be very clear? Is he saying, on behalf of Her Majesty's Government, that they accept and agree that a new Prime Minister could prorogue Parliament, in the face of this place persistently voting against leaving without a deal, deliberately and specifically in order to impose that very no deal without this Parliament having any say—yes or no?

Stephen Barclay: I speak as a Minister on behalf of this Government, and this Prime Minister has made it clear where she and the Cabinet stand on Prorogation. I have also set out the risk of any deviation from that position, because there is consensus across the House on the need to avoid any suggestion of bringing Her Majesty into a royal prerogative issue. Incidentally, the Opposition day motion does not mention the word “Prorogation”. They propose a fundamental change but do not want to deal with the issue on which the House is voting, which is the motion's proposal to take over the Order Paper. That would be a fundamental change—Opposition Members who seek to be in government in future need to reflect on this—to the way in which this House operates, and it would happen without any consultation with the Procedure Committee. If people want to support that, what is the purpose of the Procedure Committee?

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am grateful to the Secretary of State, who has never been a member of the Procedure Committee, for giving way. It is not the Procedure Committee's role to pre-vet Opposition or Government motions that are put before the House. Will he come back to the central point? How would he feel if somebody proposed to prorogue the House to avoid the House having a voice on something about which he was in the majority? On this matter, he is in the minority.

Stephen Barclay: First, I am speaking on behalf of this Government. I do not know who the next Prime Minister will be or what decisions they will take. I have set out the risks of any deviation, and Mr Speaker has made it very clear, in terms of the way in which he would represent the will of the House, that there are a number of avenues. I would not want to interpret a judgment from the Chair, but the hon. Lady knows full well that in her exchange about Standing Order No. 24, the response from the Chair is germane to the issue. Any attempt at Prorogation would open the potential for SO 24 decisions.

The hon. Lady obviously did not want to deal with the text before the House, but let me consider what constitutional experts have said. Philip Cowley, professor at Queen Mary University's School of Politics, said that taking the Order Paper outside the Government's control would be

“one of the most fundamental shifts in the relationship between the government and parliament.”

[Interruption.] Opposition Members chunter, “We have already done this.” Yes, but let us look at how effective that was. When it was done by the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), it was justified on the basis of her concern about the imminent risk of no deal. The constitutional advice from people such as Philip Cowley and Vernon Bogdanor,

professor at King's College, London, who warned about the actions at the time, saying that they were "unconstitutional", was overridden because, we were told, the risk of no deal merited that emergency legislation.

Several hon. Members rose—

Stephen Barclay: Let me finish this point and I will then take further interventions. We were told that that constitutional change—passed in haste in a day—was required, without the involvement of the Procedure Committee, without due diligence and without proper consultation, to prevent no deal. However, what then happened in the House of Lords?

Anna Soubry: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I and many others are concerned about the time. This matter has been listed for an hour of debate. So far, the Front-Bench contributions have taken up 40 of the allotted 60 minutes. Some of us wish to speak, but in any event, we all agree that this is an important motion, properly tabled by Her Majesty's Opposition and worthy of debate. Can you assist us all, Mr Speaker, about the likely length of this important debate?

Mr Speaker: I do not want to state an expected length now. I will say that the observation about an hour is something that may have got abroad, but it is mere surmise. This debate could run until 8.33 pm, which I am sure will be more than adequate time for the right hon. Lady to make her contribution. I do not suggest that the debate will run for anything like that time, but the right hon. Lady should not be overly preoccupied with the idea that it will run for only an hour and that therefore the House would be deprived of the opportunity of hearing both the intellectual rigour of her prospective contribution and her mellifluous tones. There is every prospect that several people will be heard.

Stephen Barclay: Of course, if I was not taking so many interventions, I would conclude my remarks with more alacrity. However, I accept the right hon. Lady's request.

We were told last time that the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2019 had to be passed in a day in an unprecedented manner to stop no deal. Yet, Lord Pannick, when debating the measure, said that

"the restrictions on the Prime Minister's powers...may cause a no-deal exit"—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 8 April 2019; Vol. 797, c. 405.]

That was the premise of the amendments tabled by Lord Pannick and others. The ultimate irony is that, first, we had a situation whereby emergency legislation passed in haste had the opposite effect to what was intended, and secondly, we were told that, to stop something unconstitutional, we needed to embrace parliamentary procedure that the constitutional experts said was unconstitutional.

Mr Baron: In support of my right hon. Friend's case, may I return him to the question I posed to the shadow spokesman, to which we did not get an answer? Indeed, the only answer was that if the Government cannot control their business, they should step down. I ask one or two of our Conservative colleagues who are thinking of supporting the motion to reflect on that answer. I will try to get out of my right hon. Friend an answer that we could not get from the Opposition: if we go down this road, does not that set a dangerous precedent?

The Government control the business of the House so that they can honour election manifesto promises. If we cannot do that, they turn to dust.

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I pray in aid the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin). I always listen intently to him because he is a very experienced senior Member of the House. When the previous emergency legislation was passed, he said:

"We have been driven to this only in an extreme emergency".—[*Official Report*, 27 March 2019; Vol. 657, c. 342.]

That related to timing. Yet is difficult to say that there is "an extreme emergency" if the next Prime Minister is the candidate that my right hon. Friend supports.

Several hon. Members rose—

Stephen Barclay: I will take one last intervention and then, conscious of strictures, I will conclude.

Jim McMahon: Does the Secretary of State accept that part of the public's anger and frustration with Parliament, notwithstanding the back and forth and even individual contributions, is caused by our failure to resolve this matter? The feeling is, "a plague on all your houses". What message does it send if a power grab means that parliamentarians, who are sent here to make decisions, are instead sent home and excluded?

Stephen Barclay: I have voted for the withdrawal agreement three times; the hon. Gentleman has not. That is why there is frustration. However, that is not the primary issue before the House today. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central captured the matter last time we debated the subject. I hope that he does not mind my quoting him. He said:

"If we as a House are going to be asked to hand over day after day, we should know what we will be asked to vote on during those days."—[*Official Report*, 1 April 2019; Vol. 657, c. 809.]

It is the nature of what the House is being asked to support today that is the issue: the concentration of control in a motion from an individual and the Speaker together; the fact that the scope is potentially so widespread; the fact that it is at odds with the manifestos on which both main parties stood. In essence, the problem is that the motion is an attempt to circumvent some of the internal tension in the Labour party that is best played out in its next conference rather than through a decision of this House. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron). We heard from the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras what this is really about: it is to say that the Government cannot control the Order Paper. It is, therefore, a way to get rid of the Government. I ask my colleagues to be mindful of that when they cast their votes.

3.19 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak this afternoon for Scotland's national party in this debate. I congratulate the official Opposition and thank them for giving us this opportunity. I welcome the cross-party consensus that has seen, to my reckoning, every party bar one represented on the list of signatories to the motion. I congratulate the Secretary of State. I have always admired his ability, in best debating society style, to speak at great length without hesitation or

[Peter Grant]

repetition. This afternoon, however, he managed to add the achievement of not actually saying anything during the whole time he was on his feet.

Let us forget the cries of democratic and constitutional outrage at the very idea that Parliament should decide what Parliament is going to discuss in the future. As my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) pointed out, there are very successful and highly regarded Parliaments not too far from this one where Parliament sets the business, and that seems to work perfectly well. The constitutional experts say it is a bad idea. I wonder what the predecessors of those same constitutional experts thought of the “ridiculous” notion that women should be allowed to vote and sit in this Parliament. No doubt they were telling us that that was a dangerous precedent, too.

Ms Angela Eagle: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me that the Secretary of State appeared to be telling us that he agreed it would be wrong to drag the Crown into Parliament by having a Prorogation as political as that suggested by some of the Tory leadership candidates? Does he therefore agree that passing this motion merely puts into our Standing Orders for that particular date an insurance policy to prevent the more unscrupulous of those who are currently standing for the Tory leadership from doing precisely what they are threatening in hustings to do?

Peter Grant: The hon. Lady makes a very valid point. I think the more important point is that the motion would allow, on one particular day in two weeks’ time, the elected Members of this Parliament to decide what we will discuss. The Secretary of State and others have said that that would prevent the Government from putting their business on the Order Paper. The Government cannae tell us what they want to be discussing on Monday, never mind in two weeks’ time! Given the stuff they have been using to pad out the agenda over the past several weeks, they can hardly claim that there is a backlog. Well, there is a backlog of massively important proposed legislation that needs to come through, but there is absolutely no sign of it.

I will tell you, Mr Speaker, what would be a democratic and constitutional outrage. It would be an outrage for any Government, either through deliberate malice or sheer incompetence, to plunge us into a disastrous no-deal Brexit against the interests of our four nations, against the will of Parliament, and now, since 23 May, quite clearly against the will of the people. It would be an outrage for the expressed will of 62% of the sovereign citizens of my nation to be cast aside as if they neither existed nor mattered. It would be an outrage if 3 million citizens on these islands saw their basic rights curtailed and undermined as a result of a flawed and corrupted referendum that they were banned from participating in.

All those outrages would pale into nothing, however, compared with the outrage if the first act of a Prime Minister, appointed in an election in which less than one quarter of 1% of the population was allowed to take part, was to abolish this Parliament and reinstate it only when it was too late for us to carry out the duty for which we were elected: the duty of pulling

our four nations back from what everyone in this Chamber knows would be an economic and social catastrophe.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) asked my hon. Friend a question about Prorogation. The last two times it has been used constitutionally—for instance, in the Commonwealth nation of Canada—has been to hide the utter incompetence of the elected Government who were about to lose office. Can my hon. Friend remind the House again that what the motion proposes is a constitutional norm of parliamentary procedure and that the only way to do it is to vote for the Opposition’s motion?

Peter Grant: Absolutely. I agree entirely. Of course, we were told by the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) that the motion is premature. I wonder if she could tell us on which future allocated Opposition day she would like the official Opposition to bring this motion forward, given that they were told last week that they have had their allocation for this Session and that there will not be another Opposition day.

Mrs Main: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have just been asked to nominate a day. Mr Speaker, you are always a friend of all the Back Benchers. It seems to me that there is a worry about a particular candidate that Opposition Members may or may not like the Order Paper to reflect. If there is a worry about having a choice of how we wish to leave the European Union, I am sure you, Mr Speaker, would find a way to ensure there was parliamentary time. At the moment, however, we do not know what it is we are voting to have a day for. It is a fear of one or two of the candidates. If their fears were to be recognised, I am absolutely certain you would facilitate a debate.

Mr Speaker: I always seek to facilitate the House and to ensure that the full range of opinion is expressed. These are matters of debate and, notwithstanding the sedulous efforts to entice me into contributing to it, I feel I must exercise a self-denying ordinance. The hon. Lady has made her own point in her own way, with alacrity.

Peter Grant: I say once again that it is not premature for the Opposition to have tabled the motion today. This is the last chance they have, and I, for one, am very grateful they have decided to take that chance. The reason that we need to give Parliament the chance, just once, to set the agenda is that the Government have shown no inclination whatever to do anything to prevent a no-deal Brexit.

Why would a no-deal Brexit be so bad? Let us look at what some of the key drivers of the UK economy have been saying recently. Sydney Nash, from the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, said:

“For the automotive sector, no deal is simply not an option. Hearing politicians promote a no deal does not fill any of our companies with confidence nor does it fill international investors with confidence. Our strong desire is that no deal be taken off the table.”

Seamus Nevin, at Make UK—many Members will know it better by its previous name, the Engineering Employers Federation—said:

“Our members are quite blunt, they say that a no deal scenario would be nothing short of an act of economic vandalism”.

Tim Rycroft, at the Food and Drink Federation said:

“No deal is something our members are most unanimous about. 45 % say no deal would lead to redundancies.”

Nick Van Westenholz, director of EU exit and international trade at the National Farmers Union, said:

“No Deal would be disastrous for some sectors...It is frankly worrying that that we see it being put forward as a plausible scenario to leave without a deal in October.”

Those are not choice quotes from selected commentators that I have picked up over the last three or four years. All those things were said today, in this Parliament, in evidence to the Brexit Select Committee just over six hours ago. That is what these major economic drivers are saying right now. It is about time the Government and some of their Back Benchers were prepared to listen.

Steve Brine: I realise that the Scottish National party does not like to respect referendum results either north of the border or across the UK, but when those eminent witnesses were giving evidence to the Select Committee today—I have heard from others about that evidence and I share their view; I do not want a no deal, which is why I voted for a deal three times—what did the hon. Gentleman say to them about why he kept voting against the deal? That is what has put us in this position.

Peter Grant: I have enormous respect for the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), the Chair of the Exiting the European Union Committee, on which I serve, and I know that he would show latitude where possible, but it would be a bit much if Committee members starting taking questions from those giving evidence, as the hon. Gentleman suggested. I say this to him and some of his hon. Friends: if they want to throw out accusations about failing to respect the result of a referendum that meant that Scotland has to keep sending Members of Parliament to sit in the Palace of Westminster, doing that to an SNP MP, or any Scottish MP, while they are delivering a speech in the Palace of Westminster, when we are only here because we do accept the result of that referendum, is not the most credible time for it. I have said often enough that I respect the right of the people to speak in a referendum. I also respect the right of the people to say that they want another go, and I not only expect but demand that the result of the 2016 referendum in my nation of sovereign citizens be respected, rather than simply laughed out of court time and again by the Conservative party.

We already know from previous work done by the Confederation of British Industry and others that the financial cost to Scotland of a no-deal Brexit is more than the entire amount we spend every year on our precious national health service. Up to 100,000 people could lose their jobs, although in this place, some people seem a lot more concerned about who is going to get one job than about who is going to lose the other 100,000.

There was a bit of protest from Conservative Members when I said that a no-deal Brexit was against the clearly expressed will of the people, but it is true. In a democracy, one of the key ways that we find out the will of the people is through the ballot box. For nearly three years, we knew that about 17.5 million people wanted to leave the EU, but none of us knew or had any right to assume what kind of Brexit they wanted. I cry shame on all those who had the arrogance to think that they knew what the 17.5 million people wanted.

We still do not know what Brexit they all want, but thanks to the EU elections on 23 May, we know what they do not want, because the same people who voted in 2016 to leave the European Union decisively rejected the parties whose manifestos consisted of a no-deal Brexit. This was the first time that people had ever been given the chance to turn out and vote decisively for a no-deal Brexit, and even those who voted leave avoided the no-deal parties in their millions: 34%—barely one in three—of leave voters supported the no-deal parties. Of the 17.4 million people who voted leave, 11.5 million refused to vote for hard, no-deal Brexit parties on 23 May.

Dr Whitford: Is it not also the case that the current Prime Minister went to the country in March 2017 with her approach, which was towards a hard Brexit, and ended up losing her majority and with a minority Government, so people had already expressed their will?

Peter Grant: My hon. Friend makes a very valid point. Unfortunately, on that occasion, as on too many occasions, the soon-to-be former Prime Minister was listening to nobody apart from her own reflection in the mirror. It is not even as though the Brexit party can claim that 11.5 million people wanted a no-deal Brexit but did not vote for it because they disagreed with some other aspect of the Brexit party's policies, because it does not have any other policies for people to disagree with.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am sure that the hon. Gentleman, like me and the rest of the House, recalls the Prime Minister saying before the general election that she was being obstructed by Parliament in getting her deal. That was put to the public, and as we all know, she got her result from the public: she lost her majority. On another point that he made, like him, we have consulted employers, company owners and so forth and they want a deal, as I am sure he would agree.

Peter Grant: If we asked a lot of business leaders just now what their ideal option would be if they had a completely free choice, I think most would say, “Don't leave.” Those who were pushing for us to accept the Prime Minister's deal previously made it perfectly clear that that was because they thought it was either the Prime Minister's deal or no deal. If they were presented with a choice of the Prime Minister's Brexit or no Brexit, they might give a very different decision.

The people had the chance to vote for no deal and chose not to. We can no longer say that pursuing or being willing to allow a no-deal Brexit is the will of the people. The people spoke on 23 May just as firmly and decisively as they did in June 2016. Those who, for the last three years, have been telling us that we have to listen to what people said in June 2016 better start listening to what people said in May 2019, because it was not just about the failure of the no-deal Brexit parties to get anything like a majority of support. The parties who were unambiguous in saying that they were standing on a manifesto of “Stop Brexit”, without exception, had record-breaking successes. The SNP had our best ever European election result, as a result of which, I am proud to say, my good friend Alyn Smith is president of the European Free Alliance and is likely to become the vice-president of a group that has almost 50% more MEPs than the one that Mr Farage wants to lead. Plaid Cymru had its best ever European elections,

[Peter Grant]

as did the Liberal Democrats and the Alliance party in Northern Ireland. The Greens managed only their second best ever, but it is 30 years since they were anywhere near the vote that they got this time. Meanwhile in Scotland, the Tories went into these elections telling people in Scotland to send a message to Nicola Sturgeon; I can confidently say that Nicola Sturgeon has got the message.

The purpose of today's motion is to force the Government to do what any rational, sane and democracy-respecting Government would already have done. We are trying to force the Government to give Parliament a choice and give direction to a Government who are leaderless, rudderless, drifting and utterly lost. The motion is designed to give Parliament a chance to stop a no-deal Brexit, and to stop what would in effect be the non-military coup against Parliament that some would-be Prime Ministers are already openly advocating.

In January, in March and in April 2019, this Parliament voted to take no deal off the table. On 23 May, the people made it clear that they want no deal taken off the table. This morning, some of our most important industries pleaded with us to take no deal off the table. Our duty could not be clearer: whatever our individual views on the European Union might be, it is time to get no deal off the table, and we can start that process by supporting the motion today.

Mr Kenneth Clarke *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Oh! I had not anticipated the right hon. and learned Gentleman, but I call Mr Kenneth Clarke. May I just say that, notwithstanding the immense celebrity of the right hon. and learned Gentleman, I am hoping for very brief speeches, if possible?

3.35 pm

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Mr Speaker, I am sorry that I surprised you. I am not sure that I wrote in beforehand, but I shall endeavour to be brief. I intend to be brief because there are not many complicated issues here.

The first issue to which I want to respond is the procedural point that the Secretary of State wisely tried to retreat into, citing a few constitutional experts saying how outrageous it is for the House of Commons to try to take control of the Order Paper. Indeed, that very rarely happens but, with great respect to much more distinguished experts than me, such as Vernon Bogdanor, we have already demonstrated once that procedures already exist, which can be used—as they were by the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper)—in very exceptional circumstances, for the House as a whole to take command of a day's business. Of course, the reason it did not happen for many years is that most Governments have had a comfortable majority on every conceivable subject, so there was not the faintest prospect of their losing control of the Order Paper and nobody challenged them. However, we are in exceptional times and the precedent we have already created is a perfectly valuable one.

Sir William Cash: Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr Clarke: I will when I have finished my first point.

This cannot bring down the Government. Of course, if the Government are defeated, it will be open to someone to bring a motion of confidence tomorrow. However, at present, the Government would carry a motion of confidence, so all we are doing—the majority of the House, if we do—is insisting that we want to bring some clarity to the present debate, and I would say some sanity. We want to give some reassurance to people in business up and down the country who are very worried and take the opportunity again to rule out the idea of leaving with no deal. We certainly want to rule out the idea of proroguing Parliament indefinitely, so that the Prime Minister of the day can run a semi-presidential system for a bit and put in place what he or she wants, without any parliamentary majority.

This is not a great threat to the constitutional foundations of the country. This does not actually threaten the future stability of Governments. and I am sure that, if we were in opposition, we would be supporting it without the slightest demur.

Sir William Cash: Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr Clarke: I will give way, but I am about to finish the procedural point.

In fact, when we were in opposition, David Cameron asked me to chair a committee to advise him on a lot of constitutional issues—with Sir George Young and Andrew Tyrie, who have now moved on to the upper House, and others—and to make recommendations. We actually advocated, and David Cameron in opposition accepted, that we should give the House more control over the business of the House. We started, eventually, this business of the Backbench Business Committee determining the business of the House for a day.

In office, we took a slightly different perspective. I am afraid that was then reduced to the Backbench Business Committee producing harmless motions and the Government never voting on them, with only one-line Whips. In my opinion, one day, there might be a Government and a Parliament so adventurous as to contemplate giving more control to the House as a whole over its own business. However, this Parliament seems to prefer to get steadily weaker, rather than stronger, and I do not think that day has yet dawned. At this stage, as that is all I am going to say on the procedural point, I will give way.

Sir William Cash: On that procedural point, the reality is that Standing Order No. 14 gives precedence to Government business for very good reasons. It is in accordance with our constitutional conventions and the Standing Orders that the Government have a majority and that, in those circumstances—[*Interruption.*] They do. With the confidence and supply agreement with the DUP, we have a Government and that is the point. We have a Prime Minister. This motion does no more than open the door to the possibility that, by some permutation or other, there may be some argument about a Prorogation or, indeed, about no deal. But that is not what this motion is about; it is an open-door policy—nothing more or less.

Mr Clarke: Governments pursue policies for which they have a parliamentary majority. I am going to be brief, so I shall not widen what I think is the very important broader constitutional procedural field.

It is now argued by many people that this Parliament has no powers, really, except when it is passing legislation, and I think that that is what is contemplated here. Unless a statute is passed to change the law, the Government can regard motions in Parliament as a mere expression of opinion. I regard that as nonsense; I regard it as dangerous nonsense; and the sooner it is shot down the better. It has emerged in the last two or three years precisely because Parliament is fragmented: both parties are shattered on several policies, so people are trying again to get round the problems.

Parties form a Government when they can command a majority in a vote of confidence. They can then only pursue policies for which they have a majority in the House of Commons, and continue to have a majority in the House of Commons. It is preposterous to start reinterpreting our unwritten constitution on the basis that no one ever intended that the Government should have to abandon a policy on which it is defeated in the House of Commons. That is complete nonsense. The worst thing to do—because one of the candidates at least fears that she would be defeated if she pursued her policy—is to send Parliament away and have no Parliament at all. I think that I have already made clear, in an intervention, my views on the Prorogation point. I think that the sooner the House makes this clear, takes a day to make it clear and to make it illegal to contemplate doing that—and gives Parliament a role to stop it—the better.

Leaving with no deal has, as I recall, been ruled out with increasing majorities on the three occasions on which we have voted on it. With this mad debate going on in the country at the moment, it is obviously high time Parliament reasserted the fundamental basis of what is going on—that there is no majority in the House for no deal. Apart from those who defend the desirability of leaving with no deal, which no one has done in today's debate so far, I cannot see why people are going to such lengths to resist that.

The Government's policy, for which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State speaks, is to oppose leaving with no deal. I agree with him that we can say to the Opposition, "Well, we had a deal and you would not let it go through." I supported the Prime Minister's latest attempt to surround that deal with suggestions that I think should have been supported by Opposition Members who agree with my hon. Friends and me on a soft Brexit. I have an eccentric view that they would have been supported.

We have all constantly been attending plotting meetings. I have attended meetings at which Labour Members were agreeing to vote for the Second Reading of that Bill. What we were plotting was what amendments we would pass to put in improvements and safeguards. That could have prospered, but I am afraid that the Prime Minister preferred to do all her dealings, all the way through, with the members of the European Research Group. She always made concessions to them and eventually they told her that she had to go, so she said she was resigning. So we are now in this position.

I personally believe—it may be an eccentric belief—that the Prime Minister could have secured a majority for the deal as she had finally modified it, in an attempt to

get cross-party support. It is obvious that the deal that we all need will only be achieved by any Prime Minister when we face up to the need for cross-party support to get around the party divisions. Both parties must accept that a minority will rebel against any deal that comes forward, but we could probably get a majority of the House to vote down the Labour left and the Tory right and actually pass something that is in the national interest. That, I think, is the main objective that really lies behind today's debate. To listen to all these arguments about why, for pedantic procedural and textual reasons, we should reject it is, I am afraid, to take—not for the first time—a rather bizarre perspective on the huge and historic events in which we are involved. The House really has to take some control.

My final point is this. It might even improve the quality of the leadership debate that is going on in my party—and it needs to be improved—if we forced some reality into the exchanges between the extremely distinguished candidates who are vying for the privilege of being the next Prime Minister.

3.45 pm

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): It is a privilege to speak in this debate as one of the signatories to the motion, but I want to start by paying tribute to the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin), who has not just signed this motion but anticipated the potential threat to the country, and indeed the sovereignty of the House, from proroguing and has applied his mind to a procedure for stopping it. We should all be very grateful to him. Of course although today is an Opposition day, this motion is supported by seven different parties. I hope and expect that a significant number of Conservatives will support it, not because they share my view that we should be stopping Brexit, but because they are concerned about the sovereignty of Parliament and the consequences of no deal.

Fingers have been pointed at the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), who is not present. He is probably not alone in advocating Prorogation as a solution to this problem, but actually he has done us a favour and we should be grateful to him for highlighting a risk that might not otherwise have been apparent. I believe the real risk here is that one of the mainstream leadership candidates, having made unqualified commitments to remove Britain from the EU by 31 October, encounters the same arithmetic as his predecessor and encounters the constraints of the withdrawal agreement and, to avoid the humiliation of the present Prime Minister, feels obliged to resort to drastic action. That is the risk that we face and I am grateful to the right hon. Member for West Dorset for starting a process of providing a necessary safety valve.

It has already been agreed that we do not want an extensive review of all the arguments for and against no deal. They have been endlessly rehearsed and we will get plenty of time to rehearse them again. But in the few minutes I want to take, it is worth drawing attention to a couple of recent developments that underline just how dangerous that concept is.

We have just had a visit from President Trump, who has reminded us about the instability of the world trading system. Those who advocate leaving without a deal place their faith in something called WTO rules. We now know that these WTO rules are worthless.

[Sir Vince Cable]

The President of the United States attaches as much value to the WTO as he does to the European Union. He wants to destroy it. He is undermining it. He is failing to provide judges to dispute panels, which no longer work. So WTO rules are not worth the paper they are written on. That is the world into which the extreme advocates of no deal want to plunge the United Kingdom.

The other point, which is highly topical, relates to the leadership competition within the Conservative party and the various fiscal bounties that are being offered to us. I suppose that, as an ageing pensioner on a high income, I should be deeply indebted to the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) for thinking about me when he formulated his tax policy, but actually he is one of several candidates who threatens to blow a very large hole in the Chancellor's provisions to deal with a no-deal Brexit.

It could be argued that the Chancellor is excessively conservative. None the less, he is sufficiently prudent to be aware that a no-deal Brexit will do significant harm to the economy and to fiscal receipts and that there has to be some reserve provision. However, we now enter a period of danger in which that reserve could well be blown on promised tax cuts. Among the many adverse consequences of a no-deal Brexit—not just those we are familiar with around the supply of drugs, the shock to trade and the impact on the economy—is a serious fiscal crisis leading in turn to currency devaluation and other economic consequences.

We will no doubt debate many times the consequences of no deal, but the risks are becoming more and more apparent. We should be grateful to those who anticipate those dangers and seek to prevent us from getting anywhere near them.

3.49 pm

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): I am delighted to follow the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable). Much that needed to be said has already been said, so I shall not tediously repeat it. I want to make two points that I do not think have been sufficiently brought out so far in the debate and that might influence hon. Members who are still undecided about how to vote in a few minutes' time.

First, almost everyone who has spoken has agreed that it would be wrong for the UK to leave the EU without a deal, without Parliament having the chance for a decisive vote. We have no way of telling in advance how that vote would go, or whether Parliament would have an alternative. It has rightly been pointed out that without an alternative we could not prevent no deal from occurring, and it also is questionable whether there would be a majority for any alternative. However, almost everyone has agreed that we need to leave open the option for Parliament to make its mind up in such a decisive vote.

It has been pointed out repeatedly that one possible means of preventing such a vote is a Prorogation. I am indeed concerned about that, but I accept that we might be in luck and have a Prime Minister who does not seek to use that route. However, I want to draw hon. Members' attention to a point that has not come out so far, which is that Prorogation is not by any means the only way in which an incoming Prime Minister who was determined

to leave with or without a deal—as many have put it—could avoid having a decisive vote. They would not need to go to the lengths of Prorogation; in fact, they would not need to do anything. If they introduced nothing to the House of Commons to give us an opportunity for such a vote, the House would not, in the absence of this motion and what follows it, have any such opportunity.

Sir William Cash: My right hon. Friend has just referred to this motion “and what follows it”. This is a phantom motion about a phantom Bill. Will he illustrate exactly what we are meant to be talking about, as he did before, because a few months ago there were five Bills—we ended up with a No. 5 Bill? Will he please tell us what specific wording he would import into this motion if it were to be carried to the next stage?

Sir Oliver Letwin: My hon. Friend will not need to wait very long. If, but only if, this motion is passed today, it will be proper for those who put it forward to publish a sixth Bill, which it will be the job of the House to inspect and on which the House will take a view. It could be that the Bill will be defeated, but that will be a question for the democracy of our Parliament.

Sir William Cash *rose*—

Sir Oliver Letwin: I will not give way. I am sorry.

The point I am trying to make is that it is not necessary to prorogue to prevent a vote. The incoming Prime Minister would simply need to avoid taking any action. In those circumstances, we would leave on 31 October, and only after that would we need emergency legislation to catch up with the fact that we had left—

Sir William Cash *rose*—

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind) *rose*—

Sir Oliver Letwin: I will not give way. I am terribly sorry, but I promised Mr Speaker that I would be quick and I am going to be quick.

We would then all be forced to vote for that emergency legislation because we could not possibly leave the country exposed to the fact that it had left without a deal and without due legislative preparation. So it is perfectly possible for an incoming Prime Minister to avoid any decisive vote unless we force one, and that is the purpose of reserving the day.

My second point relates to that, and again I do not think it has fully come out in the debate so far. My right hon. Friend the Brexit Secretary has said that there is no reason to act now because there is no emergency—we are not facing immediate withdrawal without a deal, as we were when the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and I put forward measures to prevent that and to ensure that we sought an extension—and of course he is right: we have until 31 October. That sounds like a long way away, but in parliamentary terms it is not. If we do not do these things now and on 25 June, and in the House of Lords thereafter, and if we do not have in place a process that leads to forcing a decisive vote in this House in early September on whatever the new Prime Minister puts forward, there will be no legislative time to do this, because the House traditionally sits for only two weeks in September and a couple of weeks in October.

That is well known to incoming Prime Ministers, and all the candidates are filled with sagacity and understanding of Parliament, so they will know perfectly well that they only have to occupy four weeks with doing nothing and we will be out. So, although it is not a fast-burning fuse, it is a bomb, and the fuse is already burning. If we do not put the fuse out now, we will not be able to disassemble the bomb in September or October.

Sir William Cash: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir Oliver Letwin: I am terribly sorry, but I will not.

That is why it is wrong to say that this proposal is premature. It may be right or wrong to vote for this motion this evening, but it is the only time we are ever going to get, and I hope that my hon. Friends and Opposition Members who are wavering about whether to support it recognise that they will have to look back if they do not support it now. If we fail, as we may well do this afternoon, they will have to look back on that as the direct cause of, in all likelihood, our leaving on 31 October without a deal. It is because I do not wish to have that on my conscience that I have taken the uncomfortable step of signing a motion that has at the head of it the name of the Leader of the Opposition, whose party I do not follow and with whose policies I generally profoundly and radically disagree. However, this is an issue so important that it transcends party politics, and I owe it to my fellow countrymen to ensure that we do not descend into a no-deal exit without Parliament having had a decisive vote.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I will apply at this point an informal limit of eight minutes on Back-Bench speeches, but I say to the next Member to speak that there is no obligation to speak up to that limit.

3.56 pm

Nick Boles (Grantham and Stamford) (Ind): Two groups of right hon. and hon. Members will be finding today's vote especially difficult. Many friends on the Conservative Benches will feel torn between their loyalty to their party and their clear understanding of the national interest. I know as well as anyone the great strain that they may be feeling this afternoon. I, too, was an instinctive loyalist—someone who towed the party line, ambitious for high office. I did not see anything wrong in that, and on most questions, I still do not see anything wrong in it, and nor is there anything ignoble about the desire to stay on good terms with the members of one's local party.

For each of us, however, there comes a moment and an issue that demands that we put such concerns to one side and do the uncomfortable thing, because we know that our constituents' best interests demand it. I do not believe that any hon. Member with a concern for the welfare of sheep farmers or for people working in car factories will be able to look them in the eye after a no-deal Brexit has led to the decimation of Britain's lamb exports and the destruction of thousands of highly skilled and well-paid manufacturing jobs. That is surely reason enough to support the motion today.

The other group for whom today's vote is hard is Labour Members who represent constituencies that voted by a clear majority to leave the European Union.

They feel that they are duty bound to ensure that the UK does leave the EU and are worried that a vote for today's motion will be misrepresented as an attempt to block Brexit. My constituents voted the same way, and I feel the same obligation, but today's motion does not block Brexit—not even close. Today's motion would secure an opportunity to debate a Bill on 25 June, so that Parliament, as my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) said, can vote in September on the new Prime Minister's plan for Brexit.

Sir William Cash: The hon. Gentleman refers to a Bill, but he does not know what it will contain, or perhaps he does. Will he enlighten us? Does it not really attempt to unwind the repeal of the 1972 Act, in so far as it deals with the question of deal or no deal? That is what the law says.

Nick Boles: The right hon. Member for West Dorset answered that question very adequately. The Bill simply provides Parliament with an opportunity in September to vote on the new Prime Minister's plan for Brexit so that we do not leave with a no-deal Brexit on 31 October, as the law currently provides, without Parliament having had a chance to vote.

If my old friends on the Conservative Benches, the true champions of one nation, and my new friends on the Labour Benches, the representatives of thousands of decent leave voters in the midlands and the north, find a way to support today's motion, much more than a day of the Order Paper will have been won: this House will have seized the chance to defend its rights and freedoms against an arrogant Executive hellbent on implementing an extreme policy; the British people will have been given the opportunity to slow their leaders' lemming-like rush towards a no-deal Brexit; and the world will have been given reason to believe that the psychodrama of the Tory party's leadership contest does not define us as a nation, that Britain has not taken leave of its senses and that the House of Commons is a place in which grown-ups come together to take responsibility for securing the future of our country.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind the House of the informal limit of eight minutes. If it were breached, I would have to impose a stricter formal limit, and I hope not to have to do that.

4.1 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Basically, I have already described this as a phantom motion for a phantom Bill. We do not know what the Bill will contain. We have had various suggestions that it may contain some elements of what has been proposed by some of the so-called leadership candidates. I do not know what they will propose by the end of the process.

What I can say, however, is that this is, as I said earlier, an open-door motion. It opens the door for any Bill, of any kind, to take precedence over Government business, which is inconceivable as a matter of constitutional convention. I put it to the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) that the reality is that there is not a single constitutional authority he could cite to disprove the proposition I have put not just once over the past six months to a year

[Sir William Cash]

on this very question, which is that our constitution operates on the basis of parliamentary government and not government by Parliament.

Dr Whitford: The hon. Gentleman has just said that he has no idea what a future Prime Minister will propose, which is exactly the point of this motion. A future Prime Minister could prorogue Parliament or, as the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) pointed out, simply tie us up and do nothing. This motion would simply prevent either of those options.

Sir William Cash: I have great respect for the hon. Lady—she sits on my Committee, and I am happy that that should be the case—and I understand what she says, but, as I said earlier, the reality is that this is a phantom motion for a phantom Bill. The real objective is to unwind the provisions set out in article 50, which is supposed to operate according to our constitutional requirements and, subject only to an extension of exit day, provides for the repeal of the 1972 Act. That Act is a bundle of all the laws, all the treaties and all the provisions, including the Lisbon treaty Act, which is part of our domestic legislation and prescribes that when we get to the end of the two-year period, that is it—subject only to an extension of exit day.

For practical purposes, there is no other way to interpret what may be in the pipeline. We all know that, and I do not know why we need to be coy. It is perfectly clear that this is an attempt by the Labour party to make political capital during a leadership election, and I do not blame it for having a shot at that. However, it is utterly irresponsible to use this procedure in a way that would enable the unwinding of the law of the land, as expressed in an Act agreed on the basis of a referendum that was itself dependent on the authority of a sovereign Act of Parliament to give the people the right to decide whether they were to leave or to remain in the European Union. That was passed in this House by six to one. It was then followed by the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act 2017, which was passed by some 499 to 120.

With great respect to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), we now move on to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. I very well remember what he said to me as we were coming to the Third Reading of that Bill, and I do not think he would disagree with this fair description of our conversation. He said, “You know, I’ve never actually voted against a provision of this kind before. I’ve never voted in a way that would be against the interests of what I perceive to be the European Union and its objectives.” I understand that, because he has been totally consistent, and I respect him for that. But the reality is that he did vote for that Bill on Third Reading and so did every other Member on the Conservative side.

The phantom Bill is all about attempting to unravel all that, although we have not yet seen the wording. We did see it before when we had Bill Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5, which ended up with the one that was passed by a minuscule majority. This is an attempt to unravel the process. I understand why people might want to do

that, but the question is one of legitimacy. I also add that the role of the House of Lords in this context is completely unacceptable, as it has no legitimacy whatsoever to deal with a matter of this importance, given its unrepresentative character; the House of Lords is not elected, and this is essentially an issue about the election of Members of Parliament and the wishes of the electorate. That is what the referendum Act was about and it was what the manifestos were about.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Is the hon. Gentleman arguing before the House today that it is illegitimate for the House of Commons, if it wishes to pass this motion today, which will happen only if the majority vote for it, and then pass any legislation that is introduced on 25 June, which will get through only if the majority vote for it, to seek to prevent the Government from taking us out of the EU without a deal? It strikes me that if that is the will of the House, it is democratic for the House to seek to do that.

Sir William Cash: I have to disagree with the right hon. Gentleman, for this reason: the decision that was taken as I have just described and the vote that was passed by a significant majority on 23 June 2016 was authorised by an Act of Parliament. Therefore, the voters were given the opportunity because this House decided to abrogate its right to make those decisions. That was a deliberate choice taken by this Parliament, by six to one, to ensure that those people have the right to make that decision. That is the basis on which I rest my argument, because ultimately any attempt to bypass that raises the most dangerous questions relating to the nature of our democracy. We have had many warnings as to what might happen if this were to be unwound, and it is my concern that this phantom Bill will do just that, for the reasons that lie behind the right hon. Gentleman’s question and intervention. He does not want Brexit at all, and I said this on Second Reading of the withdrawal Bill; I did not believe that Members of this House who were pretending that they were prepared to allow Brexit had any intention of allowing it to take place. That is what this is really all about.

I also take the gravest exception to what is being done by some Conservative colleagues who voted in line with the Government’s policy in the manifesto to pass enactments that led to our ending up with the withdrawal Act, which I happen to have drafted in its original form, early in 2016. To have that completely undermined and unwound by their reversing their votes is completely unacceptable. It is unacceptable for people to vote for a vast and important question of this kind and then to unravel it completely by subsequent manoeuvres, including the use of phantom motions and phantom Bills. I believe very strongly that that is unacceptable. It is completely inconsistent with our constitutional role as the mother of Parliaments. It is inconsistent with every single aspect of our constitutional conventions, and therefore as far as I am concerned the motion should not be passed.

It would be unwise—I will go further and say it would be a disgrace—for Members who voted for the withdrawal Act to turn around and say, “But we’re going to try to reverse it” on the basis of a Bill that does not even exist at the moment yet about which they have prattled on right the way through these proceedings.

4.10 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): On the subject of phantom Bills, there is one that has haunted this subject for many years now and he has just had nine minutes of debate time, so I shall try to be brief.

First, I thank my Front-Bench colleagues, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) and my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman), who has listened with distinction to every complaint I have had about the Labour party's Brexit process over the past two years and has done so with good grace and a smile on her face, which is difficult when talking to me.

I very much enjoyed the speech by the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles). He said that representatives of constituencies like mine have to be able to look their constituents in the eye when it comes to manufacturing jobs and the viability of the traditional industries, but I fear we have already passed that point. I have been asked time and again by the British Ceramic Confederation and those in the ceramics industries to vote for a deal. They have asked me to vote for a deal so that they can make preparations for the future. Food manufacturers in my constituency have told me that they need me to make a decision so that we can get past stockpiling. They have told me time and again that they need a resolution.

Although I understand exactly what the hon. Gentleman said, I have not done it: on the three occasions when the opportunity presented itself to me, I have not voted for a deal. The most recent time, on 29 March, I followed my party line and would not support the deal that was put in front of me. I made a mistake: on that day I should have voted for a deal. I will now vote for a deal if one is brought forward, because it is inconceivable that we can continue with this line of debate in which we seek to make the decisions that we want to make and avoid making the decisions that we have to make.

I do not object to the content of the motion, but I will not be voting for it. I shall abstain and withhold my vote, but not because I believe that no deal is something we should play with or that no deal is acceptable. I have voted continually to prevent no deal—I have ruled it out and taken it off the table—but in doing so all I have actually done is make the table longer and put it further away. Delaying Brexit does not stop no deal being the ultimate default endpoint; it just pushes it further into the future.

We do not have a European Commission until 1 November, so any talk of renegotiation and future deals is completely pie in the sky. As many leadership candidates can talk about that as they wish, but by the point that the new Commission is available to endorse any changes, the date on which we exit will have passed. The choice that faces this House is not more parliamentary procedure and chicanery to quell our souls and let us feel we have all done the best we could to prevent no deal. We have to make the simple choice that is in front of us: do we want a deal or do we wish to revoke? If the answer is to revoke, the House can make its views known—there are plenty of mechanisms for doing so.

Anna Soubry: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gareth Snell: No. I am going to carry on because of the time.

If the answer is to support a deal, I say to members of my own party that we will have been responsible for a no—

Dr Phillip Lee (Bracknell) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gareth Snell: No. I am really sorry, but I am going to carry on.

Dr Lee: On that small point.

Gareth Snell: No, I am not giving way.

We will be responsible for a no-deal Brexit by default, because of our inability to make a decision. That will not be helped if we allow ourselves today to be drawn down this route, with a two-clause Bill that brings us towards a date in September when something might come forward.

The fact is that there is a deal. It is not a great deal, but it is what we are presented with. We can make decisions only on things that are presented to us. Until we face up to that, instead of messing around on what we want to do, we will make no progress, and my manufacturing constituents may be at the mercy of no deal. That will be the responsibility of everybody in this House who refuses to decide between the deal and revoking.

4.14 pm

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I listened carefully to the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), just as I listened to what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union said at the Dispatch Box and to my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash). Each of them has picked up an issue and said to the House, "What is proposed is unusual and rather unsatisfactory. Let's leave it; the House can do something else later," but anybody who pays any attention to the way our Standing Orders operate ought to realise that there is no other opportunity than this, if the House wishes to assert its collective authority and be guaranteed a say in the event of an incoming Prime Minister wishing to take us out of the EU on a no-deal Brexit. There might be a desire to support that, but my point is that we will have no say. On that point, I am afraid that the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central is absolutely, wholly mistaken.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State produced a series of obfuscatory facts that entirely glossed over the reality, which is that the Government can control the Order Paper between now and 31 October in a way that allows them to take us out of the EU with no deal, if an incoming Prime Minister—my right hon. Friend is in no position to speak for them—chooses to do that. That is the reality facing the House.

Throughout this whole unhappy business of Brexit, I have tried to ensure a process that avoids chaos. I say this to my hon. Friends on the Conservative Benches: if we get to a point where a Prime Minister is intent on taking us out of the EU with no deal, the only way of stopping that Prime Minister will be to bring down their Government. I have to say here and now that I will not hesitate to do that, if that is attempted, even if it

[Mr Dominic Grieve]

means resigning the Whip and leaving the party. I will not allow this country to be taken out of the EU on a no-deal Brexit without the approval of this House, and without going back to the country and asking it if that is what it wants.

I desire the best for my party as a loyal member of it, and this is probably the last opportunity for a sensible way of influencing the outcome. Of course it is imperfect. The truth is that we need a hook on which to hang a Bill, so it was inevitable that the wording would be as it is today. There is no other way of doing this. It might be nicer if there were, but there is not. That, quite plainly, is the choice. I was elected Member of Parliament for Beaconsfield to represent my constituents' interests. No deal is not in their interests, nor is there the smallest shred of evidence that there is a majority for that chaotic and appalling proposal, yet I have to face up to the fact that some people who wish to lead my party appear to believe that it is a viable option—indeed, appear to believe that they cannot become leader of the party if that is an option that they are not prepared to put forward. That is all part of a process, I am afraid, of further deceit, which is slowly swallowing up democracy in this country and the reputation of this House.

I shall support the motion. I disagree on most things with the Leader of the Opposition, and I disagree fundamentally with every tenet of his philosophical outlook, but this is the only opportunity we have. I will not say to my children and grandchildren, “When it came to it, I just decided to give up.” I will not do that.

4.19 pm

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): It is a great privilege to follow the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) and the speech he has just given. I fear that the trajectory of the entire Brexit debate since the referendum, with everything that has happened, is pushing us to the extremes of that debate, because we had a Prime Minister who simply did not bring the country back together, or seek to do so. She decided that the way through this conundrum was to appease the unappeasable Brextremists in her own party. It is hard to see whether there will be the kind of consensus and bringing back together of our fragmented country for which my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) wishes.

I see us heading towards a final choice between no deal and revocation, but in the absence of that choice being before us today, the modest measure that we are debating gives us a chance as a Parliament to have an insurance policy against careering off into the catastrophe of no deal. A newly elected leader of the Conservative party with no democratic mandate from the country and no majority in Parliament might manipulate the way in which this House works to deny us the chance to express what we have already expressed clearly: there is no majority in this Parliament to take this country out of the European Union without a deal. To me, that is a modest proposal.

Lady Hermon: The Brexit Secretary studiously avoided questions about the Government's commitment to the Good Friday agreement. Does the hon. Lady agree with me that taking this country out of Europe without a

deal would have very serious consequences for Northern Ireland? Sinn Féin would certainly be incentivised to campaign for a border poll were there any hardening of the border, which would be inevitable with a no-deal Brexit. Heaven help us, but think what dissident republicans might do if there were to be no deal.

Ms Eagle: I agree with the hon. Lady. She is absolutely right to point out the Irish dimension of the entire debate. That many Conservatives seem willing to cast the Good Friday agreement into the flames has been an astonishing aspect of this debate.

Members of the Conservative party opposed to this modest insurance policy describe it as a constitutional outrage that this Parliament should seek to ensure that the country is not driven off the cliff of a catastrophic no-deal Brexit. In seeking to put aside one modest day of debate, to try to pass a Bill—which would need a majority in this House and to get through the House of Lords—to prevent that scenario, they suggest that we are somehow upending years of constitutional propriety.

I would listen to such self-serving arguments with far more patience had we not had a Government who have spent the past few years disregarding all sorts of constitutional propriety in how they have run this Parliament: gerrymandering the number of people on Select Committees, wilfully ignoring Opposition motions and finally refusing even to participate in votes, and being quite happy to ride roughshod over centuries of constitutional convention for their own aims. They then get themselves in a lather about the very modest motion that we are debating.

In the interests of the economic prosperity and security of this country, we have to prevent the Government party and any new Prime Minister behaving like a latter-day Charles I, seeking to govern without this Parliament. If we have to do that by using a modest Bill, that is the least we can do. There is no way, for the legitimacy of what we do in the future, that this Parliament must allow a Government without a majority and a new Prime Minister who does not have a direct electoral mandate to cause a no-deal Brexit without referring this back to the people.

There is only one way, in the end, of solving the constitutional issues facing us, and that is through either a general election or another referendum. In any case, it is the people who must decide how we go forward. We are not going to allow any newly elected head of the Conservative party to take that decision away from the British people. That is why I support the very modest change before us today to put that insurance policy on to the statute book.

4.25 pm

Richard Harrington (Watford) (Con): I will be very brief, Mr Speaker, because, as you know, I am a simple sort of chap—I do not preoccupy myself with parliamentary procedure and I do not claim to be an expert on it. All I can say is that in my constituency of Watford people do not come up to me and say, “It's an outrage to reverse the Order Paper on one day in Parliament.”

All I want in order to be able to oppose this motion today is someone from the Front Bench, or someone else, to tell me when I, as a Member of Parliament, can

stop two nonsenses: first, the dishonest and inappropriate method of using proroguing Parliament to stop me having a say on the Brexit situation; and secondly, no deal. If they will give me a time when that can take place between now and the end of October, I would be very delighted to oppose the Opposition motion today.

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab)
claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Main Question accordingly put.

The House divided: Ayes 298, Noes 309.

Division No. 420]

[4.26 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane	Cowan, Ronnie
Abrahams, Debbie	Coyle, Neil
Ali, Rushanara	Crausby, Sir David
Allen, Heidi	Crawley, Angela
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Creagh, Mary
Amesbury, Mike	Creasy, Stella
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Cruddas, Jon
Ashworth, Jonathan	Cryer, John
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Cummins, Judith
Bardell, Hannah	Cunningham, Alex
Bebb, Guto	Cunningham, Mr Jim
Beckett, rh Margaret	Daby, Janet
Benn, rh Hilary	Davey, rh Sir Edward
Berger, Luciana (<i>Proxy vote</i> <i>cast by Mr Gavin Shuker</i>)	David, Wayne
Betts, Mr Clive	Davies, Geraint
Black, Mhairi	Day, Martyn
Blackford, rh Ian	De Cordova, Marsha
Blackman, Kirsty	De Piero, Gloria
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta	Debbonaire, Thangam
Blomfield, Paul	Dent Coad, Emma
Boles, Nick	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Brabin, Tracy	Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Brake, rh Tom	Dodds, Anneliese
Brennan, Kevin	Doughty, Stephen
Brock, Deidre	Dowd, Peter
Brown, Alan	Drew, Dr David
Brown, Lyn	Dromey, Jack
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Duffield, Rosie
Bryant, Chris	Eagle, Ms Angela
Buck, Ms Karen	Eagle, Maria
Burden, Richard	Edwards, Jonathan
Burgon, Richard	Ellman, Dame Louise
Butler, Dawn	Elmore, Chris
Byrne, rh Liam	Esterson, Bill
Cable, rh Sir Vince	Evans, Chris
Cadbury, Ruth	Farron, Tim
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Fellows, Marion
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Fletcher, Colleen
Carden, Dan	Forbes, Lisa
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Fovargue, Yvonne
Champion, Sarah	Foxcroft, Vicky
Chapman, Douglas	Frith, James
Chapman, Jenny	Furniss, Gill
Charalambous, Bambos	Gapes, Mike
Cherry, Joanna	Gardiner, Barry
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth	George, Ruth
Clwyd, rh Ann	Gethins, Stephen
Coaker, Vernon	Gibson, Patricia
Coffey, Ann	Gill, Preet Kaur
Cooper, Julie	Glindon, Mary
Cooper, Rosie	Godsiff, Mr Roger
Cooper, rh Yvette	Goodman, Helen
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Grady, Patrick
	Grant, Peter

Gray, Neil	Maskell, Rachael
Green, Kate	Matheson, Christian
Greening, rh Justine	Mc Nally, John
Greenwood, Lilian	McCabe, Steve
Greenwood, Margaret	McCarthy, Kerry
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic	McDonagh, Siobhain
Griffith, Nia	McDonald, Andy
Grogan, John	McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
Gwynne, Andrew	McDonald, Stuart C.
Gyimah, Mr Sam	McDonnell, rh John
Haigh, Louise	McFadden, rh Mr Pat
Hamilton, Fabian	McGinn, Conor
Hanson, rh David	McGovern, Alison
Hardy, Emma	McInnes, Liz
Harman, rh Ms Harriet	McKinnell, Catherine
Harris, Carolyn	McMahon, Jim
Hayes, Helen	McMorrin, Anna
Hayman, Sue	Mearns, Ian
Healey, rh John	Miliband, rh Edward
Hendrick, Sir Mark	Monaghan, Carol
Hendry, Drew	Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Hermon, Lady	Moran, Layla
Hill, Mike	Morden, Jessica
Hillier, Meg	Morgan, Stephen
Hobhouse, Wera	Morris, Grahame
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret	Murray, Ian
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Nandy, Lisa
Hollern, Kate	Newlands, Gavin
Hosie, Stewart	Norris, Alex
Howarth, rh Sir George	O'Hara, Brendan
Huq, Dr Rupa	Onwurah, Chi
Jardine, Christine	Osamor, Kate
Jarvis, Dan	Owen, Albert
Johnson, Diana	Peacock, Stephanie
Jones, Darren	Pearce, Teresa
Jones, Gerald	Pennycook, Matthew
Jones, Graham P.	Perkins, Toby
Jones, Helen	Phillips, Jess
Jones, rh Mr Kevan	Phillipson, Bridget
Jones, Ruth	Pidcock, Laura
Jones, Sarah	Platt, Jo
Jones, Susan Elan	Pollard, Luke
Kane, Mike	Pound, Stephen
Kendall, Liz	Powell, Lucy
Khan, Afzal	Qureshi, Yasmin
Killen, Ged	Rashid, Faisal
Kinnock, Stephen	Rayner, Angela
Kyle, Peter	Reed, Mr Steve
Laird, Lesley	Rees, Christina
Lake, Ben	Reeves, Ellie
Lamb, rh Norman	Reeves, Rachel
Lammy, rh Mr David	Reynolds, Emma (<i>Proxy vote</i> <i>cast by Mr Pat McFadden</i>)
Lavery, Ian	Reynolds, Jonathan
Law, Chris	Rimmer, Ms Marie
Lee, Karen	Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Lee, Dr Phillip	Rodda, Matt
Leslie, Mr Chris	Rowley, Danielle
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver	Ruane, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma	Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Lewis, Clive	Ryan, rh Joan
Linden, David	Sandbach, Antoinette
Lloyd, Stephen	Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Lloyd, Tony	Shah, Naz
Long Bailey, Rebecca	Sharma, Mr Virendra
Lucas, Caroline	Sheerman, Mr Barry
Lynch, Holly	Sheppard, Tommy
MacNeil, Angus Brendan	Sherriff, Paula
Madders, Justin	Shuker, Mr Gavin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid	Siddiq, Tulip (<i>Proxy vote cast</i> <i>by Vicky Foxcroft</i>)
Mahmood, Shabana	Skinner, Mr Dennis
Malhotra, Seema	
Martin, Sandy	

Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Soubry, rh Anna
Spellar, rh John
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Swinson, Jo
Tami, rh Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna

Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Nic Dakin and
Nick Smith**

NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Austin, Ian
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Stephen
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex

Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark

Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, rh Caroline
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffiths, Andrew
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heapey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hoey, Kate
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkins, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph

Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, John
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Philp, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher

Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Mr Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, David
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe (*Proxy vote cast
 by Jo Churchill*)
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Rory
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel

Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Thomson, Ross
 Throup, Maggie
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Wendy Morton and
Iain Stewart

Question accordingly negated.

Inequality and Social Mobility

Mr Speaker: We now come to the second Opposition day motion in the name of the Leader of the Opposition. To move the motion, I call Margaret Greenwood. [*Interruption.*] Perhaps the House can calm itself. A number of Members are engaged in no doubt stimulating and public-interest-focused discussions, but the said discussions could just as usefully take place outside the Chamber. No names, no pack drill, but I see a number of very senior denizens of the House thinking it proper to chatter away in the Chamber. I am sure they know, say I playing for time, that the courteous thing to do is to sit attentively, as exemplified by our young friend in the Public Gallery who is a model of good conduct and an example to all right hon. and hon. Members. We take our lead from that young citizen.

4.45 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes the findings of the Institute for Fiscal Studies that the UK is second only to the US in terms of income inequality among the major world economies in Europe and North America, that the share of income going to the wealthiest one per cent of households has nearly tripled in the last four decades and that deaths from suicide and from drug and alcohol overdoses are rising among middle-aged people; further notes that 1.6 million food parcels were handed out by Trussell Trust food banks last year and that child poverty has increased by 500,000 since 2010; recognises that following the resignation of the entire Social Mobility Commission in November 2017 in protest against the Government's inaction and a near year-long delay in appointing replacements, the new Commission has found that social mobility has stagnated for four years; considers that the Government's programme of austerity has decimated social security and led to growing inequality of provision across education, health, social care and housing; further considers that the Government's austerity programme has caused and continues to cause suffering to millions of people; and calls on the Government to end child poverty, to end the need for the use of food banks and to take urgent action to tackle rising inequality throughout the UK and increase investment in public services.

Levels of inequality in the UK are both shocking and unsustainable. The crisis in homelessness evident on our streets, the stark rise in food bank use and the millions of children growing up in poverty should sound alarm bells for this Government that something is deeply wrong. It should not have taken a debate in the House to get the Government to take note, yet sadly that is where we are today.

In December 2017, the chair of the Social Mobility Commission and all four board members, including a former Conservative Education Secretary, resigned over the lack of progress in tackling inequality. What an indictment of this Government's social policy! It is the commission's job to monitor progress towards improving social mobility in the UK and to promote social mobility in England. The chair, Lord Milburn, said in his resignation letter:

"Whole communities and parts of Britain are being left behind economically and hollowed out socially."

He added that he saw little evidence of the Prime Minister's rhetoric being translated into meaningful action. In 2018, the commission's report confirmed that view, finding that social mobility had been stagnant for the past four years.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend, with whom I share a constituency border, for giving way. Does she agree that one thing we do not need at this time to tackle social mobility is a tax cut for those earning between £50,000 and £80,000 a year?

Margaret Greenwood: My right hon. Friend is absolutely spot on. I wholly agree.

Of course, it is not just the commission that is seriously concerned. In May, the Institute for Fiscal Studies launched a five-year study on equality, reflecting growing concern about the deep divisions within our society. In the same month, the final report by the UN special rapporteur for extreme poverty and human rights said that

“key elements of the post-war ‘Beveridge social contract’ are being overturned”

and highlighted that

“British compassion has been replaced by a punitive, mean-spirited and often callous approach”

by the Government. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has attacked what she called “the extraordinary political nature” of the report and the Chancellor, too, has brushed aside the evidence that Professor Alston presented—as if none of it mattered; as if the devastated communities and the lives of people ground down by poverty are of no concern. What sort of a Government are they who fail to see that the impact of their policies on people’s lives is always political? And what sort of a Government are they who can have such disregard for the suffering of their people? One of Professor Alston’s conclusions was that the

“Government has remained determinedly in a state of denial”

about the impact of their austerity policies. How right he is.

The next Labour Government will do things differently. Last Saturday, my colleague, the shadow Education Secretary, announced that Labour will create a new independent social justice commission to replace the current Social Mobility Commission. That is in line with the recommendation of the Education Committee, which called for a new commission to drive forward work across government to tackle social injustice. We believe that social justice is the right goal to pursue, rather than social mobility. Social mobility focuses on how easy it is for individuals to escape poverty. That is, of course, important, but it does not address the wider issue of tackling the causes of poverty and inequality. Our goal has to be the delivery of a fair and just society.

The Government’s own figures tell a shocking story. In 2017-18, 14 million people in the UK were living in poverty, 1 million higher than in 2010; 2 million pensioners were in poverty, 400,000 up on 2010; and 4.1 million children were growing up in poverty, an increase of half a million since 2010. Of course the impact of child poverty can continue throughout life. Children in poverty are more likely to die suddenly in infancy, to suffer acute infections and to experience mental ill health. The disadvantage they suffer can affect their progress at school or in work. By the age of 11, only 46% of pupils entitled to free school meals reach the standards expected for reading, writing and maths, compared with 68% of all other pupils. Only 16% of pupils on free school meals pass at least two A-levels—less than half as many as all other pupils.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Only 9% of kids on free school meals in Barnsley go on to university. Does my hon. Friend share my view that that is absolutely outrageous and that we need such things as the education maintenance allowance back under a Labour Government to change that?

Margaret Greenwood: My hon. Friend makes an absolutely crucial point and it is important that young people in Barnsley get the support that they need.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The most shocking statistic that I have heard since I have been in this House was when we did an inquiry with the UK Faculty of Public Health, which said that 1,400 children a year under the age of 15 die as a direct result of poverty. If it was the roof of a high school, we would be doing something about it.

Margaret Greenwood: The hon. Lady is absolutely right; she raises a shocking example and highlights the importance of this issue. We know that 4.1 million children growing up in poverty is leading to such disadvantage and we have talked about the mental ill health and the effects on children’s educational attainment.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Margaret Greenwood: I will not give way any further, because a lot of people have put in to speak.

Even graduates who have been on free school meals earn 11% less than their peers five years after graduating. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation reported that 1.5 million people were living in destitution in 2017, including—shockingly—365,000 children.

The last Labour Government understood the importance of tackling child poverty and set statutory targets for reducing it based on household income, with a co-ordinated strategy across government that took 1.1 million children out of poverty. Despite that, the Government abolished those targets and only continued to publish figures for poverty at all after pressure from Labour and voluntary organisations. Will the Secretary of State assure us that the Government will wake up to the crisis in child poverty rather than wasting time by coming up with alternative criteria and trying to dispute the figures, as they have done so far?

We know from the Trussell Trust that Government policy has played a key role in the sharp rise in food bank use. In 2018-19, it distributed around 1.6 million emergency food parcels, of which nearly 600,000 went to children. Low incomes, delays in benefit payments and changes to benefits were the key reasons that people turned to the trust for help. It has made the link clear between universal credit and increased food bank use and it is campaigning, alongside other voluntary organisations such as Citizens Advice, for Government action to end the five-week wait for an initial universal credit payment. It is absolutely right to do so.

John Redwood *rose—*

Margaret Greenwood: As I explained, I am short of time so, unfortunately, I am not going to give way.

Leaving people to wait for over a month without any income at all, when many may not have any savings, is simply callous, so will the Government end the five-week

wait? The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has identified cuts to social security, low pay and high housing costs as key reasons for rises in poverty since 2011. It has said that the benefits freeze, which affects 14 million people on low incomes, is the single biggest driver of rising poverty levels. By the time the freeze is due to end in April next year, the JRF estimates that it will have increased the number of people in poverty by 400,000, but of course, the cuts to social security did not begin or end with the benefits freeze alone. By 2020-21, the Government will be spending £36 billion less each year on working-age social security than they did in 2010.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Margaret Greenwood: Apologies—I am short of time so I will not.

That lower spending includes a cut of £5 billion in support specifically for disabled people. The Institute for Fiscal Studies identified the two-child limit as a key reason for the increase in child poverty to a predicted 5.2 million by 2021-22. The Government must wake up to that reality and understand that as a country we have no option: child poverty must end.

When we consider social justice and disabled people, the picture is bleak. A report by the Social Metrics Commission shows that nearly half the 14 million people in poverty live in families with a disabled person, yet the basic disabled child element in universal credit is worth less than half that in child tax credits and there are no disability premiums. The equivalent support under universal credit for people who receive severe disability premium is around £180 a month lower than under legacy benefits.

Research by Scope demonstrates the inequality in living standards that disabled people face, driven by the additional costs that they face for essential goods and services. Social security support should ensure that disabled people can meet these costs and participate as fully as possible in wider society.

The Secretary of State said in a speech in March that she recognised that disabled people often feel on trial when claiming social security, yet she simply proposed merging personal independence payment and employment and support allowance assessments. The MS Society has likened that to

“harnessing two donkeys to a farm cart and expecting it to transform into a race chariot.”

Will she commit to scrapping the existing system of assessments, and replace it with a supportive environment that responds to people's needs?

The Government repeatedly say that work is the best route out of poverty, yet this is not borne out by the statistics. About two thirds of people living in poverty live in a working household. The UK is second only to the United States in income inequality among the major world economies in Europe and North America. An IFS study in May found that average chief executive officer pay among FTSE 100 companies in the UK in 2017 was a staggering 145 times higher than the average salary of the worker, up from 47 times higher in 1998. This points to a huge social injustice. It cannot be right that those at the top earn so much more than the vast majority of working people.

All too many people are trapped in low-paid, insecure work, unable to pay the bills. In 2018, in-work poverty increased faster than employment, and 4 million workers were in poverty, a rise of over 500,000 over five years. About 840,000 people are on zero-hour contracts in this country, and women and young people in particular are more likely to be in insecure work. Research by the TUC shows that only 12% of people on zero-hour contracts get sick pay, while 43% do not get holiday pay, and they have average hourly pay over £4 lower than those not on zero-hour contracts, yet this Government still refuse to ban zero-hour contracts.

To make matters worse, under this Government employment support is based on the punitive sanctions regime, despite the fact that there is no evidence that it leads to people finding work that lasts and lifts them out of poverty. Shockingly, over 1 million sanctions have been imposed on disabled people since 2010, but there has been little progress in closing the disability employment gap, which is currently at 30%. Are we meant to believe that disabled people deserve this treatment? Clearly, disabled people are being punished by this Government, rather than supported. Young people are more at risk of being sanctioned, but again there is a real question mark over the effectiveness of the employment support they are being offered through the youth obligation.

I now turn to the high cost of housing. It has long been assumed that younger generations coming through would do better than their parents, but that is no longer the case. Millennials are half as likely to own their own home by the age of 30 as baby boomers, and the Office for National Statistics has estimated that about a third of young adults were living with their parents in 2017. How can they forge their own futures and start families of their own in these circumstances?

This Government have decimated the provision of social rented homes. Since 2010, the number of new social rented homes has fallen by over 80%, and the number of people in the private rented sector has increased by over 1 million households. The evidence of a crisis in housing is all around us. Rough sleeping has more than doubled since 2010, and over 120,000 children are recorded as homeless in temporary accommodation. What kind of a start in life is that?

Research has shown that greater equality has a positive impact on wellbeing for all, yet in the UK we see widening inequality and lack of social justice having a devastating impact on individuals, families and communities. We see a failure of this Government to tackle the most serious social problems that successive Labour Governments have sought to address—poverty, homelessness, disadvantage and destitution. This Government's austerity programme has decimated social security and led to inequality of provision across education, health, social care and housing.

There can be no excuses. We on these Benches call on the Government to end child poverty, invest in social housing and public services and take urgent action to tackle rising inequality and the suffering of millions.

4.58 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): I am grateful to the Opposition for giving me the opportunity, on behalf of the Government, to talk about our commitment to reducing inequality and to improving social mobility.

[Amber Rudd]

I know I came into this House to help people improve their lives. In my experience, so did every single Member of Parliament sitting across this House. We do that every weekend in our surgeries in our constituencies, and we do that on whichever side of the House we sit—addressing different policies and trying to use the levers we have and the financial stability that we hope to have to improve the quality of people's lives—because supporting social mobility, fighting poverty and giving people a chance is not distributed along party lines. That is why I always want to hear from colleagues who are fighting to improve people's lives, from the vision of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), who introduced universal credit, to the tireless work of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) in championing the most vulnerable in society.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): When she came to office, the Secretary of State rightly delayed the two-child policy limit along with the universal credit roll-out, and she deserves credit for that. Does she agree that she should scrap that limit altogether to prevent millions of children from being forced into poverty? That would be one way in which she could honour the commitments that she is making today to tackle child poverty.

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady must bear in mind the context in which some of those welfare reforms were made. The Government came to office in 2010, in the midst of an economic crisis. Reforms were needed, and if we had not made those reforms, the consequences for the national economy could have been so destabilising that they might have reduced the funds that are now available for us to spend on social security.

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con): What we also inherited was a welfare system in which dependency had been spread right across the income scales. What I encountered as an SME owner was employees deliberately stating that they did not want to work more than 16 hours a week because the system penalised them so heavily for having the aspiration to do so.

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. When people express concerns about universal credit, as they do sometimes, I often remind them of what it replaced: six different systems, two different places, annual assessments, and tax credits that were often incorrect. Our present system is about ensuring that there is real-time information, so that it is accurate.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Amber Rudd: If Members will forgive me, I shall make some progress, and then I will take some more interventions.

Let me talk for a moment about the Government's record. The hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) went on at some length about that, so let me make some points to her in reply. I will begin with our record on employment. We have helped more than 3.6 million people to enter work; we have reduced unemployment to its lowest level since the 1970s; we

have supported nearly 1 million more disabled people into work, and women's employment is now at record levels.

Those jobs are not just in London or the south-east; more than 60% of the employment growth since 2010 has taken place in other parts of the UK. Nor—I can already hear the suggestions coming at me from the Opposition Front Bench—are they just part-time and temporary jobs. The jobs that make up this increase are overwhelmingly full-time, permanent roles, giving people the dignity and security of a regular pay packet. Behind every employment statistic is a person or family whose mental health, wellbeing and life chances are improved by participation in the workforce. This increased employment means that 660,000 fewer children are growing up in workless households, which makes them less likely to grow up in poverty.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know that the number of food parcels distributed by Trussell Trust food banks increased by 19% last year. Does she recognise the close link between the growth of that problem and the roll-out, with its current flaws, of universal credit?

Amber Rudd: I know that the right hon. Gentleman has been very engaged in this subject. He will be aware that there are many reasons why people turn to food banks. There were some issues with the early roll-out of universal credit in terms of the timeliness of the payment. That has been corrected, and between 85% and 87% of recipients are now paid on time, which compares favourably with the previous legacy system.

Let me now talk for a few minutes about income inequality. Since coming to office, we have lifted 400,000 people out of absolute poverty. Another key fact that I can give in response to the Opposition motion is that household income inequality is lower now than it was in 2010. However, that is not enough for us; we need to build and do better.

Our safety net is one of the strongest in the world. We deliver the fourth most generous level of welfare support in the OECD. In this financial year, total welfare spending will be more than £220 billion¹. As has been acknowledged by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, thanks to the benefits system, overall income inequality has remained stable, even as earnings have increased for the most well paid. That is because we have what the IFS has described as a highly redistributive tax and welfare system. We have deliberately taken action, through the tax system, to ensure that income inequality is reduced.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): In my constituency, we have one of the top 100 least deprived postcode areas and just two miles down the road one of the top 100 most deprived postcode areas, where child poverty is heading towards 30%. What does the Secretary of State have to say to people living in that area, just two miles down the road from one of the least deprived areas, about income inequality?

Amber Rudd: I say to the hon. Gentleman that we recognise that there is more to do. I expect that those two areas have had the same differential for a long time, but this Government want to do more to narrow that and I will come on to some other proposals and examples of what we have put in place to try to improve that.

1. [Official Report, 15 July 2019, Vol. 663, c. 5MC.]

John Redwood: Will the Secretary of State confirm that there was a very sharp fall in real incomes at the end of Labour's period in office, and the good news is that we are now above that old level and rising? Rising real incomes is the way to get people out of poverty.

Amber Rudd: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is now over a year that monthly increases in wages have exceeded inflation. That is the best way to get people out of poverty.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Amber Rudd: I will make a little more progress and then take some more interventions.

I was referring to the information from the IFS that the hon. Member for Wirral West cited. It went on to say that household incomes are now more evenly distributed than 25 years ago. However, improving opportunities for those on the lowest incomes will always be a priority for a one nation Conservative Government.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): About 1.3 million children living in poverty in this country at present are in the private rented sector. Many of them would be lifted out of poverty if we had more council housing, which is far cheaper to live in. Does the Secretary of State agree that we need council building again and to build more homes that are more affordable, so we can lift those children out of poverty?

Amber Rudd: I certainly agree with the hon. Lady that we need to do more to provide more housing for people on low incomes, and this Government are committed to ensuring that we do build more houses, that we make more available and that we make more houses available at prices within the local housing allowance, which has also been a challenge.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Is not the truth, however, that as well as the pound that people have in their pockets being worth less now than before, the social and economic contract of this country has been completely smashed apart? The idea that if you roll up your sleeves and work hard you can get on in life and have a better life for you and your children is no longer true for millions of people in this country.

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman paints a very bleak picture, but the facts that came out on Tuesday demonstrated that monthly incomes are rising faster than inflation. There are jobs being made available and inequality has started falling since 2010.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): The Secretary of State is being generous in giving way. Does she agree that, if the Government are sincere in wanting to accelerate progress in reducing poverty, it would be madness to advocate a tax priority of cutting income tax for those earning more than £50,000 a year? She must oppose that.

Amber Rudd: The tax cuts by this Government that I am most proud of are those that have taken the lowest paid out of tax altogether. Thirty million people have received a tax cut under this Government. We brought forward the threshold, which is now at £12,500, a year early to make that point and so that people on the lowest incomes do not pay tax at all.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab) *rose*—

Amber Rudd: I am going to make some more progress.

Let me set out how this Government are supporting social mobility and helping people to improve their lot. We know that social mobility support has the greatest potential at the earliest time in life. That is why we introduced 15 hours of free childcare for disadvantaged two-year-olds. This is on top of the 15 hours of free childcare offer for all three and four-year-olds, which we doubled to 30 hours for working parents. This is more provision of childcare than at any time under Labour.

We are investing in our world-class education system. Core funding for schools and high-needs education has risen from almost £41 billion in 2017-18 to £43.5 billion this year. Since 2010, the proportion of children in good or outstanding schools has risen from 66% to 85% in December 2018.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): We talk about help for childcare but, in actual fact, local authorities and childcare facility people are only getting £5 for every child, which is less than the cost. Surely the Secretary of State has to do something about that. Earlier, she mentioned the fact that wages were increasing, and they are, but they are increasing from a lower base because we have had 10 years of wage stagnation in this country. That has to be taken into account.

Amber Rudd: I gently remind the hon. Gentleman that we came in in 2010 to an economic crisis, and the fact that we have seen an increase in people's wages over inflation in every month for the past 13 months is something that we should celebrate. The fact that we now provide 85% of assistance for people who need it for their childcare costs, compared with the 70% they received previously, should help people to access the work that they want and the support for childcare that they need.

We are also overhauling technical education, with investment of an extra £500 million a year once T-levels are fully rolled out. The UK has a long history of providing world-class university education. We have four of the 10 top universities in the world, more women than ever before are studying STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—subjects at university, and disadvantaged 18-year-olds are now entering full-time universities at record rates.

For most people, full-time work is the best route out of poverty, so it is vital that we help welfare claimants to find jobs, to progress and to work. That is why the Government designed universal credit, which removes the legacy system's disincentives to entering employment by ensuring that work always pays more than being on benefits.

Once fully rolled out, universal credit will cost £2.1 billion more per year than the system it replaced.

Ruth Cadbury: The Secretary of State talks about rising wages and full-time work, but is she aware just how many families depend on zero-hours, inconsistent and unsociable hours work while their costs, including rent and council tax, are rising? They are having to find childcare out of normal hours and they cannot make ends meet. Those people's incomes are not improving, given all the other costs that they face.

Amber Rudd: The number of people on zero-hours contracts has started to fall. This Government are always going to respond to the changing labour market and to regulate to ensure that it works for people. It was this Government who made sure that no zero-hours contract employer could say that someone could have only one contract. We legislated against that, so that people could have more independence on zero-hours contracts.

The benefits of universal credit are that, because of the real-time information, people are given the correct support once they interact with their work coach and with their page, so I hope that they will see the benefit of that. We have built a welfare system fit for the 21st century that not only supports people in need but provides a springboard into work. Every extra hour worked is rewarded, and tailored work coach support helps claimants to find the right job for their circumstances.

Marsha De Cordova: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Amber Rudd: Not just now.

I have heard success stories from people across the country who have been supported into their dream jobs through the hard work of my colleagues in jobcentres. I sometimes think that Opposition Members underestimate the great work that the work coaches do. When I go round and talk to them, they take very personally the assistance that they can give to individual members in hon. Members' constituencies, the way they can signpost them to the additional help they can provide and the personal support that they give them. When I asked one of them recently what aspect of universal credit they would change, they replied, "Our reputation." So many people talk down universal credit, but the person-to-person work that is done in the jobcentres is actually very sympathetic and constructive. We continue to roll out universal credit, and it will provide additional opportunities to people who access it. That is why the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has reported that universal credit is likely to help an extra 300,000 members of working families out of poverty, the majority of whom include someone who works part time.

I recognise that my Department, working with colleagues across the Government, must continue to open up new opportunities for workers as the labour market responds to automation and new forms of work, so we will face the challenges of a changing labour market head-on and continue to support everyone to thrive in work while of course providing support for those who cannot work. Indeed, under universal credit, 1 million disabled people will receive approximately £100 more per month than they did under the legacy system.

Marsha De Cordova: I thank the Secretary of State for giving way. She has mentioned disabled people and the fact that 1 million are better off, but does she agree that the abolition of the severe disability premium meant that a number of disabled people were left worse off? It was left to the courts to make a judgment stating that those disabled people were wrongly treated. Will she now commit to separating out the managed migration regulations to ensure that disabled people who lost out on the severe disability premium have their money back paid immediately?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady raises a good point. We are considering how best to respond, ensuring that we put the interests of the clients first. I also point out that we are spending £2 billion more on disabled people than was spent under the legacy system.¹

I will now say a few words, if I may, about health. Everyone in this House is proud of our health service. The Commonwealth Fund ranks the NHS as the best healthcare system globally. Our long-term plan for the NHS commits to tackle health inequalities, and we will target a higher share of funding towards areas with high health inequalities—worth over £1 billion by 2023-24.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): Professor Dame Sally Davies, the chief medical officer, drew attention in her most recent report to the fact that there has been no change in health inequalities, both regionally and by class, since the Black report was published in 1980. To go back to the right hon. Lady's first point, that implicates all political parties over nearly 40 years for not having dealt with those inequalities. What does she think can be done about it?

Amber Rudd: Characteristically, the hon. Gentleman raises an important point. We know that different headwinds are at play here, and we know that social media is, in some respects, having a negative impact on health inequalities. My right hon. Friend the Health Secretary recently met with social media companies to see what can be done to control the harmful websites that are, for instance, part of the reason why we believe people may be committing suicide. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary recently commissioned Dame Carol Black to review drug usage. Different things are going on here, but I reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are alive to wanting to improve health inequalities in this area, and we recognise that there is more to do.

We will set specific, measurable goals for narrowing discrepancies in health outcomes, and all local health systems will be expected to set out how they will reduce them in their area. That will ensure that we continue to provide world-class healthcare free at the point of use not just for this generation, but for generations to follow. As part of our long-term funding for the NHS, a five-year budget settlement will see funding grow by an average of 3.4% in real terms, because it is vital that anyone who suffers illness or cannot work knows that we stand ready to support them at times of need.

Jim McMahon: Will the Secretary of State give way on that point?

Amber Rudd: I want to make some more progress.

We continue to look for ways to help people out of poverty, which is why we have acted to increase the incomes of the poorest in society. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has injected an extra £10 billion into universal credit since 2016, and that meant we could increase the universal credit work allowance by £1,000 in April, providing extra cash in the pockets of hard-working people in 2.4 million households.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): While we all accept that the Government have taken some steps—I pay tribute to the Secretary of State for making some changes to universal credit since she has taken office—does

1. [Official Report, 18 June 2019, Vol. 662, c. 3MC.]

she accept that the interventions from the Chancellor at the last Budget do not even make up for the cuts in the 2015 Budget?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman must acknowledge, as I said earlier, that we took on an economic crisis in 2010 that required some reduction in spending, and those changes allowed us to stabilise and grow the economy. There has now been an acknowledgment that some of that money can be put back, and I am pleased that the Chancellor was able to support us in doing that.

This Government introduced the national living wage, providing the biggest pay rise for workers in 20 years, and increased it this year to £8.21 an hour, and we have also increased the personal tax allowance to £12,500. We are acting to increase female employment and economic empowerment, reaching out to marginalised women and trying to eliminate the gender pay gap. We are spending billions to ensure that opportunity and growth are spread throughout the country through our stronger towns fund and our transport investments, but we will not stop there. We have committed to finding new and better ways to analyse and tackle poverty in this country.

The Social Metrics Commission's "A new measure of poverty for the UK" report, which the hon. Member for Wirral West mentioned, makes a compelling case for why we should look at poverty more broadly to give a more detailed picture of who is poor, their experience of poverty and their future chances of remaining in poverty or falling into it. We are working with the commission and other experts in the field to develop new experimental statistics to measure poverty, which will be published in 2020 and, in the long run, could help us to target support more effectively. It is vital that we have evidence on the effects of poverty in order to tackle it, and in the run-up to the spending review we will examine what more can be done to address poverty, particularly child poverty, and to support social mobility.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): I am interested in hearing more about how the Secretary of State, or her Department, plans to measure social mobility and poverty because often it is based on income, rather than wellbeing. Constituents who come to my surgeries week after week are fed up of hearing from the Government in the media that poverty is going down and employment is going up when they are in such desperate situations and are seeing no more money. They are going to food banks and having a terrible time. All they hear about is all the success the Government are having and it does not reflect their lives. So how will the Department reflect people's lives in reality more accurately?

Amber Rudd: I know there are people who have difficulties, and I listen to people in my Hastings constituency. I try to make sure that we respond as a Government, and I try to help them individually, but the Government cannot just base policy on anecdotes. We also have to look at the statistics and there are many different ways of doing that.

The hon. Member for Wirral West may quote relative or absolute statistics, but it is important to have an agreed basis so that we know we are measuring the same thing. That is why I have said we will look at the Social Metrics Commission's "A new measure of poverty for the UK" report, of which she may approve because

it looks not just at people's income but at their actual spending. That makes a huge difference to people on low incomes. I urge her to look at the report.

Jim McMahon: I appreciate the Secretary of State's generosity in allowing an intervention again. In that spirit, is the Department having cross-departmental conversations on the impact of other taxation? VAT, the most regressive indirect taxation, and council tax, the most regressive direct taxation, take 8% of a lower-income family's income. Surely there should be such conversations across the Government.

Amber Rudd: We always have conversations across the Government. I work very closely with my colleagues across the Government to ensure that we devise the best policies to help everybody on low incomes. Those people need our support.

Supporting those on the lowest incomes and making sure that people's life chances are not determined by their background or gender is at the heart of a one nation Conservative Government. For as long as we lead this country, we will always put social mobility at the centre of what we do and prioritise those most in need of financial support.

We believe that good government can empower people with a hand up, not just a handout, to get a good education, enter work and earn a decent wage. We have sought to keep taxes as low as possible, particularly for those on low and middle incomes, so that these people can keep more of the money they work hard for. We are not complacent about the challenges faced by the lowest earners in this country, which is why they are entitled to free childcare earlier in their child's life than anyone else. Our increased national living wage and work allowances ensure that, once people are in work, they now earn more than ever.

It is the Government who are improving the situation for families across Britain. I urge all colleagues to reject the motion.

5.23 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in this important debate, and I thank the Opposition for moving the motion.

The IFS's recent report, "Inequalities in the twenty-first century", which partly prompted today's motion and debate, states:

"Too often the debate takes place in silos, focusing on just one type of inequality, a specific alleged cause or a specific proposed solution."

Indeed, looking back at debates in this House over the past few years—when we had the time to divert our attention from the Government's Brexit shambles—there have been many discussions on issues such as changes to housing benefit, scrapping student nurse bursaries, freezing working-age benefits, the impact of the state pension changes on women born in the 1950s, income tax changes that disproportionately benefit those on the highest incomes, and universal credit, which in itself covers a plethora of issues that could be the focus of this debate—the two-child limit, the five-week wait or the cuts to disability premiums. Although Members can argue back and forth, as they have done and will again, about the merits and demerits of these individual policies and others, what connects these disparate issues is a

[Neil Gray]

sense that the UK Government's priorities are not geared to tackling inequality across these isles. The Secretary of State is right to say that we all came into politics to improve the lives of others, but we differ on the route to improving people's lives. The evidence shows that the Government are not tackling burning injustices; they are fanning the flames with petrol.

This debate was originally scheduled for 22 May, which would have been apt as that was also the day when Philip Alston, the UN rapporteur on extreme poverty, released his final report on the impact of austerity and human rights in the UK. If anything, however, having the debate today makes it even timelier, given that the UK Government's denial and abnegation of the report's findings have been almost as concerning as the report itself. We must remember what Mr Alston actually said:

"The bottom line is that much of the glue that has held British society together since the Second World War has been deliberately removed and replaced with a harsh and uncaring ethos."

It seems clear that, collated together, the issues I mentioned earlier, and others, have contributed to some of the stark reading contained in the rapporteur's report. I hoped that, given the time that has now passed in which to reflect on Mr Alston's findings, the Minister or the Government would offer a clearer outline of what the Government intend to do about the concerns raised, today or in the near future. Sadly, that has not been offered.

We contrast what we hear in the report about the UK Government's issues with Mr Alston's conclusions about the devolved Administrations. He said:

"Devolved administrations have tried to mitigate the worst impacts of austerity, despite experiencing significant reductions in block grant funding and constitutional limits on their ability to raise revenue. Scotland and Northern Ireland each report spending some £125 million per year to protect people from the worst impacts of austerity and, unlike the United Kingdom Government, the three devolved administrations all provide welfare funds for emergencies and hardships.

But mitigation comes at a price, and is not sustainable. The Scottish Government said it had reached the limit of what it can afford to mitigate, because every pound spent on offsetting cuts means reducing vital services."

Those are Mr Alston's conclusions.

So many factors can directly and indirectly determine a person's life chances, including family income, status and health. Although Governments cannot override or entirely supersede all these factors, they can and must try to put in place measures that at the very least do not widen or exacerbate them. Unfortunately, the UK Government's record in the areas that can determine this appears to show that many of their measures would appear to do just that. Page 6 of the IFS report shows that there has been a sharp rise in the incomes of the highest earners, with the incomes going to the top 1%—the richest in this country—now being 8% of the total incomes, which represents an increase from 3% in 1970. The average pay for a chief executive officer in a FTSE 100 company is now 145 times higher than that of the average worker in those same companies—increasing from 47 times higher in 1998—while household earnings have stagnated at the bottom end of the income distribution. After adjusting for inflation, the lowest earning households today can earn little more than their counterparts did in the mid-1990s.

No one policy can end inequality or progress social mobility, which is why it is essential that all these areas—taxation, income distribution, social security, education, childcare and other policy areas—are looked at collectively and cognisance is taken of how interconnected and crucial a role they play in ensuring that future generations are more equal.

I wish, therefore, to focus on education, social security and tax changes, and policies directly about or impacting the state pension, as I believe that it is only by ensuring that those starting out have the opportunity to achieve all they can, that those who find themselves falling behind have a safety net that they can rely on and that those who have worked hard and contributed to the system throughout their lives are duly rewarded can we address inequality and stagnant social mobility.

Education is clearly key to tackling poverty, which is why the Scottish National party in government has made closing the attainment gap its absolutely priority. This has led to recent statistics showing a record high for school leavers going to positive destinations. For those who have chosen the destination of higher education, there are free tuition fees, which the Social Mobility Commission "State of the Nation" report acknowledges have

"Contributed to the increased number of disadvantaged people attending university."

However, for those who have chosen instead to enter the world of work straight from school, the UK Government's age-discrimination policies in respect of national living wage entitlement make life more difficult, as many find themselves doing the same job as their colleagues but for far less pay.

The Scottish Government's "Every child, every chance: tackling child poverty delivery plan" contains a detailed and ambitious plan for reducing child poverty rates and places education at the forefront of this effort by addressing some of the issues that directly and indirectly affect a child's chances of getting the best start in life, through initiatives such as a new minimum school clothing grant payment to help low-income families to have more money for school uniforms and £1 million of new practical support for children who experience food insecurity during the school holidays. The Social Mobility Commission acknowledges that these plans are made more difficult in Scotland due to "UK-wide benefit changes". It is to some of those changes that I shall now turn.

The 2015 Budget announced some of the most punitive cuts to social security in recent memory. We are now starting to see those cuts actively reverse previous reductions in child poverty. The Budget saw the removal of the ESA work-related activity group and the cuts to universal credit work allowances, and the introduction of the two-child policy and a harsher benefit cap, as well as the benefits freeze. The freezing of benefits has made it almost impossible for those already struggling the most to focus on long-term advancements and improvements in their job prospects, their life chances, or their family's wellbeing. Instead, they have to focus on month-to-month survival, with no certainty about whether they will have enough for the bare essentials.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a good point. Does he agree with the Church of England analysis that a single parent with

three children who works 16 hours at the Government's pretendy living wage would now need to work 45 hours just to make up the cuts from the two-child cap?

Neil Gray: I absolutely agree, and that is clearly impossible. Policies such as the two-child limit, on which my hon. Friend has been a doughty campaigner—she has led the campaign against that pernicious policy—affect the life chances of all members of the family. For the parents, it may mean increased focus only on finding the bare essentials, which for the children means less money and less time for sports, travelling, holidays, extracurricular activities and other factors that play an often unacknowledged or underplayed role in equipping children with the skills and experiences that will prove useful later in life. Often, the focus in these debates is solely on the income side of the equation, and less attention is given to those extracurricular activities and the often-ignored life-chances elements, but it is worth noting that the Child Poverty Action Group's most recent report said that the removal of the two-child limit or the benefit freeze would be the best way to stop any increased rises in child poverty.

Housing costs have become the biggest worry for many up and down these isles, which is why the Scottish Government have embarked on an ambitious programme of council house building. Since 2007, some 86,000 affordable homes have been built and 59,000 homes have been built for social rent, and they are on course to reach their target of 50,000 in the lifetime of this Holyrood Parliament. The Scottish Government have also ensured that discretionary housing payments are available for those impacted by the bedroom tax and that the housing element of universal credit can be paid direct to the landlord. Although that is beneficial for those who choose that option, one problem I have been made aware of from recent casework is that when the landlord is the local authority, the Department for Work and Pensions takes no cognisance of when the rent is due to the council, meaning that housing payments are often made after the rent was due, leading to constituents being threatened with eviction proceedings by the landlord. I have raised that issue previously and hope that Ministers will look into it.

If we look at those approaching retirement age, or who are already there, we see that the Government's recent announcement of changes to pension credit entitlement mean that some couples could lose out on up to £7,000 a year, because if one partner is under 65 they will have to claim universal credit instead. The longest running issue in this policy area, and on which the Government have shown little sign of wishing to help, is that of women born in the 1950s and the delays and changes, with little or no notice, to their pension entitlement. The issue has been debated many times in the Chamber already, and I do not wish to go over that ground in any great detail, but such policies mean that inequality is being exacerbated for people at a time of their life when they are least able or likely to be able to rely on work or education to assist them. I hope that we will have a chance to discuss Mr Alston's report in more detail, but it would have been remiss of me not to highlight some of the aspects I have raised today.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): On the Alston report, the UN special rapporteur spent exactly 11 days in the UK. Is that enough to get a clear picture of our country?

Neil Gray: I think it is; Mr Alston's report was comprehensive and spoke to the issues that we see in our surgeries daily. I invite the hon. Lady to Glasgow, where Mr Alston spent much of his time, and to which he dedicated much of his report, to see the impact of the problems I mentioned.

Amber Rudd: Mr Alston, of course, spent two days in Scotland, to follow up on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford). I refer the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) to the leader in *The Times* of 25 May, which said:

"The failings of Mr Alston's report are legion."

It referred to his report as "nonsense", and said:

"The government is vulnerable to many criticisms in economic and welfare policy"—

a point that the hon. Gentleman often throws at me—

"Yet poverty in this sense does not exist in Britain in the 21st century."

I urge him to get a copy and read it later.

Neil Gray: The Secretary of State needs to look at the report and realise why Mr Alston was able to come to his conclusions on the evidence that he found during his visit to this country, rather than doing what she and her colleagues have done up to now: report personal attacks against a UN rapporteur who visited this country to draw conclusions about poverty and human rights.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP) rose—

Neil Gray: I will take a last intervention.

Chris Stephens: I thank my hon. Friend for being most generous in giving way. Would he be surprised to hear that this morning, in the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, a Minister stated that the Department's policy is now that it regrets the inflammatory language in its response to the rapporteur's report and is taking that report seriously?

Neil Gray: I would be very interested to see the transcript, because that directly contradicts what the Secretary of State just did to me in her intervention. I would be very interested to see what was said in more detail.

There is no doubt but that the Institute for Fiscal Studies has blown a rather wide hole in the Tory rhetoric around inequality in the United Kingdom. Its report can be complemented by so many others—from the Trussell Trust, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Child Poverty Action Group, to name just a few of the expert charities highlighting how the UK Government's policies are impoverishing people across the UK. That is why we support the motion. I hope that the Government will finally wake up to the social destruction that they are causing, will act, and will no longer take their path of austerity.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. As colleagues will see, a good number of them wish to speak in the debate, and there is a further debate after it, so I am imposing a six-minute time limit, of which I was able to warn Members.

5.37 pm

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): The debate seems to pose a false choice to the House. We do not have to choose between a Britain with social justice and a Britain with social mobility, and the Leader of the Opposition is fundamentally wrong-headed to suggest that we do. It is disgraceful that a modern Labour party has sought to ditch the objective of our country achieving social mobility. Yes, people absolutely want a route out of poverty, but they also want a route up. There is no point in getting them out of poverty if, when they find the ladder to an improved life, they cannot climb up it.

I want to talk a little about how we can bring real system change to our country and how we can have more thoughtful solutions, instead of the politicisation of opportunity that I fear the Labour party is about to attempt. Social mobility has characterised my life. It is absolutely vital that this country makes the best use of its most important resource—its people. I care about that so much that I walked away from the Cabinet to focus, in my time as an MP, on my community and on driving and campaigning on this issue more broadly across our country.

The Opposition are patently wrong to attempt to portray social mobility as a narrow term that is about a gifted few making it to the top. That simply misunderstands any well-known or conventional definition of social mobility. Social mobility is about achieving equality for all and the system change—in our Government, politics and communities, and in corporate Britain—to facilitate that, with the underlying view that we will only do our best as a country when we unlock the talents of all our people, not just some.

I understand that Labour might want to criticise some policies, which is of course the practice of politics, but it is fundamentally wrong—I absolutely object to this—that in doing so the Opposition seek to ditch the entire objective of tackling weak social mobility in our country. That is plain wrong and fundamentally anti-aspiration. The Labour party led by the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) is simply engaged in prioritising class warfare over aspiration. That is absolutely wrong.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): When the right hon. Lady was a Minister in the Conservative Government—a Cabinet Minister no less—why did they seek to close half the jobcentres in Glasgow, which would have reduced social mobility? The only one that we were able to save, by the way, was in my constituency, in Castlemilk, and that was four miles from the alternative jobcentre. How did that help aspiration at that point?

Justine Greening: The hon. Gentleman falls into the trap that many of us in this Chamber do: he focuses on inputs, but I want to focus on outcomes. The employment outcome for people is that unemployment has fallen dramatically. When we came into government, youth unemployment had risen by nearly 50%. Having the dignity of work and the opportunity to live a productive life are surely at the heart of how we have a socially just as well as a socially mobile Britain.

We need an evidence-driven systemic approach to get long-term change, and we need to shift away from this incessant debate about day-to-day policies. Yes, we need

a welfare system that protects the vulnerable—of course we need a welfare system to provide a ladder out—but the challenges that Britain faces are manifold times more complex than that and need to be addressed in the round.

This House needs to understand that the solutions to unlocking social mobility do not lie only in this House or happen only through Whitehall. If throwing money at the problem had been the way to tackle it, when we came into office in 2010 unemployment would not have already risen dramatically, and schools would have already closed the attainment gap. In reality, however, the attainment gap has started to close since 2010, not before.

Labour needs to walk the talk, but its student fees proposal—scrapping tuition fees—is one of the most regressive redistributions of taxpayers' money that I have seen proposed by any party in a long time. It would directly channel money to some of the young people in our country who have the best prospects ahead of them and are likely to have had the best starts. I find it bewildering that a Labour party that talks about social justice can think that that is somehow a step in the right direction.

This Government took crucial steps to improve technical education, after years and years of a lack of strategy—frankly, from any previous Government. People want real change on the ground—system change. That is why the Social Mobility Pledge, which I set up, now works with hundreds of companies to improve, I hope, opportunity for millions of young people over time. Communities therefore need to be more involved in opportunity areas—again, that is system change genuinely to improve lives on the ground. I had the privilege of meeting the Bradford Opportunity Area team last week. They were quite keen, of course, to see this Government support the work that is going on there beyond 2020.

It is important that our politics changes. If this House cannot work together on long-term policy change and focus on what it has consensus on—if it is simply arguing about where the divisions lie—we should not be surprised if we have not collectively managed to deliver social mobility for this country.

5.45 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): In thinking about the best way to present my argument in this debate, I decided on the idea of doing a “compare and contrast” by talking about someone who matters significantly to me—in fact, one of the people who has had the greatest influence on my life. I would like to take a bit of time to tell you about my grandma—my nan—who on Saturday turned 90 years old. She is an incredible woman who benefited from the radical changes that the 1945 Labour Government brought about. She is a proud Labour supporter. In fact, family legend has it that her father helped to form the Labour party in the very beginning. She used to tell me stories about going around knocking on her neighbours' doors for, as she put it, “the Labour”, to collect their subs—the money for their membership.

My nan benefited from having a secure house. She was moved into council housing when the new towns were being built. She told me how the family moved in with orange boxes because they did not have any money for furniture, and that is what they used until they were able to buy some. When I was younger, she gave me the

best advice ever on how to deal with double-glazing salesman—"If they ring you up or knock on your door, Emma, tell 'em you're from the council and there's no point bothering until they go down the council office." That is great advice if you ever get anyone trying to sell you anything on the phone. She benefited from secure jobs. She believed in education. My mum went off to higher education, which was free and she got a grant to do it. She went on to become a teacher, and met my dad. That is how I have ended up with a southern grandmother and a northern grandmother, and my mum becoming an honorary northerner and moving up to Hull.

Shortly after my mum had moved out, my nan became a single parent when her husband left her. She ended up living on benefits and raising more than two children—a situation, had it happened right now, she would be penalised for, because she had five children, not only two. But she did not live in poverty at that time, even though she was on benefits, and she still worked. She worked as a school dinner lady and as a cleaner. She worked on assembly lines in a factory, and as a sales assistant as well. All the time, she was able, through the benefits system and the safety net that was there, to bring up her children and not to live in poverty at the same time, despite earning what would now constitute the minimum wage.

All my aunts and uncles—my mum is one of five—have gone on to become successful. They have nine grandchildren, and I think we are on about eight great-grandchildren already—the family is growing. They have all gone on to become successful individuals. They were not rich, but they were not poor either. When my nan suffered from cancer and had to have an operation to recover from it, the operation left her disabled, but she did not face a PIP assessment—a work capability test. The doctor's note was enough to say that she was not well enough to work and that she therefore had to take early retirement. Again, she did not live in poverty. She was treated with respect; she was not humiliated. She benefited from community education when she found herself—obviously, after having cancer and becoming disabled—on her own a bit. She used to go to the community education centre and did beautiful watercolours. She used to go to see her friends down there and was able to socialise, all for free, all provided by the state. She was a second world war survivor and she is still surviving now. She is still opinionated and she is still brilliant. She will still argue with anyone who knocks on the door if they are not from the Labour party.

The promise that the state gave my nan and her generation—"You work hard, and when you need it we'll look after you"—was kept. That promise is now broken. Every single one of us in this place underestimates at our peril the way that this is breaking down the fabric of our society and the deep unrest that is out there. We can see it in the rise of populism and the far right across Europe, as people move away from centre parties because we are no longer giving them the answers that we used to.

I ask each and every one of us here to give back that promise to people like my nan who work hard and to whom, then, through no fault of their own, things happen—life happens—and they need help from the state. I want to give back that promise and say, "When you need that, here you go." In return, my nan has

raised five kids, with nine grandchildren, eight great-grandchildren and more on the way. We will all be there to celebrate her 90th birthday.

In my final minute, I would like to thank my nana and every other nana out there who instils in their children, their grandchildren and their great-grandchildren those values and respect for the elderly. I want to promise every nana out there and my nana that, for as long as I am here, I will fight with the Labour party for a Labour Government who give people like my nana the respect and dignity that everybody deserves.

5.50 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): I believe that every Member in this place—on both sides of the House, in every party—came here wanting to reduce inequality and boost social mobility. At the most basic level, there will always be inequality. There is no controlling where we are born, which country we open our eyes in and under what circumstances. Some people start with opportunity, but many do not. As politicians, it is our job to create a society where there are opportunities at every stage of life for as many people as possible. By doing so, we will not only help individuals but stop wasting the potential in our country.

All my friends who I grew up with back in Liverpool had just as much potential as those I have met at the top of business, and now in politics, yet many of them were denied opportunity. In my experience, education and training are the key to unlocking that potential. I grew up in Huyton near Liverpool in the '80s. My grandad was a miner. My nan—who sounds very much like the grandmother of the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy)—worked in a biscuit factory, and my other nan was a dinner lady. My mum and dad grew up in council houses. I went to the local—unfortunately failing—comprehensive school, which I left aged 16, as there was nowhere in the whole borough to do A-levels. Opportunity came for me in the form of an apprenticeship in a car factory. Little did I know at the time that that first step on the ladder was a brilliant opportunity that would launch my subsequent 30-year business career.

Even before a child is born, inequality exists. According to the Social Mobility Commission, by the age of five, 48% of children who are on free school meals achieve poor levels of attainment compared with those from better off-families. That does not have to be the case. Chichester Nursery in my constituency is excellent at supporting children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. The maintained nursery has a children and family centre that works with the families. When I visited, I was blown away by the diversity of activities on offer, all aiming to develop both physical and mental agility, such as woodwork, cookery and computer technology.

School is a crucial time for those looking to improve their life chances, and children must have access to a good-quality education, so I am pleased that since 2010 there are now 1.9 million more children in good or outstanding schools. I did not get that opportunity, but I am glad that many more do today. Chichester exceeds the national average for attainment at key stage 4 and A-level, as a result of the hard work and dedication of teachers all the way from early years to secondary school. Even when schools are performing well, we can

[Gillian Keegan]

all think of examples when, for one reason or another, education gets disrupted. That can be because of bullying, illness or bereavement. Sometimes people miss out on their first chance, and we need to create a network of chances, so that people can always get a second and third shot.

University often provides an opportunity for people to become more socially mobile. Today, there are more people from disadvantaged backgrounds going to university than ever before. None of my friends or I got that opportunity, but many of their children do. Chichester University is a great example. It works incredibly hard to be an attractive option for people who do not know anyone who has been to university and do not come from that background—people like me, if I had got that chance. It offers all kinds of courses and gives people advice and guidance, to prepare them for a smooth transition to university. It is doing a fantastic job.

Apprenticeships are another brilliant way to develop relevant skills. They are really needed for the workplace, because they allow people to implement, the very next day, in a practical environment what they learned in the classroom. They also ensure that whatever someone studies is relevant to the workplace, which is a problem in the university sector. The Government have an excellent record of developing and promoting apprenticeships. My focus, as an apprentice ambassador and co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on apprenticeships, is to make sure that we build on that, that the programmes we offer are of the highest quality and that people can go on up the qualification levels.

This year, I have been very lucky to have an intern, Hillary Juma, from Mr Speaker's internship programme, which opens up Parliament to people from disadvantaged backgrounds. During her time with me, Hillary explained that most people who live on her council estate are often in lower-paid, lower-skilled jobs, but there is no shortage of aspiration. She said that her experience on the scheme has opened doors for her and I am delighted that she is now off to work in the civil service. Hillary told me that anyone from her estate who makes it gets called "a star in the hood", and I know that she is well on the way to becoming one. Hillary will be a future role model for others from her estate, and that is so important in encouraging social mobility.

Social mobility is about giving people chances in life. It is much better if that is done earlier in life, but if for some reason the opportunity has been missed, it is never too late to improve life opportunities and learn new skills in an ever-changing world. We as a Government must make sure that the opportunities we develop through apprenticeships and further education are properly funded and available all the way through a person's life, so that we can all fulfil our potential.

5.56 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my friend the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan). My constituency ranks bottom—533rd out of 533 of all English constituencies—for school-age social mobility. Put simply, anyone growing up in Bradford South has far fewer opportunities than someone growing up in a wealthier area. Rather than just talking about social mobility in a narrow sense, I

want to look more closely at how opportunity is distributed in this country. I believe that it is a structural problem that requires a structural response.

Ultimately, the key to improving life chances for everyone is to redistribute opportunity more equally. At the moment, some people and some places have more opportunities than others—opportunities to go to an outstanding school, to get into the best universities, to access high-paying jobs. This must change.

In the short time I have, I want to focus on three areas: first, how we can empower schools to improve life chances; secondly, the role and future of the Government's opportunity areas scheme, particularly in Bradford; and finally, the vital role that further education has to play in redistributing opportunity.

I would like to start, as other hon. Members have, by commending the Social Mobility Commission for its excellent recent "State of the Nation" report, which breaks down in forensic detail the scale of the problem we face. I was pleased to attend a meeting between the APPG on social mobility, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), and the commission. The commission rightly points out that schools are an essential vehicle for social mobility. In fact, I would go as far as to say that schools are the essential vehicle for social mobility. Good schools, as many of us know, can turn a child's life around and open up opportunities they never had before.

We need to empower schools to do more to improve social justice. Of course, this is partly about funding. Education cuts do not fall on children equally. We know that cuts to support staff, after-school activities and targeted interventions impact disproportionately on disadvantaged children. I am concerned about the number of children who arrive at my primary schools with severely delayed speech and language skills. Headteachers across my constituency have raised that issue with me, and I recently met the children's communication charity, I CAN, to discuss solutions. I CAN has developed a 10-week programme aimed at four, five and six-year-olds to deliver a language boost, and it is targeted at disadvantaged children. In the current funding climate, schools will struggle to fund such vital schemes.

I now turn to the opportunity areas programme, the Government's place-based social mobility programme, which is targeted at 12 social mobility cold spots, including Bradford. In Bradford, the scheme is focused on improving the quality of teaching, improving literacy and oracy, and widening access to good jobs. While it is too soon to evaluate properly the success of the Bradford opportunity area, I would like to make a few points. We need clearer information about where the money is being spent. I am concerned that it does not always reach the communities, including those I represent, that need it most. If such schemes are to be successful, they must be open and accountable, including to Members of Parliament, and run over at least five years, with early and regular evaluation so that we can see their real impact.

The Government should also expand cross-departmental working in opportunity areas to include the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Department for Work and Pensions. Finally, we need clarity, which I hope the Minister can provide today, about whether the Government intend to continue with the opportunity areas programme beyond 2020. People in my constituency deserve a clear answer on that.

Further education colleges take on an increasing proportion of our disadvantaged young people for their post-16 education, at a time when they face severe funding shortfalls. Those Government funding cuts, coupled with an historical debt, has led Bradford College, my local college, to propose making over 130 redundancies in a workforce of around 850. That cannot be right. The Government must increase per-student funding for 16-19 education, reintroduce the education maintenance allowance and consider a student premium for disadvantaged students in FE.

A child growing up in Bradford South should have as many life chances and opportunities as a child from the wealthiest parts of the country. It cannot be acceptable that some children are born more equal than others. That will not be solved by any one policy alone. We need a wholesale response to bring about structural change to redistribute opportunity.

6.1 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I was not going to speak in today's debate, but I thought I should because I am getting frustrated by some of the rewriting of history and the pretence that somehow there was a world of milk and honey under the last Labour Government. I will make a few brief points and tell a few brief stories.

In 2005, I was taking a break from work. I had three small children and I chaired the community pre-school, which was a lifeline for many working families in my local community. One day, one of the best members of staff came to see me in tears. Her partner had left her and she had to give up her job, which she loved, because she could not afford to work anymore—she was better off on benefits. The Labour Government did not give people opportunities, but trapped them on benefits. I also remember, during the 2005 general election campaign, mums coming to see me, again in tears, because they had been massively overpaid working tax credits by an incompetent Government that could not manage a benefits system. They were asked for that money back, which drove them into debt and desperation.

I remember the last Labour Government's legacy. We were left with a crash. When an economy crashes, it is young people who suffer. A million 18 to 25-year-olds were not in employment, education or training. That was the Labour legacy for young people: a million of them left on the dust heap without opportunity.

Look at the position now. Unemployment among young people has halved. More women are in work than ever before. Real wages are rising and there is more money in people's pockets because we have taken more people out of paying tax and given more people the ability to drive their cars and get to work without extra petrol taxes. People have £6,000 more in their pockets, and Labour voted against that.

Yes, there is more to do. I want to do more about the gender pay gap, but thank goodness—and thanks to my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening)—we have gender pay reporting so we know how big the gap is.

I also want to do more for people with disabilities. Please, Secretary of State, may we have video recordings of PIP assessments? I am really concerned about that—we must have those recordings.

I would like to do more for women in their 50s and 60s. Secretary of State, just a personal story: on my way into work this morning I had, for the first time, the experience of a hot flush. Men—thank goodness you do not menopause. We need to do more for women in their 50s and 60s, because the skills we need today are not going to be the skills we need tomorrow. We are living in a digital revolution. We are living in the fourth industrial revolution. The lives our children will be facing will be very different from the ones we have experienced. The jobs that people are doing right now will not be the same jobs that they will be doing in five and 10 years' time. So let us not hark back to a history that did not actually exist, but look forward to the future.

6.5 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): Almost three years ago, the Prime Minister stood on the steps of Downing Street and told us that she would fight a number of burning injustices. After almost three years, let us see how she has done.

The Prime Minister told us that if you are born poor, you will die on average nine years earlier than others. Last year, researchers from Imperial College found that children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are two-and-a-half times more likely to die before they reach adulthood than their peers from affluent families. We know that the Government are not addressing these inequalities. The Fabian Society found that the Government now provide more support through benefits and tax reliefs to the richest fifth of non-retired households than to the poorest fifth. The IFS estimated that more than 5 million will be living in poverty by 2022.

The Prime Minister told us that if you are black, you are treated more harshly by the criminal justice system than if you are white. In 2017-18, there were three stop and searches for every 1,000 white people, compared with 29 stop and searches for every 1,000 black people, and black people were over three times as likely to be arrested as white people.

The Prime Minister said that if you are a white working class boy, you are less likely than anybody else in Britain to go to university. The Higher Education Statistics Agency data show that the number of white boys attending university fell by almost 8,000 between 2014-15 and 2017-18. Earlier this year, a National Education Opportunities Network report found that more than half of England's universities have fewer than 5% of white students in their intakes from a lower socio-economic background. As well as raising tuition fees as part of their coalition with the Liberal Democrats, since 2010, the Government have decided to provide more financial support for the richest 20% of households than the poorest 20%, according to research by the Fabian Society.

The Prime Minister told us that if you are at a state school, you are less likely to reach the top professions than if you are educated privately. Only about 6% of the UK's school population attend private schools and the families accessing private education are highly concentrated among the affluent, but those who did attend make up 51% of leading journalists, 74% of judges, almost 30% of Members of Parliament and 70% of the current Conservative leadership candidates. Attainment earlier on in life is also unequal. In 2018, the proportion of private school students achieving A*s and As at A-level

[Preet Kaur Gill]

was 48%, compared with a national average of 26%, while at GCSEs at A or grade seven or above, the respective figures were 63% and 23%.

The Prime Minister told us that if you are a woman, you will earn less than a man. In the Cabinet Office, where the Government Equalities Office sits, there is a reported pay gap of 10.7% in favour of men. That is a higher gender pay gap than the public administration sector average, but it is not alone among Departments: in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the gap is at 14%; in the Department for Exiting the European Union, it is 14.5%; and in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, it is 22.9%. In 2019, the BBC found that fewer than half the UK's biggest employers have narrowed their gender pay gap.

The Prime Minister told us that if you suffer from mental health problems, there is not enough help to hand. A Public Accounts Committee report from earlier this year found that children and young people are being turned away from NHS services because their condition is not considered severe enough to warrant access to overstretched services. This is due to the lack of trained mental health professionals. There are only 4.5 psychiatrists per 100,000 young people. Even those with serious mental health problems are being turned away because Britain has one of the lowest numbers of hospital beds in Europe for young people struggling with such problems.

The Prime Minister told us that if you are young, you will find it harder than ever before to own your own home. Wages have not kept pace with property costs. The IFS found that about 40% of young adults cannot afford to buy one of the cheapest homes in their area even with a 10% deposit. Meanwhile, 1.7 million private rented households are paying more than a third of their income in rent, making it harder than ever to save. To make matters worse, an estimated 150,000 homes for social rent have been lost between 2013 and 2018 because of the Government's failure to address a broken housing system.

These are all things that the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) told us that she would address, in her first statement as Prime Minister, yet almost three years later, it is clear to me that she has failed to achieve her mission. Instead she has supported the powerful, prioritised the wealthy and entrenched the advantages of the fortunate few. I hope that the next Prime Minister will do more than just talk about injustices and actually match policy to rhetoric.

6.10 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill). To give everyone the opportunity to succeed, we need to tackle the injustices that hold people back. Poverty and inequality hold far too many people back in my constituency and are the No. 1 issue that they face. Our current system exposes the systematic imbalances and inequalities across society and the country. It dictates the life chances of people, often based purely on their postcode or their parents' experiences, and it entrenches a sense that, regardless of someone's aspiration and through no fault of their own,

their talents can be limited. Ultimately, if someone's destiny in life is predetermined, if their ambition and hard work do not pay off and if the town that they call home is not providing them with the first rung on the ladder to success, surely they will conclude that this is not a country, society or economy working for them. Far too many people in Leigh are now being brought up believing exactly that.

I am hugely privileged to represent such a proud town and constituency. The resilience that the people demonstrate astounds me, but there is only so much that people can take. What is so heartbreaking is that Leigh was once the heart of the industrial revolution and the soul of the country. The mills provided not only employment, but community. Our economy and industry were at the foundation of our society and represented the glue that held the fabric of our society together. The success of our towns was everyone's success. The closure of our mills, factories, pits and rail connectivity was therefore felt not just economically but socially. As the promise of a community that worked for everybody died, the glue that once held our community closely together began to dissolve.

Thatcher's Britain sowed the seeds of social fragmentation, but it was not until the austerity of the Tory-Lib Dem Government that the fertile ground was provided for the issues that we face today. Austerity pitted community against community and town against town, all scrapping for a drip of investment while the Government mercilessly cut the funding and investment tap. Although Leigh is not unique in facing these challenges, last year the statistics confirmed what many of us locally already knew: as a constituency, we are at a particular disadvantage. Thanks to the Library, we know that Leigh ranks in the lowest 7% of English constituencies for social mobility. We in Leigh also know that this is not because of any lack of ambition, determination or effort, but because our proud town has been given a sore deal. We have been let down.

We are without not only the core industrial or economic base, but the means to rebuild our economy, reskill our workforce or renew our community. Because of underinvestment by the Government, their austerity agenda and their inability to invest in place-based schemes that provide communities with the resources to build within their areas, the people of Leigh are left believing that their proud hometown will no longer provide the opportunities that they deserve.

As we have seen, however, tackling social mobility alone is no longer going to cut it. We know that children's life chances are determined at birth. Children from low-income families are more likely to fall behind in education, have poorer health and leave school with few or no qualifications. Without tackling the issue of poverty, we will never be able to provide opportunity for all. Social justice provides not only the means, but the opportunity. This is not about a select number of children being given a chance, but about access and justice for all. Social justice and social mobility must go hand in hand.

In this time of incredible division for our country, only a radical plan to reshape our country will heal those divisions and bring people back together. We must build Britain inclusively—sharing prosperity and opportunity across the country, and utilising the incredible assets of our post-industrial northern towns as the

natural home for the economics of the future to flourish in. We know there are no quick, simple answers and that is why the Opposition have the detailed, costed plans to tackle our social mobility crisis by rebuilding Britain and restoring faith in a society that should be working for every town across the country.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I am afraid that I have to reduce the time limit to five minutes, with apologies to Marsha De Cordova.

6.15 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Jo Platt).

This Government have talked up social mobility, but their record is woeful. Last month, the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty compared Tory austerity policies to the creation of 19th-century workhouses. He described cuts as leading to the

“systematic immiseration of a significant part of the British population”,

with

“punitive, mean-spirited, and often callous”

austerity policies causing what he called a

“social calamity and an economic disaster”.

This is truly a damning indictment, and it joins many international bodies in slamming the Government for their treatment of society’s most oppressed and marginalised. A recent Human Rights Watch report said that “cruel and harmful” Government policies are responsible for increasing the number of children going without adequate food.

We are used to hearing about such things happening in poor and exploited countries, but not in the fifth richest country on earth. However, this is the consequence of nine years of Tory austerity. It is what happens when we slash social security spending for some of our most vulnerable, public services are starved of much-needed funding and wages are frozen. Many Members from across the House, or perhaps just on the Opposition side of the House, come across many such instances in their constituency surgeries—from families crammed into unsuitable, overcrowded and poor housing to disabled people being denied social security. We see it in food banks handing out record numbers of food parcels—1.6 million last year, with more than 500,000 for children. That is shameful.

At the same time as the assault on the living standards of the poorest, the Government have handed out over £110 billion in tax cuts to some of the wealthiest. The 1,000 richest individuals in this country now hold record wealth: £771 billion in total, up nearly £50 billion in the last year alone. This is a shameful record, and it is the Government’s legacy—record numbers of billionaires alongside record numbers of food banks.

The hardest hit are disabled people, members of the black and Asian community, and women. Let there be no doubt but that these stark inequalities shape life chances. Young people who are born black and working class in my constituency will face struggles that are very different from those of the wealthiest. They may be living in poor housing: it might be overcrowded, and the conditions will be poor. Their parents are likely to be working multiple and low-paid jobs. Their school will be struggling with funding, and their teachers will be

overworked. Those who are poor growing up in my constituency know that going to college or university is a route for them to secure a better future, but what has happened? The Government have cut the education maintenance allowance and trebled tuition fees. They face barriers that some of the wealthiest do not face. That is the reality for so many of our young people.

This is what happens when the country is run in the interests of the most wealthy, not to benefit the many. We can fund our public services, build good social housing, build a social security system, and create secure and well-paid jobs. We can tackle inequality. Labour believes that the best way to give everyone a fair chance to succeed is to tackle the underlying structures of inequality. That is how we achieve real social justice, and that is how we achieve equality for all.

6.20 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I am afraid that the Government’s record on inequalities, across the piece, is absolutely woeful. I was particularly concerned by some of the data mentioned by the Secretary of State.

Last month, on the 49th anniversary of the Equal Pay Act 1970, the Equality Trust published more data showing pay inequalities. It analysed the average pay of chief executives and other workers, gender pay gaps and gender bonus gaps in FTSE 100 companies. That followed the report, in February, of an increase in income inequality according to the Gini coefficient, a standard measure. Who could forget “Fat Cat Friday” in January, which exposed the fact that top executives were earning 133 times more than their average worker? In 1998, the ratio was 47.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) was absolutely right to draw attention to the impact of austerity and the Government’s choices—and they are choices: poverty and inequality are politically determined—to ensure that their tax and spending plans harm the poorest most. That is not just my view. A report from the Equality and Human Rights Commission has shown that the poorest 10th of households will lose, on average, 10% of their income by 2022, which is equivalent to £1 in every £8. There have been similar findings from the Institute for Fiscal Studies and other organisations.

However, it is not just a question of income inequalities. Wealth inequalities are also prevalent and have worsened in this country. The richest 1,000 people in the UK have wealth estimated at £724 billion, which is more than the wealth of the poorest 40%, at £567 billion. That privileged 1,000 saw their income increase by £66 billion in one year alone and by £255 billion over the last five years.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Debbie Abrahams: Very briefly.

Matt Rodda: Does my hon. Friend agree that, at a time of widening inequality and huge gaps between those who have advantages in life and those who do not, it is deeply and utterly irresponsible for a leading politician to promise tax cuts to the very wealthy while lacking any consideration for those in much more challenging circumstances?

Debbie Abrahams: I could not agree more. In fact, I think that a stock question to all who aspire to be the leader of this country should be “How are you going to tackle the inequalities that our country faces?”

The impact of these inequalities on life expectancy, which is now stalling after decades of growth, has not gone unnoticed. Among women, the gap is the largest since the 1920s, and for older women—as we have heard from other Members today—life expectancy is actually reversing. What has been the Government’s response? To increase the state pension age. People’s lives are becoming shorter, but they will have to work for longer to receive their pensions. The gap in life expectancy between the rich and the poor is 10 years for men and seven and a half years for women, and that applies to healthy life expectancy as well.

The analysis shows that, while life expectancy is slowing down in the United States and some European countries, the slowdown is worst in the United Kingdom. This is not a developed country phenomenon: life expectancy is increasing in Denmark, Norway and other Scandinavian countries. The stalling in life expectancy has been picked up by the actuaries, who have estimated that there could be a 15% reduction in pension deficits—equivalent to £310 billion.

None of this is new. Seminal works such as “The Spirit Level”, published 10 years ago, showed that in societies and communities in which the gaps between the rich and poor are narrow, life expectancy, educational attainment, social mobility, trust and more increase. In addition, more equal societies see economic benefits, as described by the International Monetary Fund in 2015. Fairer, more equal societies benefit everyone.

Wilkinson and Pickett’s most recent work, “The Inner Level”, examined how more equal societies reduce stress and improve everyone’s wellbeing, unpicking the evidence of the pathophysiological pathways and mechanisms through which inequalities act to affect our health and wellbeing, physical, mental, emotional and more. Our health and longevity depend on how and where we are able to live, which in turn depends on our financial means. But on top of this, there is an independent and universal effect that reflects positions in our hierarchy: our class, status and relative power. The impacts of inequalities in power—political, practical and personal—are worthy of greater exploration and analysis, and I hope that the Deaton review will pick up on that.

6.25 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow so many other considered and thoughtful contributions on the complex issue of inequalities and structural poverty in this country.

While the impacts of the Tory party’s austerity agenda over the last decade are well documented and have been well discussed, there is a broader issue to be considered, particularly when looking at a city such as Glasgow: the economic geography of the city. Madam Deputy Speaker, you are no stranger to the city of Glasgow. I was brought up in a part of the city called Milton. I was speaking about Milton just yesterday to David Begg, who was involved recently in undertaking a study into connectivity around Glasgow and how the transport system could better join up the city and make improvements on equality. We were talking about

Milton and how cut off it is from the city. That got me on to thinking about the story of how I uttered my first word.

My first word was, oddly, someone’s name, “Brian”. I was always curious about why my first word might be Brian, and it was the name on the fruit and veg van that used to go around the housing scheme of Milton. There was no grocery shop in Milton at that time as the housing scheme was built in the post-war period as a way to relieve slum housing conditions in the city and overcrowding, but many of the amenities were never built properly and the legacy of that persisted. That speaks in many ways to the broader issues of structural poverty and inequality in Glasgow.

Research based on the historical development of Glasgow, particularly in the post-war period, suggests that Glaswegians’ higher risk of premature death was caused by that structural inequality created through the planning system. Some researchers have labelled this the “Glasgow effect”: excess mortality that cannot be accounted for by poverty and deprivation alone. It impacts on everyone in the city.

Glaswegians have a 30% higher risk of dying before they are 65—which is considered a premature death—than people in comparable deindustrialised cities such as Liverpool and Manchester. They die from the big killers—cancer, heart disease and strokes—as well as the despair diseases of drugs, alcohol and suicide. Although they have a higher chance of dying prematurely in Glasgow, if they are poor, deaths across all ages and social classes are 15% greater. So it is clear that economic advancement alone and mobility will not improve overall life expectancy.

The mystery of the Glasgow effect has been studied for many years. Recent research by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health has shed new light on the situation. In explaining excess mortality, it confirmed that in many cases the combination of the historical effects of overcrowding, poor planning decisions in previous decades and a democratic deficit in local communities is among the reasons that drive premature deaths in Glasgow.

The issue of what was described by one researcher as “skimming the cream” of the city’s population to rehouse its best citizens in new towns is particularly striking. The research is based on Scottish Office documents. It discovered that towns such as Cumbernauld, East Kilbride and Irvine were populated by Glasgow’s skilled workforce and young families, while the city was left with “the old, the very poor and the almost unemployable,”

which severely harmed the city’s tax base and distorted the population of the city region as a whole.

Clearly, this legacy needs to be addressed in the city of Glasgow through repopulation, re-densifying and increasing the diversity of incomes and social class into the city to address that structural effect and improve social mobility. This is a long-term strategy. It needs to be gripped at all levels of Government to address these long-term structural problems.

The issues in my constituency are clear. Although efforts were made, with great intentions, to improve social housing in the cities, such as the construction of Red Road in Sighthill, the impact of Thatcherite policies in the 1980s led to slum conditions emerging in those areas, particularly when drug dealers moved in, problems with antisocial behaviour and despair were apparent

and the housing quality was reduced. Efforts have been made to improve those situations, most notably in 2003 with the writing off of the City of Glasgow's £1 billion social housing debt, which has allowed an unprecedented expansion and renovation of the city's housing stock, but there is still a structural problem with that issue in Glasgow. In Springburn, 91% of the population still live within 500 metres of vacant and derelict land.

I welcome Labour's social justice commission proposal because it will delve into the structural and complex factors that drive structural inequality and social mobility issues in cities such as Glasgow. There needs to be much more research into, for example, understanding the comparative differences between Glasgow and other deindustrialised cities in Britain to understand what can be done, particularly when looking at the role of the physical environment as a component of deprivation. That is a major issue, and that is something the Government and the Opposition should consider as they consider solving this problem.

6.30 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): It is a delight to follow the really thoughtful speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney).

I do not believe that there is a parent who does not want the best for their child, and I do not believe that there is a teacher or a school that does not want the best for their pupils. I do not even believe that there is a politician or party that does not want every child to get as far as their hard work takes them. Why, then, in the 21st century and the fifth largest economy in the world are the life chances of our children still determined by the economic status of their parents? The statistical reality is that social mobility has remained virtually stagnant since 2014, and for children born into a family at the bottom of the income distribution, it will take five generations for them to move up to the average income.

These are the roots of social mobility, and they start from birth, leaving an attainment gap that will be lifelong. If we track the route of a disadvantaged child, we see that by age three, they are already four and a half months behind their better-off peers. By age eleven, they are 10 months behind, with less than half of poor children deemed secondary school-ready. By GCSE, they are 18 months behind. If they were not secondary school-ready, they had just a 10% chance of getting five good GCSEs, and by A-level, just 16% of those on free school meals attain at least two A-levels, compared with 39% of all other pupils. The anomaly is the Harris Federation, which is the only large school chain where children on free school meals outperform every other group of children in every other school.

Given those figures, the importance of the early years for a disadvantaged child could not be clearer. Why then do the early years workforce face a skills gap, low pay and poor career progression? Why are a staggering 45% of childcare workers surviving on in-work benefits, and why has the Department for Education not committed to funding the national schools breakfast programme beyond March next year, despite the clear evidence that children achieve an average of two months' additional academic progress in reading and maths over the course of one year alone when breakfast is provided?

Given the scale of this issue, I am afraid I disagree with those on my Front Bench on abolishing key stage 1 and 2 SATs. How can we ever close the gap if we do not know how many children are behind? There has to be a way of measuring progress and of ensuring standards. I understand the argument that SATs can be stressful, but when a teacher at St Mark's Primary School in my constituency asked her year 6 class to write down what was stressful in their lives, they wrote about their housing and living conditions, their fear of knife crime and their fear that their scarf-covered mother would be attacked in the street. It is the real-life problems that are going unaddressed by this Conservative Government that worry them, not the tests that they are sitting.

The evidence for the Government is clear. We know that poorer children do better in good schools, but we also know that they are 19 times more likely to go to a bad school. So why would the Government try to encourage all schools to become academies? Labour's successful academy programme just changed failing schools. Now a staggering 53,000 pupils are attending zombie academies—academies that failed their tests. I recently received a letter from Jonathan Duff, acting director in the office of the regional schools commissioner for the south-east of England, who said that a transfer to another trust is not mandatory when an academy is judged inadequate. Could it be that many failed academies are in such debt that no new sponsor will take them on without a bail-out from the Department for Education? These poor children are the innocent victims of this Government's policy. When summing up, or in writing, will the Minister say how many failed academies are in debt and how many schools and, more importantly, poor children are being left in limbo simply because the Government are not willing to pay the bill?

6.35 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh). So bad is this Government's failure on social mobility that in December 2017 the Social Mobility Commission walked out in protest, warning that "nothing" was being done to deal with inequalities and social division. That happened within a year of the new Prime Minister delivering a mission statement to the nation, promising to make Britain a country that works not for the privileged few, but for every one of us, and to tackle

"the burning injustice that, if you're born poor, you will die on average 9 years earlier than others."

Of all the Government's failures—on Brexit, schools, public services, and children's and adult social care—this is the most shameful, because not only have they utterly failed to improve the lives of the less fortunate but they have made those lives much more difficult.

Homelessness, food bank usage and in-work poverty have soared, and the Government's own data shows that the number of children in absolute poverty has risen to nearly 4 million. What could be more telling of a policy failure than the fact that a quarter of children are growing up in poverty? The privileged have become wealthier, while people from disadvantaged backgrounds have had their opportunities to get on and move up cut off. That is the Conservative way. Big businesses and the super-rich get tax cuts, while children grow up in poverty and schools struggle to pay for basic resources, struggling even to stay open for a full working week.

[*Mohammad Yasin*]

A hungry child cannot learn, which is why poorer children are falling behind their peers by the age of five. Teenagers who cannot afford university tuition fees and increased debt have their life chances cut off at 18, with children from better-off backgrounds almost twice as likely to go to university than those from low-income families. The out-of-control housing market prevents children from leading independent lives or from moving to bigger cities where job prospects are better. “Know your place and stay in it”—that is the result of Tory austerity.

It is a shameful record, and it is set to get worse under this shambolic Government. The front runner to be the next Prime Minister has already found £10 billion to fund a tax cut benefiting only the richest 12% of taxpayers. The Foreign Secretary wants to cut corporation tax even further than the Government already have to 12.5%, making the UK's tax rate by far the lowest in the G20 and turning the country into a tax haven for rich people. Whoever is appointed to become our next Prime Minister, there will be more of the same for the majority—“Know your place and pay for the mistakes of the wealthy and powerful.” Rather than helping a few people up the social mobility ladder, we need to construct a framework of social justice, so that everyone can climb, not just a few.

6.39 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): When we debate inequality and social mobility, it is important that we recognise the role of housing. Thankfully, it seems that not a week goes by these days when there is not a sod-cutting in my diary, which is a result of the record investment in housing in Glasgow. I am proud to see that, not least because it is the biggest issue in my mailbag. Arguably one of the reasons why we have such a significant housing crisis is the disastrous right-to-buy policy pursued by the Conservative party in the 1980s without replacing any of the stock.

I realise that time is tight, so I will focus on a matter relating to social mobility and, in particular, on practices that are endemic in this House. Since as far back as 2008, when I arrived here as a researcher, I have been uneasy about the concept of unpaid internships in the House of Commons and the fact that, more often than not, they simply perpetuate inequality and widen the gap between rich and poor.

I realise that what I am about to say will not sit easy with colleagues who have benefited from Hansard Society or London School of Economics interns, who all work for Members in Westminster free of charge. However, if we are genuine about looking at social mobility, we need to confront the inescapable reality that unpaid internships, by and large, do not advance social mobility. If this place is to be truly representative of the society we seek to serve, we need to do more to diversify the swathes of youngsters coming into Parliament to intern for MPs.

I realise that it is not just in politics that the practice of using unpaid interns is rife. In journalism, for example, 83% of new entrants do internships for, on average, seven weeks. Some 92% of those internships are unpaid, which will almost certainly be a factor in squeezing out people from less-advantaged backgrounds.

The costs of living and working in London are well documented, but it is only when we look more closely at the figures that we realise just how much an unpaid internship freezes out those from less well-off communities. For example, recent data shows that the cost of an unpaid internship in London has gone up to more than £1,000 a month. In reality, very few of my young constituents in Glasgow's east end would be able to afford to come to live in London and work in Parliament as an unpaid intern.

We are therefore left with a pool of largely middle class, often privately educated individuals who can essentially afford to work for free, and I understand that, for them, this is a phenomenal experience. But the inescapable truth is that, however convenient it is for MPs to have beefed up staffing teams in Westminster, we should be doing more to ensure that people are adequately paid for the work they do. If we do not, we will continue to have a Parliament in which the majority of interns are from well-off backgrounds.

We know these internships often provide a route into paid employment. Research from the Social Mobility Commission finds that around 40% of graduates working in a profession had previously worked as an intern to get on the first rung of the ladder.

Then there is the wider issue of how internships are advertised, and whether they are transparent or, in fact, just part of an old boy network. Let us say that a person is in the unusual position of having the spending power or capital to be able to work for free. The next thing they have to do is go on the spurious Work4MP website, of which I suspect few folk in Easterhouse shopping centre will have heard, to search for these wonderful unpaid internships.

Out of courtesy, I will not name the hon. Member, but a quick search on the Work4MP website this morning found an advert for not one but two interns to come and work, free of charge, for that Member of Parliament during the summer recess. It is for the conscience of that hon. Member to decide whether that is fair or advances social mobility, but we need to do more as MPs to ensure that the interns we take on are representative of our communities and help to diversify Parliament.

It is all good and well for us to debate how we tackle inequality and promote social mobility, but I am reminded of a verse in the book of Matthew:

“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?”

Put simply, if we are serious about showing leadership on social mobility and inequalities, perhaps we ought to put our own House in order first.

6.43 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I refer the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) to the report on access to the professions by the all-party parliamentary group on social mobility, which talks about politics and the scourge of unpaid internships.

As chair of the APPG, I was pleased when, on taking office, the Prime Minister talked about tackling the burning injustices. She seemed to sum up many of the frustrations and factors that led to the Brexit vote. Ironically, the fact that the Government have been tied up with that is part of the explanation for the stagnation on social mobility right now.

When the board of the Social Mobility Commission took the unprecedented step of resigning wholesale 18 months ago, it was not a decision taken hastily or lightly; it was an act of desperation, following months of frustration at the Government's failure to engage meaningfully on the issue. We have a new chair now, Dame Martina Milburn, who attended the all-party group last month, when we asked for her view on what she considered to be the top three asks of the Government. She said that they were: extending the eligibility of the 30 hours' free childcare to those working eight hours a week; introducing a student premium for those aged 16 to 19; and making the Government a living wage employer. A recent study by Pearson found that there had been a 60% drop in funding for 16 to 19-year-olds in the past few years—how on earth is that investing in young people? As for the Government being a living wage employer, as a result of what she said I have been asking written questions to Departments and it seems that most do not even hold the data on who receives it already, which hardly suggests great enthusiasm for the idea.

I was encouraged by similarities between some of the recommendations the all-party group made in its recent report on the regional attainment gap and those put forward by the commission, such as looking at the way Ofsted operates; thinking differently about how the pupil premium can be used; and the importance of children's centres in getting a good early start in life. The question we both have is: are the Government listening? What happens if the commission's recommendations are not acted on? How much longer will things be left to stagnate? For how much longer will the most likely experience in the job market for our young people be casual work, low pay and chronic insecurity?

The commission's report provides us with a wholesale national analysis of the issues, which demands cross-government action. Yes, its focus is on education—addressing inequalities in access to early years provision; primary and secondary schools; and technical, further and higher education—but it goes far wider and includes access to work, tax, welfare, housing, transport and health, to name but a few. There is plenty to build on, but we need a focused, consistent approach across many Departments, one that transcends the day-to-day whirl of politics. That is where I hope the commission can really add value.

Taking just two of the headlines from the latest state of the nation report, we can see the scale of the challenge we face. The first is that social mobility in this country is virtually stagnant and has barely moved in the past five years. The second is that a staggering half a million more children are in poverty now than there were seven years ago. Those two facts alone tell us we need to do so much more, and it is even more damning that this is coming off the years of consecutive economic growth. Could there be a clearer example of how growth is not evenly spread?

I believe there is much merit in the Select Committee's recommendation that a Minister be given specific responsibility for leading cross-government work on social mobility, with a dedicated unit to tackle social injustice. Indeed, I am pleased that my own party has pledged to create a Minister for social justice, who would also work cross-departmentally to help drive the

social justice agenda across all parts of the Government, so that whom someone was born to and where they were born are no longer the biggest influences on their prospects. The analysis that the commission's powers need to be expanded and become much more proactive is one I support; the limited role it has at the moment is evident from the previous chair's frustrations and resignation. There does need to be much greater accountability and transparency about what the Government do in this area. It seems incredible that no automatic impact assessment is carried out on every piece of legislation. Perhaps if it were, we would not have much legislation coming forward.

I wholeheartedly agree that social justice should be central for any Labour Government, but I also believe that social mobility can play a part in levelling the playing field as we work towards creating a society where everyone has the same opportunities in life, regardless of their background. We have a long way to go, and as long as three quarters of the senior judges, more than half the top 100 news journalists and more than two thirds of British Oscar winners are privately educated, we will not have a fairer society and the kids from the council estates will still get the message that those jobs are not for them. So "aspiration" should not be a dirty word, but "inequality" and "injustice" should be. The evidence shows that countries that have greater social mobility tend to have less inequality, thus demonstrating the two go together. It is a scandal that in 2019 where someone is born and whom they are born to are still the biggest influences on their prospects. If we are ever going to move forward as a nation, everyone should be given the same opportunity to achieve their potential.

6.48 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): We have heard some really impressive speeches in this debate, including those from my hon. Friends the Members for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), for Leigh (Jo Platt), for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) and for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). They were cracking speeches all, and I am so proud to be included in their number this afternoon.

In April, the Social Mobility Commission told us that social mobility had stagnated, and it is going to get worse without change. This was yet another wake-up call to a catatonic Government so consumed by the disaster of their Brexit that they cannot seem to do, frankly, anything.

Poverty and inequality in this country are dire. In the G7, only Trump's America is more unequal. Last month, Human Rights Watch told the story of Allie from Hull, who was transferred on to universal credit when she 18, as she became pregnant. She had exceptionally severe morning sickness almost every day for months. She would call the jobcentre and throw up while on the phone, but she was still fined £60 a week from the money that she needed to live, for two whole months. After sanctions and bills, she had £10 left. She was stuck in the flat on her own, lonely, ashamed to go out and suffering from depression. At her time of need, our

[Lyn Brown]

Government, by their actions, got her into debt with her rent, council tax and water. They left her with so little money that she would wake up hungry with nothing to eat in the House.

For Allie, there was no safety net; it had been cut away. Just think about it, because actually it is worse than that. She was 18 years old. Many of us would not consider that to be a fully grown adult in our own families. We would not want our 18-year-old child to be living on £10 left over each week, especially when they were pregnant. That £10 will not buy Allie or her baby the nutrition that they need. What will happen if Allie's troubles do not end here—if, like 900,000 others, the only job that Allie can access while her baby is growing is one with zero hours? What if, like so many jobs, it has no security, no workplace training, no progression and simply not enough hours to keep her away from the food bank and out of debt? What impact will that have on the life chances of Allie and her child?

Some 4.5 million children are already in poverty, and 70% of them are in families where at least one parent is in work. The fact is that in-work poverty is rising faster than employment. When the Government are faced with damning research or analysis, whether from the UN, Human Rights Watch, think-tanks that are respected across the House or child poverty charities, they do not even bother to respond. We have had the Chancellor denying that there are 14 million children in poverty in this country, but that is what the Joseph Rowntree Foundation says, it is what the Social Metrics Commission said and it is what the Government's own statistics say. When it comes to poverty and inequality, frankly this Government are a bit like Millwall: "No one likes us, we don't care!" When we talk about our children's life chances, they should care.

Through all this, the Conservative party has had the gall to talk about opportunities. The Government cannot say that opportunities are increasing for children in my constituency: 50% of them live in poverty. They cannot say that opportunities are increasing when 120,000 children were homeless last Christmas. They cannot say that opportunities are increasing when Human Rights Watch states that their policies are "cruel and harmful", or when they have been told that they are depriving children in this country of their simple right to food. As the UN rapporteur said last month, it is about the glue that holds our society together being

"deliberately removed and replaced with a harsh and uncaring ethos".

It is simply shocking.

Hard work is essential—obviously—but there is no shortage of hard work in this country. On average, Britons work more hours a year than they did a decade ago, and for a lower real wage. Talent is essential, but there is no shortage of that either. We all see it every time we visit a school. The truth is that we are able to create better lives when Governments invest. We need a Government who will focus on this agenda now, target the real divisions in our society and offer a joined-up strategy to tackle them. This Government cannot offer that vision, but Labour will.

We understand the simple truths. We do not want a grammar school society in which we get a better chance only if others get a worse one. That is not socially just.

We do not want a society as horribly unequal as ours, where the richest 1,000 individuals have more wealth than the entire bottom 40% of the country. Since the 1970s, our country has become massively and increasingly unfair. The benefit of the little sustainable growth that there has been has gone to a narrow elite: the share of national income going to the top 1% has almost tripled since 1980.

Our economy does not work for the many. Huge efforts are needed to change that, but I really do not think that the Conservative party gets it. It will never ensure that the elite pay their fair share—it ain't gonna bite the hand that feeds it—but Labour will make that commitment; it is who we are. That is why we will change the Social Mobility Commission, so that it investigates the fairness of our society across every policy area, from class inequality to regional inequality, and creates fair opportunities for all. We will match that by creating co-ordination on social justice across a Labour Government.

Cutting poverty and increasing life chances will be core goals. We will assess every policy to make sure that it plays a part in cutting child poverty and creating a fairer country. We will look at pay gaps and at the responsibility on every part of government, from parish councils to Whitehall offices, to increase social justice. We will look at new ways of tackling class discrimination and all other forms of inequality—and we will not mark our own homework; our policies and statistics will be trustworthy because they will be checked from the outside.

A Labour Government will rebuild public trust in politics and rebuild the public services that give our children a fair starting point in life: social homes, public buses and trains, regional and national public banks to fuel hundreds of billions of pounds of investment, a national education service providing the skills that our economy needs, and a flourishing NHS. A Labour Government will work tirelessly to end child poverty. A Labour Government will be a Government for the many, not the few.

6.57 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): I welcome the opportunity to respond on behalf of the Government. I was sorry to hear the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) accuse the Government of not responding to the report of the UN rapporteur. That is not true; we have responded. I was also sorry to hear her exploit Allie, an 18-year-old, in an attempt to weaponise this issue, when we have heard really thoughtful contributions from other colleagues. Labour employs the politics of division; it was sad to see that today.

I thank colleagues who have spoken, including the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), and the hon. Members for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), for Leigh (Jo Platt), for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), for Mitcham

and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin), for Glasgow East (David Linden), and for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders).

Many of the contributions this afternoon were about the long-term issue of delivering social mobility. As Under-Secretary of State with responsibility for children and families, I will naturally focus in my speech primarily on the work of my Department. You will not be surprised to hear, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I believe that one of the most effective means of reducing inequality is education. As someone who came to these shores unable to speak a word of English, I know at first hand how education can change lives and truly open doors. Everyone has the right to a good education, regardless of their circumstances.

Social mobility, tackling inequality and social justice are rightly critical priorities for my Department and of course my Government as a whole. That is why, for the Social Mobility Commission, we have recruited a fantastic chair in Dame Martina Milburn, along with a board of commissioners each with a unique experience of social mobility. I will say a few words about their vital work.

At the end of April, the commission published a comprehensive “State of the Nation” report which shines a light on where the Government, businesses and employers can continue to raise the bar for everyone living in this country.

Neil Gray: Will the Minister give way?

Nadhim Zahawi: If I have time at the end, I will happily take an intervention.

We welcome the commission’s thorough analysis and its efforts to promote social mobility and social justice across the United Kingdom, and we have therefore awarded it £2 million to undertake further work on that agenda. Indeed, despite some claims to the contrary, social justice is already an intrinsic part of the commission’s role. It is already concerned to help the most disadvantaged in society and to ensure that someone’s background does not determine future chances in life.

This Government share the view that everyone should have the chance to fulfil their potential. That is why we are taking action across the whole Government in order to make real progress.

Emma Hardy: Will the Minister give way?

Nadhim Zahawi: I will at the end if I have time. I have a lot to get through. I will try to respond to the hon. Lady and to other contributors to the debate, and I will happily take interventions at the end if possible.

Making progress means building a strong economy, achieving record levels of employment and reforming the welfare system so that it supports people into work. Now, 665,000 fewer children grow up in workless households, the support of an income making them less likely to grow up in poverty. The UK’s national living wage is growing faster than similar or higher minimum wages in other OECD countries, such as Belgium, France or Germany.¹

David Linden: Will the Minister give way?

Nadhim Zahawi: I will try to take some interventions at the end. I want to get through my remarks and to address some of the questions asked of me.

In 2014, we extended benefits-related free meals to cover further education—not something that the Labour party had contemplated—and introduced universal infant free school meals, benefiting a further 1.5 million infant pupils. In 2018, we introduced new eligibility under universal credit, and we estimate that by 2022 more children will benefit from free school meals than under the previous benefits system. Such efforts are targeted at the root causes of poverty and disadvantage.

Improving this country’s education system starts in the early years—Martina Milburn focused on that in her report. We have already made progress in closing the gap that emerges between disadvantaged children and their peers: 71.5% of children achieved a “good level of development” in 2018, up from 51.7% in 2013. Despite that very encouraging progress, far too many children still start school behind their peers, in particular in language development, which a number of colleagues mentioned. We have set out an important ambition to halve, by 2028, the proportion of children finishing their reception year without the communication and reading skills that they need.

To tackle that, this year alone the Government will spend about £3.5 billion—yes, Mr Deputy Speaker, you heard me right—on early education entitlements, which is more than any previous Government have spent. Our early years social mobility programme, backed by more than £100 million of investment, includes a professional development programme for early years practitioners, who will shape those little ones to make the most of their lives as they become adults; and work with Public Health England to train 1,000 health visitors to identify speech, language and communication in families who need that additional help. We will soon launch a home learning environment campaign, because what happens in the home in the earliest years has a huge impact, and there are many opportunities to help parents to support their children to learn—to have the confidence to help their children to learn better and faster. I look forward to working with hon. Members across this House to ensure that we make the most of the very significant potential of that campaign to help disadvantaged children.

This Government have focused on raising school standards because we know that what happens in our classrooms is critical to reducing inequality. There is nothing moral or decent about crashing an economy and leaving the most vulnerable people behind. That is why we are targeting extra support at the areas of greatest challenge and least opportunity, to raise standards and attract great teachers to our primary and secondary schools. This has helped to ensure that, as of December of last year, there are 1.9 million more children in good and outstanding schools compared with when we came into office in 2010, representing 85% of children, compared with just 66% in 2010. That is partly down to our reforms.

I am pleased to say that this Government have also made significant progress in closing the opportunity gap with regard to education. The difference in attainment between disadvantaged pupils and their peers has fallen across all stages of education. Commenting on the changes we have made to the system, including the pupil premium, the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which has been mentioned a number of times today, said:

“A system that was substantially skewed...towards the better off is now, if anything, skewed towards the least well off.”

1. [Official Report, 17 June 2019, Vol. 662, c. 2MC.]

[*Nadhim Zahawi*]

It also said:

“Reforms since 2010 are likely to have increased total funding in favour of pupils from poorer backgrounds.”

Our efforts do not stop there, when school comes to an end. To tackle inequality, everyone must have the right level of ongoing support to help them on a path to a skilled job, whether via university or a more practical, technical path. That is why widening access in higher education to ensure that an academic route is open to all is a priority for this Government, as shown in the recent report by Philip Augar.

Neil Gray: Will the Minister give way?

Nadhim Zahawi: I have said that I will at the end when I have a bit of time.

In 2018, 18-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds were proportionally 52% more likely to go to university than they were in 2009. Higher education providers have committed to spend £860 million in 2019-20 on measures to improve access—up significantly from £404 million; in fact, this is more than a doubling since 2009. This Government have also embarked on a long-overdue overhaul of technical education, backed by significant investment. Over 1.7 million people have started an apprenticeship since May 2015. Alongside this, we are introducing T-levels, which will offer a rigorous technical alternative to academic education, available to all.

On children’s social care, this Government take the view that all children, no matter where they live, should have access to the support they need to keep them safe, provide them with a stable and nurturing home, and overcome their challenges to achieve their potential. This Government are committed to improving outcomes for children in need of help and protection. That is why, owing to the work of my Department, my officials and all our teams, and of course all the brilliant social workers on the frontline, our children’s social care reform programme is working to deliver a highly capable, highly skilled social work workforce, with high-performing services everywhere and a national system of excellent and innovative practice.

It is both an economic and moral imperative that we ensure that the skills system works for all—my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney spoke eloquently about why the system really matters—and that it does so up and down the country. That is why we are taking action in every region, at every stage of a young person’s life, to close the opportunity gap. We are targeting extra support at some of the poorest areas of the country through our £72 million opportunity area programme and £24 million for Opportunity North East.

Members made a number of points that I would like to address. The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden asked how many academies are in debt. I will be happy to respond to her question in writing, but I can say that the reforms of the last eight years show that autonomy and freedom have allowed the best leaders and teachers to make the right decisions for their pupils to reach their full potential.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East rightly held us to account for our own behaviour in this place. There really should not be any unpaid internships. I remind

colleagues of the care leaver covenant, which all Departments have signed up to, meaning that we offer 12-month paid internships to those most vulnerable children who, through no fault of their own, have had to be taken into care.

The hon. Members for Mitcham and Morden and for Bradford South attacked the Government about what steps they would be taking to support children who live in food insecurity. I remind them that we are supporting more than 1 million children with free school meals and investing up to £26 million in school breakfast clubs, providing approximately 2.3 million children aged four to six with a portion of fresh fruit or vegetables each day.

Siobhain McDonagh: Will the Minister give way?

Judith Cummins rose—

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Members for Battersea, for Oldham East and Saddleworth and for Bedford talked about the national living wage and the inequality—[*Interruption.*] I am trying to address the issues that—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Let me say to those on the two Front Benches that if the Minister wishes to give way, that is his choice, but I do not need somebody next to him chuntering that the shadow Minister only gave way once. Let us continue.

Nadhim Zahawi: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was trying to address some of the issues raised.

The issue of inequality was raised by the hon. Members for Battersea, for Oldham East and Saddleworth and for Bedford. Our policies are highly redistributive. This year the lowest-income households will, on average, receive more than £4 in public spending for every pound they pay in tax—

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab): *claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).*

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Main Question accordingly put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes the findings of the Institute for Fiscal Studies that the UK is second only to the US in terms of income inequality among the major world economies in Europe and North America, that the share of income going to the wealthiest one per cent of households has nearly tripled in the last four decades and that deaths from suicide and from drug and alcohol overdoses are rising among middle-aged people; further notes that 1.6 million food parcels were handed out by Trussell Trust food banks last year and that child poverty has increased by 500,000 since 2010; recognises that following the resignation of the entire Social Mobility Commission in November 2017 in protest against the Government’s inaction and a near year-long delay in appointing replacements, the new Commission has found that social mobility has stagnated for four years; considers that the Government’s programme of austerity has decimated social security and led to growing inequality of provision across education, health, social care and housing; further considers that the Government’s austerity programme has caused and continues to cause suffering to millions of people; and calls on the Government to end child poverty, to end the need for the use of food banks and to take urgent action to tackle rising inequality throughout the UK and increase investment in public services.

Discrimination in Sport

7.12 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes with concern that levels of discrimination across sport remain unacceptable; considers that a combination of tougher sanctions against offenders, action by social media companies and better education are key to driving discrimination out of sport; and calls on the Government to hold social media companies to account on this issue.

I would like to begin by congratulating England and Scotland's women's teams on a fantastic match on Sunday. It was great that the match was the UK's most watched women's game of all time, and I am sure the whole House will join me in wishing the English and Scottish teams the best of luck for the rest of the competition.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Will the hon. Lady add to that the best of luck for the England women's cricket team when they take on the West Indies in Chelmsford tomorrow?

Dr Allin-Khan: I wholeheartedly offer them my support. I was a keen cricketer as a young woman and am a huge fan of the game. Growing up—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am not having a Member of Parliament intervening and then walking out. I suspect that the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) wants to take her seat for a while longer.

Dr Allin-Khan: I expect that the hon. Lady is as keen on my speech as she is on cricket.

Growing up, I was one of the sportiest people in my school. I would give everything a shot, whether on the football pitch, the cricket field, a dojo or the athletics track. Why? Because I enjoyed it—the togetherness, the opportunity to create new friends and the bringing together of communities, teaching young people the positives of good physical health. I even did a BTEC in sport and physical recreation.

The shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson), can attest to the incredible benefit sport can bring to people's mental and physical health. By his own admission, 18 months ago he would have struggled to climb up a step-ladder, yet last month he summited Snowdon.

There is a direct link between good physical health and strengthened mental health, but there is a worrying side of sport, which brings us here today and is plaguing the games we love—namely, discrimination. Discrimination, wherever it occurs, in whatever format, needs to be rooted out and eradicated. In football, if the abuse directed at players on pitches in this country and elsewhere is not stamped out, it will send a worrying message to the next generation of stars and spectators.

Great strides have been made in the fight against racism in recent decades, but we have seen a worrying trend this past season. Alarm bells are ringing. We were all shocked by the blatant racism experienced when England played Montenegro in March, where sustained racist chanting was aimed at England's black players.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her excellent speech. Does she agree that the Football Association and, indeed, the

Premier League have a duty of care not to send British players to play on pitches in countries where they will be subject to significant racial abuse, that the sanctions enforced so far have not been sufficient and that we need to do much more to ensure that British football players can play the beautiful game without being subject to unacceptable abuse?

Dr Allin-Khan: I thank my hon. Friend for her very important intervention. I work very closely with the Premier League and the Football Association, and I know that they take racism and the treatment of fans and players extremely seriously. However, we all have a collective responsibility to ensure that this blight on our beautiful game is stamped out. My hon. Friend is right to raise that issue.

Callum Hudson-Odoi's international debut for England should have been the proudest moment of his career to date, but he talked afterwards about hearing monkey chanting throughout the match. Raheem Sterling and Danny Rose also bravely spoke out, calling on world football's governing bodies to do more. Montenegro was fined €20,000, which is a measly figure, given how much money we all know makes its way through the football ecosystem every single month.

I am sure that many in this House will agree that this problem is not just experienced by England when they play away from home. There is a deep problem on our own soil as well.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent case for the need to tackle discrimination in sport. As well as racism, I am sure she is aware of homophobia, so will she join me in celebrating community football teams, such as the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender-inclusive Bristol Bisons and Bristol Panthers in my constituency, as well as anti-racist community football teams, such as the Easton Cowboys?

Dr Allin-Khan: It gives me great pleasure to congratulate the Bristol family mentioned by my hon. Friend. I will address homophobia later in my speech. She is absolutely right that it needs to be given the same priority as racism and gender discrimination, so I thank her for her intervention.

This past season, rarely a week has gone by without an incident being reported. Numerous teams walked off pitches in lower leagues. Danny Rose admitted that he cannot wait to see the back of football because of the abuse that he has been subjected to. Wilfried Zaha highlighted just some of the truly awful tweets he receives, including one branding him a "diving monkey". The #Enough campaign and subsequent social media boycott organised by the Professional Footballers Association saw players, pundits and organisations take a real stand against the abuse they receive. In a piece of tragic irony, however, some participating players even received racist abuse during the boycott itself. I know that the Premier League, the English Football League and the FA all feel very strongly about this issue.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Many of us joined sportsmen and women across our country in the 24-hour social media boycott to express our solidarity and to show our disgust at the amount of racism online. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government are

[Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi]

not doing enough to hold social media companies to account? They need not only to work with social media companies, but to show solidarity with organisations such as Show Racism the Red Card, which lead the way on this.

Dr Allin-Khan: It is almost as though my hon. Friend had read my speech. He is right about the sterling work of Show Racism the Red Card, which works tirelessly in schools to ensure that racism is rooted out from the heart, where it never deserves to see the light of day. Kick It Out has also worked for many years to eradicate that blight on our beautiful game.

Sadly, discrimination in sport, as in society, also extends to gender. Now retired from the pitch, former Arsenal and England player Alex Scott is a successful and respected TV pundit. Despite 140 caps for the England women's team, multiple FA cups, several premier league titles and a Champions League trophy, Scott is still subject to intense sexist abuse. Alex Scott has said that she receives sexist insults online every single day.

Outside the pundits' box, things are hardly better. In March, *The Daily Telegraph* surveyed more than 300 elite sportswomen from 20 sports and found that, shockingly, more than a third had been subjected to sexist comments from fans or social media, more than half had been the victim of gender discrimination and almost a third said that they had suffered sexual harassment.

When I called out an incident of sexism aimed at a female BBC reporter, in one day alone, I received 1,000 abusive tweets, including one from a former footballer and pundit who still presents on the radio today. He said, "Imagine being offended by it," then called me an expletive. Other colourful tweets directed at me included: "Get a grip, woman"; "Get a life, silly girl"; "Tell her I'd give her a slap"—another expletive—and then a threat that I might get a slap; and "Shut your mouth and get back to the kitchen to make my tea". I am rather good at making a cup of tea, particularly a builder's brew, but I have no desire to get into any kitchen and make a cup of tea for someone directing social media abuse at me. Those tweets remain online today.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech and I congratulate her wholeheartedly on bringing such an important issue to the Floor of the House. On social media abuse, does she share my shock that, when I was at the Women's World cup at the weekend, supporting Scotland, I took a clip of a celebration by a female footballer on my iPad while watching one of the other matches, posted it online, and FIFA almost instantly got in touch with Twitter and had it removed? Does the hon. Lady agree that it is incredible that social media companies take copyright issues much more seriously than abuse?

Dr Allin-Khan: I thank the hon. Lady, whom I will call a friend and a teammate—I will explain shortly—for her intervention. How can it be that she was requested to remove her clip, yet millions of pieces of abuse directed at many Members of the House, let alone the wider public, remain online?

If elites of the sporting world are experiencing such prevalent sexism, one can only imagine how much worse the problem is at the grassroots. Fortunately, one area

of the grassroots that I can vouch for is the women's parliamentary football team. I would like to take the opportunity to give a great big shout-out to my football colleagues, who are some of the finest women I have ever played alongside. As our recent match against Crawley Old Girls showed, it does not matter what gender or age people are, or indeed what party they represent or which newspaper they may write for, sport is a uniting force.

Back pitch-side, Sol Campbell, with his hugely successful Arsenal and England career, also had impressive form in his first managerial role. When he took on the role of manager of Macclesfield Town in 2018, the Silkmen were rooted at the bottom of League Two and five points from safety. Under Campbell's leadership, Macclesfield pulled off the great escape and stayed up with a last day draw against Cambridge United. All that was not enough to protect him from discrimination, however, with audible homophobic chanting recorded by several fans during a January game between Macclesfield and Cheltenham. The FA is investigating and I hope those responsible face appropriate and harsh consequences.

A titan of a different sport, our very own Gareth Thomas, played rugby for Wales 100 times and is the second-highest try scorer for his country. In December 2009, he courageously became the first openly gay professional rugby union player.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Just for the record, he played rugby league as well.

Dr Allin-Khan: I am very happy to say that he also played rugby league. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for your very important intervention and clarification.

Sadly, in November last year Thomas was viciously attacked just for being gay. Showing the immense strength of his character, however, Thomas chose to pursue restorative justice against his attacker. He made a full recovery, but the incident is a reminder of the barriers LGBT sportspeople continue to face, barriers that need not be there and must not be there.

Hannah Bardell: On homophobia in sport, does the hon. Lady agree that it is frankly ridiculous that we have countries such as Russia and Qatar holding international competitions like the World cup, when they persecute LGBT people and have seriously dubious human rights records? If we want to send a really strong message, we should not be allowing such countries to hold very important competitions.

Dr Allin-Khan: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, articulated perfectly as usual. She is absolutely right that no international competition should be held anywhere where fans, players, coaches and the wider public at large are persecuted for being of a minority group.

It will surprise no one in this Chamber that the discriminatory views I have outlined are plaguing social media platforms. This abuse is mostly left unpunished on social media. Racists, sexists and homophobes can leave awful comments, but without the use of specifically harmful phrases the algorithm does not notice how discriminatory those posts are. These comments would be indefensible in a court of law and indefensible in front of an employer, yet they go unpunished on social media. With social media, it is direct and it is personal. I know that many Members in the Chamber have

themselves experienced abuse on social media. We use Twitter daily and not just for our work. We scroll through when we wake up in the morning, while we travel to work or are on a tea break. When something hateful is directed at us, the pain and fear runs deep. It is personal; it is disgusting; and it is wrong.

For our sportsmen and sportswomen, who often carry millions more followers than the average MP, the abuse, and the pain that is felt, is magnified. Faceless accounts are run by bullies in bedrooms, sitting in their underpants, where an attacker can keep their anonymity and post vile replies to tweets. These people can be identified, but only through a police investigation. We want a system introduced where this information is sent to our sports' governing bodies and clubs, so that offenders can be banned from attending matches and sporting events. To be clear, a minority of fans take part in homophobic, sexist or racist chanting and it is important that we do not tar all fans with the same brush.

Chi Onwurah: I thank my hon. Friend for the fantastic points that she is making. I want to emphasise her last point: it is wrong to tar all fans with the acts of a few. British football—indeed, English football, which I am more familiar with—has come a long way since the '60s and '70s, when homophobic, racist and sexist abuse was more common in stadiums across the country.

Dr Allin-Khan: As an avid football fan who stands on the terrace alongside many other fans, I always feel very welcome. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that we have come a long way, but we have not come far enough. We need to stamp out any form of discrimination that makes any fan—even one—and any player—even one—feel unwelcome and as though there is not a place for them enjoying the sport that they love on any terrace in our country.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): There is another form of discrimination relating to the second largest team sport played by black and minority ethnic people, marginalised communities and 11 to 15-year-olds: basketball. Basketball is hugely underfunded and under-supported. It is a sport played by the majority of black people in this country and it would take just £1 million a year to support it at elite level. Other sports played in posh public schools are hugely supported, so is it not a form of discrimination in sport that a sport played by our urban youth and black people is not supported but those played in the top public schools are?

Dr Allin-Khan: Basketball has no greater advocate than my hon. Friend, who makes very important points that I hope are heard across the House about the importance of making sure that no child is discriminated against in their life in relation to achieving their full potential in whatever their endeavour is, whether that is academic or about exercising their sporting prowess. We need to make sure that every single child, every single young person and every single anybody who wants to have access to sports and fulfil their potential is able to do so.

We must recognise the work done by governing bodies, clubs and supporters' groups across all sports to combat discrimination. Furthermore, I am clear that the only way to make progress on this is by involving fans' groups and giving fans a seat at every table. Fans are the

beating heart of sport and sport enjoyment. With the far right on our doorstep, let us be aware of their attempts to infiltrate football and other sports. Let us ensure that we are brave in speaking up against them. When combating the far right, education is an extremely effective tool. Without the understanding of a deep-rooted issue, without realising the connotations behind a particular chant, innocent fans can get caught up in unsavoury actions. When there is a deliberate instance, however, of hate speech, whether on the terraces or on Twitter, the Ministry of Justice should be encouraging the Crown Prosecution Service to prioritise these cases and seek the harshest possible sentences.

We on the Opposition Benches, and I hope all of us in this House, want to live in a country where differences are welcomed—not just accepted, but wholeheartedly welcomed. I believe that there is no greater unifier than sport. Let us send a clear message from this House today that discrimination in sport will not be tolerated.

7.33 pm

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): Let me begin by thanking the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) for tabling the motion and for the way in which she opened the debate. As she says, the motion should unite us as sport does, and the Government will support it this evening. Sport should represent society at its best. As she says, it should bring us together. It should be a forum for fair competition, where anyone, regardless of their background, can test themselves against their peers. It should offer a chance for anyone to join a like-minded community, where it is the colour of their shirt that matters, not the colour of their skin.

Discrimination and racism run counter to all these things, and if we allow them to creep into sport, we will lose what makes sport so inspirational for so many people across the world. Like Members from across the House—the hon. Lady mentioned this—I was appalled by the racist chants directed at England football players in Montenegro in March. International competitions should bring cultures and countries together and we should see meaningful sanctions for the culprits when they are used to spread hate.

The United Kingdom has been a leading voice on this globally and we will keep making that case to international governing bodies. If we are going to make that argument, we also need to make sure that we are doing whatever we can to combat discriminatory behaviour at home. I have been just as appalled by reports of discrimination in domestic and grassroots sport.

It is true that over the past few decades there has been much work to combat discrimination and create a positive and welcoming atmosphere in our stadiums. The Football (Offences) Act 1991 has helped to tackle discrimination in football. Stadiums are now better equipped with CCTV, helping real-time identification of discriminatory behaviour if it occurs. However, unless we continue to root out discrimination in all its forms, we will always face the risk that it might return. In recent months, we have seen a series of unacceptable incidents in English stadiums that threaten to set back the progress we have made. Whether they are a player, a manager or a supporter, no participant in sport should have to tolerate discrimination of any kind.

[Jeremy Wright]

Our sporting competitions are admired across the globe for their excitement and passion. Players of over 100 nationalities have played in the premier league since its inception. Our rugby premiership is broadcast to over 200 countries and to over 170 million homes worldwide. If viewers from around the globe, including young people, are witnessing images of discrimination in our stadiums, it shames us all and we cannot stand for it.

Many sports clubs have initiatives to promote inclusion and diversity in the local community, and we should commend them. We are also seeing many of our top sporting icons acting as role models—not just through their sporting prowess, but through the way they have faced intolerance and bigotry head-on.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): In that vein, will the Secretary of State commend Joe Root, who was subjected to some homophobic sledging in a recent test in the West Indies? If this is about leadership—leadership on and off the field—he absolutely exemplifies it.

Jeremy Wright: Three lines later in my script, I was going to do so, but I am happy to do it now, and the hon. Lady is absolutely right. I think it is hugely significant when the captain of the England cricket team is prepared to stand up against this kind of abuse—because it is abuse, not part of the game of cricket—and call it out in the way that Joe Root did. We should absolutely recognise him for that, just as we should recognise Raheem Sterling, Nicola Adams, Danny Rose and so many other elite athletes for the dignity they have shown in the face of appalling provocation.

Discrimination should never be seen as an occupational hazard. After all, for sportsmen and women, our arenas and stadiums are their place of work, so they cannot be left to deal with this alone. Nor can they be expected just to put up with it in a way that nobody else would be expected to at their place of work.

There has been a widespread debate about the best way to respond to discriminatory abuse from spectators during a match. My view is that, if players decide they want to stay and respond with their skills on the pitch, we should support them in that and have huge respect for their resilience and professionalism. However, I also strongly believe that players at any level should not suffer any disadvantage, penalty or sanction if they choose to make a stand and walk off the pitch. We should respect those decisions, too.

Football has a protocol in place that advises referees to stop, suspend or abandon a match if discriminatory chanting takes place, and it should be followed. Football authorities must also give serious consideration to what sanctions are needed if clubs fail to demonstrate zero tolerance, whether that means significant fines, stadium closures or points deductions.

Partnerships across sport and across civil society are vital if we are to address this issue, because eradicating discrimination from sport is a challenge that affects all fans, all clubs and all governing bodies. The Government are supporting a number of different anti-racism initiatives, including the Premier League's No Room for Racism, Show Racism the Red Card and Kick It Out campaigns, all of which have achieved much in this area.

We recognise that other forms of discrimination, such as homophobia, antisemitism and sexism, can be prevalent in sport, so we are working with a number of bodies, including Stonewall, Maccabi GB and Women in Football, to ensure that all discriminatory behaviour and cultures are challenged in local, national and international sport. We are bringing together everyone with an interest to discuss a way forward. In February, the Minister for Sport and Civil Society brought together administrators, campaign bodies, fan representatives, players and managers for a landmark summit. It was agreed that there was a number of ways in which improvements could be made, from support for match stewards to improving incident reporting. Only through the combined efforts of local police forces, clubs and stewards will these offences be picked up and dealt with in the appropriate manner. We are planning to announce a series of next steps before the end of the summer.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that there is a role for sports broadcasters to feature more women in sport—as many women as men? That role should be firmly with those broadcasters.

Jeremy Wright: I certainly do agree. It is important for more women's sport to be broadcast. I think that we are taking steps in the right direction. The England-Scotland football match—I am sorry to remind the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) of it; I will not mention the result—was watched by about 10% of our population. It is important for us to get the message across to broadcasters not just that broadcasting women's sport is the right thing to do but that, if they broadcast it, people will watch it.

Hannah Bardell: I am happy to congratulate England on their 2-1 win, although I have to say that it was a very dubious penalty.

The Secretary of State speaks positively about the action that we should be taking on homophobia and discrimination in sport. I want to share something with him. I ask Members please to forgive me for the language; it is not mine.

Earlier, I called out someone who had tweeted a colleague of mine, saying:

"Is it wrong that I'm watching women's football for a possibility of tits and fanny?"

I responded to that on Twitter and received this response from another unfortunate man who appears to be a football fan:

"People like this exist cause women's fitbaw is absolutely dug shite and the only point in substituting real fitbaw for this pish is the hope of a decent swatch...it's true and if you dispute it, you like men...there av said it".

I will be reporting that homophobic, discriminatory tweet to Twitter. I hope that it will take swift action.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Of course I wanted to hear the hon. Lady's intervention, but I have found room for her to speak later, because I think that she can make a very important contribution. I would sooner she did that in a speech, rather than trying to make an intervention into one.

Jeremy Wright: I agree with the hon. Lady. Not only is that offensive, but it is wrong. I watched that match. It was a good game of football. I think that sports

fans—real sports fans—will have enjoyed it, and I think that more of them should have the opportunity to do just that.

The summit in February also highlighted the fact that one of the strongest ways in which to promote diversity and inclusion in sport is to give more opportunities to those from under-represented backgrounds. That applies at all levels, whether it means ensuring that we have representation for top-level coaching staff or ensuring that young people from all backgrounds have an opportunity to take part in their favourite sports.

I welcome the English Football League policy to make sure BME first team manager candidates will get additional opportunities to be considered for roles at the highest levels. Sport England has also been investing £2 million each year to increase the number of qualified coaches in the game, with a particular emphasis on supporting bursaries for BME coaches. And through our sports governance code launched in 2017, we are aiming for greater diversity on the boards of our national governing bodies not just because it is the right thing to do but because diversity of thought leads to a higher quality of decision making. If our governing bodies are to fully reflect the communities they represent, we need to make sure they reflect the make-up of our society.

Let me say something about the role of social media. Social media has given many of our favourite sporting stars an opportunity to communicate directly with their fans. However, it has also created new avenues for abuse, where people can send vile remarks to top players, leading to some sportspeople closing their accounts and deciding to step away from social media for good. It should be an immense sadness to us all that professional footballers felt the need to boycott social media for 24 hours to protest against the toxic atmosphere that they experience on these channels. If we surrender our online spaces to those who spread hate, abuse, fear and vitriolic content, we all lose.

Our recent “Online Harms” White Paper was a world first, setting out the steps we are taking to make the UK the safest place in the world to be online. We set out how we will create a new duty of care establishing that companies have a responsibility for the safety of their users and must take reasonable steps to tackle harmful content and activity and that compliance will be overseen and enforced by an independent regulator with significant penalties available to it. Discriminatory abuse should be as unacceptable online as it is in the stadium. The internet must remain free, open and secure, and this Government will continue to protect freedom of expression online, but we must also take action to keep our citizens safe, especially those who face bigotry and discrimination online.

We are hosting some important sporting events over the next few years: the cricket world cup, the netball world cup, Euro 2020 matches and the Commonwealth games in Birmingham, aside from the competitions already mentioned in this debate and many more.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): And the rugby league world cup.

Jeremy Wright: Including of course the rugby league world cup.

Spectators will be visiting from far and wide, and viewers will be tuning in from across the world. We have these opportunities to demonstrate, just as we did during that summer of 2012, our nation at its best—hospitable,

inclusive and welcoming to all—and to show the world that we reject racism in all its forms. We know we have further to go, but I believe that, as the hon. Member for Tooting said, sport is fundamentally a force for good: it brings us together; it can improve physical and mental health; and it can provide valuable leadership skills and promote social integration. We need to face down racism and discrimination together and show that it cannot be tolerated in any sport, at any level.

7.48 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I am delighted to take part in this evening’s debate—and for a change I really do mean that! Like many in the Chamber and millions across the UK, I know that sport, as a participant, a fan or even officiating, is a huge force for good—although my Paisley rugby club teammates will find that last point a little bizarre given that my treatment of referees was more akin to that in football than in rugby. None the less, we appreciate everyone who gets involved, and I too want to wish Scotland and England all the very best in the women’s World cup, particularly Shelley Kerr’s Scotland squad. I was delighted to be present on Sunday to watch the game and congratulate the team on its fantastic second-half performance—indeed, second-half victory; if it had not been for a dodgy VAR decision in the first half we would have had a point out of the game, so it was a moral draw. I wish the team all the best for Friday; I am sure the players will take care of business and get back to winning ways.

For participants, sport promotes the benefits of teamwork and discipline and keeps us fit and healthy—or it should do—both physically and mentally. For players and fans, it brings us together socially. In short, sport unites us as people, regardless of background or beliefs—or at least it should do. The vast majority of the time, the benefits I have just outlined hold true, but occasionally, and in some places more than others, ignorance and hate rear their ugly heads. Whether it is racism, homophobia, sexism or bigotry, in sport we generally find that it does not matter to the type of fans who mete out this outdated and abhorrent abuse. The abuse is interchangeable, and it is directed against the other—the person or player who is different from them. These Neanderthals think that because it is sport, people are fair game.

Sport must be an inclusive environment so that everyone, regardless of creed, colour, sex or religion, can come together without fear or prejudice. That being said, this is not sport’s problem alone. The problem is still far too prevalent in our society, and far from decreasing, it is actually on the rise in our public discourse. As has been said, we have only to spend five minutes on social media to see the nameless and the gormless throwing racist, sexist and homophobic taunts, knowing that there will be no repercussions for them. The Rangers captain, James Tavernier, recently posted a screenshot of abuse that he had been sent—I will not read it out, but needless to say it includes the N-word—and the Rangers keeper, Wes Foderingham, was called a “black prick” on Instagram last year. It is not just on social media that the abuse takes place. The Celtic winger, Scott Sinclair, has been targeted a number of times by mindless idiots who have used racist monkey chants and called him a “black bastard”. A banner placed on one of the summer bonfires in Belfast read “Scott Sinclair loves bananas”. It is clear that we still have a very long way to go.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Justin Fashanu, a former player at my own club, Airdrieonians, was both black and gay, and the amount of abuse that he received might be one of the reasons—just one of the reasons, because this is almost a double-edged sword—that even these days there are no openly gay footballers. Does my hon. Friend agree with me on that, and will he place on record our immense gratitude to Justin Fashanu, who went through such a torrid time? I hope that he will pave the way for more footballers to have the comfort to come out.

Gavin Newlands: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention, because I have spoken about Justin Fashanu's contribution before. The abuse that he received was shameful and it shames me. I remember that abuse very well as I was growing up. He did a fantastic job, and it is a shame that the abuse he received has led to the current situation where we do not have any players who are out and proud in the game.

I have said that racism is societal, and it stands to reason that it can and will present itself in all sports. Lewis Hamilton faced it in Spain a decade ago, and it took a decade of dominance by Tiger Woods to break down the barriers in the world of golf, in parts of the US at least. We should not be too pass-remarkable about these things over here, however, given that it is just in the past year or two that some of our own prestigious golf clubs have opened their doors to women.

On racism, Anthony Joshua has said:

"Our parents' generation has been sleeping".

He also said:

"If someone is racist to me as a boxer, my natural instinct would be to punch him in his face and kick him while he's down. But what I am going to do is to speak to you about who I am, where I've come from and what my lineage is about. I want to show you why the names and the slurs that you call me have no relevance to who I am as a person."

That is real leadership from an inspirational individual—despite his recent defeat.

We have also seen leadership in football, as it is in football that we have seen racism far too often of late. I think we all praise the reaction of players such as Raheem Sterling and Danny Rose to their abuse. Their resolve and articulacy in calling out not only their abusers but the authorities for their meek reaction to abuse itself have been fantastic, but they must be better supported by bodies such as UEFA, which all too often issue paltry fines that amount to a pittance in the modern game. That also goes for the FA, the SPFL and the football league, all of which need to step up to the plate and address the issue.

As have I said, it is not just racism that is a problem. According to an EU-wide report, nine out of 10 LGBT+ people said that homophobia and transphobia were a problem in sport. Of those currently active in sport who had had negative experiences in the past 12 months, 49% of cases involved abuse that had come from their own team mates, while 36% of cases involved abuse from members of the opposing team. That is why movements such as the Rainbow Laces campaign are so important in making sure that our game is accessible to all. No one group of people owns the game. However, a bunch of politicians—although ones making good and consensual speeches—condemning this abuse will do absolutely nothing unless it results in action by the authorities. We need more preventive action, yes, but we also need more punitive action to punish offenders.

Discrimination has no place in sport, and the SNP Government in Scotland are determined to tackle it. Sport is an integral part of Scottish society, and as such, it should reflect society. In December 2017, the Scottish Government published their race equality action plan, outlining more than 120 actions that they would take over the course of the current Parliament to secure better outcomes for ethnic minorities in Scotland. There is no place for racism in our vision for Scotland, and the race equality framework has been developed with an understanding of the urgent need to avoid and eradicate institutional racism wherever it is found. The action plan shows that our leadership is advancing race equality and builds on the race equality framework was published in March 2016.

However, advancing equality is not just the job of Government alone. Everyone in society must play their part in removing the barriers facing our minority ethnic communities. I have spoken before about the great work of Show Racism the Red Card, and recent high-profile instances of racism in the game fly in the face of the fantastic work that is done such by organisations. Sadly, despite football swimming in money—in England at any rate—a relatively small amount is spent by the game on such initiatives. That needs to improve.

Show Racism the Red Card uses the role-model status of professional footballers to combat racism through education, and it has been operating in Scotland since 2003. As well as developing anti-racism education programmes, it produces a number of educational resources, including short films featuring interviews with professional footballers to be used in conjunction with the education pack and activities in classrooms and outside school. Such programmes need our support, and the Scottish Government have invested over £214 million since 2007 to promote equality and tackle discrimination.

Some progress had been made, but there is no doubt that problems remain in football. There are still issues with unacceptable conduct by supporters, particularly with sectarianism. The Scottish Government help to tackle sectarianism in the game in several ways, including direct funding to organisations and football banning orders. The Scottish Government have been engaging with the football authorities, leading clubs and other key stakeholders on this issue. As a result, new rules and guidelines on unacceptable conduct were introduced, and data on such conduct is now being collated by the SPFL and the Scottish FA for the first time, which is surprising to those of us who grew up following the game in Scotland, but it is progress none the less.

The Scottish Government will also introduce a new hate crime Bill and have just concluded a consultation on what should be included, a full analysis of which will be published imminently. The Scottish Government are also undertaking a full consultation on the findings and recommendations of the working group on defining sectarianism in Scots law. We recognise that legislation is not enough in and of itself to build the inclusive and equal society to which we aspire, but it forms the basis of understanding what is not acceptable in society.

While clearly a much smaller problem than it used to be, sectarianism still exists and is culturally and inextricably linked to football in Scotland. The question, "What school did you go to?"—which essentially means, "Are you Protestant or Catholic?"—still gets asked, if not as much. I was raised Catholic and went to a Catholic

primary school, but I was also raised a Rangers fan by my father. In those days, few kids were bold enough to admit that they were a Rangers fan in a Catholic school—and vice versa, I assume—with maybe three or four at best. Suffice it to say, I was not bold enough to be one of them at the time, so I faked being a Celtic fan for five or six years in primary school before I had finally had enough.

Not only had I had enough of kidding on that I was a Celtic fan, I had enough of both of the teams. I was sick of the sectarian rubbish that I heard from both sides, including in primary school, and decided to support my own team, so I became a St Johnstone fan for complicated and convoluted reasons that I will not detain the House with tonight. It has been a long journey, but we have been doing pretty well over the past few years.

I was delighted to be shot of the Old Firm and sectarianism but, although I say that, you can never quite escape it. Following the 1998 league cup final at Parkhead, in which St Johnstone were defeated 2-1 by Rangers, I was attacked on the train home by a group of Celtic fans because St Johnstone “never tried hard enough to beat the huns”—their words, not mine.

As it happens, a few months prior to that, I had been walking home from a night out when two boys, who had been drunkenly singing Rangers songs, started walking with me and asking questions, the first of which was, “Which school did you go to?” I was not daft enough to say the name of the Catholic school I actually went to, but I could not persuade them that I had, in fact, gone to a non-denominational Protestant school. No matter what I said, they did not believe me and it escalated rather quickly into one of them pulling a knife from his jacket. Needless to say, I scarpered as quickly as my legs would take me. I had never been so pleased to have a turn of pace, as I did when I was 18 or 19 years old. I am not sure where that pace has gone, but I managed to get away from those boys.

Things have improved massively over the past few decades in Scotland, but the issue still hangs on in some corners of society. I do not want to end on a negative, and sectarianism, bigotry and racism—call it what you want—is not the taboo it once was. It is now out in the open and is being tackled head on. With the help of organisations such as Nil by Mouth, which campaigns to eliminate sectarian attitudes, and Show Racism the Red Card, Stonewall and many others, and through debates such as this one, we are educating the next generation to be rid of this discrimination whether it be in sport or anywhere else.

8.1 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I have just been handed an envelope, so I think I need to speak quickly.

I am not sure whether I need to declare this, but I recently became a trustee of the Cornish Sport Foundation, a new foundation that seeks to get to grips with the opportunities of sport and to address the important issues we are talking about this evening. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate on such an important subject, not just because we have a problem that must be resolved but because sport, as has been said, offers a solution.

I do not wish to rehearse the many important points that have been made, other than to say that we should never accept racist or discriminatory behaviour, and we

must always work, using sport and whatever other tools we have, to rule out their existence. Sport offers a great tool to unite people and to improve fitness. I remember being at a football match many years ago—it was a long game that had gone into a bit of extra time—and, looking around, someone said, “There are 22,000 people here badly in need of exercise and 22 people out there badly in need of a rest.” This debate has reminded me of that story.

Sport also offers a tool to address inequalities and improve life chances, and I am pleased that the motion mentions the need for education. This will come as no surprise to the Secretary of State or the Minister, but what better example of a place for education than a stadium for Cornwall? That includes Cornish wrestling, or wrasslin, which we will hear about in the Adjournment debate.

I do not wish to diminish or take away from any of the important issues related to discrimination, racism or anything that happens against individuals in some sports and on some sporting occasions. We should never accept that, as I have said.

In Cornwall, there is a different type of discrimination, which I will briefly touch on. I am told that Cornwall is the only county without a big sporting arena or stadium. As the Secretary of State said, we should be working to give young people access to sport, partly because of education and all that comes with it—the way that young people grow and develop as human beings. I hope that we can soon resolve Cornwall not having access to that. We lack a stadium, and the Football Foundation has already accepted that, because of its geography, Cornwall does not have good access, is discriminated against in the location of facilities and has not had the kind of money that other parts of the country have enjoyed.

Having said that, even without the facilities or the stadium, Cornwall has a great record. There are lots of elite sports personalities from Cornwall, and I will mention just a few, particularly because of the work they do.

Hannah Bardell: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says about a lack of sports facilities, but I know that he has a great coastline and many surfers. Does he agree that we need to see more about minority sports like surfing? Surfing is an up and coming sport that will be in the Olympics next year. In Scotland, 64% of our sports coverage in the media is of men's sport, and only 2% of print media coverage in the UK is of women's sport. We need to see a much broader range of sports being represented to break down those barriers of discrimination. Does he agree?

Derek Thomas: Of course, what the hon. Lady says is right. My entire constituency is surrounded by our immense coastline, as are the Isles of Scilly—it is a great chore for me to have to visit them from time to time! Gig rowing, kayaking, paddle boarding, kite surfing and surfing, which she mentioned, are all fantastic and they are important because they help people to know how to be safe in water. Again, on access and equality, they are expensive sports to do, whereas rugby and other sports provide more access as they can sometimes be much cheaper. However, these things are expensive in Cornwall because people travel great distances, sometimes with their young but talented children, to even get to

[Derek Thomas]

a decent pitch. They are even driving out of Cornwall from the far west, where I live, to engage, and we need to resolve this.

As I was saying, let me mention a few people who are celebrities in Cornwall. I could mention loads of others and I am going to get in trouble for not mentioning them all. Jack Richards was an England cricketer and he works with me on the sports foundation. Lucy Payne is a kickboxer who is celebrated in my part of the world. Helen Glover is an Olympian, whom Members will know. Jack Nowell is an England rugby player in my constituency. Melissa Reid is a triathlete who has been fantastic in breaking down the barriers that face so many people in sport. Then there is Sir Ben Ainslie, whom we all know. He came to speak to children at the beginning of the 2012 Olympics and just lit up Cornwall when it came to how accessible sports could be.

Let me make the case again on discrimination: sport gives people life chances, so that they know how they can and should support and accept each other, whoever they might be, wherever they might come from and whatever their differences. The right facilities also do that. Sport addresses health inequalities, and it provides the education, fairness and opportunity that we are arguing for. We are talking about celebrating elite Cornish sport and achievement. I welcome the comments the Secretary of State has made today about why it is so important that we make sure that our young people, as they grow, are never in a position where they believe that the kind of discrimination that we have heard about is acceptable. Sport is the tool, and the right facilities can be the tool, to make sure that they never are.

8.8 pm

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): First, may I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for your sterling work over a long time for the rugby league group in Parliament and the sport of rugby league? I am certain that the Secretary of State will want to ensure that the rugby league world cup gets a great venue for a launch somewhere within or near the Palace of Westminster when it comes again to this country. Perhaps it will be somewhere higher than the Jubilee Room, where we had to welcome the elite of that sport on one occasion. There is nothing wrong with the Jubilee Room, but I think that with the Deputy Speaker's assistance and that of the Minister, we can do better this time.

I wish to make a few observations and a couple of suggestions about what we can do. I chair the all-party group on mountaineering—indeed, I set it up. The work we have done and the advice we have given, using our skills as politicians—the hon. Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley) has played a huge role in that over the years, as have many other Members—have given both confidence and a bit more expertise to that sport's governing body, in expanding its scope and in dealing with its traditional bias, which was towards white men, both young and, in particular, elderly, because it is a sport one can participate in. Chris Bonington is still climbing into his 80s; we have great heroes of the sport. The sport has been opened up, and in recent years we have seen its first Asian president, Rehan Siddiqui, and women coming to the fore. Indeed, in the Olympics next year, with climbing and bouldering being a new Olympic

sport, many of our medal prospects are young women, such as Shauna Coxsey, who have come up through the sport as it has opened up. It is making sure that it is making explicit efforts in respect of participation. It is making sure that there are paths through and giving resource and priority to opening up access and to encouraging participation, from the base level, with people like me, to the elite level. That is significant and we in the House can play a modest role in assisting that.

I have a bolder, much bigger proposal for the Secretary of State, the Sports Minister and the Government. This is a big one and it is doable. Football is desperately keen to have safe standing, and the Government are considering when and how it could be done. It is clear that the safety case has been proven to people's satisfaction. Given what has been going on with the abuse of footballers, which is of course far worse at the grassroots level than at the elite level but has been brought to the fore by those prepared to be outspoken—the likes of Danny Rose, Raheem Sterling and other top footballers who are not prepared to take this rubbish any more—the Government could make safe standing in any one stadium conditional on the approval of a specific contract related to an action plan for dealing with discrimination in that stadium. The Government would then have the ability, as would external bodies and governing bodies, and external players in some communities, to hold to account those who run the sport.

If it was a premier league stadium with a capacity of, say, 60,000, a licence from the Government to give the club the ability to do what the fans and clubs say they want, with an agreement on precisely what they will do to deal with discrimination, would be significant leverage. In terms of tackling issues such as spectator abuse of those participating, given today's technology, with stadiums that sell out tickets and with computerised ticketing and all the new technologies that are already there, that is eminently doable. In other words, do not give them something without asking for a little back, and the price is something to which they say they are already committed. That would be very smart leverage by the Government. It would also allow the Government to hold the football authorities—the Premier League, the English Football League—to account for how they deal with these issues. Take the FA: I have raised some of the fines in this place and will not use up time repeating them again, but frankly the poor response to some of the worst offenders is comically bad, and of course that sends a huge message.

Another thing that we in the House can do is recognise good practice. We should try to spread best practice. When dealing with discrimination and racism, I am a strong believer in looking at what may be succeeding and telling others to copy it. Let me give an example from the premier league. Chelsea football club has launched a programme on tackling antisemitism, putting more than £1 million into it. Critically, from the owner, Roman Abramovich, to the chief executive and chair, Bruce Buck, to players such as David Luiz and others, there has been ownership of the programme throughout the club. It is early days, but it is a bold initiative and it is one that the club did not have to do—it has chosen to do it, which is part of its significance.

Let me give a second example. I intend to bring over—they are going to come—what I think is the best example in European football of how to deal with

problems among the fan base: people from German football and Borussia Dortmund. Like all German clubs, Dortmund employs fans—they are paid—as fans' liaisons. They are not elected by the fans; they are chosen because of their expertise, including, explicitly, expertise in dealing with all forms of discrimination. That has been transformative for Dortmund; it has gone from being a club with a big problem to being a club with a small problem that does not tolerate any form of discrimination or abuse. It is about to build a £10 million fans' centre, which will be a base for education, messaging and identifying the badge with the values of the club.

Dortmund is the best example, but there are others from Germany. I went to a fairly normal, non-controversial match in Bremen, at which there were 30,000 supporters. The fans threw out other fans for sexist language. Just think about that. Could you imagine that in any sports venue in the United Kingdom? That is way beyond where we are in this country. I am bringing over those Borussia Dortmund fan liaison officers and taking them round the clubs for meetings, hopefully in September. We hope to go to Scotland and to some of the bigger clubs. We will also meet people from the Football Association, and my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who chairs the all-party football group, has agreed to host a meeting of that group for the occasion.

How does the principle of employing fans work when Borussia Dortmund plays an away match with a premier league club in England? Who is looking for the fans who are misbehaving—for the racists? The liaison officers know who those fans are, because they are part of the family; it is their job to know. They know the travelling fans. It is very easy: if an away supporter acts inappropriately—say, shouts racist abuse—they do not get tickets again, so they do not go again. It is relatively easy.

As for the Government's strengths, other countries would love to have the powers that we have, and our banning orders. Ask the Germans what they would like; they would love the same powers. Banning orders have been there for quite a long time; the Government should refresh them, so that whenever tickets go on sale and sell out, the idiot who is banned from any football stadium—perhaps any sports stadium—in the country will not be going in. They might be able to sneak into a local club in my area incognito, but they become the idiot who cannot go to the game with their peer group. The lesson from that for the rest of the group is huge. Whether banning orders are for a year, five years or 10 years, it is important that they be used. That principle, and the ability to tie this to restorative justice, would be incredibly powerful, especially if club officials from the fan base were specifically involved.

Those are practical examples. I could give others, but those are sufficient, in this time-limited debate. Let us learn from others, but also use our strengths—the levers we have as parliamentarians and that the Government have. If we did that, we could make a significant dent in the problem and bring about action to address the frustrations of Mr Sterling, Mr Rose, and the many others receiving this abuse, which, of course, at the grassroots, and in kids' sport, is magnified many times; that is what I have seen across grassroots football, when I have investigated this issue for the FA, and it is the

same in other sports. Good practice, and good examples, spread. We could do more relatively easily, and make significant changes. This debate is great for contributing to that.

8.19 pm

Dr Allin-Khan: I have the unexpected pleasure of responding to this debate.

Sport is a unifying force, a force for good. It has been incredibly moving to hear so much support across the House for something that we all agree is extremely important. We are proud that this House stands together tonight against the homophobia seen at pitches, on stands and at matches, and against xenophobia, racism and sexism.

The hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) made a great intervention about social media companies, which need to do more. We all agree that they need to be held accountable. It is not okay that for years on end damaging and toxic tweets can remain accessible and online for all to read.

I am glad to hear that the English Football League, the FA and the Premier League promote good behaviour and work to make a stand against abuse. However, I acknowledge the importance of education in tackling that from the bottom up, as well as from the top down.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) made good points about ensuring that more is done. In my role, I will continue to push for all governing bodies to do more, and I do not doubt that the Ministers will do the same. I was glad to hear that my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) joined the Twitter boycott to protest against racism targeted at footballers. My hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) made some bold suggestions and rightly called for clubs to take responsibility. The hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) made some interesting points and gave us the first mention of wrestling this evening.

People know that I am a doctor—it is no secret—and I work on the frontline of our NHS. I see what gang violence does and how it damages our communities and ruins the lives of young people. It is also no secret that I am a boxer in my local community, and I see what sport can do to heal. Sometimes in debates in this place sport is not given the importance that it deserves, compared with issues such as Brexit—that is a fact. That does not mean that it is not of equal importance when we look at the transformative merits it possesses to change lives. I see that. As a humanitarian doctor, I have been in refugee camps where I have seen people wearing Man United shirts. They might not have food or security, but they proudly support a football team. That is something that no one can take away from them: they identify with a team.

Let us talk about communities. I am a Liverpool supporter, and I heard my friend on "The Anfield Wrap" talking about Mo Salah and how he has become such an important and integral part of the Liverpool community, the Liverpool family. He quoted:

"Being Scouse is a state of mind."

The importance of sport and physical activity cannot be overestimated. I stand here with great pride tonight, joining colleagues from across the House to celebrate that sentiment. We face a time in which our community,

[Dr Allin-Khan]

our society, is fractured—we have to be honest about that—but let us ensure that there is no room for those fractures to permeate the very thing that does so much to unite us.

We must also understand that discrimination in sport is not just about players on a pitch, or even about fans; it is also about what goes on in the boardroom. It is about understanding that we need representation from all groups at boardroom level—women, people from the black and minority ethnic community, and our LGBT brothers and sisters all need a seat at the table.

Tonight, I hope that everyone present unites with me to say that together we want to stamp out racism, sexism, homophobia and any form of discrimination in sport.

8.24 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): This has been a valuable and important debate as we lay bare how we must tackle racism and intolerance in sport at every level—from grassroots level up to the elite—because this is a truly crucial issue that faces this country. I am sure that, as we heard from the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), we are truly united in our determination to stamp out racism and bigotry wherever it rears its head. On what would have been Anne Frank's 90th birthday, her words are stronger and more compelling than ever—we must never, ever forget where hate leads humanity. Some of the issues that we have touched on bring to life the challenges faced by the sector and by all of us across sport and, as we heard from the Secretary of State, civil society.

Before I continue, I would like to wish Chris Froome well. He has had multiple serious injuries in a crash this evening that could rule him out of the Tour de France. I hope all is well with him.

Why do we need to get this right? Well, over the next three years, the eyes of the world will be upon us. Indeed, they already are when it comes to the cricket world cup. We have the netball world cup, and Birmingham 2022 in three years' time. I met representatives of Yorkshire cycling; what is happening in Harrogate this September is very exciting. We have the diving world series and the rugby world cup warm-ups. I am conscious that I should mention the rugby league world cup for Mr Deputy Speaker. We have the Solheim cup and the opportunities that provides for women's golf. I could go on, because we are absolutely in the right place as regards hosting and showcasing these events.

Let me turn to some of the comments made during the debate. The hon. Member for Tooting talked about the sexism and intolerance seen on social media, particularly with regard to broadcasters and abusive tweets—"getting a slap". This is just not acceptable, as we heard from the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), who talked with passion, as ever. That view continues to unite us, and we must all strive to work together to stamp it out. I, too, pay tribute to Gareth Thomas and to Justin Fashanu. The ability of players, such as Joe Root, to be out and proud and to speak out is absolutely vital for their games to thrive. This would not be acceptable in any other workplace, and we will not see it in sport. We will support everybody who rightly calls it out.

In response to my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas), sport absolutely can address inequalities. Whether it is an arena or a stadium, the inspirational opportunity provided by getting facilities is vital. I have directed Sport England to work closely with the stadium developers in Cornwall to help them to improve their business case. The significant expertise that we have in this area has been very helpful. I continue to monitor the feedback to make sure that that business case is managed.

The hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) made a characteristically passionate speech. I met him recently, and I know that he is bringing lessons from football around the world to the Department. If we do not get to every single piece of intolerance, including the sexist language that makes families not feel included, then we are absolutely missing a trick. Alongside the Secretary of State, this Government will work to hold the football authorities to account, tackling intolerance but also some of the other challenges that the hon. Gentleman mentioned around the experience of fans, including safe standing. We will keep the House updated on that.

I am very pleased, as ever, to hear from MPs who continue to affirm that there should be zero tolerance of discrimination. I have listened to, and had emails and tweets from, people who want to know that we have a real determination to ensure that sport continues to be welcoming.

There is absolutely no place in football or any sport for racism and race-related crime—I have said that before at the Dispatch Box, and I will take every opportunity to say it again. Bigotry and intolerance cannot be allowed under the cloak of football. It is not right online, and it is not right offline. We do not want it. These are not fans. We will not give the good fans the embarrassment of calling these people that, because they do not deserve it. Our sports clubs and fans continue to embrace diversity and tackle racism. We have heard tonight about Chelsea's work, and I applaud the work that Brighton have done on tackling homophobia.

We have set out a clear ambition—we heard it from the Secretary of State—for how we will combat all forms of discrimination, whether online or offline. We have a key duty of care in the "online Harms" White Paper, which will require companies in law to take steps to protect users from harm and abuse on their platforms. As the Secretary of State said, it will be overseen and, more importantly, enforced by an independent regulator.

If we get this right, there is everything to gain. We cannot have a situation online that is not matched offline. We know that racism and intolerance is not of sport's making. We need to ensure that there is no disproportionate opportunity for its impacts to be suffered on the sports field. It is wrong for that to be allowed to happen.

There is much to say about the summit that I held earlier this year, and I will update the House on it soon. I want to finish by making it clear that at the heart of this Government's sports strategy, "Sporting Future", is our desire to be at the forefront of equality and fully support a zero-tolerance stance of inappropriate behaviour. I am determined that in any sporting event on our shores, we will be at the forefront of equality. We will be world-leading in the environment that both players and spectators can expect, and we will reject racism, intolerance and bigotry in every single form.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes with concern that levels of discrimination across sport remain unacceptable; considers that a combination of tougher sanctions against offenders, action by social media companies and better education are key to driving discrimination out of sport; and calls on the Government to hold social media companies to account on this issue.

Cornish Wrestling

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Jeremy Quin.*)

8.31 pm

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): Good evening, Mr Deputy Speaker. Meur ras—thank you—for allowing me to speak in the debate. The people of Cornwall will be saluting you.

I come from a part of the country that has a very proud history and culture. Our population dates back to the stone age and is steeped in history and lore, particularly in mining and fishing. Some of our ancient traditions still exist today. Every year in Cornwall, people participate in the ancient tradition of hurling through the streets, and in the merry mornings of May, the 'Obby 'Osses descend through the streets of Padstow. In recent times, we have seen a huge resurgence in the sport of gig rowing. We are proud in Cornwall to be home to those historical cultural events, which are unique to our county.

Today, I wish to shine a spotlight on Cornish wrestling. I will, if I may, refer to Cornish wrestling in the Cornish tongue for the rest of the debate—I will be referring to wrestling as “wrasslin”. That is how we describe it in Cornwall. I have had a large number of media requests about this debate, which I was not expecting.

Cornish wrasslin bears no relation to the wrestling that people may have seen on television. It is not WWE. There are no ropes, nothing to jump off and no cage fights or tag teams. The sport of wrasslin in Cornwall sums up the Cornish very well. It is a game of power, skill and strength. Cornish wrasslin is a form of wrestling that has been established in Cornwall for several centuries. It is a unique sport that has witnessed a steady revival since the establishment of the Cornish Wrestling Association in 1920.

The history of wrasslin was recorded first in “The History of the Kings of Britain” in 1139, in which Geoffrey of Monmouth suggested that Corineus, the medieval legend, wrestled a Cornish giant named Gogmagog at Plymouth Hoe. Two Cornishmen were recorded in a poem of 1590 entitled “Poly-Olbion” at the battle of Agincourt, carrying a banner of two Cornish wrasslers in a hitch or a hold. In the 17th century, historian Richard Carew wrote of Cornish wrestling:

“Wrasslin is as full of manliness, more delightful and less dangerous”

than hurling. I can just imagine two burly Cornishmen, with hands the size of shovels, striding out into battle at Agincourt, proud of their sport and proud of their county.

In more recent times, we have seen a mini-revival. Both Devon and Brittany have a history of wrasslin, and they have competed with Cornwall in inter-Celtic matches. Cornish wrasslin is the oldest sport in the British Isles, and alongside hurling it is the oldest sport indigenous to Cornwall.

The objective of Cornish wrasslin is to throw the challenger from a standing position, with no grappling or holding on the ground. A bout begins when the competitors grab each other's jackets by the collar, lapel or sleeve, in what is known as a hitch. To win the bout, the competitor must score a back. A back is scored by

[Scott Mann]

throwing the opponent on his or her hips or shoulders. There are four pins on the back of the jacket, and three have to touch the ground to score a back and win the contest. A single pin touching the ground only counts as one point but can be accumulated and scored at the end.

There are many different techniques and throws to defeat an opponent and score a back. Crooks and heaves are the most popular. Crooks are a variation of a trip, to catch an opponent off guard, while heaves are used by heavier, more powerful wrasslers to lift their opponent in the air and fling them on their back.

The wearing of canvas jackets is essential and makes gripping easier, and competitors also wear shorts and socks. One crucial thing to keep in mind is that strength is not the main contributing factor to wrasslin. Many techniques and moves can be deployed to get a back. In fact, competitors from Devon are said to have used more kicking, which has not always gone down particularly well with the Cornish.

One of the most famous encounters between wrasslers from Devon and Cornwall must surely be the great wrasslin bout of 1826. Any match between Devon and Cornwall was almost always hotly disputed and always bore a proudly grudge, and this was no exception. James Polkinghorne was due to meet Abraham Cann. James Polkinghorne was born in the St Keverne and was usually associated with St Columb, for it was here that he was the landlord of the Red Lion inn. He set forth to uphold the honour of Cornish wrasslin when he took on Cann the challenger.

The match was to find the champion of the west of England and it took place at Tamar Green in Devonport on 23 October 1826. The ultimate result has never been agreed and it remains a matter of controversy to this day. It was from St Stephens that James Polkinghorne set off, in his gig rowing boat, on a long trip with his brother to Tamar Green. Information about the controversy surrounding the event from the outset can be found in an article on the heyday and decline of wrasslin. In 1960, the late Leslie Jolly, a recognised authority on wrasslin, wrote in a Cornish gazette that he wondered whether Polkinghorne was the right person to take on the challenger Cann. Jolly's grandfather, of Penscowen, St Enoder, was a renowned wrassler during the early part of the 19th century, and he made the case that Parkyn of St Columb Minor would have been a better representative. Parkyn had been champion for 20 years, but he was 52 and Polkinghorne a mere 38. Parkyn's claims were supported by some involved in the sport, including in St Columb, but nevertheless it was Polkinghorne who eventually went across the Tamar.

Cornish wrasslin has not always had a good name. Before the sport's governing body was founded, there were all sorts of things going on in Cornwall. The attraction of wrasslin brought about a bout in Bodmin. One of the competitors entered the ring and threw two roach men. That success was immediately followed by an attack by the Bodmin men, which led to a general riot. The contenders congested in a pugilistic style, the combatants armed themselves with bludgeons from the wooden rickshaw in the church town, and a fight ensued. Heads were laid open, teeth knocked out and the battlefield was quickly strewn with the maimed.

During the 1930s and 1940s, several members of the Chapman family achieved great wrasslin success. Grandfathers, fathers and sons all fought. Many Cornish towns and villages held tournaments, and hundreds would turn up to watch the contests. The Hawkeys and the Warnes were also well-known wrassling families, but the most famous competitor of the day was the heavyweight champion, Francis Gregory of St Wenn.

Gregory had his first match when he was 13 and he was the youngest Cornishman to show his skills at the London Palladium in 1927. He represented Cornwall seven times from 1928 at the official Cornu-Breton championships. He won seven times, on four occasions in Brittany. Later, he moved north and changed his sport to play rugby league for Wigan and Warrington and was capped for England. Taking up professional wrestling, he became known as Francis St Clair Gregory, and in November 1955 he made his first appearance in a wrestling match shown on British television.

More recently, in the face of fierce competition and promotion, Cornish wrestling waned to a small group of stalwarts. To put a stop to the decline and help raise awareness, in 2004, the Cornish Wrestling Association became affiliated with the British Wrestling Association. Publicity increased and training sessions took place in Helston, Truro and Wadebridge. Those measures have helped wrasslin make a strong comeback. Based at St Columb Major, today Ashley Cawley is the current Cornish heavyweight champion. He is also the Cornish Wrestling Association's public relations officer, while his uncle, Mike Cawley, is the association chairman. Ashley's father, Gerry, came out of wrestling retirement and won two championships recently.

Over the summer months, the Cornish Wrestling Association runs tournaments in villages and towns across the duchy. They also feature at the Royal Cornwall Show. All ages are welcome to participate and there are several children's categories. There is now a plaque in St Columb Major to commemorate the fight between Polkinghorne and Cann. The contests are overseen by three referees called sticklers, who award the points.

It is thought that Cornish wrasslin evolved the way it did because it is safer for wrestlers to land on their backs. The wrestlers are taught to grip tight and to avoid putting their arms down to soften the blow.

Wrestlers swear an oath in Cornish before wrasslin. The translation is:

"On my honour and the honour of my country"—

I think they probably mean Cornwall there—

"I swear to wrestle without treachery or brutality and in token of my sincerity, I offer my hand to my opponent."

I will give the Cornish a go:

"Gwary whec yu gwary tek",

which means, "Good play is fair play".

While it has been good to give the Minister a tour d'horizon of Cornish wrasslin this evening, I have some specific asks for her. Perhaps next time she passes through Cornwall, she would like to take me on in a bout of Cornish wrasslin. Given the current environment, perhaps the quickest way to sort out the leadership contest is to put everybody in a Cornish wrasslin ring and let them duke it out and find out who is the strongest contender.

My first objective is to raise the profile of this wonderful traditional sport. I hope that we have managed to do that through the debate. Secondly, I seek the Minister's support in getting help from Sport England to recognise Cornish wrasslin as a defined sport. That would allow Celtic tournaments between Brittany and Cornwall to continue. Sport England generously gave Cornwall £9,000 in 2012, and I hope that we can restore some of that funding.

Thirdly, the Commonwealth games are taking place in Birmingham, and there has been Greco-Roman wrestling in previous Commonwealth games. We have a chance to showcase all that is great about the British Isles. Will the Minister therefore help me to lobby the Commonwealth games committee either to put Cornish wrasslin in future Commonwealth games or to allow our fantastic sportsmen and women who do Cornish wrasslin to have a spot at the opening ceremony to demonstrate how good the sport is?

I hope that I have provided some entertainment in talking about a sport that I care passionately about. I hope that the debate has showcased Cornish wrasslin.

8.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) on securing this debate on Cornish wrasslin. I was just wondering—my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin) mentioned it, too—whether my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) sat next to my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall to see whether there would be a bout afterwards. We shall see very shortly. I very much enjoyed hearing about the heritage of this interesting sport. Most of the historical stories I have heard previously have been in the Tea Room. I am glad to hear all about wrasslin tonight. I thought my hon. Friend gave his speech without a hitch—if I have that right.

It is clear that this sport means a great deal to those present and to the communities from which it originated, which is great to see. The media interest that my hon. Friend has had might give him an insight into the media interest in life as a Sports Minister. It has certainly given me an insight over the past few weeks and months into quite how much interest there is, rightly, in sport. I thank the hon. Members in the Chamber who have listened to the debate and are wondering where they can use this in their own constituencies.

I cannot say that I have yet had the opportunity to personally take part in this ancient and noble art. However, I have noted the invitation. As my hon. Friends and other hon. Members will know, I am a passionate advocate for new and different sports. Yes, this is on my list to at least look at. I am not sure I am going to try it, but I will take a close look at it.

Cornwall is a part of the country steeped in tradition and history, which manifests itself in so many ways: in the culture, in the language, and of course in its sporting history. It has been fascinating to hear about the many interesting facets of Cornish wrasslin and how it has developed as a sport. From Agincourt to riots to rickshaws to teeth being knocked out, it is clear that this sport has been popular and truly fascinating over a number of years. I am sure that this debate will in some way boost the sport. I hope that more youngsters will be able to

understand that experience in all its vitality and history. It is fantastic to see how the sport has been handed down over many generations. That is typical of our sports and it is one of the joys of sport. It is a warming tradition that continues.

Let me, as my hon. Friend did, talk about the value and power of sport to our communities. Since I took on the job of Sports Minister, one of my key priorities has been to make sure that absolutely everyone is able to enjoy sport and physical activity. I think we are all extremely well versed in the benefits of sport and physical activity. That is reflected in the five outcomes of the Government's sporting future strategy: physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, individual development, social and community development, and economic development. I am totally committed to delivering those five outcomes for absolutely everyone. As my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives will remind me when it comes to a stadium for Cornwall, access to that is vital.

Everybody should be able to enjoy the benefits that sport and physical activity can bring. It should also, as we have heard tonight, be fun. It should be inclusive and there should be no barriers to taking part or feeling welcome. We want at least half a million more people to be regularly active across England by 2020, with at least half of them women. We are making good progress, but we must do more. Since we launched the strategy in 2015, we have recognised that this is about long-term change. This is about habits that exist over the long term. Physical activity has a massively positive impact on our nation's health and wellbeing. It can reduce the risk of chronic diseases, and tackle health conditions such as diabetes and heart disease. There are ever-increasing pressures on our health and social care systems, particularly in Cornwall. The evidence shows that referrals to exercise classes, sports groups, ballroom dancing or indeed wrasslin can help people's physical and mental wellbeing—as long as you keep your teeth.

It is extremely important to me that everyone, regardless of their background, age or where they live, can find a sport that is right for them and stick with it, getting active and staying active, whether through wrestling, wrasslin, dancing or football. We need to get young people involved in physical activity. There are still stubborn inequalities when it comes to taking part in sport; girls, certain black, Asian and minority ethnic groups, those with a disability and those with hidden disabilities are under-represented. It is clear that we need to continue to encourage more adults and children to take part in sport and physical activity and, as we heard tonight, it must be fair, safe and welcoming. The point about the Cornish wrasslin motto was absolutely right:

"Good play is fair play".

What a fantastic message for all those in sport or who are considering taking it up. The basis of good sport is fairness. It is simple but absolutely true, and experience shows that if we get fair and welcoming sport or physical activity, we absolutely benefit.

On Sport England and grassroots funding, the investment of £9,000 helped with the school taster days, which saw several hundred children taking part. Sport England also funded some new equipment, including mats and jackets, to encourage a new generation of Cornish boys and girls to experience the sport. I am sure that, like me, it will have heard the plea.

[Mims Davies]

In the last five years, Sport England has invested £7.3 million in projects in Cornwall, with the aim of getting more people physically active. We have heard about other sports. The Bude Surf Life Saving Club in North Cornwall is helping to get more women involved and it received £9,000, which seems like a lucky figure in Cornwall. Sport England has also invested over £75,000 of its community asset fund in Newquay Town Council to help with the skate park and to help to provide broad opportunities to get active. We need to shift the dial—sorry, I am falling over a pen here; that is nearly a sporting injury—when it comes to all our communities getting active and staying active.

In conclusion, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall for securing this debate and for allowing us to reflect fully on the benefits of sport and physical activity and on what sport and a connection to a community means. He mentioned the Commonwealth

games. I am not in a position to commit to including wrasslin in a future games, but I am sure that those devising the start or the end of the showcase will have heard that point and I will of course mention it to them. We will certainly explore the opportunities to showcase those slightly different sports as part of our sporting and cultural programme. What is not to like about that?

I thank everyone who has been present to talk about the enjoyment of sport in the two debates tonight and the importance of different opportunities. I hope that wrasslin continues to grow, adds more participants far and wide and includes some of the under-represented groups that I spoke about this evening. I wish the sport and all those involved the very best—and I may, bravely, try it out for myself.

Question put and agreed to.

8.52 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 12 June 2019

[GERAINT DAVIES *in the Chair*]

Domestic Abuse and Homelessness

9.30 am

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered domestic abuse and homelessness.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Davies, and I thank everyone for coming this morning. I particularly thank all the organisations that provided briefings for this debate, and all the individuals who have provided their personal experiences and stories to help us make the case for improving the law to prevent people affected by domestic abuse from ending up homeless. The case is harder to make without that experience and those statements, so I am grateful for their input.

I speak as the Member of Parliament for Bermondsey and Old Southwark, and as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on ending homelessness. Last week we published our report on this issue, entitled “A Safe Home: Breaking the link between homelessness and domestic abuse.” I thank the Minister and many colleagues for attending the launch, and everyone who has signed up to this campaign already. The campaign we are running is supported by many organisations, including Crisis, Women’s Aid, Refuge, St Mungo’s, Shelter, the Domestic Abuse and Housing Alliance, Homeless Link, Changing Lives, Hestia, Centrepoin, Depaul UK, the Chartered Institute of Housing, The Connection at St Martin’s and Surviving Economic Abuse. There is a huge platform behind the campaign, and my thanks go to all the organisations and individuals that have already signed up. The report and materials linked to it are on the Crisis website.

We hold this morning’s debate in the context of a change in Prime Minister and Government. I hope whoever next enters Downing Street, and whatever team they bring together, will not slow down the Domestic Abuse Bill and will accept the aims of our campaign. We have an evidence base that clearly demonstrates the need to improve housing support for survivors of domestic abuse. Some people get no help at all, and even those who can access emergency short-term hostels and refuges face huge and often insurmountable barriers to long-term safe homes. Too many people are being let down, having their lives further damaged and facing further isolation and risk. Sadly, that is today’s grim reality. However, we have a crucial window of opportunity to address this significant concern. I hope the Government will indicate today that they will act quickly, using the Domestic Abuse Bill as the vehicle for change.

The national evidence base is worryingly extensive and paints a grim picture of the current situation. I shall go through some key stats to inform this morning’s debate. Research carried out by Crisis found that 61% of women and 16% of men had experienced violence or abuse by a partner. Many of the men affected are from the LGBT community, but the vast majority of people

affected are women. One in five of Crisis’s clients who are women report that domestic abuse was the primary cause of their homelessness.

Some 53% of survivors supported by Women’s Aid’s No Woman Turned Away project were prevented from making a valid homelessness application by their local authority. The project provides additional support to women who struggle to access refuge places, but nearly a quarter of the women involved were prevented from even making a homelessness application, as they were told upfront by councils that they would not meet the threshold for priority need.

According to official statistics, 1.6 million women and 695,000 men experienced domestic abuse in England and Wales last year. Domestic abuse is inextricably linked with housing; most abuse occurs at home, and a lack of alternative housing is a key barrier to people escaping domestic abuse. The latest Government statistics, for 2018, show that 5,380 households were made homeless in England over a three-month period because of domestic abuse.

It is vital that victims are given a clear, safe route out of abusive and potentially life-threatening situations, and offered long-term stability. Currently, this is simply not available, but it is a situation that could be easily fixed. Without that fix in place, such abuse has contributed to some horrendous circumstances. One extreme example that was brought to the attention of the APPG on ending homelessness in 2017 was of a woman who was made homeless when her relationship ended after a neighbour contacted the police following a two-day assault by her partner. Despite the clearly visible bruising and a letter from her partner admitting the abuse, she was told by her council that she needed to provide further evidence of her vulnerability and that she was not in a priority need situation. She ended up sofa-surfing for two years.

Sadly, I have also seen evidence in my own constituency surgeries in Bermondsey and Old Southwark. It has been four years since I was first elected in May 2015—I see some other Members from the 2015 intake present this morning—and the casework that I have seen over those four years is something I am desperate to change. I am desperate to be in a position where we can actually reform the situation so that people do not end up in these circumstances.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. The link between being a victim of domestic abuse and homelessness is undeniable, and the draft Domestic Abuse Bill will be an opportunity to change that. Currently, one person can end a dual tenancy, which means a victim can effectively be left homeless. Does my hon. Friend agree that this must be changed, and that we must ensure that it takes two parties to end a tenancy?

Neil Coyle: Of course, no one should end up homeless as a result of a decision made by someone else. The changes we are seeking would aim to address exactly those kinds of circumstances: domestic abuse situations in which there is a coercive or controlling partner who would do something like that.

Let me return to my casework in Bermondsey and Old Southwark. In four years, I have seen six women with children made homeless as a direct result of abuse.

[Neil Coyle]

Those are just the women who have managed to come to my surgery sessions—not everyone will find their MP in such circumstances. Cases that I have seen include one mum who was told to sleep in Walworth police station with her children, rather than return to her abusive partner.

A pregnant woman with a one-year-old son recently came to see me. She was forced to sofa-surf following an incident of domestic violence by her ex-partner. She is not yet 18, so there is additional difficulty in trying to find alternative emergency shelter that caters for under-18s. Last year I met a mother with a five-year-old daughter who was made homeless after being kicked out by the abusive father, who dragged her out of the house half-naked. She was under hostile environment conditions, with no recourse to public funds, and was forced to sofa-surf before further intervention eventually helped secure a home. “No recourse to public funds” conditions used to cover only people who were in this country illegally, but they were extended by Cameron and Clegg’s coalition Government and now affect more than 50,000 British-born children in the UK. The APPG on ending homelessness recommends that no one with dependants is prevented from accessing public funds, as this has directly contributed to people staying with abusive partners, ending up with sex-for-rent landlords, or being forced into rough sleeping and homelessness.

Disturbingly, I have had brought to my attention instances of vulnerability being heightened after someone has sought official support or help. Women forced to stay with abusive partners have been told to go back to their partners to collect ID, or to prove abuse. One example came to the APPG on ending homelessness two years ago. A domestic abuse survivor got an injunction against her husband, who had threatened to kill her and take away her son. He broke the injunction and was put on bail. Her new address was revealed to him in his letter of probation, despite her being relocated due to the risks he posed. Despite the previous history of abuse, her council deemed her not to be at high risk and she was forced to remain in the same property, living in fear.

Despite all the well-documented evidence nationally, the problem persists. If anything, it is growing due to the strain on local authority resources. The Prime Minister—I know it is about to change—claimed austerity was over. That is certainly not how it feels on the frontline in council offices, or to people who seek emergency help. Of course, we are meant to have seen a change under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. We should not deny that that legislation has been successful in some ways, but a key loophole has opened up that councils use to deny help. The context is important, and we all have examples of what councils have lost, particularly since 2010—being starved of resources. My council has lost half its funding from central Government.

On top of losing funding, many councils have had additional responsibilities placed on them, putting further pressure on limited resources. That includes the families of parents who are subject to “no recourse to public funds” conditions. It is estimated that, last year, London councils provided £53 million of help to that group alone under what is supposed to be emergency children’s social services provisions. Southwark is disproportionately affected, and is forced to provide more than £6 million of support for families in those circumstances alone.

More positively, the Homelessness Reduction Act means that local authorities have a legal duty to provide meaningful support to everyone who approaches them as homeless. They must provide support to prevent people from becoming homeless and to find a home for those who are already presenting as homeless. Despite that welcome change, there is no guarantee that people fleeing domestic abuse will receive an offer of settled housing if the other options fail.

New research in the report published last week by the ending homelessness group reveals that almost 2,000 households fleeing domestic abuse in England every year are not being provided with a safe home by their local authority because they are not considered a priority need. That research was conducted after the Homelessness Reduction Act was introduced, which shows that there is a key weakness in this area. Of course, 2,000 households is not a huge number in Government terms, so extending automatic priority need to that group would not result in a new or significant burden on councils. It would, however, have a hugely positive and significant impact on the lives of the people fleeing dangerous and potentially life-threatening situations, who currently face the further devastation of homelessness.

Karen became homeless after suffering shocking violence at the hands of her partner. These are her words:

“It went from punching and kicking to trying to slit my throat, stab me in the stomach, splitting my head open, putting a cigarette out on me, pushing me through a glass coffee table, battering me with a table leg and the final straw was when he tied me to a chair and put my feet in a bowl of water he then plugged a car battery charger in and threatened to electrocute me. I knew I had to get myself and my girls out of there.”

She managed to escape her partner and was found a new home with her children, but she bumped into her ex a year later and the abuse began again. Eventually, social services got involved and her children were taken into care, at which point she was evicted because she was deemed no longer to have priority need. She and her partner ended up sleeping rough. She told us:

“We slept in empty garages, shop doorways, bus shelters even under railway bridges. I had given up on life at this point and didn’t care if I lived or died.”

It was only when her partner died from an illness caused by addiction that she finally felt free to save herself.

Our research shows that, despite the new prevention and relief duties under the Homelessness Reduction Act, survivors are still being found to be not in priority need for the main homelessness duty of settled long-term accommodation, and councils are still simply turning people away. The Government’s recent commitment to place a statutory duty on top-tier local authorities to assess and meet the need for emergency accommodation-based support services for people experiencing domestic abuse is welcome. Our group, and other organisations and all-party groups, have welcomed that, but we have done so with a significant reservation: the commitment falls short of providing people with the safety and security of a permanent long-term home. That is the problem that we are trying to address.

Currently, unless a person experiencing domestic violence can prove that they are more vulnerable than an ordinary person would be if they became homeless, they are not defined as being a priority need or eligible for an offer of settled housing.

Experience shows that domestic abuse in isolation is rarely considered sufficient to qualify someone as being in priority need, particularly if they do not have dependent children. In 2017, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government stats showed that only 2% of the people found to be in priority need and made an offer of settled housing were given housing because they were vulnerable as a result of domestic abuse.

Of course, it can be hugely stressful for a survivor to prove that they are homeless due to domestic abuse. During the all-party group's inquiry into domestic abuse and homelessness in 2017, we heard evidence of local authorities consistently failing to provide people fleeing domestic abuse with the help they need. We also heard that the vulnerability test is being used as a gatekeeping tool to deny access to services and support. We also heard accounts of survivors being told to return home to a dangerous situation to retrieve ID or other evidence to prove that they were homeless due to domestic abuse. One woman told us that she was told to return home to get a letter from the perpetrator stating that he had raped and attacked her. Those situations must end, and we have the means to do it.

Crisis's "No One Turned Away" research found that many local authorities are failing adequately to assist people presenting as homeless due to domestic abuse, and that there is often a lack of sensitivity when dealing with survivors. There are accounts of people being asked to recount experiences of abuse and violence in public, often in crowded housing office waiting rooms, or being asked to return to the perpetrator. That must end, and we have the means to do that.

We do not come to the Chamber empty-handed. The campaign believes that everyone who experiences domestic abuse is by definition vulnerable and should be placed in the automatic priority need category. We call on the Government to ensure that the Domestic Abuse Bill makes provision to ensure that all survivors of domestic abuse have access to a safe, long-term home. We ask that everyone fleeing domestic abuse who is homeless be automatically considered as in priority need for settled housing, rather than subject to the vulnerability test to determine whether they qualify. Without that change, people who are homeless due to fleeing domestic abuse will still be required to prove additional vulnerability, which can be impossible. Our findings show that almost 2,000 people in those circumstances are denied help.

Those are the aims of the campaign and today's debate. We have even tabled amendments to the draft Domestic Abuse Bill that I hope the Government will accept. I hope the Minister can give us an indication about that this morning. I thank the housing team at Garden Court Chambers—especially Liz Davies—for their work on the amendments. For those who need a copy of the amendments in full, they are on pages 26 and 27 of the all-party group report. The "A Safe Home" campaign report, published last week, is on Crisis's website.

If the Minister has any reservation about the amendments, I hope she will air them here so we can move forward and improve them. The Government can, of course, adapt or adopt the amendments or introduce their own proposals. I really hope we will hear something positive from the Minister. I thank other hon. Members in this Chamber in advance. I know that they have worked on this issue for many years and will bring a wealth of experience to the debate.

9.46 am

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I thank the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) for securing this important debate and for his thorough and interesting introduction.

I have been privileged to be a member of the Joint Committee on the Draft Domestic Abuse Bill, and I was very interested to hear from the Minister on housing last month. We heard considerable evidence about how domestic abuse and homelessness are directly connected. Domestic abuse is, of course, inextricably linked to housing, which, alongside health and education, is devolved to Wales, whereas justice and policing issues are reserved to Westminster. That means that the draft Bill contains an interesting mix of responsibilities. During the Joint Committee's work, we heard about the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015. There is therefore a complex picture of devolved and reserved powers, and Government responses diverge as they develop.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): The Government's recent announcement about accommodation-based services is an example of that. They have promised funding to give refugees and other accommodation a long-term, sustainable future, which is welcome, but does the right hon. Lady agree that it is essential that they also ensure that Wales is funded to be able to do that? It is a national network, and we do not want to risk there being a postcode lottery.

Liz Saville Roberts: Yes, indeed. Later, I will raise the issue of the difference in the definition of priority need. The reality is that it is one thing to have a definition, but another to have the resources to implement those policies in Wales. That applies to Wales as much as it does to Westminster and across borders.

In relation to Wales, Shelter Cymru found that in 2017, people from 1,218 households became homeless due to the violent breakdown of a relationship with a partner. Survivors of domestic abuse in Wales already have a priority need for accommodation, which is not the case in England. It is evident, therefore, that legislation in England should follow Wales's lead. Automatic priority should be introduced to ensure that more individuals who have experienced abuse are given the help they need when at risk of homelessness. Of course, equally important in Wales and England is the need to ensure that sufficient resources are available to enable automatic priority in practical terms. Politicians have every temptation to create policies and legislation, but realising them is as, if not more, important.

By way of an effective response to domestic abuse, Wales cries out for co-ordination in its complex mix of devolved and reserved responsibilities. That means additional layers of governance and accountability for the Domestic Abuse Bill and for the domestic abuse commissioner that the Bill will create. I understand that the Minister present will not necessarily be directly responsible for the domestic abuse commissioner and the answerability of that person, but as housing is a devolved matter, and this issue will be raised in Wales and in Westminster because of the domestic abuse commissioner's lynchpin role, will she tell us how she anticipates working with others on the role of the commissioner?

[*Liz Saville Roberts*]

I urge the Minister to explain how the commissioner will work effectively in Wales to ensure the best outcome for victims. I propose that there should be a duty on the commissioner to consult specifically with partners and agencies in Wales, and that the work of the commissioner should be subject to scrutiny by the National Assembly for Wales. At present, although well intentioned and well planned, different activities are not co-ordinated between Wales and England, despite the cross-border aspect mentioned by my friend, the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden). There is real concern that the Domestic Abuse Bill will not effectively hold to account and measure the interface between devolved and reserved matters.

The Domestic Abuse Bill, which I am sure we look forward to as a means to address the problems under discussion, must respect the legislative divergence between England and Wales, and ensure that the UK and Welsh Governments work closely to bring about positive change. *Diolch yn fawr, Mr Davies.*

9.51 am

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on securing this debate and on all the work that he does with the all-party parliamentary group on ending homelessness, which he leads ably, and presumably alone, now that his Conservative counterpart, the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), has been promoted. I wish my hon. Friend well for the future of that all-party parliamentary group, which has done some incredibly important work and given Government clear direction on actions that they could take further to reduce homelessness and on additional steps beyond that which they have already done.

I wanted to participate in the debate because on Friday, at my regular weekly surgery, three cases of domestic abuse came to me. I wish that that was unusual, but sadly, it is not. I will focus on two of those cases, which have particular links to housing. I thought that the Government response to today's debate might come from a Home Office Minister, rather than the Minister with responsibility for housing and homelessness, because of the nature of the domestic abuse involved. I trust that the Minister will have close conversations with her Home Office counterpart following the debate.

The first case that came before me involved a woman who had experienced severe financial coercive control at the hands of her former partner. After six years of a relationship—five years as a co-mortgager with the individual—the woman has been left with full responsibility for the mortgage and all the utility bills, as well as associated bills for which her former partner happily took her money for five years, but never actually paid the companies. Her ex-partner will not allow her to remove herself from or seek to close down that mortgage, or make any progress whatever on selling the property, so he retains his control over her life and her ability to move on from the relationship, although she is the one who engages with all the different agencies to try to work out a payment plan for all the debt accrued as a result of that relationship.

This woman has been to every organisation that she can think of, whether it be Women's Aid, StepChange or her local authority, and has even taken advice from a solicitor on how to extricate herself from this situation. The only response is that she should default on her part of the mortgage payments, which would significantly affect her credit rating, and allow the property to be repossessed and sold by the bank at auction, at a much lower price than if it were sold on the open market. Both she and her partner would lose out, but her former partner could not care less about losing out—all he wants is to ensure that she struggles and that she cannot move any further along.

As an exercise in domestic abuse, such financial coercion is already legislated for, but the police simply do not seem to have the ability, focus and priorities to investigate such incredibly complex and sensitive situations, and the available avenues left to my constituents are few and far between. I hope that the Minister will meet the Home Office Minister, with whom I have already had a conversation about this particular case, to ensure that we see in the upcoming Domestic Abuse Bill a much greater focus on financial measures and packages, and on the institutions that can better support those in controlling relationships, particularly of a financial nature.

On homelessness, for that individual in that first case, getting either another mortgage or private rented accommodation will be very difficult and challenging with a poor credit rating.

The second case involves a woman who had been in a very violent relationship with her former partner, with whom she had four children. The partner was in a particular situation, and the police gave my constituent just 48 hours to get out of the family home and remove themselves as far away as possible.

The homelessness team put this woman and her four children into emergency bed-and-breakfast accommodation, but that was not entirely suitable. It was a long way from the children's schools, which made it impossible for the mother to do any work because most of the day was spent taking four children back and forth to school on public transport. Her finances were certainly taken up by doing that, because she received no additional financial support in that situation. She then began sofa-surfing with her family, which has gone on for more than two years since they were advised to move on from that housing association property.

The homelessness team has now found my constituent a home, which she has been told is permanent, but after a matter of months the walls are crumbling, the roof and the bathroom leak, the whole house has electrical problems and electricians have assessed it as a tinderbox waiting to go up, and an outbuilding in the garden is so dangerous that the children cannot play out there, and one of them has already injured themselves in it. There is a crisis in the kind of property that local authorities can offer people in such dire situations. It would be great if the council or the housing association had sufficient properties, but when my constituent has asked the housing association to rehouse her in more suitable accommodation, she has been told that she made herself voluntarily homeless, and she has accrued debts as a result of non-payment of rent.

I cannot believe that Lincolnshire Housing Partnership, the housing association in question in this case, does not allow a waiver for individuals who have experienced

domestic abuse to say that they are leaving a property, particularly when that is done under police advice. I cannot believe that the housing association cannot do more to ensure that people are properly accommodated.

Government have done some good work to prevent those who are suffering from domestic violence and seeking housing support from being turned away from neighbouring or external local authorities merely because they have no local connection. That is welcome. The Minister will know that I am very aware of the work undertaken to try to tackle rogue landlords and protect those in the private rental sector, but these two cases show that financial coercion as a crime is not fully investigated with the same vigour as other forms of physical abuse. The support is not available.

Much more could be done to get the institutions that offer mortgages to provide some breathing space and freeze mortgages until the situation is resolved to ensure that individuals are not punished. The partner of my constituent has gone to ground and constantly changes address so that the mortgage company cannot get hold of him and insist that he sign documentation. That is deeply frustrating for my constituent, because in her eyes she is the victim: she has done everything she can, having done all the right things and having gone to all the right agencies, yet still she will lose out.

The housing association procedures do not seem to reflect the reality of people's lives. In those extraordinary circumstances, there must be some flexibilities in processes and procedures to make sure that people, particularly children, are not at a disadvantage. Council homelessness teams do not have sufficient good-quality properties to house people properly and rogue landlords are still getting away with offering poor-quality—and frankly, in this situation, dangerous—properties to incredibly vulnerable people. They are taking advantage: a local authority would be charged a much higher rate to house such people, who would feel they had no other choice. There are feelings of helplessness, hopelessness and failing as a parent, as well as the great impact of the disruption on the lives and education of my constituents' children. That shows that the Government have a role to play to offer greater resources to close the many, very obvious gaps.

I would not feel so strongly about this issue if people coming to see me about it was not a weekly occurrence, but that is what it is, and they all experience similar housing situations. We have a great refuge service in Great Grimsby run by Women's Aid, which caters for people across the country, but that is not a permanent home. When victims have done nothing wrong, being forced out of their home feels like further punishment.

I hope that in the Domestic Abuse Bill, as well as in the Minister's remarks, there will be an acceptance that Government should prioritise victims remaining securely in their own homes, with the perpetrator being removed and prevented from interfering with their victims and the wider family. I wholeheartedly believe that it should not be the victims who lose their homes, communities, friends, family, social clubs, schools or jobs, and I hope the Minister shares my view.

10.4 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on bringing forward this matter for our

consideration. It is always a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn). All Members who have spoken have given examples of why the system needs to do better. I am pleased to see the Minister in her place and I look forward to her response.

As always in these debates, I will give a Northern Ireland perspective and a couple of examples of how we can do better in Northern Ireland when it comes to domestic abuse and homelessness. Some of the shortcomings of the system that I see may replicate what everyone else has said so far. Domestic abuse is simply heartbreaking, and almost every week in my advice centre I deal with those issues on my constituents' behalf. I am blessed to have extremely good, sympathetic and compassionate staff who can be a listening ear for the stories that are told, but also point people to where they need to go.

In the period from 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017, the Police Service of Northern Ireland recorded 29,166 incidents of domestic violence, 13,933 domestic crimes and three murders. That is in a small population of 1.8 million. Unfortunately, that is a fairly clear picture of things in Northern Ireland.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman underlines some stark statistics, and obviously each number represents a person. Although it was not in Northern Ireland, last week at the White Ribbon UK conference we were lucky enough to hear from Luke Hart, who gave extremely powerful and humbling testimony about his father killing his mother and sister, just days after he and his brother Ryan had managed to secure their freedom from the family home where they had been under coercive control and abuse, which had been normalised, for more than 30 years. It is about not just securing appropriate accommodation, but keeping the abused safe from the perpetrator thereafter. That is an additional requirement that we cannot forget when we are talking about ending homelessness caused by domestic abuse.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for sharing that story; it is a salient reminder to us all that there is a lot more to domestic abuse than meets the eye.

We are very pleased to have Women's Aid refuges there to assist when needed, but they are frequently filled to capacity and must turn away women and their children. This debate enables us to look at how the system can respond better, because although Women's Aid refuges can give assistance, more often than not it is the housing associations on the frontline that have to respond.

The relationship between domestic violence and homelessness is complex, as the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) made clear in his intervention. It is often underpinned by a range of factors such as gender inequality, socioeconomic disadvantage, mental ill health and poor access to income support and housing. Although domestic violence occurs in same-sex relationships and can happen to men, the overwhelming number of victims are women at the hands of a male partner or family member. That is the reality that I see in my constituency. In nearly every case, the victim feels as though they are tied into that unhealthy, bad relationship because they do not know where they will live with their children if they leave.

[*Jim Shannon*]

I will give an example of someone who came to me with a problem and did not know what to do, because they did not have the finances—the hon. Member for Great Grimsby referred to that at some length. I am dealing with a case where the partner of a young lady with three children threatened her with a knife, and her 13-year-old daughter heard it. That was the moment when the mother decided to do something, because until then, the threats, beatings and physical abuse had been only against her. At that moment, the mother realised that she was no longer the only one who was affected—although that had been bad enough.

The mother came into the office unsure what to do, as she and her partner both work. She does not understand the Housing Executive system and the allocation of points. I am sure the system in the rest of the United Kingdom is the same, but if it is not, it might help if I explain how the Housing Executive system works. She told my personal assistant, “I just don’t know how to get out with my three kids, but when my eldest daughter heard him say that, I knew I had to do something.” That was the catalyst. She said, “I can’t have her growing up and thinking that this is a normal situation.”

It has taken not threats against the mum, but threats against the future mental health of her children to make her take that step. She is still in that house while she tries to find a way forward. The sad fact is that because her mum and dad have a three-bedroom house, her situation is not classed as overcrowding. I will explain the system. She will automatically qualify for 70 points for being homeless. The threat of violence will probably mean another 20 points, because it is not a deep threat in the sense that someone could be murdered—she would get more points for that. The solution for that lady is to move in with her parents. She would have qualified for overcrowding and sharing points, but because her parents have a three-bedroom house, there are probably enough bedrooms available, so she will not get any overcrowding points and she may not get some of the sharing points.

We have to try to find a system that would enable that lady, who is suffering from domestic abuse, automatically and urgently to receive the necessary points to find her a house anywhere in Newtownards. Since she has to rely on the current system, she is trapped. That worries me. Under the system currently applied by the Housing Executive and the housing associations, she would need 150 or 160 points to get a house in Newtownards, so 70 points is a long way off what is necessary. We need a system that reflects that.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): My hon. Friend outlines the difficulties and complexities for domestic abuse victims of getting accommodation if they choose to do so. Does he agree that, on some occasions, the perpetrator of the domestic abuse is well aware of the difficulties the person they are abusing would face in getting accommodation and actually deploys that, to some effect, to try to ensure that they stay in the home where the abuse is taking place?

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The partner often knows the system better than their other half—the lady who is trying to find a way out. The situation is also complicated by the fact that, more

often than not, the finances of the family are done by the male partner. The hon. Member for Great Grimsby referred to that, and I know it to be true in almost every case. The name on the rent book is probably the male partner’s, the application for housing benefit is probably in his name, and although the lady’s name would be on the tax credits system, applications for working tax credit would be done through him. For someone who has to leave because of threats to themselves and their family, the financial implications complicate matters. They ask themselves, “How do I get out of this system? How do I make sure I have finance to get me beyond whenever I move out?”

However, many people step in to help. The girls in my office have asked the local church charity shop to send a team to pack that girl and her kids up in one day so that when her partner returns it is a fait accompli. A method of getting her out of that house has been found. We always look to the Government, as we probably should, for a response, but the Government cannot step in all the time, so voluntary bodies—in this case a church group—sometimes step in to make the move to get a person out. My office is working with the Housing Executive and the local community group to get that young lady’s points assessed urgently—in other words, to get her the extra points she needs to get on the list so she can go elsewhere—and is providing her with emotional support, including looking at schools in a different location.

Although it does my heart good to see that we are able to help that person, we always wonder—I am sure you think the same as the rest of us, Mr Davies—how many other people out there are going through all this but do not know about the help that is available. It is good when victims know that there is help available, that people care, that they are not alone in their cycle of abuse and that that cycle can be stopped. We need a system that responds urgently to the victimised person and their family. How do we do that? Will the Minister say how we can have a system in which people’s circumstances are more urgently assessed?

Knowing that a domestic abuse call is made to the PSNI every two minutes shakes me to my core. As a grandfather, I pray that my granddaughters, when they grow up, will find good men, and that they will be good women as well. However, sometimes things do not work out, so we also need to know that should that happen—should they be blinded and miss the warning signs—there would be help available to get them out of a harmful situation. I very much agree with Women’s Aid that the current system does not respond in the way it needs to. It is not enough.

I hear these stories in my office and in the church circles I move in. I call for an urgent overhaul of the allocation system so domestic abuse victims are homed as quickly as possible. They should also be able to request correspondence only by email. Sending a letter through the post may inadvertently alert a woman’s partner to the fact that she has applied to be housed by the Housing Executive, for example. The partner may open the letter and say, “You’re moving out? What’s this all about?” There has to be another method. We must be sensitive to how we communicate with and treat people in such difficult positions. No one should feel stuck in a dangerous partnership that they seem unable to get out of. The welfare system is in place for the vulnerable, as it should be, and it is the responsibility of

us all to point people in the right direction, but we need to do better by them. For the sake of my grandchildren and everyone else's, we need to do very much better.

10.16 am

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Thank you for chairing the debate, Mr Davies. I thank the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) for bringing it forward.

This is an incredibly important issue and it is vital that we tackle it. Someone who is going through domestic abuse is incredibly vulnerable. They may be being physically or verbally abused, or both. They may be being coerced or controlled financially. Despite all that, leaving that situation is not easy. For someone who has been coerced and controlled, and whose partner has made it clear to them that they are the one in the wrong, finding the energy to leave that situation is very hard. It is even more difficult when they know they do not have anywhere to go and that there is no system in place to ensure that they have safe accommodation.

I have discussed this issue with a number of constituents who have come through my door, and I have spoken to Women's Aid and various other organisations about the issues people face. If we could make it easier for one person to leave an abusive partner and get out of that situation, that would be a good thing. Anything we can do to make that process easier—to ensure that people who are suffering from abuse can find the energy to leave because they know they will be supported—is a good thing. It is incumbent on us to make those changes and to promote any policies that will bring them about.

The position of children in domestic abuse situations has been mentioned. There are often, although not always, children in these situations. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) pointed out that we have to consider things such as schools when children are involved. Why should somebody who is being abused—who has not done anything wrong—have to move their children's school, and go through a massive change to their life and the lives of their children, just because of the perpetrator's evil behaviour? We can and should do better in that regard when providing support to people.

We also need to ensure that we stop people from going back. We must do everything we can to ensure that support is in place—both physical support for housing and navigating complex systems if, for example, schools and so on need to be changed, and emotional support—so that people can start the healing process and get through it. If someone has been so badly controlled that they believe everything is their fault and not the perpetrator's, it is much more difficult to get through that process; it is much easier to contemplate going back. That is why we need to ensure that the emotional support is there.

Liz Saville Roberts: The Scottish Government have been trying to address the issue of split payments and universal credit. Does the hon. Lady agree that that has been one way of trying to enable people—through being in power by having their own finances—to leave? None the less, although that policy is in place, I understand it has not been all that easy to put into effect.

Kirsty Blackman: That is absolutely right. I wonder whether the right hon. Lady can see my speech, as I was about to come to that point. That universal credit is a

single payment is a really big problem, particularly for families where there is a financial control element to the domestic abuse. Because of that, it is really important that the victim has their own financial means and the ability to build up a pot of money. It must be even more terrifying for them to think about leaving if they have not got any money.

The SNP Scottish Government are determined to deliver split payments for universal credit, because that would be a good way to stop the exacerbation of financially controlling behaviour. The problem is, the Scottish Government cannot deliver split payments until the Department for Work and Pensions gets the system sorted out. We would like to do so as soon as possible. The Scottish Government have proposed to DWP how they think it could be delivered, and it would be good if that happened as soon as possible. I urge the UK Government to do so in the rest of the UK, because the single payment is a big problem that aids those who are determined to financially control their partners.

Neil Coyle: Instead of split payments, which I support—the Select Committee on Work and Pensions is also working on that—has the SNP Government also considered making payments automatically to the primary carer, who is almost always the woman in the relationship and the mother of the children?

Kirsty Blackman: I honestly do not know and I do not want to give a wrong answer. That is not my area of expertise. I will find out and get back to the hon. Gentleman. We are keen to see split payments, but his proposal also has merit.

I turn to universal credit and increasing homelessness. Some 75% of local authorities believe that universal credit will increase homelessness. The Scottish Government are doing what they can to mitigate the impacts of austerity on the social security system, but it is really important that the UK Government halt the roll-out of universal credit, because it has not long happened in Aberdeen and I am beginning to see a massive increase in the case load coming through my door. I imagine a number of those families will end up homeless as a result of the changes to the benefit system made by the UK Government.

To tackle homelessness, we also need to build more homes, and not just homes that people can buy with a mortgage, whether at normal prices or affordable prices. It is also about social housing. In the four years to 2018, the Scottish Government have delivered per head of population 50% more affordable homes than have been delivered in England, and five times as many socially rented properties. I still maintain that one of the best things ever done by the SNP Government was cancelling right to buy. The social housing situation in my constituency has changed drastically. It is still far from perfect, because we have not had time to build all the new houses we need, but if more socially rented properties were available, people would be able to go into those properties. We also do not have a priority need system in Scotland; everyone who is homeless or at risk of homelessness is in priority need and therefore given access to the housing they require. On 1 April the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018 came into force. It makes clear that coercive and controlling behaviour is domestic abuse, and that it is a crime.

[Kirsty Blackman]

To return to the availability of safe housing for all, the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark mentioned the women—and men, in fact—who were not born here but who have come to this country and have no recourse to public funds. Those cases are the most devastating that I see around the table at my constituency surgeries. Basically, “no recourse to public funds” means that someone cannot claim public funds because of their immigration status. They cannot claim housing benefit, which is incredibly relevant for those in a domestic abuse situation looking to go into a refuge. I found out only recently that in England—this is not the case in Scotland—such families do not have access to free school meals, so children are not being provided with food. In Scotland, John Swinney sent a directive to local authorities saying that such children should be entitled to free school meals whether they have recourse to public funds or not, and schools are working together to ensure that that happens. We should not see children going hungry.

On “no recourse to public funds”, I promoted a private Member’s Bill that asked for the destitution domestic violence concession open to those from outside the European economic area fleeing domestic violence to be opened to EU nationals as well. That would allow them access to housing benefit for a period to go into refuge provision, which is incredibly important. In fact, we could also cancel “no recourse to public funds”, which would be incredibly helpful. It is vital that everyone has a home.

I finish with advice and a stat from Police Scotland. It launched a campaign called “every nine minutes”, because it responds to a domestic abuse call every nine minutes. Domestic abuse is illegal, and it is really important that we remember it is the perpetrator’s fault. It is not anybody else’s fault; it is the fault of the person who chooses to be abusive. We must do what we can to protect survivors, and we must let everybody out there suffering from domestic abuse know that we will do everything in our power to protect them. We must follow through on that.

10.27 am

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on securing the debate so soon after the launch of the report by Crisis and the all-party parliamentary group on ending homelessness. I join the tributes to him for the work he has done as chair of the group.

That important report is founded on the real-life experiences of the survivors of domestic abuse, and their struggle for a home and other support. At the launch event last week we heard from the APPG’s vice-chair, the hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis), who gave the story of one woman survivor who was told by her local authority to return home and get a letter from the perpetrator of the violence; only then would it consider finding accommodation for her. Another was told that domestic violence is not a primary case for rehousing.

Today we have heard so many examples of people really suffering, and yet that seems to count for nothing. We are told that being abused by a partner is not a good enough reason for being rehomed in some parts of our

country. The risk of a person being killed by someone they live with is also supposedly not a good enough reason. Someone may even find that having children, with all those additional vulnerabilities, counts for nothing.

Last week my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) spoke of the need for any action to include all women who find themselves homeless after surviving domestic abuse and violence. That includes migrant women, who are much more isolated and less likely to get the support they need. The Minister spoke of her determination to make that change, and I hope she will confirm that today.

More importantly, last week we also heard from the survivors—women fleeing their homes because of mental and physical violence. A mother of four told us how she had suffered two periods of homelessness and thought that she had nowhere to turn, and only because of Crisis was she able to get a home of her own. The third sector stepped in where Government and local authorities had failed. We all know that there is no easy fix. Finding someone a home is one measure to help those fleeing domestic violence to rebuild their lives, but many other areas need to be fully funded to support victims in the way they deserve. Instead, however, funding has been cut, local authorities are unable to sustain services, and the health service is under real pressure.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about the heartbreak caused by domestic violence, and he praised support services for their work. We must recognise the tremendous work done by such organisations across the country. He emphasised the need for more capacity in the system, and said that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive could do much more.

Women are fleeing their homes because of mental and physical abuse. The third sector is acting. We know we must provide that support, yet such services are wide and varied. A briefing from the Royal College of Psychiatrists stated that victims of domestic abuse are three times more likely than other women to develop mental illness—indeed, those who shared their stories last week all spoke of that. Addressing this issue only begins with housing, and we must fight for the health support that survivors need, and do whatever it takes to get them back on their feet. That could be help in pursuing further training or education, if that is what they want, or support in getting into employment. We must give people control over their own lives.

I can only imagine what it must be like for those who have experienced domestic violence and abuse to fear going home to the place where they are supposed to feel safest, to be frightened of the person who is supposed to care for them, or to cover physical marks and pass them off being caused by an accident. As we know, domestic violence is not always physical, but it can torture and abuse one’s mind in ways that some simply will not understand.

My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) said that it was not unusual for her to hear about three domestic abuses cases in each of her surgeries. Is that not a terrible condemnation of our society? She spoke of the coercive financial control that had left her constituent with huge debts, and yet that constituent was told that she should just default on her mortgage payments and lose her home, and then she might escape. That is not good enough. My hon. Friend called for changes to the Domestic Abuse Bill, and for

the various agencies to recognise the specific needs of people who have been abandoned in a similar financial situation. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

Some might say that stopping domestic abuse is an impossible task, but we must ensure that there is support to make leaving as easy as possible. My hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark outlined the tremendous barriers that survivors face. Work to put things right starts with putting those who have experienced domestic violence at the top of the housing list, but there are other considerations, and the wishes of the victim must always come first. We cannot have people being moved, without a say, away from their families and friends or their support network. Those networks are essential parts of helping a victim of domestic abuse to get on in life, and we cannot allow politicians and council officers to decide what happens to a person in such circumstances. Let me be clear: Labour's position is that survivors of domestic abuse must be put in the highest possible category when it comes to housing, and I invite the Minister to match that this morning.

We will not get anywhere without an adequate housing supply. My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby spoke of local authorities and housing associations, and of the shortage of homes. The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) smiled when she stated that obvious fact, as if it is a no-brainer. We need more homes in this country, and we cannot meet the need if we do not build them. There are already countless people in the highest category for housing support—older people, young people and people with families who, at best, are living with friends or family. Waiting lists for homes are incredibly long, and to address the problem we must build more housing stock. It is of little use including victims of domestic violence in the top priority band if they simply have to compete with others in the top bands and wait years for an adequate home. Unless we have the housing stock, I fear that changing the law could be just a formality and not help those who need it.

Many excellent organisations have come together to back a change to the Housing Act 1996, and other legislation, and to support the Domestic Abuse Bill and introduce that automatic qualification for survivors of abuse to have priority need for settled housing. It would be good to hear the Minister say that that will happen. Those organisations include Refuge, Women's Aid, St Mungo's, Shelter, Crisis—I could go on, but my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark already gave a considerable list in his opening remarks. Those organisations are the experts in tackling domestic violence and homelessness, and the Government must listen to them.

The Government must recognise that there is a gap, and that vulnerable people are being let down. We can address that with a change to the legislation. In 2017, nearly 7,000 people cited the breakdown of a relationship with an abusive partner as the primary reason for their homelessness, and that did not include the number of people who opted not to leave an abusive partner because they feared being made homeless. We can change the law to give victims more support to leave if they wish, and we could provide the resource for their lives to change for the better. It must be a priority for those people to be rehoused by the local authority.

We must build more houses if we are to address waiting lists in this country but—I say this with experience of serving as a former councillor and cabinet member in a local authority—the homes that we provide must be of a decent standard. Many of us will have heard of the poor housing conditions in which our constituents have found themselves—with mould, with heating that does not work, and with unsuitable or unhygienic furnishings. That is supposed to be a place that they consider home. Local authorities must ensure that those homes, whether they are in the private sector, the local authority or a housing association, are fit for use. We know that some landlords are indifferent to the quality of the home they provide, as long as they get their rent. Local authorities must step in and ensure that those homes are fit for people to live in.

Vulnerable people will often not complain about poor conditions because they fear being turfed out and losing their sanctuary. They should never be put in conditions that we would complain about, and they should not fear making such complaints. This weekend I heard the case of a woman in my constituency who is fleeing domestic violence and has been given a house. She said:

"I realise I am extremely lucky to be given a house given the shortage of housing",

but the house she has been given is in awful condition. She was offered the property in early March, but because of errors there have been long delays. She received the keys last week, and she sent me the pictures of what she was confronted with—severe black mould in the bedrooms that would be her children's accommodation. She has gone through extreme difficulty, but she has been given a house that is unsuitable for her and her family. The £125 decorating grant was no consolation at all, and she is distraught. My caseworkers are working to try to get her a better deal.

This is not just about putting domestic abuse survivors in the top priority category; we must also ensure that the home they are given is of a good standard and quality. That is not just about cleanliness, but about the safety and security of the property—that point was raised by other Members this morning. Some domestic abusers will try to find their victims, particularly if their victims are housed in the same locality. Many victims choose to stay in the locality, because it is their community and it is where they have family connections. They should not be fearing for their safety and the safety of their family once they have left the abuser. Damaged windows and doors must be dealt with before new tenants move in.

The last thing that those who are fleeing domestic violence need is a requirement to prove their abuse before they can be rehoused; others have spoken in more detail and better than I can on that topic. Tell me Minister, how does a person prove emotional and mental abuse? I certainly do not have a clue. There are no bruises or scars that the eye can see, but that does not make the injuries less horrific or the victim in any less need of a home. Putting the burden of proof on to the person who has made the move to leave their abuser is inhumane and cruel.

Those who are fleeing domestic violence are quite literally running for their lives; let us give them priority, but let us build the housing they need. We must make sure that we can put a roof over their heads, but also provide the support services that they desperately need.

10.40 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler):

It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and I thank hon. Members from across the House for their considered speeches. I particularly congratulate the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on securing the debate and on his tireless work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on ending homelessness. I am delighted that his health has recovered since last week, when he missed the launch of this interesting document.

This Government have made domestic abuse a key priority and we are committed to doing everything we can to end domestic abuse. Domestic abuse is a cross-Government issue, but I shall focus solely on the work of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Since 2014, our Department has invested £55.5 million in accommodation-based services, including refuges, to support victims of domestic abuse.

We have recently launched a consultation on future delivery of support to victims and their children in accommodation-based domestic abuse services, which ends on 2 August. The consultation complements wider Government work on tackling domestic abuse and supporting victims, including the new Domestic Abuse Bill. Proposals in the consultation include a new legal duty on local authorities to provide support for domestic abuse services for victims and their children. This will provide a range of services to support victims and their children in secure accommodation.

Local authorities will be required to work together across boundaries to ensure domestic abuse services reflect the needs of local people, including targeted, specialist support for black, Asian and minority ethnic survivors; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender survivors; and, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller survivors. We will work with local authorities adequately to fund the new duty. We estimate the early broad annual cost to be around £90 million per year. However, we want the full cost to be informed by the consultation and taken into the spending review.

I was asked questions about the domestic abuse commissioner.

Melanie Onn: Is the Minister planning to accept the amendment proposed in the report “A Safe Home”?

Mrs Wheeler: We want to be informed by the consultation, which finishes on 2 August. We will look at everything in the round after that.

The domestic abuse commissioner will be funded by the Home Office and operate UK-wide. The £90 million will be subject to the Barnett formula for Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland.

Ensuring that everyone has a decent, affordable, secure home is a key priority for this Government. That is why we have made a commitment to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and end the practice altogether, and why we are dedicated to preventing people from becoming homeless in the first place. It is simply unacceptable that people have to sleep on the streets in 2019. That does not reflect the country we want to be and I am determined to put a stop to it.

My Department, with support from colleagues across Government, has been working tirelessly to put in place new support for people who sleep rough. This has included the rough sleeping strategy, published last August, which sets out our plan to end rough sleeping, alongside bespoke support and funding for local areas through the rough sleeping initiative.

I want to focus specifically on the work the Department is doing to help women. We know that violence and abuse are a key factor in women being made homeless or having to sleep rough. Through our rough sleeping strategy, boldly backed by £100 million in funding, we are providing more support to those sleeping rough or who are at risk of sleeping rough. Crucially, this includes additional funding for dedicated accommodation, frontline workers who are trained to support vulnerable women, staff working with victims of domestic abuse in local authority housing options, rapid rehousing pathway navigators, and our Somewhere Safe to Stay assessment centres. We will extend this to voluntary organisations, commissioned and non-commissioned services, and staff in homeless hostels.

We have undertaken a procurement exercise to recruit the right organisations to deliver the training and we expect to award contracts to successful suppliers in the near future. As part of our rapid rehousing pathway, we recently announced a Somewhere Safe to Stay hub in Brighton, which will focus on supporting women to get off the streets. These hubs build on the No Second Night Out model rapidly to assess the needs of people who are sleeping rough and those who are at risk of sleeping rough, and support them to get the right help quickly. The Brighton service will be a two-hub model, with one hub reserved for women only and specialising in tackling complex needs. The second hub will be delivered by the domestic abuse charity partner RISE.

We are continuing to provide funding through the rough sleeping initiative to ensure that provision is in place for women who sleep rough. This supports a locally driven approach, with local authorities leading the charge. For instance, Southwark is receiving funding of £585,000. This includes funding for a support worker, through Solace Women's Aid, which will work with offenders who have experienced domestic abuse. Medway is receiving funding of £486,000, which includes a specialist mental health worker to work with people who have experienced domestic abuse and other health issues, as well as additional housing-led approaches for women with medium and high needs, and couples.

We are supporting 63 projects across England to provide support for over 2,500 victims and their families, and over 2,200 additional bed spaces in accommodation-based services, including refuge. In response to the earlier question, the definition of domestic abuse used by the Home Office and by us includes coercive control.

Underpinning our work on rough sleeping is the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which came into force last April. This is the most ambitious reform to homelessness legislation in decades. I am sure many Members are aware that the Act brought in a number of new duties and strengthened a number of existing ones. The Act extends the duties that local authorities owe to homeless households and expands the types of household

that are entitled to help. That means that, for the first time, people without dependent children, who are often not deemed to be in priority need and were often turned away with little or no assistance, are now entitled to help from their local authority.

The Act strengthened the advice and information duty. This enhanced duty means that local authorities must provide free advice and information about homelessness and the prevention of homelessness. They must also ensure they design that advice to meet the needs of particularly vulnerable groups, including those who are victims of domestic abuse.

The Act also strengthened the prevention duty, meaning that local authorities must take reasonable steps to try to prevent a person who is threatened with homelessness within 56 days from becoming homeless regardless of priority need status or whether they have made themselves intentionally homeless. Local authorities must now also take reasonable steps to try to relieve a person of their homelessness, again for a period of 56 days, regardless of priority need status or whether this was done intentionally. At the heart of the Act is a more person-centred approach to find bespoke solutions, including for victims of domestic abuse.

We want survivors to stay in their own homes, when it is safe and possible to do so. Sanctuary schemes are supported as part of our £22 million fund, which lasts from 2018 to 2020. The duty also covers sanctuary schemes across the country. We will work closely with the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice to make sure that that option is always there.

A new duty was also introduced for specified public authorities to refer those whom they think might be homeless or threatened with homelessness to a local housing authority of their choice. Children's services and A&E services are among the specified public authorities. That will help to ensure that people's housing needs are considered and that services work together more effectively. We know there have been significant changes for local authorities, which it has taken time to embed. Good progress is being made, but we know that there is more to be done by local areas.

As to our most recent statistics, they are experimental, but there are some promising signs. Since the introduction of the Act just nine months ago, more than 60,000 households, including families and single individuals, have been helped to secure accommodation.

I welcome the report produced by the all-party group, but there are a few discrepancies in it, which I think I must pick up on. Certainly, most of the experiences cited happened before the Homelessness Reduction Act came into force, and I completely understand why. I am aware that prior to the Act people were sometimes turned away without being able to make a homelessness application. That is precisely why the Act is so important and why it had cross-Government—indeed, cross-Chamber—support.

Local authorities must now assess everyone's needs if they are homeless or threatened—

Neil Coyle: I think it is a little unfair to criticise the report without the collection of proper and robust data by the Government. If the Minister disputes the evidence that has been collected, is she committing the Government to undertaking their own research to get to the bottom of the matter?

Mrs Wheeler: The experimental data are dealt with under the new H-CLIC process—homelessness case level information collection—and when the national statistics authority signs them off as robust, they will be the data. We are collecting them now, and I was just giving a caveat by calling the data experimental. I am delighted to be able to tell the hon. Gentleman that that is exactly what is happening now.

Local authorities must now assess everyone's needs and are duty bound to provide help for those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. If any hon. Member is aware of incidents where that is not happening, I would be grateful if they provided me with the names of the authorities, so that we might investigate further. The thresholds for considering someone homeless and at risk of abuse are deliberately low. For example, a woman living in a refuge is considered homeless even though she has a safe place to stay. The definition of domestic abuse includes all forms of abuse, not just physical violence, and a chapter in the statutory code of guidance contains extensive advice on how local authorities should assist people at risk of abuse. It was drafted in collaboration with Women's Aid.

Our focus is to ensure that the new prevention and relief duties are being deployed to provide help to all eligible people, including single people who do not have priority need. Existing legislation provides that a person who is pregnant or has dependent children, or is vulnerable as a result of having to leave accommodation owing to domestic abuse, already has priority need for accommodation. The Government's focus is on ensuring that the Homelessness Reduction Act works for all and that those fleeing violent relationships get the support they need.

I hope that my remarks today demonstrate the Government's commitment to supporting some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Survivors of domestic abuse should not have to fear that escaping their abusers will force them into homelessness, or on to the streets. Survivors must be afforded the dignity of a roof over their head and the ability to move on to build full and independent lives.

On the matter of universal credit and the Department for Work and Pensions, we are working closely with a number of Departments, including the DWP, and will continue to do so as we assess responses to the consultation, which, as I said, ends on 2 August.

It is always an honour for me to represent the Government in debates of this kind. Hon. Members from both sides of the House share the aim of ensuring that people fleeing domestic abuse do not become homeless as a result. The Government have a commitment to providing funding, and to publishing legislation, to go further than ever to support those brave victims. In that spirit, I thank hon. Members for their speeches and questions today. I look forward to working further with the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark in his capacity as chair of the all-party group, as we continue to address what is a vital issue.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I thank Mr Coyle for taking the trouble to dress like me, and invite him to make a short winding-up speech.

[Geraint Davies (in the Chair)]

10.54 am

Neil Coyle: I got the memo, thank you, Mr Davies.

We have heard from all four countries of the United Kingdom this morning, beginning with the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts). The prevalence of the issue is clear from our casework and surgeries, and from examples such as those given by my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn). We should not lose sight of the fact that the measures we seek, and that the campaign seeks, are meant to tackle the fact that, sadly, in this country today, two women a week will die at the hands of their partner or ex-partner. That is what we are trying to change, and we have the opportunity before us to do it.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is not in his place, but he made an important point about our staff. We are reliant on our caseworkers to support us in the job we do, and there is not a single member of my team who has not been reduced to tears after trying to help people in circumstances such as those we have discussed this morning. From the Front Benches, the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) made points about the need for more housing, but also about changes that could help—even if they helped just one person to escape.

As to the report, another 2,000 people have been affected since the introduction of the Act. The Minister asked us to name local authorities that are not providing the required help. That could be done through the freedom of information process, with the organisation involved in compiling the report. We are seeking a simple, outright commitment to accept at least the rationale behind the amendment, even if the amendment itself needs changes. It is frankly disappointing not to have had that this morning.

The Minister has restated commitments on rough sleeping. However, the Government are three decades behind meeting their own target to halve rough sleeping. The figure fell by only 74—according to data based on putting a thumb in the air. Some councils do not even do a head count. There is no way on earth that Southwark could go through every bin cupboard that people are sleeping in—every stairwell, or all the places outside the lifts in tower blocks on the Brandon estate. It just is not done. The Government are not collecting enough data to make the case.

Then the Minister suggested that the all-party group's report is not sufficient to make the case. I think that the evidence base is there, and that she should work more closely with organisations such as Women's Aid that support the change. Many organisations back it. She should commit to securing that change during consideration of the Domestic Abuse Bill. We have the opportunity before us and should not let it slip.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered domestic abuse and homelessness.

10.57 am

Sitting suspended.

Vaccination and Public Health

11 am

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered vaccination and public health. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and a particular pleasure to participate in a debate on health with my near neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) for the first time in her new position as Minister.

Vaccination and public health is an immensely important area not only for the UK, but across the world, and vaccination has contributed so much to our public health. It is a pleasure to open this debate, following on from a Westminster Hall debate that I recently secured on clinical trials. It highlights the UK's strength in the life sciences sector, not only in the companies and corporations involved, but in the importance of our medical research charities and the academics who work in the sector. In this area, we truly are a world leader.

Some of the concerns that I highlighted about clinical trials also feed into this debate. Fundamentally, it is about saving millions of lives every year, and with immunisation we can also eradicate diseases. The World Health Organisation declared in 1980 that it had eliminated smallpox, a terrible disease that killed a great many people and left survivors with terrible afflictions throughout their lives. I suppose the most famous example of a smallpox sufferer was Queen Elizabeth I.

In 1796—we were a little bit behind the Chinese; I think the first example of Chinese inoculation was about 1,000 years ago—Edward Jenner in Gloucestershire and others noticed that milkmaids caught cowpox, but milkmaids who caught cowpox did not catch smallpox. When that was identified, Edward Jenner inoculated James Phipps, the eight-year-old son of his gardener, and that inoculation protected James Phipps from smallpox. Since then, the World Health Organisation and health organisations around the world have targeted smallpox with such amazing success that the terrible disease has been defeated and eradicated.

Immunisation speaks to something that is increasingly important and increasingly recognised in the national health service: maintaining one's health rather than having something go wrong and then repairing the damage. It is about asking, "What can we do to keep fit, keep active, avoid excesses in one regard or another and maintain our health?" It is so much cheaper, more effective and better for our standard of living to maintain our health than it is to lose our health and try to regain it. It is also immensely cost-effective; like all organisations, the national health service is under resource pressure, and, in terms of both direct and indirect costs, immunisation is reckoned to provide a saving of £13 for every £1 spent.

In the United Kingdom, we do well on immunisation. The population of the UK is well informed and well educated on immunisation, which leads to a high take-up of those vaccinations; but we cannot rest on our laurels. In 2017-18, there was a 91% take-up of the measles, mumps and rubella vaccination in England, the lowest since 2011-12.

It is reckoned that, in order to have herd immunity, an immunisation take-up rate of 95% is needed. A 95% uptake protects the remaining 5% of people who,

for whatever reason, fall through the gaps, do not take the immunisation or perhaps move to the UK after missing the opportunity. England is falling behind the rest of the United Kingdom; in the rest of the UK, the take-up rate is 3% higher than it is in England, and it is important that we close that gap.

Media, and particularly social media, present a problem. When we look at the information that is available, we can see that it is easy for scare stories to develop in the media or to be perpetuated on social media. When stories or misleading ideas not backed by any evidence get out of hand and people buy into them, it is very important that they are challenged.

A sense of solidarity is also important. It is very difficult if a number of people think, "I am concerned about the risk of this immunisation, so I will rely on the 95% of other people to have their children immunised and I will be part of the 5% who are otherwise protected." We cannot rely on everyone else to do the right thing, because the proportion of people who do not take up the immunisation may increase to more than 5%.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and calling out the frankly irresponsible behaviour of some in the anti-vaccination movement. Does he agree that it is particularly important that mothers get their children inoculated with the MMR vaccine, because otherwise they are potentially putting at risk not just their own children, but other mothers whom those children may come into contact with, who may develop measles, mumps or rubella—all of which can be very harmful to a developing foetus and to mothers in pregnancy?

Chris Green: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. When I was young, I had both chickenpox and measles. At that time, it was part of growing up, and many people who have had those diseases think, "It's not a big thing; it's not a big problem." However, serious health outcomes or problems can develop from diseases that people may dismiss as not being terribly important. In that sense, solidarity is vital; we must all take responsibility not only for ourselves and our own families, but for the wider community.

Media and social media concerns are just one factor. There are a number of other barriers to achieving comprehensive vaccination. The World Health Organisation highlights vaccine hesitancy, and identifies three Cs: confidence, complacency and convenience. Is it convenient to have the vaccination? Are people confident or complacent about take-up, with a sense of, "I'll be one of the 5%," or, "It's not really a problem in our society; the treatment isn't actually dealing with a significant problem"? Or do people think that the disease has gone the way of smallpox and been effectively eradicated? That is not the case, especially given the ease with which people can travel across the world.

The UK is a leader in what we do here, but our support for countries around the world is also incredibly important. Support for funding the Department for International Development is often challenging, but I think there will be pretty much universal support for the announcement earlier this year of the £10 million to develop vaccines against global infectious diseases. That came on the back of the Ebola crisis in west Africa,

where 11,000 people were killed, and it goes into a wider fund of £120 million committed to infectious diseases. The UK is the single largest contributor to Gavi, contributing a quarter of its funding and saving hundreds of thousands of lives around the world.

The UK also has an important role to play in co-ordinating and helping other countries. If another country does not have the health infrastructure that we have, they will need that support—that was the case in the Ebola example in west Africa—and we can lend our expertise. I reiterate that with flights from west Africa to the UK, Europe and the rest of the world, the transition of easily communicable diseases is a significant risk.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): It is great that the hon. Gentleman has secured the debate.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Order. According to the rules, Front-Bench spokespeople are not supposed to intervene in half-hour debates, but if Chris Green is happy to take that intervention, I will allow it. I just thought that I needed to put that on the record.

Chris Green: I am happy to take the intervention.

Dr Whitford: As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on vaccinations for all, I was very disappointed that our debate in the Chamber sadly clashed with the local government elections and was therefore poorly supported. I welcome the hon. Gentleman's comment on health systems. A huge amount of work has been done on eradication, but less than 10% of children have had their full World Health Organisation vaccinations. Thankfully, the big global players are beginning to see that it is about universal health coverage and routine vaccination.

Chris Green: Absolutely; those comments are so important. I recognise the hon. Lady's chairmanship of the all-party parliamentary group on vaccinations for all, which is a really important group.

There has been a slight decline in the UK in the take-up of vaccinations. Is the Minister concerned that recent healthcare reforms have inadvertently contributed to the decline in vaccination rates, as highlighted by the British Medical Association? The loss of care roles—such as primary care trust immunisation co-ordinators, who provide training as well as co-ordination—occurred as responsibility was moved away from primary care trusts.

Turning around the gradual decline in vaccination coverage is likely to involve the provision of more accessible services and more active outreach by health professionals into individual under-vaccinated communities; the wider provision of vaccination services, through things such as school visits by community nurses and mobile vaccination services; better training of health professionals on what vaccines are, what they do, how they work and what is in them, so that those professionals are ably equipped to answer parents' questions; increasing public awareness of the benefits that vaccines confer and the danger that the return of vaccine-preventable diseases poses; provision of the right public health funding to enable vaccination services to function effectively, including by reaching under-vaccinated groups, which costs more than standard provision; and communicating

[Chris Green]

with parents to improve their access to evidence-based information. By implementing some, if not all, of those ideas, we will help to address the difficulties that are leading to a fall in vaccination rates, and make a positive case for why immunisation is good for public health.

This debate is timely, given that NHS England is currently undertaking a review of GP-led vaccinations and immunisations. The review was first announced in January as part of the NHS long-term plan, but it began properly only in the last six weeks. The purpose of the review is to consider how screening and vaccination programmes could be designed to support the narrowing of health inequalities, as well as to reduce complexity, improve value and increase the impact of the current vaccination programmes delivered by general practices. That includes reducing the administrative burden on GPs by simplifying the system, addressing the anomalies in the system that directly incentivise some vaccines but not others, and looking at how we deal with outbreaks and catch-up programmes.

The review is a perfect opportunity to assess how each vaccine programme is performing and to address and improve underperforming programmes. There are also opportunities to streamline the system and introduce a consistent approach. For example, some programmes, such as flu and pneumococcal programmes, include call and recall measures to boost uptake, but that is not the case for other programmes, such as shingles.

Community pharmacies have a really important role, and they could make an important contribution to vaccination. They are a convenient way for people to address their healthcare and receive vaccination services, perhaps without the need for an appointment. Many community pharmacies in England already deliver the NHS flu vaccination service, which has proved popular among patients. Following that success, would it not be possible to provide a wider range of vaccines in that way? That would help people to remain healthy, and it would reduce GP's workload and the wider pressure on the health service.

Community pharmacies are uniquely positioned to help the NHS to meet its immunisation targets in England, and to help to ensure that people in more deprived communities receive the vaccinations they need. In contrast to other healthcare settings, there is a greater density of pharmacies in the most deprived areas per head of the population, making pharmacies ideal for bridging the gap in areas where people face greater health inequalities.

I reiterate that the UK has a strong history of vaccinations, from being the country that invented the first ever vaccine to becoming a truly global player in creating a healthier world for everyone to live in. However, we must take stock of vaccination levels here at home, and we must not allow complacency or misinformation to reduce the level of immunisation. We must continue to strive for the highest levels of immunisation, so that our children continue to enjoy living in a healthy society free from disease. I thank the British Society for Immunology, Save the Children and the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee for their help. I am glad that we are having this important debate, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister.

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I am pleased to stand before the House in recognition of one of our greatest achievements in health. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green), my Lancashire neighbour, for tabling the debate. He is a great champion for his constituents and for raising science and health issues on to the parliamentary agenda.

Immunisation offers every child the chance of a healthy life, from their earliest beginnings and into old age. It saves millions of lives every year, and after clean water is the world's most successful and cost-effective public health intervention. Our vaccination programmes are a cornerstone of the UK's public health offer, and I know that all hon. Members here will join me in commending those involved in the delivery of our world-class vaccination programmes, which protect both individuals and all our communities. Our routine vaccination programme protects against 16 different diseases that, even today in developed countries, can cause serious long-term ill health, and even death, if not prevented.

The Government are committed to keeping vaccination uptake rates as high as possible. We constantly review ways to do that, and we are committed to ensuring that everyone eligible for vaccination takes up the offer. We should be proud that our routine vaccinations in England continue to have a high uptake, with more than 90% coverage for almost all childhood vaccines. That reflects the high levels of confidence that the vast majority of parents rightly have in our vaccination programmes.

Dr Whitford: The levels are above 90% for the majority, but does the Minister accept that the WHO advice is that the figure should be 95%, for community safety? We have to tackle this drop of even a few per cent.

Seema Kennedy: I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Lady, who brings to this place her great expertise from a career as a doctor. The Government have a commitment to reach the WHO target of 95%.

My hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) is no longer in his place, but he made an intervention. He referred to mothers, but I think that all parents—mothers and fathers—have a responsibility to ensure that their children are immunised. I urge parents who are thinking of getting the last rounds of MMR vaccines for their children to do so. In every classroom, there will be children who are immunosuppressed and unable to have those vaccinations, so it falls to all the rest of us, as parents, to ensure that our children have their vaccinations.

Evidence from Public Health England's annual attitudinal surveys, which have been run since the early 1990s, shows that more than 90% of parents trust our vaccination programmes and most people automatically get their children vaccinated. Regrettably, there has been a small, steady decline in coverage since 2013. That is of concern. There are likely to be many factors contributing to it, not just a single one. We are not complacent and we know that we need to take action now to halt the decline. That is why I am so glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West sought this debate: it enables me to outline some of the measures that my Department is taking.

The Department of Health and Social Care leads on policy for immunisation in England, and officials are working very closely with Public Health England and NHS England to take steps to improve vaccination coverage and reverse the downward trend. That includes better national co-ordination of our vaccination programmes; making it easier for people to access vaccinations; making information readily available to parents and those needing vaccines; and better training for staff to enable them to answer questions that parents may have.

In addition, we have data systems to ensure accurate information on the immunisation status of children and young people, so that health professionals can provide a “catch-up” on any missed vaccinations. We will continue to improve those systems. For example, the Digital Child Health programme, which includes the development of a digital personal child health record, will create a system that allows parents and healthcare practitioners to access a child’s immunisation history, improving the ability to give immunisations at every opportunity.

NHS England is reviewing vaccinations in the context of the GP contract, to ensure that GPs are properly reimbursed for vaccinating their populations and that the right incentives for increased uptake rates are in place. That is set out in “The NHS Long Term Plan”, published in January of this year.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West asked about community pharmacies and the very important role that they have to play in our primary care. I thank him for his suggestion. The Government recognise the value and importance of the services that community pharmacies provide. We want to see them working with primary care networks to encourage more people to use their local pharmacy to keep them healthy.

With regard to vaccinations, I am aware of the success, which my hon. Friend highlighted, of seasonal flu vaccines. Indeed, the number of seasonal flu vaccinations provided by pharmacies between September 2018 and March 2019 was more than 1.4 million. I had my seasonal flu vaccine in my local pharmacy in Penwortham. I am sure that my hon. Friend, as a very responsible parliamentarian, had one as well. His facial expression suggests otherwise; perhaps he will have one this September.

I will write to him regarding his suggestion. NHS England is currently leading a review of GP vaccinations, and I would not want to pre-empt its findings.

It is very important that our vaccination programmes continue to evolve. They are constantly reviewed and updated to reflect the changing nature of infectious diseases, based on expert advice. The Government receive expert advice on vaccination programmes based on decisions from the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation. That includes advice on new and existing programmes and on which vaccines should be used. Recent examples of JCVI advice leading to improvements to our vaccination programmes include the extension of the seasonal flu immunisation programme to children and the extension of human papillomavirus vaccination to adolescent boys.

It is important to remember—the House will be aware of this—that if we do not continue to vaccinate, diseases that we rarely see in the UK at the moment will return. Examples of such diseases are diphtheria, measles, tetanus and polio. Vaccines are responsible for a substantial reduction in the number of those infections.

Let us cast our minds back to the early 1950s, when there were epidemics of polio infections, with symptoms ranging in severity from fever, to meningitis, to paralysis. At the time, there were as many as 8,000 annual notifications of infantile paralysis caused by polio in this country. Following the introduction of polio immunisation, the numbers of cases fell rapidly to very low levels. The last outbreak that started in the UK was in the late 1970s. Today, protection against that disease is included in our 6-in-1 vaccine, and owing to the success of the vaccination programmes, that disease and its effects are now rarely seen in the UK.

We should be very proud of our successes in the UK and of the public health benefits afforded by our immunisation programmes. However, as I hope I have made clear to hon. Members today, we are not complacent. We will continually seek to improve those services, seeking advice from experts and taking proactive action, to ensure that we have the best vaccination offer in order to protect the health of our nation.

Question put and agreed to.

11.25 am

Sitting suspended.

Local Bank Closures

[JOAN RYAN *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Government response when the closure of the last local bank is proposed.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I am delighted to have secured this debate, because the closure of our local bank branches in Moray has been an issue of significant concern for some time. I want to start with a roll call. Since 2015, we have seen 16 bank closures in the following towns in Moray: Cullen, Dufftown, two in Aberlour, three in Keith, two in Buckie, Elgin, a further two in Lossiemouth, two in Forres, Burchhead and Fochabers. Those bank closures have affected communities in the north, east, south and west of Moray—no part of our area has been unaffected. The issue continues, with growing frustration for my constituents in Moray and constituents across Scotland and the UK.

In the UK, bank branches have reduced from 11,365 in 2007 to just 7,207 10 years later. In Scotland, between 2010 and 2018, a significant number of branches closed. RBS reduced its branch network by 70%, Clydesdale bank by 53% and Santander by 42%. Which? estimates that there are 130 communities in Scotland alone that are described as cash deserts. That means they do not have access to either a local bank branch or an ATM.

The banks have their reasons for doing this. They explain that footfall is decreasing, that more people are taking up online banking and that people can use different methods to deal with their banking needs. I disagree with that for a number of reasons, but an email I received from a constituent summed it up perfectly. The constituent comes from Portknockie, and wrote:

“I support you in calling banks to account. We know that bank closures in Moray have been severe and that banks have not even followed their own protocols when closing branches.”

She continued:

“I use online banking and am fortunate to have both the skills and fast broadband which make this possible, but I think that it is wrong that banks are acting on the assumption that everyone has these and increasingly that they have smartphones and good mobile signals. I have a smartphone but the mobile signal where I live in Portknockie is so poor that SSE were unable to install a smart meter.”

Yes, the banks do have many reasons for suggesting that these closures are the right way forward, but I believe that this constituent and many more who contacted me ahead of this debate are absolutely right. People are not unaffected by these closures. A large number of people in our communities either do not have access to fast broadband, to allow mobile banking, or simply do not want to use it, but wish to continue the face-to-face contact that they value with their banks.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. His constituent also raised the question of the procedures and processes that banks go through before they disengage with a community. In the experience of my constituents and my own experience in Bridge of Allan, that is a tick-box exercise and nothing more.

Douglas Ross: I endorse and agree with my hon. Friend's comments. I want to focus specifically on how banks approach this whole process. It could be done far better—indeed, it could not be any worse.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent case for why it is wrong that these banks have been closed. In my own area in the Scottish Borders, we have lost many bank branches, which causes great anxiety to many of the residents. When banks shut a branch, they say that there are mobile or other banking options, but many communities do not have access to mobile phone signals or broadband. Does my hon. Friend agree that the banks should be doing more, before they shut the branch, to ensure that all residents and communities are properly connected? The Government may have a role in supporting that, too.

Douglas Ross: My hon. Friend's seat in the Scottish Borders, my own in Moray and many others across Scotland do not have adequate broadband provision to allow a suitable online connection, to which the banks are directing so many people. I will be interested to hear the Minister's response to the point made by my hon. Friend.

It is right that we should discuss bank closures in the round, but this debate specifically addresses the point at which the final bank branch in a town closes. Sadly, we have recently seen that in Lossiemouth. Lossiemouth is not a small town; it is a growing town. The population is increasing, largely due to the UK Government's investment there. We are putting £400 million extra in RAF Lossiemouth, which will be the home of the P-8 Poseidon aircraft. With that, there will be at least an additional 400 personnel and their families coming to the town.

It is all the more bizarre and upsetting that now, when Lossiemouth has this huge investment and is preparing for an increase in population, the last branch in the town should have decided to go—it closed last week. This weekend was the first without the branch and, as I will mention later, the ATM was also removed. In the first weekend after the branch closed and the ATM was removed, a town with almost 8,000 residents was left with no cash whatever. The two remaining cash machines in Lossiemouth ran out of money.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I am sure that all of us here now have experience of towns with no banks in them. If a town known to be highly dependent on the cash economy, as many of our tourism towns are—this particularly affects bars and pubs—loses its last bank, people will be aware that cash is being kept on premises. To what extent have the Government considered the security of the towns and the threat of organised crime? Bars and pubs in particular—on bank holiday weekends, say—will no longer be able to deposit cash locally, so that cash will be held on the premises, which are not equipped and not necessarily insured to hold that level of cash. This is an aspect that we have not considered so far.

Douglas Ross: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady, because that issue came up when I held a public meeting in Lossiemouth, following the announcement that the final branch in the town would close. The local football club, Lossiemouth F. C., said that it had checked with

its insurers, who said that they would either increase the premium to a level that it could not afford or simply not insure it at all, because it would now not be able to deposit cash at the end of the night: the cash would have to remain on the premises. I hope the Minister addresses that issue, but we also have to put it to the insurers, because it is no fault of the football club or other operators in these towns that the banks are now closed and people cannot deposit money.

I want to return to Lossiemouth, a huge town in Moray, being left without cash this weekend. Denise Bedson of the Lossiemouth Business Association told *The Press & Journal*:

“The situation at the weekend was disgraceful. A lot of small businesses can’t afford card facilities. I know there are cheaper solutions but the phone signal isn’t always the best here for them to work properly. We’re trying to get more banking facilities here because the situation is very difficult”.

It was so difficult that there were reports of people going into the local store to buy one tin of baked beans just to get cash back. They had to buy something that they did not want or need, simply to get money from the store, because the cash machines were not working. Councillor James Allan, my colleague, who represents Heldon and Laich, has been a great local champion for this cause for years. We have gone from four banks and seven ATMs down to just two ATMs. In a community the size of Lossiemouth, that is simply unacceptable. This is just the first weekend. We have serious concerns that this will go on further.

Mention was made of tourism and tourist businesses. Lossiemouth is a great attraction for tourists, with whom it is very popular. We have takeaways and taxi firms, which do not accept credit cards or debit payments. They will suffer as a result of this. Lossiemouth Community Council and its councillors Mike Mulholland and Carolle Ralph have been highlighting the bank closures for some time; they also held a public meeting about them, following my meeting. The issue has been of considerable concern since the announcement was made last November. We knew that this was coming, but the banks have deserted Lossiemouth and other communities across Moray, Scotland and the UK. I believe that they have to do more about it.

While I am speaking about Lossiemouth, the area in Moray that is most affected because it has no branch left, I also want to mention post offices. They play a vital role, but there are some limitations. I know how hard Tony Rook, owner of the post office in Lossiemouth, and his staff are trying—as he commented in *The Northern Scot* this week, they are doing their level best—but when there is a spike in use and they are away for the weekend, there is nothing that they can do to put more money into their cash machine. He has one of the two cash machines in Lossiemouth. It costs his business to have it facing outwards to the street, but he does it as a public service. It is a great service, but even with great efforts from him and his staff, we were still left without money in a Moray town at the weekend. That is something that we need to look at.

It is not just Lossiemouth that has been affected. At the same time as the closure in Lossiemouth was announced, there was another in Keith. I held a public meeting there as well; I was grateful for the attendance of local councillor Donald Gatt, as well as Paul McBain, representing the post office, and Pearl Hamilton from the Federation of Small Businesses.

When we consider the impact of branch closures or the reduction of ATMs, we often think only about the customers who want to take money out, but the small businesses in our communities suffer just as much, if not more. FSB Scotland retweeted my tweets about today’s debate because it has great interest in the matter. Small businesses are losing not only the branch that they bank with and deposit their takings at, but the opportunity for people to take money out and spend it in their shops. They are the lifeblood of our local communities, so it is unfortunate and deeply reprehensible that they are being drawn into this.

I also want to speak about the bank’s response. I have to say that its contempt both for its own customers and for local communities is disgusting. As the local Member of Parliament, I got a phone call about the Bank of Scotland’s closures in Lossiemouth and Keith, days before it even wrote to its customers; I know my MSP colleague did, too. It came to the politicians to tell us, “This is what we are doing—oh, and by the way, we will tell our customers after the bank holiday weekend.” It thought that they could wait a few days before even bothering to tell its customers about news of such magnitude.

The banks get involved in the process that has been laid down to consult and inform communities of their decision, but they never change their mind. It is a fait accompli—they have decided what they are doing. When communities rightly stand up against these cuts and removals to express their concern about how deeply damaging they will be, the banks turn a deaf ear: they are not interested, and they do not want to hear it. I have to say that I think their behaviour shocking and unacceptable.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making a most persuasive speech. When a local authority in Scotland wants to close a school, there has to be a proper public consultation process. Does he agree that something similar would be appropriate for proposed closures of bank branches?

Douglas Ross: The hon. Gentleman makes a valuable point with which I wholly agree. Like him, I have been involved with school closures as a local councillor, and they are not easy decisions to take. When we were proposing to close Cabrach Primary School in Moray, we had to have a full consultation, even though it had no pupils left at all—the final two, a brother and sister, had moved to another school. There has to be a full consultation with the community to close a school with no pupils, but a bank branch with so many customers that is so valuable to the local area can be closed when the bank comes in and ignores every view put to it.

My most abiding memory of Lloyds’s reaction to what it was doing in Lossiemouth and Keith was that it was not even willing to engage. I wrote to it when I quickly assembled the public meetings, which were attended by people from community councils, the post office and business associations. The meetings in Lossiemouth and Keith both had an empty chair for the bank; because it could not even be bothered to turn up and face the public about its decision, I thought it only right to show the public that it was absent by leaving a chair empty.

[*Douglas Ross*]

People wanted to challenge the figures about reducing footfall or the number of transactions. There were several people in the community who did not believe the figures that were put forward. The bank should have either substantiated its claims and stood up to support them, or gone back to the community and said, "This is where we were correct, and this is where you were correct." That it was unwilling to do that demonstrates its whole attitude to this crisis.

The bank's next response is, "Well, we'll put in mobile banking." A town the size of Lossiemouth, which has gone from four branches to none, now has a mobile bank coming for an hour or two a week. We have a great climate in Lossiemouth, but it is not always sunny and beautiful; it is sometimes cold and wet, and yet we expect elderly bank customers to stand outside and wait while others go in and carry out their business. There are also elements of privacy that a mobile banking service cannot replace. It is wrong that we should keep hearing, "We are closing your branch, but we will continue to have a presence." That presence is pitiful, and it does not match the needs and aspirations of the community that uses it.

As I have mentioned before in Westminster Hall, in a debate about access to cash, RBS in Moray has a mobile branch van called the Moray Rambler. There have been so many closures of bank branches across the north-east of Scotland that the Moray Rambler now has to ramble into Banffshire and Aberdeenshire to cover areas outwith my constituency. Not only have we a poor service, but it is being stretched further and further and towns are getting less and less time with the mobile bank.

Post offices rightly have a role to play that we all value. Paul McBain represented the National Federation of SubPostmasters at my public meetings, and he did so well. Some tasks can be done at the post office instead of the bank, but some simply cannot be replicated: transferring money from an account, seeking advice about bank accounts, opening or closing accounts, registering a power of attorney or grant of probate, making complaints or inquiring about savings, current accounts, credit cards, mortgages, personal loans or investments. There is a role for the post office and there are tasks that it can do, but there are many that it simply cannot. It is wrong for the bank to say, "We'll put in a mobile branch, or you can use the post office as an alternative." It is not a like-for-like alternative; it is misleading and wrong to say so, and we will be in trouble if we go down that route.

Research into post office usage by Which? reveals that only 55% of adults are aware that they can use the post office for banking—almost half of the population do not know that—and that 47% are unlikely to use a post office for banking in the future. I hope that we can change those figures; as I said in an Adjournment debate in the main Chamber a couple of months ago, we need to encourage the public to use our post offices. However, many people out there do not want to use them for certain aspects of their banking needs. Some 42% of people did not want to go into a post office for banking because queues were too long, while 32% believed that they were not private enough.

Stephen Kerr: The key thing is that post offices have to be financially viable. If they are to take on more services, they have to be able to make a living from them. That is a fundamental challenge to the existence of many sub-post offices.

Douglas Ross: I agree wholeheartedly. That is an issue for the Government, but not for the Minister; I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), has been discussing it. I want our post offices to be rewarded for doing the tasks that the banks are currently doing, because they are not being rewarded at the same level as banks for the jobs that they do.

My final point about closures goes back to the figures on footfall. In Lossiemouth, we have been told, "Your nearest branch is in Elgin, which is not too far away." It is not far away in mileage, but getting there can be quite difficult because our bus services are not as good as they once were. People are expected to get the bus from Lossiemouth into Elgin, but ironically the branch there is not as accessible: people cannot park very easily on the high street, so they have to pay to use a car park and then troop round to the bank. Customers of the same bank used to go from Elgin to Lossiemouth because it was easier to park outside, and now we have closed the branch that they actually wanted to go to. Again, that shows how ill thought-out these plans are.

I know that many hon. Members want to speak in this debate, but I will just highlight access to cash. I have already mentioned the scenario in Lossiemouth where there was no cash available over the weekend. There has been a decline in the use of cash, but research undertaken in 2018 showed that 73% of people used cash frequently—that means once or twice a week.

The next figure that I will cite is interesting: 60% of 18 to 24-year-olds use cash frequently—again, that is once or twice a week. I am looking around me in Westminster Hall; before my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) came in, I thought I was the youngest Member here, but she has beaten me to it. My hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) may have a complaint to make about that. Generally, we think that younger people—those in their thirties, or younger—are more likely to use smartphones, other technology or contactless payment, but we are told that 60% of 18 to 24-year-olds still use cash. Access to cash is not just something that affects the older population; it affects everyone in our communities. Industry figures predict that in a decade's time, cash will still be the second most popular payment method.

A further concern that was mentioned today in a press release from Which? is that 7 million people were unable to use a payment card last year because of IT glitches. We can encourage people to use different payment methods and move away from cash, but people will still be affected if there are IT glitches, and such problems sometimes cost them money. We need to bear in mind that in the last year, 7 million people were affected by IT glitches.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making an important point. Access to cash machines is also important for people who are on a budget. They like to withdraw small amounts

without being charged, to help them to budget, whereas better-off people may make one large withdrawal for the week.

Douglas Ross: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Research into the issue shows that some of the lowest paid in our society will be most affected if there is an even greater reduction in access to cash.

John Lamont: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about the importance of cash. There is a wider economic point, because many of the small towns that he represents, and many of those that I represent in the borders, are absolutely dependent on cash. In Coldstream, Hawick and other towns in my constituency, when the banks have shut and the cash machines have gone, many traders have noticed a significant decrease in footfall and sales. That undermines the economic viability of the high street.

Douglas Ross: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. As he mentioned Coldstream and Hawick, I am sure he will get two press releases out of that intervention—something he always does well in debates such as this. Our high streets are vital to our communities, but we have seen a reduction in the number of shops on them. If that continues, we will really suffer.

I will briefly mention banking hubs. They are an idea that we have to consider, and I want to hear what the Minister has to say about them. The idea is not a new one; I know that it was suggested as far back as 2002. Last year, I wrote to every bank operating in Scotland about the suggestion of looking further at banking hubs—I know it has been made by several politicians from different parties—and I have to say that the response was disappointing. Some of the banks ignored the suggestion, and others said that hubs were not right for them. Nationwide said that it did not believe it was in the interests of its members to enter into a branch-sharing scheme. Such a scheme might not be in the interests of Nationwide's members, but it might be in the interests of our constituents and its customers.

We have to do far more to get the banks to work together. They may have some concerns, but if we cannot have the four branches that we used to have in Lossiemouth, let us at least have one hub where the banks can work together to ensure there is still a banking presence.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for bringing this important issue to the House. We have seen the starting up of a pilot business hub in Birmingham, whereby four bank branches have come together to help businesses. Does my hon. Friend agree that that shows that there is a mechanism for banks to do this, and that they just need the will to ensure that they help their personal banking customers just as much as their business ones?

Douglas Ross: My hon. Friend makes the point that hubs have been created before and there should be no blockage. However, the banks seem unable or unwilling to move forward on the issue, and perhaps the Minister can use either a carrot or a stick to encourage them to do a little more.

I will end by putting some points to the Minister and asking him some questions, and then I will allow others to contribute to this debate. I was interested to read a report from July 2018 by the Scottish Parliament's Economy,

Jobs and Fair Work Committee, which was chaired by my colleague Gordon Lindhurst. The report contained a number of key points, including that there will be an indefinite ongoing need for cash and universal face-to-face banking provision; that the access to banking standard, with its post-closure-decision consultation, is failing and a binding pre-decision consultation is needed; and that there is a need for the UK Government to research the issue properly and come up with binding statutory and regulatory conclusions.

I know that the Minister listened intently and understood the concerns of Scottish Members when he addressed this issue at the Scottish Affairs Committee this morning. I hope that, with some of the asks from me and other Members, the UK Government can make some progress on this issue.

I hope that the Minister will look at the access to banking standard and toughen it up, because some banks are not part of it. As I said when I read out communications from a constituent and others, there are concerns that banks are not adhering to the standard. I also hope that he will engage with the banks about banking hubs; the banks have too easily written off that suggestion rather than engaging properly on it. Although I accept that there are commercial reasons why banks choose to leave towns, I hope that the Minister will accept that the situation is different when a bank branch is the last to leave a town or village, and that that has a far greater impact than earlier closures.

To conclude, there has already been a devastating reduction in the number of branches across Moray, across Scotland and across the UK. We almost always lose ATMs at the same time, and therefore access to cash as well. We need to reverse that trend. Banks can improve their image—it is not always the most positive—by listening to communities and working with them, and not by simply leaving towns and villages. To date, I do not believe that the Government have done enough. We can also improve our image on this issue by working with communities and ensuring that they retain the banking presence and bank branches that they so greatly need.

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): I intend to start calling Front-Bench spokespeople at 3.27 pm. That leaves roughly between four and five minutes if each Back-Bench Member who wishes to speak is to have an equal share of the time that is left; I leave Back-Bench Members to manage their time themselves.

2.57 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) on securing this extremely important debate.

This is not the first time that I have spoken in this Chamber on this subject area. Last Thursday, we discussed a Treasury Committee report; the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), who is the Labour spokesperson this afternoon, also attended that debate. The issue cuts across two Government Departments and I hope that they will soon get their heads together and sort it out.

As has been said, Scotland has lost more than a third of its bank and building society branches in the last eight years. New analysis from Which? shows that 610 branches in Scotland closed between 2010 and 2018,

[*Marion Fellows*]

and Santander's recent decision to close 15 branches in Scotland will have a devastating impact on staff and local firms.

As we have heard, communities are devastated when local bank services close, and when the last bank goes it can have an unacceptable effect on local communities. In its report, the Treasury Committee said that

"there are still large sections of society who rely on bank branches to carry out their banking needs."

As the hon. Member for Moray said, it is not only the elderly who need cash; everyone seems to need cash at some point during the week. If they cannot access it, there are real problems, and there is a deleterious effect on our local high streets and our local businesses.

The UK Government must step in and act; they can no longer argue that they cannot intervene. They made a similar argument about Royal Bank of Scotland closing branches, but we now know that the Treasury thought that it was okay to force RBS to pull finance from customers through the asset protection scheme.

The view of the Treasury Committee is that

"the Government should make changes to competition law to allow banks to share facilities in order to maintain a sustainable branch network"

and that

"intervention by Government or the FCA may be necessary...to provide a physical network for consumers",

which is extremely important. We need people to be able to access cash. Perhaps we need the Lending Standards Board to be involved in this as well, to increase transparency and the potential for external scrutiny over branch closures. It could publish examples of non-compliance when people do not do the right thing through their annual reports.

Post offices are a subject in which I have taken a great deal of interest; I secured a backbench business debate on the sustainability of the post office network. Post offices have lifted a heavy burden when banks in their vicinity have closed. One sub-postmaster in my constituency told me that because of the closure of local banks, he was now having to work extremely hard simply counting cash, and he worked out that in one week his take-home pay was £1.37 an hour. I am aware that Post Office Ltd has increased the rates it pays sub-postmasters, but that increase will not come into effect until October of this year. It is extremely important for local authorities, communities and businesses that where the last bank closes, the Government do what they should be doing: supporting banks through banking hubs, charging banks to use those hubs and using any other means that they can find to do a good job and keep cash going in local economies.

3.1 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) for having secured today's debate. This issue is of real concern to my constituents, who have been hit by a number of closures of bank branches in recent years. I am a member of the Scottish Affairs Committee, which has done a lot of work in this space: we have done a bespoke short inquiry into RBS's significant run of bank closures, and we are going to do another one into access to cash. I am sure the Minister will be sick of the sight of me, since he was in front of the Committee this morning.

I will touch a lot on some of the points that our Committee has drawn out through our inquiry, and focus in particular on the impact of bank branch closures—especially the last bank in town—on the local post office network. That network is often used by banks as a justification for abandoning a community and a high street. It seems to me that banks effectively want post offices to do their work for them, often at a loss, as the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) has explained. From evidence given to my Committee, we know that banks do very little to ensure the longevity and sustainability of the post office network on which they rely so heavily. In East Renfrewshire, half a dozen post offices have closed over the past couple of years for a variety of reasons. Just about every single one of those post offices was included in the so-called consultation documentation produced by a local bank as the nearest place for customers to carry out their transactions.

The Government need to set out a clear policy paper on how to tackle this issue, and reform the access to banking standard from a voluntary agreement into something with more legislative backing. They also need to do more to facilitate genuine alternatives to banks using the post office as a quick fix when closing branches. Post offices are not a replacement for branch services, and their staff do not have the training to act as banking specialists; my hon. Friend the Member for Moray ran through a whole range of things that they cannot do and explained well the lack of awareness about the post office. However, it is crucial to ensure the post office network is receiving adequate funding to deliver banking services, rather than post offices subsidising bank branch closure programmes, which is effectively what is happening at the moment.

I agree that banks need to look seriously at sharing space to keep a local presence; that is particularly important when the last bank leaves. If those banks still want to pass the buck to the Post Office, the Government should explore making them responsible for setting up and funding banking hubs. Such hubs could be located or co-located in post office branches in certain instances, but the post office branches themselves and the services currently available through them should not be seen as a replacement for banking services. The Government could raise the bank corporation tax surcharge and the bank levy to fund the provision of banking services in the post office network and a network of community banking hubs, especially when it comes to staff training. In 2019-20, those two taxes are forecast to raise over £4 billion. Of course, funding should also be available through fines collected for non-compliance with the standard.

My constituents living in Neilston saw their post office suddenly closed in March, leaving that village without any banking services whatsoever. The same has happened in Eaglesham, at the other end of the constituency. Post offices that banks used as excuses for why their branch was no longer needed are gone. Where are the banks? They simply do not care; as far as they are concerned, it is now the Post Office's problem. Their responsibilities to the communities they used to serve are, in their view, over.

Surely, the least we can expect is that if banks want to pass the buck to the Post Office, they ensure that post offices are sustainable alternatives to bank branches in the long term. It is quite clear that for my constituents, they are not. As I told the executives of RBS, Bank

of Scotland, TSB and Clydesdale Bank when they appeared before the Scottish Affairs Committee, it is completely unacceptable for high street banks to rely on the post office network as a justification for abandoning local communities while doing nothing meaningful to ensure the continued survival of that network.

3.5 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, Ms Ryan, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) on having secured it. While I am always pleased to support any debate that the hon. Gentleman secures, I have a deep interest in this particular topic.

I used to come to these debates and talk about my rural areas and social isolation. As I did that, bankers nodded at me, all the while pushing on with their plans to close rural banks, which succeeded. The last banks in the Ards peninsula in my constituency closed over a year ago, although to give a bit of credit to Ulster bank, I highlight the fact that it provided a mobile bank and a customer adviser on a weekly basis. That has been useful, so some of the banks—one of the banks, anyway—took the opportunity to do something.

These closures mean that much of my constituency has no local branch. When that is paired with the fact that some areas of the peninsula are using dial-up internet, the isolation becomes incredibly clear. However, according to the banks, the numbers did not tally, and the customers could be relocated to another branch—how frustrating it was to watch that. It was fine until the closures started hitting the main town, Newtownards, which has a population of some 30,000 and serves the Ards peninsula. We saw the First Trust bank close, as well as the Bank of Ireland branch. Someone from Portaferry, some 30 miles down the road, has to travel to Bangor or Belfast simply to speak to their local bank.

I thank God for Danske bank, Ulster bank, Santander and Nationwide, which have carried out enhancements to their Newtownards branches. Those enhancements show their dedication to the local area, and I highlight them to anyone who asks me about those banks. I much prefer to work and do business with those who are prepared to have a local branch, paying rents and providing a service. Most people now are doing things online, which is phenomenal for the people whose lives are made easier by doing a lot online. My parliamentary aide is at that all the time—she is always on the app, moving her money around to cover bills, which is great—but at lunch time she goes down to Nationwide to lodge money in the children's accounts; she has access to the banks and can do transactions there. How much more is this a case of enforced technology for people my age or older?

I will give Members a real example: in the six months before the consultation on closing one of the banks in Newtownards, a staff member had been designated to stand in front of the counter and ask people in the queue if they could help get them online and do their transactions online for them. The bank then raved about the uptake of online banking. That is a slight false economy when a staff member had to stand patiently with the customer, who got to jump the queue and get what they wanted if they had talked to that staff member. In addition, the banks began to say, "We have to charge a fee, but if you do it online yourself, it is free." Explaining all that to the

customer took longer than carrying out the transaction would have done, but that would not provide the same excuse to say that the branch had become obsolete.

I read a story in the paper at the weekend, which is a true story. I am rather loath to use the bank's name, although anyone who reads *The Mail on Sunday* can find out which bank it was. The headline states:

"As banks continue to axe branches around Britain and force firms to go cashless, this furious baker"—

who is one of the bank's customers; not a banker, but a baker—says that her bank

"talked me into a pricey card reader...then shut down my branch".

Wow! Listen to this one: she pays £39 a month for a debit card reader, and 1.85% of every transaction goes to the bank. If cash disappears, there is a danger that contactless card payment fees will soar. That is the bottom line and the unwritten rule: whenever they get control of your assets, they will screw you a wee bit more.

The next one comes from a lady in a village—this is an absolute cracker. Her bank boasts that it is "by your side". It was so much by this person's side that it closed down her branch last year. That illustrates what the issues are.

I have constituents who do not know how, or have the facilities, to carry out their banking online, and even those who do still frequent their bank regularly. People need that service and pay for that service; that must be the priority, not simply giving shareholders a bigger dividend. No one expects the banks to be charities, but providing a service to those who pay is not being charitable. Let us bring back the banks, the local branch manager and the forgotten ideal of being part of a local community. That is what banks should be, and very often now they are not.

3.9 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) for securing this important debate.

It is all very well for the banks to say that people are required to move with the times, but there is a generation out there who came through school having been taught mental arithmetic, not IT skills. Not all members of that generation will be fortunate enough to have children and grandchildren fluent in IT speak, with a knowledge of apps and so on, to act as trusted advisers and able to direct them through the technological maze. Not all have good memories for the passwords required, and it is a regrettable fact of life that our faculties fail us with age. I am testament to that.

On a brighter note, I congratulate staff and pupils at Kyle Academy in Ayr in my constituency, whose pupils are learning about cyber-crime and passing on that skill to others, including small businesses and the elderly in the Ayr community. I congratulate them.

Online is a modern maze where, on occasion, even the most skilled might fall victim to scams. At a rural crime event in my constituency, it was highlighted how a farmer had been scammed when purchasing and paying via an online bank account for expensive agricultural equipment. Might it have been different had there been a bank branch open to conduct that business? The banks and the Government need to instil confidence in the user of digital banking services, whether that is in

[Bill Grant]

relation to the availability and basic reliability of the internet in the first place, or protection from the cruel, heartless scammers who appear to be able to read bank cards or secure an individual's bank details. Is it any surprise that, until the banks and Governments robustly and timeously minimise, if not eradicate, those known risks, the public will remain averse to bank closures and feel that they are being pressured to move online?

The banks place great emphasis on the fact that shared facilities exist through post offices by virtue of the Post Office banking framework, which is an agreement with around 28 high street banks, supported by the Government. However, stand-alone post offices are virtually a thing of the past as well. Most are incorporated into stores and, again, privacy is often an issue. Worryingly, some postmasters have contacted me, and I am sure many others throughout the UK, regarding the profitability of their business being driven down by the Post Office itself. Thankfully, the Post Office has been listening and in October we should see changes that afford greater support to sub-postmasters, which is to be welcomed.

I am delighted that a bank—the TSB, I believe—in the seaside town of Girvan has survived the closures, having stated that it was determined to make significant efforts to keep branches with low footfall open by reducing opening hours. A face-to-face presence remains, at least for the time being. Perhaps that is a model worth considering. On the negative side, the nearby village of Dailly no longer has a visit from the mobile bank, which appeared there for a couple of hours a week. I understand the Government acknowledge the valuable role of credit unions. However, I have constituents who remain aggrieved that banks are permitted to provide services through post offices while credit unions are not permitted to co-locate with post offices. Hopefully, the Minister will be able to review that somewhat restrictive practice.

The Government refer to the access to banking standard and have said that the decision to close a branch is a commercial decision for the management team of the bank, and the long-time policy of successive Governments has been not to intervene. Yet Members will remember that in 2008 the Government of the day chose to intervene when banks' management decisions nearly brought the banks to their knees, so why not consider their stance and intervene now to extend the presence of the last bank in town?

It is very important that we endeavour to avoid financial exclusion and age discrimination. We still see ATMs and Link is working on initiatives to preserve access to cash, despite the reduction in the use of cash by some groups in society, but, as has been said, for those living on a pension, benefits or lower incomes, dealing in cash sometimes makes financial management easier. Too often, tapping a card or entering a four-digit pin number fails to register in the mind of the purchaser the actual spend building up until it is too late and they are plunged into unaffordable debt.

Will the Minister assure us that personal customers—particularly, although not exclusively, the elderly—and small businesses will not be prejudiced by the continuing bank branch closures and that choosing to use internet banking will be better protected from the impact of cyber-crime?

3.14 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan.

I want to draw Members' attention to the county of Sutherland in the highlands, which is part of my constituency. Since 2005, eight branches have shut. With the recent announcement that the Clydesdale is going to shut its branch in Brora, we will be left with precisely one branch, the Bank of Scotland in Golspie, in a very large county of 2,028 square miles, with a population of some 13,500 who will have only one branch left. For some people that means a 150-mile round trip to get to the bank, if someone lives in Durness in the upper north-west—a three and a half hour bus journey for my constituents. And it gets worse. We have talked about post offices and how the banks say, "Go online or use the post office," but Clydesdale bank seems to have conveniently forgotten that the post office in Brora has been shut for some time, making a complete mockery of that.

I and other Members have always said that the point of having a real branch is to have a human face behind the counter. Even if people can go online—not a lot can in my constituency—if someone has a big payment coming along but they do not know what it is, which can be a real worry for people, old and young, it would be better if they could go into a branch and see somebody who would say, "This is what it is," or, "This is a scam." That is why we want the human face, which is very hard to replace.

In my huge constituency, we are told to use mobile banks, but it is not awful funny going to a mobile bank in Wick if it is sleeting in January. The weather in good old Wick can sometimes be very inclement.

My contribution is short, but the matter of Sutherland serves the purpose of helping all Members here today, because it provides such an extreme example: one branch in a vast county of 2,028 square miles, which is astonishing. However, I give credit where it is due to the Minister. He has met and listened to a cross-party group of MPs, and I think he has taken the issue on board, but I say to him from the bottom of my heart that we have to get something together. The hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) made a superb speech. This is about getting the hubs to work. Where there is a will, there is a way before us. If we could get those hubs to work together that would not solve the problem, but it would make things a heck of a lot easier, so I say to the Minister, "Go and bang the banks' heads together. Tell them to get off their backsides and get the show on the road!"

3.17 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) on securing the debate. It provides me with an opportunity to review the position just over a year since the last bank branch closed in the market town of Bungay in my constituency, where there had been a bank branch since 1808 when Gurney's, the predecessor of Barclays, opened one of its first branches.

Looking back over the past year, I shall highlight three issues. The first is the pace of change in the transition to what I would term an almost cashless society, which has been much quicker than anticipated.

Very often when I am in a queue for a sandwich or a newspaper, I feel self-conscious as I get out my wallet. Invariably, particularly in London, I am the only person paying by cash, and I sense that eyes are gazing at me with a sense of bemusement. The transition is happening much quicker in metropolitan areas than in market towns and the countryside. The breakneck pace of change causes difficulties for the elderly, the disabled and, particularly, those on low incomes for whom cash provides the best means of managing a very tight budget.

Secondly, having ready access to cash is the main challenge that has arisen out of the Lloyds bank closure in Bungay last May. There are no longer 24/7 cashpoints available in the town centre. There is a cashpoint in the post office, but it is not accessible all the time, and when the extremely popular Sunday street fairs take place, there is a major drawback for traders without card machines.

It is also appropriate to highlight the emergence of a postcode lottery along the Suffolk-Norfolk border. In Bungay, there are no 24/7 cashpoints. Likewise, 9 miles away in Halesworth in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), there are no such facilities. However, if I go 8 miles west to Harleston, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr Bacon), there are three such cashpoints within 100 metres of each other.

That revolution is happening when high streets and town centres are under pressure and face the challenge of reinventing themselves. For that to be done successfully, it is important that business should not unwittingly be diverted elsewhere. Bungay and towns like it serve a large rural hinterland, from where many residents, once a week, come into the town to shop, go to the bank and socialise over a coffee or a meal. Take away the bank and they might go to another market town instead. To adopt the practice of King Canute and try to stop the change would, I sense, be futile, but we can manage that change properly, so that the vulnerable are not compromised and towns such as Bungay can compete on a level playing field with their neighbours.

3.20 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), who gave an excellent speech, logically and rationally explaining a situation that we face in many parts of the United Kingdom but which, speaking parochially, is very much an issue for Scotland. If my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) thinks that people look at him strangely when he uses cash in London, I encourage him to try using a Royal Bank of Scotland £20 note. Recently I was refused the opportunity to spend my money in London—an issue that I took up with WH Smith. I got a good apology, which is only appropriate.

Since I was elected to this House, I have been involved in many campaigns to fight unwanted and unnecessary branch closures. In my constituency, Balfron, Bannockburn, Bridge of Allan and St Ninians have no bank branches at all, owing to recent branch closures, and Callander is down to its last branch. When a town is down to its last bank and that bank is threatened with closure, I strongly believe that it is right for the Government to act—and I say that as a Conservative Member of Parliament.

We had an anomalous situation in Bridge of Allan, which may be of interest. Clydesdale Bank and the Royal Bank of Scotland both closed their branches at the same time. Each bank justified its closure by citing the existence of the other branch. How ridiculous is that? They have now both closed leaving the people of Bridge of Allan without a bank branch, despite both banks stating that there would be one. That situation must not be allowed to happen. The Government must be prepared to act to remove that kind of justification, when two bank branches announce their closure at the same time. When Royal Bank of Scotland closed its Bannockburn branch, it justified it in terms of proximity to city centre premises—but guess what: it then moved those premises further from the customers. The branch in question happens to be very plush, but there are a few obstacles to getting there in the first place.

It is important that the consultation process that banks are required to go through should not just be a tick-box exercise. I am fearful that it is exactly that—a fait accompli from the point of announcement—and that any consultation is a completely pointless exercise. I might add that that could also be true when post office closures are announced. They are also, I think, nothing more than a tick-box exercise. I should like to hear from the Minister what the Government plan to do. I know him, and he is a very good fellow. There have been many representations, debates and speeches on the subject, and it is time for the Government to produce some kind of policy initiative, to do something about it.

The Treasury Committee has been referred to, and post offices are not a fair substitute for a branch of a bank. It is very unfair: many sub-postmasters in my constituency do not have the facilities or resources to become an alternative to the bank branch that once existed next door to them, or on the same street. It is not fair on the customers, or on the community that those branches served.

Another suggestion that has been made—and it is a fair one—concerns banking hubs. I strongly believe—as, I say again, a Conservative—that the banks should be encouraged, and perhaps more than encouraged, in the light of the earlier reference to carrots and sticks, to come together and fund the creation of a community banking hub. Perhaps that could be done in conjunction with the Post Office, but I do not think that just taking a laissez-faire approach to the facilities will hack it. The banks have said that the Post Office should be encouraged to take up the slack, and they have said they will support local post offices, but I asked one postmaster in my constituency what support the bank gave him when it moved out of town. He said, “I got a bundle of leaflets, so I could put them out on my counter.” That was the sum total of the support.

When bank branches are closed and the community is told that the banks will support it through local post offices, what is the mechanism for delivering that support? What positive encouragement is there for the bank to deliver on that? What will the Government do about the situations that I describe? Is it not time we came up with a policy to deal with the situation? I hope that the Minister will be able to describe fully what the Treasury will do—because this is not any old Minister of the Crown replying to the debate: he is a Treasury Minister, so we have great expectations. We need radical ideas now to make sure that vital banking and community

[Stephen Kerr]

services will be available across the villages and towns of Scotland and the whole United Kingdom. The Government have a role in enabling and supporting that, and a responsibility to do so. I urge them to do it.

I cannot sit down without mentioning the people of Dunblane, who were told they would have a mobile banking service for a few minutes every other week. That is not a replacement for a bank facility. However, it is the kind of support and recompense that communities have been offered by banks that have deserted them, although the people of this country were not slow to step up to the mark and bail them out of the mess they had made. My colleagues and I will not forget that in a hurry.

3.26 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) for bringing this important debate forward. Moments of agreement are rare, so when they happen they should be celebrated in a mighty fashion—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”]—although the debate is not over yet.

I feel that I spend half my time in this place—I do not exaggerate and I know that others will share this view—bemoaning the stampede of banks out of our communities without so much as a backward glance. I represent a constituency where several towns have no bank at all. They are Ardrossan, Stevenston, Kilwinning—a town of 21,000 people—West Kilbride, Dalry and Beith. Kilbirnie’s last bank is having its opening hours reduced, and that is the only bank left in the entire Garnock valley, where there are three distinct towns with a collective population of more than 19,000 people.

My constituency has been hit particularly hard, so I fully appreciate the similar concerns expressed by the hon. Members for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) and for Stirling (Stephen Kerr). In Scotland we have lost one third of our bank branches in just eight years. Research from Which? has shown that 610 branches closed across Scotland between 2010 and 2018. The recent Santander announcement of closures is the latest in a long line of such announcements from banks across the board.

The hon. Member for Stirling talked about consultation on bank closures being a tick-box exercise, and that is true. I remember the same thing happening in 2007-08 when there were, in my constituency anyway, mass post office closures. Perhaps naively and innocently—this was long before I was elected to this place—we had street stalls and went door to door with petitions to move the banks and Post Office, but nothing changed.

This has to stop. The Minister will be aware that the Treasury Committee concluded that

“there are still large sections of society who rely on bank branches to carry out their banking needs. A bank branch network, or at least a face-to-face banking solution, is still a vital component of the financial services sector, and must be preserved.”

The Minister will probably not agree, but I genuinely believe this: there was no UK Government intervention when RBS, which was owned by us, the taxpayers, announced a significant—eye-watering—closure programme, and I believe that the fact that nothing was done emboldened other banks, with no element of public ownership, in their closure programmes.

If the Government were willing to accept the closure of RBS branches, which they owned on behalf of the taxpayer—I listened carefully but did not hear them condemning those closures—then closing local branches seems to have been an option that other banks could employ almost without consequence. As a result, communities have suffered for want of a bank, and they continue to do so—we have heard much about that today. Mobile banks are not disability compliant, and their reliability is questionable at best.

The Government said that they could not intervene in the RBS closure programme—as the Minister will know, that rankled with many of us—and they insisted on leaving all operational decisions to RBS throughout the closure programme. As my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) pointed out, the Government apparently pressured RBS to pull finance from customers through the asset protection scheme. If the Government had tried to use whatever influence they could in the original RBS closure programme, I am curious to consider what effect that might have had. Would we still be where we are now? I think we might not be.

RBS is not the only bank to have closed branches, but it has certainly emboldened the others. As the hon. Member for Moray set out, the gaps left by banks cannot properly be filled by post offices, regardless of what we have been told. The Treasury Committee concluded that post offices

“should not be seen as a replacement for a branch network, but as a complementary proposition”,

and we have heard similar sentiments from every Member in today’s debate.

Over the past two years, I have corresponded with the UK Government and Post Office Ltd about the poor rates of pay for postmasters, and I am delighted that some action has been taken. We cannot have a situation where banks abandon our towns and the provision of some banking services is carried out by post offices, but those post offices are not properly paid by banks, which then rake in huge profits while some postmasters do not even earn the minimum wage—the hon. Members for Stirling, for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), and for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), and my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw also made that point. Such a situation is simply not acceptable.

We are witnessing the demise of free cash machines—3,000 in the past 18 months across the UK—and 32 free cash machines a month are closing in Scotland. There is a stampede to charge people to use cash machines. The ATM Industry Association has warned that one fifth of Scotland’s free ATMs will start charging consumers in the next year, which can only be seen as a cynical move to force us to become a cashless society.

Just as bank closures have, in my view, been a tool to force people to bank online, so are banks now cutting the fees that they are willing to pay machine operators to provide bank customers with access to cash. Banks are attempting to put pressure on customers who are not acting in a way that they find convenient. What happened to the customer being king? Going cashless and banking online is the preferred option for some, but although some of us do not wish to go down that route, there are increasingly aggressive efforts to force us to do

so at breakneck speed, as the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) pointed out. I and my constituents who do not favour those options will not be forced to do that—the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) also made that point—and we will not be bullied into going cashless and digital. In any case, those options are not available to some people for a variety of reasons.

We need to move from a commercial model of access to cash to having a more utility approach, and keep cash sustainable for longer. Our cash infrastructure matters, and we cannot sleepwalk into a cashless society without serious consequences for many of our constituents and small businesses, which already face challenges if they are unable to bank takings or customers cannot access cash in order to shop on their premises. Not everybody has a debit card; as the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) said, not every small business is equipped to take plastic. This issue therefore affects the footfall and sustainability of those small businesses.

I have corresponded with the Minister, and he accepted that broadband access is not good enough for everyone to rely on digital banking. I know he wants more banking services to be provided by post offices, but that is not the issue at hand. The Government, and the Access to Banking standard, must ensure that banks have a social responsibility to provide banking facilities to all our towns. Such services could be provided relatively easily through banking hubs, and there is no discernible obstacle to that option except—I am sure the Minister will correct me if he thinks I am wrong—a lack of political will, and the arrogance and intransigence of the banking industry. Our communities and constituents deserve better. Banks must face up to their social responsibilities and get their heads together to create banking hubs. There is no real impediment to that, and it is what customers want.

I urge the Minister to use his good offices to bang some banking heads together and ensure that their customers' voices are heard. The Government have a role to play when the last bank in a town is closed. The Government have said repeatedly that these are commercial decisions, but this is not just a commercial matter. This is about social responsibility and financial inclusion, and I urge the Minister to reflect further on the strong feelings and concerns expressed today. Will he consider legislative proposals to ensure that our banks live up to their responsibilities to our communities?

3.36 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak with you in the Chair, Ms Ryan, in this interesting and well-informed debate, and to sit across from the Minister. I was starting to get withdrawal symptoms because there have not been many statutory instruments recently, although I am sure the Government will rectify that.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) on securing this debate, as I know that the issue has seriously affected many of his constituents and local businesses. For those without an intimate knowledge of north-east Scotland, let me underline that the communities we are talking about are often far apart. They either have next to no public transport, or it is of poor quality and very expensive. Local facilities are therefore incredibly important.

As the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) rightly said, we had a debate on a similar topic just a few days ago. It was mentioned that in certain circumstances an ATM might close on a high street that still has a number of different facilities. We are not talking about that in this debate; we are talking about situations where few facilities are available. This is not about duplication; it is often about the last services moving away. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, this is about social and rural isolation.

High street banks are an essential part of our financial infrastructure and they help to support local economies and communities. The bank branch network has been shrinking at an accelerating pace. Many statistics have already been given, but the UK has lost nearly two thirds of its bank and building society branches over the past 30 years. In 2018 and 2019, banks and building societies will have closed, or planned to close, a total of 1,080 branches, and 3,318 branches have shut in the past four years. Banks have been closing at a rate of nearly 70 a month. Overall, a fifth of the population lives more than two miles from their nearest branch—and a good deal further away in some of the situations that have been mentioned.

The debate has focused particularly on Scotland, where there have been a large number of closures, with RBS alone closing more than 200 branches—a 70% reduction in just five years. There have been similar developments across the country. In the north-west, 425 bank branches have closed since 2015, and even in the south-east—I represent a south-east constituency—more than 410 branches have closed since 2015, including one in Headington in my constituency. Such closures occur everywhere, and they often have a particularly significant impact on the most disadvantaged people.

The recent debate on the Treasury Committee's report on consumer access to financial services emphasised the importance of local banks at a time when many people are not able to access basic financial services. That disenfranchises them from many different activities.

Research shows that in 2006-07, more than 1 million people had no access to a bank account in their household. Although that fell to 660,000 in 2012-13, it increased to 730,000 in 2013-14. We are going in the wrong direction in terms of access to basic financial services. We need to be clear that in many cases the process is leading to people who are already digitally excluded being financially excluded. That point was very well underlined by the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont).

There are also impacts for businesses, particularly small and medium-sized businesses. A YouGov poll showed that more than 68% of SME customers said that a branch was important, and 66% said they needed the bank branch because of the need to discuss issues face to face. The Federation of Small Businesses has done some interesting work on this. The situation in Lossiemouth when the town ran out of cash has happened in other places as well—it is not the only instance of that occurring. As the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) said, bank branch closures put a burden on businesses and organisations. Sports clubs were mentioned. They might be collecting a large amount of cash and want to be able to get rid of that cash to a bank branch, but they are not able to.

[Anneliese Dodds]

Worryingly, the situation is also leading to issues with SME lending. For example, the British Bankers Association pointed out that bank branch closures dampen SME lending growth by 63% on average in postcodes that lose a bank branch. That figure rises to more than 100% when an area loses its last bank in town. This is not just about inconvenience. It is a much bigger issue for many businesses, and is arguably part of the reason why we have not seen investment come back to the level we want.

The Opposition acknowledge the importance of dealing with this issue and have set out plans for a radical shake-up of the UK banking system, which needs a change to the law so that banks cannot close a branch where there is a clear local need. We believe that the duties of the Financial Conduct Authority need to be broadened, and that amendments are needed to the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000—particularly part 4A, which authorises banks to carry on regulated activity: the banking licence.

We would seek to amend the process substantively. I was pleased to hear a number of Members mention that, including the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr). I will not go through all the details on how it should be amended, as others need to speak, but it is important that we see meaningful consultation. The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) also rightly underlined the fact that local authorities are often not part of the process, but they need to be.

The hon. Member for Moray and many other Members referred to the role of the post office network. There are strong grounds for believing that that role can be boosted, but not simply through it becoming the default option for offering services without any extra support. That is simply not sustainable. The Labour party has commissioned research to look at how a proper postbank network could be set up, how it could be financed and how it could operate. I hope the Government will look at that. The current approach is just not working, and we cannot rely on sub-postmasters who are already overburdened to deliver the services. A big part of the answer has to be to boost credit unions, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant). I know the Minister is interested in that, but we need to do more.

As the debate has highlighted, it is becoming increasingly clear that we need to take action to deal with the shrinking bank branch network. The Government need to do more to invest in our communities and to support local high streets. Strengthening their approach to bank branch closures would be a straightforward way to deal with a number of issues. We need to take immediate action to preserve and build on our banking infrastructure to create a system that works and that serves a diverse range of customers and communities.

4.44 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) on securing this important debate. I acknowledge the contributions of all who have spoken this afternoon. I have listened carefully to the

speeches, and it is good to have seven of my hon. Friends from north of the border here. I will endeavour to answer the points substantively.

I gave evidence to the Scottish Affairs Committee this morning on this very issue. Straight after this debate, I hope to make a speech at the Which? cash summit, where I will set out the work being done by industry, the Government and regulators to ensure that access to cash is safeguarded. I recognise that this is a very important issue for many of our constituents. In my own constituency of Salisbury, I have seen bank branches close and I understand how difficult that is for communities. We have heard some specific examples this afternoon of the distress that can be caused when the process does not go smoothly. I recognise there are different opinions across the House about how the challenge should be met, and I will address those shortly.

Undoubtedly, the fact that the retail financial landscape is changing rapidly, as more consumers and businesses opt for the convenience, security and speed of digital payments and digital banking, is a significant factor. Ten years ago, cash accounted for more than three fifths of all payments in the UK; today, the figure is less than three in 10—and that is anticipated to fall to less than one in 10 in nine years, by 2028. In 2017, debit cards overtook cash for the first time as the most frequently used payment method in the UK.

I am very sensitive to the point made by the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) that debit cards are not everyone's choice; it is really important that we keep in focus the need to maintain access to cash. In 2018, two thirds of UK adults used contactless payments, 72% of UK adults used online banking and 48% used mobile banking. How we use financial services is changing and consumers have more choice than ever. It is an exciting time, but it is also a disruptive and potentially confusing time for our constituents.

Closing a branch is never an easy decision, but the decision will ultimately be a commercial one for the bank. The Government have been clear that we do not intervene in those decisions because industry is best placed to know what works best for its customers. I recognise that branch closures can be very disappointing for customers and the impact on communities must be understood, considered and mitigated where possible. I will therefore set out some of the ongoing work in this area—in particular, access to the banking standard and how it might be enhanced.

Douglas Ross: The Minister says that closing a bank is a commercial decision and the banks are listening to their customers. How can they be listening if they take those decisions prior to any consultation and if, when they are encouraged to engage, they do not even turn up?

John Glen: That behaviour that my hon. Friend experienced in his constituency is not best practice. It is not acceptable. It is very unfortunate when that happens. My job is to try to ensure that there is a systematic upgrade to the quality of the consultation and engagement from the banks, and I will now set out what is happening.

The access to banking standard has been noted by a number of colleagues today. Since May 2017, the major high street banks have been voluntarily signed up to the standard, which commits them to work with customers

and communities to minimise the impact of branch closures. The standard ensures that banks keep customers informed about branch closures, and that the bank sets out its reasons for closure and the alternative options for continued access to services. How meaningful that consultation process is has been raised, on the basis that it happens when a decision has been made and not prior to the decision. I am looking into that. I have written to the Lending Standards Board and will be meeting its representatives to discuss the matter further.

The options for continued access should include specialist assistance for customers who need more help. For example, the Lending Standards Board, which monitors and enforces the standard, has told me it sees evidence of support from firms to assist customers in understanding and using alternative banking options. I recognise that that happens in some, but not all, cases. Such support might include digital experts being placed in the relevant branches to demonstrate how mobile and online banking works and assisting those customers who wish to use that functionality, as well as making introductions to nearby post offices and retained branches.

I continue to be very supportive of the access to banking standard and I value the commitment it places on banks to communicate the next steps for customers when the decision is made to close a branch, but I am aware of the concerns that colleagues have expressed about the standard. I confirm that I recently wrote to the Lending Standards Board to seek reassurances that the access to banking standard remains fit-for-purpose, and I intend to meet the chief executive to discuss matters further, drawing on the meetings I have had with various groups from all parts of the House and on the representations made so forcefully by colleagues this afternoon.

I turn to the Post Office. I was pleased to see the successful renegotiation of its commercial agreement with high street banks. That will enable 99% of personal customers and 95% of small and medium-sized enterprise customers to continue to carry out their everyday banking at one of the UK's 11,500 post office branches; that is 91 more branches than there were in March 2018. I acknowledge the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Moray made about functionality and how not all functions can be carried out at the post office. That could evolve, but we already see aggregation of banking services at the sub-regional level when more specialist advice is required. The issue is about working out ways to solve that challenging problem. I am engaged in that work and am happy to explore that further with him.

As a result of the renegotiation, postmasters will see a considerable increase in fees for processing deposits, and the fees will rise further if transaction volumes continue to grow. An increase in fee income will help the Post Office and its network become more financially sustainable and will allow for investment in automation, training and security in post offices. Some £2 billion has been invested by the Government since 2010.

It is essential that more people know about the banking services offered by the Post Office, which is why I asked it to work together with UK Finance to raise awareness. According to a survey by Which?, only 55% of UK adults are aware that they can use their post office for banking services; that statistic was made clear this afternoon by my hon. Friend. The point he did not make was that 77% of those who had used the post office for banking

said they would do so again. We are on a journey of understanding, as people become familiar with what can happen in a post office. After that work, UK Finance and the Post Office found that awareness had increased and committed to using community outreach to further improve awareness. I will continue to take a keen interest in the progress of that work.

Although many customers are satisfied with the Post Office's banking services, I am aware that there are still some outstanding concerns—they have been mentioned this afternoon—such as with privacy and queueing. I have therefore written to my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), the Minister in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy responsible for postal affairs, to request that our officials continue to work closely to explore the issues.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) made a point about credit unions and post offices. I welcome any feasible innovations in that space. The main trade body for credit unions is conducting extensive UK-wide consultation, and it will come back to the Government in September. I would be happy to explore with it how the solution he suggested might be acted on.

Related to bank closures is the issue of continuing access to cash. It is clear that for some people, cash remains their preferred, or only, method of payment for a variety of reasons. My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) set out his experience, and that situation remains true for many people out of choice. Our financial system needs to cater for everyone in our society. Although it is exciting for many consumers, technology must not come at the expense of choice. There will therefore be no changes to our current system of notes and coins. We want to ensure that cash is available for those who need it, when they need it.

In 2015, we established the Payment Systems Regulator, a powerful economic regulator of the payments industry. Its objectives balance the need for competition and innovation on the one hand with the protection of consumer and business interests on the other. Through the creation of the joint authorities cash strategy group, we are acting to ensure a comprehensive approach to regulation in light of changing trends and preferences for cash. The Payment Systems Regulator is already examining the factors that affect the distribution of ATMs across the country. I was concerned by what happened in Lossiemouth: it is a good case study for the regulator to be examining during the early weeks of its work.

I welcome today's announcement by UK Finance, the trade body for banks, that it too intends to explore key issues around access to cash, including the role of local areas and communities. The industry must continue to play its part, and developers should consider the needs of all customers as they design new digital banking products and forms of payment. We are seeing companies such as Square trying to increase the use of card payments in small towns. No one should be locked out of the benefits that technology brings.

I recently concluded a Westminster Hall debate speech with a call to arms to the industry to think about all consumers when developing its services, and I re-emphasise that here this afternoon. I welcome the innovations that banks are introducing to respond to changes in customer

[John Glen]

behaviour as more of us choose to bank on demand online or via an app, rather than visiting a branch. We cannot reverse digital innovation, and nor should we, given the benefits it brings to our constituents—I acknowledge once again the point made by the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) about his constituents' experience of connectivity—but we need to find solutions for the whole of the United Kingdom. Improving digital and financial inclusion is key to ensuring that vulnerable customers are not left behind.

I will keep pushing the industry—someone mentioned the carrot and the stick: both are required—to move forward and do more. I hope Members will recognise that I have responded thoroughly to the points made. I am happy to continue the dialogue, but I am working to engage on the specific issues raised and to secure the improvements needed.

3.56 pm

Douglas Ross: First, I thank you, Ms Ryan, for how you have chaired this debate; there was a subtle change in your demeanour indicating that I had spoken for long enough, and that ensured other colleagues were able to speak.

I am grateful to the hon. Members for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone); to my hon. Friends the Members for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and for Stirling (Stephen Kerr); to the hon. Members for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), the Opposition spokespeople; and to the Minister for a constructive, detailed and hopefully positive debate—not only for Lossiemouth, Moray and Scotland, but for communities across the United Kingdom that have been affected in this way.

The Minister said that the Government have made progress, which is welcome, but we can also agree that there is more to be done after this debate. His constructive response shows that the Government are listening. I have written down the actions that he is taking at the moment and that he will take going forward, but he will be left in no doubt by today's debate that there are still major issues in all our constituencies that need to be tackled. There was mention of banging heads together and carrots and sticks: we have to use any and all means to find a solution to the problem. Although it is useful to have had this debate, talking only goes so far. We need action, and we need it now. I am encouraged by this debate that that will happen, but the pressure will remain until we can ensure that our communities can continue to be served by the banks they need.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Government response when the closure of the last local bank is proposed.

Housing Associations

[ALBERT OWEN *in the Chair*]

3.59 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the accountability and role of housing associations.

I am pleased to see you presiding, Mr Owen, and to see the Minister in his place. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this important issue. I thank the National Housing Federation; Grenfell United; the Deputy Mayor of Tower Hamlets, Councillor Rachel Blake; the House of Commons Library; the Charity Commission; the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership; and Poplar Housing and Regeneration Community Association for their briefings ahead of the debate, as well as Jenny Symmons in my office for pulling them all together.

I do not believe that what I will say today is at all controversial, which might reassure the Minister. There are more than 1,400 providers of social housing in the UK, and roughly one sixth of our households live in a housing association or council property. There is clearly agreement that the status quo on oversight needs changing.

On Monday, the Minister and I attended an event at Speaker's House to mark the second anniversary of the Grenfell fire. A speaker for the group, Ed Daffarn, made the point that the regulator had let them down. We all know that disastrous decisions were made in the refurbishment of Grenfell Tower that led to the tragedy, and Ed identified that a key issue was the lack of regulation.

In the wake of Grenfell, the Government's Green Paper on social housing, released last year, promised to create "safe and decent" homes,

"empowering residents and ensuring their voices are heard so that landlords are held to account"

and

"improving and speeding up how complaints are resolved".

Those commitments were very welcome; however, we are yet to see the fruits. One of the biggest areas that needs tackling in the sector is the lack of clear regulation and accountability for housing associations. Solving that problem would surely lead to the delivery of safer homes, empowered residents and an effective complaints procedure.

I often find it confusing what the exact roles of the social housing regulator and the ombudsman are. Where are the lines of responsibility? It is unclear what the demarcations are in the roles of the two bodies, which causes serious problems not only for residents who need to report concerns, but for me. Currently, the social housing regulator seems to oversee financial regulation and value for money, and in extreme cases consumer standards, but does not handle routine customer service oversight. That lands in the jurisdiction of the local government ombudsman.

However, residents can turn to the ombudsman only if their complaint is rejected by the housing association in the first instance. Even then, many residents do not know that they have that option. I have been informed that even if a resident does know that they can escalate their complaint to the local government ombudsman,

it can take at least a year for their case to be dealt with due to the huge remit covered and the high volume of complaints.

There is also the issue that two ombudsmen cover housing. The local government ombudsman technically covers social housing, but the housing ombudsman supposedly covers all housing. That leads to confusion about which body to turn to, and sometimes residents turn to both, which is a waste of time and resources. Labour's Green Paper, "Housing for the Many", makes it clear that the way forward is to have a single housing ombudsman who takes responsibility for the regulation of all housing, and who completely covers customer service and complaints handling. That dedicated service could deal with complaints in a shorter timescale, and would cut out confusion and restore authority to residents.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that, owing to their status, neither housing associations nor private landlords are required to respond to freedom of information requests? Given that, tenants might therefore have no access to fire safety reports or other such important information?

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I will come to that point later.

For residents, be they social renters, key workers, people with shared equity or leaseholders, accountability and transparency are key. For public sector home owners or renters, responsibility for their home maintenance is generally clear, but in the private sector it is not. A recent example of such confusion is the Barking fire on Sunday. There appears to be a complete lack of information on who owns the freehold. Responsibility for the failings therefore cannot be allocated. How are residents supposed to feel confident in their homes when no particular company or individual will take responsibility for their safety and welfare? A clear system of regulation for housing association homes would go some way to making residents feel comfortable and protected.

Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab): This is an important debate. We had similar issues in Tower Hamlets, across Barking and Dagenham and Havering, with Old Ford, which was Circle Housing, and a notorious case on the Orchard Village estate because of a lack of effective regulation across the sector. At the same time, a number of housing associations increasingly saw their role as being developers, rather than fulfilling their historical ethical role of delivering for working people. Does my hon. Friend agree that the lack of regulation plays into the changing role of housing associations across the sector?

Jim Fitzpatrick: My hon. Friend makes a very good point, and I will come on to the role of housing associations and the change in their ethos. That will reinforce the concern that he expresses.

I hear all the time from constituents who are having trouble getting complaints about their housing associations dealt with. Issues such as above-inflation rent increases, unjustified service charges, unreasonable refurbishment costs and problems with repairs seem to be rife. The lack of information about tendering arrangements has also been a source of frustration. Residents often find it unclear who they can go to with their complaints, and do not have confidence that they will be given a fair hearing.

Accountability questions are all too common. In my constituency, there are many housing associations, many of which are very good. Some are average and some are poor. One of the best, if not the best, is Poplar Housing and Regeneration Community Association, commonly and locally known as HARCA. HARCA is a much-valued organisation in Tower Hamlets, going beyond its brief in housing to create community hubs and therefore maintaining a strong social ethos. It is also exemplary in its accountability. Its board has always had a majority of members from the local community, and it has created a tenant advisory panel with the aim of strengthening relationships with tenants and landlords. It was also an early adopter of the National Housing Federation's "Together with Tenants" plan, again prioritising building good relationships with tenants.

In a recent consultation regarding plans for the Teviot estate in my constituency, there was a turnout of 81% of residents, 87% of whom voted in support of the plan. That demonstrates the high level of approval for HARCA's work. HARCA also runs a resident-to-resident survey, where residents are trained to call other residents to get their comments on issues such as recent repairs, providing unbiased feedback for Poplar HARCA and involving the residents in shaping their local services.

Those initiatives have proved successful for Poplar HARCA not only in operating an efficient not-for-profit business, but in achieving high levels of resident approval. Its most recent survey, conducted in May, found that 83% of tenants and 75% of leaseholders were satisfied with the service. Clearly, involving residents in decision making at every possible level and seeking feedback regularly works in favour of both residents and housing associations.

However, that level of provision for, and investment in, tenants sometimes seems to be the exception rather than the rule. Housing associations are no longer obliged to have residents on their board. I urge the Minister to consider bringing back that requirement, as another means of making associations directly accountable to residents, and ensuring that executive boards have a local perspective.

At the opposite end of the spectrum to Poplar HARCA is A2Dominion, notorious in the housing world for its, at best, neglect of or, at worst, disdain for residents. The *Daily Mirror* recently reported that residents in Clyde House in south London are scared to sleep in their homes due to unsafe conditions. Thick mould covering pipes, water leaking into flats, vermin across the building and an assessment declaring it a

"moderate to high fire risk"

all appear in a new development.

A2Dominion is supposed to have the exact same social purpose as Poplar HARCA. However, residents are being ignored in their justified complaints. The lack of clear accountability means that it can get away with not taking responsibility for the necessary repairs and upkeep, while still charging tenants extortionate service charges. Associations such as A2Dominion need clear regulation, and residents need to know who they can turn to when they are not being taken seriously.

As the Minister knows, I have spoken several times in this place about fire safety in high-rise flats—not as often as him, of course—and the dangerous, highly flammable cladding that is still in place in too many blocks. If we

[Jim Fitzpatrick]

want to show that we have learned the lessons from Grenfell, we have to bring in stringent legal oversight, so that no further lives are lost due to its absence, in addition to shoddy, cost-cutting workmanship, poor maintenance, wrong materials and weak fire regulations.

Another point of consideration is bringing local government into a more formal role in oversight. Local authorities are well placed to understand the performance, or underperformance, of housing associations through the relationships between councillors and residents, and through public realm services.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a good speech with many good points. On his earlier point about accountability in the context of having a more effective national ombudsman, given that we all, I hope, accept that social housing is a social good and, in many respects, a public service, the out-and-out free market approach that has been taken to its provision has not been effective and there is evidence of market failure. Does he believe that greater local oversight and giving local authorities a role in holding housing associations to account for how they treat their tenants are also important parts of improving the regulatory framework?

Jim Fitzpatrick: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, which I am also trying to make. The Government's proposals for a national regulator and beefed-up regulations are sound and welcomed across the sector—the House reinforced that last week during the Grenfell debate—but there is a gap that local authorities could easily fill. There could be local oversight through local authorities engaging with the housing associations that operate in their local authority area, as well as national scrutiny through the national regulator, so there would be a local and national partnership to hold housing associations to account. Some housing associations are getting so big that they are becoming far too remote from their residents.

On that point, local authorities have no official role in formal regulation. If councils were given a role locally, alongside a national social housing regulator that focused on customer service, associations could be held to account and complaints dealt with more directly. I would be grateful if the Minister commented on that possibility.

Another concern is the practice of under-the-table mergers between housing associations. Although the Government do not officially play a role in that, they have created an environment that has led to more mergers and takeovers of housing associations. Those have to happen sometimes, but as housing associations get bigger, whether through mergers or national expansion, their ability to be financially transparent and locally accountable reduces. That is a serious problem for residents who pay service charges, as it becomes less clear to them where their money goes. Bigger and more remote associations can also avoid being answerable to residents on other questions about repairs not being done, or not done to a high enough standard, or about costs going up or questionable rent increases.

My worry is that the bigger housing associations become, the more they become like money-driven businesses, rather than locally focused organisations with a social

purpose, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) said. I am grateful for the commitments in the Government's Green Paper, which was published last year, and for the matters raised by the Secretary of State in last week's written ministerial statement, but we need progress to be made through regulation and legislation.

On a separate matter, I agree with Grenfell United, and the recent Labour party paper, that it is high time that the Freedom of Information Act 2000 covered housing associations, rather than just council properties, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron). Residents and the public should have the right to information about safety standards and the like, to ensure that conditions and costs are monitored.

The Green Paper and the written ministerial statement offer better protection, more transparency and real accountability for residents in social housing, and I would be grateful for any assurance from the Minister that those commitments will be met as soon as possible after the close of the consultation that was announced last week. We want to ensure that our social housing lives up to its purpose of providing comfortable homes that are considerately managed, and that residents feel empowered in decisions made about their homes.

As I said at the start of my speech, I do not believe this issue is controversial or rocket science. There is support across parties and across the housing sector for what the Government are proposing—more transparency in respect of housing regulation, policing and enforcement—through a more powerful regulator. We need a strong commitment from the Government that they will move with speed and efficiency. As we approach the two-year memorial to Grenfell, some recommendations in Dame Judith Hackitt's report have been enacted, but the Grenfell public inquiry will likely not conclude or produce a report until 2021 or 2022.

As I think the Government recognise, they need to take action where and when they can to reassure the public that their safety and wellbeing are paramount. A new regulator would be an easy way to demonstrate that determination, as would the other ideas I have suggested. I look forward to the Minister's response, and I would be grateful if he considered this speech my contribution to the Department's consultation on the matter.

4.14 pm

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): It is a pleasure to appear under your wise gaze, Mr Owen. I congratulate the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing this important debate. He has been a consistent and persistent voice on housing issues, particularly the safety and welfare of residents, not just in his constituency but nationally. I understand his concerns about the accountability and role of housing associations, and particularly about the situations that some of his constituents face. I acknowledge the continuing role that hon. Members across the House play, as I know from my own experience, in resolving issues raised by tenants with their housing associations and other types of landlords; they rightly spend significant amounts of time trying to resolve problems when something has gone wrong.

Everyone has the right to be and feel safe in their home, and to expect their complaints to be dealt with effectively. The Government have taken recent steps to make sure that that happens. As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, we published the social housing Green Paper last year. We engaged extensively with residents to inform and shape it. After its publication, I held roadshows across the country with hundreds of residents in social housing and listened to them to understand their experience at first hand.

The Green Paper contains proposals to rebalance the relationship between residents and landlords, setting out the level of service that residents should expect and clarifying how to hold landlords to account when they are not delivering. We heard that residents want redress quickly when things go wrong, and that they want processes to be clearer and simpler. The Green Paper asks how we can ensure clear and effective redress for residents, including a question about the future of the democratic filter, which can delay the complaints process. I confess that when I was first elected to the London Assembly in City Hall, it came as a surprise that people came to ask for permission to go forward, through the democratic filter, to the ombudsman, which injected a significant amount of delay. We are grateful for the input of residents, landlords and other stakeholders through the process. We are assessing the consultation responses and finalising our response to the Green Paper, and I hope that we will publish that response shortly.

Alongside the Green Paper, we launched a review of the regulation for social housing to make sure that regulation maintains standards for residents while ensuring that landlords remain well run and financially robust. We asked whether social housing regulation focuses on the right things and whether the regulator should be able to take action more swiftly where landlords are not fulfilling their responsibilities. We are analysing what we have heard and will publish the outcome of the review of regulation in due course.

Registered providers of social housing must comply with the outcome-based regulatory standards set by the independent regulator of social housing. It has three standards covering economic regulation and four standards covering consumer regulation. The regulator takes a proactive, risk-based approach to enforcing the economic standards for private registered providers. It monitors landlord performance against those standards and, for larger associations such as Clarion, carries out in-depth assessments and publishes ratings for financial viability and governance.

All local authority landlords and housing associations must comply with the regulator's consumer standards, which seek to ensure that homes are safe and of good quality, and that landlords deliver the right services. The regulator may take action where a breach of those standards has caused, or may cause, serious harm to tenants. Again, we asked questions in the Green Paper about whether that is the right threshold for intervention by the regulator.

Providers have principal responsibility for effectively identifying and resolving problems, and they are accountable for complaints about their service. The first step for residents with a complaint is to report the problem to their landlord. The regulator expects registered providers to have a complaints process that deals with issues

promptly, politely and fairly. The onus is on individual landlords, working with residents, to set their approach and timescales for handling complaints. I stress that if any hon. Member, acting on a constituent's behalf, is unhappy with a registered provider's response once their internal complaints process has been exhausted, they may take the matter further.

Social housing residents can also approach the housing ombudsman service at any time to seek advice, but for a complaint to be formally referred, it must pass through the democratic filter. Should the ombudsman determine that a complaint falls within its jurisdiction, it will investigate the complaint to determine whether there has been maladministration by the landlord. As I am sure the hon. Gentleman knows, the ombudsman can then issue a determination letter, which may include orders and recommendations to resolve the dispute. The landlord is expected to follow any orders within a specific timeframe.

All housing associations must be a member of the housing ombudsman service—a free, independent and impartial complaints resolution service. It is primarily the role of the housing ombudsman to investigate individual complaints from tenants. For example, it can consider complaints about how a landlord has responded to reports of a problem. The regulator meets and communicates regularly with the housing ombudsman, in line with the memorandum of understanding that has been agreed between the two organisations. This includes sharing data on providers, such as evidence of potential systemic issues with registered providers, and on other issues. The regulator will intervene should it find that a landlord's failure to meet a standard has caused, or may cause, serious harm to tenants, and it is for the regulator to decide on the appropriate level of action to take.

The hon. Gentleman raised an interesting point on the plethora of ombudspersons. It is certainly the case that we will add to that number—as he will know, we have already pledged to introduce a new homes ombudsman. He raises an interesting question on whether there should be a general aspiration to agglomerate these ombudsmen into a single housing ombudsman, which is something that the Department has been thinking about. However, there is an argument about specialism and responsiveness in a particular area that needs to be addressed before we move to that stage.

Dr Poulter: My hon. Friend mentioned this earlier. From a tenant's perspective, one of the main challenges is the issue of serious harm and how it is defined. The threshold for serious harm often relates to something that might cause a danger to life or safety. If we are talking about having civilised housing conditions that are free from damp and fit for human habitation, we need to have a lower threshold. I hope that is something that the Government will look at very seriously in the Green Paper and their further work in this area.

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend is quite right. As I said earlier, the serious detriment test is one of the hurdles that need to be passed before there is intervention. We have asked in the Green Paper whether this is at the appropriate level. I would just point out that there is a difference between detriment and harm. In a situation where there is the threat of serious harm, local authorities have powers to step in and do the work that is required

[Kit Malthouse]

to deal with any immediate threat to safety or life. We have enhanced the housing health and safety rating system assessment tool, which local authorities can use when they look at a particular property in order to detect whether there is a particular harm that will allow them to intervene. That has been very pertinent to safety, particularly on the cladding issue that we have been dealing with over the past few weeks. We expanded the test to cover the envelope of a building, so that the local authority can make such an assessment.

Jim Fitzpatrick: Have local authorities actually availed themselves of that power in respect of defective cladding? It is quite difficult for local authorities to step in, is it not?

Kit Malthouse: It is, and the bar for that is very high, because there has to be an immediate threat to life. With cladding, one of the things that we have tried to ensure is that everybody is safe tonight. I have just commissioned and received reassurance through a review that that is still the case—everybody is still safe in buildings. If interim measures are in place in buildings that have not yet been remediated, one hopes the immediate threat is receding. Nevertheless, the power is there for local authorities to use. That is not just the case in a situation involving cladding; it is available to them in any situation.

I shall move, rather conveniently, on to safety. The hon. Gentleman and I have both spent time this week with Grenfell United, and we will spend more time with the group later in the week. Safety is uppermost in our mind. When things do go wrong, particularly on safety, it is of the utmost importance that such concerns are resolved as soon as is practicable. Registered providers must ensure that properties meet, and are maintained at, the decent homes standard. The regulator's standards also require landlords to provide a repairs and maintenance service that responds to the needs of tenants and offers them choices. The objective is for landlords to ensure that repairs and improvements are right the first time. When they are not, tenants should complain and have the right to expect that something is done.

I should point out that if hon. Members believe they have constituents living in properties with serious hazards that present a risk to health and safety, they can report that to their local council, which can inspect and assess properties using the HHSRS. Should the local council become aware of a category 1 hazard, it can intervene.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): I am sorry to intervene on the Minister, but we are expecting a vote very shortly. It might be helpful if he could finish.

Kit Malthouse: I will conclude very quickly.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse raised several other issues. The first was accountability for safety. As he will know, we accepted all of Dame Judith Hackitt's recommendations. In the consultations that we published last week, however, we are seeking to pin individual responsibility for safety on a named individual throughout the process—from design, through construction and management—so that there is clear accountability.

The hon. Gentleman quite rightly raised the issue of the residents' voice, which is something that I heard consistently on the roadshows. Again, this is a big part of both the Hackitt review and our social housing Green Paper, because a lot of residents feel that either they are excluded from the conversation in a committee, or it is just not happening at all. We already have a group of housing associations that stepped forward to look at best practice in this area, and they are working away at the moment.

The hon. Gentleman raised the size of housing associations. There is some truth to the view that the bigger any organisation gets, the more it has to have due regard for its responsiveness on the frontline. We hope to address in the Green Paper whether that is a structural issue about it being localised, or whether it loses focus on its primary product, which must primarily be the happiness and care of its tenants.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman raised freedom of information. There is a technical issue with freedom of information: the Office for National Statistics tends to classify organisations that are subject to freedom of information as being part of the Government, hence their debt moves on to the national balance sheet. Given that housing associations have something like £72 billion-worth of debt, that would make a fairly significant dent on our national accounts. Having said that, one of the issues that we will, I hope, address in the social housing Green Paper—when it eventually emerges—is transparency.

One of the key issues that Grenfell United has raised with me again and again is that the group has asked for information and has just not been given it. We think all those organisations—they are fundamentally not for profit, but serve the public and their tenants—have a duty to be as transparent as they can, subject to commercial sensitivities. That is something we hope to embed when the social housing Green Paper reforms come to light.

I thank hon. Members for their participation; it has been very useful. I will take into account the hon. Gentleman's submission to our general consultation. As he knows, we have stood shoulder to shoulder in trying to reach the reforms we need to ensure that everybody is safe and well served in their homes.

Question put and agreed to.

4.27 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

Public Health: County Durham

4.40 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered public health in County Durham.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I am pleased to have secured this debate, but it is unfortunate that we have to have a debate on public health to highlight the effects that the Government's cuts have on one of the poorest counties in our nation. I thank the men and women of the NHS, those who work in public health for the county council, and the voluntary and community sectors, which are part of the matrix of support for delivering in County Durham not only general healthcare, but, importantly public health.

In recent years, there has been debate about Government funding not just in health, but in local government and other areas. That debate starts from the premise that everywhere is the same, so a fair funding formula spreads the jam evenly around the country, but I am sorry—that is just not the case. Deprivation and need are factors that must be taken into consideration. In local government funding, fire service funding and police funding, need and poverty have been removed as determinants.

County Durham is a large rural county of 525,000 people. It faces some unique issues on health, partly because of the legacy of the county's industrial past of coalmining and heavy industry, which means a high incidence of diseases associated with those industries, such as respiratory diseases, which put particular demands on the health service.

We also have a legacy of rapid deindustrialisation in the 1980s, when the hearts of many of the coalmining and steel communities across County Durham were ripped out by the policies of the Thatcher Government. That legacy remains in terms of hopelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, obesity and smoking, as well as the poverty that goes with all that. Previously, I have described County Durham as a rural county with urban problems, but those urban problems are sometimes ignored because of County Durham's rurality.

We also have a growing elderly population. In the period to 2035, the number of people aged 65-plus will rise by 31%, and the number of people aged 85-plus will rise by 82%. That puts particular demand on the health service at all levels, in both the community and the acute sectors. Life expectancy in Durham is 78.3 years for men and 81.4 years for women. I will mention two other counties, and allude to the reasons for doing that later in my remarks: in Surrey, life expectancy is 81.5 years for men and 84.8 years for women, while in Hertfordshire, it is 81 years for men and 84.2 years for women.

The figures for healthy life expectancy, which indicates the age at which people develop serious health concerns, are even worse. In County Durham, they are 58.9 years for men and 58.7 years for women, whereas in Surrey, they are 68.3 years for men and 68.7 years for women, and in Hertfordshire, 64.9 years for men and 65.9 years for women. People in County Durham who get long-term health issues get them sooner than people in more affluent areas, which leads to demand on our health service. We are always told by the Government that we need to stop people using the health service to reduce

the demand placed on it, but unless we tackle some of the underlying causes of the problem that pressure will continue.

Responsibility for public health funding was transferred from the Department of Health and Social Care to local government in 2013-14. I supported that move because public health is best delivered locally. The budget devolved to County Durham in 2013-14 was £40.5 million, based on the assessment of health needs by the primary care trust, which was abolished under the same legislation that introduced the transfer of responsibilities. To give credit to County Durham, it has used that money effectively, with services commissioned both directly by the county council and externally by private and third-sector organisations.

As with many things, however, devolution of responsibility for public health came with a sting in 2016, when the budget was reduced by 12.8%. That was part of George Osborne's strategy, in a host of areas, to devolve money locally and tell the local authority to decide where the cuts would come. He could then stand back and say, "That decision has to be made locally." But that misses the point. By sleight of hand, he sought to give the idea that somehow he had no responsibility for the cuts when he had top-sliced the budgets.

To be fair to County Durham, its public health priorities were the right ones to tackle. The funding was directed towards the control of tobacco and cessation of smoking, teenage pregnancies, obesity and weight reduction, mental health—an issue close to my heart—and improved dental services. I do not know whether the Minister is aware of this, but when I was first elected in 2001, certain areas of my constituency had no access to dental services at all. That has changed—not since 2010, I hasten to add, but certainly under the last Labour Government.

County Durham also targeted drug and alcohol addiction. I give it credit for the work that it has done on that. In the light of the recent confessions of the Conservative party leadership contenders, I think that they could take note of the available drug and alcohol services. However, unlike those middle-class people who have confessed to drug use, the young people we are talking about will not go on to glittering careers in the media or elsewhere. They will be pushed into a cycle of poverty and desperation at local level, and will add to our shared tax burden, because their demand on health, police and other services will increase. I always look at public health as an investment in our local communities to ensure not only that we have good public health outcomes, but that we reduce demand elsewhere in the system.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Before my right hon. Friend moves on to the next section of his speech, I want to congratulate him on securing this important debate. What shocks me is the fact that in Woodhouse Close in my constituency, the healthy life expectancy is 10 years lower than that in Barnard Castle, yet those two places are only 10 miles apart. The notion of cutting public health funding seems grotesque.

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend is correct. She highlights that example in County Durham, but there are many more between the more affluent areas and the pockets of poverty. They have been there since the 1980s and

[Mr Kevan Jones]

they need to be addressed. I am passionate about this issue; the idea that where someone lives should determine how long they live, in a wealthy country such as ours, is wrong. We should be able to tackle that in this day and age.

The new funding formula, ironically called the fair funding formula—trades description comes to mind—is based on the premise, pushed mainly by a lot of Conservative Members, that somehow the needs of individuals in health and other areas are the same across the nation. That is just not the case. The methodology put forward by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government means that County Durham will lose 38% of its existing budget—that is £18 million a year. It is the worst loser in this process, because the dedicated, ring-fenced public health budget is being abolished. It is being pushed in terms of the business rate retention scheme, which concerns me because it means that there will be areas where councils—I will refer to two in a minute—that get a budget increase will have no duty at all to ring fence that money and put it into public health. That is a retrograde step.

County Durham has achieved a lot: smoking is 22% down and teenage pregnancy is down to a level that is no longer statistically different from national averages. That certainly was not the case when I was first elected in 2001. We have made great strides getting cardiac mortality down from 31 deaths per 100,000 in 2001 to 5.7 deaths per 100,000 by 2015. A lot of effort has gone into addressing suicide rates, particularly among men. That is a credit to multi-agency work, including the police, the voluntary community sector and others. We have a good-news story in the sense that we have a good partnership-working approach in County Durham, yet the Government want to take that budget away.

People ask, “Why can’t it be made up from elsewhere in the council budget?” This is a county council that has had its budget slashed by nearly £240 million since 2010. It is due to lose another chunk of funding under the so-called local government funding formula. The scandalous situation, and the reason I mentioned Surrey earlier, is that, while County Durham will have its budget cut by 38%, Surrey County Council’s budget will be increased by £14.4 million a year, and Hertfordshire’s by £12.6 million a year. It cannot be right—I will give some reasons in a minute—that money is being moved from deprived areas such as County Durham in the north-east to some of the most affluent areas in the United Kingdom. The life expectancy and other figures that I mentioned earlier are not comparable. That is not a fair way of distributing that money.

It is not just County Durham that is affected; the north-east loses some £40 million under the proposals, in some of the most deprived parts of this country. Gateshead, for example, loses 12.44% of its budget; Redcar and Cleveland loses more than 27%; South Tyneside, one of the most deprived parts of the region, loses 29%; and Sunderland loses 24%. That will not address health inequalities and stop people going into the health service; the cuts to the most deprived areas cannot be right.

There is a deliberate policy—not just here, but in other areas—of moving the central Government grants or funding formulas to benefit mainly Conservative-voting

southern areas. That is the worst example of pork barrel politics. The Conservative party leadership contenders talk about one-nation conservatism. If this is one-nation conservatism, they can keep it. The cuts will have a direct effect on the ability of healthcare professionals to provide services. It is not acceptable to go backwards on smoking cessation and drug treatment.

What has been going on? The county council has lobbied; it has written to the Minister, met Public Health England and worked with other local authorities not just in the north-east but elsewhere, such as Blackpool Council, which is also affected. It has contributed to the fair funding review. It is not just politicians on the Labour county council; the health and wellbeing boards, the police and crime commissioner, and the local NHS trusts have all argued that this is not correct, because they see what is coming down the road. If these short-sighted cuts take place, the demand on local acute services will go up—exactly what the Government and NHS England want to avoid. That disjointed approach beggars belief.

What do we want in County Durham? We want and need a clear commitment to public health. That is referred to in the NHS forward plan, but with no funding commitment or power to ensure that local councils deliver good-quality public health. We need a form of funding that reflects need. We also need a clarification on timetable. I understand that a decision is being kicked right back to the spending review. When the spending review will take place, given the chaos in the Conservative party, I do not know.

There is real pressure on the county council and other bodies because they have to let contracts—the current contracts come to an end in March next year. If there is no clarification by the end of this year, that will not leave much time for those organisations not only to tender but to let those contracts. That will lead to a lot of organisations worrying about their future. A lot of public health is delivered by the local voluntary community sectors. They rely on that, and they do a fantastic job. We cannot have money deliberately moved to areas of prosperity. I challenge the Minister to conduct an impact assessment on the effects of the cuts, to highlight those effects.

It does not surprise me what the Government are doing because they have done it in every other area, particularly local government funding. I do not question the commitment of the Minister to good-quality public health, but there is a disconnect in relation to the funding formula and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. On 7 January, I asked the Health Secretary directly about the issues concerning County Durham. He said:

“That is obviously not right. Indeed, there is a whole section of the plan on reducing health inequalities, which is extremely important.”—[*Official Report*, 7 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 77.]

He might recognise the importance of public health, but MHCLG does not. That is not a very good example of joined-up government.

This is not charity; it is an investment, not just in the lives and wellbeing of individual constituents in County Durham but in the future of the country. Unless we tackle some of these health inequalities through good public health, our efforts to relieve the pressures on our health service will come to nothing. In a statement on

exiting the EU, the Prime Minister, who will not be with us much longer as Prime Minister, said she wanted to work

“across all areas to make this a country that truly works for everyone, and a country where nowhere and nobody is left behind.”—*[Official Report, 10 December 2018; Vol. 651, c. 25.]*

If these cuts go through, those words will be pretty hollow, because County Durham will be left behind.

5 pm

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate my hon. Friend—

Mr Kevan Jones: Right honourable.

Phil Wilson: He is my right hon. Friend, as he reminds me. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) on securing this timely debate. He has been a real campaigner on this issue in County Durham for many years, and I know he takes a real interest in the public health issues we face in Durham.

The backdrop to the debate is this: we face cuts to public health provision in the north-east of England, primarily in County Durham, at the same time as we see a parade of candidates to be leader of the Conservative party, virtually all of whom want to cut taxes by billions of pounds. I am beginning to wonder where exactly the money will come from for any kind of public sector provision. Those claims of future tax cuts will probably end up being unfunded after Brexit, considering that the pot of tax money for the public sector will be reduced anyway.

As my right hon. Friend said, we may face cuts to public health services of around £18 million in Durham. I reiterate what he said about Surrey and Hertfordshire: under the new formula, there will be a £14.4 million increase for Surrey and a £12.6 million increase for Hertfordshire. That cannot be right when we consider the problems we have with health and healthcare provision in Durham. Sedgefield grew up, as a community, on coal. The number of men who worked down the collieries and are still alive today but have ailments related to that industry, such as lung disease and arthritis, just goes to prove that there is a requirement not to cut funding but to increase it.

If we look at random at some areas of health, we see that the figures for Sedgefield are worse than the national average in all of them. It has higher than the national average cases of dementia, patients on antidepressant drugs, patients on painkillers, asthma sufferers, people with high blood pressure, people with depression—the list goes on and on. We are talking about a formula devised by algorithm rather than by listening to what healthcare professionals say the county needs. People in Durham can expect to live a decent life in good health for seven years less than people in Surrey and nine years less than people in Hertfordshire.

Great strides have been made over the years in the use of the public health grant in County Durham. For example, the smoking rate has reduced from 22% to 14%. However, smoking during pregnancy is still an issue and still above the national average. About 20% of the people who live in Durham—I think that is about 114,000 people—are under 19. They should all be due some kind of safeguarding provision. If the cuts go ahead, will we have the health visitors to provide that?

The cuts will affect the safeguarding of young people. If drug and alcohol services are reduced, the police will have to deal with an even greater problem of rising crime.

The chief executive of the Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS mental health trust came to see me about the cuts a couple of weeks ago. Because of cuts to public health, fewer and fewer health visitors and school nurses are going to schools and people's homes. Because that provision is not there, the trust has to see people it would not otherwise have seen because they would have been seen at home or school. Its provision for people with mental health problems is being put under more and more stress. The cuts are impacting on services other than those provided through public health funding.

One thing for which public health services have mandatory responsibility is health visiting services for those under the age of five. The breastfeeding initiation rate in County Durham is 59%, compared with 74% in England as a whole. Health visitors play a pivotal role in helping and encouraging women to continue to breastfeed their babies until they are at least six months old. Public Health England guidance acknowledges:

“Mothers who are young, white, from routine and manual professions and who left education early are least likely to breastfeed.”

Cutting the public health grant to an area in which many women fit that profile and which is already way behind on breastfeeding rates would once again penalise an area with real need.

Then we have obesity. In the fight to keep the population healthy and active, healthy weight is of core importance to the public health agenda. An estimated 14% of adults on GP registers across the Sedgefield constituency are obese, with the figure in some areas as high as 19%. Five of the 15 neighbourhoods with the highest rates of obesity are in County Durham. In the south-east, which may end up with increased public health provision, those rates are in single digits—around 8%, if not less. In Richmond Park, the figure is 3.6%.

The common theme in all this is that if we cut public health provision in our communities, other providers will be affected. Those providers, which otherwise would not have had to provide those services, will end up doing more and more. The mental health trust told me that case loads are skyrocketing for some of its workers. How, for example, will they be able to look after young people with mental health issues that are not picked up at school or in the home? Those young people will be passed along the road to mental health trusts, which will not be able to cope because they, too, face cuts. That needs to be addressed.

Mr Kevan Jones: Does my hon. Friend agree that, especially in mental health, the outcomes for an individual are better if we intervene early, at a young age, rather than leaving problems untreated for many years?

Phil Wilson: That is absolutely right, and that is an issue that the mental health trust raised. If those issues are picked up in the early years or when someone is still at school, they can be resolved. Leaving them just puts extra strain on the mental health trusts in the area.

I want to end on a positive note. I had some schoolchildren in Parliament yesterday from the primary schools in Ferryhill and Chilton. Cleves Cross Primary

[Phil Wilson]

School in Ferryhill has a whole host of initiatives around mental health, eating properly and so on. Around the village, it is setting up edible walkways: instead of flower beds, it is planting vegetables, which people can pick when they mature. It is great that schools are coming up with those great initiatives, but if the same thing is to happen in schools across County Durham, there needs to be central provision from public health services.

For wellbeing, there are initiatives to make sure that children have meals together with their families, and to ensure that if there are problems, other children and friends from school are invited along to share those meals. Such initiatives for those aged seven to 10 bode well for the future, and the public health service in Durham needs to look at them, but they must be funded.

We also need to think about how we develop best practice, so that we see such initiatives not just in Ferryhill and Chilton but in Consett, Barnard Castle, Durham city, Esh Winning and Easington—all over County Durham. There needs to be some strategy. As my right hon. Friend said, we need some kind of audit or impact assessment of what cuts to public health mean to areas like ours. What is the reasoning behind making cuts in Durham, where services are needed, and increasing funding in places such as Surrey and Hertfordshire, where they will not be?

Albert Owen (in the Chair): Order. Before I call Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods, I remind Members that this an hour-long debate. I will call the Front-Bench speakers at 5.25 pm, with five minutes for the Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister, allowing Mr Jones a couple of minutes to finish the debate.

5.11 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): May I say what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen? I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) for bringing forward this important debate. In 2013, there was a general welcome for the transfer of public health funding to local government, because it meant that public health and addressing public health issues could be integrated into the council's service delivery objectives to better promote public health objectives.

On transfer, the grant to County Durham was £44.5 million, based on an assessment of health needs in the county by professionals—albeit one heavily influenced by the Government's austerity programme. It is therefore extremely alarming that the Government now plan to move to determining the county's grant level not on need but according to a new formula, under the huge misnomer of the "fair funding review"—it is anything but. The public health grant to County Durham will be reduced by a massive 38% while resources are transferred to more affluent areas of the country that have much better health outcomes. That is clearly madness and cannot be right.

The public health team in County Durham has done a good job, despite facing the hugely complex health issues discussed in some detail by my right hon. Friend. The county has an industrial past of heavy industry

that has left a huge legacy of negative health impacts on the local community. Despite that, and through use of the public health grant, public health professionals, to whom we all pay tribute this afternoon, have done much. They have reduced smoking prevalence and teenage conceptions, and they also provide excellent support for vulnerable families on health and wellbeing issues, including access to mental health services. Those positive changes will be very much put at risk by the massive reduction in funding. In fact, given the severity of the problems Durham faces, it should be given more funding, not less.

Public health professionals in Durham have to address not just the problems of our industrial legacy but high current levels of poverty, because proper regeneration of the county has not taken place as yet. For example, just one food bank said that it gave out 20,000 emergency food bank parcels in Durham last year. We are talking about massive levels of poverty. Almost a third of children in County Durham are being brought up in households affected by poverty. Increasingly, such households are those with parents in work, sometimes having to do multiple jobs just to make ends meet.

Mr Kevan Jones: Under the last Labour Government, my hon. Friend, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), pioneered a free school meals initiative. Is she alarmed that, as I learned yesterday, the national school breakfast programme, which costs only £12 million nationally and affects quite a few schools—primary schools in particular—in her constituency, my constituency and other parts of County Durham, has still not had its funding guaranteed for next year?

Dr Blackman-Woods: My right hon. Friend makes an important point, which I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and I will take up in the coming weeks. That is an indication of how little the Government seem to be concerned about the children growing up in poor households.

Let us look at the Durham situation. The starkest indicator is the seven-year healthy life expectancy gap between females in Durham, currently at 59, and those in Hertfordshire, where it is 66, and Surrey, where it is 68. That gives rise to the question of why the Government are transferring resources from County Durham to Surrey and Hertfordshire. I know the Minister is new to her post, but it would be helpful to get an explanation of why the Government think that is a good idea, because we have not had one so far. The appalling health inequality is compounded by overall life expectancy figures, which for women are 81 in Durham compared with 84 for Hertfordshire and Surrey. There is a similar gap for men.

Let us look at other measures. Suicide rates in County Durham were above the national average, with 20.6 deaths per 100,000 of the population for males. On mental health, the rate of young people admitted to hospital because of self-harm is significantly above the national average. On alcohol, 33.8% of people in County Durham drink more than the low-risk guidelines recommended, and 290 people died due to alcohol-related problems last year. There were also 12,500 hospital admissions and 108 road traffic accidents. That suggests a significant problem that needs to be addressed.

Furthermore, the percentage of mothers smoking at the time of delivery is above regional and national averages. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson) made clear, breastfeeding rates are low, yet we know that it provides the best nutrition that babies and young children can get. Seven out of 10 adults in County Durham are overweight or obese, significantly more than the national average, and cardiovascular mortality rates are also higher than the national average.

I could go on with endless statistics, but we are making the point that County Durham is an area with high levels of disadvantage and poverty. It is below the national average on almost every public health indicator imaginable, yet what are the Government doing? They are not giving additional funds to address those problems and ensure that our services continue to improve; they are threatening to take money away.

The workforce would be significantly affected by this measure. There would be a significant reduction in the number of visits that health professionals could make and the universal work on emotional wellbeing would be removed. Instead, only higher level and more targeted work would take place, although we know that misses most of the families and individuals who would benefit from services. Other prevention priorities, including visits and programmes trying to address problems around smoking at the time of delivery, breastfeeding, unintentional injuries and obesity, would also be reduced. The service would have to focus on safeguarding, which would increase inequalities, and issues would be missed.

I could go on and on. We have already seen a massive reduction in services. For example, my constituency has no Sure Start centres operating, which means there is nothing in place to bring together services that could support very vulnerable families. Can the Minister look at that issue as well?

What do we want the Minister to do? The point was put forcefully by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham: we need a commitment from the Government to increasing public health funding in line with need; an extension to public health funding to be used in areas where the grant has been utilised effectively; and clarity on the timescale for decisions. We have already seen concern in County Durham about future funding, especially from the voluntary sector organisations that do much of the heavy lifting in terms of providing services to improve public health outcomes. The Government do not seem to be aware that funding for such organisations is often precarious and that they need some certainty from the Government to invest in staffing and services for the future.

The Government should certainly not be moving money from areas with the greatest health inequalities to those with the least health inequalities. They should be carrying out an impact assessment of any funding decision, so that we are really clear about what the impacts of that massive reduction of 38% in County Durham would lead to. As my right hon. and hon. Friends have said, this is an issue across north-east England. I look forward to hearing what the Minister will say to address this problem.

5.22 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Owen. I thank my

right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) for securing this important debate and for his excellent speech. I also thank my hon. Friends the Members for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson) and for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) for their insightful and powerful contributions.

As I have said many times before, under the Tory-led coalition and the current Conservative Government, public health budgets have been cut by £700 million since 2013, with no financial settlement agreed so far post-2020. As we have heard, that means that vital public health services, such as those for smoking cessation, obesity, sexual health and many more, have been stripped back to the bare minimum. That has consequences: gonorrhoea is at its highest level in 40 years and syphilis at its highest level in 70 years; rates of smoking among pregnant women have risen for the first time on record; and Victorian diseases, such as scarlet fever, whooping cough, malnutrition and gout, have seen a 52% upturn since 2010, with an increase of over 3,000 hospital admissions per year.

Life expectancies are stalling and, in some places, declining, with the north-south divide as wide as ever in terms of health and productivity. For a number of us in this Chamber, it was the north-south divide that drove us into politics; to see it as wide as ever, and not closing, drives us to come to debates such as this one. This is a welcome opportunity to highlight and discuss public health in County Durham.

Overall, health and wellbeing have improved significantly in County Durham, but it still remains worse than the England average. Although it has improved in the north, the rest of the country has also improved, so the gap remains wide. In addition, large health inequalities still remain across County Durham, especially with regard to breastfeeding, babies born to mothers who smoke, childhood obesity and premature deaths. The impact becomes obvious when we look at life expectancy. As we have heard, a child born today in the most deprived areas of County Durham can expect to live between seven and eight years less than one born in the least deprived areas.

With that in mind, it is concerning and shocking that County Durham is the worst affected local authority in England when it comes to cuts to the public health grant. Current predictions suggest that Durham County Council will lose £18 million this year from its public health grants. To put that into perspective—I will repeat the figures we have already heard, because they are more shocking the more times you hear them—this means County Durham will be receiving an £18 million cut to public health budgets but Surrey County Council will receive £14.4 million extra and Hertfordshire County Council will receive a boost of £12.6 million.

What assessment has the Minister made of this funding disparity between councils in the north and south, and the impact that has on health outcomes? Does she agree with me that where there is need, funding should follow? How will the Minister support Durham County Council in delivering vital public health services to those who need them most?

The current grant for County Durham, with a population of 525,000, is £47.4 million, which equates to £90 per head. Does the Minister believe that this is a substantial amount of funding per person to tackle all the public

[Mrs Sharon Hodgson]

health issues, as well as look at prevention for smoking, alcohol and drug misuse, obesity and weight management? Does she believe that £90 per head is enough to also fund early years services, nutrition and physical activity programmes and support mental health and wellbeing services?

As has already been mentioned, there is a life expectancy gap between the north and south of England: it is clear that money follows higher life expectancies, rather than the other way around—or, indeed, deprivation—as it used to. In County Durham, women have a healthy life expectancy of 59. That is compared with Hertfordshire, where women have a healthy life expectancy of 66, and Surrey, where it is 68.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): To give time for the Minister, can the hon. Lady finish up, please?

Mrs Hodgson: Yes, I will. I ask the Minister: when will the Government agree a future funding settlement for public health? I am under the impression that this has been postponed now until after the leadership contest. Local authorities and public health services need to know where they stand. As my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham said when he opened the debate, we cannot have County Durham or other local authorities being left behind any longer.

5.28 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I thank the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) for raising this important issue, and the hon. Members for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson) and for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) for their contributions.

The Government fully appreciate the importance of protecting and improving the health of the population. We share hon. Members' commitment to prevention and public health, which this debate has highlighted. The costs, both to individual lives and to the NHS, are simply too great to ignore.

The population in England is growing, ageing and diversifying rapidly. Some 40% of morbidity is preventable, and 60% of 60-year-olds have at least one long-term condition. Helping people to stay well, in work and in their own homes for longer is vital. As hon. Members have highlighted, the gap in healthy life expectancy between the most and least deprived areas of England is approximately 19 years for both sexes. As somebody who was born in Lancashire and represents a Lancashire seat, I see that disparity in my constituency. It is a great motivating factor for me in my role, as it was for my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister when she set her grand challenge of extending a person's period of healthy, independent and active life by five years by 2035.

However, we will not achieve that by simply adding five extra years at the end of life; as with many things, the earlier we start, the more we stand to gain. Investment in early years and onwards is essential if we want positively to influence future lifestyle choices, prevent disabling conditions and enable people to contribute fully to society. We must continue to focus our efforts

on areas such as digital technology and behavioural science so that we can show the public that the healthy choice is the easy choice.

We are doing work—on childhood obesity, smoking, air quality and more—that has the potential to make a real difference to people's health and wellbeing. The amount of sugar in drinks has been reduced by 11% and average calories per portion have been cut by 6% in response to our soft drinks industry levy. By 2020, the NHS diabetes prevention programme will support 100,000 people at risk of diabetes each year across England. Last year's ambitious prevention vision statement and the forthcoming prevention Green Paper will enable us to meet the ageing grand challenge and address health inequalities, supporting people to live longer, healthier lives.

We recognise that the funding position for local authorities is extremely challenging and understand the huge efforts that local government has made to focus on securing best value for every pound it spends. The 2015 spending review made available £16 billion of funding for local authorities in England over the five-year period. I remind the House that that is in addition to the money the NHS spends, which is part of the public health offer on prevention and includes our world-leading screening and immunisation programme and the world's first national diabetes prevention programme.

Today's debate has highlighted an important issue about the distribution of funding for local authority public health functions. Historically, funding for public health services in the NHS was left to local decision and was not necessarily based on need, which led to wide disparities in the amount of funding dedicated locally to public health services. Before these functions were transferred to local government, we asked the independent Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation to develop a needs-based formula for the distribution of the public health grant. The introduction of that formula meant that some local authorities received more than their target allocation under the ACRA formula and others received funding under target. In 2013-14 and 2014-15, when the overall grant was subject to growth, local authorities' funding was iterated closer to their target through a mechanism called "pace of change".

In 2015, ACRA was asked to update the formula to take account of the transfer of responsibility for commissioning health visiting services from NHS England to local authorities. We consulted on this formula and ACRA made recommendations to Government in 2016. I understand that the public health formula is more heavily weighted towards deprivation than either the adult social care formula or the clinical commissioning group formulation.

Mrs Hodgson: It is not working.

Seema Kennedy: Of course we want evidence. The shadow Minister says from a sedentary position that it is not working. We did an impact assessment in 2015-16 and we are reviewing all the evidence in preparation for the next spending review.

Phil Wilson: Just for clarification, did the Minister actually say that the formula is not working?

Mrs Hodgson: No; I said that.

Seema Kennedy: No, I was repeating what the shadow Minister had said.

The recommended formula, which would create winners and losers in terms of overall levels of funding because of the disparity in historical spend compared with current need, has not been implemented because of the Government's intention to extend the system of retained business rates. We continue to review the position, and future spending levels will be decided as part of the spending review, where we will review all available evidence.

I commend all local authorities on the efforts they are making to improve population health, as well as third-sector groups such as the children in Cleves Cross with their edible walkways. We continue to believe that local authorities are best placed to make decisions about the services that best meet the needs of their populations.

Dr Blackman-Woods: I am sure the Minister would accept that any formula that moves services from areas of relatively high need to areas of low need cannot be working properly. Does she also accept that it is simply not fair to push the onus to provide more services on to local authorities? As my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) made clear, Durham County Council's budget has been cut by 60% since 2010.

Seema Kennedy: I believe that local authorities and local communities are the right place for public health to be situated, because they best understand the needs of their communities.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Seema Kennedy: May I just finish addressing the point made by the hon. Member for City of Durham? I also want to ensure I give the right hon. Gentleman, who moved the motion, time to wind up the debate. We recognise that there has been pressure on local authorities and we commend them for the work they have done. As I have said, we continue to review the position, and future spending levels will be decided as part of the spending review.

Mr Jones: I agree with the Minister that local communities are best placed to decide these things, but is she happy with the fact that under the new funding formula, there is no onus on local government at all to use money for public health?

Seema Kennedy: I think public health is ring-fenced, and local government does have to use the funding for that. We are reviewing the position, and we will look at all the evidence carefully in the upcoming spending review.

Across England, we are seeing examples of councils adopting new service models and commissioning more effectively and innovatively. Stakeholders often tell us, most recently through the review of commissioning sexual health and health visiting services, that councils are achieving better value for money while maintaining or improving outcomes in challenging financial circumstances.

However, we need to acknowledge that improving public health is about far more than the grant, and we know that spending more money does not necessarily improve outcomes. What we spend it on matters a lot.

That covers all local government activity, including transport, planning, housing and the economy, all of which contribute to population health and wellbeing. The work that local government does on the ground through place-based approaches makes joining up those different factors easier, and the NHS long-term plan has a significant focus on prevention and reducing health inequalities.

We do not know what the outcome of the spending review will be, but I am committed to working closely with local government and other partners to build on the achievements of the past six years. We need to take action on a local, national and global level to meet the public health needs of the present and rise to the public health challenges of the future.

5.37 pm

Mr Kevan Jones: I thank the Minister for that. She is a new Minister, so I will give her a word of advice: do not come to a debate and just read out a civil servant's speech, as she did today. It is all right her saying that she recognises the importance of public health, but in her position she needs to be a champion for public health. If that means giving the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government a kicking, she needs to do it. Without that, demand will increase on her Department of Health and Social Care and its budget.

I am sorry, but I just do not accept what the Minister says about efficiencies. No organisation can have 38% taken out of its budget through efficiencies while delivering the same thing. Morally, this policy, which is like Robin Hood in reverse—taking from the poor and giving to the rich—is just not acceptable. I expect her to be a champion for public health, because all the evidence from this country and internationally—not from politicians for party political points—is that early and proper direction of public health funding not only reduces demand on the health service but improves people's lives.

It cannot be right that one of the most deprived parts of the UK—the north-east of England, and County Durham in particular—has its budgets and its council's ability to provide public health services to its population reduced because of a funding formula put in place by this Government. Other areas, which I and my hon. Friends the Members for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson), for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) and for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) highlighted, have far fewer health needs.

We cannot take need out of the funding formula and hide behind the NHS long-term plan. The plan has all good intentions in trying to address health inequalities, but that will not be done without proper investment. Since 2013, Durham County Council has proven—in very straitened circumstances, and not just in this area but in how it has administered its budgets—that it has been able to get efficiencies. However, there is a limit to that, and taking 38% out will not work. This is simply not fair, Minister. As someone who represents a northern constituency, she should recognise that.

On whether we will see any change from the new leadership of the Tory party, if the front-runner gets it I very much doubt that. My hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield is correct: directing money to tax cuts for the wealthy will not mean a growth in public services.

[Mr Kevan Jones]

Public health is not a luxury; it is a vital part of a strategy not only to tackle inequality, but to tackle unfairness and to make people's lives better.

I went into politics to make people's lives better, as I am sure the Minister did. Her Government—I accept that it is not her Department, but the local government Department—are making people's life chances worse. That cannot be right.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered public health in County Durham.

5.41 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 12 June 2019

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

General Licences for Controlling Wild Birds

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): On 4 May, DEFRA took on decision-making for the purposes covered by the general licences that had been revoked by Natural England on 25 April. An evidence-gathering exercise was then initiated in order to determine next steps which closed on 13 May.

Some 4,378 responses were received, some of which were general opinions, and 3,952 responses were more specific and have provided a useful set of evidence and views. The majority of responses came from individuals or smaller businesses and organisations. Thirty six local and national organisations also responded, including conservation, animal welfare, pest control, farming, game keeping and land management organisations.

The responses demonstrated a range of impacts that individuals and groups experienced as a result of Natural England's revocation of licences GL04, 05 and 06. These include crow attacks on lambs and ewes during lambing, the risk of predation for eggs and fledglings of birds of conservation concern, and public health issues caused by pigeons in urban areas.

We recognise the unintended consequences of Natural England's decision on 23 April and completely acknowledge the need to address this situation quickly. This is why we issued an urgent call for evidence so that we could assess the situation carefully.

Next steps will be confirmed imminently following engagement with users and other interested stakeholders.

A summary of the evidence and the Government response will also be published shortly.

We remain determined to ensure that we have a robust and effective licensing system in place.

[HCWS1615]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

Bilateral Voting Rights: Portugal

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Today, I can confirm that the Government have reached a reciprocal agreement with Portugal that will secure the rights of UK nationals living in Portugal, and Portuguese citizens living in the UK, to stand and vote in local elections in both a deal and no deal. This agreement builds on our centuries of close ties with Portugal, dating back to the Anglo-Portuguese agreement in 1373, and is a welcome step towards our continuing close future relationship.

Citizens, including protecting the interests of British expats, have always been our priority in the negotiations for our departure from the EU. The UK pushed hard in negotiations to protect the right to stand and vote in local elections for UK nationals living in the EU, and EU citizens in the UK, but these rights were not included in the withdrawal agreement. Instead, we have been pursuing bilateral arrangements with individual member states to secure these rights on a bilateral basis. We have been clear that allowing EU citizens to vote in local elections in the UK should be considered alongside the rights and interests of UK nationals and it has been our priority to secure these reciprocally.

We have now reached agreements with Spain and Portugal and we are continuing our discussions with other member states.

I will be depositing the latest agreement in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1614]

Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 12 June 2019

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Medial Aesthetics Industry: Regulation

The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on Medical Aesthetics Industry: Regulation on 14 May 2019.

Jackie Doyle-Price: We are moving into a new period of regulation of dermal fillers. My hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire is quite right that they are completely unregulated at present, but they will become regulated by the Medicines and Healthcare

Products Regulatory Agency, **which will put them on a similar footing to Botox and will mean that they need to be given by the prescriber.**

[Official Report, 14 May 2019, Vol. 660, c. 88WH.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price):

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa).

The correct information should have been:

Jackie Doyle-Price: We are moving into a new period of regulation of dermal fillers. My hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire is quite right that **some** are completely unregulated at present, but they **will all become regulated** by the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency **from May 2020.**

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MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

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